

# The Problem with Alcohol Industry Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Fact Sheet

From a public health perspective, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have been used by the alcohol industry as a marketing strategy. As with any marketing strategy, CSR are being used as a tool to shape preferences – framing alcohol-related issues through corporate interests, increasing their legitimacy, and boosting their image as ‘responsible’ companies.(1–3) In most low- and middle-income countries where transnational alcohol companies have expanded their operations, the alcohol industry's corporate social responsibility (CSR) has included disaster relief, drink-driving prevention programmes, sustainability and environmental initiatives, health-related initiatives, sponsorship of sports, arts, and cultural events, and alcohol education provision.(4) However, there is no evidence that these initiatives achieve their supposed aims, not even in CSR initiatives aimed at reducing alcohol harms.(1)

**This fact sheet is part of a wider campaign by FORUT, which includes a research project commissioned to study alcohol industry activity across sub-Saharan Africa. It includes documenting examples of marketing and corporate social responsibility activities in sub-Saharan Africa. The research project focused on the activities of three transnational alcohol companies in which the Norwegian Government Pension Fund invests: AB InBev, Diageo and Heineken (See Fact Sheet 1). All examples cited here are documented in Part 1 of the report, “Pursuing profit at the expense of public health? Case studies of alcohol industry activity in sub-Saharan Africa.”**

#### **Recommended citation:**

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#### **What FORUT calls for**

From a public health perspective, governments and civil society organisations should be aware of the unethical marketing agenda of the alcohol industry's CSR programmes and avoid engaging with alcohol industry CSR initiatives. As shown below, the alcohol industry's CSR serves to frame alcohol-related and development issues in ways that benefit the industry (1).

Governments should focus on formulating and implementing evidence-based alcohol control measures based on the WHO SAFER Initiative, which includes comprehensive restrictions on alcohol marketing, whether in advertising, promotion, sponsorship, CSR or public-private partnerships. CSR initiatives should be seen as a tool by the alcohol industry to present a good public image while masking their conflict of interest (2).

Civil society organisations should continue to monitor the alcohol industry’s political strategies and highlight the misleading nature of alcohol industry practices in public awareness campaigns (2,3).

Governments and civil society organisations should advocate for international legally binding regulations that reduce the marketing potential of alcohol industry CSR.

**Fact Box: The WHO SAFER Initiative refers to the most cost-effective alcohol policy measures to reduce alcohol-related harm.**

- **Strengthen restrictions on alcohol availability**
- **Advance and enforce drink-driving countermeasures**
- **Facilitate access to screening, brief interventions and treatment**
- **Enforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotion**
- **Raise prices on alcohol through excise taxes and pricing policies**

## Alcohol industry CSR becomes a branding exercise

Alcohol industry CSR often comes with their products’ branding, often in the form of the company logo or one of their brand’s logos. When Uganda Breweries Limited, primarily owned by East African Breweries Limited, a **Diageo** subsidiary, sponsored the Gulu Elephant Monument erected in Gulu City in 2022, the brewery linked the cultural significance of the elephant to the Acholi people with the logo of Tusker, a brand produced by the brewery.

In **Ghana**, a research article published in the journal *Technium* (a social sciences journal) pointed to the branding potential of CSR, and stated that community-focused CSR initiatives, including programmes on education and health “go a long way to build a solid brand identity and equity in the case of Accra Brewery Limited (5).” The article was co-authored by employees of Accra Brewery, an **AB InBev** subsidiary, and Ghana Water Company Limited. (5)

## Alcohol industry CSR becomes product promotion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities for the alcohol industry to promote their products under the guise of ‘smart drinking’ initiatives as part of their alcohol

education programmes. ‘Smart drinking’ initiatives are similar to ‘responsible drinking’ campaigns, which focus on the individual’s responsible behaviour towards alcohol without considering alcohol marketing, availability, and affordability. There is limited evidence that these programmes effectively reduce alcohol consumption.(1) In 2021, **Uganda’s** Nile Breweries Limited (an **AB InBev** subsidiary) introduced food and water vouchers as prizes for those who purchased beer from a food delivery service as part of their ‘global smart drinking week.’

In the same year, **Zimbabwe’s** Delta Corporation Limited (partly owned by **AB InBev**) started marketing for its 2023 ‘Castle Lager National Braai Day’ (a social barbeque event) with COVID-19 guidance and a promotion prize when consumers bought three castle lagers.

### Alcohol industry CSR for sports is a marketing tool

The most prominent branding opportunity for alcohol industry CSR is through sports sponsorship, and alcohol companies have been using sports to promote their brands – especially to young people. This is problematic as research evidence has shown that there is an association between exposure to alcohol sports sponsorship and increased alcohol consumption among young people.(6)

In the sub-Saharan African countries of Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Burundi, alcohol industry sponsorship of football leagues is common. In **Zimbabwe**, alcohol companies have also sponsored a national pool tournament, a fishing tournament and a rugby team. For example, when Carling Black Label sponsored the national pool tournament, participants were required to purchase Carling Black Label beer to qualify.

### Alcohol industry CSR becomes healthwashing

Health-related donations by the alcohol industry have been previously documented, and often become opportunities for marketing their products and improving their public image. (7) Healthwashing happens when the alcohol industry's CSR becomes a tool to influence public perception and policy that benefits the industry. This often involves portraying a misleading impression of the alcohol industry’s commitment to public health while also blocking evidence-based public health policies.(1,8) Healthwashing can include, but is not limited to, alcohol education programmes, health-related donations, and road safety programmes.

Alcohol education programmes often target young people. For example, in **Uganda**, Nile Breweries Limited sponsored an ‘Inter-University Smart Drinking Challenge’ in 2021, targeting university students who were encouraged to compete in the challenge and submit ideas on promoting smart drinking for cash prizes. Similarly, in **Sierra Leone** in 2022, Sierra Leone Brewery Limited, a subsidiary of **Heineken**, co-launched a campaign called ‘Below 18? Zero Tolerance Against Alcohol.’ The campaign, which included a

workshop and training on underage drinking prevention, reportedly reached 200 schoolchildren from 20 schools in Freetown.

Alcohol education programmes also target health professionals. In 2014, Accra Brewery, a subsidiary of **AB InBev**, was reported to have partnered with the German Development Agency (GIZ) to hold a ‘health enlightenment clinic’ at a hospital in Accra, **Ghana**. The partnership aimed to engage doctors and health professionals to educate pregnant women about the effects of alcohol on unborn children as part of the Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) awareness day. The activity was also promoted as part of Accra Brewery’s ‘commitment to sustainable development.’

In 2020, Sierra Leone Brewery Limited and Heineken Africa Foundation supported the building of a new hospital in Wellington, Freetown, **Sierra Leone**. This prompted a local parliamentary representative to call on the government to make a favourable tax concession to the brewery as a ‘partner in nation building’ at the opening ceremony.

Alcohol industry-led drink driving prevention programmes are problematic. Research has found that such programmes are often mass media campaigns that advocate for ‘responsible drinking’, which are considered to be ineffective in reducing drink-driving incidents. (9) Research has also found such programmes to be inconsistent with evidence-based public health recommendations (e.g., random breath testing and sobriety checkpoints).(10) Such programmes are often implemented through public-private partnerships, which are touted as collaborations between government agencies and the alcohol industry. For example, Nile Breweries Limited, along with the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Uganda National Roads Authority, the Emergency Medical Services Department of the Department of Health, the Uganda Police and a national health association, launched the ‘Ondaba’ road safety campaign in 2022 in **Uganda**. The brewery reportedly made several donations to these government agencies, including two shelter tents to the Uganda Traffic Police, donations to a health centre in Mpigi, and a prosthetic leg to a road accident victim in Njeru.

## Alcohol industry CSR provides unnecessary interaction with government officials

Some CSR activities increase the alcohol industry’s interaction with government officials and community leaders who are invited to attend and promote these CSR-related events. For example, two parliamentary representatives, a community tribal head, a pastor and a youth leader were reported to be present when Sierra Leone Brewery Limited reportedly donated 100 bags of 25 kg white rice and 1,000 crates of Maltina (a non-alcoholic beverage made by the brewery) to a community in Freetown, **Sierra Leone**, following the November 2021 fuel tank disaster.

Similarly, the launch events of a water sanitation project and a water supply project by Sierra Leone Brewery and the Heineken Africa Foundation in 2022 were attended by members of parliament in Sierra Leone.

In 2022, a women’s employee group at Uganda Breweries Limited donated a universal anaesthesia machine to a health centre, with the handover event reportedly taking place at the office of the Ministry of Health in **Uganda**. At the event, the Ministry of Health representative celebrated businesses like Uganda Breweries Limited as a ‘business with a purpose.’

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