



Opinion

COVID-19 fight, South Africa's alcohol ban: Lessons

By Alhaji Adam Yunus

A COMMON lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is for all to appreciate that the health and well-being of people are paramount. The entire world locked down its citizenry because of the pandemic.

This is certainly understandable as it resonates with the common saying that "when there is life and good health, there is certainly everything to cheer for".

With COVID-19, two human pursuits which have pre-occupied the minds and thoughts of people, especially in modern societies, suddenly vanished into thin air: human rights and money acquisition, both sacrificed to attain one good thing: good health.

Many governments had even

healthcare delivery?

Example

The example of South Africa in identifying and responding to one underlying factor straining their healthcare system is a good reference point.

The government of South Africa, having identified alcohol consumption as one of the causes of diseases and also a source of stress on its healthcare delivery system, could not afford to allow people the luxury of drinking alcohol at the detriment of their personal health.

Thus, it accordingly banned the distribution, sale and public drinking of alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol consumption is known for its harmful effects on the health of people and its strong relationship with a range of mental and behavioural disorders, non-communicable

The President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, in pronouncing a re-ban on alcohol-related activities in the country remarked, "There is now clear evidence that the resumption of alcohol sales has resulted in substantial pressure being put on hospitals, including trauma and ICUs."

The ban was certainly not applauded by some South Africans, but the government vowed to go with the common good. Indeed, when human life and well-being are at risk, freedom and wealth acquisition occupy very little space in the discourse.

Alcohol

alcohol.

Much more

Even though as a country we have made some efforts in minimising the harmful effects of alcohol consumption, there is still much more to be done. We need to boldly enforce existing regulations and restrictions, especially in the area of marketing/advertisement of alcoholic beverages.

Regulations are certainly weak and enforcement largely relaxed. Five years after the adoption of a National Alcohol Policy (NAP) which was launched by the

Ministry of Health (MoH) and the WHO, with support from civil society, led by the National Coalition of NGOs in Health and the Baraka Policy Institute, a social policy think tank, as well as players in the alcohol sector, little is known about the policy, with virtually no public discussions on it.

The NAP provides a certain regulatory framework on production, marketing and

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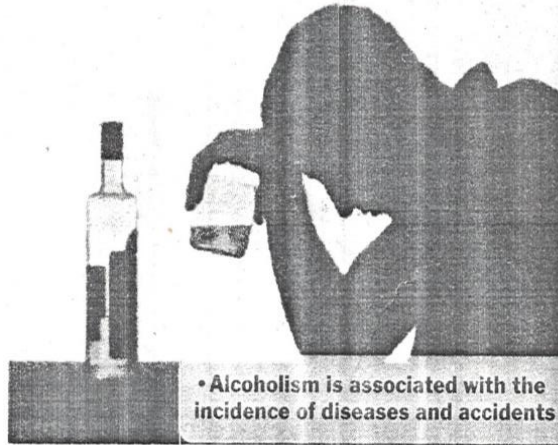
Many governments had even introduced legislation to limit the rights and freedoms of people obviously for the common good.

So lest we forget the lessons, let me reiterate a question my little girl asks anytime President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo addresses the nation with his "fellow Ghanaians" COVID-19 updates. She asks, "But Daddy, why don't we address the underlying health conditions of those people who die from COVID-19?"

My little girl's interrogation made me ask several rhetorical questions. As a nation, have we done enough to address the root causes of such health conditions? Have we not concentrated more on cure more than prevention in our

disorders, non-communicable conditions, infectious diseases and injuries.

Under COVID-19, it was required that people lived a healthy lifestyle and alcohol consumption was certainly not part of the equation, as it is medically known to compromise the body's immune system and increases the risk of adverse health outcomes.



• Alcoholism is associated with the incidence of diseases and accidents

Alcohol

Ghana certainly needs to take alcohol issues more seriously as alcohol drinking is a major cause of many health conditions, including public health issues such as road accidents, which according to the National Road Safety Commission (NRSC) are the leading cause of deaths in Ghana.

We certainly need to prioritise matters of our health and well-being over all other considerations. We should never as a nation relent in our efforts at adopting effective regulations and implementing interventions that mitigate risk factors of major sicknesses. We certainly need to do better with enforcement of the laws on alcohol, especially regulations contained in the Public Health Act (2012).

We also need to be more mindful of the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) directives to all countries to protect its population, especially the vulnerable against the harmful use of

a certain regulatory framework on production, marketing and consumption of alcoholic beverages, aimed at minimising the harmful use of alcohol. Unfortunately, it appears nothing exists as both the alcohol sector and the informal sector in the alcohol trail continue to produce, promote and aggressively advertise alcoholic beverages against compromised and non-enforced alcohol regulations.

A Legislative Instrument (LI), which is required to be developed by the government to give alcohol regulations stronger legal command and enforcement, has been left in the state of stagnancy for a long period of time.

It is critical at this time for our nation to take the health of our people more seriously by enforcing regulations and promulgating robust legal regimes to tackle the menace of alcohol consumption.

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