

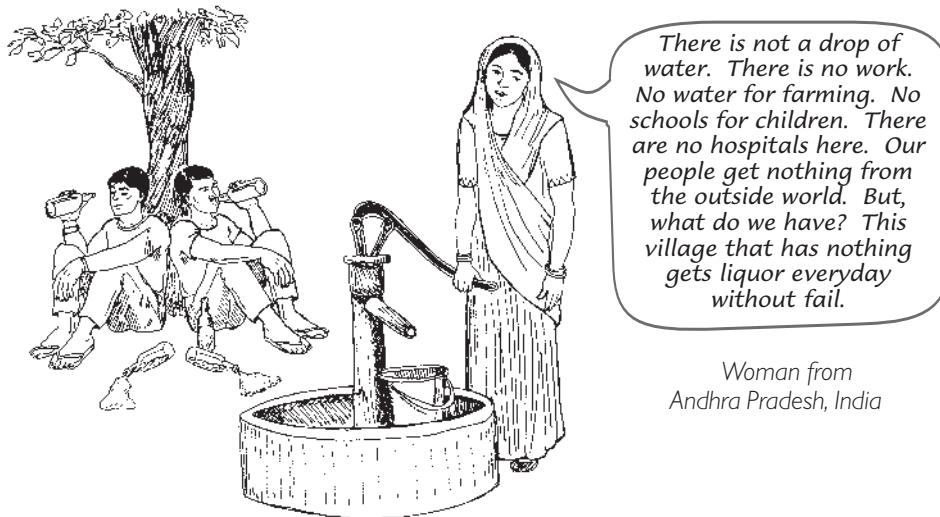
# Women's Health Exchange

A Hesperian Foundation publication  
for education and training



Issue No. 9, 2001

## Alcohol companies target the poor



Large alcohol companies are selling more and more alcohol in poor communities. To make people want to buy their alcohol products, companies often advertise alcohol in sly and dishonest ways. Sometimes they use types of advertising that are banned in many wealthy countries, like falsely claiming that alcohol is healthy. Companies also make alcohol cheap enough so people can continue to buy it.

In some countries, like India and Malaysia, governments have banned alcohol advertisements in radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. But the alcohol companies find other ways to advertise. They may fund or sponsor events where their alcohol brand and symbol or "logo" are shown on signs and T-shirts, for example. That way people connect the brand with a popular team or group. Companies may even offer prizes and sweepstakes to reward those who buy a lot of their alcohol. This type of indirect advertising means that people will

recognize and feel positive about a brand of alcohol even without advertisements.

Billboards (large public advertisements) and posters that promote alcohol surround poor communities around the world. Governments are often unwilling or unable to prevent this or to control what these advertisements say. Why?

*Continued on page 8...*



Drinks such as brew, beer, spirits, liquors and wine all contain alcohol.

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### From the editors

This issue provides information for communities that identify alcohol as a problem and want to take action.

To take action, it is important to understand the reasons why alcohol may be a problem. This issue focuses on one reason that is often overlooked: the sale and advertising of alcohol in poor communities. Discussing how companies sell and promote alcohol can be a helpful way for groups to raise awareness and organize others. See page 3 for an example of this kind of activity.

Learn about how one group organized against alcohol advertising in their community on page 6.

Although we do not address the reasons why someone may drink too much or how to overcome dependence on alcohol, you will find resources for this on page 6.

### Why is alcohol use a women's health issue?

More women have problems with alcohol now than in the past. And many women are hurt by alcohol because men in their families and communities drink too much. A woman may feel that it is her responsibility to solve her family member's problem with alcohol, especially if people make her feel embarrassed or ashamed. But problems with alcohol are beyond the power of any one woman to solve by herself. Read pages 2 and 7 for stories about groups of women who have worked to change the way their communities use alcohol.



## ***Uniting a community in Mexico to ban alcohol***

by Hilary Klein

The Zapatistas are a large social movement in rural Mexico. The movement is made up of indigenous people whose culture has existed in Mexico for thousands of years.

Many of the Zapatista leaders are women, and their voices are being heard for the first time.

When you ask women how their lives have been changed by the Zapatista movement, they say again and again, "the men don't drink anymore." Several years ago, the Zapatista communities agreed to pass a law banning alcohol.

Luiza, a 49-year-old woman from the village of Morelia, has organized with local women for many years. Luiza talks about what life was like before the ban:

"When the men drank more, there was no money in the house. The men did not care if there was enough food for the rest of the family. The women could not leave their houses. They did not feel safe walking around because there were drunken men who would bother them. Sometimes when a man had been out drinking, he would come home wanting to fight. When he was sober, he would think twice about what he had done and feel sorry. But the woman had already been beaten up."

Luiza explains how the women protested against the problems caused by alcohol:

"We began to organize with the Catholic Church and the Zapatista organization. In religious meetings, we talked about how alcohol was sold everywhere. We organized a march to protest the way men kill and die for alcohol. We marched 3 different times. Once we broke the windows where

*We, the Zapatistas, are struggling for land rights, women's rights, and control over our natural resources and local governments.*



they sell beer and poured the beer into the street."

The next step for the Zapatistas was to reach an agreement in all of the communities. Women spoke up about domestic violence and other problems with alcohol. People discussed how the Zapatista movement demands a high level of organization. They talked about how hard it is to organize and work together when people are drunk. They agreed that it would be better to save money for basic needs like food, medicine, and clothing than to spend it on alcohol. All the men and women in every community voted, and the decision was to ban alcohol. Once the Zapatista support base expressed that it did not want alcohol in its communities, it became law.

There are other reasons why the Zapatistas passed a law to ban alcohol. Throughout history, alcohol has caused a lot of harm to indigenous people. When the Europeans arrived in the Americas hundreds of years ago, they began to oppress the indigenous people in order to take control over the land and resources. Alcohol was an important weapon in the destruction of indigenous cultures and traditions. The Europeans who owned land often paid their workers partly in alcohol instead of money. And they traded

alcohol to the indigenous people in exchange for food. Many indigenous people came to depend on alcohol to ease their pain.

Today, alcohol still plays a strong role in the violence against indigenous people. Government soldiers occupy many Zapatista villages. Often, they bring alcohol with them. The soldiers know that alcohol divides the communities and weakens the Zapatista movement. And when the soldiers get drunk, attacks on people in the community are even more violent. If the Zapatistas are drunk, it is very hard for them to stop the violence. Banning alcohol is a way for the Zapatistas to resist violence.

The Zapatistas see alcohol as a drug that leads to violence and loss of community. There are signs in many Zapatista villages that say "**Drugs and soldiers, NO! Corn and peace, YES!**" Banning alcohol is part of the Zapatistas' struggle for peace and justice.

Hilary Klein works with indigenous women's groups in Chiapas, Mexico.



**Training Guide**

# Alcohol and Advertising

More and more, advertisements shape what we think and how we feel. Advertisements (ads) sell more than just a product. They also sell ideas or messages that encourage people to buy that product. Learning how to question messages in ads can be a powerful tool. It can help us understand some of the reasons we are attracted to things that are not always good for us, such as alcohol, cigarettes, or fast food.

Alcohol ads encourage people to drink alcohol. Companies spend a lot of time and money to create images and pictures in their ads that make drinking alcohol look attractive. The overall message is that alcohol will make life

better. In these ads, alcohol is a symbol of success, status, sexual ability, and happiness. But the ads don't acknowledge that alcohol problems can harm the health, success, and well-being of an individual, a family, and an entire community.

Looking closely at alcohol advertisements can help your group:

- Learn more about how advertising encourages people to buy and drink alcohol.
- Understand that advertisements often present ideas about alcohol that are not true.
- Find ways to communicate healthier and more truthful messages about alcohol to others in the community.

*You will need about 2 hours for the following activities. You may want to plan other meetings to develop alternative ads about the harmful effects of alcohol.*

## I. Identify alcohol advertisements.

Ask the group to think of alcohol ads that they see or hear. You can bring examples of alcohol ads to the workshop to give the group ideas. Have everyone share an ad with the rest of the group. Here are some ways to present different type of ads:

- Cut out alcohol ads in magazines and newspapers.
- Prepare a skit that copies a television or radio commercial about alcohol.
- Draw or describe an alcohol billboard near the community.

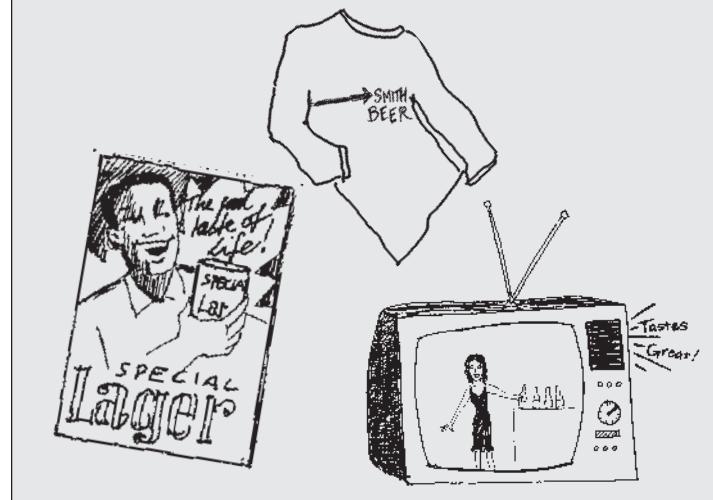
*In my community, people don't read magazines or newspapers or watch television, but everyone listens to the radio. I wrote down the words of a beer commercial and sang them at the workshop.*



### What is advertising?

Advertising is how a company tries to call attention to a product so that people will want to buy it. Some examples are:

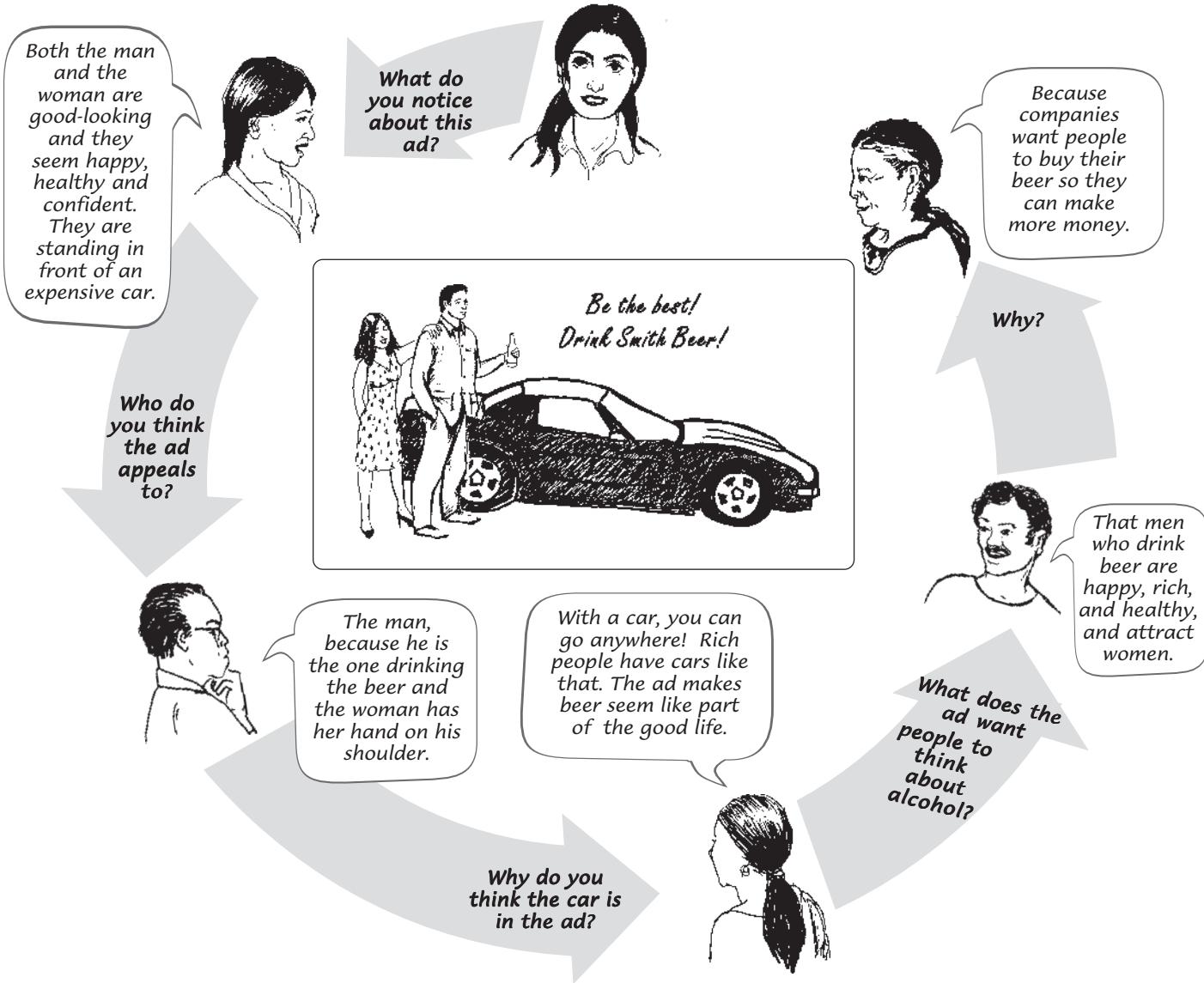
- Large public advertisements (billboards), magazine or newspaper ads, TV or radio commercials, or fliers
- Sponsoring sports events or teams, fashion shows, or musical concerts
- Providing free samples, free T-shirts, or sweepstakes and rewards
- Showing the product symbol or "logo" in a movie or TV show, or at a public event



**Training Guide****2. What do ads say about alcohol?**

It is important to help the group understand that ads sell more than just alcohol. They sell ideas that encourage people to drink alcohol. Companies choose pictures that send positive messages about alcohol to make it seem like people need alcohol to have a good time. Ask the group to

identify the messages and images in each of the ads brought to the workshop. It may help to point out different parts of an ad and discuss how they may appeal to certain people. Talk about who benefits from ads for alcohol. Here is one group's discussion of an ad:

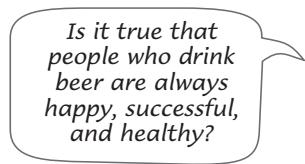
**Exploring the role of women in alcohol ads:**

While looking at alcohol advertisements, ask the group to discuss how women are represented. Often companies use sexual images of women to sell their products. A common example is when an ad shows only a woman's body, not even her face. This makes a woman look more like an object of pleasure than as a whole person who deserves respect. She may be dressed like the bottle of alcohol or even appear inside of it in a sexual position or in revealing clothes. Because sexual violence is often made worse when people drink too much alcohol, these types of pictures can send a dangerous message. The message encourages men to think that when they drink, they can have women too.



## Training Guide

### 3. The reality of alcohol is often different.



After identifying the messages in these ads, ask the group to think about whether or not these ideas are true.

Consider how problems related to alcohol affect individuals, families, and the entire community. Discuss the difference between these messages and the reality of alcohol problems. Write down the effects of alcohol on a separate piece of paper or on a chalkboard.



### 4. Create alternative messages about alcohol.

Large companies are not the only ones who can make ads. Some communities are using "popular ads" as a way to spread information about the harmful and unhealthy effects of alcohol.

Your group can create new ads with your own messages. Some may choose to make an ad that discusses the harmful effects when people drink too much. Others may want to

alter or even make fun of existing alcohol ads to reveal the messages companies use to sell their products.

Here are some ideas for different ads:

- Write a song or poem about the problems caused by alcohol in your community.
- Draw a picture that could be painted on a billboard or as a mural (painting on a public wall).
- Alter a magazine or newspaper ad by pasting pictures or messages on top of it.
- Develop a script for a radio "commercial."
- Act out a TV commercial with a new message.

Have everyone share their ideas with the rest of the group when they are ready.



*Encourage the group to use humor. For example, make up a funny skit based on a radio or TV commercial that everyone is familiar with. People often enjoy and pay more attention to humorous ads.*

### 5. Make a plan to share the messages!

Discuss as a group how these ads can be shared with the community. See the next page for ideas and resources to help your group get started.

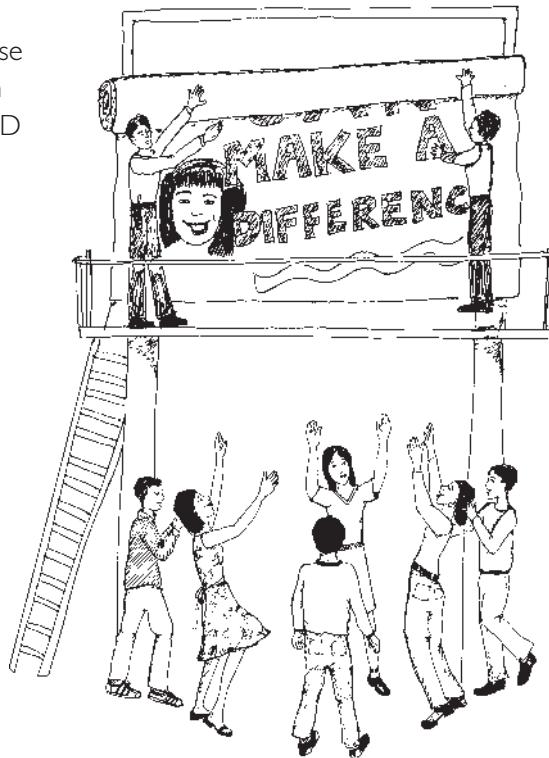


## A BOLD story: How one community organized against alcohol advertising

In the city of San Antonio, Texas (USA), a group of young people wanted to know if alcohol and tobacco companies were targeting the poor (as well as youth and minority groups). To find out, they decided to count the number of alcohol and tobacco billboards in the poor and wealthy areas of the community. The group found 2 billboards in a wealthy neighborhood and 84 billboards in a poor neighborhood of the same size. The youth could not believe how many billboards there were in the poor areas. Everyone agreed to take action.

First, the group decided to become an official community organization. They chose the name BOLD (Bi-cultural Organization for Leadership Development). Then BOLD contacted the billboard companies and made several demands:

- Take down all alcohol and tobacco ads from billboards near schools, churches, apartments, shops, and hospitals.
- Make a plan to decrease the number of alcohol and tobacco ads on billboards.
- Replace these alcohol and tobacco ads with positive messages created by students. The new messages should encourage staying in school, stopping violence, not using drugs, etc.



After 5 years of many meetings and press conferences, the billboard company finally agreed to take down billboards advertising alcohol products within the community. They also donated 200 billboards to BOLD so that they could put up new ads with positive messages created by youth. BOLD then held a poster contest for the youth in their community. The winners had their designs placed on billboards across the city.

"We started crying. It was our biggest victory ever," said

Nora Mardi, one of the group's leaders. "We started it together, and we finished it together!" BOLD's story shows that one group can make a difference.

### Contact information:

SAFB (San Antonio Fighting Back of United Way)  
Barbara Jordan Community Center  
2803 East Commerce  
San Antonio, TX 78203  
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Website: <http://www.safb.org>

BOLD is a youth-led group that received assistance from San Antonio Fighting Back of United Way (SAFB). SAFB is a program committed to empowering the community and to preventing substance abuse, crime, and violence. The program is part of the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County in Texas, USA.

### Resources for help and information about alcohol:

#### Books:

##### **Case Histories in Alcohol Policy**

This book presents stories of organizations that have worked to reduce alcohol-related problems in their communities in the United States. The entire book is on the Internet at the Trauma Foundation's website.

##### **Thirsting for Markets: the global impact of corporate alcohol.** By

David Jernigan. Available from the Marin Institute (see contact information)

#### Organizations:

##### **Alcoholics Anonymous**

World Services Incorporated  
PO Box 459 Grand Central Station  
New York, NY 10163, USA

##### **Institute of Alcohol Studies**

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##### **The Trauma Foundation**

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Fax: 01-415-282-2563  
E-mail: [tf@tf.org](mailto:tf@tf.org)  
Website: [www.tf.org](http://www.tf.org)  
(A list of international resources is available on their website.)



## Play about alcohol motivates community action in India

In Maharashtra, India, a women's group called MASUM decided to do something about alcohol-related problems in their villages. At first, women from one village decided to organize a ban on alcohol. After the women held several protests and meetings, the local politicians agreed to support the ban.

But there were many problems with the ban. The rich people felt that the ban did not apply to them. They kept bringing alcohol into the village. When the women tried to enforce the ban equally among rich and poor people, the ban on alcohol lost support. In the next local election, new leaders came to power that voted to stop the ban.

At this time the women's group along with other groups from neighboring villages, began to think of new ways they could organize around alcohol. The women wanted to change the way people thought about alcohol, through education. Because most of the people in their communities did not know how to read or write, the group decided to write a play about the problems alcohol can cause.

To help write their play, the women from Maharashtra held many meetings. They discussed why alcohol was so common in their communities, and what other problems were related to alcohol. This is what they found.

### **Who drinks in our villages, and why?**

In Maharashtra, almost all the people who drink alcohol are men. Most women believe that men drink because they feel tension or stress. The men work very hard but are never able to get out of debt. Some feel hopeless and angry, and they want to escape reality by drinking.

### **How does alcohol relate to women?**

Women suffer as a result of their husbands' drinking. They cannot rely on their husbands to support the household because the men spend their earnings on alcohol. Sometimes, men even lose their jobs because of their drinking. The women's group also felt that men who drink become irrational and violent. They accuse their wives or children of things they have



not done. Sometimes, other people in the village even blame the drinker's wife, saying that she is unable to control her husband.

### **How do the rich and powerful gain because of alcohol?**

The women observed that alcohol plays a role in local politics. During local elections, politicians give alcohol to their supporters in order to buy their votes. Politicians also use alcohol to keep themselves in power. When a new leader begins trying to change things in the village, local politicians may give him free alcohol and encourage his drinking. The politicians know that alcohol can make the person lose interest in helping his community and participating in local politics.

The women from Maharashtra also

noticed that in their villages rich people control and sell alcohol. They allow poor men to buy alcohol on credit, putting poor families into debt. These rich families also own a lot of the farmland in Maharashtra. Most men in the villages work on their farms. The poor women felt scared about standing up to these rich landowners, because they control both the sale of alcohol and their husbands' jobs. But they felt that something had to be done.

The women's group based their play on the community discussions and their personal experiences so people could relate to the story.

They performed the play in several villages and received a lot of attention. Eventually, the women were asked to share their experiences on television. As a result of the TV program, women's groups in nearby villages became active again. Some groups decided to organize a ban on illegal alcohol. Other groups took action to prohibit the sale of alcohol near schools. Also, MASUM started a program to help men to deal with their problems with alcohol and violence, and to raise awareness with youth.

MASUM faced many challenges when they first tried to ban alcohol. Instead of giving up, they changed their strategy to community education. This process has motivated people to better understand alcohol-related problems and to take action in many ways. MASUM's experience shows that ongoing dedication can lead to real and lasting changes.

#### **Contact information:**

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E-mail: masum@vsnl.com

## Alcohol companies target the poor, continued from page 1

### Governments depend on alcohol

We have no water, no light, no schools, no washing facilities but the municipality says that they will build a beer-hall for us. If we drink beer, the municipality can earn money so that one day we will have a water pipe. How much beer do I have to drink before my children can have water to drink?

— Man from Zambia

Most governments know that alcohol can be harmful. According to the World Health Organization, alcohol causes as much death and disability around the world as TB, malaria or measles. But governments in many countries benefit from the sale of alcohol. Some even depend on it. Taxes on alcohol sales may provide money for development projects or agriculture. The money may also be used to pay off government debts.

In addition, many governments in poor countries must seek help from international banks to start development projects. To receive help, a government must agree to a plan that the bank proposes.

This plan usually has two parts:

- 1) The poor country must cut its spending on social welfare programs — things like food subsidies, free school tuition, and health care.
- 2) The poor country must allow more foreign investment. This means the government must let foreign companies, including alcohol producers, open factories and sell their products freely.

When governments spend less on social welfare programs, families must spend more on schooling, food, and health care. There are also fewer services available to help people with health problems like alcohol abuse, or to provide education that can help prevent alcohol abuse. But by allowing foreign investment, more alcohol than ever is flowing into poor communities. So people are forced to deal with increased alcohol in their communities, but are not given the support to face the problems this may cause.

### What can communities do about alcohol?

*Beerhalls should not take the place of schools, and alcohol should not take food off the family table.*

— from Thirsting for Markets  
(See resources on page 6.)

Around the world, groups are working to change the way people use alcohol because of the problems it causes in their communities. Some groups focus on educating about the danger of drinking too much alcohol. Others have tried to ban alcohol or alcohol advertising from their village or town.



Not every community views alcohol the same way. And not every person who drinks alcohol has a problem or causes harm. It is important to include the entire community in discussing the situation openly. Many solutions involve people working to understand social causes for alcohol problems and deciding together what action to take.

**The Women's Health Exchange** is a publication of the Hesperian Foundation.

The Hesperian Foundation is a non-profit organization committed to improving the health of people in poor communities throughout the world by providing tools and resources for informed self-care. We believe that people can and must take the lead in their own health care.

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