

The Impact of Substance Abuse on Zambia's Growing Economy

Ravi Paul and Edwin Kanombola Chembo share the challenges and consequences of substance use in Zambia

Introduction

Substance abuse, encompassing the use of harmful or dangerous psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illegal drugs, has far-reaching consequences on society¹, particularly in the context of Zambia's growing economy. This article delves into the multifaceted impacts of substance abuse in Zambia, focusing on public health, social, and economic dimensions

Public Health Challenges

In recent years, African Union (AU) member states, including Zambia, have grappled with escalating public health challenges, especially among youth, women, and children. The increased availability and consumption of psychoactive substances, both imported and locally produced, have contributed to this predicament. Substances like opiates, stimulants, cannabis, and pharmaceuticals are increasingly abused, further exacerbated by alcohol and tobacco consumption¹.

Global Perspective

The scourge of drug and alcohol abuse is not unique to Zambia; it is a global issue that affects every sector of society in every country. This menace takes a heavy toll on the freedom and development of young people, often viewed as the world's most valuable asset². The consequences ripple through the social fabric of communities, hinder economic development, and strain national public health systems³.

Impact on Health and Mortality

The detrimental effects of substance abuse on health are undeniable. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that in 2011, an estimated 211,000 drug-related deaths occurred globally, primarily among young users⁴. Additionally, alcohol-related causes led to 2.3 million deaths worldwide in 2002, making alcohol a significant contributor to mortality.

Substance Trends in Africa

Cannabis remains the most widely consumed illicit substance in Africa, with the highest prevalence and consumption growth in West and Central Africa. Amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) have emerged as the second most abused drug on the continent. Other substances like benzodiazepines and inhalants are also prevalent, contributing to the complex substance abuse landscape.

Ravi Paul is the Head, Psychiatry Department, University of Zambia and Edwin Kanombola Chembo is an MBChB graduate, University of Zambia.

Youth Demographics in Africa

Africa's youthful demographic structure, with nearly 60% of the population under 25 years old, presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The frustration and despair of the young, unemployed population have led to severe consequences. A report by the African Union's Pan-African Epidemiological Network on Drug Use (PAENDU) reveals that nearly 70% of those seeking treatment for substance use disorders in Africa fall within the 15-34 age group, underlining the early onset of substance abuse in some contexts.

Zambia's Unique Challenge

In Zambia, substance abuse poses a significant threat to the country's growing economy. Alcohol, cannabis, heroin, cocaine, crystal meth, and prescription drugs are commonly abused. Notably, alcohol abuse, particularly binge drinking of locally brewed beverages, is a growing concern, significantly affecting the well-being of the youth. Recent studies indicate a surge in both male and female binge drinkers⁵.

Health Consequences

Alcohol abuse is linked to various health issues, including cancer, neuropsychiatric disorders, cardiovascular diseases, and cirrhosis of the liver in the Zambian population. The statistics are alarming, with a notable increase in alcohol-related disorders over the years⁵.

Drivers of Substance Abuse

The lack of employment opportunities and inadequate recreational facilities are pivotal factors contributing to substance abuse in Zambia. Easy access to both pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical drugs, available without prescription, further exacerbates the issue⁵. The proliferation of pharmacies selling prescription medicines poses a significant challenge.

Drugs like codeine containing cough syrups, tramadol, pethidine, oxycodone, morphine, diazepam, benzhexol and more recently zolpidem are all available over the counter at an extra cost to anyone irrespective of their age or gender. There is a heavy infestation of pharmacies all around Lusaka without a substantial increase in the health facilities or patient base. Most of these pharmacies thrive on selling of prescription medicines⁶. The drug traffickers now employ various methods to reach out to their clients. Many use bikers to drop off the drug parcel at a stipulated point. Many female clients hide opioid injections in their genitals to avoid being caught by the police or hospital staff when taken for admission. The availability and affordability of drugs make it easier for

individuals to develop addiction issues. According to a recent survey by the Mediterranean School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (MedSPAD) related to the availability of substances (alcohol, tobacco marijuana, cocaine, mushroom, heroin, ecstasy, amphetamine, methamphetamine and crack), showed that an average of 76.74% of students (male = 79.84%; female = 75.36%) think that these substances are “quite easy or “very easy” to have. In many communities, there is a lack of proper role models, particularly in ghettos. This absence of positive guidance further pushes the youth towards substance abuse as they lack alternative sources of inspiration⁷.

Self-medication, boredom, and relief of daily stressors associated with lack of housing, safety, and employment were reasons that people used drugs. Stigma due to the criminalization of and societal ideals and religious beliefs regarding drug use was identified as a substantial barrier to accessing and seeking treatment⁸.

Alfred Kasongo and Ravi Paul in their study to look at the pattern of substance use during Covid-19 pandemic found that Covid-19 caused an increase in substance use with alcohol, cannabis, and opioids being the most abused products. Substance abuse was most likely to be practised by those who were unemployed, bored, overcrowded at home, and experienced gender-based violence during the Covid-19 period⁸.

Barriers to Recovery

The absence of proper role models and the challenges posed by self-medication, boredom, and societal stigmatization complicate the fight against substance abuse. These barriers limit access to prevention and treatment services and discourage individuals from seeking help⁴.

Impact on HIV and Other Infections

Substance abuse plays a role in the increase of HIV infections, as it leads to risky behaviours, including unprotected sex. Additionally, the sharing of contaminated needles among drug users contributes to the transmission of hepatitis and other infections. The consequences are substantial, affecting the labour force, breaking homes, and leaving children in vulnerable situations⁹.

The repercussions of increased HIV infections and the subsequent high death rates are far-reaching. It negatively impacts the labour force, as those infected may be unable to work, leading to reduced productivity. Additionally, the high death rates associated with HIV contribute to broken homes and orphaned children left in vulnerable situations. As a result, an increasing number of street children may emerge, lacking proper care and guidance³.

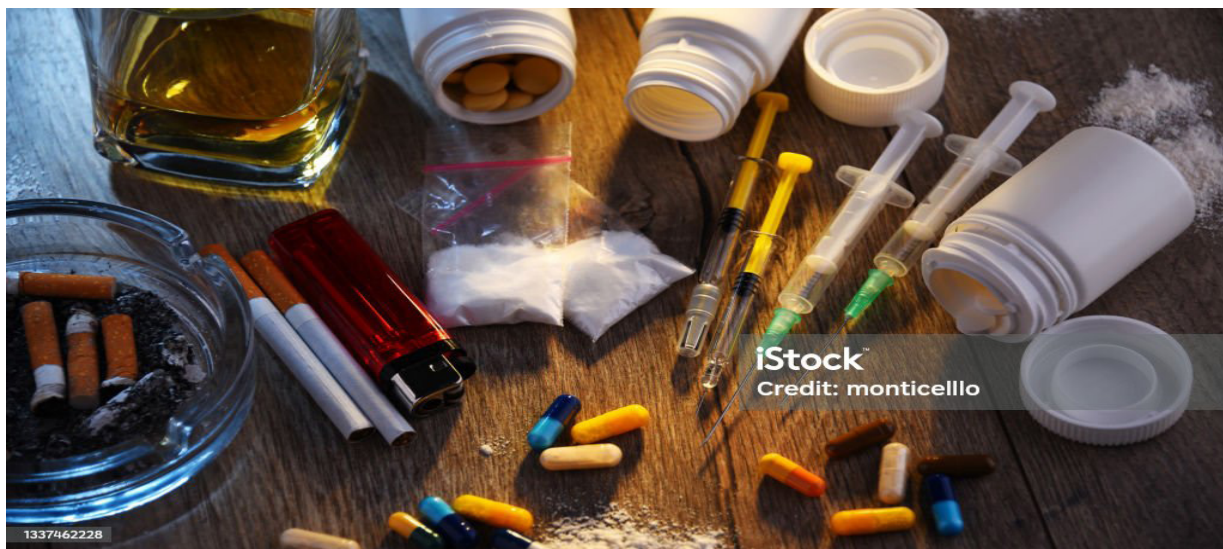
Mental Health Issues:

Substance abuse often leads to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and psychosis. Substance use affects the brain's chemistry and can cause or exacerbate existing mental health conditions. Persons with mental health issues, induced or aggravated by substance abuse, may struggle to maintain healthy relationships and engage in productive behaviours. According to research done at Chainama Hospital in 2022, studies showed that mental disorders due to alcohol and other drugs affected 2523 males and 269 females, and compared to the figures that were obtained in 2016, it showed that the numbers had increased four times, signifying a rise in drug use amongst the youth and the population at large¹⁰.

Substance abuse can impair judgement, reduce inhibitions, and increase impulsivity. This can lead to aggressive or violent behaviour, including gender-based violence. Individuals under the influence may be more likely to engage in abusive acts, as their inhibitions and ability to reason are diminished. Also, due to the impaired judgement most drug users have, it has been



Substance abuse among youths



Addictive substances, including alcohol, cigarettes and drugs. Courtesy istock photo

discovered that there has been an increase in the number of alcohol-intoxicated road traffic accidents. According to the 2010 Zambia Road Accident Data report, more than 1,200 people have died in road accidents in Zambia and 50% of these road deaths were related to alcohol and drunk driving⁸.

Social Consequences

The rise in street children and broken homes perpetuates crime, with street kids more likely to engage in criminal activities for survival. Family relationships are strained, and domestic violence and child abuse rates increase. Substance abuse is now the leading cause of divorce in Zambia. Children growing up in households affected by substance abuse are more likely to experience neglect or violence, which can result in long-term psychological trauma and perpetuate cycles of violence and substance abuse⁸.

Substance abuse can also contribute to social disintegration, particularly in impoverished communities. Compulsive drug use can isolate individuals, leading to disrupted social networks and reduced access to educational and employment opportunities. This marginalisation further exacerbates mental health issues, violence, and criminal behaviours⁸.

Economic Disparities and Crime

Substance abuse creates financial hardships and may lead to increased crime rates, as some individuals resort to criminal activities to support their addiction. The economic burden of addiction perpetuates poverty cycles, contributing to criminal behaviour. Over the years, there has been a rise in junkies in Lusaka, terrorising communities day and night, thus causing an increase in crime rates in Lusaka⁸.

Additionally, substance abuse has contributed to the rise of gambling as individuals may turn to gambling as a way to cope with their addiction or as a means of obtaining money to support their substance abuse habits. This can lead to financial ruin, further exacerbating poverty and other negative consequences².

Path Forward

To address these challenges, a comprehensive approach is essential. It should include the creation of recreational facilities, awareness campaigns, skill development through trade, schools, government-initiated loan schemes, and increased access to prevention and treatment services².

Conclusion

In conclusion, substance abuse in Zambia has wide-ranging consequences, from mental health issues and gender-based violence to HIV transmission and economic disparities. Addressing these issues necessitates a coordinated effort, combining prevention, treatment, education, and the development of recovery-oriented systems of care.

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