

Klara Södra Kyrkogata 20
111 52 Stockholm, Sweden

T: +46 721 555 036
info@movendi.ngo
www.movendi.ngo

OFFICIAL STATEMENT

RC70 AGENDA ITEM:

SPECIAL EVENT:

THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE AFRICAN REGION

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Movendi International and our 57 Member Organizations from 22 African countries are working diligently to help contain the spread of the coronavirus and to help mobilize communities in all efforts against the global pandemic. Together, we raise awareness, empower people and communities to protect themselves, deliver food and other essentials to the most marginalized, provide help for children and youth, and partner with policy-makers to tackle the role of alcohol in the current public health crisis. In our work on the frontlines, we have gained concrete insights into the impact of the pandemic as well as the policy responses by our governments.

It is clear that alcohol is a serious risk factor for the spread of the coronavirus, for infection and disease progression of COVID-19 and for the health system's capacity to respond to COVID-19.

- Alcohol use is linked with a range of infectious, noncommunicable and mental health disorders that can make a person more vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Alcohol weakens the immune system, thereby increasing the risk of coronavirus infection as well as adverse health outcomes.
- Alcohol consumption norms, habits and rituals also fuel the spread of COVID-19, as evidence in recent months and weeks across African countries.

Apart from risks to individuals, there are more harms linked to alcohol and the coronavirus, including the public health, economic and social burden.

- Especially in our region, alcohol users are likely to divert scarce resources from healthier and more sustainable spending, thus compounding vulnerability and health risks;
- People might turn to alcohol to cope with stress, anxiety, boredom, thereby increasing mental health problems, incidences of violence and other health risks;

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- Alcohol use at home may fuel an escalation of family and domestic violence, injuries due to falls and burns, self-inflicted injuries (including suicide attempts), and child abuse.
- Children and youth are likely to be at greater risk of alcohol harm, both due to other's alcohol use (domestic violence, abuse, neglect, economic vulnerability, health risks) as well as due to increased access to alcohol at home; this could lead to earlier initiation to alcohol and/ or increased consumption, putting them at higher risk of alcohol-related and other health problems.
- A probable increase in alcohol consumption during lockdowns may cause alcohol-related harms such as poisonings, cardiovascular emergencies, violence and other problems thereby imposing an additional burden on health systems that are already strained by the need to treat COVID-19 patients.

This reality has brought into sharp focus the importance of alcohol prevention in the context of health emergency preparedness, health system capacity and community resilience to withstand shocks and crises.

Therefore, we call on the WHO Regional Office and our governments to finally make alcohol prevention and control the priority it clearly should be. Our region already carries the proportionately heaviest alcohol burden in the world. We encourage WHO in the African Region to issue similar guidance on alcohol and COVID-19 as the WHO European, Pan-American and Eastern Mediterranean regions have done.

In addition, people with alcohol use disorders – who are many in our countries – have a right to receive the support and care services they need during the pandemic and beyond. While a vast majority of Africans abstains from alcohol, those who consume alcohol often do so in high-risk patterns and amounts.

Therefore, the WHO SAFER technical package consisting of five comprehensive, evidence-based and cost-effective alcohol policy solutions should become a key element of the response to the COVID-19.

We remain ready to increase our support for and partnership with governments and WHO country offices across the region to tackle alcohol harm as key response to the current public health crisis.

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