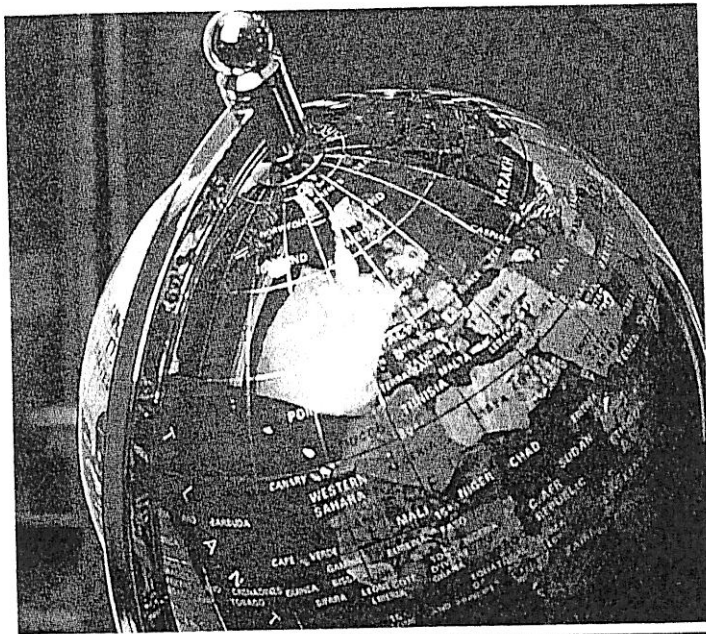


Globalisation and Alcoltol

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Alcohol has been a global beverage for centuries. It is the best known and most widely used psychoactive drug. It occurs in nature without human assistance. It is one form of the four universal beverages -- water, milk, fruit/plant juices (which may be fermented) and blood. Alcohol is consumed in almost all societies of the world and all societies acknowledge, either directly or indirectly, its good and its bad affects. Despite the universality of alcohol and more than 5000

years of recorded experience, alcohol and its problems continue to challenge governments, businesses, communities, and families.

Over time each society developed ways to regulate alcohol use to enjoy its benefits and minimize its harms, but today globalization has undermined many of these traditional controls on alcohol. As a result, problems from alcohol use are increasing.

For example, until five years ago liquor production in Thailand was tightly

controlled by the government, which could decrease liquor availability to control problems. Under pressure of globalization the nation privatized the liquor industry. At the same time globalization has internationalized the Thai alcohol market place and the result has been increased availability of alcohol at cheaper prices.

Community leaders and policy makers seem ill prepared to develop policies that encourage and reinforce practices that minimize problems caused by alcohol while still allowing those who wish to enjoy its benefits to continue to do so. This is, in part, the result of an incomplete understanding of the role of alcohol in society. Alcohol is neither entirely evil nor entirely good. It is a "mixed blessing."

Alcohol's Benefits

Alcohol plays an important part in the social and cultural life of any society, even those societies that officially ban it. Alcohol is often a part of religious ceremonies; it is the basic ingredient of a good deal of traditional medicine, it is an important part of hospitality, special celebrations and rites of passage. Alcohol enhances the enjoyment of food, and is an important socializing agent. It is an accepted mood modifier. Alcohol is an important source of government revenue. The manufacture and sale of alcohol directly and indirectly provides employment for thousand of people.

Costs-Visible and Invisible

Alcohol also contributes to a variety of health problems, including some cancers, heart disease, liver disease, suicide and injuries. Alcohol also causes social problems such as fighting and violence. It is commonly associated with motor vehicle crashes and is a source of workplace problems, such as reduced productivity

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and on-the-job injuries and property damage. In fact, a great many of the costs of alcohol use are invisible. Traffic crashes at new years and Songkran are well-publicized, but throughout the rest of the year alcohol-related traffic crashes are barely noticed. Just a few of the invisible costs of alcohol use are youth violence, family violence, lost workplace productivity and poor school performance.

Mixed Effects

The effect of drinking alcohol varies from person to person. The amount of alcohol consumed, the strength of the alcohol, the rate of consumption, the age and experience of the drinker, the physical size and gender of the drinker all influence the outcome of any drinking event. Even a person's expectations about the effects of alcohol can change its effects. College students, for example, who were told they are drinking alcohol at a party began act intoxicated even when their drink actually had no alcohol in it. The activities that follow drinking also profoundly affect its outcome. Drinking followed by driving an automobile is high risk. Drinking followed by sleeping is not.

While reducing per capita alcohol consumption is a good goal, a more useful approach would be targeting specific high-risk behaviors for high-risk groups.

Globalization And The Thai Situation

Neither globalization nor alcohol are new in Thailand, but in the last 20 years the rate of globalization is challenging traditional values.

Prior to the Ratanagosin period (pre 1781) drinking alcohol was looked upon as violating Buddhist teachings. Nevertheless drinking was still a part of important social events such as weddings, funerals, celebrations for new houses and new year. Drinking in the context of these special events, however, was not considered "drinking".

Early in the Ratananagosin period (1782-1982) drinking was no longer seen as necessarily bad and drinkers were not necessarily bad people. During the reign of King Rama 1 the first liquor production company was established and the taxation of alcohol began to generate revenues for the government. The elite, civil servants and other community leaders could be seen drinking in public. The literature of that time notes that drinking caused certain public problems,

especially fighting. Many of the "new" drinking practices observed one hundred years ago were introduced by foreigners and students returning from the West-the impact of an earlier globalization.

In the recent past liquor production has been privatized and the "old market" of domestic liquor has been replaced with a "new market" which includes beer, wine and imported liquor. Intense competition in the beer market has led to the increased availability and decreased prices. The beer, wine and liquor markets have become internationalized with imported products and joint ventures. Efforts to encourage economic development through programs like "one tambon-one product" (OTOP) have encouraged the local production of rice wine (Sarto) and fruit wines.

According to The World Health Organization per capita alcohol consumption in Thailand increased 333% between 1970/72 and 1994/96. Between 1990 and 2000 alcohol consumption increased from 7.46

liters per adult to 13.59 liters per adult. During this period beer consumption quadrupled and liquor consumption doubled.

Governments, businesses, communities, and families are all challenged by these rapid changes. Unfortunately, few scholars and researchers have taken the time to study the complex role alcohol plays in any society. Governments, businesses, communities and families are left with little data for sensible decision and policy development.

How Do We View Alcohol Problems?

The most widely accepted conclusion about alcohol's effects is that the larger the per capita consumption of alcohol in a society the greater the incidence of alcohol-related problems. The simplistic solution therefore is to reduce average per capita alcohol consumption. Unfortunately this strategy overlooks the many low risk roles that alcohol plays in any society. Low risk use is typically the most common use. A one-size-fits-all policy against alcohol that affects all alcohol users (both low-risk and high-risk users) would lack popular support and probably fail. While reducing per capita alcohol consumption is a good goal, a more useful approach would be targeting specific high-risk behaviors for high-risk groups. This approach would have popular support, would be a better use of resources, and would be more likely to produce measurable results in a shorter time period. Alcohol-related automobile crashes are an obvious focus for a targeted approach.

What Can We Do?

Automobile crashes occur all year and are not specific to the new year. Many automobile crashes are the result of causes unrelated to alcohol. Some good first steps to reduce alcohol-related crashes would be: 1) understandable laws that are well-publicized and known by the public. 2) consistent enforcement of these laws.

3) and meaningful and swift penalties for law breakers. The cost of such strategies cannot be ignored. Widespread publicity of the law is expensive, training and incentives for law enforcement and the judiciary who apply the law is expensive, the purchase of enough breathalyzers is also expensive and it would take time to introduce breathalyzer use all over the country.

However, there is widespread popular support to reduce alcohol-related traffic crashes and the case for action can more easily be made today than a few years ago. Such a focused effort apparently ignores other alcohol-related problems, but success in this area would provide insight and support for addressing other pressing alcohol-related problems in the future and may contribute to the overall reduction of total per capita consumption.

Not to be forgotten in this discussion is the role of traditional Thai values that have controlled alcohol problems for hundreds of years. Government policies, laws, and education strategies to reduce alcohol-related problems can benefit by being connected to Thai traditions and values: for example, programs that encourage women to drink less frequently and smaller amounts of alcohol than men, programs that encourage parents to supervise their adolescents more and teach them to use alcohol only in ways that do not bring trouble and shame to the family, and programs that promote the Buddhist values of no alcohol or the "middle road" concept of drinking in a moderate, low-risk manner. Developing policies and programs to reduce alcohol problems requires looking closely at traditional controls and seeking ways to update, reintroduce, and reinforce these time-tested strategies.

Also needed is good research and clear thinking that focuses on a specific outcome. Social scientists can contribute much to the understanding of alcohol use and how to reduce alcohol problems. Marketing models and business management strategies have something to teach public health advocates, traffic officials, and community leaders as we consider ways to enhance and reinforce potential social assets related to alcohol and reduce the known social costs. Rapid globalization makes these tasks more urgent.

