Every specialist queried on the subject agreed that the figures are horrifying. Just recently the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed what can be directly observed in the shanty towns of Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa. From 1965 to 1980, the production of alcohol increased by 50 percent in the developing countries, which appears to be leading to a rapid rise in alcoholism.

"What we are seeing is the standardization of personal habits," says David Archibald, chairman of the International Council on Alcohol and Addictions (ICAA), based in Geneva, of which 130 countries are members. Archibald, who is also one of the founders of the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario, Canada, says that the international mobility of people is leading to the Westernization of habits.

"As you know, tobacco, alcohol and drugs are an integral part of the Western way of life. What is to be deplored is the lack of a tradition of moderation in the use of alcohol. People in developing countries have not yet learned to live peacefully with alcohol, to fear its dangers and the consequences of abuse.

"They are also not cautious of tobacco. I predict that in 10 or 15 years, we shall see a real epidemic of cancer in Third World countries because of their lack of knowledge of the harm tobacco can do. The situation is the same with alcohol. The multinationals think of the Third World as a market with a bright future for these cheap products. The people there, in their struggle with poverty, are an easy target for the manufacturers."

THE CASE OF CHILE

Chile has been producing wine and "chica" since the time of the Spanish conquest and of the Incas respectively, and it now has serious health problems directly related to alcohol. The same is true of Brazil, Argentina, and in fact Latin America as a whole. Chile has one of the highest rates in the world of cirrhosis of the liver. One adult in five is recognized as having an alcohol problem and five percent of the population over 15 are definitely alcoholics.

The government has recognized the seriousness of the problem and is trying to set up programs to alert not only the general population but the medical profession as well. An IDRC-funded project is aimed specifically at educating medical personnel to improve their diagnosis and knowledge of the health problems related to the abuse of alcohol. Of the alcoholics admitted for treatment to Santiago's hospitals, only 20 percent were noted as such on their admission card. Dr Alfredo Pemjean and Dr Ramon Florenziano of the School of Medicine of the National University of Chile are currently busy preparing changes in the training of doctors in Chile so that they can better detect problems arising from alcohol overconsumption and treat them without prejudice.

PUBLIC PRESSURE IN BOTSWANA

Developing countries cannot afford to treat alcoholics in institutions, according to Archibald. Each country has to think of ways to treat such people as out-patients, rather than hospitalize them. That, of course, will require personnel trained to help the one in five adults with a drinking problem.

For the last 20 years about 10 percent of all admissions to Botswana's psychiatric hospital have had to do with alcohol abuse. In the last few years there has been a considerable increase in the admission of male alcoholics. The
general public of this poor Southern African country believes the problem is serious and should be dealt with. With more than half its population under the age of 15, Botswana has every reason to mobilize its resources to counter this serious situation.

Reacting to this popular pressure and the concern of the medical profession, the Government of Botswana has decided to attack the alcohol problem. An IDRC-supported research team from the University of Botswana, for example, is trying to understand public attitudes toward alcohol, particularly those of youth, to determine what factors lead to regular and excessive consumption. Before anything can be done there is a need to understand the problem of alcohol abuse better.

"In Nigeria 13 new breweries have been built in 10 years to meet rising demand," says Archibald. "It is an industry that is profitable for governments and even for part of the population. But if the problems caused by alcohol cannot be coped with, such countries will lose greatly not only on the economic and social levels, but at the human one too. From this point of view, Nigeria is an obvious example of a country grappling with serious problems of alcohol and drug abuse. You know, alcohol, drug, and tobacco abuse can quite literally put a stop to development or seriously compromise it.

"Each country must set its research and popular education objectives," says Archibald. "Third World societies are going through a period of profound change. They must strive to better define the epidemiology of certain diseases and to understand their own society. It is up to each country to come up with a policy to deal with alcohol and drugs, and to decide, on the basis of thorough knowledge of the social factors involved, how to take advantage of the changes going on.

"It cannot be denied that the production of alcohol contributes significantly to the economies of many countries or that its consumption can be a very agreeable habit — if of course people have learned to manage the negative effects and if there is protection against the ruinous results of blind excess."

If, as Archibald says, the increase in alcohol consumption is a result of the Westernization of life-styles in the Third World, particular attention should be paid to Western cultural products that portray stereotypes extolling the use of alcohol. The US National Research Council's Newsreport has published a study dealing with the 10 most popular TV dramas. It revealed that at least 10 scenes of alcohol consumption were shown for each hour of broadcast time. In effect, the cultural products of television or the cinema can contribute to the general perception that alcohol consumption is normal and acceptable by linking it to an increasing number of situations and contexts.

In Peru, where many American TV programs are among the most popular, the Centre for the Study and Promotion of Development, with IDRC support, has studied the content of the most widely watched TV programs. It hopes to identify the needs and tastes of viewers in order to design educational programs that better reflect the values of the marginal population. They also want to take into account the ethnic, cultural and geographical differences and peculiarities.

There may in fact be a link between this appropriation of the media by the people of the Third World and the trend to decrease the Westernization of habits that for several decades has been leading to new and serious health problems related to alcohol and drugs.

In the West, cigarettes and other forms of tobacco have been linked to numerous diseases. In the case of alcohol, a lot still needs to be done. In the study by Professor Lawrence Wallack of California, quoted in Newsreport, it is pointed out that during the broadcast of TV dramas the rate of alcohol consumption is higher than normal, and that references to alcohol consumption are, generally, very positive. This means that the West has not yet dealt with the contradictions inherent in its way of life. How then, can one hope to see the Third World get rid of the image of cigarettes and drink as being upper class and a sign of success and happiness?

The industrialized world has not yet turned the corner. In the developing nations, the repercussions of an idealized and misleading way of life are only just beginning to be felt.