

A conversation with Greg Hallen, March 4, 2020

Participants

- Greg Hallen – Program Leader, Food, Environment and Health Program, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
- James Snowden – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Hallen.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Hallen of the IDRC as part of its investigation into alcohol-control policies. Conversation topics included the work of the IDRC, the evaluation of alcohol-control policies, tobacco-control efforts, and strategies for policy change.

IDRC's work

IDRC, under its noncommunicable disease (NCD) prevention program, funded some of the first research projects to support alcohol-control evidence generation in low- and middle-income countries. Despite a clear need and demand for such evidence, IDRC has been unable to sustain support to grow this field due to competing priorities and a lack of the additional funder partnership required for significant impact. If sufficient interest from funding agencies could be generated, IDRC could leverage resources to strengthen the field, especially by drawing on lessons from work on fiscal policies for health and tobacco control.

Local research

IDRC's mandate is to build the capacity of researchers in low- and middle-income countries, and it has the institutional memory and background to work directly with them. It believes this approach has a high impact, is sustainable, and ensures that research addresses the questions of local people and provides context-specific answers to inform local policymaking.

The IDRC recommends using existing local capacity by supporting institutions directly within countries. The IDRC provides grants for projects with civil society organizations, academic institutions, and government in those countries. In its NCD prevention efforts, IDRC has worked equally with academic and civil society organizations that in turn work closely with government. The IDRC has provided grants for evidence generation and knowledge policy, and it has built local capacity through scholarships for graduate students and postdocs.

Tobacco-control efforts

IDRC was a leader and early funder of international tobacco-control research and helped build the movement for tobacco control, particularly in low- and

middle-income countries. Some leaders in tobacco control were first funded by IDRC.

Alcohol use as a risk factor

Alcohol is one of the most neglected risk factors for a number of public health and development issues, including NCDs, domestic violence, and road safety. Funders have generally neglected the issue, with the exception of Bloomberg Philanthropies, which includes alcohol control in its road safety campaigns. The reasons for this neglect include the normalization of alcohol use around the world and opposition by the alcohol industry to alcohol-control measures.

Alcohol control would seem to be a key issue for advocates against domestic violence, for example. There does not yet appear to be sufficient collaboration between public health, social welfare, and injury prevention interest groups to magnify attention to alcohol control. A common mistake seems to be to focus too much on education campaigns to change the behavior of individuals rather than on broader policy campaigns that could substantially reduce alcohol consumption, both for the general population as well as for heavy drinkers.

Recent evidence from a number of studies shows that the alcohol industry depends on alcohol consumption by those who drink to excess, and the industry works to retain those consumers.

Evaluating alcohol-control efforts

Over the past decade, IDRC has supported research that provides the economic rationale for policy changes, including alcohol-control policies. Researchers have also studied the impact of tax increases on consumption using discrete-choice experiments, which analyze individual preferences. Discrete-choice experiments are being used more often, particularly when time-series data are not available; the alcohol industry is also employing this method. Randomized controlled trials are rarely used, as they are difficult to effectively apply to alcohol control policy interventions.

Research using modeling

IDRC has supported research that models the impact of interventions, such as alcohol taxes, on consumption, prevalence, and equity. Models should examine the differential impact of alcohol taxes on different socioeconomic groups, as there is concern that the taxes would disproportionately harm the poor (a point which the alcohol industry has used to argue against alcohol tax increases).

Assessing the effect of alcohol-control efforts

Few alcohol-control policies have been implemented, so there have been limited opportunities to monitor the effectiveness of those interventions. However, the Philippines implemented a "sin" tax on both alcohol and tobacco. A lot of relatively low-cost research has already been conducted there to help the Ministry of Finance

and the health authorities understand the impact of the taxes. Alcohol taxes that have been implemented in other countries have often been relatively insignificant, sometimes not keeping up with inflation, so the outcomes of those interventions are difficult to measure.

Multimethod research

Sally Casswell, a professor at Massey University in New Zealand and chair of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance, has supported collaborative international research using a standardized methodology with qualitative and quantitative components that can take place over time to measure the impact of alcohol-control policies, including taxes, marketing bans, and strategies for restricting access to alcohol. The studies measure changes in consumption, attitudes, and practices. These studies are among the first and most effective methods and tools available for measuring change over time and comparing across countries. Accumulating data from additional countries and completing more studies has taken place slowly because of a lack of funding.

Local versus outside researchers

Researchers from the Global North may be given opportunities to lead research in low- or middle-income countries and generate data more quickly than local researchers could, but if authentic partnership with local researchers does not exist, there is a risk that research will lack the context-based evidence and processes that are necessary for local influence. However, international collaborations (such as the International Alcohol Control Study) can facilitate cross-country analysis by standardizing data collection across countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) has used such syntheses of global evidence to develop messaging around highly cost-effective interventions, such as the NCD "best buys." It has published syntheses related to tobacco control and other NCD prevention.

Single-issue policy change versus broader policy focus in fiscal policy

There are some competing schools of thought about whether to focus all efforts on a single, effective intervention, such as tobacco tax increases, or to take a broader approach to fiscal reform that puts downward pressure on several unhealthy commodities simultaneously. The latter approach may attract too much opposition and so be unfeasible. Depending on the local context and interest from policy makers, working on fiscal policy related to several issues simultaneously may be more attractive to ministries of finance. It could also build more allies and could make more significant overall progress on the issues being addressed.

Ministries of finance may prefer to implement several tax-related policies with counteracting effects at the same time, as they could then describe the benefits of one policy as a way to make the effects of another policy more palatable. For instance, a government might put in place an alcohol tax while also implementing a policy that reduces the cost of fruits and vegetables, or directing revenues to other

social benefits. While the resulting reduction in alcohol consumption might harm the alcohol industry, it would be counterbalanced with benefits to another industry, improving livelihoods and reducing the total cost of living.

Multipronged approaches have not yet been put to the test in many countries. It may be difficult to convey the complex message associated with multiple policy changes, and the effects of the policies will be difficult to measure.

Food systems change as an example of a multipronged approach

Fiscal policies for sustainable agriculture could be considered more broadly in terms of fiscal policies for food systems change, which will impact health, livelihoods, the food system in general, and potentially climate change. Such policies also need to address subsidies, which are very difficult to change, if they are to be successful.

Tobacco-control efforts

Neglectedness

Tobacco control was severely neglected until the mid-2000s. The Rockefeller Foundation was the first major foundation to support international tobacco control; its efforts lasted six to seven years. Later, funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made a significant difference in global tobacco-control efforts. Some early tobacco-control advocacy efforts took place before sufficient local evidence had been generated, but that has at least partially been addressed and significant progress on the issue has taken place.

Effectiveness of tobacco tax increases

Mr. Hallen suggests that tobacco tax increases have contributed a very large part of the total benefit—in reduced consumption and lives saved—relative to all tobacco-control policies, but other policies have also contributed and have at least been critical to de-normalizing tobacco use. For example, smoking indoors was the norm twenty years ago; this is no longer the case due to multiple interventions that have changed public perceptions of tobacco.

Task Force on Fiscal Policy for Health

The Task Force on Fiscal Policy for Health has recommended "sin" taxes on unhealthy commodities, including alcohol and tobacco. Thus, it has moved beyond single-issue policy, but it has not recommended policies to reformulate subsidies or redirect funding.

Vital Strategies

Bloomberg Philanthropies may not have sufficient bandwidth to work directly with local institutions in every country it supports, so it works through organizations such as Vital Strategies, which engages in efficient and effective targeted advocacy to promote the adoption of specific policies in specific countries. Vital Strategies is also able to build local capacity.

Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK contributes to IDRC's Economics of Tobacco Control Research Initiative. The initiative examines the economic rationale for tobacco-control efforts and brings together researchers and advocates to build an evidence base and to work with governments. Alison Cox, Director for Cancer Prevention at Cancer Research UK, has been a lead in this collaboration and has been involved in tobacco control for decades.

*All GiveWell conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/research/conversations>*