

PREFACE



Some countries comprising the South-East Asia Region of the World Health Organization, are steadily moving towards a higher level of alcohol use in the last decade. It is well established that an increase in alcohol consumption by a community or a nation leads to a higher proportion of persons with what can be considered problem use (abuse/harmful use) and addiction (dependence). Harm from alcohol use has a significantly adverse impact on the lives and most notably, on the health of affected persons and their families. Simultaneously, there is a substantial socio-economic impact on the communities. Thus, policy-makers in nations facing increasing alcohol consumption should pay urgent attention to alcohol control policies.

The effects of alcohol use depend on a number of internal and external influences. At the societal level, availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability have a major influence on alcohol use. The visual and print media play a major role in terms of informing, highlighting and influencing people's values and thinking processes. The systems of law, judiciary and welfare determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in every society. Socio-cultural attributes of peer group influences, the status symbol attached to alcohol use and liberalized attitudes of society all have a major impact on the entry and spread of alcohol use in society.

The family plays a major role in terms of social, economic and cultural values. At the individual level, age, sex, social status, physiological attributes, nutritional levels, the activity being performed, psychological status and awareness determine how much a person drinks and what effect it has on him/her and others. Thus, the increasing use of alcohol is not just due to an individual's likes or dislikes but rather due to several extraneous factors operating in respective societies. Understanding and identifying critical factors is crucial to reduce the growing impact of alcohol use.

There is an urgent need to focus on prevention of harm from alcohol use and abuse in countries of the Region, both from the perspectives of health promotion as well as social development. The contextual evidence from the Region regarding what is successful in reducing harm from alcohol consumption is not very clear. Nevertheless, there is considerable international evidence which identifies components of successful programmes.

There are a wide range of alcohol control policy options. However, there is clearly no single policy measure to combat and reduce all alcohol-related problems. Rather, it is more effective to incorporate a range of measures in a comprehensive alcohol control strategy. It is the policy 'mix' or finding the right balance that is the key in reducing the overall public health burden caused by alcohol consumption.

The goal of a comprehensive, effective and sustainable alcohol control policy can only be attained by ensuring the active and committed involvement of all relevant stakeholders. Alcohol control

strategies need a high degree of public awareness and support in order to be implemented successfully. Without sufficient popular support, enforcement of any restriction is jeopardized, leading to possible resistance and circumvention.

Multiple agencies, for example, ministries of law, industry, revenue, agriculture, the customs department, law enforcement departments, medical associations and NGOs should all work together for a clear formulation and effective implementation of a rational, integrated and comprehensive alcohol control policy.

Countries and communities should search for policies that protect and promote health, prevent harm and address the numerous social problems associated with alcohol use. Ideally, scientific evidence should be the basis of both policy making and public debate. One of the issues to be examined is the extent to which successful public health measures are transferable between different cultures, and the different situations in developed and developing countries.

This document provides information on alcohol use and abuse in WHO's South-East Asia Region. It makes practical suggestions on what the individual, the community and governments can do to protect each and every one from the harmful effects of alcohol use. It should be found most useful by all those interested in a healthier and happier Region.



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