

106 community leaders call on World Health Organization to stop closed-door meetings with alcohol lobbyists

A group of 106 community and public health leaders from 60 countries and six continents are calling on the World Health Organization (WHO) to stop its closed-door meetings with alcohol lobbyists, which allow companies that profit from alcoholic products to have unprecedented access to leaders who are responsible for advancing global health.

To coincide with the Seventy-sixth World Health Assembly, which is underway in Geneva, leading health advocates from around the world are calling out the secretive, annual invitation-only WHO meeting with alcohol company representatives.

In a joint letter, leaders from organisations representing public health, community, family violence, children's rights and First Nations groups called on WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to stop engaging with alcohol lobbyists.

"Alcohol companies should not have a seat at the table where policy and programs to progress community health, wellbeing and safety is being developed, assessed or evaluated," the letter said. "The health, wellbeing and safety of our families and communities is far too important."

Alcohol companies' repeated efforts to undermine public health reforms have been observed in Australia and around the world.

In Mexico, multinational alcohol companies take millions of litres of water from drought-ravaged communities to produce beer, forcing communities to protest for the basic human right to access water.

In Ireland, alcohol companies have lobbied at every step to undermine the Public Health Alcohol Action Act, watering down its impact and delaying many measures, such as the rollout of mandatory warning labels spelling out the health risks of consuming alcoholic products.

In Australia, a large alcohol retailer spent five years trying to build a large bottle shop near a dry Aboriginal community in an area with high levels of alcohol harm, forcing the community to fight back.

In many African countries, multinational alcohol companies are deploying unethical practices to drive alcohol use, including using "beer promotion girls" and aggressive marketing that exposes children to alcohol promotions.

Ms Kristina Sperkova, President of Movendi International said reducing alcohol harm was crucial for the WHO to achieve its aim of giving every person an equal chance at a safe and healthy life.

"Alcohol companies and their lobby groups work relentlessly to undermine common sense measures to improve the health and safety of people across the globe. They should not be given unprecedented access to the very people who are responsible for advancing global health," she said.

“Alcohol kills 3 million people a year globally, representing 5 per cent of all deaths. Among young adults aged 20 to 39 years, one in seven deaths are a result of alcohol. Every effort should be made to prevent this harm.”

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) CEO Caterina Giorgi said alcohol companies and their lobbyists had a clear track record of working to undermine public health reforms in Australia.

“In Australia, a person dies every 90 minutes and another is hospitalised every three and a half minutes because of alcohol. Governments can take action to prevent this harm, but time and time again alcohol companies and their lobbyists do all they can to delay or stop meaningful action that could save lives,” Ms Giorgi said.

“For twenty years alcohol companies lobbied Australian governments to delay the introduction of mandatory pregnancy warnings.

“Alcohol companies should not be given a say in policies that aim to protect the health, wellbeing and safety of our communities.”

Caterina Giorgi, CEO Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education is available for interview.

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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education** (FARE) is the leading not-for-profit organisation working towards an Australia free from alcohol harms. We do this through developing evidence-informed policy, enabling people-powered advocacy and delivering health promotion campaigns.

FARE has been working with communities across the country to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians for 20 years. To learn more about us and our work visit www.fare.org.au.