

Uganda steadily becoming an Alcoholic State?

Recent media reports have showed a gloomy picture about alcohol consumption in the country. Indeed taxation data obtained from the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) reveals that alcohol industry brings in significant amounts of revenue into the country; it was ranked 6th among the major revenue contributors. The revenue realized from the alcohol industry was Uganda Shillings 8.933 billion in the financial year 2005/06. Government appears to have welcomed this development with open hands and driven by desire to expand its taxation base by largely concentrating on alcohol industry, as reflected in statement in the financial statement of 2008/9 and reduced the excise duty on beer made from local raw materials. The Minister Finance Dr. Ezra Suruma is quoted in the media to have said that drinking beer is okay, it's not harmful as long as you don't drink too much.

The beverage industry is, largely dominated by water industry though alcohol is equally picking up. The brewery industry in Uganda is dominated by three breweries Nile breweries Ltd (a subsidiary of SAB Miller plc- South Africa), Uganda breweries Ltd and Parambot Ltd. In fact all the breweries are grateful to their patrons and in return Nile breweries and others have bought over 10 boilers and want to expand their so called good markets in the country, in 2 years time alcohol will supersede other tax payers. Information from Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) indicates that only 15 breweries mainly spirit producers have passed their standard tests. It is a legal requirement that any one wishing to join this sector must be registered as a means of regulating and controlling the production of alcohol. However, the share of the Alcohol market of this group is only 30-35% of all alcohol consumed in the country.

In Uganda, the production and sale of alcoholic beverages generates profits for farmers, manufacturers, employment for people, importers, advertisers and investors. Locally produced alcoholic beverages include beers with alcoholic content which ranges from 10-20% volumes, spirits whose alcohol content ranges from 30-70 % volume, and adulterated alcohol containing other toxic impurities. In most urban centers of Uganda, many shops serve as bars in early afternoon till late night selling all kinds of alcohol ranging from the locally brewed crude liquors to industrial kinds. Since 75% of the population is rural based, most of the alcohol is crudely and locally made from sugarcane, banana juice, maize flour, meat flour, cassava flour and pineapple juice, since they are easy and cheaper to get. This alcohol is not regulated, high density of toxic substances; do not accrue income to government and still eludes the National Bureau of Standards.

The desire to increase profits have encouraged sale of alcohol products at sales counters frequented by minors and young people in super markets, groceries, shops, bars. This is in total disregard with the law on availability of alcohol, time of selling alcohol, gender and age. Although some breweries explicitly state that alcohol should not be taken by young people below 18 years, alcohol retailers have no local marketing code of conduct that prevents under-age children from buying alcohol. The benefits connected with the production, sale and use of this commodity have come at an enormous cost to the Uganda society and has proved to be an obstacle to development and escalated domestic violence

meted to children and women. In fact Ugandans now are known for spending hugely for parties and heavy time drinkers in a binge style.

Uganda has one of the highest alcohol consumption levels in the world and yet there appears to be very little effort to address the problem. The World Health Organization ranked Uganda in 2005 as the leading consumer of alcohol at 19.5 litres per capita. Easy availability of alcohol in Uganda influences high level alcohol consumption and related harm. Availability of beverage alcohol depends on several factors such as quantity of alcohol, affordability of the alcohol, geographical accessibility of alcohol to the population, accessibility of alcohol at various times and days, and accessibility of alcohol to minors.

The education sector is the most hit as over 400 teachers in Hoima were recently required to give reasons why they shouldn't be expelled over excessive drinking, partly responsible for massive UPE failures. Again, availability and consumption of alcohol among college and university students is high on the campuses, in the hostels and the neighborhoods. Almost 70% of university students use alcohol. Some of the major academic institutions such as Makerere University, Kyambogo University, Makerere Business School (MUBS) and Mukono University are surrounded by an array of bars that provide an environment conducive for students to take alcohol at their convenience. For instance, Makerere University is bordered by Wandegaya, a suburb that has over 500 bars. Other slums bordering the university such as Kivulu, Katanga, Kikoni, Bwaise and Kalerwe have several bars that serve both local and conventional brands of alcohol.

Alcohol on university campuses is easily accessible. Canteens located in the halls of residences provide both bottled alcohol and spirits in sachets. Hostel canteens also sell alcohol all the time. Because of easy availability and accessibility of alcohol in canteens, students start drinking alcohol as early as 10:00 am. Student guild canteens also occasionally provide discounted beer during cultural and entertainment festivals. It is reported that canteens in halls of residences make more money from selling alcohol sachets than any other item. Incidences of alcohol use among secondary school students have been reported to occur. Alcohol sachets are smuggled in schools and it was reported that there are secondary school students who drink waragi during lunch in Kabale district.

Males in Uganda have been noted to be likely to be long time drinkers than females; partial reason for low life expectancy. Women drinking alcohol mainly in homes and during parties is also reportedly on the rise. Daily and heavy drinking increases with age in both genders; whereas in developed countries as people grow older they drink less. In Uganda old people drink more which is life threatening and partly responsible for high mortality.

Associated risky behaviors: Unprotected sex still the major HIV transmission mode, and there is a strong link between being high on alcohol and unsafe sex. HIV experts reveal that people with alcohol use disorders are more likely than the general population to contract HIV. It is observed that alcohol takes away fears and encourages high risk sexual

behaviours because intoxication makes people lose sense of judgment and may practice unsafe sex. Men under influence of alcohol are at high risk of engaging in unprotected sex during rape, marital rape, defilement, sexual harassment leading to HIV transmission. While it is clear that teens that drink and use drugs are more likely to have sexual intercourse at earlier ages and with more partners, it is not clear which behavior starts first—sexual intercourse or drinking/drug use. It is possible that drinking by them, for instance, may not sufficiently explain inconsistent condom use.

Alcohol is partly responsible for undermining protective environment for children in homes; escalated child abuse and the rampant domestic violence, poor hygiene and nutrition problem. Meager incomes spent on alcohol, thus; collapse of household income security, the 5th major cause of income poverty in Uganda. The implication of such high levels of drinking appears to be evading both technical and political leaders in terms of daily hours lost and other health consequences. The burden of alcohol has not been fully appreciated by major stakeholders.

It appears the Alcohol industry is targeting future leaders and employees. Deterioration in academic performance and expulsion of students reported, again the similar situation has been reported in work places where hours and a days have been lost due to excessive drinking. Alcoholism does not only affect individuals but the entire family work places and encroaches on Incomes of the house hold and affect decisions making at work places. Unintended suicides/sleep walk have been reported. It is a cause and consequence of poverty (people drink because they are poor and are poor because they drink). The social and cultural benefits connected to production, sale and use come at enormous cost to society. The cost of harmful use of alcohol also extends to illness, health problems and premature mortality. Absenteeism ,unemployment, criminal damage and violence raises costs in law enforcement, justice and health.Potential years of life lost due to premature death, years of “healthy” life lost due to poor health and disability resulting from alcohol and time lost due to heavy and high usual quantity of alcohol per occasion.

Police officers have been implicated in alcohol related indiscipline; over 177 people have been referred to Butabika Mental Hospital for treatment, again 500 police officers with alcohol problems were reported in 2007. This compromises security and law enforcement.

Road carnage and accidents attributed to alcohol are on the rise, drunken driving problem and accidents 2005-7 police reports on accidents noted that “*These accidents involved 50,000 vehicles from which a totals collection of UGX.107 million only was raised from the express penalty scheme returns. The majority of accidents are a result of drink-driving situation*”.

A GENACIS study¹ conducted in 2005 shows a gender dimension of alcohol consumption behaviour. The study shows that males are more likely (40.1%) to be long-time drinkers

¹ Preliminary results from the *Gender, Alcohol and Culture: An International Study (GENACIS Project)*.International Research Group on Gender and Alcohol (for more information please see<http://www.med.und.nodak.edu/depts/irgga/GENACISProject.html>).

than females (23.5%) and that males are also less likely (28.6%) to be abstainers compared to women (36.4%). Males are over three times (24.4%) more likely to be daily drinkers than the females (7.0%) and males are more likely (22.9%) to be frequent heavy drinkers than females (6.5%). The study also shows that whereas daily and heavy drinking increases with age among males, abstinence from alcohol reduces with age among males and increases with age among females.

Given the evidence that alcohol consumption represents a current and future threat to social, economic and public health in Uganda and the need to promote alcohol policy measures that are evidence based and doesn't compromise public health principles there is a need to find an appropriate policy response to alcohol-related problems. Uganda government need to recognize that reducing the number and density of outlets, locations, days and hours of opening can all reduce the harm done by alcohol. It needs to note that industry self-regulation of alcohol marketing is an ineffective mechanism to protect vulnerable populations especially young people, and reduce harm done by alcohol.

Recommendations: We recommend banning all forms of alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship that promote alcoholic products by any means that are false, misleading or deceptive or likely to create erroneous impression about its characteristics, health effects or hazards be prohibited. Appropriate health warnings or messages should accompany all alcohol marketing and advertising. Bans adopted by Norway and France could serve as appropriate models.

Strict enforcement of laws regarding the sale of alcohol to minors under the age set by domestic legal statutes. There should be frequent compliance checks to enforce this policy and those retailers found to be selling alcohol to minors should receive appropriate sanctions, such as license suspensions.

Appropriate higher taxes on alcohol products should be introduced. Price and tax measures that increase the relative cost of alcoholic beverages are highly cost effective in reducing the harm caused by alcohol to young people and heavy drinkers. Taxes should be adjusted periodically to compensate for the effects of inflation.

Education, communication, training and public awareness: Effective education communication and training initiatives should be implemented to raise awareness, taking into account the need to strengthen public support for effective alcohol policies. In addition, economic operators should not design their products in a way that appeals to young people, women and other vulnerable population groups (e.g., small alcohol-containing sachet_ tot packs that can be concealed by young people).

Development of the Alcohol Policy: Aware that the WHO recommended in 2007 that countries need to consult but not to collaborate with economic operators in the alcohol market chain, governments should consult with the economic operators but not allow

them to influence the process of policy development in ways that compromise the public health. Any interaction should be confined to discussion of the contribution the alcohol industry can make to the reduction of alcohol-related harm only in the context of their roles as producers, distributors and marketers of alcohol, and not in terms of alcohol policy development or health promotion.

Government should bring all other stakeholders on board (e.g., media, social welfare, judiciary, finance, enforcement agencies, NGOs, etc.) in order to have a comprehensive multi sectoral alcohol policy, and consult with industry as well as industry-sponsored trade and social aspect organizations to identify ways that the alcohol industry can improve its production, packaging, product design, product safety and marketing practices in ways that are consistent with the public health objectives of national alcohol policies.

Uganda has various legislations that provide for or impact on alcohol trade, manufacture, standard specifications, revenue collection, sale, premises and hours of sale, marketing, public health, traffic and road safety. The existing laws if well implemented would to a good extent regulate, control and manage the manufacture, trade, sale and consumption of alcohol, thus a body be established to deal with this problem.

A comprehensive study of laws and policies relating to alcohol should be undertaken to establish more deeply areas that need to be addressed, taking into account perceptions of the public and institutions involved in alcohol related matters, and laws from other jurisdictions. This study will focus on effectiveness of alcohol related laws and will help establish to what extent these laws are enforced by the relevant institutions.

Parents should also take the responsibility of setting a good example for their children by addressing the alcohol problem at household level by providing children with necessary information about dangers of alcohol abuse. Government, NGOs, FBOs, and other training institutions such as universities and research bodies should engage in policy research in order to evaluate the effectiveness of alcohol control policies and to close the knowledge gap.