

Public health and Big Alcohol

The Comment by Robert Marten and colleagues (March, 2020)¹ explores how the regulation of alcohol use is being sorely neglected worldwide. The authors provide a number of concerning examples of the extent to which the alcohol industry (particularly the largest companies, known as Big Alcohol) is being embraced by policy makers as playing a vital role in curbing alcohol-related problems, although, in reality, the alcohol industry is interfering with and shaping alcohol control measures and the production of science.

The expansion of the alcohol industry's corporate social responsibility strategies is central to this debate. A prime example comes from Anheuser-Busch InBev's global campaign that takes on the issue of drinking and driving.² This campaign involves a partnership with the UN Institute for Training and Research and Together for Safer Roads, comprising a global coalition pertaining to road safety issues. The motivation behind this campaign is rooted in Anheuser-Busch InBev's projects in several developing countries, such as Brazil, China, India, and Mexico.² Its proposed response to road safety concerns includes the development of a data system to register incidents, road infrastructure improvements, road safety education, and traffic supervision.

What is absent from these proposals is one of the most relevant interventions to substantially decrease road-related deaths and other kinds of alcohol-related harm: reducing per capita alcohol consumption. There are decades of public health data to support the relationship between decreased alcohol use and increased public health safety. For example, one study in Sweden found that a 1 L increase in per capita alcohol consumption was associated with a 17% increment in driving while intoxicated.³

Despite the evidence, it would be challenging for Big Alcohol to adopt a policy to encourage less alcohol use. Anheuser-Busch InBev's 2019 report for investors described how the company bases its product expansion model on an evaluation of the degree of alcohol market maturity and on each country's alcohol consumption. Most Latin American countries, for example, are likely to contribute to the growth of the company, because they have median market maturity and low per-capita alcohol consumption. Brazil alone represents more than 36% of Latin American alcohol sales in volume,⁴ and is the country with the most corporate social responsibility activity in the region.⁵

The main message of the corporate social responsibility initiatives is that both the regulators and society need the alcohol industry to come forward and take on a pivotal role in addressing alcohol-related harm. However, as much as bringing people together for a better world sounds good, the financial motivations of Big Alcohol do not align with evidence-based public health initiatives to reduce alcohol harm. On the contrary, Big Alcohol's involvement in public health is indisputably one of the most serious conflicts of interest in the field of global health.

We declare no competing interests.

Copyright © 2020 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an Open Access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license.

Ilana Pinsky, Daniela Pantani,

**Zila M Sanchez*

zila.sanchez@unifesp.br

School of Public Health, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA (IP); and Department of Preventive Medicine, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, 01246-903 Sao Paulo, Brazil (DP, ZMS)

- 1 Marten R, Amul GGH, Casswell S. Alcohol: global health's blind spot. *Lancet Glob Health* 2020; **8**: e329–30.
- 2 Anheuser-Busch InBev. Road safety: creating safer roads. <https://www.ab-inbev.com/what-we-do/road-safety.html> (accessed March 11, 2020).
- 3 Norström T, Ramstedt M. The link between per capita alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in Sweden, 1987–2015. *J Stud Alcohol Drugs* 2018; **79**: 578–84.

4 Euromonitor International. Alcoholic drinks. <https://www.euromonitor.com/alcoholic-drinks> (accessed March 11, 2020).

5 Babor TF, Robaina K, Brown K, et al. Is the alcohol industry doing well by 'doing good'? Findings from a content analysis of the alcohol industry's actions to reduce harmful drinking. *BMJ Open* 2018; **8**: e024325.



For the **UN Institute for Training and Research** see <https://unitar.org/>

For **Together for Safer Roads** see <https://www.togetherforsaferroads.org/>