Global Fund collusion with liquor giant is a clear conflict of interest
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Abstract Alcohol is the third leading contributor to death and disability in South Africa, where SABMiller is the major supplier of malt beer, the most popular beverage consumed. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) has recently included SABMiller as a recipient of funding for an education intervention aimed at minimizing alcohol-related harm, including HIV prevention, among men in drinking establishments. Global Fund support for this initiative is cause for concern. It is debatable whether these men are the best target group for the intervention, whether a drinking establishment is the best location, and whether the educational intervention itself is effective. Our experience is that the liquor industry is inclined to support alcohol interventions that will not affect drinking rates at a population level. These interventions allow the industry to simultaneously fulfill social and legal obligations to address the harmful use of alcohol while ensuring that sales and profits are maintained. Providing funding for a highly profitable industry that could afford to fund its own interventions also reduces the funds available for less well-resourced organizations. Do we take it that the problem of “corporate capture” has now spread to one of the largest health funders in the world?

SABMiller is a major alcohol supplier to approximately 34,000 licensed outlets in South Africa and through them an estimated 200,000 illegal outlets (called “shebeens”) that act as a de facto distribution arm. It has established an educational intervention that aims to minimize alcohol-related harm in men, and reduce male violence against women and children as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) has included SABMiller as a sub-recipient of its Round 9 funding in support of the brewery’s Tavern Intervention Programme for Men. Global Fund support for this initiative is cause for concern because it reflects the successful attempt of a highly profitable industry to position itself as committed to public health objectives. In reality, the liquor industry’s aggressive marketing of its products is irrevocably linked with major health harms throughout the world, in South Africa in particular. As the impetus by government and nongovernmental organizations to address alcohol-related harm in South Africa has increased, we have seen an upsurge in efforts by the liquor industry to partner with government and public health agencies. Such partnerships lend legitimacy and provide a platform for the liquor industry to lobby against proposals to reduce the availability of alcohol, increase the price of alcohol through raising excise taxes and place restrictions on the marketing of alcohol, despite the global evidence that these measures are the most cost-effective way to decrease alcohol-related harm.

Alcohol is the third leading contributor to the disease burden in South Africa, mainly through injury, particularly from interpersonal violence; infectious diseases, particularly tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS; and neuropsychiatric disorders. At face value, a programme that aims to reduce HIV infection as well as violence against women and children is welcome, but it is debatable whether men who attend shebeens are the best target group for the intervention, whether a drinking establishment is the best location, and whether the educational intervention itself is effective. There are two interventions addressing HIV and intimate partner violence that have been proven effective in South African settings and which would have been more fitting recipients of donor funding. Neither targets men specifically nor uses the shebeen as a classroom.

Calls for accountability and good governance relating to the Global Fund and similar agencies have been increasing recently. While it is commendable that the Global Fund has a zero-tolerance policy on corruption and misappropriation, we would argue that it should also not fund organizations with conflicted interests. In the case of the liquor industry, that conflict arises in that the industry can appear to be dealing with the social responsibility requirement of addressing the harms associated with its products – in itself a form of advertising – with an intervention that does not reduce availability of alcohol or consumption of its products.

We believe this should place organizations that manufacture or sell alcoholic beverages off limits. The liquor industry is already highly profitable and aggressively markets products in developing countries that can least afford the high burden of disease and demand for health services that result from the use of these products. Despite submission of a request for the Global Fund to reconsider the award to SABMiller, no
response has been received to date. Do we take it that the problem of “corporate capture”, so clearly described in the field of nutritional research,10 has now spread to one of the largest health funders in the world?

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Résumé
La collusion entre le Fonds mondial et le géant des boissons alcoolisées constitue un conflit d’intérêt manifeste

L’alcool est la troisième cause de décès et d’invalidité en Afrique du Sud, pays dans lequel SABMiller est le principal fournisseur de bière de malt, la boisson la plus consommée dans le pays. Le Fonds mondial de lutte contre le SIDA, la tuberculose et le paludisme (Fonds mondial) a récemment ajouté la société SABMiller à la liste des bénéficiaires du financement d’une intervention pédagogique visant à réduire les dommages liés à l’alcool, notamment la prévention du VIH, chez les hommes fréquentant les bars. Le soutien de cette initiative par le Fonds mondial est préoccupant. On est en droit de se demander si ces hommes sont le meilleur groupe cible pour l’intervention, si un bar est le meilleur endroit et si l’intervention pédagogique qu’elle-même est efficace. L’expérience dont nous disposons montre que l’industrie des boissons alcoolisées est disposée à soutenir des interventions liées à l’alcool tant qu’elles sont sans incidence sur les taux de consommation d’alcool au niveau de la population. Ces interventions permettent à cette industrie de remplir ses obligations sociales et légales en matière de consommation nocive d’alcool, tout en s’assurant que ses ventes et ses bénéfices n’en sont pas affectés. Offrir un financement à une industrie hautement rentable et capable de financer ses propres interventions réduit en outre les fonds disponibles aux organisations moins bien nanties. Devons-nous nous en déduire que le problème de la « capture d’entreprise » s’étend désormais à l’un des plus dix-filles de fonds mondiaux dans le domaine de la santé?

A preliminary round table discussion on HIV prevention and the liquor industry

HIV prevention and the liquor industry

Richard Matzopoulos et al.

Global Fund with brewing giant SABMiller is a major conflict of interest

Alcohol is the third cause of death and disability in Africa. In South Africa, the main supplier of malt is SABMiller, which is the largest seller of beer in the country. The Global Fund recently added SABMiller to its list of beneficiaries of education interventions to reduce the harm associated with alcohol, particularly HIV prevention among men visiting bars. The support of this initiative by the Global Fund is concerning. We are left wondering whether these men are the best target group for the intervention, whether bars are the best setting and whether the educational intervention itself is effective. Our experience shows that the alcohol industry is disposed to support interventions related to alcohol so long as they do not impact on alcohol consumption at the national level. These interventions serve to fulfill the industry’s social and legal obligations while ensuring that its sales and profits are not affected. Offering funding to a highly profitable industry that can fund its own interventions reduces the funds available to other organizations less well endowed. Could we conclude from this that the problem of corporate capture now affects one of the largest health funders in the world?
Резюме
Противоречия между Глобальным фондом и гигантом по производству алкогольных напитков
представляют собой очевидный конфликт интересов

Алкоголь является третьей по значимости причиной смертности и инвалидности в Южной Африке, где компания SABMiller является основным поставщиком солодового пива, самого популярного у потребляющих напитков. Глобальный фонд по борьбе со СПИДом, туберкулезом и малярией (далее Глобальный Фонд) недавно включил компанию SABMiller в число получателей средств, предназначенных для проведения в питейных заведениях образовательных мероприятий, направленных на минимизацию вреда от употребления алкоголя, включая профилактику ВИЧ среди мужчин. Принципией для беспокойства является поддержка этой инициативы Глобальным фондом. Существуют сомнения по поводу того, являются ли эти мужчины наилучшей целевой группой для данных образовательных мероприятий, являются ли питейные заведения лучшим местом для проведения таких мероприятий, и является ли собственно образовательное мероприятие эффективным средством в данном случае. Наш опыт показывает,
что индустрия алкогольных напитков склонна к поддержке образовательных мероприятий, имеющих отношение к алкоголю, в тех случаях, когда эти мероприятия не влияют на уровень употребления алкогольных напитков в масштабе всего населения. Эти мероприятия позволяют индустрии выполнять социальные и правовые обязательства, направленные на устранение вреда от употребления алкоголя, и одновременно поддерживать уровень продаж и прибыли на прежнем уровне. Кроме того, предоставление финансирования высокорентабельной отрасли, которая может позволить себе финансирование собственных мероприятий, снижает возможности для направления средств менее обеспеченным организациям. Должны ли мы воспринимать это так, что проблема "тотальная под влияние корпораций" теперь распространяется и на один из самых больших фондов по поддержке здравоохранения в мире?

References
Response from the Global Fund
Victor Bampoe, Amy Clancy, Maya Sugarman, Jon Liden & Mary Ann Lansang

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria appreciates the interest in the relationship between the public and private sector. The Global Fund, as a public–private partnership, encourages the private sector to engage in all aspects of its work, ranging from mobilization of resources, implementation of grants and governance of funds. The Global Fund stresses that partnerships with the private sector are critical to expanding the resources available to effectively fight HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The Global Fund does not endorse the actions, practices or policies of any corporation or industry beyond the field of the fight against these three diseases. Conversely, it does not have any objections to collaborating with corporations (with the exception of tobacco, producers of arms and those involved in pornography) that conduct, finance or otherwise support evidence-based, effective interventions to prevent, treat or provide care for any of the three diseases.

As clarification, the model of the Global Fund is based on the concept of country ownership. Countries determine their own programmatic priorities, implementation strategies and submit requests for funding based on identified funding gaps. One of the central channels of country ownership is the Country Coordinating Mechanism, which is made up of representatives from both the public and private sectors including governments, multilateral or bilateral agencies, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, private businesses and people living with the diseases. In its mandate as the Country Coordinating Mechanism, the Resource Mobilization Committee of South Africa submitted a Round 9 HIV proposal focusing on HIV prevention and care and support activities. This proposal was reviewed by the Global Fund’s Technical Review Panel, an independent panel of international experts on health and development, for soundness of approach, feasibility and potential for sustainability and impact.

A portion of the Round 9 funding is directed towards a cost-sharing programme that is implemented jointly by SABMiller, the South African Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS (SABCOHA) and the Government of South Africa. This programme focuses on the provision of HIV counselling and testing, training and peer education in taverns and shebeens, and psychosocial support for caregivers. The Global Fund regards this cost-sharing programme as an important endeavour to mobilize greater resources for the fight against HIV and recognizes the contribution that SABMiller and SABCOHA can make in reaching at-risk populations with prevention and care and support activities.

The Global Fund’s primary commitment is to those affected by HIV/AIDS and to interventions that reach populations most at risk. The Global Fund of course does not endorse excessive drinking and it understands well the risks associated with alcohol consumption. Researchers estimate that more than 85% of locations where individuals meet new sexual partners in South Africa are shebeens and other alcohol-serving establishments. However, studies have shown that even brief interventions in bars and taverns can result in reduced risky sexual behaviours. The Global Fund considers men attending alcohol-serving establishments to be a key target population, and sees these establishments as viable and dynamic locations for intervention.

The Global Fund supports South Africa’s implementation strategy to collaborate with SABMiller and SABCOHA as an innovative approach to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As is the case with other programmes it supports, the Global Fund will monitor the performance of the grant and expects an evaluation of the programme in line with its system of performance-based funding.

The Global Fund welcomes any discussion about the efficacy of interventions and programmes it supports, including the points made in this paper. However, we do not recognize any “conflict of interest” – as the term is generally used – in the situation regarding the Round 9 HIV grant to South Africa.

Competing interests: None declared.

References
Global Fund needs to address conflict of interest
Anna B Gilmore & Gary Fooks

At the heart of the problems described in this round table discussion is the apparent failure by both the Global Fund and the Government of South Africa to recognize and adequately address the potential conflict between corporate interests and public health goals. In the current example involving SABMiller, the world’s second largest brewer by sales volume, a conflict of interest arises because of well-established links between alcohol use, violence (including sexual violence) and risky sexual behaviour, making alcohol a risk factor in the spread of HIV infection. Reducing alcohol use can therefore be seen as key to reducing HIV infection. Yet this inevitably conflicts with SABMiller’s underlying goal of maximizing profits from alcohol sales.

While we are unable to comment in detail on this specific case, the commentaries would suggest that the initial failure to recognize this conflict of interest lies with the South African Government, which entered into a partnership with SABMiller before the Global Fund funded this public–private partnership. Industries whose products are harmful to health are increasingly attempting to enter into such partnerships as part of their corporate social responsibility strategies. Evidence suggests that these corporate social responsibility strategies are intended to facilitate access to government, co-opt non-governmental organizations to corporate agendas, build trust among the public and political elite and promote untested, voluntary solutions over binding regulation. Furthermore, corporate social responsibility strategies, including corporate philanthropy, have also been used to create divisions among public health professionals. The two previous commentaries highlight this very danger.

The failure to recognize potential conflicts of interest between the alcohol industry and public health policies aimed at reducing the harm from alcohol is unfortunately not unique to South Africa. Most recently, despite prior calls for the recognition of such conflicts, the food and alcohol industries were invited to participate in the United Nations high-level meeting on noncommunicable diseases that one advocate apparently likened to “letting Dracula advise on blood-bank security.” Predictably, given existing evidence on efforts by the alcohol industry to prevent effective public health policies, they pushed for voluntary rather than regulatory approaches. Similarly, the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol requests that Member States adopt evidence-based public health actions.

The Global Fund is being naïve in simply exempting tobacco and arms producers from its remit. The products sold by these corporations may be unique but their conduct is unlikely to be and these two issues should not be confused. Whether a company sells cigarettes or alcohol, its main goal is to maximize shareholder returns. Policies that could reduce such returns are, therefore, antithetical to its interests. Indeed, evidence suggests tobacco and alcohol companies (with some evidence relating specifically to SABMiller) use remarkably similar strategies in their efforts both to market their products and prevent and delay effective public health policies, in some instances working collectively to this end. It is also noteworthy, given the educational component of the funded intervention, that evidence suggests that educational interventions are the least effective means of reducing alcohol-related harm, and that alcohol industry-funded educational programmes are ineffective and potentially counter-productive, like their counterparts funded by the tobacco industry.

While the need for funding will continue to drive corporate philanthropy in global health, until those developing or funding alcohol interventions address these potential conflicts better, problems such as this one under discussion will recur and the harms arising from alcohol misuse will fail to be addressed. Even in the field of tobacco control, which is arguably leading the way in this area, the drive for resources continues to result in conflicts. It is clear that robust rules for managing potential conflicts of interest are required to ensure effective philanthropy in the public interest.

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