

## Editorial



## Licit Illicit Drugs and Tourism

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June 26th, the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking focuses on strengthening collective efforts with a goal of zero illicit substance usage. Though people claim various reasons for using licit and illicit drugs, escaping from reality had been the main reason highlighted in many publications (1). The drugs used under this claimant include licit drugs like opioids and benzodiazepines which are medicinally highly valued and illicit drugs like heroin, cocaine and marijuana throughout years. However, the prevalence of illicit drug use remains low in Sri Lanka compared to the prevalence of licit drugs, alcohol and tobacco use. Of the illicit drugs, the highest prevalence of use is for cannabis, which has shown an increase in use during the past five years.

Sri Lanka, due to its unique geographical location in the middle of the Indian Ocean with easy access to many of the international logistics, transportation modalities and routes, this island nation had been used by drug dealers for trafficking in the past and in the present (2-3). Each year, defence forces retrieve hundreds of kilos of these products during different raids concentrated mainly around the sea and airports (3). These raids sometimes discover cigarettes and alcohol as well, mainly contrabands, products that have been bought or transported from a low-tax country, to be illegally re-sold here. Globally, these industries are known for trafficking their own

products, even the British American Tobacco PLC, the mother company of the Ceylon Tobacco PLC, which holds monopoly of the cigarette manufacturing and trade in Sri Lanka. Tobacco control advocates have also noted that these contrabands are frequently discovered around the time of parliamentary budget debates and are often cited as an excuse for not raising the excise tax, claiming that it will increase illicit trade. Thus, drug trafficking is a more complex phenomenon than many public health advocates realise.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its control measures during the past 20 months and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war have severely and adversely affected the global economy, where lower- and middle-income countries like Sri Lanka are facing the worst effects even at its early stages. This current economic collapse the country is facing, has been complemented by the import dependent economy with low production outputs. Tourism was a major contributor for the Sri Lankan economy which was vastly growing during pre-pandemic era where several international ranking agents ranked Sri Lanka within the top few touristic destinations of the world (4). Emphasizing the worst effects on countries being locked down, contribution of the tourism sector to the Sri Lankan economy reached almost zero during the pandemic. The newly formed government has now taken measures to increase accessibility and

availability of alcohol, allowing any premise that is registered as a home-stay facility in the Ministry of Tourism to trade alcohol under a licensing system, claiming it to be a method for promotion of tourism.

Promotion of Alcohol and Tobacco at tourist attraction areas had been significantly justified throughout the years in literature, emphasizing its greater contribution to the development of the tourism sector. Many studies published on the issue have concluded that one of the major factors for tourists to move away from previously well attracted touristic destinations, had been the new policies and rules restricting the usage of both licit and illicit drugs. These conclusions had often been postulated, disregarding their long-term effect on health, especially of the young populations who are the target group for promotion of these drugs (5). Even if we disregard the negative consequences to their health and wellbeing, and analyse this issue purely based on economic rationale, it is still obvious that they would have a productive and greater contribution to the country's economy had they not become victims of these industries (6-7).

Due to dire need of recovering from its economic collapse, Sri Lanka will have to take extreme measures in most of the contributing sectors of the country's economy. As such, hidden agendas from stakeholders with vested interests may have a say on liberating and less restricting laws and policies of drug control in the name of promoting tourism, as tourism is one of the easy-to-make-profit industries, given the wide variety of tourist attraction destinations that Sri Lanka possesses.

Medicinal cannabis, as promoted by industries, had been a hot topic in Sri Lanka from time to time during the past few years, emphasizing its economic value and claimed benefits (8-9). This is amidst the fact that cannabis is legalised for medicinal use in Sri Lanka decades ago, to be used by licensed Ayurveda and Traditional Medicine practitioners. In addition, the global legal cannabis industry, largely concentrated in the Northern American Region, since 2018 when Canada legalised cannabis for non-medicinal or recreational use, has not up to date, recorded any profits from its legal cannabis trade. This is even

when the industrial cannabis is now being genetically modified to a different biochemical composition and a higher level of addiction compared to the indigenous cannabis plant varieties used for medicinal purposes by the traditional practitioners. Currently, tobacco and alcohol industries have heavily invested in the cannabis industry, and it is promoted as a smoking alternative in the countries in which it is legalised.

Thailand, which legalised cannabis for medicinal use in 2019 (10), was the first country in the Southeast Asian region to reduce the restrictions of use to allow non-medicinal use, claiming to promote tourism. This was in the context of the Western world who legalized it several years earlier for the same purpose, is now considering of imposing more rules for restricted use of cannabis because of its severe negative public health and societal impacts (6, 11). Though Thailand has legalized Cannabis for medicinal use, as in all the other countries with similar legal contexts, some studies have concluded that majority of the users used Cannabis for non-medicinal (recreational) purposes warranting potential public health concerns due to increased availability and accessibility (10).

Even though there is no doubt that tourism is one of the easy-to-make-profit industries for countries like Sri Lanka, the promotion strategies should be implemented in a way that it is not harmful to the health of Sri Lankans or tourists. Development should be considered as a collective improvement of economic, social, political and cultural aspects with minimum disturbances to livelihood and healthiness of its community. Thus, promotion of drugs for the sake of promoting tourism is unscientific and irrational as well as a dangerous path to take to arrive at a better tomorrow.

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