

# Summary

This report is on a study of ‘Alcohol and Poverty’ commissioned by the development agency FORUT (Norway). The study ran from June 2002 to June 2003. It covered several settings specified by FORUT, as the agency commissioning the study. These settings included urban overcrowded communities (commonly referred to as ‘slums’), dry zone and wet zone rural communities, an estate sector community and a setting of persons internally displaced. To provide better coverage, a predominantly Roman Catholic ‘fishing’ community was added to the list originally provided.

## Methodology

The methodology was principally an in-depth qualitative inquiry through trained and regularly supervised field assistants. The in-depth component required the field assistant to be in the given community for a period of at least ten days. There were seven locations so studied. This was supplemented by a brief inquiry in three other settings to obtain greater coverage. An ‘informal’ entry was used to study eight other urban settings within the capital Colombo.

In addition, a short questionnaire exploring quantitatively some variables connected to alcohol use was administered at the end of the qualitative study.

## Principal findings

### Poverty

‘Poverty’ could refer to many things, including a limitation in richness of people’s lives, poor income or lack of basic needs. All of these, unsurprisingly, went together in most of the settings that we studied. Lives were limited in the range of things to be involved in or to do, in variety of interests, in aspirations to aim for and in comforts and range of opportunities to enjoy leisure. We found that people with poor income generally, but not always, had poorer or more limited lives. But poverty of lives was not always a function of poor income.

Poverty seemed strongly to imply uncertainty and a lack of control over the future. Many had such regular and routine lives, with so little variation, that they could forecast today the routine they would have to follow on any given day in the future, even ten years hence. But such persons too still felt uncertain about the future. They were still at the mercy of such things as droughts and other natural disasters. Any possible variation from a routine and unchanging life could occur only due to a calamity!

Among the economically deprived there was a great deal of intra-group differences. The poor are of many levels, but some common features that were evident are listed below.

### **Porosity**

Many of the most poor in the city are crowded together. Much of the character of their lives stems from being unable to 'wall themselves off', for example as a family, from what happens in their community. Most of the poor in the village and the not-so-poor in the city have a slightly better defined space, a boundary. But porosity is found in rural settings too, particularly among those living in 'camps' for the internally displaced, the estate workers living in the line houses, and in the fishing community.

Because of not having a boundary beyond which the rest of the world or community cannot intrude (or 'porosity' of the living space), the poor in the city's overcrowded tenements find it difficult to improve economically. Especially so if others around them do not particularly want them to. This phenomenon has major implications for those living in such circumstances and for those working for development in such settings.

Porosity has other important consequences too. The lack of private space makes it difficult to resolve conflicts in private. 'Loss of face' has to be avoided and, strangely, there is probably more fighting and aggression where people cannot have a boundary between themselves and the rest of the world. Or the fighting is more visible.

### **Envy and jealousy**

A feeling of 'envy' for anybody who rises above the rest was strongly evident. Whether this tendency, to want to keep all others no better than oneself, is a feature outside this kind of community has to be

studied. But it certainly is a strong element in these communities. Many of our informants have referred to this as 'jealousy'. This tendency is most evident in relation to money and material possessions, and was common to both rural and urban settings.

More subtle improvements are envied too. A couple that is happy together will be envied. There may even be attempts to impede their wellbeing. A man who does not consume alcohol daily with the crowd can be targeted in the same way.

### **Visible consumption**

People spend money on things that give them social credit. We found that there are massive expenditures on alcohol for 'celebrations' in poor families. It is almost as if they want to be envied their expenditure. At the same time as they complain of others wanting to keep them down because of envy or 'jealousy' there is a desire to do exactly the things that make other people envy them. Show off is a kind of must. The need to be envied, or to get social credit, is probably an important factor that keeps people poor. Families getting into debt, and having to pay interest of over ten per cent per month for life, was reportedly common following even a single celebration such as that for a daughter reaching menarche.

### **Lack of control**

Poor people seemed to have more direct pressure applied on them than the rich, regarding how they should live. Others in the community could directly demand conformity. This applies even to how they choose to conduct a 'private' event.

Parents, in a poor community, who did not wish to have a party when their daughter reached menarche, could be asked to explain why. Some informants said that they could even be forced to change their decision.

## **Criminality**

Criminal acts and violence appeared rather close to the surface in the poorest communities. Whether similar degrees of violence and criminality in richer communities are somehow hidden requires separate investigation. But the overall impression was that violent and aggressive behaviour was always lurking somewhere close to the surface. And it was as if this tendency strongly influenced life in the poorest communities. ‘Everybody’ recognized, for example, that the trade in illicit drugs and illicit alcohol should not be seriously challenged. The undertone of possible organized criminal elements was more evident in the urban settings.

## **‘Impossibility’ of overcoming poverty**

A repeated theme was that people could never emerge from poverty as long as they lived in their overcrowded urban setting, irrespective of the income they were able to earn. One factor underlying this is the ‘porosity’ of living arrangements that we referred to earlier. There is no room for gradual growth or development. Any progress is visible, and others are not keen to see just one family prosper. The sense was that others would not allow people to develop, and that the shared lives allow them to obstruct those who want to develop. There may be other barriers too, common to both rural and urban settings. One of these is that people have not only

to overcome their own personal and private poverty. They have to overcome the culture of poverty that is a part of their surroundings and their everyday life. It appears that acceptance of current circumstances is more adaptive than trying to overcome them.

## **Alcohol and other substance use**

Significant heroin use was almost entirely an urban phenomenon. Cannabis smoking was common in several rural settings. Alcohol was nearly everywhere. Alcohol and heroin are needed as an essential daily commodity by a significant minority of the poor in urban communities. Alcohol, mostly illicit, is similarly needed daily by a significant minority of the rural. Tobacco is too, but it is somehow less noticed or commented upon. Alcohol and heroin get much more attention than tobacco does.

An apparent discrepancy was found between the qualitative and quantitative study results. In the quantitative study 63 % reported that they never consumed alcohol. Only 17 % consumed more often than once a week. But the qualitative study yielded the impression that nearly every male wanted to have alcohol at weddings and celebrations and they would all protest openly about not being able to enjoy the event if there was no alcohol. But in the anonymous quantitative study just 32% said that the act of drinking was a pleasant experience while only 14% said that the experience of ‘being drunk’ was pleasant.

The data were analysed separately and could not be clarified with the respondents. There are several possible explanations for this seeming contradiction. One of these



is that, during social events, a minority of very vociferous individuals who want to promote alcohol are able to create an impression that becomes somehow the view of the whole group, most of whom remain silent.

### **Perceptions of 'alcohol user' and 'abstainer'**

The quantitative component of this study included a focus on how people saw alcohol use and users. In this, fifty nine percent of the total number of respondents rated alcohol users as less attractive than others (versus 20 % who found them more attractive). Similar ratings were obtained for whether alcohol users were seen as stronger or weaker than the others, more or less intelligent than others and whether they enjoyed life more or less than others.

On nearly all of these parameters the occasional drinkers and abstainers had close to identical proportions holding the same opinion, quite different from the proportions given by frequent (twice a week or more) drinkers. The classification of people into 'alcohol users' and 'abstainers' is often used in Sri Lanka. This division may be artificial. The more 'natural' division appears to be between the occasional users and non-users on the one side and the frequent users on the other.

### **Cost of alcohol**

The effect of alcohol on the community was enormous. It was not just the money spent on alcohol, but also its impact on norms of behaviour. But the monetary cost too was high. The findings of our quantitative study correspond to what has

generally been known and reported about the monetary expenditures on alcohol. Over 10 % of male respondents report spending as much as (or more than!) their regular income on alcohol. An additional number probably comes close to this. From a community development perspective this is a frighteningly large group – as they are probably the most abjectly poor and the most difficult to help.

In our qualitative study we discovered that 'calculation' of the expenditure on alcohol grossly underestimates the real cost. And this is not only because of people deliberately or unwittingly 'underestimating' the amount of money they spend on alcohol. There are two other mechanisms which came to light.

One of these is that heavier drinkers make others pay for their alcohol using a variety of tactics. And this expenditure is not registered either by those who consume the subsidized alcohol or by those who subsidize it. There are several means through which others are made to pay for part of the alcohol expenditures of the regular or heavier users. Heavier consumers ensure, for example, that every 'fun' occasion is made into an alcohol occasion. The feeling that much alcohol must be served for a 'proper' party or occasion is constantly reiterated. People who are new to a group or junior in a workplace or boarding are made to take up much of the bill for alcohol when they go out with heavier drinking seniors. Collecting money from light alcohol users and non-users too, when special events are organized is common.

The second mechanism through which some alcohol expenditures became invisible was the inattention to the amount spent during special occasions. Weddings,

'big girl parties' and other celebrations called for large expenditures. The heavy alcohol component of this was not included in calculations of 'average' alcohol expenditures. But this money was considerable. People reported becoming indebted, and having to pay high rates of interest to 'loan sharks', sometimes for life. Property, jewellery and other possessions were reported to be lost to the family in this way.

### **Behaviour and alcohol use**

People in the settings studied appeared to be allowed freely to transgress personal boundaries after consuming alcohol. This was probably more evident than in 'wealthier' settings. Those who wanted to control what others say, do and think were able, in the drinking setting, to tell them forcibly what they should do. The stronger person, during the drinking event, was given the right to comment and criticize the conduct of others in the community. Some informants claimed that people said to be 'jealous' used this opportunity to ensure that others didn't surpass them.

Domestic violence and gender based violence was almost taken for granted in nearly all settings as an 'automatic' consequence of alcohol use. Deprivation of the needs of children due to the father's heavy alcohol use was regarded simply as a misfortune of the children concerned, and not a matter for special concern or mention. Women being abused in the home by 'drunken' husbands was known, and even heard, but it was accepted as fate or as an evil caused by alcohol.

Striking differences too were visible in the way that alcohol affects behaviour. In an urban hotel, a wealthier group consuming

alcohol behaved very differently from a group of poorer workers who came there once to drink as a special treat. Only the poorer drinkers became noisy and conspicuous. Similarly, when alcohol was used surreptitiously in places where it was prohibited, people did not become loud and aggressive.

### **Alcohol and public norms**

Many informants highlighted the impact of alcohol on public norms. The 'license' afforded by alcohol to say and do things without too much concern about social consequences has consequences. It allows the physically strong or aggressive to dominate others. And it permits 'unacceptable' behaviour to be openly admitted. Previously unacceptable behaviour that people learn to brag about in drinking settings was said to become gradually more socially acceptable with time. These ceased to cause shame or embarrassment, even in non-drinking settings, after they were publicly boasted about while intoxicated.

There are norms about alcohol drinking too. It is almost shameful, for instance, to drink kasippu publicly, but it is not so shameful to be seen drunk on kasippu. Another example is the creation of strong norms commanding people to serve alcohol on special celebratory occasions.

### Main conclusions and recommendations

**T**here are a great variety of meanings attached to alcohol use. So also of behaviours related to use and reported subjective experiences with alcohol. Understanding these provides potential for interventions to reduce harmful consequences of alcohol use.

Whilst alcohol remains a great hindrance to development for the poor, some forms of alcohol use are celebrated as the very symbol of economic success. In the wealthier world the alcohol arena is one in which the search for a modern identity is acted out. How this influences the consumption and images within the poor world should be recognised, as also other unseen sequelae of modernisation.


Money spent on alcohol by poor families and communities is underestimated to a remarkable degree. This is not due simply to deliberate or unwitting under-reporting. A large part of alcohol expenditure is unseen. One reason is that others 'subsidise' a significant part of the alcohol used by heavy or regular drinkers, which neither party notices or reports. A second is that the sometimes huge and unbearable cost of alcohol for celebrations or events is not reported. Lifelong debt and misery too often follows just one family event. Another alcohol expenditure, unrecognised and unreported, is 'unexpected' money or illegally earned money being immediately 'busted' on alcohol. A cultural change is needed to make these expenses evident and to help communities address the social assumptions that lead to such expenses.

A large proportion of the poor is heavily into regular alcohol use – and an additional number in the city into heroin use as well. Families in these categories are likely to be the most abjectly poor and most in need of 'development'. They are also likely to be the most resistant and difficult to help progress. The risk that the most in need will be left out of, or fail to benefit from, all poverty alleviation or developmental endeavours is high indeed. Special, focussed, attention to this group of heavy alcohol and other drug users is essential if community development efforts are not to miss the most deprived.

Freedom from normal social norms when 'intoxicated' allows much abuse of weaker members of society, especially women. Children too are open to abuse in this way but the reports were mostly of women being abused. The 'authority' given to domineering individuals, to force others to conform by using alcohol-related aggressiveness, is used in other ways too. One such use is to forcibly prevent members of the community from improving economically. Attempts to help the poorer families to overcome their poverty have to address this 'forcible' retention in poverty, partly through force exerted under the guise of intoxication.

Acceptance and 'social cleansing' of socially disapproved behaviours occurs through these being openly proclaimed in the drinking setting. The impact of this goes beyond the drinking setting. When people are allowed to get away with boasting about breaking certain social norms, even whilst 'drunk', these norms gradually disappear.

Illicit alcohol use is rife, but its consumption is not associated with 'fun' and 'enjoyment'. This is probably just as well.



But the finding should be helpful in educating people about the social modulation of alcohol effects.

Poverty has many expressions. In the worst instances, it is associated with hopeless apathy. This was particularly visible among those who had been displaced.

Envy or 'jealousy' and a tendency for communities to obstruct, actively and deliberately, the possible economic development of their neighbours are reported to be widespread. Those who don't want others to progress use subtle coercion and extortion, often under cover of 'alcohol-induced' criticisms or veiled threats. Many in overcrowded tenements believe they can never uplift themselves whilst resident there. The implications for development are that these social dynamics need to be addressed in a collective developmental effort or that people have to be provided avenues to escape the setting or its culture.

Families with much lower income than those in a 'poor' or under-serviced tenement enjoyed a better standard of living when they were resident in a different setting. This was associated with the adoption of more 'middle class' norms and aspirations. Much can be learnt about the interaction of low income with other factors in generating 'poverty', by studying the relative wellbeing of low-income earners who do not belong to a 'poor culture'.