TRANSNATIONAL ALLIANCE
TO COMBAT ILLICIT TRADE
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ILLICIT ALCOHOL TRADE IN LAOS
Challenges and Solutions

A Briefing by the Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade

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ABOUT TRACIT

The Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade (TRACIT) is an independent, private sector initiative to drive change to mitigate the economic and social damages of illicit trade by strengthening government enforcement mechanisms and mobilizing businesses across industry sectors most impacted by illicit trade.

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1. Introduction

In Laos, alcohol is legal and socially accepted – the country has one of the highest levels of alcohol consumption per capita in ASEAN.[1] At the same time, the prevalence of unsafe, unregulated products presents a serious concern. Illicit alcohol can account for as much as 33% of all alcohol consumed in Laos —much higher than the global average of around 26% or 1 in every 4 bottles.[2] Illicit consumption is even higher in the ASEAN region, representing roughly 32% of total consumption, which is significantly higher than in other regions, for instance, Europe (13%) and Latin America (20%).[3]

A tragic event in November 2024 highlighted the severity of the situation: six foreign visitors in the popular tourist town of Vang Vieng in Laos lost their lives after consuming methanol-tainted, illicit alcohol. In response, multiple governments issued official travel warnings about the severe hazards of unregulated alcoholic beverages. This event was not an isolated episode, but a reflection of a broader, ongoing problem in the region:[4]

- Thailand: In 2024, six people died and 37 were hospitalized after drinking illicit alcohol containing methanol in Bangkok.[5]
- Cambodia: In 2021, during a funeral, 11 villagers died and 10 were hospitalized after drinking toxic rice wine. This occurred alongside over 30 additional deaths in three separate incidents linked to home-brewed rice wine tainted with methanol.
- Vietnam: Between 2012 and 2022, 382 people were reported to have suffered methanol poisoning from unsafe alcohol, 98 of whom died.[6]
- Indonesia: In 2018, nearly 150 people died after consuming homemade “oplosan” containing toxic additives like mosquito repellent and cough medicine, marking the country’s worst recorded alcohol poisoning case.
- Malaysia: In 2018, 45 people died after consuming toxic alcohol. In 2019, at least 17 fatalities were reported, and one individual suffered permanent blindness from contaminated alcohol.

Alcohol consumption in ASEAN is projected to increase by up to 18% by 2025. As such, it is important for ASEAN governments to prevent illicit consumption from increasing alongside overall growth in alcohol consumption.[7]

TRACIT recommends that the Government of Laos consider a comprehensive portfolio of policy and regulatory measures to curtail the trade in illicit alcohol. These measures could serve as a model for broader regional or international approaches to ensuring the safety of consumers:

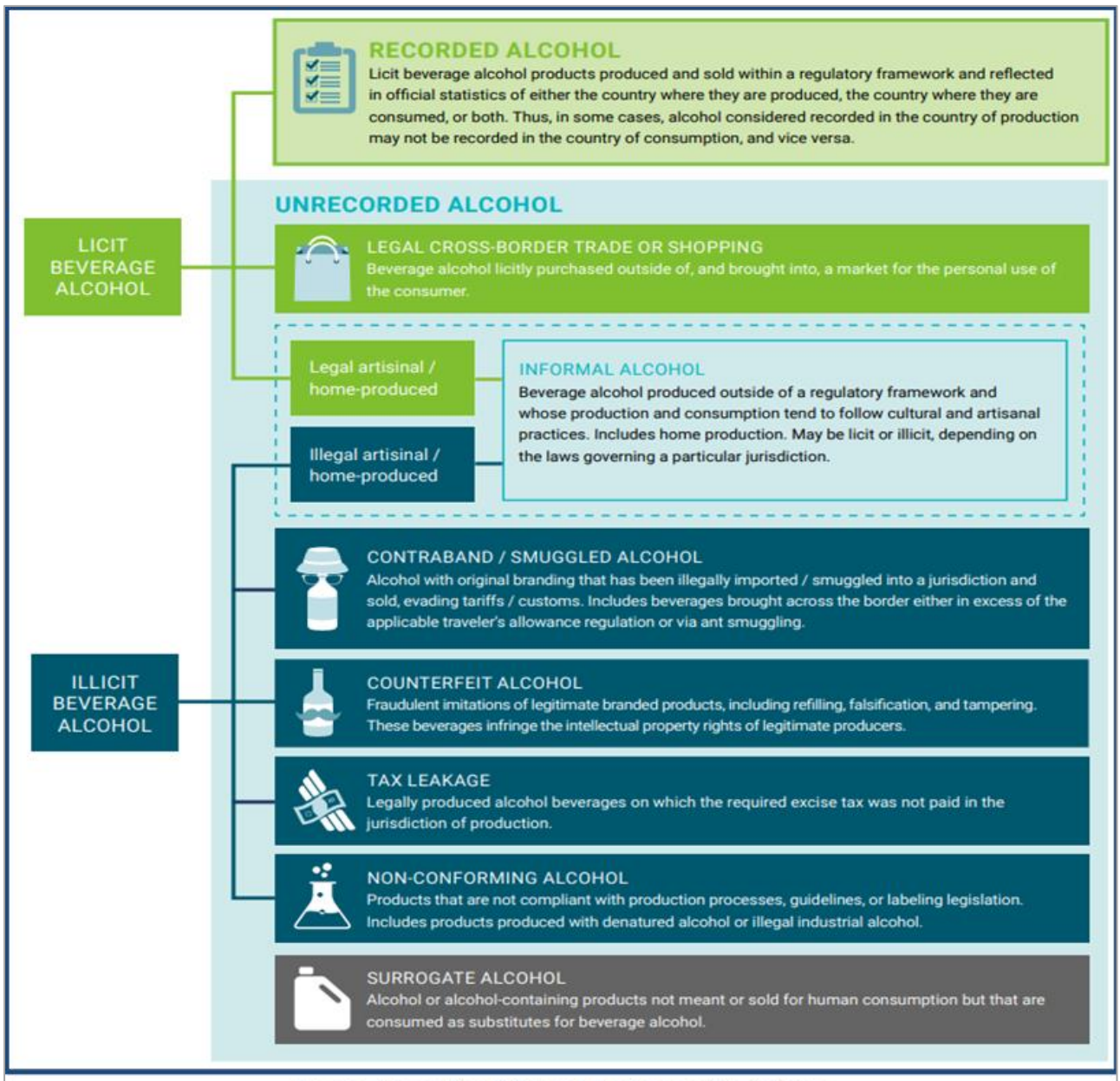
- Incentivize local producers to legalize their production of artisanal products or homebrews to bring them into the regulated sector.
- Strengthen regulatory oversight by enforcing mandatory registration, routine quality inspections, and strict penalties to create a framework that curbs illicit alcohol.

- Raise awareness of illicit alcohol among consumers and the related threats to health and safety and the economic and social impact, especially with the weakest sections of society.
- Improve accessibility of legal products at affordable prices and increase the density of legal outlets to stem demand for illicit products.
- Enforce laws and impose sanctions and penalties at levels sufficient to deter criminal activity. Moreover, imposing administrative, criminal and civil penalties for illicit trade in alcohol including counterfeits should be made a priority.
- Improve ethanol regulation and enforcement to ensure that ethanol intended for industrial, pharmaceutical or other commercial purposes is not used in the production of alcoholic beverages.
- Rationalize tax policies and subsidies to ensure that they do not incentivize illicit trade, smuggling, adulteration and theft.
- Improve inter-agency cooperation as responsibility for alcohol policy, regulations and their enforcement are shared by a number of ministries. This encompasses various entities including customs, tax agencies, health and regulatory organizations, as well as bodies addressing counterfeiting and illicit trade.
- Promote the creation of local private-public partnerships to develop policy solutions, deploy technology solutions, use international open standards to secure supply chains, share intelligence for better risk assessment and border control, enhance awareness, and broaden knowledge bases.

Types of illicit alcohol

The landscape of illicit alcohol is varied and complex. These products can range from homemade artisanal beverages[8] sold without manufacturing/ trading licenses or proper sanitary permits to counterfeits, fakes and legitimately branded bottles of alcohol smuggled illegally into a country.[9]

Illicit alcohol is comprised within the umbrella of unrecorded alcohol – which constitutes a substantial portion of the total alcohol consumption per capita among adults. Unrecorded alcohol refers to alcohol that is not accounted for in official statistics on alcohol taxation or sales in the country where it is consumed. This is because it is usually produced, distributed and sold outside the formal channels under government control.



Source: International Alliance for Responsible Drinking

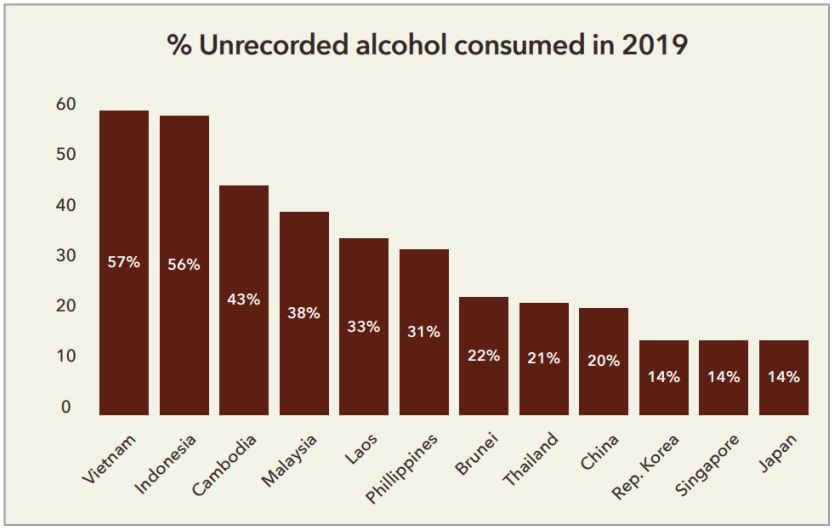
2. Illicit alcohol in Laos

Scale of illicit alcohol consumption

Although market characteristics differ across countries, the problem of illicit alcohol exists in every region, in developed and developing countries, urban and rural areas, and higher-income and lower-income neighborhoods alike. Similarly, there are a wide variety of factors that drive markets for illicit alcohol, related to consumers, business practices and government policies.

As per Euromonitor's 2018 Global Study on Illicit Alcohol, approximately 25.8% of the total worldwide alcohol consumption corresponds to illicit alcohol, equating to one out of every four alcohol bottles.[10] These findings correspond to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that unrecorded alcohol[11] accounts for around 26% of total worldwide adult alcohol consumption.[12] In Laos unrecorded alcohol can account for up to 33% of total consumption.[13]

In the ASEAN region, alcohol consumption is projected to increase by up to 18% by 2025. As such, it will be important that ASEAN governments not allow illicit consumption to increase alongside overall growth in alcohol consumption.[14]



Laos

In Laos, alcohol is legal and socially accepted, and the country has one of the highest levels of alcohol consumption per capita in ASEAN. At the same time, the prevalence of unsafe, unregulated products presents a serious concern. In fact, illicit alcohol can account for as much as 33% of all alcohol consumed, exposing consumers to significant health and safety risks.

A tragic incident in November 2024 underscored these dangers: six foreign visitors in the popular tourist town of Vang Vieng lost their lives after consuming methanol-tainted, illicit alcohol. In response, multiple governments issued official travel warnings about the severe

hazards of unregulated alcoholic beverages. This event was not an isolated episode but a reflection of a broader, ongoing problem demanding more stringent oversight, enforcement, and public awareness.

Heightened media attention and mounting safety concerns have collectively magnified the issue of illicit alcohol in Laos.[15] As major news outlets continue to report on health emergencies and tragic incidents linked to illicit beverages, the global awareness of these risks is rapidly growing. Simultaneously, consumer advocacy groups underscore the need for comprehensive public education campaigns to inform both visitors and local populations about the inherent dangers associated with illicit alcohol consumption.

This heightened visibility has generated considerable pressure on national governments in the region to introduce stronger regulatory measures and more robust enforcement mechanisms to prevent the problem from escalating further.

Why is it important to tackling illicit alcohol consumption in ASEAN?

- Recent incidents of hospitalizations and fatalities among international tourists have underscored the critical importance of addressing safety concerns. Increased media attention amongst growing international tourist activity calls for swift action to improve regulation and control of illicit alcohol.
- This issue holds particular significance for the tourism industries in ASEAN, as tourists increasingly prioritize food and beverage (F&B) safety when selecting destinations. 84% of travelers consider safety and reliability—including safe F&B offerings—as crucial factors in choosing their destination.[16]
- F&B offerings rank as the most important consideration for tourists visiting Southeast Asia, followed by historical and cultural sites.[17]
- Unsafe alcohol incidents not only pose significant health risks to local communities but also damage the reputation of ASEAN destinations amongst high-value tourists. Such occurrences threaten tourism strategies aimed at delivering premium experiences.

Enablers of illicit alcohol in Laos

Consumer perception and awareness

Criminals often use various methods to make their products appear legitimate, including refilling branded bottles with illicit alcohol, using counterfeiting packaging or forged tax stamps and selling together a mix of legal and illicit alcoholic beverages. Consequently, consumers are often unaware when they purchase illicit alcohol.

Consumers may also perceive illicit alcohol as having few or no health risks. For example, in some regions, the consumption of these products is socially acceptable, with low-income consumers often preferring to purchase cheap, high-potency illicit alcohol in place of (unaffordable) licit counterparts.[18] Moreover, illicit alcohol is also not subject to restrictions around legal purchase age, so it may be attractive to young people below the legal age limit.

Affordability

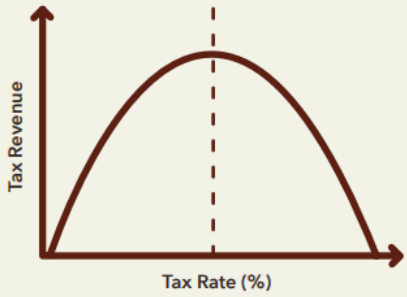
Consumers at all income levels purchase illicit alcohol for various reasons, with lower prices being the most common driver.[19] The importance of affordability is especially strong among low-income consumers with restricted purchasing power, such as youth, students, and people living in poverty.[20]

An important factor affecting affordability is the government's own substantial increases in taxes. In 2023, the Laotian government increased excise taxes on alcoholic beverages. Under the new policy, beverages (excluding beer) above 23% ABV now face an excise tax of 110%, up from 70%. Taxes of drinks ranging from 10–23% ABV have increased from 60% to 90%, while those below 10% ABV are subject to a 72% excise tax. Beer containing more than 5% ABV is taxed at 70%, and beer with 0.5–5% ABV incurs a 60% tax.[21]

This has widened the price gap between licit and illicit alcoholic beverages, with varying effects on illicit alcohol consumption.[22] While the government may aim to maximize their revenue and moderate consumption by setting high excise rates, excessively high taxes can be counterproductive if they stimulate demand for illicit products.

Tax leakage in the context of illicit alcohol happens when taxation (import tariffs + domestic excise) is too high in a given country. High tax rates cause trade customers and consumers to switch from legally imported products to illicit, non-tax-paid products in order to avoid high tax rates. The importance of affordability is especially strong among low-income consumers with restricted purchasing power, such as young adults, and people living below the poverty line.[9]

The Laffer Curve



This principle is best demonstrated by the Laffer Curve, which shows the relationship between tax rates and the amount of tax revenue collected. The Laffer Curve establishes that there is a maximum tax rate, after which the price of a product gets so high that the return of government revenue diminishes. In other words, when the taxes are too high, the demand for the products decreases and the total government revenue also decreases.

Lack of proper oversight and enforcement

A key factor enabling the sale of illicit alcohol in Laos is the country's weak enforcement and oversight mechanisms. A lack of trained personnel, limited funding for inspections, and insufficient coordination among agencies hinder effective implementation. Without a robust and accountable system for monitoring quality, verifying producer credentials, and penalizing violations, illicit traders face minimal deterrents. This enforcement gap allows unlicensed producers and distributors to operate with relative ease, resulting in a flourishing shadow market that jeopardizes consumer safety and public health.

Impact of illicit alcohol consumption

Health risks

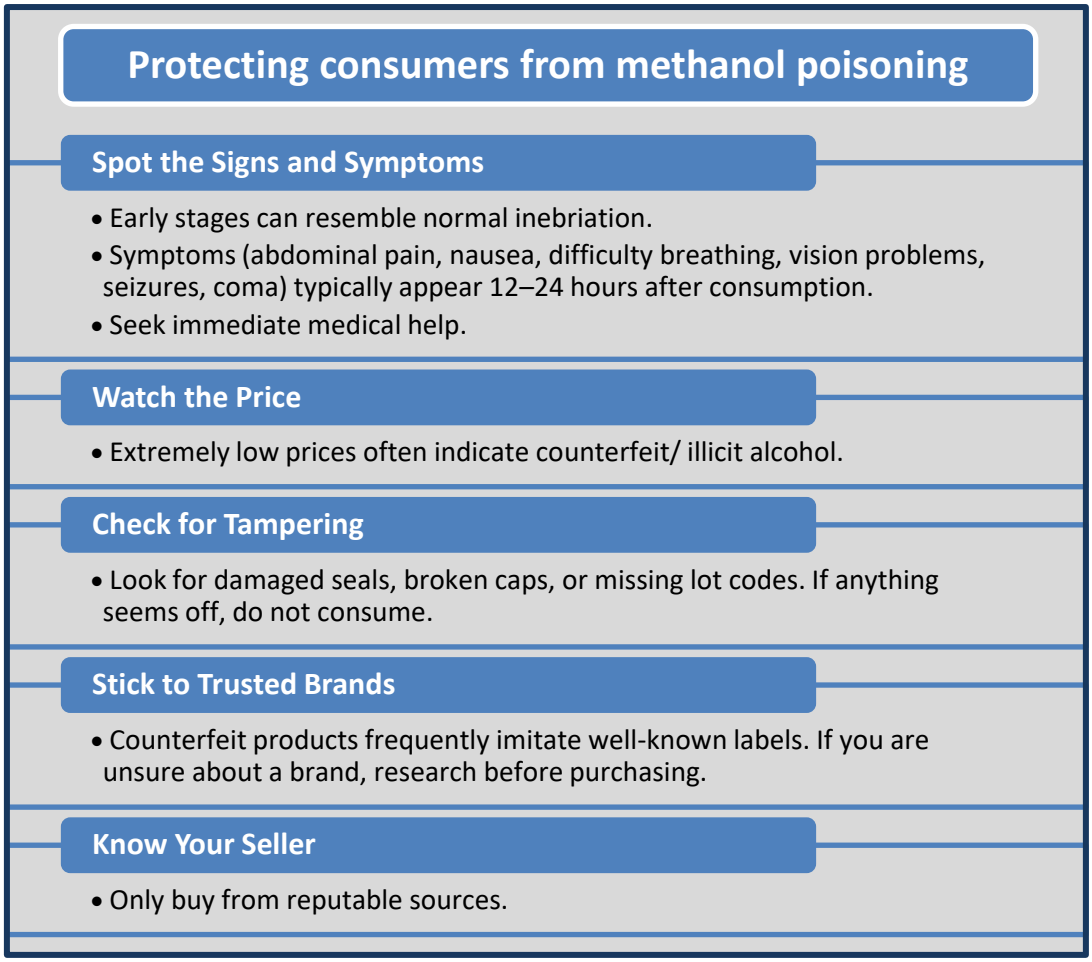
> *The biggest health concern with respect to illicit alcohol is consumer exposure to health risks associated with toxic illicit alternatives…these illicit substitutes do not comply with sanitary, quality and safety regulations, the most hazardous are contaminated with toxic chemical additives.*[23] *(OECD, 2022)*

The public health costs and personal tragedies from illicit alcohol are staggering. In the last few years, illicit alcohol poisoning and death have been reported in several countries, most recently in Laos – where six tourists lost their lives due to the consumption of methanol-laced illicit alcohol. Other incidences include:

- Thailand: In 2024, six people died and 37 were hospitalized after drinking illicit alcohol containing methanol in Bangkok.[24]
- More than 150 people have died from drinking illegal alcohol in India between 2020-2022.[25]
- During a funeral in Cambodia in 2021, 12 people died and 10 were hospitalized after drinking toxic rice wine. This occurred alongside over 30 additional deaths in three separate incidents linked to home-brewed rice wine tainted with methanol.[26] Separately, in 2018 – 11 people died, and 138 were hospitalized for drinking methanol-laced wine.[27]
- More than 300 people lost their lives due to illicit alcohol consumption in the Dominican Republic in 2020.[28]
- More than 150 people died in Mexico in 2020 from illicit alcohol laced with methanol in Mexico.[29]
- In Vietnam, between 2012 and 2022, 382 people were reported to have suffered methanol poisoning from illicit alcohol, 98 of whom died.[30]
- Nearly 150 people died after consuming homemade "oplosan" in Indonesia in 2018 containing toxic additives like mosquito repellent and cough medicine, marking the country's worst recorded alcohol poisoning case.[31]

- Around 45 people died after consuming toxic alcohol in Malaysia in 2018. In 2019, at least 17 more fatalities were reported, and one person suffered permanent blindness due to contaminated alcohol.[32]

Illicit alcoholic beverages pose health risks to consumers primarily because they are unregulated and not subject to the stringent requirements and quality standards of legally produced beverages. In many instances, these products are produced using toxic compounds, including cheaper or toxic types of alcohol that can have serious adverse health effects. Illicit operators, for example, add ethanol to increase the potency and this may cause alcohol poisoning resulting in liver damage, kidney failure and cancer. Substitutes for ethanol are also used in the production process, which can include chemicals used in cleaning fluids, nail polish remover and automobile screen wash.



Furthermore, methanol – a highly flammable liquid commonly used in industrial applications such as solvents, antifreeze and fuel – is toxic to humans. When ingested even in very small quantities, it can lead to serious health problems such as blindness, organ failure, and even death.[33] In the context of illicit alcohol, methanol contamination often occurs because of improper or unregulated distillation practices. Producers of illegal or counterfeit alcoholic beverages may use low-quality ingredients or fail to remove methanol byproducts during the distillation process. This makes methanol-tainted drinks particularly dangerous, as consumers

have no way of verifying the contents or purity of these unregulated beverages. Methanol poisoning affects thousands of individuals each year, with untreated cases often resulting in fatality rates ranging from 20% to 40%, depending on both the concentration of toxic methanol and the amount ingested. Notably, Asia experiences the highest prevalence of methanol poisoning worldwide.[34]

Fiscal risks

Lost corporate and personal income taxes, along with avoided excise duties, strip governments of income intended for public investment, with relatively more severe impacts on developing countries. The alcoholic beverages market plays a vital role in Laos's economy, with substantial revenue generation and a positive growth trajectory projected over the next several years.

The Laotian alcoholic beverages market size is estimated at about USD 1.3 billion annually.[35] This revenue is anticipated to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.10% from 2024 to 2029, reaching an estimated US$1.47 billion by 2029. [36] For developing countries, widespread smuggling and local production of illicit and counterfeit alcoholic drinks can have a particularly debilitating effect on efforts to improve domestic resource mobilization by denying the government a significant source of potential tax income.

Legitimate producers

Counterfeit, smuggling and other forms of illicit alcohol trade can diminish the sales of legitimate products, with severe consequences for the alcohol sector including those that are employed in the primary and secondary industry. Further, there is also a reputational cost to legitimate producers from consumer dissatisfaction with counterfeit products or the perception that a brand is likely to be counterfeit, eroding trust and reducing sales.[37]

Organized crime

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) notes that the profitability of trade in illicit alcohol has attracted the attention of organized crime groups (OCGs).[38] Globally, OCGs dominate the illicit trade in tobacco, alcohol and pharmaceuticals. The illegal trade in alcohol empowers organized criminal syndicates, providing them with the financial resources and capacities to engage in large-scale, cross-border operations. For these criminal networks, illicit alcohol is merely one of numerous endeavors, running in parallel with activities like drug trafficking, firearms smuggling, fraud, and money laundering, which can serve as means to support other unlawful pursuits.[39]

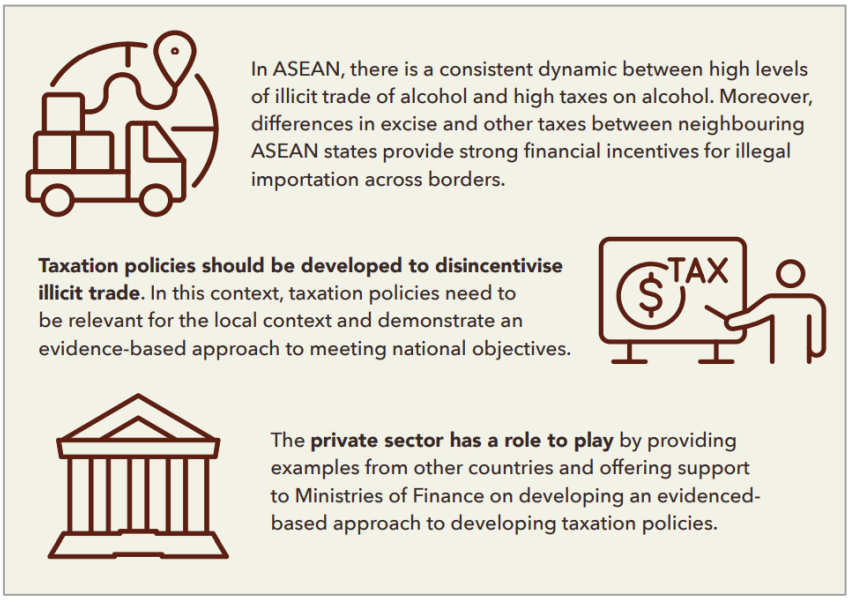
3. Recommendations on the way forward

A coordinated global response is imperative to raise awareness of the dangers associated with consuming illicit alcohol. In many Southeast Asian countries, including Laos, weak regulation and enforcement create an environment where illicit trade can thrive. Successful mitigation of this challenge requires concerted efforts among governments, international organizations, and local stakeholders to limit both the production and the distribution of illicit alcohol.

TRACIT recommends that the Government of Laos consider a comprehensive portfolio of policy and regulatory measures to curtail the trade in illicit alcohol. These measures could serve as a model for broader regional or international approaches to ensuring the safety of consumers:

- Incentivize local producers to legalize their production of artisanal products, homebrews and country liquors. There is an urgent need to formalize this growing market. The absence of proper and strong regulations incentivizes the production of dangerous, illicit alternatives. Controls could include requiring manufacturing and sanitary permits, retail sales licenses and the introduction of rational tax policies.
- Strengthen regulatory oversight and enforcement. Implement and enforce comprehensive regulations governing the production, distribution, and sale of alcohol. This should include mandatory registration of local producers, routine quality inspections, and strict penalties for non-compliance. By creating a consistent, transparent legal framework, the government can reduce the prevalence of illicit alcohol.
- Raise awareness of illicit alcohol. Illicit alcohol products are relatively easy to produce and consumers can be easily deceived, especially in the case of counterfeits. The government is encouraged to launch nationwide awareness programs that inform both locals and visitors about the dangers of illicit alcohol consumption. Consumers need to be made aware that illicit alcohol, often sold at lower prices, can contain toxic substances such as methanol and isopropanol – chemicals that can cause severe injuries, including blindness, organ failure, and even death. Such initiatives should disseminate information on how to identify legal, safe sources of alcohol. Raising awareness can help prevent further tragedies by enabling consumers to make informed choices and understand the life-threatening consequences of consuming illicit alcohol.
- Improve accessibility to legal products at affordable prices and increase the density of legal outlets to stem demand for illicit products. Increasing the number of legal retail outlets that sell legitimate alcohol is an effective way to curb the sale of illicit alcohol. Effective monitoring of retail outlets is also crucial to ensure that these units do not trade in illicit alcohol. Strategies that seek to effectively regulate the commercial availability of alcohol are also important ways to reduce the general level of harmful use of alcohol. This is especially true in rural areas where the density of shops is particularly low and the ease of access to unregulated homemade alcohol is high.

- Enforce laws and impose sanctions and penalties at levels sufficient to deter criminal activity. Effective enforcement of laws requires coordination among countries, national government agencies (revenue, border, police, health, etc.) and different levels of government. Moreover, imposing administrative, criminal and civil penalties for illicit trade in alcohol including counterfeits should be a priority to prohibit illicit traders from exploiting markets with the weakest penal regimes. This is particularly important in the context of homebrews that are manufactured and traded commercially without the requisite licenses. Consideration must also be given to rescinding business licenses from retailers, manufacturers and distributors involved in illegal trade.
- Improve ethanol regulation and enforcement to ensure that ethanol intended for industrial, pharmaceutical or other commercial purposes is not used in the production of alcoholic beverages. This can be achieved through the process of denaturing. Denatured alcohol is ethanol with additives to make it taste bad, foul smelling or nauseating or, in some cases, dyed to discourage consumption. Denatured ethanol should not be subject to excise tax, while ethanol produced for the beverage would remain subject to excise tax.
- Rationalize tax policies and subsidies to ensure that they do not incentivize illicit trade, smuggling, adulteration and theft. Tax policies need to account for various demand-related factors, particularly the price and income factors that determine the overall affordability of products. In 2023, the government introduced substantial increases in excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, adjusting rates according to alcohol content. Under the revised policy, beverages (excluding beer) above 23% ABV now face an excise tax of 110%, up from 70%. Drinks ranging from 10–23% ABV have increased from 60% to 90%, while those below 10% ABV are subject to a 72% excise tax. Beer containing more than 5% ABV is taxed at 70%, and beer with 0.5–5% ABV incurs a 60% tax. By rationalizing these tax policies—ensuring a proportional and evidence-based approach to taxation—the government can discourage illicit activity and maintain a regulated market that supports public health, consumer safety, and sustainable revenue generation.



- Improve inter-agency cooperation as responsibility for alcohol policy, regulations and their enforcement are shared by a number of ministries. This encompasses various entities including customs, tax agencies, health and regulatory organizations, as well as bodies addressing counterfeiting and illicit trade. It is crucial for these agencies to possess sufficient resources to effectively oversee, intercept, and discourage unlawful activities across the complete supply chain. Collaboration between these agencies should extend to multiple areas, including the regulation of raw material supplies, especially ethanol; supervision of production facilities with the enforcement of health and sanitation permits for manufacturers; and bolstering border security and law enforcement divisions to detect and prevent illicit activities.
- Promote the creation of local private-public partnerships to bring key industry and government stakeholders together to define strategies, including: developing and deploying technology solutions based on internationally recognized open standards to protect the integrity of supply chains; ensure easy sharing of intelligence and data to improve risk assessment and border control; improving awareness; and expanding the knowledge base.

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