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In this article, the Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD), a non-governmental organisation working to create an alcohol- and drug-free society in Sri Lanka, shares the lived experiences of young people as agents of change through its programs in the Monaragala and Hambantota districts from 2019 to 2023.

What: The program involved children and young people aged twelve years and above completing the “**A World Filled with Happiness**” workbook (**Sathutin Piri Ape Lovak**’ in Sinhala and **‘Santhosham Niraintha Emathu Ulaham**’ in Tamil). FISD developed the workbook to help children and young people become agents of change. The workbook aims to:

- (1) challenge positive expectancies and social norms leading to drug use and the consumption of alcohol,
- (2) reduce initiation of alcohol consumption,
- (3) build the capacity of children to challenge social norms and expectancies,
- (4) promote children as advocates and change agents in their families and communities.

Why: While Sri Lanka has relatively low alcohol consumption compared to other countries in the region and does not have a predominant drinking culture, drinking patterns are changing, and the alcohol marketing policy environment is weak (Athauda, et al., 2022). In 2021, the Global Burden of Disease study estimated that there were 3,451 alcohol-related deaths in Sri Lanka, a 5% increase from 1990 estimates, making alcohol use the top three behavioural risk factors in the country, following dietary risks and tobacco use (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2024). In 2015 the economic cost of alcohol-related conditions in Sri Lanka was estimated at USD 885.86 million (Ranaweera et al., 2018). While low compared to regional and global levels, alcohol per capita consumption in Sri Lanka has increased from 2.31 litres in 2010 to 2.58 litres in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2022). At the population level, alcohol consumption has been identified as a contributing factor in the high number of incidences of deliberate self-harm, suicide, domestic violence, poverty, malnutrition, and traffic injuries in rural areas (Senanayake et al., 2018; Schölin, et al., 2022).

Despite a ban on direct alcohol advertising to minors, young Sri Lankans, especially school-going adolescents, are exposed to alcohol marketing through social media and other platforms (Senanayake et al., 2018). Such exposure to alcohol marketing has been associated with suicide attempts, a distraction from education, and delinquent behaviour (Senanayake et al., 2018). The 2016 Global School-based Student Health Survey in Sri Lanka

showed that 3.4% of the students had consumed alcohol. The percentage was higher among older students, and those who had more than a few sips had their first drink before they turned 14 years old (Senanayake et al., 2018).

The Sri Lankan National Policy on Control of Alcohol encourages the active participation of civil society organisations in implementing alcohol control. However, insufficient mechanisms and structures limit civil society organisations’ contribution. While there are existing policies to address issues related to alcohol and drugs, there are weaknesses in the legal system and policy loopholes that hinder progress in implementation. Supporting children and youth’s involvement could be one way to reverse this situation and increase their participation. FISD’s factfinding survey in 2019 showed that children and young people are considered important family members, and the family and community recognise child-led initiatives.

How: FISD introduced the children’s workbook – *A World Filled with Happiness* – which focuses on ten main areas that challenge positive expectancies of alcohol and drugs:

- 1) understanding the health harms of consuming alcohol and drugs,
- 2) understanding the social rejection and damage to self-image that alcohol and drugs create,
- 3) understanding the harm it does to the dignity of a person,
- 4) understanding the economic harm it does to a person, family, and the village,
- 5) understanding the difference between true happiness and fake/earned happiness that alcohol promoters create,
- 6) understanding the importance of peaceful problem-solving methods and communication,
- 7) understanding the promotional strategies backed by the alcohol and drug promoters,
- 8) understanding the mythical connection between alcohol and the behaviour created by social norms,
- 9) understanding the importance of creating a world with no alcohol and drugs and,
- 10) understanding the importance of celebrating an alcohol- and drug-free life.

Who: 107 youth aged 12 years and above completed the workbook. After completing the workbook, all 107 children and youth reported that they understood how alcohol negatively influences and affects the individual, family, and community. This contrasts with their beliefs before they completed the workbook. Before FISD introduced the workbook, children, and young people (and adults) had positive expectancies that drinking alcohol is normal, fun, shows maturity, provides pleasure, brings out manliness, justifies misconduct, decreases tiredness, helps to forget problems and recall old memories, and increases recognition among peers.

1: A Beautiful Village Clean and Free from Alcohol and Drugs

Young people from the Kekulu Child Club were motivated to create a beautiful, clean village free from alcohol and cigarettes based on the first workbook activity, which focuses on the theme “Let us live in a village with no smells of alcohol and drugs.”

After completing this lesson, twenty-six young people from the Kekulu Child Club, which FISD formed in the Ilukkumbura village of Monaragala district, identified the abandoned Alanmulla

Community Hall as a gathering place for men who drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes, making it scary, dirty, and unsafe. These young people, using the skills they learned from the workbook, gathered, planned, and initiated a small project called 'Beautiful Village' to address this issue. Here is a testimony from one of the members of the Kekulu Child Club.

"My favourite lesson in the children's workbook is the first lesson about 'let us live in a village with no smells of alcohol and drugs.' After completing that lesson, we, the children, started to find places where people gather to drink alcohol. We identified a land area surrounding the abandoned Alanmulla Community Hall that young adults are using to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes. We realised that if it continues like this, more youth in the village will get used to alcohol and cigarettes and ruin their lives. We wanted to intervene before more places like this would become spots for drinking alcohol. Therefore, we got together, removed the garbage, installed garbage bins, and cleaned that area, which had been polluted by throwing alcohol bottles and beer cans; we planted flower plants and fruit trees there and installed a permanent board with alcohol and drug prevention slogans. We collected money for this work from the village people. Some individuals had questioned our work on preventing alcohol and drugs at the beginning. They underestimated us, but many individuals in the village encouraged and helped us. Now, I am very happy to say that after this initiative, no one drinks alcohol or smokes cigarettes in the Alanmulla Community Hall area, and no empty bottles, cans, or garbage are found" (boy, 16 years old).

The children's club made significant progress in advocating against alcohol consumption. The initiative received overwhelming support from the elders. Active participation from adults and elders has led to a positive shift in behaviours related to alcohol consumption. The village elders also provided financial support and are actively involved in maintaining the Alanmulla Community Hall area, including watering plants and ensuring cleanliness. As a result, the area has transformed into a beautiful and clean environment, with the active involvement of children and youth. Other community-based organisations in the area supported the young people's initiative by organising Shramadana or volunteer activities to maintain the safety and cleanliness of the area.

2: A Family Free from Alcohol

Some of the young people who completed the workbook have become advocates against alcohol and drug consumption within their families. It is within their families that young people often witness the impacts of alcohol firsthand. One inspiring testimony illustrates how a young person was able to help her father overcome his struggles with alcohol and appreciate the true happiness of family life.

"My father used to drink alcohol several times a week. He said that he drank alcohol to reduce tiredness due to his hard work. So, I shared what I learned from the 'A World Filled with Happiness' workbook with my father. I made him understand that drinking alcohol does not reduce exhaustion but increases it. Also, I did not talk to him the day he came drunk with a bad smell of alcohol. I showed him the cost of alcohol and cigarettes and pointed out the useful things that we could do with that money. Also, I told my father that I felt very ashamed to see what he was doing after drinking alcohol. Over time, I observed a massive change in my father, and he started looking at my 'A World Filled with Happiness' work-

book. Now, my father has completely stopped consuming alcohol and cigarettes; he spends more time with us after work. I am very happy now and focus more on my studies" (girl, 16 years old).

The testimony demonstrates how young people can create a safe space for adults to reflect on their attitudes and behaviours in relation to alcohol. At least 72 of the 107 youth who completed the workbook reported that they observed significant changes in family members who usually consume alcohol. They noted how their family members either reduced or stopped their alcohol consumption. These young people believed that individual understanding and awareness about the negative impacts of alcohol and drugs would lead to a gradual community change.

3: A Children's Library vs the Cost of Alcohol and Tobacco

The young people's advocacy and awareness of how much people spend on alcohol and cigarettes that could be used for productive activities were increasingly recognised by the community. The youth made the community aware of health issues associated with alcohol and drugs and how they were losing financial stability, reputation, quality of family, and social life. They encouraged the community to reduce or stop buying alcohol and cigarettes. A young person from the Andupalana Child Club shared their experience.

"After completing the lesson on 'Our money is for Us,' we thought about how much money the people in our village spend on alcohol and cigarettes a year. So, we did a small village-level survey. We found that our village people spend approximately 2.16 crore Sri Lankan rupees (LKR 21.6 million or USD 71,000) per year on alcohol and cigarettes. After that, we made leaflets and posters presenting the cost of alcohol and cigarettes and distributed them among the people. And posters were pasted all over the village. Then, we decided to start a children's library with the money spent on alcohol and drugs in the village. We talked to the community regarding our plan, and we were allocated a place in the village community hall to start the library. We collected money from the people. Now we have a library with three hundred books. Anyone in the village can visit the library, read, and borrow books" (boy, 17 years old).

At the start, the young people acknowledged that they did not have a proper understanding of the financial cost of alcohol and cigarettes. When they learned about the cost, this became an alarming situation for the children and youth, and it made them raise their voices and concerns about their family members' expenses for alcohol and cigarettes that go on to profit the alcohol and tobacco industries. Their initiative of starting a children's library brought positive changes to the community. Local officials also supported the children's library initiative, helping to add books to the library's collection. Their advocacy and awareness around this not only led to a reduction in alcohol consumption but also helped to establish a library that benefits everyone in the village.

What worked?

The examples show that when children and young people have access to proper knowledge and first-hand information on the impact of alcohol and drug use in their communities, they can effectively plan and implement interventions to prevent and reduce the consumption of alcohol and drugs in their communities. The scepticism about how children and youth could effectively

prevent and reduce alcohol use was overcome when the communities witnessed the results of youth initiatives.

Also, after their training with the workbook, the children and youth used social media to get involved in community mobilisation and policy advocacy. The children and youth used their newfound knowledge, skills, and expertise to make positive changes in the community as community mobilisers, activists, and policy advocates.

Lessons learned:

We believe that when children and young people work to promote the health and well-being of their communities, it will be increasingly difficult to market alcohol and traffic drugs into the communities. In addition, while the alcohol industry has increasingly used social media to promote alcohol, the youth's proficiency in creatively using social media could be used to counter alcohol marketing.

While children and the youth can be active agents of change toward challenging the positive expectancies of alcohol and drugs, other actors in the community could also be more active in providing support for children's and youth initiatives. As children and the youth advocated for community-based organisations to include the prevention of alcohol and drugs in their action plans, the community and local officials were increasingly engaged in initiatives to prevent alcohol and drugs in the community. However, there is still room for high-level policymakers and elected government officials to integrate and support such initiatives and allocate resources for children's and youth initiatives in their communities.

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