

UGANDA ALCOHOL POLICY ALLIANCE: - NAVIGATING THE LEGISLATIVE JOURNEY

**Addressing the Rejection of the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023: A Strategic
Roadmap for Future Advocacy**



Courtesy photo

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Executive Summary

On August 13, 2024, the Ugandan Parliament rejected the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, marking a significant setback for public health advocates and civil society organizations, including the Uganda Alcohol Policy Alliance (UAPA)¹. The bill, introduced by Hon. Sarah Opendi, aimed to regulate various aspects of the alcohol industry, including the manufacture, sale and advertising of alcoholic beverages. However, the bill's rejection was not merely a result of its technical shortcomings, as articulated by the Parliamentary committees and the Attorney General, but also a reflection of the complex political dynamics and economic interests at play.

This policy paper looks into the reasons behind the bill's rejection, exploring the political environment, the influence of private sector interests, and the strategic missteps that hindered its success². It also provides a roadmap for future legislative efforts, offering strategic recommendations for "lobbying", coalition-building, and public engagement to ensure that future attempts to regulate alcohol in Uganda are successful.

Introduction

Uganda's relationship with alcohol is both deep-rooted and complex. Alcohol plays a central role in cultural and social practices across the country. Yet, it also poses significant public health challenges, contributing to a range of social and economic issues, including domestic violence, road crashes (what would be referred to as "accidents", and preventable diseases³. The Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, signified a determined effort to address these challenges by introducing stricter regulations on the alcohol industry. However, its rejection by Parliament highlights the challenging obstacles that such legislation faces.

Understanding the reasons behind the bill's failure requires an exploration of Uganda's legislative landscape, the political dynamics that shape it, and the economic forces that influence decision-making⁴. This policy paper aims to provide that understanding,

¹ Uganda Parliament Hansard, November 2023.

² Uganda Alcohol Policy Alliance (UAPA) Press Release, August 13, 2024.

³ World Health Organization (WHO), "Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2022."

⁴ Uganda Ministry of Health, "National Alcohol Control Policy, 2020"

offering a detailed analysis of the factors that led to the bill's rejection and proposing strategic recommendations for future advocacy.

Legislative History and Analysis

The Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, was not the first attempt to introduce comprehensive alcohol regulation in Uganda⁵. The bill followed in the footsteps of a similar proposal by Hon. Bakireke Namboze in the 10th Parliament, which also failed to pass through Parliament. The 2023 bill, introduced by Hon. Sarah Opendi, sought to fill the regulatory gaps left by the repeal of older legislation, such as the Enguli (Manufacture and Licensing) Act, Cap. 86, and the Liquor Act, Cap. 93⁶.

The bill's provisions were wide-ranging. It proposed restrictions on the hours during which alcohol could be sold, a ban on the sale of alcohol to minors, and stringent regulations on the packaging and advertising of alcoholic beverages. Importantly, it also sought to address the issue of illicit alcohol, which accounts for a staggering 65% of alcohol consumption in Uganda.

Despite its well-intentioned objectives, the bill faced significant opposition from the onset. The Parliamentary committees tasked with reviewing the bill raised several concerns, including its lack of clarity on key issues, potential conflicts with existing laws, and the economic implications of its provisions. The Attorney General echoed these concerns, advising that the bill be rejected due to its perceived legal and financial flaws.

However, these official reasons, while important, tell only part of the story. The bill's failure was also shaped by the political dynamics of the time, particularly the role of Hon. Sarah Opendi and her recent involvement in high-profile anti corruption campaign within Parliament, the political correctness position taken by the Ministry of Health, the private sector's weight on the ongoing issues among others.

⁵ Uganda Parliament, "The Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023.

⁶ Bakireke Namboze's Legislative Proposal, 2020.

Political Dynamics

The political environment in Uganda is characterized by a delicate balance of power, where personal relationships, political alliances, and economic interests often take precedence over policy considerations. In this context, Hon. Sarah Opendi's role as the mover of the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, became a double-edged sword⁷.

On one hand, Opendi's reputation as a steadfast advocate for public health and her commitment to anti-corruption efforts lent credibility to the bill. On the other hand, her recent involvement in the motion to censure five commissioners of Parliament, coupled with her vocal criticism of corruption within the leadership of Parliament and the Executive, alienated key political actors. Behind closed doors, there was a sentiment among some MPs that allowing Opendi to succeed with the alcohol bill would strengthen her political position at a time when she was seen as a threat by certain factions⁸.

This political backdrop significantly undermined Opendi's ability to rally support for the bill. Even those MPs who might have supported the bill on its merits were hesitant to align themselves with Opendi, fearing the political repercussions. The Ministry of Health, which should have been a key ally in this effort, also adopted a cautious approach, likely influenced by the same political considerations.

Economic vs. Public Health Debate

The debate over the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, also reflected the broader tension between economic and public health priorities in Uganda. The alcohol industry is a significant contributor to the Ugandan economy, providing substantial revenue to the government through taxes and creating jobs across the value chain, from agriculture to retail. According to data from the Uganda Revenue Authority, the formal alcohol sector contributes approximately UGX 1.5 trillion annually in taxes, representing around 3% of the country's GDP⁹.

⁷ New Vision, "*The Politics Behind the Rejection of the Alcohol Bill*," August 2024.

⁸ Daily Monitor, "*Alcohol Bill not a ban but a regulation?*" November 2023.

⁹ Uganda Revenue Authority, "*Annual Revenue Report, 2022*."

This economic contribution has made the alcohol industry a powerful player in Ugandan politics. Industry representatives, including the Uganda Alcohol Industry Association (UAIA) and major companies like Nile Breweries, were vocal in their opposition to the bill. They argued that the proposed regulations would harm the formal sector, driving more consumers towards illicit alcohol and reducing government revenue.

These arguments were not without merit. During the COVID-19 lockdown, restrictions on alcohol sales led to a significant increase in the consumption of illicit alcohol, which is cheaper and more readily available in rural areas. The alcohol industry confirmed increased sales during the same period. Illicit alcohol, however, poses severe health risks due to its lack of regulation. It is often adulterated with dangerous substances, leading to a high incidence of alcohol-related deaths and illnesses.

Public health advocates, including the Uganda Alcohol Policy Alliance, have long argued that the economic benefits of the alcohol industry must be weighed against the public health costs. Uganda has one of the highest alcohol consumption rates in Africa, with an average per capita consumption of 12 liters of pure alcohol annually—almost double the global average of 6.4 liters¹⁰. The health consequences are dire, with alcohol contributing to a range of non-communicable diseases, mental health disorders, and social problems such as domestic violence¹¹.

The rejection of the bill highlights the challenge of reconciling these competing priorities. While the economic arguments against the bill were compelling, they overshadowed the urgent need to address the public health crisis caused by alcohol abuse in Uganda.

Ministry of Health's Role

The Ministry of Health should have been at the forefront of the push for the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023. However, the Ministry's response was lukewarm at best. This lack of interest can be partly attributed to the political dynamics discussed earlier. The Ministry, led by a political appointee, may have been reluctant to fully support a bill

¹⁰ World Health Organization (WHO), "*Uganda Alcohol Consumption and Health Impacts, 2022.*"

¹¹ World Bank, "*Economic Impact of Alcohol in Uganda,*" 2022.

championed by Hon. Opendi, given her contentious relationship with other powerful political figures¹².

Moreover, the Ministry of Health's approach to the bill was characterized by a focus on political correctness rather than a strong public health stance. This cautious approach may have been intended to avoid controversy or conflict with the influential economic interests opposed to the bill.

This reluctance was a missed opportunity. A more assertive stance by the Ministry of Health, emphasizing the public health benefits of the bill and providing clear, evidence-based arguments, could have swayed more MPs to support the legislation. The Ministry's failure to fully engage in the legislative process reflects a broader issue of inadequate advocacy for public health policies in Uganda's political environment.

Strategic Recommendations

In light of the challenges faced with the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, it's clear that future efforts need to be more strategic and well-coordinated. The following recommendations are aimed at strengthening advocacy and increasing the chances of success for similar legislation in the future.

1. Strengthening Lobbying Efforts

To effectively push for alcohol regulation, it's crucial to have a deep understanding of the political landscape. This begins with **political mapping**, where we carefully analyze the positions and influence of key Members of Parliament (MPs) and other stakeholders. By identifying those who hold sway in Parliament, we can tailor our advocacy efforts to appeal directly to their interests and concerns. It's important to understand not only their political affiliations but also their personal and professional ties, especially with industry players who might oppose stricter alcohol regulations¹³.

Another important strategy is **building alliances**. We cannot do this alone. Forming partnerships with other civil society organizations, public health advocates, and even

¹² Uganda Ministry of Health, "Response to the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023."

¹³ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, "Advocacy for Health Policy Change: A Guide," 2021.

responsible members of the alcohol industry can amplify our message. These alliances create a united front that can exert more pressure on policymakers. Working together, we can develop stronger arguments, pool resources, and reach a wider audience¹⁴.

Additionally, ***engaging the Ministry of Health*** is essential. The Ministry needs to be a more active partner in this effort. By working closely with them, we can ensure that public health concerns remain at the forefront of the debate. This might involve joint campaigns, public statements, and collaborative policy development, all aimed at making the case for stricter alcohol regulations.

2. Addressing Economic Concerns

One of the main arguments against alcohol regulation is the potential economic impact. To counter this, we need to develop a ***comprehensive counter-narrative*** that highlights the long-term economic benefits of reducing alcohol-related harm. By presenting data on how lower healthcare costs, improved workforce productivity, and a healthier population can positively impact the economy, we can challenge the short-term economic fears that often dominate the discussion.

We also should ***promote responsible industry practices***. By encouraging the alcohol industry to enforce the already existing self-regulation measures, we can show that it's possible to reduce harm without entirely stifling the industry. This might involve working with companies that are willing to support moderate alcohol consumption and compliance with existing laws. Such partnerships can help demonstrate that economic growth and public health are not mutually exclusive.

3. Tackling Illicit Alcohol

The issue of illicit alcohol cannot be ignored. We need to ***advocate for stronger enforcement*** of existing regulations to crack down on the illegal production and sale of alcohol. This includes pushing for more funding for enforcement agencies and better coordination between different government departments. Only by reducing the availability of illicit alcohol can we begin to shift consumption patterns towards safer, regulated products.

¹⁴ Public Health Institute, "*Economic Arguments for Public Health Interventions*," 2020.

A ***public education campaign*** is vital. Many people turn to illicit alcohol because it is cheaper and more accessible, but they are often unaware of the dangers it poses. By raising awareness about the health risks associated with illicit alcohol and highlighting the benefits of consuming regulated products, we can help change consumer behavior. Education efforts should be widespread, reaching both urban and rural populations to ensure that everyone understands the importance of drinking safe, regulated alcohol.