



“If you save the money instead of spending it on alcohol, our family can celebrate the New Year with joy and happiness.”

Thambadi Child Club – Kytes

Preventing Alcohol and Drug Use in Communities in Sri Lanka

FORUT Civil Society Impact Series



Summary

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Summary

Forum for Rural Income and Environmental Development Services (FRIENDS) has implemented community-based alcohol and drug prevention initiatives in Sri Lanka since 2011, mobilizing women, children, and youth through village organizations using FORUT prevention methodologies. Recognizing the high risks associated with the Sinhala and Tamil New Year period, the organization conducted a community mobilisation across nine project locations in April 2026. Forty-eight women's groups and forty-seven child clubs developed and displayed 190 awareness banners encouraging for alcohol-free families and communities. The initiative strengthened community engagement, amplified the voices of women and children, and promoted healthier, safer, and more peaceful environments while highlighting the continuing need for sustained prevention efforts.

Acknowledgements: FRIENDS and its community level project officers would like to extend their gratitude to the members of the child clubs and women's groups who participated in this campaign. This campaign would not have been possible without the active participation and collaboration of the members of the child clubs and women's groups in the communities where FRIENDS launched the campaign. The complete list of child clubs and women's groups are listed in the appendix.



A Community Initiative for the Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Use

What:

The intervention, titled “A Community Initiative for Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Use,” is a community mobilization programme implemented by FRIENDS. Since its establishment in 2011, FRIENDS has worked with women, children, and youth to address alcohol and drug-related harms in vulnerable communities. The initiative combines community mobilization, awareness raising, advocacy, and empowerment to reduce harmful alcohol use and strengthen family well-being.

Why:

Alcohol remains a risk factor for major public health and social challenge in Sri Lanka. Among adults aged 18 and older, current yearly alcohol use is reported at approximately 43.3% for men, compared to just 1.2% for women (Ministry of Health Sri Lanka, 2021). Harmful drinking patterns contribute to non-communicable diseases, domestic violence, road traffic accidents, mental health problems, and poverty. Rural communities are disproportionately affected because alcohol consumption reduces productivity and household income (Samarisinghe, 2014). Women and children bear a significant share of the consequences, including emotional distress, violence, neglect, and reduced educational opportunities (Laslett, et al., 2025; Sveinhaug & Endal, 2015).

The Sinhala and Tamil New Year period during the month of April is particularly associated with increased alcohol consumption. Media reports and community observations consistently show rises in alcohol-related conflicts and accidents during festive periods (Lanka News Web LNW, 2025). Women and children often report being unable to enjoy celebrations because of the behaviour of intoxicated family members. These realities provided a strong rationale for community mobilization and implementing a targeted awareness campaign during April.

How:

FRIENDS adopted FORUT prevention methodologies emphasizing community ownership, participation, and behaviour change (Bakke & Endal, 2015). The programme mobilized existing women's groups and child clubs to design locally relevant messages. Participants developed emotional and persuasive slogans encouraging fathers and husbands to remain alcohol-free for the benefit of their families.

FRIENDS conducted training sessions to discuss alcohol-related harms, communication strategies, and campaign implementation. Community members identified high-visibility public spaces and coordinated with leaders from community organizations to display banners. Field officers provided technical support and monitored campaign activities. Various community groups utilized WhatsApp to expand the reach of the campaign.

The campaign began on April 9 and continued throughout the festive season. FRIENDS, along with women's groups conducted monitoring which documented public responses, challenges, and examples of positive engagement. Lessons learned were consolidated through discussions with field teams and community representatives.

Who:

The primary target group consisted of men who consume alcohol and drugs, particularly fathers and husbands whose behaviour negatively affects family environments. Secondary target groups included women, children, and youth who experience the consequences of alcohol use. The intervention was implemented in Kayts, Karaveddy, Maruthankerney, Mahakumbukkadawala, Pallepola, Meegahakiula, Madagama, Madulla, and Kandekatiya locations.

A total of 47 child clubs, comprising 526 children, and 48 women's groups, with 484 members, participated in this initiative. All these women groups and majority of child clubs which FRIENDS helped to form were initiated through an ongoing Gender Economic Empowerment project funded by FORUT. The wider community, including religious leaders, local authorities, and the general public, benefited indirectly through exposure to campaign messages and increased public discussion regarding alcohol-related harm.

SRI LANKA

Project Locations



The Outcome

The intervention generated significant outcomes at community level despite being a relatively low-cost initiative. One of the most notable achievements was the active participation of women and children (526 children, and 484 women). The involvement of 95 community groups (women's groups and child clubs) demonstrated strong local ownership and highlighted the willingness of communities to address alcohol-related issues collectively.

In total, 190 banners were designed and displayed by community groups across key public locations. Community groups designed the banners and decided on the locations for the banners' placement in the village. Each village displayed two banners. The visibility of the campaign during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year period ensured that messages reached large audiences when they were most relevant.

Community members reported that the messages encouraged discussions within households regarding alcohol consumption and family responsibilities. The financial burden of alcohol use, its impact on family relationships and responsibilities, and its negative effects on health and children's well-being were among the key issues that came up during these household discussions.

The campaign strengthened the confidence and leadership skills of women and children. Participants reported that the campaign contributed to increased awareness and discussion within their villages, particularly around alcohol-related harm and safe and peaceful family environments. Child club members demonstrated creativity and commitment in developing and sharing messages with their peers, families and community members.

Community responses varied across locations. In Meegahakiula, Marathankerny and several other villages, community members openly supported the campaign and shared banner images on social media platforms, extending the reach beyond project areas. Fathers in some communities assisted with banner installation and expressed appreciation for the initiative.

However, resistance was also observed. In Karaveddy and Kayts, some banners were removed or damaged, and field officers experienced intimidation from illegal alcohol sellers in the villages. Community groups and field officers identified the illegal alcohol sellers and reported the sellers' vandalization of the banners to local leaders. These incidents underscored the sensitivity of alcohol-related interventions and highlighted the influence of individuals benefiting from alcohol consumption and sales. Nevertheless, the campaign teams remained committed and documented these challenges as evidence of

the need for sustained advocacy. This serves as an important lesson to establish strong partnerships with local leaders to help FRIENDS manage such incidents and protect child clubs and women's groups.

The initiative also contributed to broader community development outcomes. Women's groups reported increased solidarity and collective action with the support of rural government officers and members of the community. Child clubs gained recognition within their communities and strengthened their relationships with local civil society organizations, particularly women and youth groups and child protection officers. The campaign encouraged conversations about domestic violence, child protection, and financial management, demonstrating the interconnected nature of alcohol-related harms.

Importantly, the intervention reinforced FRIENDS' long-term commitment to prevention. Communities acknowledged that one-time awareness activities are insufficient and requested continued engagement through education programmes, counselling services, and youth development initiatives. The experience demonstrated that prevention efforts can be effectively integrated into existing community structures and implemented with limited resources.

Although behaviour change is a long-term process, the campaign succeeded in placing alcohol prevention prominently within the community during a period of higher risk for alcohol harm. The initiative established a foundation for future interventions and strengthened partnerships between community organizations, families, and local leaders.

Long-term commitment is key to prevention

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“Dad, isn’t our little smile worth more than a bottle? Please don’t come home drunk and ruin our New Year again this year.”

Demadaoya village in Pallepola, Bosath Child Club.



“Because Dad no longer drinks alcohol or smokes cigarettes, all of us can come together and celebrate the New Year traditions as one family this time.”

Janakagama Village in Pallepola, Pipena Kekulu Child Club



“Dad, please save the money you spend on alcohol and cigarettes. Let us spend the New Year happily.”

“We, the little ones are the happiest during the New Year. Please don’t come home drunk and take away our happiness, Dad.”

Udumulla Village in Madulla, Dilenatharu Child Club



“If you save the money instead of spending it on alcohol, our family can celebrate the New Year with joy and happiness.”

Thambadi Child Club – Kytes





“May this new year be a safe and alcohol-free new year.”

Self-employed women’s group in Marathankerny



“This Year, Our new year is truly prosperous and joyful, because my husband has put aside the bottle of alcohol and chosen the happiness of our family.”

Self-employed women’s forum - Meegahakiula



“This time, we too have a prosperous new year. My husband gave up drinking. Choose the happiness of the family.”

Self-employed women's forum - Meegahakiula



“We, the children, are the ones who look forward to the new year with the greatest joy. Please don’t come home drunk and take away our happiness, father.”

Pokarappu School, Maradankerny Jaffna



Nishantha Kumara

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On Migahakiwula Kattawatta Road, at the junction where it turns onto Welala Landa Road, there was a wonderful banner that read:

“This New Year, our father doesn’t drink. He doesn’t quarrel. He doesn’t hit our mother. And we’re not afraid anymore.”

Thankfully, this New Year, that heartfelt wish has come true – not only for many fathers, but also for many older and younger brothers.

What worked?

Several factors contributed to the success of the intervention. First, the campaign was community-led (Gates et al., 2026). Rather than imposing messages externally, women and children developed their own advocacy materials. This created a strong sense of ownership and ensured that messages reflected local realities.

Second, the timing of the intervention was highly strategic (Srisuk et al., 2026). Conducting activities immediately before and during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year maximized visibility and relevance. Communities were already aware of increased alcohol consumption during this period, making them more receptive to prevention messages.

Third, the use of existing community structures proved highly effective. Women's groups and child clubs were already established and trusted within their communities. Mobilizing these groups reduced implementation costs and enabled rapid coordination across multiple locations.

Fourth, the campaign successfully combined emotional appeal with public advocacy. Messages directed at fathers and husbands emphasized family well-being rather than punishment or blame. This positive framing encouraged constructive dialogue and reduced resistance in many communities (Siriwardhana et al., 2012).

Finally, the intervention benefited from FRIENDS' long-standing presence in project areas. Years of engagement had established trust with community members and local stakeholders, creating an enabling environment for sensitive discussions related to alcohol use and its consequences.

The campaign demonstrated that even simple community interventions, when implemented strategically and collaboratively, can generate meaningful social impact and stimulate public conversation around difficult issues.

Lessons Learned

Several important lessons emerged from this initiative. Alcohol prevention requires sustained, multi-level action. While awareness campaigns are important, lasting behaviour change also depends on continuous education, counselling, and support services. Effective prevention further requires supportive policies and regulations, community mobilization, early intervention, accessible treatment, and collaboration among health, education, government, and community sectors. Thus, alcohol prevention should combine individual, community, and policy-level approaches and be sustained over time (Amul et al., 2025).

Second, women and children are powerful agents of change. Their participation challenged traditional assumptions regarding who can lead community advocacy efforts (World Health Organization, 2025; FISD, 2024). Future programmes should continue to invest in leadership development among these groups.

Third, resistance should be anticipated. Alcohol-related interventions often encounter opposition because they challenge established social norms and economic interests. (Amul et al., 2025). Organizations implementing similar initiatives should develop risk mitigation strategies and strengthen relationships with local authorities.

Fourth, prevention programmes should adopt a holistic approach (Amul et al., 2025). Alcohol use is linked with poverty, unemployment, mental health issues, and social exclusion. Addressing these underlying factors through livelihood development, youth engagement, and family support programmes will enhance the effectiveness of prevention efforts.

Fifth, documentation and evidence generation are essential (World Health Organization, 2021). Documenting community responses, participation, and implementation challenges supports learning and future programme improvement. Evaluating the effectiveness and sustainability of initiatives is equally important. The indicator-based monitoring framework through FORUT helps FRIENDS systematically track progress, identify gaps, assess achievements, and strengthen programme effectiveness and sustainability

Finally, partnerships matter. Collaboration between civil society organizations, community groups, local government institutions, and development partners is critical to sustaining prevention efforts (World Health Organization, 2024). Community ownership, combined with institutional support, offers the greatest potential for creating lasting change.

The experience of FRIENDS demonstrates that community mobilization remains a powerful strategy for reducing alcohol-related harm and promoting healthier, more resilient communities throughout Sri Lanka.

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Appendix:

List of women's groups

Diriya Shakthi Women's entrepreneurship Development & Welfare Forum- Pallepola
Dinuliya Women's entrepreneurship Development & Welfare Forum – Medagama
Madulla Women's entrepreneurship Development & Welfare Forum - Madulla
Prathibha Women's entrepreneurship Development & Welfare Forum – Meegahakiula
Dinuliya Women's entrepreneurship Development & Welfare Forum – Kandeketiya
Diriya Women's entrepreneurship Development & Welfare Forum – Kandeketiya
Women in Self Employed & Welfare Forum – Kytes
Women in Self Employed & Welfare Forum – Karaveddy
Self Employed Community Forum – Marathankerny

Child Clubs

Kandakettiya

Dilena tharu - Baduluoya east
Minimuthu - Ulpatha
Dilenatharu - Welwalathanna
Sihinatharu - Hawandhana

Kayts

Kathiresan - Paruthiyaddapu
Hero Star- Melincimunai
Gnanaoli - Naranathanai
Senthamizh - Naranathanai South
Vinmeen - Sinnamadu

Karaveddy

Ilanthalir - Karanavai center
Karavai - Karaveddy west
Ilanthalir – 2- Karaveddy east
Young lion - Nelliady north
Barathy - Alvai East

Madulla

Rantharu - Gonathalawa
Ellekona - Sihanada -
Dilenatharu - Thampalawela-
Minimuthu - Dambagalla
Dilenatharu - Udumulla
Sumithuru - Therella

Mahakumbukkadawela

Pipena Nelum - Undiyakulama
Pipena kekulu - kawayankulama
Dimuthu - Kandayaya.
Pubudu - Goda Govijanapadaya
Samagi - Rathmalgaswewa

Medagama

Samagi Sayura - Dahagoniya
Supipikusum - Bibilemulla
Arunalu - Senapathiya
Sinhapaura - Yakunnawa
Rawana - Pothubandana
Wishva - Diviyapola

Meegahakiula -

Pipena Kusum - Koomarika
Pipena kekulu - Keselwathta
Abhimani - Aggalaulpatha
Sitagi - Balagolla
Ankura Nanwana Diyawara- Morahela
Arunalu - Katawathta

Pallepola

Dinsara - Nilannoruwa
Pipena Kekulu - Janakagama
Dilena tharu - Janapadaya
Bosath Lama - Demadaoya
Dilena tharu - Madalanda

Maruthankeny

Vaththirayan - Vaththirayan
Kalaivani - Aaliyawalai
kalaimakal - Chempianpattu north
Alaiyosai - vettilaikkeny
Mulli - Mulliyan

The Alcohol, Drugs and Development Programme in FORUT

The Alcohol, Drugs, and Development (ADD) programme addresses alcohol harm at multiple levels by supporting community mobilisation as well as advocacy at national, regional, and global levels to put in place alcohol policy and legislation. Experience and knowledge from the local level will inform national, regional, and global advocacy, as well as the other way around. The programme relies heavily on research and evidence on high-impact alcohol control policies and tools, the strength of the partnerships between civil society actors and authorities, and the drive towards cultural change through transformations of dominant norms and discourses.

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