



ADD Fact Sheet:

World Bank on Alcohol and Poverty

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The World Bank has published a series of fact sheets on topics of relevance to public health; alcohol being one of them. Here are some selected paragraphs from the fact sheet:

Why is reducing alcohol-related problems a priority?

Alcohol abuse is one of the leading causes of death and disability worldwide. Alcohol abuse is responsible for 4 percent of global deaths and disability, nearly as much as tobacco and five times the burden of illicit drugs (WHO). In developing countries with low mortality, alcohol is the leading risk factor for males, causing 9.8% of years lost to death and disability. Alcohol abuse contributes to a wide range of social and health problems, including depression, injuries, cancer, cirrhosis, dependence, family disruption and loss of work productivity. Health and social problems from drinking often affect others besides the drinker. While men do the bulk of the drinking worldwide, women disproportionately suffer the consequences, including alcohol-related domestic violence and reduced family budgets. Heavy alcohol use takes a particular toll on the young, and has been linked to high rates of youthful criminal behaviour, injury, and impaired ability to achieve educational qualifications. Many deaths and much disease and suffering could be prevented by reducing alcohol use and related problems.

Alcohol and poverty

Alcohol-related mortality is often highest among the poorest people in a society (Mäkelä, 1999a). Alcohol is often a significant part of family expenditure: Romanians spent an average of 11% of family income on alcohol in 1991, Zimbabwean households averaged 7%. However, national averages conceal the impact on families of drinkers: families with frequent-drinking husbands in Delhi spent 24% of family income on alcohol, compared to 2% in other families. Surveys among the urban poor in Sri Lanka found that 30% of families used alcohol and spent more than 30% of their income on it.

Alcohol and youth

Alcohol is of particular risk to adolescents and young adults: in Latin America and Eastern Europe respectively, 36% and 41% of deaths among 15-29 year olds were due to alcohol use. Effective policies and prevention for youth have immediate payoffs, in addition to longer-term effects from forestalling development of alcohol dependence or alcohol-related chronic diseases.

Approaches to reducing alcohol abuse

The most effective approach to reduce alcohol-related problems is to implement a comprehensive set of measures to reduce alcohol consumption and related problems. Policy options include price increases, restrictions on availability (i.e. limits on the times and conditions of alcoholic beverage sales or service, minimum-age limits), strong drink-driving legislation and ready access to treatment. Some countries have succeeded in reducing per capita consumption substantially, and consequently have reduced liver cirrhosis deaths, a common indicator of alcohol-related problems in a society. Efforts to reduce alcohol consumption and related problems face formidable obstacles: alcohol dependence; social pressures; aggressive alcohol marketing and promotion; other pressing health problems competing for limited resources. But there are many good practices that can be replicated with political will, and broad support.

Global action

The overall trend is towards stricter laws and increased enforcement in some areas such as drinking-driving. Provision of treatment for drinking problems has increased in many places in recent decades. But national and local alcohol controls have been undercut by a tendency at the global level to treat alcohol as an ordinary commodity, and to weaken or eliminate effective controls in the interests of liberalizing markets and trade. Trade agreements, structural adjustment programs, and GATT/WTO dispute settlements usually fail to recognize alcohol's special status as a commodity which adversely affects health. In this context, actions like the World Bank Group's decision in 2000 to take "public health issues and social policy concerns" into account in considering investments in alcoholic beverage production are important first steps. (See World Bank Group Note on Alcohol Beverages). There is a need for strengthened global action and commitment to reduce alcohol abuse and address the related health and social effects.

The full text of the fact sheet:

<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/HDNet/hddocs.nsf/c840b59b6982d2498525670c004def60/09174c13bbe34c9f85256df3004ee21a?OpenDocument#section7>

World Bank Group Note on Alcohol Beverages:

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