

Addressing and managing conflicts of interest in alcohol control policies

Snapshot series on alcohol control policies and practice

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Brief at- a-glance

The problem

Overwhelming evidence indicates that companies producing and selling unhealthy commodities have defeated, delayed or weakened the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies worldwide. Strategies used include interference in policy development, litigation, coalition-building through front groups and misusing knowledge or propagating misinformation. The alcohol industry has also used these practices to legitimise its participation in the public health agenda strengthening the narrative that policies and regulations work only if economic operators sit at the table. Experiences of other unhealthy commodities showed that protecting policy development from conflicts of interest is essential to reduce the burden of disease.

The evidence

There are irreconcilable differences between the goals of governments, which include to protect and promote people's health and well-being and the goals of economic operators, which are to pursue private profit maximisation through increased alcohol consumption. Corporate social responsibility initiatives, narratives related to individual choices, *moderate* and *responsible* drinking and the co-option of public health researchers and universities to collaborate with alcohol industry-funded organizations may undermine the effectiveness of alcohol control policies. Evidence points to opportunities to reduce conflicts of interest including using evidence to inform the development of alcohol

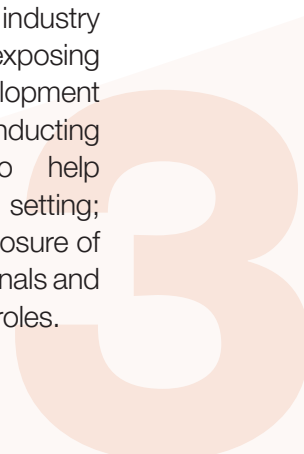
control policies, disclosure of research funding and implementing national and regional policies that capitalize on opportunities such as those presented through trade law and negotiations.

The know-how

Previous experience in managing conflicts of interest for tobacco and other unhealthy commodities can help to inform future approaches to apply to alcohol. Examples are provided on country and regional governance mechanisms that can be used to reduce the conflict of interest between industry and policy development. These examples include The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the use of trade agreements to maintain regulatory control, and the removal of industry as a partner in alcohol control policy development.

The next steps

Coalitions of partners can help in managing conflicts of interest across multiple levels of governance. Other steps include developing guidance for addressing conflicts of interest on trade and customs agreements; providing tools to support in-country efforts to reduce industry interference; documenting and exposing industry behaviour; supporting the development of contextualised strategies and conducting implementation-focused research to help determine what works and in what setting; promoting the improvement of the disclosure of conflicts of interest in peer-reviewed journals and of academics acting in expert advisory roles.



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Related resources

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About the series




This Snapshot is part of a series of briefs tackling critical issues related to the determinants driving the acceptability, availability and affordability of alcohol consumption and how it affects people and their communities. The series aims to facilitate evidence and experience-informed conversations on key topics relevant to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the noncommunicable diseases targets in the context of the WHO Global Strategy for reducing the harmful use of alcohol and its global action plan. Each brief is the result of a global, multistakeholder conversation convened by the Less Alcohol Unit, part of the WHO Department of Health Promotion. The topics of the series emerged in response to blind spots in the current policy conversations. The approach and length of the Snapshots do not fully describe the complexities of each topic nor do the illustrative country experiences. The series is a conversation-starter rather than normative guidance. Relevant WHO resources are provided to explore the subject in more depth.

The series is intended for a wide audience, including professionals working in public health and local and national alcohol policy focal points, policy-makers, government officials, researchers, civil society groups, consumer associations, the mass media and people new to alcohol research or practice.

What is a health promotion approach to reducing alcohol consumption?

Drinking has multidimensional connotations. Robust and growing evidence demonstrates that cultural, social and religious norms influence alcohol consumption – acceptability, ease of purchase (availability) and price (affordability). Addressing this multidimensional causality chain requires a portfolio of health promotion interventions to moderate the determinants driving alcohol consumption and, in turn, enable populations to increase control over and improve their health to realise their full potential.

Determinants driving the consumption of alcohol

	Acceptability	Availability	Affordability
			
Public health objectives	Protect consumers	Promote healthier settings	Build resilient societies
	Raising awareness, e.g. labelling	Mediating licensing, e.g. outlet density and location, online sales	Increasing prices, excise taxes and moderating other fiscal measures, reducing and ending financial incentives and subsidies
Health promotion interventions	Banning or comprehensively restricting alcohol marketing, advertising, sponsorships and promotion	Promoting healthy settings and pro-health environment, e.g. schools, stadiums	Tackling unrecorded alcohol
	Addressing commercial determinants and conflict of interests		



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