Dialogue Summary

Alcohol Drinking and Young People in Lebanon: Potential Solutions to Delay Initiation and Reduce Harm

K2P Policy Dialogue convenes key policymakers and stakeholders to capture contextual information, tacit knowledge, views and experiences including potential options to address high priority issues. K2P Policy Dialogues are informed by a pre-circulated K2P Policy Brief or Briefing Note to allow for focused discussion among policymakers and stakeholders.

Dialogue Summary

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Knowledge to Policy | K2P | Center

K2P Dialogue Summary

Alcohol Drinking and Young People in Lebanon: Potential Solutions to Delay Initiation and Reduce Harm

Knowledge to Policy Center K2P

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Funding
IDRC provided initial funding to initiate the K2P Center

Acknowledgements
The policy dialogue meeting was arranged, organized and supported by the K2P Center. The views expressed in the dialogue summary are the views of the dialogue participants and should not be taken to represent the views of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Research Group or the authors of the dialogue summary.
The authors wish to thank the K2P core team including Diana Jamal, Rachel Ashkar, Clara Abou Samra, Nour Hemadi, and Lama Bou Karroum.

Dialogue
The policy dialogue about Alcohol Drinking and Young People in Lebanon: Potential Solutions to Delay Initiation and Reduce Harm was held on Jan 27, 2017 at the Gefinor Rotana Hotel, Beirut, Lebanon. The policy dialogue was facilitated by Dr. Fadi El-Jardali, Director of the K2P Center.

Citation
Saleh, R., El-Jardali F., K2P Dialogue Summary: Alcohol Drinking and Young People in Lebanon: Potential Solutions to Delay Initiation and Reduce Harm. Knowledge to Policy (K2P) Center. Beirut, Lebanon; February 2017

Contents

Preamble 2

Deliberations about the problem 2

Deliberations about Elements of an Approach for Addressing the Problem 6

Recommendations and Next Steps 13

Recommendations 13

Next Steps 16

Content

Preamble

The K2P Policy Dialogue, conducted on January 27, 2017, hosted 22 diverse stakeholders from multi-disciplinary backgrounds. These included representatives from

- Ministry of Public Health (MOPH),
- Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS),
- Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA),
- Ministry of Economy and Trade (MOET),
- Ministry of Tourism (MOT),
- Ministry of Interior (MOI),
- Ministry of Finance (MOF),
- International agencies (such as the World Health Organization), national agencies and programs, civil society groups, and non-governmental organizations
- The Alcohol Harm Reduction Research Group (AUB)

The policy dialogue was facilitated by Dr. Fadi El-Jardali, the Director of the K2P Center, in the presence of Dr. Walid Ammar, the Director General of the MOPH.

Deliberations about the problem

Dialogue participants discussed the overall framing of the problem of alcohol drinking among youth. All participants acknowledged the existence of the problem and agreed on the need to focus on the many factors that are leading to the problem. They highlighted the importance of framing the problem of alcohol drinking and the relevant harm reduction policies around "youth" as the issue of alcohol has broader societal factors making it difficult to be tackled unless the goal was harm reduction among youth. Participants also highlighted the sensitivity of alcohol and the harmful alcohol drinking especially that some families do not perceive youth drinking as a problem and, most importantly, youth do not perceive themselves having a drinking problem as opposed to other substance use problems

Background to the Policy Dialogue

The Policy dialogue was convened in order to support a full discussion of relevant considerations (including research evidence) about a high-priority issue in order to inform action.

Key features of the dialogue were:

1) Addressing an issue currently being faced in Lebanon;
2) Focus on different underlying factors of the problem;
3) Focus on four elements of an approach for addressing the policy issue;
4) Informed by a pre-circulated K2P policy brief that synthesized both global and local research evidence about the problem, elements and key implementation considerations;
5) Informed by a discussion about the full range of factors that can inform how to approach the problem and possible elements of an approach for addressing it;
6) Brought together many parties who would be involved in or affected by future decisions related to the issue;
7) Ensured fair representation among policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers;
8) Engaged a facilitator to assist with the deliberations;
9) Allowed for frank, off-the-record deliberations by following the Chatham House rule: "Participants are free to use the information received during the meeting, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed"; and
10) Did not aim for consensus. Participants' views and experiences and the tacit knowledge they brought to the issues at hand formed key input to the dialogue. The dialogue was designed to spark insights that can only come about when all of those who will be involved in or affected by future decisions about the issue can work through it together. The dialogue was also designed to generate action by those who participate in the dialogue and by those who review the dialogue summary.

Participants also expected that this problem will only increase and it will be evident in the new GSHS data, to be published later this year, due to the increased affordability and availability of alcohol mixes. These alcohol mixes are now present in multiple flavours and are easily accessible and socially acceptable among youth. Participants highlighted the importance of understanding not only the increased alcohol consumption among youth but also the quality of alcohol these youth are subjected to. It has been reported that low-quality alcohol is available in the market and its being advertised widely which requires an effective monitoring program for alcohol quality in the market.

The issue of increased alcohol drinking among youth is particularly evident among females in Lebanon. While between 2005 and 2011 there was a general increase in the youth alcohol consumption by 40%, this increase was even more evident among females, reaching a 120% increase. The participants highlighted the need for further research to understand the reasons behind the higher increase in female drinking. Furthermore, the importance of national surveillance was highlighted as a means to help monitor the problem and how it may be affected by interventions.

One of the participants shared the results of a new study in different universities in greater Beirut area. This study concluded that 14% of the youth surveyed had moderate-severe alcohol-related problems (as per the DSMV alcohol use disorders criteria). Most importantly is that those 7% with severe alcohol-related problems do not have anywhere to go as there are no existing alcohol-specific support systems. This fact was ascertained by multiple stakeholders due to the unavailability of detox and rehabilitation centres specific to alcoholism, not necessarily poly-substance users.

Underlying factors

Participants then proceeded to discuss the underlying factors of the problem. Most participants agreed on the multi-level factors approach to the problem including the familial, socio-political, environmental and individual factors. The stakeholders agreed that media, the extensive alcohol marketing, and the power of the alcohol industry are important underlying factors of the youth drinking problem. The participants then focused on the unavailability and/or inadequacy of the alcohol harm reduction laws in Lebanon. The available alcohol-

related policies and laws are scattered across different legal texts, in a non-comprehensive way. Furthermore, these laws are either outdated, incomplete, not implemented or not clear. For example, the minimum legal age is not clearly stipulated in any text. The law only holds alcohol servers responsible for serving those in a drunken state, charging them with a very minimal fine, in comparison with the high profit margin of serving alcohol. One stakeholder confirmed the need to have a law that holds responsibility on the consumers themselves as well. One of the participants stated that without having a significant penalty, laws are deemed incomplete and thus perceived as inexistent.

However, and even with these inadequate existing laws, they could be considered as a window of opportunity for future work provided that they are coupled with strong implementation and monitoring plans. Participants emphasized the importance of advocacy efforts by NGOs and academics in ensuring the proper implementation of effective and evidence-based laws amidst the industry's activities.

Deliberations

Deliberations about Elements of an Approach for Addressing the Problem

Dialogue participants discussed the two elements that were examined in the policy brief.

Element 1› Implement interventions at parents, schools and community levels

Deliberations about this element covered the awareness programs to delay alcohol initiation and to reduce substance use. All stakeholders agreed that the issue of early alcohol initiation among youth cannot be solved with a single intervention but with multilevel comprehensive programs and policies. The participants agreed that health education should be incorporated as part of a multilevel program targeting multiple problems faced by youth, including drug use, alcohol drinking, smoking and other mental health related problems. It was suggested that educational curricula have to be adapted and modernized to respond to the needs of youth through not relying only on educational messages and lectures. Youth have to be involved in the programs' development and delivery, specifically through peer education. New innovative ideas can be used such as involving them in scouts activities, media advocacy, E-health modules and social media messages. These programs should also focus on developing a sense of responsibility among youth towards their society. In return, the roles of municipalities, NGOs and parents should be activated to embrace youth and their needs. Whenever youth have exciting programs and activities to fill their time with, their substance use risk reduces considerably. It is also crucial to address the students transitioning from middle to high school and to target problems they face and that are considered as a taboo in their societies, including drugs, alcohol and sexual and reproductive health. Some of the participants also mentioned the need to support parents with skills on how to deal with their children. It has been suggested that such support can be provided through special orientation and listening centers for psychological consultations.

The participants acknowledged the importance of institutionalizing the successful interventions, especially since the last

Lebanese school curriculum change was in the 1997. For example, life skills trainings, a very successful intervention according to published international evidence, is being implemented in schools in Lebanon based on individual efforts of different NGOs, but not through a decision or a law from the Ministry of Education. Another problem faced in Lebanon, is the inability to secure sustainability to promising efforts or programs; each minister comes with his/her own agenda and stops whatever was being done before it. Furthermore, not all programs implemented currently are evidence-based or have undergone adaptation or impact-assessment studies. All the participants agreed on the importance of monitoring and evaluating interventions. Successful interventions, based on proper evaluation, can be taken forward to policy makers for scaling up to national levels. The stakeholders suggested having a coalition between NGOs and the relevant ministries with a long-term vision to (1) develop or adapt internationally renowned interventions; (2) monitor and evaluate the process and outcomes; (3) secure funding for the sustainability of the interventions; and (4) coordinating all activities to avoid any duplication of work.

Element 2› At the regulatory and policy level- Implement national alcohol harm reduction polices

This element included policies to regulate alcohol availability, affordability, alcohol marketing and advertising, as well as drink driving.

Element 2.1› Regulate Alcohol Availability

After sharing high quality global evidence about the importance of regulating alcohol availability, participants agreed that it is very essential but not easy to implement in Lebanon. These strategies include having a Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA), regulating the physical activity (limiting days and hours of sales), monopolization or licensing of alcohol outlets, and refusing to sell for intoxicated individuals.

One participant described the process of licensing of alcohol-selling outlets in Lebanon as present but inadequate and in need of being changed. The law number 7 year 1985 is the law that controls the licensing of alcohol outlets and it gives the licensing governance to the MOF. However, MOF is only involved in taking the fine charges but not in

controlling the alcohol quality or setting criteria regarding who receives the license. Anyone can get a license and open in any place including places near universities, schools and residential areas. Furthermore, the MOF does not monitor and oversee the alcohol sales for off premises (supermarkets and convenience stores) but only of on premises outlets (restaurant/cafes and bars). Nonetheless, a local study showed that youth mainly purchase alcohol from off premises rather than on premises outlets. In addition, in case a non-licenced store sells alcohol, the store will only be fined 25000 LBP as a penalty, undermining the perceived need for a licence. The licensing fines increase as the size of the outlet increases, however, those fines remain insignificant compared to the large profit margin of alcohol sales. Alcohol importers, for example, pay 900 000 LBP to import alcohol brands from Europe and other countries, which is obviously much lower than their profits.

An inter-ministerial effort shall be invested in amending the current licensing law to include higher fines and more restrictions on the quality and availability of alcohol sold in the market. Furthermore, it is of heightened importance to know who would be amending the new law in terms of their background and any potential conflict of interest, especially that previous effort to increase the fines was halted by the alcohol industry lobbying. One participant added that it might be fair to increase the fines on the importers not on local producers.

One stakeholder highlighted the role of municipalities in controlling the alcohol availability. Municipalities by law have the authority to do so, but rarely practise their right to do so. They might not be aware of their authority or are subjected to political/ social/ religious pressures. An example was the municipality of El Hadat where controlling alcohol sales was successful through regulating the times of sale of alcohol. The participants agreed that there has to be a law or implementation decrees to standardize the agendas and work of all municipalities.

The issue of the Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA) was thoroughly discussed highlighting the importance of stating it explicitly in the law. Currently, the MLDA is stated only once implicitly in the Lebanese law, penalizing those who serve minors (6-13 USD). Nothing, however, clearly states that minors are not allowed to purchase alcohol. The participants suggested that once the MLDA is clearly set by law, there should be high penalties paid by both the server and consumer.

Element 2.2› Reduce Alcohol Affordability

The participants discussed the available evidence on the effectiveness of increasing taxation and implementing a Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) policy for decreasing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms without causing other undesirable side effects. While published evidence is consistent and clear, participants agreed that more local studies should be conducted to identify the best formula for decreasing alcohol affordability. A local study, for example, showed that increasing tax on one type of alcohol may have the same effect on alcohol purchasing patterns as raising the tax on all types of alcohol. Meanwhile published evidence shows that taxation should also be coupled with a MUP policy to be effective, especially that some alcohol drinks remain so inexpensive, even after being subjected to increased taxes.

Other important issues to be taken into consideration while studying the local applicability of this element are (1) would increasing the tax increase the possibility of selling illegal and low quality alcoholic drinks?; (2) would raising the taxation increase home alcohol-production?; (3) can we raise alcohol prices or the MUP as to exceed the prices of surrounding countries, while considering the capitalism, free-market and economic nature in Lebanon?; (4) if a specific law is present for decreasing alcohol affordability, how well will it be implemented, monitored and evaluated?; (5) should we encourage local alcohol production rather than tax them? Countermeasures for any harmful effects of this policy should be studied thoroughly before implementation.

Element 2.3› Implement Drink Driving Counter-Measures

Deliberations about implementing drink-driving counter-measures included lowering blood alcohol concentrations (BAC) laws, increasing policy patrols, having drink-driving checkpoints, having a MLDA, and conducting education campaigns and media advocacy. Participants discussed the availability of a good BAC law in the current road safety law. However, it is not implemented well with insufficient checkpoints to measure BAC levels. While police patrols and checkpoints increase during special occasions, these are not maintained regularly throughout the year. This could be attributed to the limited resources for proper implementation. Similarly, taxi services that increase during special occasions are not maintained. Discussions

covered the need to have an organization for the taxi drivers who pick people up from restaurants and clubs.

A participant, however, highlighted that the current road safety law has made a difference, as it helped by reducing injuries from car accidents by 20% so far (based on preliminary statistics). This success is mainly due to having a political will to implement it, implementation decrees and a clear implementation strategy for this law. For example, the checkpoints for unregistered motorcycles is being routinely and strongly enforced especially that it had its clear implementation decrees and a set fine of 300,000 L.L. Participants suggested the need to develop a clear implementation strategy for this policy brief to avoid the inability to implement and thus lose citizens' trust. Furthermore, this should be combined with lobbying for proper implementation of drink-driving counter-measures by different related ministries and NGOs.

As for educational campaigns, multiple stakeholders from different NGOs outlined their educational campaigns strategies. A stakeholder emphasized the importance of training bartenders and valet parking personnel, as they might be the main people who can properly detect and handle a harmful alcohol use among youth. One of the participants also shared their experience in adapting the Lebanese curriculum to include road safety education in schools, even before students are allowed to drive. Road safety education for youth in schools aims at avoiding the harms related to driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs or medications, when they start driving, and so that the youth can be mentally and intellectually ready to interact with their community and the rules of the state. The deliberations also tackled the issue of licensing and the driving test as it does not cover road safety education and is not issued properly. Participants concluded with the need for a comprehensive strategy that incorporates (1) youth education on road safety; (2) new recommendations for the driving license and test; and (3) enhancing awareness of the general public about road safety. Participants agreed on the importance of not only implementing drink-driving awareness campaigns, but also evaluating them.

Element 2.4› Regulate Alcohol Advertising and Marketing

The participants deliberated about the current status of alcohol advertising and marketing in Lebanon. In light with the published evidence linking alcohol advertisement with the increased

consumption, it was agreed that the alcohol advertisements in Lebanon are promoting the culture of drinking to make it more acceptable, particularly among the youth. They ascertained that the alcohol advertising in Lebanon is dominated by alcohol corporations, outspread, intensive, and with content that directly targets youth and particularly females, which might describe the increase in female drinking in Lebanon. The participants agreed that there is a need to monitor the content of TV shows and movies and all media outlets as well for promoting alcohol drinking and not only monitor the regular banners and advertisements. It might be worthwhile to conduct research on the amount of advertisements the alcohol companies are investing in on Lebanese media outlets.

Discussions also tackled the different ways the alcohol industry employ to promote alcohol including the industry's philanthropy and using the corporate social responsibility as a cover to indirectly promote their products. Special concerns were raised about the sponsorship of alcohol companies of sports activities. The participants agreed, in-line with the international high quality evidence that the marketing restrictions should not be left to the industry's self-regulation and code of ethics. A strong and comprehensive law is needed along with continuous monitoring and lobbying to avoid the industry's influence. One participant shared a law that can be adapted to control alcohol marketing. Item number 18 from the Decree number 3380 of the law that determines the main principles related to advertisement of products and services states that announcements must clearly and explicitly include a warning to any age category that are allowed to use the advertised product and the risks that result from such use, as recommended by the laws and regulations. This decree can be a window of opportunity to leverage on. The consumer protection can be given the authority to monitor the content of alcohol advertisements. They can play an important role in tracking loopholes in the law and therefore tackles errors in implementation.

The participants agreed that this issue is very sensitive and needs to be studied well to provide strategic recommendations. Furthermore, any law to be issued should be comprehensive and studied thoroughly to not leave any loophole that the alcohol industry can use.

Next Steps

Recommendations and Next Steps

The deliberations about the two recommended elements were successful in creating consensus among the different stakeholders. The AUB Alcohol Harm Reduction Research Team has undertaken several local surveys in the past two years, and will soon be publishing new data about the impact of alcohol relevant policy variables on youth alcohol consumption and purchasing behaviours, including the impact of taxation. The international published evidence is consistent and clear about the impact of these elements on youth alcohol consumption, mainly underage drinking, and alcohol-related harms but local data is crucial to ensure laws and policies are contextualized and properly implemented. As a result, the participants decided to create an advocacy coalition to follow up on the recommendations that arise from the local research, and push for the implementation of these two elements. Participants discussed and agreed on the following recommendations.

Recommendations

School/family/community intervention programs

- Engage youth in future discussions and ensure their presence in future dialogues.
- Empower youth to work, themselves, on the implementation of future policies, mainly through peer education.
- Understand specifically the reasons behind youth alcohol drinking and what may possibly work to get them to delay their drinking and drink less harmfully as young adults.
- Plan evidence-based quality, consistent and sustainable school/family/community intervention programs (especially exciting afterschool and school programs) and invest in monitoring and evaluation of implemented programs.

Alcohol Taxation

- Conduct a regional assessment of alcohol pricing and taxation to benchmark local practices to regional ones for guiding the decision-making process.

Alcohol Advertising

- Study the practices of the alcohol industry specifically in terms of alcohol advertising and marketing and their influences and develop counter-strategies.
- Increase the role of media in counter-advertising for harmful alcohol drinking among youth and drink-driving.
- Develop and implement guidelines regarding reporting and portraying of alcohol in media (an objective within the National Substance Use Response Strategy 2016-2021 by MOPH).

Drink-Driving Counter-measures

- Increase policy patrols and sobriety checkpoints.
- Assess the qualifications and commitment of police officers in implementing and enforcing drink-driving laws.

Regulations and Governance

- Encourage NGOs on collaborating, advocating and supporting ministries in developing and implementing draft laws.
- Define and strengthen the roles of municipalities in policy development and implementation.
- Define the roles of each ministry in the development and implementation of the policy.
- Ensure the inclusion of all experts in this field including researchers, service providers and others.
- AUB Alcohol Harm Reduction Research Team to increase public awareness by becoming more active on social media tailoring their messages to the general public.
- Advocate to add the issue of alcohol harm reduction to the national policy agenda to create effective laws and implementation decrees with strict penalties.
- Work on revisiting the existing laws; work on amending outdated policies and developing new ones, based on international and local evidence; develop an operational plan or an implementation plan for policies to be implemented.

- Initiate and strengthen cross-institutional work to develop adequate decrees for the laws available to ensure implementation.
- Ensure the proper study of the cost-effectiveness of the interventions/policies to be implemented.
- Study the possibility that the Mental Health Program within the MOPH would harness this initiative and follow up on its implementation, since it is in line with the objectives of the Inter-Ministerial Substance Use Response Strategy 2016-2021 that was developed over two years among five different ministries, NGOs and researchers in the field. The implementation plan of this strategy, to be released within the next two months, should include ways to operationalize those objectives.
- Revisit ministerial funds to check the possibility of different ministries targeting different interventions (an objective within the National Substance Use Response Strategy 2016-2021 by MOPH).
- Create and maintain an advocacy coalition that is responsible for making recommendations, advocating for the issue to be placed on the national policy agenda, discussing local research findings, and following up on the implementation and evaluation of the interventions/policies.

Next Steps

It was agreed that the K2P Dialogue Summary along with the revised K2P Policy Brief will be used by each stakeholder organization as a guiding policy document and that they will communicate internally and externally with relevant bodies, agencies and department, in order to push agendas and advocate for improvements. An advocacy coalition shall be initiated to follow up on the implementation of those recommendations. All relevant stakeholders, experts and youth shall be engaged in the process. Further work is needed to create an implementation plan, with special attention to all the implementation considerations that would arise from these recommendations and the subsequent policies/interventions. The Alcohol Harm Reduction Group will be generating local evidence to inform local alcohol-related policies and will be engaging all stakeholders in the discussion of these findings and the recommended policy strategy. Furthermore, the National Road Traffic Counsel will lead on any activity related to drink driving and cooperate with the active NGOs to reach schools and conduct more awareness.

Knowledge to Policy Center draws on an unparalleled breadth of synthesized evidence and context-specific knowledge to impact policy agendas and action. K2P does not restrict itself to research evidence but draws on and integrates multiple types and levels of knowledge to inform policy including grey literature, opinions and expertise of stakeholders.

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