10 Policy Making for Alcohol: Towards a Combined Approach

Aims and learning outcomes

This aim of this chapter is to explore the efforts of policy makers in creating alcohol policies through regulatory and legislative structures which contribute towards increasing understanding of the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption at the individual and societal levels. After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain the reasons behind the need to increase the understanding of moderate alcohol consumption at individual and societal levels.

- Outline the policies currently used to control alcohol consumption and define alcohol consumption patterns around the world

- Identify the regulatory and legislative structures, and direct and indirect regulatory measures used towards effective alcohol policies globally.

- Outline the steps and outputs involved in creating sustainable alcohol policies and describe examples of targeted educational programmes aimed at changing the harmful behaviour which surrounds alcohol consumption.

10.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the key areas which underline international and local approaches towards developing and implementing alcohol policies, based on drinking patterns, targeted interventions and the building of partnerships. The amount of alcohol which individuals consume largely determines the outcomes they are going to experience. Harmful patterns of alcohol consumption have had a detrimental effect on society and national healthcare providers; we have witnessed increased levels of public order offences and violent

acts, all related to the misuse of alcohol. It is for this reason that consumption patterns are a key consideration in policy development. In recent years research studies have indicated that individuals across the world consume alcohol differently, some abstain completely due to health reasons or religious beliefs. This limits the value of examinations of drinking patterns based on average measures of consumption of whole populations, when the majority of consumers enjoy alcohol on an occasional basis at special events, within the meal experience or for relaxation purposes. Effective prevention requires an understanding of how people actually drink. It is therefore crucial to know consumption styles at an individual or group level. These challenges have influenced governments, industry bodies and community groups in recent years to move towards a combined approach towards policy making for the sale, service and consumption of alcohol.

10.1 A rationale for alcohol policy making

The primary rationale of any policy for alcohol is to aim to reduce its harmful effects and to increase the knowledge base and understanding of the benefit of moderate consumption. Polices for alcohol are also intended to balance the rights and responsibilities of every person against those of society. Heath (2000) and Marshall (1979) state that the majority of people drink alcohol moderately because it gives them pleasure and it acts as a social lubricant, which is important in life. Although people usually consume their alcohol in a responsible manner, the abuse of these products can bring about harmful societal and health consequences for some individuals. A combined approach towards policy making for alcohol which incorporates policies at the individual and societal levels is required. The policies must include the following.

- **Individual level**: to safeguard wellbeing and health, offer protection from harm, increase the understanding of harms and benefits, and promote a change in behaviour. It should encourage positive and discourage negative drinking patterns, improve the ability of individuals to make informed decisions and ensure personal choice and freedom, without unduly impinging upon the freedoms of others.

- **Societal level**: to reduce the burden of harm due to alcohol misuse, decrease the overall cost to society, provide treatment and support services for those who are harming themselves or have been harmed by others' abuse of alcohol, ensure public safety and to create an informed society.

ICAP (2014e) propose that particular attention in the development of policy approaches is required especially in areas where the potential for positive and for negative outcomes exist. They suggest that these include:

- responsiveness to changes in the role of alcohol in society, especially under conditions of social and economic transformation;
- unencumbered availability while protecting those at risk of harm;
- responsible practice around advertising and promotion;
- education for the public;
- provision of health care for those who need it;
- responsible service of alcohol;
- product quality and integrity.

The challenge in developing policies that can address these areas is to create an approach broad enough in scope and emphasis to involve and satisfy the concerns of all sectors, public and private, governmental and nongovernmental (ICAP, 2014e).

Setting a context for adopting alcohol policies

If you are going to adopt a combined approach towards your policy making for alcohol, which incorporates the individual and societal levels, then you must consider the potential benefits to be increased and the potential harms to be reduced.

- **Potential benefits**: the economic, societal and health contributions of alcohol, which includes employment and revenue from the distribution, sales, manufacturing fields, plus the tourism, hospitality and retail industries. Production in some regions or countries may be vital to their economic sustainability especially in rural areas. Please refer also to Section 5.4 for a wider discussion of the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption.
- **Potential harms**: Stockwell et al (1996) highlight that these harms are traditionally associated with abusive or excessive drinking patterns, which cost society in the workplace (see Chapter 6); through the medical costs associated with accidents and injury at home, other venues or on the road (Chochinov, 1998; Nelson and Wechsler, 2003), through violence and aggression, sexual activities including pregnancy, disease, unwanted sex (Singh et al 2001; Ferrins-Brown et al, 1999). Please also refer to sections 5.2 and section 5.3 for more on the risks of alcohol consumption.

Prior to any policy being implemented you must also consider if (a) the benefits of implementation exceed the costs, or the other way round and (b) if all the variables (including the less obvious) have been fully assessed (Gmel et al 2003; Single and Easton, 2001). These considerations should assist you in deciding on the best policy approach which increases the benefits and reduces the harms of the policy to society.

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10.2 Policies to control alcohol consumption

Reduce alcohol consumption

Alcohol policies were usually based on the association between a country's average level of consumption per person and their incidences of medical and social problems in the overall population (Babor and Del Boca, 2003; Ledermann and Tabah, 1951; Saunders and DeBurgh, 1999). This approach, which is used by many countries today, is aimed at reducing overall consumption, which should lead to reductions in alcohol related incidences.

Restrict its access and availability

This control traditionally covers entire countries, regions or areas depending on the legislation in place. It will also contain measures which control some of the following elements: restriction of licensing hours, banning the sale on certain days, pricing, taxation and duties, limiting the number of alcohol sale and service retail premises, setting minimum age limits for consumption, operating state-run monopolies to control sales, or in some circumstances total prohibition.

These control measures can also include cover restrictions on the marketing and advertising of alcohol. Grant and Litvak (1998) and Stockwell et al (1993) maintain that these types of measures are flawed because of their inability to distinguish between the moderate and the abusive consumer. Norstrom (2001) and Rehm and Gmel (1999) agree and add that these measures lack flexibility and fail to react to the individual or group needs at which they are aimed, especially harmful consumers.

Adopt a standardized approach for every country

Heath (2000) highlights a major flaw of this policy, arguing that drinking has been around since the dawn of time and the practices and traditions which follow its use in many cultures are tightly ingrained. For this reason, alcohol control policies which don't suit the local culture will not work. Ramstedt (2001) adds that because every country across the world contains their individual rituals, attitudes and beliefs in relation to alcohol, if you try to create a standardised approach for every country and every setting, the results are likely to differ in their intended outcomes.

Structuring alcohol policies – areas to consider

To structure policies which will deliver sustainable and effective results, you must recognise the role of alcohol in society and the potential risks and benefits associated with its consumption. Policies need to be relevant, practical and