

## EDITOR'S CORNER

### Out of Africa: Three Threads Tying the Alcohol Industry to an Emerging Alcohol Epidemic

SOMETIMES the perceptive reader can find interesting threads of information buried in the back pages of a regular issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. So it is that our March 2018 issue contains three threads that highlight an emerging issue not readily apparent in a cursory review of the table of contents.

The first thread is a brief report by Amanuel et al. (2018), which shows that, among women of childbearing age in both urban and rural settings in South Africa, easy access to alcohol and exposure to alcohol advertisements were associated with adverse health and social outcomes, including complications during pregnancy—this in a country with the highest rates of fetal alcohol effects in the world. As the authors mention, “despite the World Health Organization’s (WHO) policy recommendations for alcohol reduction strategies . . . the Department of Health and other government ministries face pressure from the alcohol industry to weaken or stall regulatory policies, often at the expense of the social, economic, and physical wellbeing of families in urban and rural South Africa” (Amanuel et al., p. 302). Despite the acknowledged limitations of this particular study (e.g., cross-sectional design), it is important not only because of its public health implications but also because it illustrates both what is right and what is wrong with current alcohol studies. What is right is that epidemiological methods are now very capable of identifying risk factors for, as well as potential inducers of, alcohol-related problems in the far corners of the world where a variety of natural experiments are occurring, such as a massive infusion of alcohol marketing targeted at women. What is not right about current alcohol studies is its inability, if not unwillingness, to consider the alcohol industry as an inducer of alcohol-related problems.

The second thread comes in the form of a letter to the editor from colleagues (Odeigah et al., 2018) working in Africa’s most populous country, Nigeria, where alcohol stands out as the country’s most important risk factor for burden of disease and road traffic injuries. The authors note that despite these consequences, Nigeria has yet to implement an alcohol control policy containing the kinds of strategies—such as the enforcement of alcohol-purchase age restrictions, retail licensing, product labeling, and marketing controls—that

have been recommended by the WHO since 2010 (WHO, 2010).

In the third thread, a letter to the editor from Ajiji and Constant (2018) notes that most of the international health agencies (with the exception of the WHO), in their understandable preoccupation with infectious diseases, poverty, and injuries, have ignored the growing threat of excessive drinking as a risk factor for a variety of health and social problems. They argue that most local governments tend to consider the alcohol industry only as a driver of economic development, ignoring the active role played by some industry segments, especially the large, transnational producers, in the promotion of alcohol consumption to such an extent that it is creating the potential for an epidemic of alcohol problems. They suggest three solutions: include alcohol control issues in international development projects, improve the use of public health surveillance of risk factors and alcohol problems, and expand the use of primary care services focusing on alcohol, especially e-health.

#### *Trail of evidence*

All three communications implicate the alcohol industry directly or indirectly in the emerging wave of alcohol-related death and destruction, and none of them suggests that the industry can be trusted to play a role in the solution. Their concerns with the alcohol industry are not unfounded, as indicated by the reports received from investigative journalists, nongovernmental organizations, and concerned academics.

For example, in a recent book, published first in Dutch and soon to be available in English, van Beemen (in press) describes the results of 3 years of research and hundreds of interviews throughout Africa, concluding that Heineken’s operations have not only failed to benefit the continent, but they also seem to have contributed considerable harm by stifling indigenous competition, collaborating with authoritarian governments, avoiding taxes, and being implicated in high-level corruption.

A recent statement (Sperkova et al., 2018) from a coalition of nongovernmental organizations (IOGT International, Global Alcohol Policy Alliance, and NCD Alliance) identi-

fied alcohol as a major obstacle to sustainable development and asked the United Nations Global Fund, which supports sustainable development activities around the world, to reconsider their partnership with Heineken because of the inherent conflicts of interest. The authors state that transnational corporations producing and marketing alcohol rely on the harmful use of alcohol for their sales and profits, and this “leads companies such as Heineken to undermine and subvert evidence-based alcohol policy implementation at the same time as they expand distribution networks and marketing to grow their market in low- and middle-income countries.”

Part of the strategy seems to be based on the emerging concept of “stakeholder marketing,” a new tactic that combines social marketing with brand advertising under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility activities. For example, at the same time Stella Artois launched the third year of its “Buy a Lady a Drink” campaign, the company signed up celebrity Matt Damon to appear in television and cinema advertisements to promote its partnership with water.org, the charity co-founded by Damon (Anheuser-Busch Companies, 2017). The brand, owned by Anheuser-Busch InBev, is providing 6 months of clean water to someone in the developing world for every six-pack of Stella sold, and 1 month for every bottle or pint sold in certain restaurants and bars. It is introducing limited edition packs to highlight the program.

#### *Pull the thread*

There is an expression that says “pull the thread, and watch the sweater unravel.” Pulling these threads, one by one, is an opportunity to unravel the new strategy of the alcohol industry to make Africa an enormous global profit center at the expense of public health and sustainable development. There is now growing evidence (Babor et al., 2015; Ferreira-Borges et al., 2015, 2016; Matzopoulos et al., 2012) that the alcohol industry is part of the causal chain linking upstream influence on government controls with downstream modifications of the commercial environment in which alcoholic norms, attitudes, and distribution networks are leading to increased binge drinking and inadequate alcohol controls. During the 19th century, the leading colonial powers agreed among themselves to restrict the exportation of alcohol to Africa, based on the selfish notion that it would harm their other colonial interests. It is time again for national governments, this time the emerging economies of Africa, along with international agencies (including trade), nongovernmental organizations, and academia to declare a moratorium on further marketing of alcohol in the continent. It is time to get the global alcohol producers out of Africa, at least until a framework of alcohol control policies recommended by the

WHO (2010) have been put in place from the Atlantic coast to the Indian Ocean, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Cape of Good Hope.

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