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Crisis of Illicit Alcohol in sub-Saharan Africa

WASHINGTON, DC, 25 NOVEMBER 2008 – The consumption of illicit or noncommercial alcohol is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and contributes significantly to a number of negative social and health outcomes, according to a new report released today by the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP). Although the historical importance of noncommercial alcohol has been gradually receding in favor of commoditized drinks like Western beer, wine, and spirits, noncommercial beverages continue to play a prominent role in the life of the average African.

“The extensive use of noncommercial alcohol takes an enormous toll on the health and welfare of people in sub-Saharan Africa,” says Dr. Moruf Adelekan, lead author and professor at England’s Royal Blackburn Hospital.

The report, *Noncommercial Alcohol in Three Regions*, finds that the production and consumption of noncommercial alcohol is prevalent throughout the region, particularly among the lower income rural and urban segments of society. The report defines noncommercial alcohol as traditional beverages produced for home consumption or limited local trade, counterfeit or unregistered products, and nonbeverage – or surrogate – alcohols.

The report finds that the main source of noncommercial alcohol in SSA consists of homebrewed beers, fruit-based beverages, palm wine, and home-distilled drinks. Noncommercial drinks, while significantly cheaper than their commercial counterparts, may fall below quality standards for human consumption and may contain harmful impurities.

Examples from Botswana, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria provide further insight on the most popular noncommercial drinks in various parts of the region.

“Within the context of SSA countries, noncommercial beverages often have a stronger impact (both potentially positive and negative) on society than the commercial alcohol in terms of prevalence and outcomes,” writes Dr. David M. Ndeti, professor at University of Nairobi and Director of the Africa Mental Health Foundation in Kenya, in an accompanying commentary.

The report calls on SSA governments to recognize the complexity of the issues involved in addressing the informal alcohol sector. They are encouraged to implement multi-sector partnerships aimed at:

- engaging consumers of noncommercial alcohol by providing affordable legal drink alternatives;
- engaging illegal producers by offering options for legal income-generating activities;
- educating the public about quality and health risks associated with noncommercial drinks; and
- eliminating or minimizing some of the identified adverse consequences.

Unless urgent and concerted efforts are made to implement these measures, the report concludes, the poor in sub-Saharan Africa will continue to produce and consume noncommercial alcohol.

The full report may be found at ICAP's web site:

<http://icap.org/Publication/ICAPReviews/tabid/158/Default.aspx>

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Noncommercial Alcohol in Three Regions was commissioned by the International Center for Alcohol Policies. ICAP is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to promote the understanding of the role of alcohol in society through dialogue and partnerships involving the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community, and others interested in alcohol policy, and to help reduce the abuse of alcohol worldwide. ICAP is supported by major international producers of beverage alcohol. The views expressed in this report are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of ICAP or of its sponsoring companies.