

Broader international action needed on alcohol policy and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction: The global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, lay out a path for global development with 17 broad overall goals, 169 specific targets and multiple specific indicators. Alcohol policy is mentioned specifically in just one of the targets (3.5, “Strengthen the prevention and treatment of ... harmful use of alcohol”).

Approach: We lay out the wider effects of alcohol production and consumption on the SDGs, and consider the implications of the history of fluctuations in alcohol consumption levels.

Key findings: Among international agencies only the World Health Organization (WHO) and its component agencies have measured harms to the person who drinks and the development of alcohol policies and treatment responses – and the WHO effort has been somewhat fragmented and sporadic. Also, thinking about the SDGs has tended to assume a single direction of development, while national histories of alcohol consumption levels show patterns of “long waves” rather than of development in just one direction. Thus thinking about alcohol policy at the international level (1) needs to think about factors and development beyond the limits of the health of the person who drinks, and (2) needs to plan ahead for what will be needed for a sustained reduction in levels of alcohol-related problems.

Discussion & conclusions: In the paper, we lay out a broader frame than individual health for thinking about and reducing alcohol-related problems, taking account of harms beyond health, of harms to others beside the person who drinks, and of harms to society and to global environments more generally. We also consider what may be needed to forestall the “long waves” of alcohol consumption – i.e., recurrence of increasing consumption and problems when rates of alcohol-related problems have declined.

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