



European Region

Empowering public health advocates to navigate alcohol policy challenges

summary of Alcohol policy playbook





European Region



Reframing alcohol: a summary of the Alcohol policy playbook

Profit-seeking and public health perspectives
on reducing alcohol use and its harm:
weighing up the public health evidence
for the health of everyone





What this document is about

This summary is the entry point to the Alcohol policy playbook.

It highlights how key public health questions about alcohol are addressed differently depending on whether one adopts a perspective driven by the public good or a perspective driven by profit.

It first compares these perspectives at a glance. It then presents the main opposing arguments about alcohol policies that are of fundamental importance to public policy-makers.



Reframing
alcohol

Reducing alcohol use: a public health priority

It has now been demonstrated that alcohol is harmful to health.

This is why, in 2010, the World Health Organisation (WHO) developed an international strategy to recognize alcohol use as a public health priority.

The strategy is complemented by a reference framework and an action plan. These documents set out the public health policies and measures that countries can implement to reduce alcohol use and its impact on health.

The Alcohol policy playbook: a guide for policy-makers

To help policy-makers make decisions about public health policies and measures based on the highest-quality scientific evidence, the WHO Regional Office for Europe has developed a guide. This guide is called the Alcohol policy playbook.

The Playbook objective

The Playbook's aim is to help policy-makers to identify when alcohol-related issues are presented from a profit-seeking perspective and to ensure that the policies they implement ignore this and are based instead on public health evidence. Ultimately, the Playbook seeks to protect people's health and reduce the negative impact of alcohol on both public health and public finances.



Divergent perspectives on alcohol

Like the general public, policy-makers are exposed to two divergent perspectives on alcohol use which need to be distinguished.



The profit-seeking perspective

This is motivated by increased alcohol sales and financial profitability.

It is represented by major segments of the European alcoholic beverage industry, including major producers, trade associations, public relations organizations and research groups, and it is supported by a strong lobby.



The public health perspective

This is driven by a mission to serve the public interest in relation to alcohol policy, to prevent alcohol-related diseases, injuries and social problems, and to promote the health of the population.

It is represented by a range of nongovernmental organizations, associations of medical and public health professionals, and intergovernmental organizations, including the WHO Regional Office for Europe, government agencies, and research centres involved in public health surveillance and policy research.

The misleading profit-seeking perspective

Both perspectives may seem credible. In fact, the profit-seeking perspective also relies on concepts and notions that make it appear, on the surface, just as valid as the perspective promoted by public health organizations.

By intruding into alcohol narratives, the alcohol industry's profit-seeking perspective influences people's perceptions and attitudes, and subtly shapes decision-making in the public sector.



Disrupting alcohol
narratives



Comparing the two perspectives

At a glance



Profit-seeking perspective

Emphasizes the complexity of establishing causal relationships between alcohol use and harm, as well as the complexity of linking commercial practices and negative impacts on population alcohol use.



Public health evidence

Summarizes years of international research, which is increasingly converging on the toxic, carcinogenic, teratogenic and addictive effects of alcohol consumption, and how alcohol control policies targeting the whole population are the best way to protect people from experiencing alcohol-related harm.

Argues that alcohol use is a problem only for a minority of problem drinkers.



In fact...

Alcohol-related harm can happen even with low or moderate alcohol use. As a result, the risks of harm are widespread among people who drink alcohol, and their drinking can also affect people who don't drink.

Emphasizes the benefits of moderate alcohol use, particularly in terms of social benefits, well-being and cardiovascular health.



In fact...

No safe level of alcohol consumption can be established for cancer risk. Nor are there any proven positive effects on overall health.



Presents alcohol as one of many risk factors that can cause cancer, a disease in which alcohol may play a role, but not necessarily a direct one.



In fact...

Alcohol use increases the risk of breast, liver and colon cancer, as well as other major cancers and health problems. The fact that alcohol can cause cancer has been established since the late 1980s.

Claims that the sale of alcohol has a positive economic impact which, overall, generates revenue for national governments.



In fact...

The revenue governments generate from alcohol taxes does not come close to offsetting the losses caused by alcohol use. These include direct costs due to additional health care, lost productivity and expanded justice systems, which governments must bear.

Focuses on the alcohol industry's sense of responsibility, presenting self-regulation and voluntary partnerships with governments as an effective solution to reduce alcohol-related harm.



In fact...

Self-regulation and partnerships with government increase alcohol use, harm, and risk to youth and vulnerable groups.

Advocates targeted measures for problem drinkers as a better alternative to population-based measures that restrict the public's freedom to use alcohol.



In fact...

Alcohol use has significant societal consequences, making it essential for effective public policies to create environments that promote healthy options. Such policies benefit the entire population.



The profit-seeking perspective on alcohol:

a component of the commercial determinants of health

The influence of the profit-seeking perspective is a component of what are known as the commercial determinants of health, which can lead to the development of public policies contrary to the health interests of the population.

Commercial determinants of health: a definition

Commercial determinants of health refer to various private sector activities such as product design, packaging, research funding and lobbying that influence people's health, directly or indirectly, and most often negatively.

This is why learning to distinguish the profit-seeking perspective from the public health evidence is crucial.

Measures and policies

to reduce alcohol- related harm

Being able to identify the profit-seeking perspective helps to reframe decision-making in relation to alcohol control and to ensure that it is on the basis of public health evidence that public health policies are developed and implemented.



Freedom
from influence



Minimum pricing and taxation policies



- **Can raising the price of alcohol help reduce harm?**

Profit-seeking perspective

Heavy drinkers suffer the most harm and are not influenced by pricing and taxation policies. These measures unfairly impact responsible drinkers and alcohol businesses.

Public health evidence

There is robust evidence from around the world that minimum pricing and taxation policies, when implemented together, reduce alcohol use and related harm by reducing affordability.

Minimum pricing policies set a baseline price for alcohol and specifically target low-cost, high alcohol content products that are often favoured by heavy drinkers.

Volumetric taxation also targets high alcohol content products which are associated with more harm. Moreover, it ensures that drinkers who use alcohol the most contribute more in taxes than lighter drinkers.

These policies then benefit everyone, especially heavy drinkers, and prove to be the most cost-effective and impactful measures.



Alcohol availability policies



- **Can restrictions on the hours of alcohol sale and alcohol outlet density reduce alcohol harm?**

Profit-seeking perspective

Alcohol harm cannot be attributed solely to the hours when alcohol is sold or the number of licenses to sell or distribute alcohol.

It is not the availability of alcohol itself that influences its use and associated harm, but rather a complex interplay between social, economic, demographic and cultural factors that define the context where alcohol is available.

Public health evidence

Availability contributes to the social perception that alcohol is like other commodities and that alcohol use is normal. Greater availability of alcohol may also encourage drinking because it makes it more convenient and easier to access, including for people who are already intoxicated.

Limiting the hours and days of alcohol sales and controlling alcohol outlet density have been shown to reduce violence, hospitalizations and drink-driving accidents. Areas with fewer alcohol outlets experience lower rates of violence and health issues.



Alcohol marketing policies



- **Are alcohol marketing policies necessary to prevent alcohol harm, particularly among young people?**

Profit-seeking perspective

Alcohol marketing influences brand choice, not consumption behaviour. It targets only adults and does not contribute to youth alcohol use or harm. There is no strong evidence linking alcohol advertising to drinking alcohol, particularly among young people. To protect vulnerable groups, including minors, from exposure to alcohol marketing, self-regulation is an effective, flexible, and cost-efficient solution.

Public health evidence

Research consistently demonstrates that children and young people are particularly vulnerable to alcohol marketing, with a significant link between exposure to alcohol advertising, early initiation and excessive drinking.

At the same time, there is compelling evidence that alcohol marketing deliberately targets young people, employing strategies like sponsorship of sporting and cultural events and pervasive digital marketing.

In order to effectively prevent alcohol-related harm, especially among young people, statutory regulation is needed as a robust solution to limit young people's exposure to alcohol marketing, especially in the digital space.



Alcohol labelling policies



- **Are health warning labels on alcohol containers effective in preventing alcohol-related harm?**

Profit-seeking perspective

Mandatory health warning labels on alcoholic beverages are ineffective and have no potential to influence behaviour. Besides, the public is already aware of the risks associated with alcohol use.

Voluntary initiatives, such as self-regulation of alcohol container labelling, and alternative measures, such as information campaigns and partnerships, are more effective in informing the public and preventing harm.

Public health evidence

Research shows that health warnings effectively raise awareness of alcohol-related harm, particularly cancer, which is the least-known harm associated with alcohol. These warnings also influence intentions to drink less and build support for other alcohol policies.

In fact, mandatory health warnings directly on products are the most effective way to provide information since they are visible and repeated, and reach consumers promptly at the point of purchase and consumption.

In contrast, the alcohol industry's voluntary labelling practices are inconsistent and generally inadequate. They often fail to provide clear and sufficient information about alcohol's contents and health risks.

Over the long term, well-designed health warning labels can help to reduce alcohol-related harm – but only if the design of the labels follows best practice.



Drinking and driving interventions



- **What are effective strategies to prevent drink–driving?**

Profit-seeking perspective

Effective strategies to prevent drink–driving include targeting “hardcore drink–drivers,” who are people with previous convictions or who are found driving with high blood alcohol concentration levels. They are a minority of people responsible for a significant portion of the harm.

Designated driver programs and safe ride initiatives can reduce drink–driving accidents, which tend to occur during festive and social occasions. These measures lead to a reduction in road traffic fatalities, making them key components in preventing drink–driving.

Public health evidence

Occasional drinkers are responsible for most harm associated with drink–driving. Thus, the most effective strategies involve a combination of targeted interventions for hardcore drink–drivers, and broad population-wide measures.

Interventions such as administrative licence suspensions and alcohol ignition interlocks are known to reduce recidivism. However, it is also essential to implement broader deterrence interventions such as setting low blood alcohol concentration limits, frequent and visible testing, and well-publicized enforcement.

It is well documented that it is not designated driver campaigns, but comprehensive policies to reduce overall alcohol consumption that are effective in preventing alcohol-related traffic accidents and fatalities.



No- and low-alcohol products availability



- **Can no- and low-alcohol products reduce alcohol-related harm?**

Profit-seeking perspective

The industry presents no- and low-alcohol (NoLo) products as a response to the growing public interest in health, well-being, sobriety and moderation. By offering these products, the industry sees itself as committed to reducing alcohol-related harm.

NoLo options can help consumers achieve higher levels of health and well-being, offering practical solutions for those who prioritize health and safety in their drinking habits.

Public health evidence

The role of NoLo products in drinking habits and the regulation of these products are still being questioned and need to be clarified. More research is needed, particularly on the effectiveness of NoLo products in reducing alcohol use and its harmful effects.

Ultimately, the potential benefits of NoLo products must be carefully weighed against their potential risks, and potential in reinforcing cultures that normalize drinking alcohol.





Reframing
alcohol

You are in a key position to implement policies that promote the health of your populations.

Access the Alcohol policy playbook to distinguish between the profit-driven perspective and the public health perspective to gain greater insight into how to effectively reduce alcohol consumption and harm.

<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/379378>



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