



## **Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance Zimbabwe (SAAPA ZW)**

**Address:** 156 Samora Machel Avenue, Harare, Zimbabwe

**Tel:** +263 782 108 555, **Email:** saapa.zw@gmail.com

**Web:** www.saapa.net

**Healthy Nation. Empowered Communities**

### **WHY A BAN OF ALCOHOL SALES DURING THE LOCKDOWN IS NECESSARY**

Through an Extraordinary Government Gazette dated 28<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Government of Zimbabwe declared a Public Health Emergency resulting in a 21-day national lockdown due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

Accordingly, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2020 announced that they will be enforcing a ban on the sale of alcohol in retail outlets countrywide to prevent the spread of COVID-19; However, the ban was lifted within 24 hours.

As a public health community, we fully support the government's temporary regulations relating to the ban on the sale of alcohol in the interest of containing the spread of COVID-19. The reversal of the ban is however regrettable for the following reasons.

Alcohol, when ingested by humans, weakens the immune system and increases the risk of infection with COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Limited financial resources diverted to alcohol use will increase interpersonal violence. Older people and women, in particular, will face increased risk as they struggle to feed families.

The availability of alcohol will bring people out of their homes. This will increase the existing challenge of law enforcement and human rights abuses by overzealous law enforcement agents. The culture of sharing beer bottles and glasses when drinking beer compromises people's adherence to hygiene and social distancing recommendations. Also, when people get intoxicated, their inhibitions and judgment become impaired thus further compromising their ability to practice COVID-19 prevention.

Banning the distribution and sale of alcohol during the COVID-19 crisis is a critical element in the country's containment strategy to reduce strain on the limited health system so that it can respond to the needs of the pandemic, secondly, it will minimize non-adherence of physical distancing and hygiene advice due to intoxication

### **CORE VALUES**

**Public Health. Collective Action. Gendered. Accountable. Development Centred. Autonomous**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a public health and economic crisis. In times of extremely scarce resources, society benefits from more regulation of the alcohol industry to decrease alcohol harm, alleviate alcohol's burden on the health and economic system and reinvest those resources to benefit public health and wellbeing.

With that said, there is a need for an extensive communication campaign to get communities to support the efforts of the government and understand why allowing alcohol availability during this period would hamper the country's efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and increase their own risk of getting infected.

The communication campaign should also ensure that law enforcement agencies know and accept that their role is helping people to understand how to contain the spread of the virus and must be implemented within a human rights framework; they should not unnecessarily overwhelm the justice system with alcohol related arrests.

While we are aware that the lockdown is a temporary measure, we believe we will learn lessons from this period that could lead to stronger, more effective long-term alcohol regulation after this crisis is over and call upon the government to consider fast-tracking the enactment of the draft National Alcohol Policy.

Lifting the current restrictions on the availability of alcohol may provide a temporary respite, but it is not a long-term solution. Furthermore, it has the potential to undermine the country's efforts to contain the coronavirus and so should be avoided at all costs. **-END-**

### **About the writer**

Tungamirai Zimonte is a public health activist and coordinator of Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance Zimbabwe (SAAPA ZW), a national network of civil society organizations advocating for a public health-centered, evidence-based alcohol policy in Zimbabwe.