Towards an alcoholic holocaust?

by Alastair Anderson

The production and consumption of alcoholic beverages are increasing in virtually all the regions of the world.

Moreover, the growth in the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages has usually outpaced the growth in the population, so that consumption of alcohol per person has been increasing on a global scale.

The growth in consumption of alcoholic beverages in some developing countries has been much more rapid than in others, and if this trend continues for another generation they will attain or exceed the present levels of per capita alcohol consumption in the developed countries.

The rapid growth of alcohol consumption in developing countries is likely, after some lapse of time, to be followed by a higher incidence of alcohol-related problems. These additional problems will represent a very substantial drain on scarce economic and social resources.

Facts like these can only be described as sobering. They form part of an overview of the world’s alcohol situation which introduces a round-table discussion in WHO’s health development journal, *World Health Forum* (1985, Vol. 6, No. 3). The introduction drives home in hard-hitting terms the fact that, while the commercial production of alcohol occurs mainly in the industrialised countries, much of the output is exported to the Third World, where the consumption of alcohol has been rising steadily for the past two decades. It comments: “Policies have yet to be implemented to counter this threat.”

The introduction is written by Professor Brendan Walsh of University College, Dublin, and Mr Marcus Grant, senior scientist with WHO’s Mental Health Division in Geneva. This is how they sum up the damage that alcohol can cause to health: “Not only the alcohol dependence syndrome itself but also many disabling and some fatal physical and psychological conditions can be attributed either wholly or in part to excessive drinking. In addition, alcohol-related traffic accidents account for a significant proportion of deaths in many countries, especially among young people. Accidents at work, in the home and during sporting events are more frequently related to alcohol consumption than is widely recognised.

In more general terms, excessive drinking disrupts family life and can also result in violence and neglect. Another area of concern is drinking by pregnant women, which can damage the unborn child. So it is clear that the vulnerable group includes many more people than just the heavy drinkers.

“...In some developing countries, which do not have long traditions of consuming commercially produced beverages of the variety and strength available in most developed countries, alcohol-related problems may be especially serious among technicians and professionals, who are the scarcest resource, or among young people, who represent the country’s investment in its future.”

The writers also point out that accidents at work, in the home and during sporting events are more frequently related to alcohol drinking than may appear on the surface. They note that between 1965 and 1980, the total commercial production of alcohol rose by almost 50 per cent, while production per person rose by just under 15 per cent. Two-thirds of the world’s production at both dates occurred in Europe and North America. “The fact that these are the very regions of the world where population growth was least rapid is an indication of the growing importance of international trade in alcoholic beverages.”

Since it is at present impossible to estimate the extent of non-commercial production, including both legal and illegal home manufacture, the writers conclude that “the real consumption figures for some developing countries, including those with rapidly increasing rates, may actually be substantially higher than appears at first sight.”

Eight specialists in the social and psychological aspects of alcohol contributed to the round-table discussion that followed. One dissenting voice is that of Professor Donald W. Goodwin, of the University of Kansas, USA, who writes: “I cannot agree that there is evidence of considerable increases in alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems in all parts of the world... Non-commercial alcoholic beverages are excluded from the official
Alcohol-related problems: The disruption of family life, neglect, violence, traffic accidents.

Photos: WHO/P. Almasy and H. Christoph

production statistics on which (Walsh and Grant's) report is based, and the real consumption figures could be substantially higher or lower than those given. Without data on illegal and non-commercial production, one can only guess.”

But Dr Samuel W. Hynd, chairman of the Swaziland National Council on Smoking, Alcohol and Drug Dependence, comments: “Walsh and Grant take too mild a view of what must be recognised as an impending global catastrophe. We need something hard-hitting that will shock not only health professionals but the entire world community into action. Alcohol is destroying millions more than the famine in the Sahel, and in some countries the numbers of known alcoholics equals the population of the largest cities.”

He goes on: “Newspaper and magazines give scant coverage to the alcohol-related problems eating at the heart of every country, because they need the advertising revenues received from multinational and national liquor producers...

“Somehow, somewhere, we need a breakthrough to the front pages. Just as a few motivated people in the last century were able to convince the world that slavery was wrong, we must press on in the belief that the world community will finally come to realise that it is marching towards an alcoholic holocaust.”

Let the last word be with Professor Robert E. Kendell, of the University of Edinburgh, UK. He says: “The transnational corporations that have played a prominent part in the development of this (alcohol) trade may be even harder to influence than governments. Certainly the behaviour of the great corporations of the tobacco industry over the last 25 years provides few grounds for optimism.

“Nonetheless it is vital that WHO should draw attention to the steadily increasing production of and trade in alcoholic beverages and insist, as Walsh and Grant have done, that these are activities with inevitable public health implications that will have to be faced both by governments and by the world's alcohol industries; the latter will only do so reluctantly, and in response to sustained pressure from WHO and their own Ministries.”