

## 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 fulfil 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?

Abstracts in **عربي**, **中文**, **Français**, **Русский** and **Español** at the end of each article.

SABMiller is a major beer 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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> mainly through injury, particularly from interpersonal violence; infectious diseases, particularly tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS; and neuropsychiatric disorders.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4,5</sup> Neither targets men specifically nor uses the *shebeen* as a classroom.

Our experience is that the liquor industry is inclined to support alcohol interventions that have limited impact on drinking at a population level. These interventions allow the industry to be seen to be fulfilling social and legal obligations to address alcohol abuse while simultaneously ensuring that sales and profits are maintained. Eliciting funds earmarked for the global public good not only provides the liquor industry with free advertising and a mechanism to achieve its goals, but also reduces available funding for less well-resourced organizations.

Calls for accountability and good governance relating to the Global Fund and similar agencies have been increasing recently.<sup>6–8</sup> While it is commendable that the Global Fund has a zero-tolerance policy on corruption and misappropriation,<sup>9</sup> 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

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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,<sup>10</sup> has now spread to one of the largest health funders in the world? ■

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Stellenbosch University, South Africa; and Joanne Corrigan with the Western Cape Department of Health, South Africa.

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#### ملخص

أفضل موقع، وما إذا كان التدخل التثقيفي ذاته فعّالاً. ومن واقع خبرتنا فإن صناعة الكحوليات تميل إلى دعم التدخلات الكحولية التي لن تؤثر على معدلات الشرب على مستوى السكان. وتسمح هذه التدخلات للصناعة بالوفاء بالالتزامات الاجتماعية والقانونية بشكل فوري للتعامل مع الاستخدام الضار للكحوليات مع ضمان الحفاظ على معدلات المبيعات والأرباح. كما أن توفير التمويل لصناعة من الصناعات ذات الربحية العالية التي يمكنها تمويل التدخلات الخاصة بها يجد أيضاً من الأموال المتاحة للمؤسسات التي تمتلك موارد جيدة أقل. فهل نفترض الآن أن مشكلة “استئثار الشركات” قد وصلت إلى أكبر ممولي الصحة في العالم؟

تواطؤ الصندوق العالمي مع عملاق المشروبات الكحولية تضارب واضح للمصالح المشروبات الكحولية هي المساهم الرئيسي الثالث في حالات الوفاة والعجز في جنوب أفريقيا، حيث تعد شركة SABMiller المورد الرئيسي لجمعية الشعير، أكثر المشروبات الشعبية من ناحية الاستهلاك. قام الصندوق العالمي لمكافحة الإيدز والسل والملاريا (الصندوق العالمي) مؤخراً بإدراج SABMiller كإحدى الشركات التي تتلقى تمويلاً مخصصاً للتدخل التثقيفي الهادف إلى خفض الأضرار ذات الصلة بالمشروبات الكحولية بما في ذلك الوقاية من فيروس نقص المناعة البشرية (HIV) بين الرجال في مؤسسات الشرب. وما يثير القلق هو دعم الصندوق العالمي لهذه المبادرة. ومن المثير للجدل ما إذا كان هؤلاء الرجال يمثلون أفضل مجموعة مستهدفة للتدخل، وما إذا كانت مؤسسة شرب ما، هي

#### 摘要

#### Global Fund 与酿酒巨头共谋是明显的利益冲突

酒精是南非的死亡和残疾的第三大肇因，SABMiller 是南非麦芽啤酒的主要供应商，而麦芽啤酒则是最受欢迎的消费饮料。抗击艾滋病、结核病和疟疾全球基金 (Global Fund) 最近将 SABMiller 纳入为其教育干预措施的资金受助者，这项教育干预措施旨在最大程度减少酒精相关危害，包括针对饮酒场所男性的艾滋病毒预防。Global Fund 对此举措的支持引起人们的关注。争议点在于：这些人是否是最佳的目标干预人群、饮酒场所是否是最佳的目标位

置以及教育干预措施本身是否有效。我们的经验是，酿酒行业倾向于支持不影响大众层面饮酒率的酒精干预措施。这些干预措施让业界既能履行解决酒精有害使用的社会和法律义务，又能确保维持销售收入和利润。向有能力自行出资实施干预措施的高利润行业提供资金还会减少对资源缺乏的组织提供的可用资金。我们是否可以认为“企业捕获 (corporate capture)”这一问题已经波及到了全球最大的一家卫生基金机构？

#### 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 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 en déduire que le problème de la «capture d'entreprise» s'étend désormais à l'un des plus grands bailleurs de fonds mondiaux dans le domaine de la santé?

## 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 из употребляемых 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. Причиной 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 "попадания под влияние корпораций" теперь распространилась и на один из самых больших фондов по поддержке здравоохранения в мире?

## Resumen

### El contubernio del Fondo Mundial con un gigante de la industria del alcohol, un claro ejemplo de conflicto de intereses

El alcohol es la tercera causa de muerte y discapacidad en Sudáfrica, donde SABMiller es el principal proveedor de cerveza de malta, la bebida más popular. El Fondo Mundial de lucha contra el SIDA, la tuberculosis y la malaria (Fondo Mundial) ha incluido hace poco a SABMiller como receptor de fondos para una intervención de carácter educativo con el objetivo de minimizar los daños relacionados con el alcohol, incluida la prevención del SIDA, entre hombres en bares. El apoyo del Fondo Mundial a esta iniciativa es motivo de preocupación. Es discutible si esas personas son el mejor grupo objetivo para la intervención, si un bar es el lugar más adecuado y si la intervención educativa en sí es efectiva. Nuestra experiencia nos dice que la industria del alcohol tiende a apoyar

intervenciones sobre bebidas alcohólicas que no afectan a las tasas de consumo a nivel de la población. Dichas intervenciones permiten a la industria cumplir con las obligaciones sociales y legales para abordar el consumo perjudicial del alcohol al tiempo que se aseguran las ventas y los beneficios. Proporcionar fondos a una industria con grandes beneficios que podría financiarse sus propias intervenciones reduce también la cantidad de fondos disponibles para organizaciones con menos recursos. ¿Tendremos que asumir que el problema de «captación empresarial» se ha propagado a uno de los mayores financiadores en el ámbito de la salud del mundo?

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## Round table discussion

### Response from the Global Fund

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The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria appreciates the interest in the relationship between the public and private sector.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2,3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> However, studies have shown that even brief interventions in bars and taverns can result in reduced risky sexual behaviours.<sup>5–8</sup> 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. ■

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## Global Fund needs to address conflict of interest

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At the heart of the problems described in this round table discussion<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2,3</sup> making alcohol a risk factor in the spread of HIV infection.<sup>4-7</sup> Reducing alcohol use can therefore be seen as key to reducing HIV infection.<sup>8-10</sup> 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.<sup>11-14</sup> Furthermore, corporate social responsibility strategies, including corporate philanthropy, have also been used to create divisions among public health professionals.<sup>15,16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> Most recently, despite prior calls for the recognition of such conflicts,<sup>18</sup> the food and alcohol industries were invited to participate in the United Nations high-level meeting on noncommunicable diseases in what one advocate apparently likened to "letting Dracula advise on blood-bank security".<sup>19</sup> Predictably, given existing evidence on efforts by the alcohol industry to prevent effective public health policies,<sup>2-23</sup> they pushed for voluntary rather than regulatory approaches.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the World Health Organization's (WHO's) strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol requests that Member States encourage the mobilization and engagement of all concerned social and economic groups including industry associations.<sup>24</sup> This call for engagement stands in marked contrast to WHO's approach to tobacco which, since 2000, has explicitly recognized and actively addressed potential conflicts.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control includes Article 5.3 which requires Parties to the treaty "to protect these [tobacco control] policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry".<sup>26</sup>

The Global Fund is being naïve in simply exempting tobacco and arms producers from its remit.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>21,29-33</sup> 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,<sup>29,31</sup> like their counterparts funded by the tobacco industry.<sup>34,35</sup>

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,<sup>26</sup> the drive for resources continues to result in conflicts.<sup>36-38</sup> It is clear that robust rules for managing potential conflicts of interest are required to ensure effective philanthropy in the public interest.<sup>38,39</sup>

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