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Jan Poolman
The Editor
The Namibian Sun

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Dear Mr Poolman

**Open letter in response to the Namibia Sun article of 27 February:
Namibia, a nation of Drunkards?**

The article published in the Namibian Sun on the 27th of February, raising the issue of Alcohol Abuse in Namibia, herewith refers. The Self-Regulating Alcohol Industry Forum (SAIF), an organization representing all major suppliers and producers of alcoholic beverages with its main objective being the promotion of responsible drinking, herewith wishes to provide the following response to the above article, for your consideration.

Our response thereto is not to deny that alcohol abuse is a problem in Namibian society, in fact, we wholeheartedly agree that harmful drinking needs to be addressed through effective strategies by an array of stakeholders. However, as alcohol abuse is an emotive matter, and easily taken out of context, we wish to provide a different perspective on this matter and correct some of the statements made in the article.

The article refers to an average adult consumption of *10 litres of alcohol a week*. Contrary to this figure, the Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health, published by the WHO in 2011, states that Namibians consumed an average of *9.62 litres of pure alcohol in a year*. For most people this is difficult to comprehend in terms of their own consumption, however, considering recommendations published in a booklet by the Coalition of Responsible Drinking (CORD), a responsible drinking

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initiative coordinated by the Namibian Ministry of Health and Social Services, this is well within recommended guidelines on responsible drinking. CORD regards a small beer (Dumpy) as one unit meaning that one unit at a 4% alcohol by volume content will hold 13.2 ml of alcohol. At the 21 units per week threshold, this would add up to 14.414 litres of pure alcohol per annum. Thus, simply stated, Namibians drink 4.7 litres of pure alcohol per annum less than would be considered as harmful. While such per capita figures may challenge the notion of labelling a nation as drunkards, due to the behaviour of the minority, these figures do not tell us much about harmful drinking, as this is usually directly related to a deeper understanding of drinking patterns.

In formulating effective alcohol policy, all stakeholders must be involved, and the consequences as well as the contributing factors to harmful drinking need to be fully understood. While it is globally recognised that poverty and unemployment significantly contribute to harmful drinking, these insights are glaringly absent from current alcohol policy debate. A further matter which is not adequately addressed is informal alcohol, which according to the Nationwide KAP Baseline Survey on Alcohol and Drug use and Abuse In Namibia conducted by the Ministry of Health and Social Services in 2002, accounts for more than half of the alcohol consumed in Namibia.

SAIF beliefs that responsible consumption of alcohol can complement a balanced and healthy lifestyle, however, we too are concerned about excessive or irresponsible consumption by the minority, and therefore advocate for balanced policies and strategies to eliminate alcohol related harm. We believe the question should not be *Is Namibia a nation of drunkards*, but *Are we formulating an alcohol policy that will effectively reduce alcohol related harm?*

SAIF was invited on the 10th of February by e-mail from the Ministry of Health and Social Services, to submit its comments on the Draft National Alcohol Policy within 12 days. We submitted our comments on the 22nd of February, and have also appealed to the ministry for inclusion in further discussions regarding the National Alcohol Policy. It is our belief that the current draft alcohol policy requires further rework, needs to be informed by reliable data, and should provide for wide participation by all stakeholders, if it is to effectively address alcohol-related harm.

For further information on SAIF, please visit www.saifnamibia.com.

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Yours sincerely,

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