



Joint Open Letter

19.02.16

Children of Alcoholics – Hidden Human Rights Crisis and crucial SDGs Issue

Dear Honorable Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein,

We hope that our letter finds you well.

It is our privilege to address you today by way of this letter, on the occasion of International Children of Alcoholics Week.

Children of alcoholics are the forgotten victims of someone else's alcohol use. All too often they do remain invisible and alone: neglected by their parents, overlooked by teachers, down prioritized and ignored by governments and authorities.

But data shows that children of alcoholics (CoAs) do constitute a significant group.

- In Australia ca. 1 million children live in homes with at least one addicted adult.
- In the United States, mothers convicted of child abuse are 3 times more likely to be alcoholics and fathers are 10 times more likely to be alcoholics. More than half of all confirmed abuse reports and 75% of child deaths involve the use of alcohol or other drugs by a parent.
- In the European Union, there are at least 9 million children and young people growing up with alcohol-addicted parents.
- Research estimates that there are 2.6 million children of school age living with parental alcohol problems in the UK alone.

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The World Family Organization (WFO) is an international organization which has as main objective to represent Families of the world at all levels, to defend their interests and to act with them and for them vis a vis governments and the international community.

IOGT International is the premier global interlocutor for evidence-based policy measures and community-based interventions to prevent and reduce harm caused by alcohol and other drugs.

LIFE SET FREE



- The number of children living in homes that are ravaged by alcohol problems sky-rockets considering the countries around the world that are currently not even measuring the issue.

Children growing up with parents who struggle with alcohol problems are a Human Rights crisis of tremendous proportions. CoAs are greatly exposed to various types of harm:

- They are five times more likely to develop an eating disorder.
- They are three times more likely to commit suicide.
- They are almost four times more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder themselves later on in life.
- In Low- and Middle-Income Countries, children of alcoholics often end up on the streets, where they are often exposed to grave dangers such as violence and crime, human trafficking, and substance abuse.

When we talk about children of alcoholics, we face seven aspects that make up the severity of the Human Rights crisis:

1. The societal stigma, stereotypes and associated taboo that still are attached to alcoholism and to living with parents who have alcohol problems.
2. Authorities' inability to identify children of alcoholics, for example in schools.
3. Governments on local and national level fail in providing effective and sufficient services to these vulnerable and marginalized children.
4. Governments on local and national level fail in providing treatment for parents with alcohol problems, like programs that help the entire family.
5. Society's inability to prevent and reduce alcohol harm in general.

2

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6. In general, the lack of enabling, safe environments for children to grow up and thrive in.
7. Government shortcomings in implementing the Best interest principle enshrined in Art. 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Also these aspects are interdependent. Their absence from the debate and from effective policy-making processes is hurting children of alcoholics.

In fact, they keep fuelling a Human Rights crisis that sees CoAs deprived of the enjoyment of eight Human Rights, such as (for detailed list, see Annex I):

- Protection of the family (Art. 16.3)
- The right to social security and realization of economic, social and cultural rights (Art. 22),
- The right to a standard of living conducive to health and well-being (Art. 25.1),
- Special care and assistance for motherhood and childhood (Art. 25.2).

Having on mind the sheer extent of the problem, the severity of the problem and the impact of the problem not just on the present but on the future, we hold that it is essential to understand that Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Agenda2030 are not possible without comprehensive efforts to help and support children of alcoholics and to ensure that their number decreases in the coming years.

The fact that hundreds of millions of children grow up exposed to neglect and abuse due to their parents' alcohol problems is a Child Rights issue, a public health issue, a social development issue, a poverty eradication and sustainable development issue.

3

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In short, this is a complex and an urgent issue. Sometimes, especially in low- and middle-income countries it is a matter of life and death.

In this spirit, we call on the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner to put the situation of children of alcoholics on their agenda. And we urge you to explore ways to make the Best Interest Principle, enshrined in Art. 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child work for children of alcoholics.

Using the collaborative synergies of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda2030, we urge the UN system to exercise leadership and seriously explore ways forward to address and improve the situation of millions of children around the world.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Deisi Noeli Weber Kusztra
World Family Organization
President



Kristina Sperkova
IOGT International
International President

” No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”

In the United States, Australia and the European Union alone, ca. 30 million children have to grow up with alcohol addicted parents. It is among these that the most severe and often most apparent violations of fundamental rights occur. Children who have to endure living with alcohol-addicted parents often and repeatedly fall victim to “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Life in a family with alcohol problems is often dominated by conflicts and unpredictability.

Children of alcoholics understand that their own family doesn't function like other families. Often they develop feelings of shame and self-blame for their parents' alcohol problems. Many of these children and young people are victims of domestic violence. In Ireland and

Iceland 71% of the cases of domestic violence are attributable to alcohol. Alcohol is estimated to be a causal factor in 16% of all cases of child abuse and neglect.

That tens of millions of children worldwide suffer from neglect and abuse in their own homes, in an age where they would need shelter, care and support to find their place in the world is a Human Rights crisis. Often CoAs have to clean the vomit of their parents, and/ or have to witness or endure violence and abuse – which is clearly “cruel, inhuman and degrading”.

Studies have shown that children of parents with alcohol problems are much more exposed to other health risks, to negative influences on their intellectual capacities and their mental health.

” The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”

It is at home where a child should feel safe, protected and sheltered. Home is where children find security, joy and a stimulating environment.

Evidence and experience shows that the reality for children of alcoholics (CoAs) is different. In tens of millions of cases it's home where children find alcohol intoxicated parents.

In these cases children frequently have to take over the role of grown-ups and take care of a parent who is intoxicated by alcohol, of the family household or of younger siblings. In the United States, Australia and the EU alone, there are ca. 30 million children of alcoholics.

Surveys show: Children in presence of adults under the influence of alcohol often feel insecure and worry; they have problems to read adults' emotions and to understand their behavior. It evokes anxiety and confusion.

In the United States, mothers convicted of child abuse are 3 times more likely to be alcoholics

and fathers are 10 times more likely to be alcoholics. More than half of all confirmed abuse reports and 75% of child deaths involve the use of alcohol or other drugs by a parent.

Studies conducted in Uganda and in other countries, such as Nigeria, South Africa, India, and Colombia; show that a large fraction of reported domestic violence incidents is related to alcohol use by the male partner. In Uganda alone, 52% of the women who recently experienced domestic violence reported that their partner had consumed alcohol.

Alcohol harm erases the family's most important role - to protect. It tears down the safe shelter and robs the child of the right to grow up in a secure environment. All this has enormous consequences in a child's current and future life.

“ Everyone, (...) has the right to social security and is entitled to realization (...) of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.”

The provision of facilities, environments, meeting places and activities for children to grow up safely and healthily is very limited in most countries and local regions of the world. Even the richest countries often do a poor job on this measure.

Seen with the eyes of children, the world we live in has an alcohol problem. Therefore national and local governments need to invest more into alcohol free environments and open leisure time facilities where children can develop their personality in safe and enabling environments.

For example, a survey among all Swedish municipalities shows that even in a welfare state like Sweden many municipalities close the doors of their leisure time facilities and activities during holidays. 49% of the municipalities that replied to the survey closed all doors during the national holidays and vacation periods, with the reason being that they didn't “see a need”.

However, the tens of millions of CoAs are in great need of safe places to go to, when at home their parents are alcohol intoxicated; when at home they would face abuse and neglect.

A representative survey among children, adolescents and youth in Sweden, one of the most progressive countries concerning welfare spending, showed that 87% think that alcohol makes public space and leisure time activities unsafe and excluding. Almost a quarter of Swedish youth starts using alcohol because they do not have anything else to do in their leisure time.

The lack of investment in alcohol-free, safe and enabling common spaces and activities for minors is a Human Rights problem – parental alcohol abuse is compounding this problem and intensifies the need for children and youth to find available spaces that provide shelter, stimulation and creativity.

” Everyone has the right to rest and leisure (...)”

Meaningful free time activities in safe and enabling environments are crucial for all children, and especially for children of alcoholics, in order to find their place in society, to understand who they are and what they want to do with their lives. This fundamental right is often violated, in two ways:

Evidence shows that children who grow up in families with parental problems don't have time and don't feel they're "allowed" to enjoy leisure activities; they're focused on helping at home, on carrying the burden of running the household, covering up the problems of their parents, and/ or caring for their siblings. Research shows that CoAs in many cases have difficulties to build and sustain close relationships due to several factors.

The absence of governmental investments in and prioritization of common spaces, projects,

activities and facilities for children and youth is a factor concerning the problematic reality with regard to UDHR Art. 24.

At the same time, alcohol is becoming part of cultural, social, customary events in societies around the world. As the alcohol norm takes over more and more space, aggressively pushed by the alcohol industry, space for children to enjoy free zones from alcohol related harm is shrinking and further eroding UDHR Art. 24.

The overall offer of meaningful and safe leisure time activities is often rather limited due to the current alcohol culture. Where this is true, the principle of article 24 is not met to the extent it should be.

” Everyone has the right to a standard living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services (...)”

Children of alcoholics grow up in environments that are permeated by insecurity, anxiety and the constant threat of physical and psychological violence. CoAs often witness or even become victims of violence.

In these families and homes, CoAs' needs are neglected and the standard of living is rarely adequate health and well-being. Especially in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, parents' expenditures on alcohol drain the household economy and undermine other necessary expenditure on education, health care or healthy foods.

Thus the natural obligations of parents towards their children's standard of living such as adequate food, clothing and medical care are all too often neglected.

Alcohol problems by parents are a major burden on the well-being and well functioning of the family – the corner stone of any resilient community and society.

CoAs are greatly exposed to various types of harm:

- They are five times more likely to develop an eating disorder.
- They are three times more likely to commit suicide.
- They are almost four times more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder themselves later on in life.
- In Low- and Middle-Income Countries, children of alcoholics often end up on the streets, where they are often exposed to grave dangers such as violence and crime, human trafficking, and substance abuse.

” Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.”

Social protection of a child's development cannot be overestimated. It means both that the community as a whole sustains norms and rules and that the political system designs regulations which help creating the most enabling environment for children to grow up and thrive in.

In communities around the world, no matter whether from high-income or LMIC countries, CoAs often encounter the lack of safe and enabling environments.

That childhood is entitled to special care and assistance calls into questions the pervasive omnipresence of alcohol marketing in children's lives.

Seen with the eyes of children of alcoholics, marketing that exposes children to alcohol is an infringement of the fundamental right stipulated by Art. 25.2. Consider evidence from Ireland:

The majority of Irish children are regularly exposed to alcohol advertising and marketing. This is a “child protection issue”.

Significant exposure to alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that children will use alcohol, binge use and engage in risky behavior. 90% of Irish children were exposed to “traditional” or off-line advertising in the week prior to the study, with more than 50% of those surveyed citing four or more such advertisements a day. 77% reported online exposure and 61% owned alcohol-branded merchandise. More than half of Irish children (53.5%) between the ages of 13 and 15 had previously consumed alcohol¹.

Freedom from exposure to alcohol marketing is a child protection and Human Rights issue. And so is the issue of enabling, safe and inclusive, alcohol free environments that should be available to all children in a community. When children don't even have their own homes to feel shelter in, society needs to provide special care and assistance by offering these environments, activities and facilities.

¹<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/children-are-regularly-exposed-to-alcohol-ads-study-finds-1.2444051>

” Everyone has the right to education.”

In general, alcohol harm is a major obstacle for children's enjoyment of the fundamental right to education. This is true especially in LMIC and is thus a crucial issue for the Sustainable Development Goals.

For example: A 2010 Transparency International report, with research gathered from 8,500 educators and parents in Ghana, Madagascar, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Uganda, found that education is being denied to African children in incredibly large numbers. The report found that many schools were plagued by teacher alcoholism.

Research from Uganda shows that parents' alcohol use has both direct and indirect effects on the poverty status of individuals, families, and the entire community. Economic consequences of alcohol consumption are particularly severe for the poor and marginalized – causing negative impacts on key human development outcomes in education, health, and nutrition.

Children growing up in affected households oftentimes lose out on education and be negatively affected by stigma.

” Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”

Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stipulates, “Everyone has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” Participation in cultural life of the community plays a fundamental role. However, children of alcoholics often feel excluded from cultural and social life in communities around the world. Often they experience marginalization because of the lack of inclusive, safe, alcohol-free environments.

The provision of facilities, environments, meeting places and activities for children to grow up safely and healthily is very limited in most countries and local communities around the world. Even the richest countries often do a poor job on this measure.

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