

Political Economy Analysis of the Alcohol Industry in Sri Lanka

RESET Alcohol Initiative in Sri Lanka

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FINAL REPORT
2024



INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES OF SRI LANKA

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1 INTRODUCTION

Every year, alcohol consumption globally leads to the loss of three million lives, accounting for 5.3% of total annual deaths (WHO, 2022). It remains a significant risk factor for illness, disability, and mortality, contributing to over 200 diseases and injuries. In Sri Lanka, alcohol-related deaths, including those from liver cirrhosis, road traffic injuries, and cancer, reach 4,201 per 100,000 population annually (ADIC, 2023). The economic cost of alcohol-related conditions in 2015 amounted to USD 885.86 million, equivalent to 1.07% of the GDP (Ranaweera et al., 2018).

The political economy significantly influences the development of alcohol control policies in any country. Beyond mere affordability, a nation's vulnerability to alcohol-related mortality hinges on various factors, including its cultural preferences for different types of alcoholic beverages, religious practices, and prevailing public policy contexts. Moreover, resistance from influential interest groups, voter and political opposition, and bureaucratic hurdles often hinder the implementation of comprehensive alcohol policies. Industry interference and conflicts of interest further complicate policy formulation, as evidenced by the tactics employed by companies involved in the production and sale of unhealthy commodities like tobacco and alcohol. In the context of Sri Lanka too, it has been observed that alcohol control policies have primarily been driven by political considerations rather than evidence-based approaches. Literature also suggests that government efforts to regulate alcohol are driven largely by revenue considerations and are constrained by powerful domestic and international alcohol lobbies with ties to the political elite.

In this context, analyzing the political-economic factors, relationships, and power dynamics is crucial for facilitating effective changes in alcohol control policies. Political economy analysis (PEA) involves understanding the political dimensions of any context and using this information actively to inform policy and programming. This study aimed to identify the primary decision-makers and influential figures shaping alcohol policy in Sri Lanka, understand the perspectives on critical aspects related to the alcohol industry and alcohol control, assess whether these stakeholders support or oppose alcohol control measures, and evaluate their impact. Additionally, the study aimed to identify trustworthy and influential advocates capable of advocating for reform through insider advocacy. The study's theoretical framework was based on Campbell's Institutional Approach, emphasizing the importance of understanding the underlying ideas, paradigms, and actor influence guiding policy decisions. Using a qualitative approach, the main data source comprised key informants representing various stakeholder categories. A semi-structured interview guide based on the theoretical framework was employed to collect data from the key informants. The study utilized an 'inductive-dominant qualitative content analysis' approach for data analysis, and the data were analyzed using NVivo14 software.

2. BACKGROUND

Every year, three million lives are lost globally due to alcohol consumption, accounting for 5.3% of the total annual deaths worldwide (WHO, 2022). Alcohol consumption stands as one of the foremost risk factors worldwide for illness, disability, and mortality, contributing significantly to over 200 diseases and injuries. Approximately 4.8% of the global burden of disease and injury is linked to alcohol consumption. Additionally, it ranks among the primary behavioral risk factors associated with non-communicable diseases (NCD). Globally, alcohol use is estimated to be responsible for over 10% of the burden of NCDs diseases, including conditions like cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatitis, various cancers (such as those affecting the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, liver, and colorectal region), haemorrhagic stroke, and hypertension (WHO Regional Office Eastern Mediterranean, n.d.). In Sri Lanka, 4,201 deaths per 100,000 population are attributed to alcohol annually (from alcohol-attributable liver cirrhosis, road traffic injuries and cancer) (ADIC, 2023). In the context of Sri Lanka, the estimated present value of the current and future economic cost of alcohol-related conditions for Sri Lanka in 2015 was USD 885.86 million, which was 1.07% of the GDP of that year (Ranaweera, et al., 2018). Forty-four percent of the total cost was direct cost and 66 % of the total cost was indirect costs. Road Injury cost was the highest cost category among the conditions studied.

Alcohol, total per capita (15+) consumption (in litres of pure alcohol) (SDG Indicator 3.5.2) for Sri Lanka recorded as 2.8 (for both sexes) and 4.8 (for males) for 2019 as per the WHO data (WHO, 2024). This is a significantly higher value compared to some of the other regional counterparts. For example, total per capita alcohol consumption for Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal was recorded as 0.0, 0.2, and 1.4 litres, respectively. The recorded consumption of alcohol in Sri Lanka is distributed among spirits (84.9 %), Beer (13.2 %), wine (0.3 %) and others (1.5 %). The alcohol beverage industry in Sri Lanka is highly competitive, and supplier bargaining power is excessive (ADIC, 2020). Due to high provider concentration, purchases by group only, no deliver substitutes, many specialised investments through an organisation with suppliers, significant danger of ahead integration and confined differentiation of materials, the degree of rivalry is high in the industry (ADIC, 2020). Among alcohol beverages companies, Distilleries Company of Sri Lanka (DCSL) is the leading producer (ADIC, 2020). Other significant players include International Distilleries Ltd, Rockland Distilleries Ltd and Mendis Co. Ltd. Apart from these legal producers, there are many illicit alcohol producers operating in the country.

Illicit alcohol comprises alcoholic beverages produced outside regulated channels and therefore remains unaccounted for in official records, including sales figures. Referred to by various names such as Kasippu, Goda, and Moonshine, this local, illicit, or unrecorded alcohol lacks comprehensive data, posing challenges for research into consumption patterns. Currently, there is a lack of scientific evidence regarding non-regulated alcohol, including its production, consumption trends, and associated effects (ADIC, 2020).

The political economy of alcohol plays a crucial role in formulating the alcohol control policy landscape of any country. A country's susceptibility to an alcohol-related mortality crisis depends on many factors besides sheer affordability (Treisman, 2010). Some such determining factors include the country's traditionally favoured form of alcoholic beverage (liquor vs. wine or Beer), religious and cultural practices and norms, and public policy context. Moreover, opposition by

powerful interest groups, the hostility of voters and politicians, and resistance by government bureaucracies are found to be barriers to bringing comprehensive alcohol policies (Baggott, 1986). Industry interferences and conflicts of interest also play a crucial role in formulating alcohol control policies. For instance, international evidence clearly shows that companies producing and selling unhealthy commodities such as tobacco and alcohol have defeated, delayed, or weakened public policy design, implementation, and evaluation worldwide (WHO, 2022). Interference in policy development, litigation, coalition-building through front groups and misusing knowledge or propagating misinformation are the main strategies used by the alcohol industry in shaping alcohol control policies in favour of the industry.

Further, the WHO has made it clear that the alcohol industry uses these practices to legitimise its participation in the public health agenda, strengthening the narrative that policies and regulations work only if the representation of economic operators is ensured at the discussion table. However, based on different country experiences and evidence, the WHO categorically questions the industry participation in the public health policy formulation process (WHO, 2022). Evidence from other unhealthy commodities shows that protecting policy development from conflicts of interest is essential to decrease the burden of disease (Collin, 2021) (Hawkins & McCambridge, 2020).

The alcohol control policies in Sri Lanka were largely politically driven and not based on evidence, argues Abeyasinghe (2011) (Abeyasinghe R. , 2011). Abeyasinghe further points out that even though religious views, political expediency and tax revenue are highlighted as essential factors in formulating alcohol control policies, a rational alcohol policy that suits Sri Lanka should base on evidence-based knowledge exists today in the medical literature (Abeyasinghe R. , 2011) A study by Oliver, Sujeet & Lokuge (2021) found that the effectiveness of government efforts to regulate alcohol in Sri Lanka is motivated mainly by governments' heavy reliance on alcohol-related tax revenues but also constrained by a powerful domestic and international alcohol lobby with close ties to the political class (Walton, Karn, & Lokuge, 2021) Further, political instrumentalisation of alcohol by politicians, rebel groups, and civil society actors can be observed in Sri Lanka.

In this context, analysing the political economy factors, relationships, and power dynamics is vital in bringing effective alcohol control policy changes. Political economy analysis (PEA) is about understanding the political dimensions of any context and actively using this information to inform policy and programming (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016). Boak (2011) describes PEA as 'the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time' (Boak, 2011).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Identifying (i) the key decision makers & (ii) the key influencers who determine alcohol policy in Sri Lanka – identifying the actors.
2. Understanding the perspectives on crucial aspects related to alcohol industry and alcohol control, exploring whether these actors are pro/anti-alcohol control, and assessing their level of influence – gain insights into their ideas and power dynamics.
3. Identifying credible and influential' message carriers' who can press the case for reform via insider advocacy.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study Framework

We used **Campbell's Institutional Approach**, which underscores the significance of comprehending the underlying ideas and paradigms guiding policy decisions. Additionally, it focuses on the institutional context and stakeholder landscape in which these decisions are made (Campbell, 1998). The main dimensions of this approach are ideas, institutions, interests, and power. 'Ideas' pertain to implicit assumptions, concepts, and theories evident in policy discussions. 'Institutions' encompass formal structures and norms, including government agencies and both formal and informal rules. 'Stakeholder interests' involve the objectives and goals of various actors and their perceived essential indicators, while 'power' pertains to the actors who influence policymaking and the mechanisms by which they do so (Figure 1). We considered both the policy development and implementation stages. Our analysis covered both the policy development and implementation stages. In addition to examining the broader political economic context of alcohol control policies, we specifically delved into the political economic context of alcohol tax policy formulation.

Figure 1: Campbell's Institutional Approach

Ideas	Underlying assumptions, concepts and theories, that are evident in policy debates
Institutions	Norms and structures; include formal institutions, formal and informal rules and procedures.
Interests	Objectives and goals of different actors, and the indicators they see as important
Power	Which actors are influencing policy making, and mechanisms through which this occurs.

Source: Authors illustration based on (Campbell, 1998).

Ideas, institutions, stakeholder interests, and their power relations play a significant role in the policy implementation stage.

4.2 Data Sources and Data Collection

The study took a qualitative research approach, widely used to examine the nature of phenomena, investigate the reasons behind observations (or lack thereof), evaluate complex multi-component interventions, and concentrate on enhancing interventions (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020) .

The main data source for this study was the key informants. We captured the experiences and knowledge of the main stakeholders through in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs). When identifying the key informants, we considered different stakeholder categories. Accordingly, we identified four stakeholder categories: (1) decision-makers, (2) advisors and influencers, (3) beneficiaries, and (4) industry. We purposively selected key informants who possessed informed viewpoints in the relevant areas from various sectors and interests. Initially, we reached

out to potential interviewees through formal requests. Subsequently, we identified additional key informants based on the recommendations of those we had already interviewed, following a snowball sampling approach.

We used the following framework to assess key informants in alcohol control policy reforms.

Table 1: Study Framework

Stakeholder	Power, interests, and motivations	Attitudes/ perceptions towards alcohol control and alcohol control policies	How influential?	Scope for shifting their position?
Decision maker/ influencer/ beneficiary/ industry	Formal vs informal power Who are they & what are their interests/ motivations/ incentives in alcohol control?	Pro, anti, indifferent?	Scale – low to high influence	Given what we know about their interests etc., in what ways might they become supporters of alcohol control?

We utilized a semi-structured KII guide designed based on our study framework to interview the key informants. We tailored slightly different versions of the KII guides for each category. In total, we conducted fifteen KIIs (see Appendix 1 for the profiles of the key informants). Unfortunately, despite several follow-ups, we were unable to secure interviews with any relevant officials from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Finance (MOF). Interviews were conducted in either English or Sinhala, based on the preferences of the key informants. Sinhala is one of Sri Lanka’s national languages. Interviews were conducted in both physical and virtual formats, taking into consideration the key informants’ preferences. With the consent of the respondents, interviews were recorded and supplemented with notes taken by the interviewers. Sinhala interviews were translated into English, and all interviews were transcribed and edited.

4.3 Data Analysis

We used an ‘inductive-dominant qualitative content analysis’ approach for our data analysis. This approach is suitable when there is a lack of or limited previous theories or research findings, which is the case for the political economy in Sri Lanka (Armat, Assarroudi, Rad, Sharifi, & Heydari, 2018). However, since we had predefined theoretical framework, research questions, study aims, and some relevant assumptions, guiding our analysis, there was also a deductive component involved. Therefore, we utilized both modes of reasoning. Initially, we started with the inductive mode, and as new categories emerged, we employed both approaches, with the emphasis on maintaining the ‘induction’ as the dominant aspect. Two researchers developed the initial code list, and it was further discussed and developed the final codes for analysis. The data analysis was conducted in English, using NVivo14 software.

4.4 Ethical Clearance

The ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities (ERCSSH) of the University of Colombo.

5. Review of Literature

This chapter comprises a review of the literature under seven subsections: overview of alcohol, patterns of alcohol consumption in Sri Lanka, factors leading to alcohol consumption, repercussions of alcohol consumption, history of alcohol policies, and viable solutions.

5.1 Overview of alcohol

Alcohol refers to ethyl alcohol, which is consumed as an alcoholic beverage as the diluted form of absolute ethyl alcohol (Eswar, Gopalakrishnan, Umadevi, & Geetha, 2019). Alcohol is referred to as the most psychoactive agent in the whole world (Dietler, 2020) and the most commonly used addictive substance (Pallewaththa, Niwarthana, Thambiliyagodage, Abenayaka, & Abeykoon, 2016). These are produced by the fermentation of high-carbohydrate food such as grains (Bandera & Kushi, 2006). Available alcoholic beverages in Sri Lanka can be categorised as, low alcoholic beverages like Beer, toddy, and wine with an alcohol content of less than 10%; strong liquor or spirits like arrack, gin, and brandy with an alcohol content of 35-40% and illicit liquor commonly known as *Kasippu* with a very high alcohol content around 50% (Wilsnack, Wilsnack, & Obot). The most consumed beverages are beer, wine, whisky, rum, vodka, gin, brandy, and locally brewed beverages like arrack and toddy. Today, the alcoholic beverage industry is dominated by coconut sap distilled arrack (Tamang, 2016). Among alcoholic beverages, arrack and Beer are the two predominant ones that account for 90% of sales in Sri Lanka (Leifman & Trolldal, 2020).

Further, alcoholic beverages can be divided into three categories: fermented beverages derived from fruits and grains, distilled beverages derived from grains, sugarcane, and fruits and beverages with alcohol added, such as liquor, cream, and mistral (Nunenz- Caraballo, et al., 2019). The alcohol market exists in two types licit and illicit market (Stake & Fleisch, 2008). The alcoholic beverage market is not only confined to local licit production but also open to the importation and smuggling of foreign liquor and illicit local brews (Hettige & Paranagama, 2005); (Kariyakarawana, 2021).

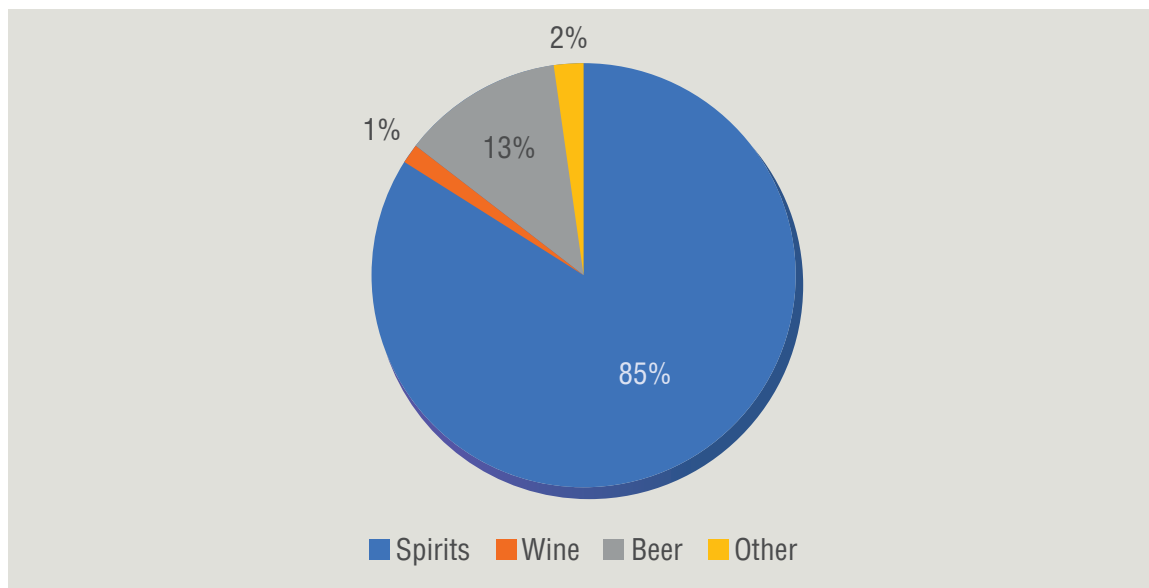
Illicit alcohol production is often conducted unhygienically (Manning & Kowalska, 2021). 40% of alcohol consumed is illicit in Sri Lanka (Schulz J. , et al., 2023). Illicit alcohol falls under the scope of established regulations such as taxation, pricing, availability restrictions and marketing, which last in high-income countries (Pearson, et al., 2023). 50-70% of progress has been achieved in minimising and controlling the spread of illicit liquor as mentioned in the performance report 2019 by the Department of Excise.

5.2 Patterns of alcohol consumption in Sri Lanka

The consumption of alcoholic beverages became popular after the colonisation of Sri Lanka by Europeans, starting with Portuguese, followed by Dutch and English (Katulanda, et al., 2014). The type of alcohol consumed greatly depends upon the social class background of its consumers (Silva, 2003). Usually, the consumption of alcohol among upcountry regions increased more than in the rest of Sri Lankan regions (Rewathy & Krishnasoban, 2021). Arrack and Beer are the two predominating alcoholic beverages that account for 90% of sales in Sri Lanka (Leifman & Trollidal, 2020) Beer consumption indicates the highest per capita consumption over other alcoholic drinks (Nugawala, Lewis, Szatkowski, & Langley, 2017) which contradicting to the finding of Ariyawardana et al., 2007. Further, Beer is considered the most popular alcoholic beverage among the young Sri Lankan generation (Perera & Torabi, 2009). According to findings on the trends and patterns of alcohol consumption in Sri Lanka 1987-2017 by ADIC, arrack was found to be the predominant beverage during 2010-2017, accounting for 70% of total consumption, supporting the fact of Ariyawardana et al., 2007.

The most consumed beverage type in Sri Lanka is spirit, which accounts for 85%, followed by Beer, with 13 % of types of beverages (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Recorded alcohol per capita (15+) consumption (in liters of pure alcohol) by type of alcoholic beverage, 2016 or latest year available.

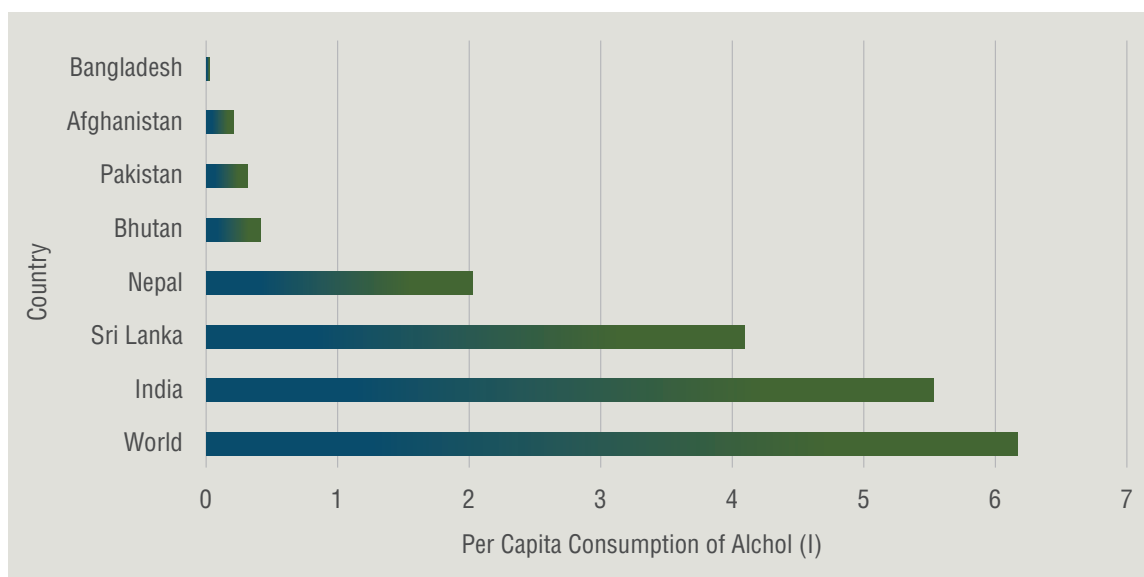


Source: (WHO, 2018)

The per capita alcohol consumption among drinkers in Sri Lanka in 2016 was calculated at 14.9 L, slightly lower than the global average of 15.1 L. Notably, male drinkers in Sri Lanka recorded higher consumption (18.9 L) than their female counterparts (6.7 L). This difference aligns with the global trend where, in all WHO regions, females are less frequently current drinkers than males, and when women do consume alcohol, their intake is generally lower than that of men (WHO, 2018) .

Figure 3 illustrates the per capita alcohol consumption among countries in the South Asian region, while Table 2 depicts the disparities in consumption between the two sexes.

Figure 3: Per capita alcohol consumption of South Asian countries



Source: World Health Organization (via World Bank)- <https://ourworldindata.org/alcohol-consumption>

Table 2: Total alcohol consumption per capita among people over 15 years in the South Asian Region in 2018.

Country	Total alcohol consumption per capita (l)		
	Overall	Male	Female
India	5.54	8.99	1.9
Bangladesh	0	0	0
Maldives	2.22	3.45	0.5
Afghanistan	0.2	0.4	0.1
Pakistan	0.3	0.6	0.1
Bhutan	0.4	0.7	0.2
Nepal	2.05	3.5	0.8
Sri Lanka	4.1	6.78	1.7

Source: World Development Indicators

<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SH.ALC.PCAP.FE.LI&country=LKA#>

5.3 Factors leading to alcohol consumption.

Alcohol consumption is not merely an isolated individual action, but an effort shaped by contextual and social factors influencing behaviour and status (Sørensen, et al., 2020). Advertising and marketing, along with the politics, economy, and regulatory contexts, shape the drinking patterns of alcohol (Walls, Cook, Matzopoulos, & London, 2020).

Alcohol is the primary motivation to earn extra income through estate incentive works or off-estate employment opportunities (Silva, 2003). The choice of alcohol is mainly influenced by the economic capital of the men (Sørensen, et al., 2020). Trade costs, government taxes and regulations, consumer preferences, income availability, and the cost of non-alcoholic beverages are critical determinants of alcohol consumption (Anderson, Meloni, & Swinnen, 2018). Patterns of alcohol consumption differ with the area of residence, level of education, and income (Karunaratne, et al., 2008). Alcohol consumption patterns of young people are associated with demographic characteristics such as gender, financial situation, living at a family home, place of residence, academic performance, and use of tobacco and other drugs (Herrero-Montes, et al., 2019). Illicit alcohol consumption is significantly associated with poverty (Jayathilaka, Selvanathan, & Bandaralage, 2016).

According to the National Strategic Plan on Adolescent and Youth Health 2018-2025 by the World Health Organization, peer pressure and lack of life skills are the main risk factors that make adolescents more vulnerable to alcohol addiction. According to the literature, government changes are also associated with mostly unhealthy forms of alcohol consumption (Pathmeswaran, Perera, & Hettiarachchi, 2015). People who work on a shift basis are more likely to binge alcohol to reduce the time taken to fall asleep as alcohol contains sedative properties and is reviewed as a specific factor that leads towards alcohol consumption (Dorrian, Heath, Sargent, Banks, & Coates, 2017).

5.4 Repercussions of alcohol consumption

Alcohol is treated as the fifth leading risk factor for global disease burden, disability, and mortality (Nugawela Pathirannehelage, 2017). Alcohol consumption can result in many negative consequences ranging from health consequences such as liver cirrhosis to social matters such as conflicts with family and friends and job loss (Graham, et al., 2011). Alcohol is associated with broader social harm, including increased crime, reduced economic activity, and increased financial costs arising from policing, health care, and prison provision (Babor, 2010). Ethanol and its metabolites such as acetaldehyde are carcinogenic substances present in alcohols which may lead to oral cancer (Schwartz, et al., 2001). Alcohol consumption is strongly linked with suicide attempts and a high tendency to deliberate self-harm (Abeyasinghe & Gunnell, 2008). Alcohol consumption is a significant risk factor for chronic non-communicable diseases according to the national policy and strategic framework of preventing chronic non-communicable diseases by the Ministry of Health and Nutrition. Alcohol is the main factor that causes seven out of 10 deaths in Sri Lanka (Alcohol and Drug Information Center, 2021). According to the WHO data, it is evident that around 137 deaths per 100,000 people were reported in the year 2019. Illicit liquor contributes immensely to the alcohol problems, and official figures are unable to reflect the burden (Somatunga, Ratnayake, Wijesinghe, Yapa, & Cooray, 2014). 7.2% of males and 2.2% of females are being individually influenced by global burden disease due to misuse of alcohol.

Further, the WHO has identified over 300 diseases and harmful conditions that could arise due to irresponsible alcohol consumption (Jayathilaka, Selvanathan, & Bandaralage, 2016). Also, research findings claim that alcohol negatively affects cognitive functions (Stavro, Pelletier, & Potvin, 2013). Regarding workplace performance, alcohol is a decisive factor of presenteeism, which impairs job performance and increases sickness absence (Thørrisen, Skogen, Bonsaksen, Skarpaas, & Aas, 2022). Alcohol is independently associated with an increased risk of attempted suicide (Knipe, et al., 2019). The risk of suicide attempts nearly doubled among women who live in households that misuse alcohol (Knipe, et al., 2017).

5.5 Policy Context

Alcohol control policies are laws, rules, and regulations aimed at preventing and reducing alcohol-related damages. Alcohol policies can be on a global, regional, international or national level. Effective alcohol control strategies include a multi-component approach such as access, price, marketing, and drink-driving. Studies highlight that Sri Lanka has tried to empower alcohol policies between 2010- 2017 (Schölin, et al., 2022).

In the context of Sri Lanka, the followings can be regarded as important policies, laws and regulations pertaining to alcohol.

National Policy on Alcohol Control 2016: With the vision of achieving the best practices in alcohol, the National Policy on Alcohol Control focusses on ten policy priority areas; (1) marketing, (2) pricing, trade and investment, (3) availability and accessibility of alcohol products from any source, (4) protecting all segments of the population from consequences of alcohol use, (5) driving, road use and operating machinery after drinking alcohol, (6) community action, (7) surveillance, monitoring, evaluation and research, (8) strengthening supportive services and rehabilitation, (9) preventing alcohol industry interference, and (10) institutional arrangements and financing (Ministry of Health Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, 2016). The central coordination of the implementation for the National Policy on Alcohol Control rests with the Directorate of Mental Health within the Ministry of Health, under the guidance of the Director of Health Services and relevant Deputy Director General. At the provincial and district levels, the coordinating bodies are the planning and coordination unit of the Provincial Director of Health Services office and the Medical Officer/Mental Health (Focal Point) in the Regional Director of Health Services office.

National Health Strategic Master Plan (NHSMP) 2016-2025: The NHSMP identifies alcohol as an important issue and covers under several programmes including family health, health education and publicity, health services in plantation sector, prevention and control of NCDs, and National Cancer Control Program.

National Multisectoral Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in Sri Lanka – 2022-2026: The action plan identifies use of alcohol as a strategic action area under health promotion and risk reduction. The action plan presents the measures that should be taken to control alcohol usage in detail under eight thematic areas; (1) eliminate all forms of promotion of alcohol products and promotion of alcohol use, (2) raise prices on alcohol through taxes and pricing policies, (3) strengthened restrictions on alcohol availability and accessibility, (4) protect all segments of population from consequences of alcohol use at home, work places and public places, (5) eliminate all types of injuries related alcohol including

road traffic accidents, (6) create social milieu that prevents initiation and discourages alcohol use, (7) promote surveillance and research on alcohol related issues including impact on the country's development at large, (8) strengthen supportive services and rehabilitation with involvement of the community.

National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol Act, No. 27 of 2006 (NATA Act): *The Act established the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) and stipulates the following functions under the purview of the NATA:*

- advising the Government on the formulation and implementation of policies, regulations, laws and rules which govern the production, promotion, distribution, sale and use of alcohol.
- advising on measures to minimize the harm arising from the consumption of tobacco products and alcohol products, for the elimination or minimization of illicit drug use,
- encouraging and assisting research on issues relating to alcohol,
- securing participation of all necessary governmental, or non-governmental agencies and private sector organisations in the implementation of the National Policy on Tobacco and Alcohol
- encourage active community participation in implementing and monitoring policies related to alcohol.
- Liaising with local, regional, and international organisations on issues related to alcohol.

The NATA Act authorizes the public health inspectors, police officers, and excise officers to execute duties or functions conferred on or assigned to him under the Act. An amendment to the Act was introduced in 2015.

Alcohol Taxation Policies

Alcohol excise taxation emerges as the most economical measure for mitigating alcohol-related harms by curbing alcohol consumption and potentially deterring individuals from starting or delaying drinking (Pan American Health Organization, 2019). Given that alcohol is relatively insensitive to price changes, a hike in alcohol excise taxes is expected to lead to higher tax revenues. Moreover, a substantial price hike due to increased alcohol excise taxes could result in reduced demand for alcoholic beverages, directly benefiting public health. Consequently, raising alcohol excise taxes presents a mutually beneficial policy option, yielding favorable outcomes for both public health and government revenues (Pan American Health Organization, 2019).

Sri Lanka stands out as one of the top-performing nations in the middle-income category across Southeast Asia, implementing highly efficient tax strategies grounded in specific taxation. This approach involves imposing higher tax rates and consistently raising them over time (Sornpaisarn, et al., 2020).

Sri Lanka employs a specific taxation method that imposes tax based on the alcohol content of alcoholic beverages (Sornpaisarn, et al., 2020).. In Sri Lanka, the production and sale of locally made alcoholic drinks are primarily regulated by the Department of Excise. The existing excise duties in the country operate on a volumetric tax basis, where the amount of tax imposed depends on the alcohol volume in the product (ADIC, 2020). Currently, different alcoholic beverages are taxed using two main systems: (a). Absolute Litre System (ABV): This system applies to various beverages, including arrack (molasses, coconut, processed, palmyra, and special), locally made foreign liquor, local wine, malt liquor (beer) above and below 5% alcohol content, and sake. It taxes these beverages based on the specific volume of alcohol they contain. (b). Bulk Litre System: Under this system, alcoholic drinks are taxed based on their entire volume, rather than the alcohol content. It is typically used for beverages with lower alcohol concentrations (5.5%-7.5%). Currently, this method applies solely to bottled toddy production, which holds a small market share in the liquor industry.

6. Findings

6.1 Ideas

6.1.1 Arguments for alcohol control

The key informants underscored the primary arguments for alcohol control, emphasizing negative health impacts, adverse effects on the country's net benefits, detrimental effects on household economies, and adverse social impacts. The strongest case for alcohol control stems from the pervasive health issues associated with alcohol usage. The health impacts and the resulting healthcare costs form a central argument for stringent alcohol control measures. The key informants also emphasized that the adverse effects of alcohol far surpass the revenue generated through taxation. The health, economic, and social costs incurred due to alcohol-related issues outweigh the financial gains from taxation. However, some key informants noted that, despite the negative net benefits of alcohol, the government still considers it a major revenue source.

Moreover, alcohol consumption contributes to a range of social issues, including crimes, road traffic accidents, family disputes, and single-parent challenges. The harm caused by alcohol extends beyond the individual consumer, affecting families, communities, and societal structures. The social impact encompasses a degeneracy of education, family dynamics, and societal health, as opined by the key informants.

Even the critics of strict alcohol regulations admitted to the overarching social impact of alcohol surpassing health costs. However, they believe that more harm comes from illicit alcohol varieties rather than licit alcohol brands.

“I think the biggest mistake made in our countries is that we always put forward the health cost only. Most of the disputes are caused by alcohol. So, if you take how much fuel is consumed in a particular police area to sort out the issues, fuel consumption is mostly because of the alcohol issues. Therefore, when you calculate only the health impact, it is not accurate. And the other thing is the crimes. Another thing is road traffic accidents and even family disputes. Finally, the single parent issues. Mostly because of alcohol. All these are direct and indirect costs.” (KI from beneficiary category)

The key informants also emphasized the negative impact on household income security as another major reason to control alcohol consumption. They particularly highlighted economically vulnerable sectors such as estates and rural areas. Expenditure on alcohol affects productivity and becomes a significant determinant of poverty. Families grappling with alcohol-related expenses may lack the financial means to address basic needs, including healthcare, education, and adequate nutrition.

6.1.2 Arguments against alcohol control

The arguments against alcohol control, as articulated by key informants, centered around consumers shifting to illegal products and the growth of the illegal alcohol industry, tax income generation from the industry, employment generation and tourism promotion. It should be noted here that mostly the key informants representing the industry and alcohol regulation implementing categories emphasized on the reasons against alcohol control.

The most cited argument was that stringent control on legal alcohol may lead to the rise of illicit alcohol consumption, which is deemed more harmful to health. The key informants those who put forward this argument feared that such restrictions might force individuals, especially those with limited financial means, to turn to illicit substances, including drugs, as a substitute for alcohol. The increase in alcohol prices and taxes is viewed as a driving factor pushing consumers towards illegal alcohol. The continuous rise in excise duty beyond the purchasing power of the population is seen as a potential catalyst for the diversion to illicitly manufactured liquor. Economic crises, coupled with escalating taxes, create a scenario where legal alcohol becomes unaffordable for certain segments of the population, resulting in a shift towards illicit alternatives according to some of the key informants.

The argument against stringent alcohol control includes the perspective that alcohol serves as a substantial source of revenue for the government. The reduction in government revenue due to decreased alcohol consumption is highlighted, posing economic challenges, especially in the context of fiscal deficit.

Key informants also stressed the employment generation aspect of the alcohol industry. They argued that the industry contributes to job creation and fosters a chain of businesses related to the alcohol value chain. The need for a regulatory approach that encourages innovation and flexibility within the industry was emphasized.

Concerns were also raised about the potential impact of alcohol control on tourism. Arguments suggested that strict regulations, such as closing wine stores on religious days and imposing early closing times, might be viewed unfavorably by tourists and impede the overall tourism experience.

6.1.3 Government Stance on Alcohol Control

As revealed by the data collected from KIs, the government's stance on alcohol control in Sri Lanka involves nuanced considerations. However, most key informants expressed the opinion that the government could take more proactive measures in this regard. Both current and former governments were criticized for their lack of enthusiasm and proactive engagement in implementing robust actions for alcohol control.

Key informants raised concerns about the current government's apparent prioritization of alcohol as a major revenue source, despite acknowledging that the health and economic costs of alcohol far exceed the revenue gains from taxation. This economic perspective creates a tension between immediate fiscal gains and long-term health and economic costs, according to the key informants. Questions emerged regarding the government's willingness and ability to prioritize alcohol control amidst economic crisis and the need for revenue generation. The dilemma prompts questions about the alignment and prioritization of alcohol control amid competing policy goals.

“The health and economic costs of alcohol are much more than the revenue gains that people gain by taxation. But that’s a remote thing. The governments don’t take that very seriously. Because firstly you don’t see healthcare happen in one shot. Whereas the taxes that you get from alcohol come to the Treasury almost overnight” [KI from Advisor/ Influencer category, former chairman NATA]

Additionally, the influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements to increase alcohol taxation adds another layer of complexity to the government's approach, with key informants noting the government's compliance with IMF recommendations.

“When it comes to alcohol control, I think whether the government is interested or not as it is following, they must follow the recommendations of the IMF. They must do it. In that sense, I think the Government is interested. Maybe it is not because of understanding the real issue of alcohol. But it may be because of the recommendations given by the IMF and the alcohol and tobacco taxes.” [KI from beneficiary category, civil society organization, former Executive Director of ADIC]

Furthermore, the strategy of relying on price increases as the primary approach was questioned by a key informant representing a health worker trade union, raising doubts about its efficacy in addressing the multifaceted issues associated with alcohol consumption. The discussion widely covered the accessibility of alcohol, including topics such as licensing, selling permits, sale hours, and points of sale. Both supporters and opponents of strict alcohol policies agreed on the need for regulated licensing instead of ad-hoc or temporary licenses.

6.1.4 Political Support

The key informants provided diverse perspectives, shedding light on the complex dynamics that shape political attitudes and actions related to alcohol in Sri Lanka.

Several key informants highlighted the potential influence of public perception on political decision-making. They suggested that policymakers, if fully aware of the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption, might be interested in adopting measures to regulate its sale responsibly, rather than advocating for a complete ban.

The key informants emphasized the need to leverage public support during elections, as politicians are sensitive to public opinion to secure votes. They suggested framing alcohol control as a popular move, especially considering that a significant portion of the population, including women and most males, does not consume alcohol.

“There are elections, as local government or general or whatever, that's the advantage that we can take. If you can garner that support from the public and bring it out as it has been done in the past. As I was telling you where the public themselves advocated and said, we want you to do something about it, then the politician takes note and says OK this is what the people want. So, I will include in my manifestos, or I speak to them about that.” [KI from an alcohol regulating authority/ Decision Maker category-]

However, concerns were raised about the significant role alcohol plays during elections, where politicians often distribute alcohol as a campaigning tactic. Additionally, key informants highlighted the challenge of achieving broader political support and consensus, as politicians hold different opinions on alcohol control, with some openly promoting alcohol consumption.

The election manifestos of the political parties were considered a starting point for advocating alcohol control. However, the key informants expressed their doubts about the translation of these promises into tangible actions, given the potential influence exerted by the alcohol industry. Moreover, key informants perceived a lack of political commitment toward alcohol control presently, noting the absence of identifiable figures strongly advocating for it at the highest levels of government. Even there are few politicians who support alcohol control,

influences from the alcohol industry were cited as a significant obstacle. The tension between politicians who favor control policies for societal well-being and those supporting the expansion of the alcohol market for economic gains was also highlighted by the key informants.

6.1.5 Public Support

The key informants expressed a generally positive view regarding public aversion to alcohol, noting that people wouldn't mind having 'some control' over alcohol, despite diverse social attitudes. They believed that even stringent policies would be accepted by the public, recognizing the importance of a stricter alcohol policy. Acknowledging the fact that most of the public are non-drinkers, including males, the key informants emphasized the need to highlight the voting power of non-drinking segments of society.

The key informants from the beneficiary group category were particularly optimistic about influencing public opinion to shape the perspectives of decision-makers. The consensus among key informants was that once the public is adequately informed about the harms of substance abuse, politicians are likely to align with public sentiment, given the electoral significance of this issue. Politicians are seen as recognizing the utility of supporting policies that resonate with the concerns of the voting public.

The historical context of the "Temperance Movement" in Sri Lanka, led by Buddhists, emerged as a culturally powerful force against alcohol consumption, as highlighted by key informants. Religious influences, especially from Islam and Buddhism, play a role in shaping attitudes toward alcohol, with both religions discouraging its consumption. Despite this, some informants expressed concerns about the potential influence of the industry and politicians, suggesting they could easily overpower the public mandate. Additionally, some key informants perceived challenges in generating mass enthusiasm and interest in the harmful effects of alcohol, particularly due to the dispersed public attitudes toward alcohol consumption. Despite these challenges, community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations, such as ADIC, were recognized for their crucial role in garnering public support. These organizations have successfully lobbied a significant number of people, leveraging the trust built over the years.

6.1.6 Social Acceptance

While there is generally positive public support for policies aimed at alcohol control, discussions with key informants revealed significant variations in public perception and social acceptance of alcohol consumption. The difficulty of challenging deeply rooted social and cultural aspects associated with alcohol consumption was a recurrent theme highlighted by the key informants. The promotional and cultural dimensions of alcohol have become integral to social occasions, posing challenges in countering these ingrained practices. Additionally, the glamorization of alcohol and the belief in its potential benefits were identified as contributors to shaping public opinion. Key informants emphasized the challenges of addressing these positive views and the justifications people often provide for alcohol use.

Some key informants emphasized the distinction between tobacco and alcohol policies. Formulating policies for tobacco control is perceived as relatively straightforward, while developing effective alcohol policies encounters different public opinions. For instance, advocating for a zero-alcohol policy poses many complexities and challenges compared to advocating for a 'zero-tobacco generation.' One key informant from a decision maker category

highlighted these difficulties, attributing them to the long-standing presence of alcohol in society and variations in social acceptance of alcohol consumption.

“When it comes to tobacco, making policies is very easy. However, when it comes to alcohol, there is a different opinion among the public. For example, with the help of NATA, the police were able to capture instances where alcohol was freely distributed during Vesak. In that situation, we could see that the public had two different views. Some feel that having alcohol is enjoyable.” [KI from an alcohol regulatory authority/ Decision Maker category]

Furthermore, as noted by a key informant from academia, issues related to alcohol are often perceived as confined to individual households rather than being recognized as a widespread societal concern. This observation implies a certain level of compartmentalization, where the impact of alcohol is seen as a private matter rather than a shared societal issue.

6.1.7 Alcohol Taxation

The discussion with the key informants on alcohol taxation primarily emphasized the necessity for a robust and technically sound taxation policy for alcohol. The key informants provided diverse insights into the government’s approach and the challenges associated with this critical aspect of fiscal policy.

According to the key informants, there appears to be a general acceptance among the public regarding an increase in alcohol taxes. The perception was that such increases would be more acceptable for the public than similar adjustments to essential commodities. However, this acceptance is contingent on the government adopting a rational and carefully formulated model of taxation. The necessity of a technically sound approach, considering the complexities of alcohol taxation, including cross-substitution effects and cross elasticities, was emphasized.

“The Government should go on optimizing its tax increase. They should keep increasing their taxes but based on a rational model of taxation. Unlike tobacco taxes, alcohol taxes are very tricky because there are different types of alcohol. There can be a lot of substitution effects, cross substitution, and cross elasticities. There are a lot of things that must take care of. It must be formulated very carefully and use good data. I would say technically sound models so that we are sure that we will get what we want?” [KI from a professional association/Advisor/Influencer category-]

Despite the potential economic benefits, the key informants expressed their doubts about the government’s long-term plans and strategic vision regarding alcohol taxation. The prevailing opinion is that the Ministry of Finance is engaged in a firefighting exercise, reacting to immediate economic challenges and IMF recommendations rather than instituting planned and sustained taxation systems. The key informants called for transparent indexation formulas akin to those proposed for tobacco taxation, emphasizing the importance of avoiding ad hoc measures.

The key informants also underscored the need for innovative approaches for alcohol taxation. They also advocated for exploring untapped revenue sources to increase government revenue, rather than rely on conventional sources such as alcohol taxation. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of utilizing management tools for alcohol taxation that have not been previously explored. A recurring concern of the key informant representing the industry revolved around the effectiveness of tax policies and their impact on both the industry and consumers. The

common sentiment is that the current taxation system lacks standardization and technical correctness, often appearing ad hoc and elective. The challenge lies in striking a balance between revenue generation and affordability for consumers, argued some key informants. The impact of taxation extends beyond the economic realm, with consequences manifesting in societal and health domains. An increase in taxes has led to consumers resorting to illicit alternatives, contributing to health issues, and escalating hospital bills.

“There are targets to be achieved, but there should be mechanisms to ensure that taxes are implemented and collected properly. If the tax is leaking, increasing the duty only affects legal entities like us, resulting in our products selling less and less. The targets are never met. We are squeezed by the tax and the consumers are also squeezed because we are becoming more expensive. As a result, they resort to drinking moonshine, get sick and then hospital bills go up. It’s a real cycle that’s going on and must be addressed at some point.”
[KI from industry category]

Moreover, instances of inconsistencies in tax collection mechanisms, such as varying license fees and fluctuating excise duties, were also highlighted.

6.2 Institutions

Ministry of Finance - According to the majority observations, Ministry of Finance was seen as the key decision-maker in alcohol tax policy. At the same time, some felt that the pressure to raise the government revenue has narrowed MOF’s vision to the cash flow from the alcohol industry to the Treasury coffers, ignoring the large health costs incurred.

Ministry of Health and National Alcohol and Tobacco Authority (NATA) - The respondents believed that these two organisations are key to opposing alcohol industry pressure. However, according to some key informants, NATA lacks financial resources and human capital to face the pressure put by the industry lobbyists. One informant from the influencer category blamed the government for making it a defunct organisation ‘without muscle power’ by cutting its funds.

Department of Excise (DOE) - Many respondents commented on the strong influence of the DOE on alcohol tax. Respondents, including that of the DOE itself expressed how tax collection and meeting the revenue targets, set by the MOF at the budget, are their priorities. The alcohol industry representative was frank in criticizing the corruption of the Excise Department, detailing their firsthand experience with the Excise officials. Their argument is that it affects legitimate alcohol businesses, that pay their due taxes where officials and politicians accept favours from alcohol companies, to continue their illicit alcohol production. Though not in such strong words, many key informants seem unfavourable with the conduct of the Department of Excise.

“All these Acts are implemented to earn money for the government only. Collecting excise tax is the first step, and collecting fines is the second step. There is no mechanism for proper regulation of tobacco and alcohol inside the country.”
(KI from a health-worker union/ Advisor/Influencer category)

6.3 Interests

In terms of actor interests, the key informants identified the industry as a major impediment to implementing more systemic and stringent policy measures to control alcohol consumption among the public. Specifically, the soft alcohol sector exerts immense pressure, creating significant obstacles, as opined by the key informants.

Despite the industry's pressure, several influential groups support alcohol control initiatives, affirmed the key informants. Religious organizations, the Temperance Movement, professional associations such as the Sri Lanka Medical Association, NGOs, and civil society organizations play pivotal roles as supporters in alcohol control. For instance, a key informant representing the beneficiary category mentioned that around 10 organizations actively collaborate with them in activities related to alcohol prevention and control, and many more individuals engage through Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).

Enhancing support from these supporters involves group discussions and providing technical materials and other resources, including financial support. Advocacy, both privately and publicly at the policy level, along with structured discussions, is crucial. Offering a comprehensive understanding of industry arguments and countering them, especially regarding tax policies, is essential, as asserted by the key informants.

Moreover, leveraging social media platforms to deglamorize alcohol and tobacco with the backing of influential individuals, particularly non-political figures like cricketers, can significantly impact public opinion suggested the key informants. Collaborating with celebrities who have overcome struggles with alcohol and tobacco can be a powerful way to educate the public.

6.4 Power Dynamics

The key informants unveiled several dimensions of power dynamics among the stake holders.

Conflict of Interest - Conflicts of interest can complicate decision-making in alcohol control, as revealed by insights from key informants. The intricate relationships among key stakeholders and the conflicting nature of their interests were discussed, particularly focusing on the dissatisfaction and mistrust expressed towards the Department of Excise (DOE), the key government implementing agency in alcohol control.

Some key informants explicitly highlighted the challenges regulatory bodies face in maintaining impartiality, especially when influential officers may have conflicting ties to the corporate sector.

“I’m not scared to say this: the Department of Exercise, the main government agency for the control and regulation of illicit alcohol, has influential officers with a conflict of interest with the corporate sector.” [KI from a professional association / Advisor/ Influencer category]

“Very highly placed officials, especially those responsible for deciding on taxes within the Ministry of Finance, consistently face conflicts of interest, whether legitimate or not. The extent of legitimacy is unclear. I believe they tend to favor taxing the alcohol or tobacco industry and provide various explanations to avoid implementing such measures.” [KI from a professional association / Advisor/ Influencer category]

While some key informants emphasized the significance of income generated by the alcohol industry, particularly in a context where the country is grappling with an economic crisis, some other key informants with different perspective, accused the government of solely prioritizing revenue generation, neglecting the broader net benefits that the country could achieve through effective alcohol control.

“There is a misconception that alcohol easily generates income for the government. In reality, only 11% of the government’s total income is derived from the taxation of tobacco and alcohol.” [KI from a alcohol regulatory authority/ Decision Maker category]

The conflicting stances of two key regulatory and implementing authorities, NATA, and the DOE, were revealed in the discussions. While NATA advocates for a country free of tobacco and alcohol use, the DOE aims for efficient administration and maximising the revenue collection from the liquor and tobacco industry. Conflicting priorities between these two authorities pose challenges for officers in these respective authorities in implementing their mandates.

“Concerning temporary licenses, we have made multiple requests on behalf of NATA to the Department of Exercise. Unfortunately, the Department of Exercise operates under the Ministry of Finance, and they must adhere to financial requirements. Given the country’s challenging economic situation, they prioritize revenue generation. Consequently, it becomes challenging to assign blame, considering the difficult circumstances faced by the nation.” [KI from alcohol regulatory authority/ Decision Maker category]

“ The NATA office restricts us from promoting alcohol. It’s noteworthy that I am aware of 100 doctors at the Ministry of Health who consume alcohol, albeit advising against its use publicly. Additionally, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) share an anti-alcohol stance. However, our primary responsibility lies in collecting substantial taxes related to alcohol. Unfortunately, promotional activities are prohibited under these circumstances.” [KI from alcohol regulation implementing department / Decision Maker category]

The need for generating revenue from alcohol clashes with the necessity for prioritising public health, posing a dilemma for policy advocates. The absence of a proper formula to decrease demand indicates a reactive rather than proactive approach to alcohol regulation.

Moreover, the discussions with key informants uncovered a troubling connection between research studies on illicit alcohol and funding from the alcohol industry. Failing to disclose these conflicts of interest raises ethical concerns, as scientific studies ideally should be free from biases associated with vested interests.

Unethical interferences, practices, and promotions by the industry - The key informants provided insights on industry interests, questionable promotions, and potential corrupt practices intersect, prompting questions about the integrity of regulatory frameworks.

The key informants noted on a troubling trend emerges as the industry strategically targets females, exploiting societal dynamics under the guise of feminism. The portrayal of strong females associated with alcohol consumption in media and political movements raises questions about the ethics behind such promotional tactics by the industry. The deliberate or unconscious promotion of alcohol by media personalities, especially in the entertainment

industry and political movements underscores the need for scrutiny in understanding the motives behind such actions.

Some key informants expressed their suspicion that industry players may be involved in the illicit market, adding another layer to the narrative. The suggestion that major players could be producing illicit alcohol raises questions about the industry's integrity and adherence to regulatory standards.

“Consider the industry itself. It consistently asserts the existence of an illicit market. At times, we question if the key players might be involved in the illicit market themselves or even producing illicit goods. There are numerous factors to consider when attempting to comprehend the primary arguments at play here.” [KI from alcohol regulatory authority/ Decision Maker category]

The key informants provided examples of instances where unethical promotions took place, despite the NATA Act prohibiting the promotion of alcohol. For example, NATA authorities successfully halted a major promotional campaign supported by a leading alcohol manufacturer at the last minute. The industry's tactical nature is exposed, showcasing its ability to exploit legal loopholes and use strategic maneuvers to evade regulatory scrutiny, as pointed out by the key informants.

Allegations of corruption made by a key informant representing the industry within regulatory bodies raise serious concerns about the integrity of the system. The mention of commissioners with multiple houses and extravagant lifestyles, potentially funded by industry players, paints a picture of a system susceptible to corrupt practices. Addressing corruption becomes a focal point in ensuring a fair and transparent regulatory environment.

However, some key informants were hesitant to make definitive statements on unethical interferences, practices, and promotions by the industry without concrete evidence. The lack of evidence, despite gut feelings, highlights the difficulties in navigating the complex web of industry influence without tangible proof.

One key informant representing the advisors and influencers category pointed out how the global alcohol industry influences the local policy landscape. He referred to global alcohol and corporate-funded research funds being provided to friendly researchers, indicating the potential influence these industries have in shaping narratives and policies at the local level.

Stakeholder relationships - The dynamics of stakeholder relationships play a pivotal role in regulatory discussions and policy shaping. The key informants provided insights into the nature, challenges, and complexities faced by stakeholders in navigating interactions, particularly within the Department of Excise and the broader regulatory environment.

As a decision maker, NATA's active participation in various meetings, exemplified by the recent invitation from the presidential secretariat, underscores its importance and commitment to addressing crucial issues related to policies and regulations in alcohol control.

Discussions with key informants implied that, despite stakeholder consultations, concerns and recommendations are not always given sufficient attention. For example, the informant representing the industry mentioned challenges when making recommendations for choosing a manufacturer for implementing stickers, as authorities overlooked their concerns and recommendations. This highlights the struggles faced by certain stakeholders in influencing decisions within the regulatory framework.

Moreover, the key informant representing the industry pointed out that the near monopoly enjoyed by one of the manufacturers creates a one-sided landscape, hindering collaborative efforts and diverse perspectives among other manufacturers. For instance, the inability to form an manufacturers' association is due to this one-sided nature in the industry and this hinders collaborative efforts and diverse perspectives explained the key informant.

As highlighted by key informants, within the DOE itself, internal divisions arise when proposing new policies or regulatory measures. Concerns about the credibility of certain higher officers and the appointment of individuals with questionable ethics have led to mistrust among other stakeholders, complicating the regulatory landscape and raising concerns about decision-makers' integrity.

The discussions with the key informants suggested a certain level of disconnection and mistrust, even among key government decision-making bodies.

“They (officers at the Fiscal Department) think they are wiser than us. Sri Lankan administrative people think they are the controllers of a particular department. Equisetic problems are there. Sri Lanka never comes out of these struggles unless a masquer would take place. Sri Lanka Administrative Services (SLAS) is the one who has controlled the government for the last 50 years. Even today it is controlled by them.” [KI from alcohol regulation implementing department decision maker category]

A significant concern is the disconnect between government decisions and their execution by the DOE. Ideally, policies related to alcohol control and taxation should be crafted by NATA and the Fiscal Department under the Ministry of Finance, with the DOE serving as the implementing agency. However, according to key informants, the DOE drafts policies for themselves, raising serious concerns about policy integrity. The call for policies to be crafted by the government (NATA or the Fiscal Department) and then implemented by the DOE highlights the need for a transparent and accountable regulatory process. The observation that the department plans to draft a new exercise manual without consulting relevant stakeholders, including NATA, raises questions about the inclusivity of the policymaking process. The discussion with key informants emphasizes a call for reassessment of the policymaking process, suggesting that excise laws should be drafted by external entities, not the implementers themselves, to ensure an unbiased and independent regulatory framework.

However, presenting a different opinion, a key informant from the DOE assured that consultations are happening, specifically with other government stakeholders, even though the department is constrained with limited human resources.

Negative media influence, Political Interferences, and other stakeholders' relationship with the industry sector. - The key informants also shared their perspectives regarding various aspects of power dynamics among stakeholders.

In shaping public opinion on alcohol control policies, the media assumes a significant role. While most of the public may endorse the necessity of alcohol control, media influence, often propelled by corporate interests, introduces complications. Public opinion and the perspectives of influential figures are swayed by media narratives that may not consistently align with the public's best interests. The key informants highlighted the importance of recognizing and addressing the impact of media influence on shaping perceptions and decisions related to alcohol control.

“When it comes to the necessity of controlling alcohol among the public, there is likely to be a majority favoring such policies. Unfortunately, public opinion and the views of influential individuals are significantly influenced by the media, which is often not people friendly. Individuals are wittingly, or unwittingly influenced by the corporate sector.” [KI from KI from a professional association, Advisor/Influencer category]

Political interference and influence in the alcohol industry are pivotal factors in shaping the industry’s landscape, according to a key informant representing the industry sector. For example, the informant cited that in 1974, W. M. Mendis and Co Ltd¹ leveraged political connections to secure government permission for arrack production, resulting in the creation of special laws. This preferential treatment allowed Mendis to gain recognition for arrack. Similarly, government privatization efforts led to the establishment of the Distilleries Company of Sri Lanka PLC (DCSL)², inadvertently creating a monopoly. Such political interferences in the industry’s evolution raise questions about fairness and equal opportunities.

Transparency and information access are vital for evaluating industry-stakeholder relationships. However, a key informant representing the beneficiary category stated that the Department of Excise’s data, once openly accessible, is now restricted, indicating efforts to control information flow.

¹ A Sri Lankan beverage alcohol company, known as one of Sri Lanka’s oldest liquor manufacturers in the country.

² Distilleries Company of Sri Lanka PLC (DCSL) is a diversified Sri Lankan conglomerate.

7. Discussion

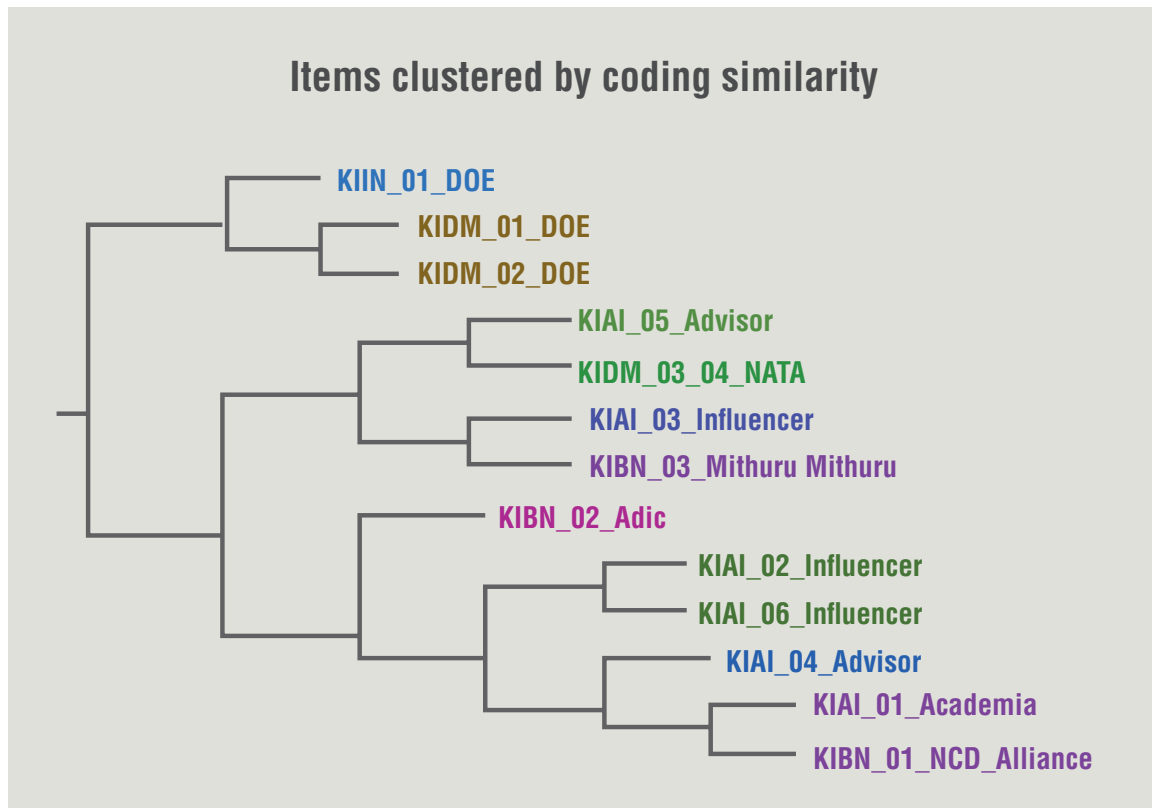
Our analysis indicates that the political economy landscape and power dynamics among the stakeholders of the alcohol industry in Sri Lanka are multifaceted and complex. Diverse and conflicting perceptions could be observed among the stakeholders regarding almost every aspect related to the industry.

There are several arguments for alcohol control, emphasizing its detrimental effects on health, adverse impact on the country's net benefits, economic strain on households, and broader social repercussions. The primary focus of these arguments lies in the pervasive health issues linked to alcohol consumption, with resulting healthcare costs forming a central rationale for stringent control measures. The detrimental health effects of alcohol consumption are extensively researched and documented. The harmful consumption of alcohol stands as a primary behavioral risk factor for NCDs where it is projected that over half of the three million annual deaths linked to alcohol use are attributed to NCDs, which encompass conditions such as cancer (WHO, 2022). Individuals with alcohol dependence experience significant health consequences, including mortality, psychiatric conditions, neurologic impairment, cardiovascular disease, liver disease, and malignant neoplasms (Cargiulo, 2007). The economic impact of alcohol consumption is visible at different levels of the society. At the household level, the spending on tobacco and alcohol intensifies poverty, particularly in low-income households. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of additional households are categorized as living in relative poverty when their income is calculated after deducting expenses on tobacco and alcohol (Nyakutsikwa, Britton, & Langley, 2020). Even though individuals with lower incomes spend less on alcohol and tobacco compared to those with higher incomes, the proportion of their income allocated to these expenditures is significantly higher. This compromises their capacity to fulfil basic needs (De Silva, Samarasinghe, & Hanwella, 2011). At the macro level too, it has been consistently confirmed that the economic burden of alcohol on society is substantial. For instance, the economic burden of alcohol on society is substantial. The economic burden of alcohol in the 12 selected countries was estimated to equate to 0.45 - 5.44% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Thavorncharoensap, Teerawattananon, Yothasamut, Lertpitakpong, & Chaikledkaew, 2009).

In addition to health concerns, the adverse effects of alcohol extend to social issues, including crimes, road accidents, family disputes, and challenges in single-parent households.

Our analysis indicates that, despite overwhelming evidence of the negative impact of alcohol consumption, there are still arguments in favor of promoting lenient policy measures to control alcohol consumption. These arguments are primarily justified based on the perceived belief in the growth of illegal alcohol consumption due to high prices of licit alcohol and the tax income generated by the alcohol industry.

Interestingly our analysis found that the ideas expressed by the DOE and the alcohol industry are similar (Figure 4). They had similar notions of the illicit alcohol industry being prominent. Furthermore, both parties highlighted the importance of the industry's revenue as a main income source for the government, especially during times of fiscal downturn. Moreover, it is argued that more stringent alcohol control measures would hamper economic activities and employment generation done by the industry.

Figure 4: Items clustered by coding similarity.

Source: Authors' illustration using NVivo

Given the existence of the illicit alcohol market, it is valid to consider whether any tax increases could expand its market share. A price elasticity analysis could help counter this argument by determining whether current consumers are likely to switch from licit alcohol to illicit alcohol. The contribution of alcohol tax to revenue generation is an argument brought up in the case of Sri Lanka as well. The International Monetary Fund stated in November 2023 that Sri Lanka is behind the revenue target by 22% (IMF, 2023). There is pressure on the government to bridge the revenue gap, and opponents to tax hikes believe that further increases will only decrease the current revenue flow. However, this argument is made without sufficient evidence of the change in demand. Increased availability and accessibility to alcohol are recommendations made by some stakeholders, including several ministers in the current government (Gunaratna, 2022). Advocates for lenient alcohol policies link them with tourism, suggesting that increased access promotes tourism growth. This was also mentioned in the 2024 Budget Reading by the President of Sri Lanka (Ministry of Finance - Sri Lanka, 2023). The proposal aims to introduce flexible opening hours to discourage illicit selling of liquor and revise related regulations for tourism promotional activities. However, according to a survey conducted by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), the main tourist attractions in Sri Lanka are the beach and nature (SLTDA, n.d.). Nightlife and alcohol varieties are not even mentioned. Therefore, the argument of using alcohol to promote tourism does not align with positioning Sri Lanka in the tourism market, as it is not supported by existing opinion surveys. The narrative that fits the country is a scenic, family destination rather than promoting nightlife.

The international literature also shows that the industry uses these arguments to justify and demand lower taxes and lenient policy measures for alcoholic beverages (Paraje, Jha, Savedoff, & Fuchs, 2023). For example, the producers of alcohol lobby governments and the public by arguing that taxes do not reduce consumption; that they are regressive; and that they are “discriminatory” (as they are levied on specific groups of products) or even unconstitutional (Paraje, Jha, Savedoff, & Fuchs, 2023). Opposing tax increases, the industry contends that a tax increase will reduce tax revenues owing to decreases in consumption, cause unemployment, hurt the poor, given the regressivity of consumption taxes, and lead to extensive tax avoidance and evasion. However, experiences from around the world demonstrate that these arguments are false or exaggerated (Chaloupka, Powell, & Warner, 2019).

The study’s findings highlight the potential impact of public perception on political decision-making. Policymakers, if fully informed about the detrimental effects of alcohol, may opt for responsible regulation instead of a complete ban. It underscores the importance of conveying to decision-makers and politicians the need to control alcohol consumption in the country and the overall economic benefits that would result from such measures. Additionally, capitalizing on public support for stringent alcohol policy measures, especially during elections, by framing alcohol control as a popular move is crucial, considering the significant non-drinking population. While election manifestos can serve as a starting point for advocating alcohol control, sustained pressure from the public and other lobby groups is necessary to translate these promises into concrete actions. Enhancing political prioritization of alcohol policy reform can be achieved through two approaches: sector-specific and system change initiatives (Gage, Connor, Jackson, McKerchar, & Signal, 2023). Sector-specific strategies focus on influencing policymakers and mobilizing civil society, involving activities such as formulating a cohesive solution, building coalitions, and using effective framing. On the other hand, system change initiatives aim for structural adjustments to reduce the power imbalance between industry and civil society. This includes limiting industry participation in policymaking and ensuring consistent funding for advocacy. An illustrative example is the creation of an international treaty, similar to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, to support domestic policymaking efforts (Gage, Connor, Jackson, McKerchar, & Signal, 2023).

As revealed by our analysis, there exists a public aversion to alcohol in Sri Lanka, coupled with an acceptance of policies aimed at controlling alcohol consumption. This sentiment is reinforced by the significant non-drinking majority and their influential voting power. Public opinion serves as a crucial factor, providing legitimacy to alcohol control policies, and whether these opinions are favorable or opposing can impact the sustenance or rescission of such policies. As societal consequences of alcohol, combined with ideological norms regarding individual responsibility, are more influential in shaping public opinion than self-interest factors (Karlsson, Holmberg, & Weibull, 2020) efforts to promote and strengthen public support for alcohol control policies should focus on highlighting societal-level issues rather than personal considerations. Moreover, recognizing the vital role played by community-based organizations in shaping public opinion, it is imperative to enhance the resources and capacities of these organizations. Strengthening them is crucial for fostering and sustaining a favorable public stance on alcohol control policies.

While there is generally positive public support for alcohol control policies, there are variations in social acceptance regarding alcohol consumption. The challenges lie in confronting deeply rooted social and cultural aspects linked to alcohol use, including its integration into social occasions, the glamorization of alcohol, and the belief in its perceived benefits, all of which make

countering positive views challenging. Such social acceptance towards alcohol consumption could result in low recognition of alcohol use related health problems, consequently resulting in poor help-seeking behavior (Ssebunnya, et al., 2020).

Taxation and pricing strategies for alcohol stand out as highly impactful and economic measures for alcohol control (WHO, 2018). Raising excise taxes on alcoholic beverages has demonstrated effectiveness in curbing the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption while concurrently offering governments additional revenue to counterbalance the economic repercussions of such usage. Globally, implementing taxes leading to a 50% rise in alcohol prices could prevent over 21 million deaths over 50 years and generate nearly US\$17 trillion in extra revenues. This substantial figure is comparable to the entire government revenue of eight of the world's largest economies within a single year (WHO, 2023). The discussion with key informants on alcohol taxation primarily emphasized the need for a robust and technically sound taxation policy for alcohol. However, our analysis indicates that the key stakeholders have concerns about the government's long-term plans and strategic vision regarding alcohol taxation. The common sentiment is that the current taxation system lacks standardization and technical correctness, often appearing ad hoc and elective. The alcohol tax policy of a country should aim to achieve the public health goal of reducing demand for alcohol and be integrated as part of a comprehensive strategy to decrease alcohol consumption (WHO, 2023). When designing a tax system, factors such as policy goals, tax administration capacity, political economy, and the structure of the alcohol market must be taken into consideration (WHO, 2023).

Creating an impactful tax policy requires a collaborative approach, with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance taking the lead. It is their responsibility to work together to gather the most accurate estimates for alcohol price elasticities and model the potential effects of tax adjustments on alcohol consumption across various population segments, as well as on factors like mortality, hospitalization, crime, and productivity (WHO, 2018). Additionally, crucial partners in this endeavor include ministries and government departments tasked with tax collection and the oversight of smuggled, illicit, or informally produced alcohol, as well as regulating authorities that ensure public health interests are met (e.g., DOE, DOC, NATA). Moreover, the government needs to capitalize on the public sentiment of acceptance among the public regarding an increase in alcohol taxes and treat it as an opportunity to implement an effective taxation policy for the country.

The analysis revealed intricate conflicts of interest and a sense of mistrust between the two major stakeholders in alcohol control decision-making, regulating and implementing: NATA and the DOE. Conflicting priorities among these regulatory authorities highlight the dilemma between revenue generation and robust regulation. The DOE appears to have limited concern about the broader negative repercussions of alcohol consumption and its overall adverse impact on the country's economy. It was evident that other stakeholders perceived the DOE making decisions and implementing measures in favor of the industry. The mandate of the DOE stipulates the collection and protection of revenue from liquor and tobacco, thereby achieving the revenue targets set by the Ministry of Finance. In contrast, NATA aims to eliminate alcohol-related harm by assessing and monitoring the production, marketing, and consumption of alcohol products, with a focus on restricting access, especially for children. In this context, inevitable rivalry arises between these two key decision-making bodies on alcohol policy. For example, our analysis indicates that representatives from the DOE did not hold a favorable attitude towards the conduct of NATA or the Ministry of Health due to their staunch disapproval of alcohol.

Several approaches can be employed to address the conflicting objectives of public health and economic interests. For instance, achieving policy alignment across diverse sectors necessitates collaborative efforts during the policy development phase (Jankhotkaew, Casswell, Huckle, Chaiyasong, & Phonsuk, 2022). It is crucial, however, that this participatory process remains free from conflicts of interest, particularly those stemming from the alcohol industry. Most importantly, the government must establish a specific, targeted policy on alcohol, fostering consensus and acknowledgment among all government stakeholders regarding the government's approach and stance on alcohol. It's imperative that their objectives align with public health and safety concerns, giving due recognition to the importance of revenue generation. However, the government should refrain from viewing the alcohol industry merely as a source of income for the government. Strong leadership at the government level is essential to prioritize public health concerns in any alcohol policy (WHO, 2022). One suggestion to achieve this is proposing the establishment of a specialized Alcohol Office. This office would take the lead on alcohol policy and offer insights across various government departments regarding the impact of alcohol, encompassing areas such as the night-time economy and agriculture (WHO, 2022).

The analysis of insights from key informants indicates that stakeholder relationships and coordination in formulating and implementing alcohol control policies are not in good shape. As mentioned earlier, coordination gaps are evident between the two major decision-making bodies, NATA, and DOE, primarily due to their conflicting interests. Additionally, sentiments expressed by key informants from other stakeholder categories suggest a distant relationship among key stakeholders, with the majority expressing concerns about the DOE's effectiveness in implementing alcohol policy control measures. Interestingly, the analysis also reveals that even the industry representative has concerns about how matters are handled within the DOE, indicating a perceived favoritism toward specific business entities rather than a focus on the industry's overall development. Given the array of interests from various sectors, effective coordination requires competent coordinating organizations with legitimacy and a robust sense of ownership to facilitate coordination seamlessly across different sectors (Jankhotkaew, Casswell, Huckle, Chaiyasong, & Phonsuk, 2022).

Unethical interference by the industry emerges as a major concern in the formulation and implementation of effective alcohol control policy measures, as revealed by our analysis. Industry interference manifests in various forms and occurs at different levels. This includes unethical product promotions that violate the NATA Act, potential involvement of industry players in the illicit market, allegations of bribing officials within regulatory bodies, exploitation of legal loopholes to evade scrutiny, funding research to produce biased conclusions favoring the industry, shaping public opinion to glamourize alcohol consumption, and strategically targeting females under the guise of feminism. In general, the industry endeavors to shape policies through two main methods: (1) shaping policy discussions in a cogent and internally cohesive manner, thereby sidelining issues that run counter to commercial interests from policy considerations; and (2) employing both immediate and enduring strategies to address challenges to commercial interests within the policy domain, establishing connections with key actors through diverse organizational structures (McCambridge, Mialon, & Hawkins, 2018). The WHO proposes strategies to tackle industry interference at various levels of governance. These encompass implementing internal procedures in the formulation of public health policies to both identify and restrict interactions with the alcohol industry, ensuring transparency in such engagements. Another aspect involves exploring the potential regulation of corporate social responsibility activities undertaken by the alcohol industry, treating them as forms of

marketing. Additionally, the recommendation emphasizes the institutionalization of conflict-of-interest assessments across sectors, spanning health, agriculture, economy, and trade. Lastly, considering regional mechanisms to fund alcohol harm prevention and reduction, mirroring the approach taken by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria for HIV (WHO, 2022).

The analysis highlighted the role of the media in shaping public opinion on alcohol control policies, often influenced by corporate interests. Athauda et al. (2021), also found that the alcohol industry in Sri Lanka directs its activities through marketing approaches and influences alcohol policy (Athauda, Peiris-John, McCool, Wickremasinghe, & Amerathunga, 2021). In the context of Sri Lanka, an aggressive marketing environment that exploits social media as its primary vehicle was identified as a major contributing factor in exposing adolescents to alcohol use. This negative media influence is further exacerbated by a lukewarm policy environment and permissive cultural and societal norms surrounding alcohol (Athauda, Peiris-John, McCool, Wickremasinghe, & Amerathunga, 2021). News organizations, functioning as corporations, mirror the values and interests of political and economic elites. Consequently, the media often present perspectives more in line with the alcohol industry than what the scientific consensus on public health policy would deem appropriate (Mercille, 2017). Nonetheless, to a limited degree, there is some backing for public health viewpoints, particularly from certain socioeconomic elite groups such as the medical professions and progressive politicians. However, in general there is a clear reluctance to support strong public health strategies. To enhance the visibility of public health experts and advocates in the media, it is advisable for them to actively participate in alternative media, which tends to be less corporate, more diverse, and less commercially driven than mainstream media. Additionally, there is a long-term necessity to promote diversity within mainstream media and reduce its corporate influence (Mercille, 2017).

8. Conclusion

This study delved into the multifaceted and complex landscape of the political economy and power dynamics within the alcohol industry stakeholders in Sri Lanka. The study reveals divergent and conflicting perceptions among stakeholders, reflecting the complex challenges associated with alcohol control policy formulation, policy implementation and decision-making while giving priority to and ensuring the public health interest.

The arguments for alcohol control are rooted in the considerable health, economic, and social ramifications associated with alcohol consumption. The detrimental health effects, particularly the significant contribution to NCDs, present a compelling case for stringent control measures. However, despite overwhelming evidence, our analysis uncovers arguments favoring lenient policy measures, often centered on concerns about the growth of illegal alcohol consumption and the economic contributions of the alcohol industry. Notably, there is alignment in perspectives between the main authority responsible for implementing most vital alcohol policy and regulatory measures, i.e. DOE, and the alcohol industry.

The study highlights the potential impact of public perception on political decision-making, emphasizing the need for responsible regulation over a complete ban. It suggests framing alcohol control as a popular move during elections, capitalizing on the significant non-drinking population. Efforts to enhance political prioritization of alcohol policy reform should focus on sector-specific and system change initiatives, aiming for structural adjustments to reduce industry influence. Community organizations and other civil society groups play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and garnering political support and commitment for policy measures aimed at alcohol control. These organizations also serve as important and influential “message carriers” who can advocate for reform.

The intricate conflicts of interest and mistrust between key decision-making bodies, NATA and DOE, pose challenges in achieving a balance between revenue generation and robust regulation. Collaborative efforts and competent coordinating organizations are essential for effective coordination among diverse sectors.

The study findings indicate the need for a robust and technically sound alcohol taxation policy, as the existing policy and mechanism are questioned for their lack of standardization and technical correctness. Any new reforms to the alcohol tax policy for the country should aim to achieve the public health goal of reducing demand for alcohol and be integrated as part of a comprehensive strategy to decrease alcohol consumption. Furthermore, formulating such a policy should be a collaborative effort, with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance taking the lead.

Unethical interference by the industry emerges as a significant concern, taking various forms such as unethical product promotions, influencing, and seeking favouritisms from politicians and government officials, and alleged involvement in the illicit market. Implementing internal procedures to identify and limit interactions with the alcohol industry, ensuring transparent engagements; considering the regulation of corporate social responsibility activities as a form of marketing; and institutionalizing conflict-of-interest assessments across various sectors, including health, agriculture, economy, and trade are important strategies to counter industry interference.

The media's role in shaping public opinion, influenced by corporate interests, is a critical aspect revealed in our analysis. To counter this influence, active participation in alternative media by public health experts is recommended, alongside long-term efforts to diversify mainstream media and reduce corporate influence.

Essentially, addressing the complex challenges in alcohol control decision-making necessitates a comprehensive and collaborative approach that prioritizes public health considerations alongside economic interests and societal perspectives. The findings of this analysis offer valuable insights for policymakers, underscoring the significance of evidence-based, responsible alcohol policies that accommodate the diverse interests and concerns of different stakeholders.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Profile of Key Informants

Category	Serial Number	Affiliation
Advisors and Influencers	KIAI_01	Senior Professor, Department of Economic, University of Colombo
	KIAI_02	Former Chairman NATA, WHO
	KIAI_03	Senior Lecturer, Department of Community Medicine, University of Colombo
	KIAI_04	Expert Committee on Tobacco and Alcohol, Sri Lanka Medical Association
	KIAI_05	Expert Committee on Tobacco and Alcohol, Sri Lanka Medical Association
	KIAI_06	Public Health Inspectors' Union
Decision Makers	KIDM_01	Commissioner - Department of Excise
	KIDM_02	Commissioner – Department of Excise of
	KIDM_03	Chairman, NATA
	KIDM_04	Legal Officer, NATA
	KIDM_05	Chairman, National Dangerous Drugs Control Board
Beneficiaries	KIBN_01	NCD Alliance, Former Executive Director ADIC
	KIBN_02	Executive Director ADIC
	KIBN_03	Mituru Mituro - Rehabilitation Centre)
Industry	KIIN_01	CEO, Managing Director, Private sector, industry



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