

The Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance (SAAPA) applauds the WHO for its global leadership in prioritising the promotion of public health. In particular, SAAPA welcomes the WHO's recent ground-breaking announcement that, in the process of developing its policies and implementing its programmes, it will not consult with or enter into partnerships with the alcohol industry.

The WHO directive to its staff, and its caution to governments in this regard, highlights the inherent conflict of interest that arises when the alcohol industry is involved in developing policies or implementing programmes that are intended to address the very problems that arise out of the abuse of the products they manufacture and distribute. This announcement is also useful with respect to the 17th Sustainable Development Goal, which promotes public private partnerships, in that it suggests that there are limits to the types of partnerships one should enter into when considering issues of public health.

The public health community locally and internationally has been lobbying for policy makers to recognize the problematic conflict of interest inherent in direct industry involvement in policy development and programmatic implementation. SAAPA recognises that industry should play a positive role in reducing alcohol-related harms through the polluter must pay principle, but the industry should not have any say in the content or direction of the harm reduction, and should not use this for brand promotion or recognition. Increasing tax on alcohol with a percentage ring-fenced for prevention has been shown to be a useful way of getting the industry to contribute to supporting efforts to reduce alcohol harm. Thailand has successfully used a 2% levy on alcohol and tobacco products to generate resources for health promotion and reduce smoking, alcohol consumption and road accidents. Similarly, Botswana has an alcohol levy, currently pegged at 35%, from which the Ministry of Health and Wellness receives 5% to combat harmful alcohol use and reduce its negative consequences.

SAAPA supports the caution to member states on partnerships with the alcohol industry. Alcohol and development are negatively interlinked. The achievement of the SDGs and Agenda 2030 is threatened by not addressing alcohol harm holistically. In the Southern African region, we have seen several industry-government partnership iterations spanning water stewardship, GBV, job creation, education and health. However, we are concerned that these serve the interests of industry more than they do our development needs, particularly as the alcohol industry uses such partnerships as leverage when they seek to oppose more stringent alcohol legislation. Governments need to be encouraged to seek alternative resource support for their development programmes.

SAAPA requests that WHO develops a technical brief in line with the WHO SAFER initiative outlining how alcohol undermines development and the urgent need to:

- i. Limit alcohol marketing,

- ii. Relook at pricing regimes and taxation,
- iii. Reduce availability in residential areas; and
- iv. Increase resources allocated to road safety.

Governments need assistance in balancing the economic benefit argument against the economic cost of alcohol-related harm. Studies in South Africa have highlighted the fact that the cost to the South African economy of +R245b is almost 3 times that of the economic benefit of +R97b. All countries should be encouraged and supported to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of alcohol sales to the economy; and develop evidence-based policies and programmes.

Governments in the Southern African region urgently require technical support to develop protocols to manage their relationships with the alcohol industry which is aggressively pursuing governments across departments at local, state, federal and national levels. SAAPA strongly recommends to WHO and advocates for the development of such protocols which will guide not only government relationships with the alcohol industry but also will strengthen member states capacity to curtail future partnerships and exploitation of traditional leaders at local levels owing to their vulnerability and influence from the alcohol industry.

SAAPA wishes to offer its full support to WHO in pursuing this agenda.

Kind regards

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