



Fundasaun Mahein (FM), February 28, 2020

Press Release

Coming to an Alcohol-Control Policy for Timor-Leste

In light of Timor-Leste's recent singling out by the World Health Organization (WHO) as having the least restrictive environment for alcohol in South-East Asia, Fundasaun Mahein (FM) believes that it is of critical importance that the Timorese government develop and enforce a comprehensive alcohol control policy. Given this, FM applauds the Ministry of Health, in conjunction with the WHO Regional Office for Southeast Asia, for their recent drafting of a proposed alcohol policy framework; however, FM would like to raise concerns about the draft framework, with particular focus on its relevance to the Timorese context.

At present, the majority of alcohol production and sales in Timor-Leste is of *tua mutin and tua sabu*, or home-brewed palm brandy, an industry that supports entire families and communities but is nonetheless entirely unregulated. Even for commercially manufactured alcohol, however, there is no minimum purchasing age and almost no sales restrictions; companies and vendors remain similarly unrestrained by limits on advertisements. Beyond the lack of regulations or official sanctions on alcohol misuse, drinking is highly ingrained in Timorese society, with alcohol playing a central role in cultural ceremonies and social events.

The nexus of the lack of alcohol regulation and social pressure to drink, sometimes to excess, can be disastrous. Beyond the tragedies of drunk driving and alcohol poisoning, the Timorese public and several civil society organizations have expressed growing alarm at the apparent link between violence and alcohol misuse: both the flagrant instances of violence (some of which is linked to martial arts groups) accompanying the heavy drinking of national holidays, and the soaring rates of alcohol-linked domestic violence.

This report examines the current situation of alcohol in Timor-Leste, and also offers a critique of the proposed "Recommendations for the Timor-Leste National Alcohol Control Policy Framework," submitted to the Ministry of Health on September 25th, 2019. While FM is pleased that the Ministry of Health, along with the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, has taken steps to introduce a policy, the proposed draft policy framework nonetheless presents some serious concerns. Although the policy framework was formulated by international experts in the fields of public health, medicine, and alcohol policy, the policy was written after only six days spent in Timor-Leste, and thus presents a serious disconnect between the proposed measures and the cultural and social context that it is meant to regulate. FM believes that the misunderstandings of the Timorese context embedded in the document could thus potentially derail its otherwise positive impacts.

While the seriousness with which alcohol control is taken by the Ministry of Health is an encouraging and positive development, the resulting policy framework, as currently drafted, stands to make its strongest impact on Timor-Leste's urban elite. Those for whom alcohol control might otherwise have the most positive impact—families facing alcohol-infused domestic or gang violence, victims of alcohol-related accidents far away from lifesaving medical care, and children initiated into early drinking through cultural ceremonies, among others—will be the lightest touched. While FM sees this policy framework draft as being well-intentioned and benign, FM believes that Timor-Leste can, and should, demand policy that rises above being mostly harmless.

To this end, FM calls for a redrafting of an alcohol control policy—one that may, indeed, involve international advisors and experts, but which also places an emphasis on understanding and responding to Timor-Leste's particular context for alcohol. FM thus requests that the Ministry of Health consider developing a policy that is Timorese in its fabric, one that learns from the successes of other nations but is intrinsically geared towards Timor-Leste's unique situation and needs.

For more details on this issue, please contact:

João Almeida

Acting Director

Email: almeidamahein@gmail.com

Mobile Phone: (+670) 7756 1184

Website: www.fundasaunmahein.org