



# ***EARLY WARNING AND EARLY RESPONSE***

## ***POLICY BRIEF: ALCOHOL AND ITS LINKS TO CONFLICT***



***DILI, DECEMBER 2010***



In 2008, BELUN – in cooperation with Columbia University’s Center for International Conflict Resolution (CICR) – established the Early Warning and Response System (EWER) in Timor-Leste. EWER is designed to increase early responses to conflict and prevent the escalation of violence at both national and community levels.

CICR and BELUN recognize that the EWER system requires broad-based coordination, and joint planning and action by stakeholders at the sub-district and national levels. As such, we are grateful to the Government of Timor-Leste, national civil society organizations and other representatives of the State for their active cooperation and dedication to violence prevention in Timor-Leste.

CICR and BELUN would also like to thank the National Police Force of Timor-Leste (PNTL) and the United Nations Police Force in Timor-Leste for their cooperation, and for providing access to national crime statistics. Access to external data sources enables the EWER system to be more accurate in its reporting and can help to identify anomalies in the data sets.

The EWER system is generously supported by the Government of Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs, through the Conflict Resolution Unit. BELUN asserts that it is the sole author of this report and that the ideas, opinions and commentary contained within are not intended to reflect or represent those of the Government of Ireland.

Cover photo by Andrew Marriott, Marconi, Dili District, 8 November 2010.



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Generously supported by the  
Irish Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Conflict Resolution Unit.



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## ***Executive Summary***

In Timor-Leste, alcohol is used in various contexts, whether socially as part of a family gathering or celebration, or as part of a cultural ceremony. Whilst many people report to enjoy its effects, this relies on consumption in a responsible manner. Dependent, in part, on the context in which it is used, alcohol can have negative effects. Research undertaken by BELUN indicates that, in many cases, alcohol can cause social occasions to turn violent, and can escalate existing tensions.

Whilst Timor-Leste has traditions that have incorporated the use of alcohol, this entails a degree of risk. Discussions of *barlake*, often facilitated by consumption of locally-made palm wine, or *tua*, were reported as having a tendency to end in drunkenness and conflict. Similarly, many research participants spoke of the conclusion to agricultural cycles, such as planting and harvesting, as being marked by social use of alcohol. Whether for a feast or other formal ceremony, those consulted by BELUN noted that there was rarely any regulation of alcohol intake by convention or authority, resulting in widespread overconsumption and often violence.

From an economic perspective, alcohol was reported as being used to promote negotiation of business interests or the settlement of debts. It is also a source of revenue in its own right, with traditionally-produced alcohol such as *tua* fetching a good price at market, enough to support a family. Conversely, research turned up many stories of families where the husband and/or adult sons spent income on alcohol rather than on necessities. Whilst this is an issue in its own right, it was further reported as a precursor to domestic tensions and assaults.

Research participants reported that, among the reasons they might consume alcohol were to reduce stress or enjoy a social situation, or perhaps to aid sleep. Whilst there was an admission that such consumption across society might be a risk factor for conflict and, especially, domestic violence, there was less understanding of the long-term health impacts. Medical experts consulted in the course of this research pointed to the fact that habitual over-consumption can lead to chronic illness, decreased working productivity and can also add challenges to family life. Misunderstandings over the impact of alcohol on pregnancy and other aspects of women's health were also revealed as common, with many self-medicating rather than seeking appropriate care from a clinic or hospital.

BELUN also found a worrying degree of drug use, often in tandem with alcohol consumption. Although there were reports of the use of locally-grown plant substances, and some limited reference to opiates, amphetamines seem to be the most common form. According to participant reports, these may be gaining acceptance (largely among youth) within the same social context previously reserved for alcohol, and indeed may be mixed (even sold) together for ease of transport and consumption.

In order to reduce the risks associated with alcohol abuse, it is clear that the main intervention – from Government and other development actors – must come in the form of further education. Whilst NGOs like PRADET are already increasing knowledge among juvenile offenders and through police training, understanding of health impacts and the links to conflict remains low. Also, with cheap, high alcohol content spirits entering the country, often illegally, and the quality of locally-produced alcohol varying greatly, there may be a case for greater regulation and border control. Given the role that alcohol currently plays as a common precursor to violence, there is an inherent benefit to encouraging restraint, and more responsible drinking.

## ***Introduction***

In 2008, BELUN, a local NGO headquartered in Dili, established the Early Warning and Early Response System (EWER). This program was designed to contribute to human security and specifically to aid in arresting the escalation of violence in Timor-Leste. This system has been developed by, and is implemented in partnership with, Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution (CICR). In using the system, BELUN is able to prepare actionable research and recommendations for use by the Timorese Government and development partners, as well as communities themselves, in responding to emergent conflict.

This is the fourth policy brief under the EWER system, and the first to be authored by local staff. The purpose of the research is to gather perspectives and perceptions about the impacts of alcohol in Timor-Leste. The topic was chosen due to recent monitoring data that suggested links between the use of alcohol and the increased likelihood of incidents turning violent. BELUN staff conducted research across urban and rural locations and analyzed findings in light of social and economic factors, and broader conflict dynamics. BELUN notes that this research does not argue against the use of alcohol, but is focused on the impact of over-consumption.

## ***Methodology***

BELUN and CICR recognize the complexity inherent in the social (and arguably cultural) role of alcohol in Timor-Leste and do not seek to constrain the actions of individuals as consumers. In order to secure cooperation from relevant stakeholders to the research, BELUN undertook to introduce the EWER program and its aims to relevant parties. Initial interviews confirmed the specifics of conflict incidents previously reported to EWER monitors in various communities. Government officials were also, in many cases, initial points of contact for exploration of this topic.

Between July and September 2010, BELUN undertook interviews with key officials from the Ministry of Health and other departments, both at the national and sub-district levels. These included, among others, the Director-General of the Maubesse Referral Hospital, the National Chief of Clinic Departments, the National Head of Mental Health, various Sub-district Chiefs of Health, the Dili Customs Advisor in the Ministry of Finance, PNTL and Civil Security members, a number of District Agriculture Representatives, district focal points and representatives from the Ministry of Social Solidarity, Sub-district Administrators and suco council members. NGOs working in the health sector, notably PRADET, Health Alliance International (HAI) and Ba Futuru were also constructive participants in discussion. BELUN also conducted focus group discussions (FGD) with youth groups, students, teachers, parents and community groups involved in social development.

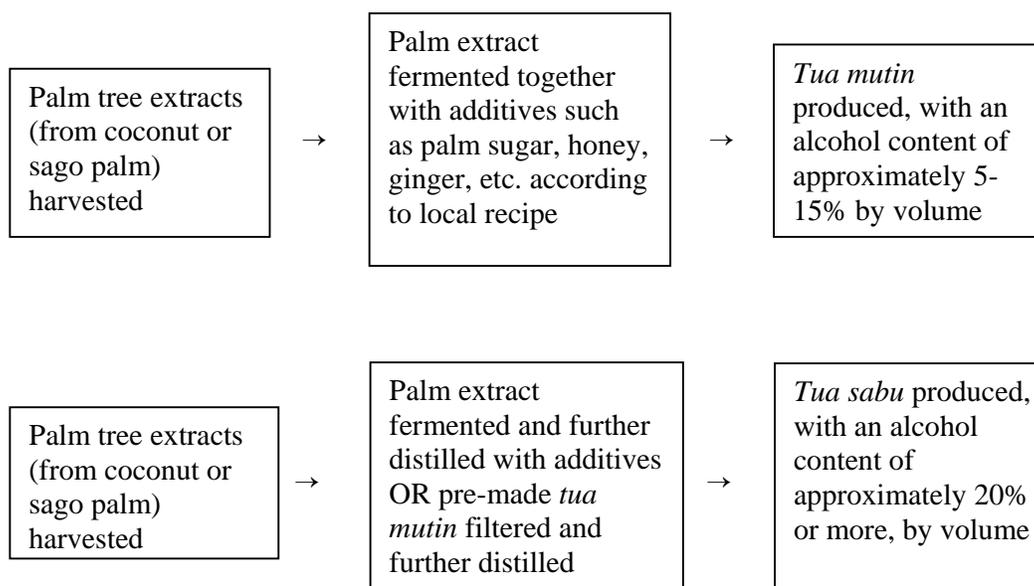
The complete list of participants that were involved in the interview is available on request from BELUN, although some of the names have been withheld for reasons of confidentiality. Data collection and analysis were conducted using qualitative methods, with interview participants reflecting on their own experience and perspectives as well as their observation of local issues leading to conflict. This approach has been determined to be the most appropriate means of capturing the social dynamics of such an issue.

### ***Background and Context***

Alcohol is traditionally produced in Timor-Leste, and is commonly referred to in its simplest form as *tua* or *tua mutin*. This is produced mostly from fermented sago palm, often with additives such as palm sugar, honey, flowers, sugar cane or cassava. It is similar to other traditionally-manufactured types of alcohol such as the Indonesian *arak*, and is often used for ceremonial purposes.

Another kind of locally-produced alcohol is called *tua sabu*, and is the product of further distillation and filtration of *tua mutin*, often with other additives such as the bark of certain trees, for flavour. Local sources suggest that whilst the original *tua mutin* product has a relatively low alcohol content, comparable to wine or beer at between approximately five and fifteen per cent by volume, the further refined *tua sabu* is more comparable to spirits, with an alcohol content upwards of twenty per cent by volume.

Diagram of the manufacturing process for *tua*:



Of course, it is not only locally-produced alcohol that is consumed in Timor-Leste. Import arrangements are in place to sell products from Indonesia, Portugal and Australia. Beers, wines and spirits are available from suppliers principally in the capital and in regional centres. Research suggests that the consumer base for these pre-packaged items is largely urban elites. Of some concern, though, is the (reported) wider appeal of low-cost spirits with exceptionally high alcohol content.

Discussions with customs personnel revealed that many of these higher alcohol content spirits (often marketed as whisky or gin) are being imported from Indonesia across the land border. Customs advisers admitted to BELUN that as there is little regulation on the quality and content of such beverages, and ventured the opinion (as yet unconfirmed by testing) that some may, in fact, pose a health risk.

Timorese law does, however, place some limitations on the importation of alcoholic drinks and other saleable products. Accordingly, police from the Border Patrol Unit, as well as Customs personnel, are charged with preventing the illegal importation of goods. Border control staff routinely inspect vehicles and packages crossing into the country in order to prevent the smuggling of alcohol (that is, its importation without payment of official duties) and of illegal drugs.

Interviews in the course of research suggest that remote areas in Maliana are currently used for smuggling purposes. Both alcohol and drugs are common, and lucrative, cargo. According to BELUN informants, local community members are paid a small amount (often as little as one dollar) to facilitate the entry of goods into the country via remote and unguarded routes, beyond the control of the police Border Patrol Unit.

Some participants in this research pointed to this kind of smuggling operation as indicative of a wider lack of controls and regulation on commerce. Some went so far as to suggest that the illegal importation of alcohol showed that local entrepreneurs had found circumventing official oversight to be the easiest way to turn a profit.

The method by which alcohol is imported has a flow-on effect in terms of its pricing on the local market. Whereas the economic situation of many people had meant that internationally-produced alcohol was too expensive, illegal operators can sell at a lower cost, not having to factor in duties and other official impostes. This appears to have put higher alcohol content whiskys and gins in reach of a wider proportion of population, though they remain rare in rural and remote communities.

Another phenomenon of concern that was revealed through EWER monitoring and investigation is that of drinking among children and youth. Many participants indicated that, in their respective communities, boys would be introduced to alcohol, and in some cases encouraged to partake in the home, from about the age of twelve. Consumption of alcohol was most common among men, and tended to be socially segregated, though women and girls often drank too, though not as early or as often.

BELUN heard that many high school students, especially those from families of lower socioeconomic standing, will attempt at the conclusion of their studies to contribute to farming, rather than seek an independent income. In some cases, it was claimed that this led to frustration and a need to rebel. Participants in focus group discussions cited this as a risk factor for over-consumption of alcohol, and concerns were raised in respect of physical and mental health impacts.

Data suggests that the practice of drinking frequently is most common in the 15 to 25 age group, with this behaviour tailing off after 25. Employment is a factor in lessened recourse to alcohol, respondents claiming that the routine of working life left less time, and placed less emphasis, on drinking. After a certain point, said interviewees, most people limited their drinking of alcohol to family or festive occasions.

Many parents to whom BELUN spoke were of the view that it was traditional for their young sons to be introduced to alcohol quite early, as a part of their heritage and culture. It was felt by some respondents that this kind of familiarization not only provides a sense of connection to the cultural and social life of the community, but

aids in adapting to the effects of alcohol. The mentality of boys progressing through a rite of passage by way of such exposure appears common.

On the other hand, research suggested an increasing tendency among some parents to disallow younger children from drinking alcohol, preferring them to focus on their studies. This approach was described in terms of moral education, rather than stemming from an appreciation of the health impacts. This was also seen as having an effect on the company kept by sons and (to a lesser extent) daughters.

Younger respondents confirmed that alcohol often precipitated conflict among their peer groups. Many of the young men, in particular, to whom BELUN spoke, reported a great deal of frustration and anxiety in their daily lives, often related to employment and social jealousy issues. Alcohol was seen by some as a recourse. Its propensity to escalate internal group tensions, though, is becoming better understood. Focus group attendees spoke of verbal confrontations and teasing that took a violent turn due, in part at least, to over-consumption of alcohol. Some EWER monitors also noted an effect on girls and young women, some of whom are reportedly enticed by means of alcohol into activities outside of social sanction.

Socially, research indicated regular use (and over-use) of alcohol at events such as wedding feasts and funerary rites, such as might be common across many cultures and countries. Interviewees noted that the best quality and/or most expensive alcohol would be reserved for such occasions, in order to bolster family pride and prestige. It was, however, also noted that such displays of material wealth often motivated social jealousy and could serve as a trigger to conflict.

Such events can occasionally also serve as a forum for drug use, say respondents, though this remains relatively uncommon. Accordingly, data is difficult to gather – all the more so for legal and moral concerns. Public awareness is also limited, and many participants in this research, despite understanding that drugs were circulating in their communities, had little knowledge of their effects.

Research suggests that the use of illegal drugs is mostly limited to Dili, with far less evidence of this in rural areas. Participants in a focus group discussion in Manatuto did indicate, however, that there were believed to be channels for distribution being established through district centres, and that supply chains may be making use of porous borders and unguarded crossing areas with Indonesia. PNTL members who were interviewed, as well as many other community members, were in favour of a concerted policing effort to target distributors, vendors and consumers alike.

According to customs advisors, the capacity and resources to prevent and detect illegal shipments of drugs and alcohol remain limited. Customs officers face many challenges, without recourse to ‘sniffer’ dogs or other technologies. Many interviewees from the Customs service recognized the threat to internal stability posed by this issue and called for more in-depth training in order to combat smuggling.

Whilst alcohol might be more readily found than easily-disguised or hidden illegal drugs, customs officials were no less concerned about the smuggling of high-proof spirits. This was seen by many respondents not only as potentially escalating community tensions through access to potent liquor, but also as calling into question

government procedure and denying a source of state revenue by way of import taxes and duties that smugglers otherwise avoid.

### ***Alcohol and Socio-cultural Perspectives***

Alcohol is a part of many community gatherings and celebrations, and is felt by many to lend a familiar and intimate atmosphere. Alongside large banquet meals, it forms part of a social display that signals social standing. These events, however, entail some risk – research uncovered various stories of such occasions spiraling out of control, with a lack of control exercised on younger drinkers who become intoxicated and often become disruptive and violent.

Interviewees and focus group attendees suggested that there was a responsibility on the part of the organizers or hosts of any such gathering to minimize the availability of alcohol, and to offer alternative beverages (water, soft drinks, low-alcohol beers) and food to accompany it. Many voiced the opinion that, in order to ensure that a social event run without interruption or conflict, someone should be overseeing the rate of drinking by youth, and limiting it as necessary.

Many participants warned that, as alcohol has been a part of Timorese society, and social interactions, for a long time, it has become entrenched in cultural practice. As such, it will not be easy to shift behaviours in respect of its use. A need for greater understanding of its health impacts and relationship with community tensions was recognized by most.

### ***Ceremonial Use of Alcohol***

Findings from interviews and focus group discussions suggest that consumption – and indeed over-consumption – of alcohol as part of a cultural ceremony is accepted practice in many communities across the country. Whilst this is not necessarily a conflict factor in its own right, social constraints are often lacking. Accordingly, participants noted that one impediment to reducing recourse to alcohol is the belief that greater moderation will have an adverse effect on social and cultural life.

A range of traditional events were listed as including alcohol as a component, whether related to respect being paid to ancestors, celebration of the harvest, *tara bandu* agreements over access to natural resources or other conflicts, or the inauguration of a new *uma lulik* (sacred house). As a part of all of these ceremonies, there is a long process of preparation, during which contributions are offered by the families involved, such as animals, food, and almost always *tua sabu*.

Animals and other gifts provided as tribute on the occasion of a cultural ceremony will be brought together with the alcohol and consecrated to the purpose of the event. The eldest among the community, generally men, are in charge, as guides of the ritual. Such elders often call specifically for the contribution of alcohol, whether *tua mutin* or *tua sabu* and incorporate its consumption into the ritual itself. All participants will then be asked to eat and drink of the assembled and dedicated gifts as a way of offering them to God and to ancestors. This often results in attendees becoming intoxicated, and – according to some research respondents – is encouraged in order to facilitate traditional singing and dancing, known as *tebedai* or *bidu*. Some

respondents spoke of alcohol being consumed in this way, by young and old, as a way of lowering inhibitions and feelings of shame that would otherwise hold participants back from engaging in the spirit of the celebration.

Because such rituals have their origins in centuries of Timorese culture and heritage, imported types of alcohol are shunned or even expressly prohibited. It is believed, and suggested by ceremonial guides, that the souls of the ancestors would refuse such an unaccustomed offering. In this way, the cultural life of a community is often bound up in the production of local types of alcohol, and may even serve to produce a feeling of unity and collaboration.

As well as being involved in ceremonies that serve to focus an entire community, or celebrate a particular event or moment, alcohol is also linked to relations between families. This can be seen especially in the tradition of *fetosaan-umane*, which involves planning for engagement and marriage supported by the families of the betrothed. The two families come together to prepare food, money and animals, but also *tua sabu*.

According to the rules of this custom (and admitting some regional variances), the groom's family is obliged to contribute money, buffalos or goats, and food as well as *tua sabu* to the bride's family. The bride's family, conversely, is obliged to offer food, pigs, *tais* cloth and also *tua sabu*. Without the exchange of drinks, the banquet settling the match is considered to be incomplete. Alcohol is seen to be vital to building good relationships, and welcoming new members into the respective families.

Alcohol is also seen as important in showing respect to honoured guests. Government officials, foreigners, guests for public celebrations (such as on Independence Day) are all traditionally welcomed with alcohol. This is seen (by some of those consulted) as a means of preserving the reputation and prestige of the community, and ensuring goodwill and positive alliances.

Focus group discussions also noted a range of traditional beliefs around the use of alcohol and childbirth. Participants from Maubisse reported an understanding that some women, shortly after giving birth, consumed local *tua* as part of a cleansing ceremony, and also to promote good circulation. This was cited as a longstanding tradition in colder parts of the country such as Maubisse and Hatubiliko.

Other customs were reported as having been passed down through generations. For example, some respondents claimed that from three days after giving birth, a woman should take a small cup of high-proof alcohol each day. This is usually done at noon, or during the day, and breastfeeding is disallowed during this period.

Representatives of the Department of Health were especially concerned about reports presented by BELUN during this research of women drinking whilst breastfeeding. The Department wished to make plain that it does not support or recommend this approach, and warns of the risk of alcohol being passed to the child. Officials noted this is a particular concern in more rural areas, and acknowledged the need for improved access to health clinics such that pregnant women and new mothers can be more consistently supported.

Hospital staff gave further indications of the need for more education around the effects of alcohol. Such respondents noted the inherent risk of pregnant women consuming alcohol and subsequently losing their balance, potentially injuring themselves and the baby. This possibility reinforces calls from health sector sources for awareness-raising on this topic.

Many of those consulted during this research believed that alcohol has a positive effect on circulation and would accordingly have a positive impact on maternal health. It was widely suggested that, after consumption of alcohol, sufficient food, hot water and an hour's rest would neutralize the effects of alcohol enough to recommence breastfeeding. Generally, it was felt among the majority of interviewees that a mother's intake of alcohol would not render any negative result for the baby.

Although research did find some respondents who believed a woman ought to be allowed to drink throughout pregnancy as they believed there were no ill effects, this was rejected by most participants. There was consensus that alcohol could endanger both mother and child before birth. BELUN reports these beliefs for reference only, and encourages medical advice and oversight in line with international best practice.

### ***Economic Impacts of Alcohol***

Research data suggests that, even among people with a regular income, management of household finances can break down over the purchase of alcohol. Respondents claimed that this impulse was a major impediment to good domestic management and planning. Some social activities, such as gambling and sports, were linked to alcohol use, and some interviewees indicated it was not uncommon for parents to provide money to their young children for use on alcohol.

For some, alcohol is mostly used in company, such as when visitors arrive in the home, and is seen as facilitating conversation. When visitors are common, this kind of hospitality can become an economic burden, and is often put before the daily necessities of the family. Similarly, saving for social occasions and ceremonies, where alcohol is a considerable expense, can create a significant economic burden.

Alcohol is itself a source of revenue for many, and can be quite lucrative. *Tua mutin* and *tua sabu* are sold almost everywhere across the country, often in recycled water bottles of various sizes. *Tua mutin*, being the less refined, often sells for only 50 centavos in the larger size, whereas *tua sabu* may reach two or three dollars in the smaller bottle. Prices vary according to the season, with *tua* significantly cheaper shortly after its peak manufacturing times (mostly in late October – early November). EWER monitoring suggests this may be linked to a rise in community tension.

Whilst prices rise from their initial selling point, over the course of the year, this does not appear to greatly erode sales. Alcohol is sold in public spaces such as markets, from kiosks or private homes, or simply at the roadside. Entire families, including children and the elderly, are involved in the manufacture and sale of the product.

## ***Alcohol and Driving***

Social drinking, especially among youth, has become a particular issue in Dili, with its relatively high rate of vehicle ownership and crowded streets. Respondents noted that the sight of intoxicated young people driving cars or riding motorbikes at high speed, disobeying traffic rules and creating traffic jams, was a growing concern.

Although many respondents recognized the effect of alcohol on concentration, awareness and reaction time, this was not universal. Focus group discussions with youth, in particular, revealed a worrying downplaying of the risks. This may be related to the apparent, general misapprehension in respect of the physical and medical impacts of alcohol as a drug.

BELUN monitors suggest that there is rarely any noticeable enforcement of traffic rules, nor any penalty for drink-driving. This has seemingly led to a social atmosphere tolerant of driving (or riding) while intoxicated. Many interviewees called for greater co-operation between police and the community to educate people as to the dangers of this kind of behaviour and the traffic rules in operation with respect to alcohol, in order to avoid (further) loss of life. Regrettably, fatalities on the roads are becoming an ever more present reality in Timor-Leste. Research revealed many stories of injuries, paralysis and death as a result of the combination of alcohol and traffic. Increasingly, this can be seen by way of the streetside, symbolic 'grave' signs and crosses left by the bereaved.

## ***Impacts of Alcohol on Physical and Mental Health***

Medical sources consulted in the course of this research gave a clear, and uniform, message – drinking to excess can produce a range of negative physical and mental impacts. Whilst the particular effects of long-term drinking depend on various factors such as the extent and regularity of drinking, and an individual's physiological make-up, there are risks inherent to everyone from immoderate use of alcohol, even if the ill effects may take some time to emerge.

Doctors interviewed were definite in the view that damage to the liver is a widespread problem from drinking and can – in some serious cases – lead to chronic illness or death. A compounding factor is the fact that alcohol can create dependency, making people feel that they need to drink in order to cope with challenges in their lives. A moderate approach to the consumption of alcohol is always healthier.

Medical specialists noted the effect that alcohol has on the senses, and on behaviour as well. Intoxication can not only make people feel hazy or sleepy, but can also lower inhibitions, making people more likely to initiate or respond violently to conflict. A worrying element of this research was the low proportion of interviewees and focus group attendees who made the connection between alcohol abuse and these effects. Relatively few respondents were aware of the negative health impacts, though many were quick to claim physiological benefits not supported by evidence.

A range of health sector stakeholders were interviewed in the course of this research, including (but not limited to) senior practitioners from the emergency clinic, and specialists in mental health from Dili and Maubisse hospitals, health officials in

Ainaro, and psychosocial welfare experts from Ba Futuru and PRADET. As well as acknowledging the broader, negative effects of alcohol over-consumption, many health professionals were especially troubled by the evidence of the use of alcohol by pregnant women. Participants called for more education on the effects of alcohol on maternal and child health, and of the need for appropriate post-birth care.

Instead of following traditional prescriptions involving alcohol, doctors recommended that new mothers make an appointment for a consultation with a local or visiting medical practitioner, or otherwise visit a clinic or hospital in order to discuss the best methods for caring for themselves and their child.

### ***Impacts of Alcohol on Conflict and Violence***

Many respondents reported feeling more open in their views and discussing sensitive issues more freely when intoxicated. They also acknowledged that overconsumption could sometimes exacerbate underlying tensions, inflaming them with feelings of superiority, lack of self-control, irrationality or an unwillingness to accept compromise.

Given these possibilities inherent to excessive drinking, interviewees typically made the link to threats they had observed (or, in some cases, issued) that had resulted in violent clashes between individuals and groups in their community. Often, these were between family members, or between people with different ideas on politics.

Social jealousy was also put forward as an issue that often came to the fore as a result of intoxication. Especially as many of the types of events at which people tend to drink to excess are ones that encompass a degree of material display, this can cause resentment and, ultimately, trigger violence.

Alcohol was also linked, through research findings, to domestic violence. Interviewees suggested that this commonly occurs as a result of disputes between husband and wife over the spending of money for household necessities on alcohol. This narrative was repeated by respondents all over the country, and emphasizes the indirect impacts of alcohol abuse on the economic life of many Timorese families. Many participants also reported that alcohol bore a direct relation to the incidence of sexual assault. It was claimed that some husbands would return home intoxicated and initiate unwanted sexual advances, the refusal of which would often precipitate violence against the partner and also, potentially, other family members.

### ***Existing Alcohol Management Mechanisms***

Not all consumption of alcohol results in conflict or violence, of course. Research did find some examples of communities in which controls were in place to avoid drinking to excess. In Hatu-Udu subdistrict, in Ainaro, for example, ritual guides are in charge of dispensing alcohol during ceremonies and other traditional gatherings, and keep an eye on the respective intake of those present. People who overindulge, and are disruptive of the occasion, are subject to community-endorsed punishment.

Also, despite the popular image of young people gathering to drink and causing trouble, research indicates some evidence of more responsible drinking among youth.

Some younger respondents and focus group attendees noted that one or two alcoholic drinks might be consumed at the completion of a building project or civil society planning meeting, or following farm labour or a sporting match. It was noted that money is often a limiting factor in obtaining alcohol.

Participants indicated that their understanding of the effects of alcohol (though this was generally low, and incorporated some misapprehensions) was the result of their interactions with state-sponsored health services and health sector NGOs. Clearly, there is cause for further access to such services and for additional, targeted programming in order to address potentially harmful beliefs about alcohol and to educate more widely on its negative impacts. With a clearer understanding, it is hoped that people can be encouraged to drink responsibly and so diminish community tensions and the incidence of violence.

### *Alcohol and Drug Use*

In the course of BELUN research, monitors and civil society representatives provided information pointing to the increasing use of alcohol together with local, and illegal drugs. Various types of drugs were referred to among respondents, though imported and highly processed illegal drugs appeared to be most often available in urban centres.

In rural areas, interviewees spoke of the use of a local plant, the *korneta* or ‘cornet flower’ that produces feelings of euphoria. This is reportedly in common use by young people, the leaf or blossom of the plant being cooked, and mixed with alcohol and/or instant noodles for consumption. It is also becoming a part of formal ceremonies in some areas. The plant is most common in colder parts of the country such as Maubisse and Ainaro. Little is known about the properties of the plant, but interviewee statements suggest that its use can lead to nausea and prolonged illness.

Whilst illegal drugs are not the principal focus of this report, and respondents are naturally reticent to give information about illegal activities, it is clear that various drugs are being illegally misused, manufactured and/or imported into Timor-Leste. These include, but are not limited to:

- Drugs that serve a legitimate medical purpose, such as morphine or pethidine and other opiates, but which are being imported and sold for use outside of any authorized prescription regime.
- Illegal drugs, whether grown and harvested as crops like marijuana or psilocybin mushrooms, or manufactured like (now apparently quite common) amphetamines - locally called *sabu-sabu*.
- Substances that, used in a way contrary to their intended purpose, produce an euphoric or hallucinatory effect, and which can be habit-forming. Examples include solvents, gases and some glues.

Interviewees noted that where the use of illegal drugs takes place, it typically does so in tandem with excessive consumption of alcohol – in the experience of many research participants, these are linked phenomena. Social and religious values, among the majority of respondents, appear to view habitual drunkenness and drug abuse as similar manifestations of moral weakness. There was, in the course of research, less

discussion of the social pressures that might lead to seeing alcohol or illegal drugs as a recourse. Nor was there a deep understanding of the health impacts of either.

Practitioners in community health clinics noted the apparent unauthorized use of some narcotic medicines, and cautioned strongly against their use in any setting not explicitly licensed by a doctor. Whilst these drugs can be helpful when their dosage and administration is carefully controlled, with such oversight, their effects can be unpredictable and addictive. Accordingly, their use is legally limited to clinical settings.

There is, as yet, little clear data about the spread of illegal drugs in Timor-Leste. Anecdotal evidence, collected here in the course of a broader focus on the effects of alcohol, suggests that the phenomenon is not yet endemic, though a greater focus on public awareness-raising would be timely and appropriate.

### ***Recommendations***

#### *For the Security Services*

- This report has identified issues in respect of the illegal importation of alcohol (and, to a lesser extent, of illegal drugs), possibly using unguarded sections of the land border as crossing points. Dependent on budgeting and operational priorities, the PNTL, through its Border Patrol Unit as well as at the airport and marine ports, may wish to consider redistributing resources to enable more extensive searches to be conducted.
- The issue of illegal importations obviously requires a certain degree of international co-operation. This may require the establishment of further official channels for reporting and exchange of intelligence. It may also provide an opportunity for relevant Timorese staff to learn new techniques and perspectives that would aid in countering smuggling operations.
- Given the reported incidence of driving under the influence of alcohol, the PNTL may wish first to publicise relevant laws and regulations related to alcohol and motor vehicle use, and may further wish to develop a strategy for more comprehensive enforcement. The goal of any such strategy would be to minimize traffic accidents, and with them the occurrence of injury, trauma and death as a result of drink-driving.

#### *For Government*

- In response to the misapprehensions around women's health and pregnancy revealed in this BELUN research, the Ministry of Health may wish to conduct a targeted campaign of health education. This might include specific information addressing (in a culturally sensitive manner) the harmful, neutral or potentially beneficial effects of current, widespread beliefs about the positive effects of alcohol during and immediately following pregnancy, and about the impact of alcohol use on breastfeeding and the health of the child.
- Customs officials have, in some cases, expressed concerns over the quality and content of high-proof alcoholic beverages entering the country. This may be an area where, subject to testing and confirmation, a more deliberate state response is needed, whether operationally, or by way of regulation/legislation.

- Whilst schools and Churches appear to be providing a moral education in respect of alcohol (and illegal drugs), there remains an opportunity to provide evidence of the health impacts of these substances, from a medical perspective. Research revealed a low level of understanding across all participant communities, in respect of the way alcohol, in particular, acts on the body. In fact, the consensus was generally that it was a positive contributor to well-being. Some private schools, such as Saint Francis secondary college in Tibar, are already recognizing the local importance of this issue, and incorporating teaching about the impact of alcohol and illegal drugs on mental and physical health. This is not yet a feature of the national curriculum, however, and may merit further consideration to this end.
- With youth such a visible demographic in terms of alcohol consumption, it may be constructive for the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport to look at ways to combat this. Whilst alcohol may be a legitimate part of celebrating sporting victories and marking other occasions, a focused intervention (whether through seminars, themed events or literature) may be needed in order to make the point that this can be done responsibly, in moderation.

*For the National Parliament*

- Laws and regulations are in place that deal with many issues of importation, responsible (and/or licensed) use and sale of alcohol and drugs. Whilst this framework has been established, in some areas there is still a lack of resources with which to fully execute it. Accordingly, the Parliament may wish, in the course of budget debate and national strategy deliberations, to consider further allocation of funds and materials to border control, and to awareness-raising on health matters. Expenditure of this kind would likely see benefits in terms of additional revenue from import duties, less pressure on medical clinics, and a decrease in community tensions.

*For the Community*

- Participants in this research noted that some social gatherings had a tendency to get out of control, and for intoxicated attendees to turn violent. It was recommended by various members of the community whom BELUN consulted that the hosts, or organizers, of such occasions provide some oversight to the alcohol intake of their guests. It was also suggested that alternatives, and accompaniments, to alcohol be offered. In this way, events will be more likely to run without any conflict or disruption.
- Public awareness of the effects of alcohol (and illegal drugs) remains low in many communities across the country. This has resulted in the continuation of some practices that may be harmful, especially in respect of maternal and child health. Accordingly, although access to services – and so to information – may be limited in some areas, individuals should nonetheless seek to inform themselves as much as possible, by reference to official medical advice.

### *For BELUN and Other Civil Society Institutions*

- Civil society agents may wish to keep a watching brief over the emerging issue of illegal drugs. Although there is yet little firm data, by sourcing and recording information, a clearer picture may form over time that will allow for a more concerted and targeted official response.
- With education on drug and alcohol issues not yet a feature of the national curriculum, and awareness accordingly low, there may be an opportunity for NGOs to conduct socialization campaigns and to produce materials that address this gap in available information. Organisations working with youth, and delivering lifeskills training, such as UNICEF and the Timor-Leste Red Cross (CVTL), may wish to incorporate this as a module into programming.
- BELUN will distribute its findings from this research to target communities, and work with relevant stakeholders in Government and civil society to collaborate toward solutions. Additionally, the issue will continue to be monitored across the country through BELUN's Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) system.

### ***Conclusion***

This report is a result of earlier monitoring through BELUN's Early Warning and Early Response system (EWER) that suggested a link between the use of alcohol and the increased likelihood of incidents turning violent. Further investigation has confirmed this link but also explored the cultural, social and economic factors that may contribute to the phenomenon.

This research has not been undertaken with the intention of arguing against any use of alcohol at all. Instead, BELUN has focused on the negative impacts of alcohol, including its potential to trigger, or inflame conflict.

Interviews and focus groups presented a consistent picture of alcohol, particularly of the types locally produced (*tua mutin* and *tua sabu*), as a fairly entrenched feature in the cultural life of many communities. It appears to be used as a medium of exchange, as a means of material display at social gatherings, as a token of respect and as a gesture of hospitality. More directly, its use is, in some instances, encouraged at formal ceremonies to break down social barriers.

Respondents noted, though, that alcohol was just as likely to contribute negatively to such events as to promote warmth and solidarity. Being a factor of relative economic advantage, alcohol itself was seen as something that might produce resentment or jealousy. Furthermore, public gatherings were – in the eyes of research participants – rarely subject to any oversight or means to regulate alcohol intake. This seems often to have the effect of seeing intoxication interrupt a previously peaceful occasion. Data from Ainaro suggests that some communities have developed customs to ensure against such disruption, and to punish those who overindulge. This suggests that local solutions to this issue are possible, and durable.

Alcohol also has the potential to generate tensions in the private sphere. Based on the stories emerging from interviews and focus groups, this appears to occur in two ways:

firstly, friction occurs between husband and wife due to the spending of income on alcohol instead of household necessities, adding to economic pressure.

Additionally, some female respondents complained that they were subjected to unwanted sexual advances, even assaults, from their husbands and partners who had returned home intoxicated. These respondents further claimed that resistance or refusal would often be met with violence, whether against a partner or another member of the family. The consistency of this narrative through research suggests a very clear relationship between excessive use of alcohol and domestic abuse.

Many of BELUN's discussions about alcohol, particularly those in more rural areas, focused predominantly on locally-produced palm wines, but imported alcohol, often high-proof spirits, is also a feature. Customs officials noted that there are few checks on the content and quality of such liquors (raising concerns about their suitability for consumption), and also intimated that smuggling operations saw packaged alcohol as a lucrative item. With a porous land border and limited resources, the police and customs service are hard pressed to stem the flow.

Perhaps the most troubling finding from this research is that public awareness of the health impacts of alcohol is universally low across all research locations. Whilst there were some respondents who had questioned the use of alcohol by young children and pregnant women, this was far from widespread. Instead, participants widely claimed a belief in the benefits of alcohol, whether in removing impurities from the blood or promoting circulation. A number of misapprehensions around alcohol and maternal health appear common.

Some evidence of illegal drug use was also captured in the course of this research. Whilst this is an emerging issue, and worthy of continued attention, data remains unclear and limited to a few urban areas. The greater concern that this report hopes to present is that of a lack of medical information. Although access to clinical services across the country is an ongoing issue in its own right, what avenues of medical practice do exist can perhaps be harnessed – along with similar initiatives through schools and civil society – to ensure the impacts of alcohol are better understood. Not only will this have direct benefits in terms of public health, the research suggests socialization of this kind will likely lead, over time, to a reduction in the escalation of conflicts. Accordingly, this is an area deserving of reform and resource allocation.