

# People, Planet, or Profit: alcohol's impact on a sustainable future

November 2022

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to those who presented at or chaired one of our sustainability series webinars, without whom the development of this report would not have been possible:

Webinar 1: Kristina Sperkova, Dudley Tarlton, Professor Jeff Colin, and Aadielah Maker Diedericks.

Webinar 2: Dr Katherine Severi, Dr Modi Mwatsama, and Tom Cumberlege.

Webinar 3: Dr Rob Ralston, Nina Renshaw, and Professor Mark Petticrew.

Webinar 4: Professor Leslie London, Olivier van Beemen, Dr Sarah Hill, and Professor Amandine Garde.

## About the Institute of Alcohol Studies

IAS is an independent institute bringing together evidence, policy and practice from home and abroad to promote an informed debate on alcohol's impact on society.

Our purpose is to advance the use of the best available evidence in public policy discussions on alcohol. The IAS is a company limited by guarantee (no. 05661538) and a registered charity (no. 1112671).

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# Executive summary

## **Sustainability and environmental issues regarding alcohol have been overlooked by drinkers and governments**

Alcohol is a discretionary, non-essential product that causes over 200 health conditions.<sup>1</sup> The harm that alcohol causes to health, society and the economy is already well-known. However, the damage caused to the environment, sustainable development, and human rights across the lifecycle of alcoholic products has received little attention so far. Much of this harm is invisible to drinkers, and is also not taken into account by governments formulating alcohol policy.

## **Current alcohol production, consumption, and corporate social responsibility activities are all barriers to sustainable development**

The production and consumption of alcohol adversely impacts 13 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>2</sup> It can push people into poverty or keep them there, uses up water for crop growth in areas where people do not have enough to drink, contributes to human rights abuses across the globe, and exacerbates the climate crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these negative impacts, many alcohol companies aim to position themselves as engines of development and align their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities with the SDGs and other development causes.<sup>3</sup> They do so as a core part of their marketing strategy to increase product sales – putting profit above the health of people and the planet.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some companies use this CSR activity as a lobbying tactic to delay or prevent the implementation of proven, effective alcohol control policies.<sup>5</sup>

Environmental research highlights damage from the release of greenhouse gas emissions during production, transportation and refrigeration, to crop growth damaging animal populations and displacing essential food production.<sup>6</sup> Consumers should be made aware of this to make informed decisions

about their consumption of products that damage the environment.

Some alcohol multinationals have been and still are involved in human rights abuses, especially in the Global South. This includes wages below the poverty line, inadequate protection from health and safety risks, and vulnerability to exploitation and forced labour.<sup>7</sup> Higher income countries like the UK continue to import significant quantities of alcohol from such regions. One example is South Africa's Western Cape, which still has substandard working conditions.<sup>8</sup>

## **Co-benefits exist between sustainability and alcohol control policies**

The alcohol industry and alcohol consumption both impede progress towards a more sustainable future. Approaches to alcohol policy globally must address the wider harms of alcohol production and consumption, and its impact on the SDGs, environment and human rights. Evidence-based and cost-effective alcohol control policies can work to both reduce harm from alcohol and tackle alcohol's negative impact on the environment, development and human rights.

It is crucial that global alcohol policies are developed by worldwide collective action to prevent the alcohol industry from simply shifting production and marketing of products from countries with increasingly stringent and effective policies, to countries with less developed policies. This has already occurred in the environmental space, with multinational companies moving polluting factories to countries with more lax regulations.<sup>9</sup> The development of a Framework Convention on Alcohol Control would go some way to tackling the issue of cross-border offloading of harm, whether in relation to environmental, marketing, or economic policies.

Alcohol producers can and should improve their business practices to move towards more sustainable practices. However, a reduction in production and consumption of alcohol could benefit the twin goals of population health and sustainable development.

# Recommendations

In the development of global and national alcohol policy, policymakers should take account of the wider harms of alcohol production and consumption, and its negative impact on the SDGs and human rights.

Countries should implement evidence-based, cost-effective alcohol control policies to reduce consumption and harm from alcohol. This would in turn reduce production and help to tackle alcohol's negative impact on the environment, development and human rights.

## 1 Develop a Framework Convention on Alcohol Control

Develop and sign a Framework Convention on Alcohol Control (FCAC), similar to the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC), an evidence-based treaty that reaffirms the right of all people to the highest standard of health, and places health above private economic interest. An FCAC would help prevent global alcohol producers from moving bad practices to countries with more lax regulations.

## 2 Affordability:

Reduce affordability through both minimum unit pricing and alcohol duty. England should follow the examples of Scotland and Wales and introduce a minimum unit price for alcohol and increase it in line with inflation. Policymakers should capitalise on the opportunities presented by the proposed UK alcohol duty system set to commence in 2023. The principle of a strength-based system is welcome, but duty rates should be consistent and must automatically increase in line with inflation. They should also cover the costs that alcohol harm contributes to society.

## 3 Availability:

Add protecting and improving public health as a fifth objective of the alcohol licensing system in England, as it is in Scotland. This will enable health more broadly to be part of local decision-making on alcohol availability.

## 4 Marketing:

Put in place comprehensive statutory restrictions on alcohol marketing, including corporate social responsibility activity (CSR), comparable to bans on tobacco marketing.

## 5 Conflicts of interest:

Recognise the inherent conflict of interest that exists when the alcohol industry is involved in policymaking, particularly relating to health. The alcohol industry should be treated like the tobacco industry and banned from such discussions. Relevant standards and practices – such as labelling and marketing – should be mandated instead of relying on voluntary agreements, which have been shown to do little to reduce harm.

In addition to policies to reduce alcohol consumption and production, the following policies could incentivise improved business practices and would improve transparency and information provision for consumers.

**6 Labelling:**

Give power to an independent agency to require, monitor and enforce what appears on alcohol labels, working in the interests of public health and consumer rights and free from influence or interference from corporate interests.

Introduce mandatory environmental labelling standards (to cover features such as use of renewable energy during production, use of electric vehicle fleets, compostable packaging), to be overseen by the independent agency.

**7 True Value Approach:**

Adopt a True Value Approach to alcohol and acknowledge that alcohol is a non-essential product that displaces the production of essential products, such as food, and of wildlife and natural flora. Such an approach would economically incentivise better business practices which would have less of an adverse impact on environmental and social sustainability.

# Introduction

The United Nations (UN) defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.<sup>10</sup> The UK has signed up to a number of sustainability commitments, including ‘Working towards net zero by 2050’, ‘Reducing our water use’, and ‘Procuring sustainable products and services’,<sup>11</sup> showing there is appetite within Government and beyond to move towards more sustainable practices. This creates a need for evidence shining a light on how to do so.

There is an established evidence base regarding the role alcohol plays in harming people’s health, the wider harms to society, and the costs to public services. Alcohol is a causal factor in more than 200 diseases and injury conditions and leads to 3 million global deaths each year: over 5% of the global burden of disease.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol harm exacerbates health and economic inequalities, with mortality rates from alcohol in the most deprived areas in England more than double those in the least.<sup>12</sup> In the UK, alcohol harm costs the economy at least £27 billion a year, including through crime and disorder, public service costs, and lost productivity.<sup>13</sup>

Alcohol has rarely been considered from a sustainability angle. Between 2021 and 2022, the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) ran a four-part webinar series on ‘Alcohol and Sustainability’, with expert speakers from academia, think tanks, and journalism presenting on interrelated topics. This report is inspired by these presentations. It includes IAS and speaker recommendations for how civil society and policymakers should consider sustainability when formulating alcohol control policies.

Chapter 1 focuses on the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how alcohol is an impediment to 13 of the 17 Goals, the alcohol industry’s use of the SDGs as a marketing tool, and further use of the sustainability agenda and corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a lobbying tactic.

Much of the industry’s activity slows the progress of sustainable development, while its CSR activities position it as an engine of such development.

Chapter 2 presents the environmental impact the production of alcohol has across its lifecycle, from the farming of raw materials through to refrigeration of products, potential solutions to help customers choose more sustainable options, and what companies can and should do to reduce their environmental impact. A key consideration is that alcohol is a discretionary, non-essential product. With land becoming an increasingly scarce commodity, prioritising land for the production of essential products - such as food - and for improving the planet’s biodiversity is crucial to reduce climate breakdown.

Chapter 3 investigates the human rights abuses of the alcohol industry, particularly in the Global South, and considers using human rights to support alcohol control policies. The use of human rights arguments is becoming increasingly important in holding governments and private companies to account for putting profit above public health.

The webinars within the series included many case studies as evidence of the speakers’ arguments, some of which are included within this report. Others can be found in the further reading sections and in the speakers’ research papers.

It was already recognised that alcohol places a burden on health, society, public services, and has significant economic costs. This report adds to this understanding by showing that the alcohol industry and alcohol consumption are obstacles to sustainability. Urgent policy action on alcohol harm is needed to help not only the health of people, but also the planet.

The webinars that inspired this report can be found on [IAS’ YouTube channel](#).

# Chapter 1: Alcohol Industry, Sustainable Development Goals and Corporate Social Responsibility

Alcohol adversely impacts many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across environmental, social and economic dimensions. To come closer to achieving the goals – and a more sustainable future for all – alcohol control policies need to be implemented to help reduce alcohol consumption and harm and drive down production.

There is an inherent conflict between achieving the SDGs and the interests of alcohol companies, especially in a consolidated market dominated by a small number of large multinational firms. Alcohol companies' main obligation is to increase profits from sales of alcohol – which is in direct conflict with aims to reduce consumption and achieve the SDGs.

Alcohol companies have increasingly aligned with the SDGs and positioned themselves as contributing to sustainable development. However, rather than leading to actual positive change, research has shown that this support for sustainability is part of alcohol corporations' core strategic marketing.<sup>4</sup> It has also been used as a tactic to prevent effective alcohol control measures.<sup>5</sup> For many years, companies have supported voluntary commitments as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity. These commitments have been mostly ineffective and have often not been met.<sup>14, 15</sup>

## What are the SDGs, and why is alcohol an impediment to achieving them?

The UN's SDGs are a set of 17 global goals for Member States, designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all".<sup>16</sup> Alcohol is specifically included in the SDGs, showing recognition of reducing alcohol harm within the global development agenda. Target 3.5 states to "strengthen the prevention and treatment of

substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol".<sup>16</sup>



In addition, alcohol adversely impacts 13 of the 17 goals, and a total of 52 out of 169 targets within those goals.<sup>17</sup> This intersects all three dimensions of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda: social, environmental, and economic.

Social goals within the SDGs include no poverty, zero hunger, gender equality, and peace and justice. In many countries, particularly countries in the Global South, alcohol pushes people into poverty or deeper into poverty.<sup>18</sup> It drains income that could be used on education and food, and is directly linked to violence, including domestic violence and violence against women.<sup>19</sup>

Environmental goals include protecting the planet from degradation – such as through sustainable





consumption and production – sustainably managing natural resources, and taking urgent action on climate change.<sup>20</sup> As discussed further in Chapter 2, alcohol production often uses crops that adversely impact biodiversity, uses clean water that could be used for drinking or sanitation, and releases greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Economic goals include access to decent work, sustainable economic growth, and full and productive employment.<sup>21</sup> Alcohol causes a huge loss of work productivity and associated costs, and additional costs across health, welfare and justice

systems. The total economic burden of alcohol on society ranges between 0.45%-5.44% of gross domestic product in developed countries.<sup>22</sup> In the World Health Organization's (WHO) factsheet on alcohol and sustainable development they recommend three 'best-buys': policies that are most effective and cost-effective to reduce alcohol harm. These are: reducing the affordability, promotion and availability of alcohol.<sup>23</sup> In 2018, WHO launched the SAFER initiative, which added two further 'best-buy' policies on countering drink driving and improving brief interventions and treatment (see SAFER initiative below).<sup>24</sup>

### World Health Organization Factsheet: Alcohol Consumption & Sustainable Development (2020)<sup>1</sup>

Goal	Target	How does alcohol adversely impact it?
	<b>Target 1.2:</b> Reduce the number of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty.	Alcohol harm is greater for drinkers and their families with lower incomes than for those with higher incomes. It pushes people into poverty or keeps them there, exacerbating socioeconomic inequality.
	<b>Target 3.4:</b> Reduce premature mortality from NCDs and promote mental health and well-being.	Alcohol use is one of the major risk factors for NCDs and premature mortality.
	<b>Target 6.1:</b> Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.	Alcohol production uses huge amounts of clean water, and many breweries operate in water-stressed areas where it should be used for drinking.

### Summary of WHO's SAFER initiative



Modelling by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and WHO across 12 countries including Russia, Turkey, and Ethiopia shows that investing in WHO's SAFER initiative would generate a 5.8 to 1 return on investment. It would raise \$19 billion over the next 15 years – mainly due to productivity gains – and prevent 865,000 deaths.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, the sooner these policies are implemented, the sooner the return on investment.

UNDP has developed toolkits with several countries to take up these policies, and return on investment is the main driver for implementation. There is overlap in the interests of civil society groups in public health, human rights and development, and opportunities to make progress towards SDGs using evidence-based alcohol control policies that would create a win-win situation of reduced alcohol harm and improved health and economic sustainability.

## Alcohol industry appropriation of the SDGs

Alcohol companies use CSR activity to position themselves as engines of development and as appropriate partners to governments. This alignment with the SDGs jeopardises the effective implementation of health-improving policies – such as the WHO's best-buys or SAFER initiative.

For example, the multinational alcohol company Diageo has signed up to the 'Business Avengers' coalition. The coalition, which includes UN agencies as well as private organisations, states its aim is to "highlight the crucial role businesses have to play in hitting the targets of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030".<sup>26</sup> Two of Diageo's targets within their

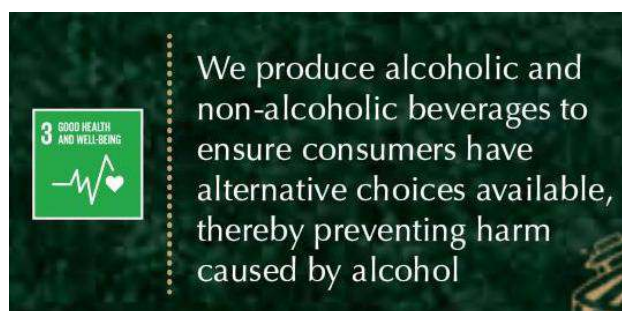
sustainability commitments are to 'Promote positive drinking' and 'Preserve water for life'.<sup>27</sup> While these targets show that Diageo wants to present itself as part of the solution, this is in conflict with the fact that alcohol is an impediment to all health-related SDGs and to Goal 6 on Clean Water.

Alignment with the development agenda can also be seen with other multinational alcohol companies – including AB InBev and Pernod Ricard – signing up or stating that they are guided by ISO 26000, the 'Social Responsibility' standard of the International Standards Organization.<sup>28</sup> The standard includes a voluntary commitment to contribute to "sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society".<sup>29</sup>

### Case study 1: Namibia Breweries Limited

Namibia Breweries Limited is part-owned by Heineken.

In their 2021 Annual Report, Namibia Breweries Limited includes a section on how they are contributing to the SDG agenda, including Goal 3 on 'Good Health and Wellbeing'.<sup>30</sup>



They also state that their "biggest opportunity to contribute to the SDGs is in economically uplifting Namibians", despite alcohol harm costing more to society than tax revenue raised.



The SDGs do include working with private partners (Goal 17 and Targets 17.16 and 17.17). However, given the clear conflict of interest, this involvement is problematic regarding the alcohol industry or other unhealthy commodities, such as tobacco and unhealthy foods.

The tobacco industry's conflict of interest is well-acknowledged and the industry is not included in policy development and health promotion.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, because alcohol is an impediment to many of the SDGs, there is a conflict of interest when industry attempts to partner with governments and intergovernmental organisations to present itself as a positive impact on the sustainability agenda. The same rules that apply to the tobacco industry should apply to the alcohol industry: they should be banned from policy development and health promotion, and governments should not partner with alcohol companies.

## CSR as core strategic marketing

Alignment with the sustainability agenda is part of the industry's CSR activity. CSR is a management concept where companies seek to integrate social, environmental, ethical and human rights concerns into their core business operations and strategies.<sup>32</sup> Many businesses present this as a virtuous circle in which the primary concern of the shareholders – growing their investment – is delivered on, while also providing a societal benefit. This perceived benefit is often framed by corporate actors as the best way to mitigate the negative outcomes of their business practices.

Previous engagement in CSR, particularly pre-1960s, can be seen as more ad hoc philanthropic activity.<sup>33</sup> However, over the past few decades, CSR has increasingly developed into a strategic marketing tool.<sup>4</sup> A 2022 study concluded that “The alcohol industry's CSR actions demonstrably perform significant marketing functions and are structured to advance cross-border strategic interests”.<sup>34</sup> By integrating corporate logos and branding into CSR activities, companies become linked with specific domains of social responsibility. Whether this is cause-related marketing (**as in Case Study**

**2**), corporate philanthropy, or perceived socially responsible business practices, all such methods are used as an opportunity to promote the company's brand and products.<sup>5</sup> One example of this is alcohol companies supporting female empowerment.

Since 2016, Diageo has collaborated with the international development charity CARE, to “build on the strength of both partners to tackle gender inequality on a global scale”.<sup>35</sup> The partnership aims to address barriers to gender inclusion throughout Diageo's value chain, empower women, and reduce gender-based violence. This is important, however it overlooks and ignores the established link between alcohol and gender-based violence.

### Case study 2: Buy a Lady a Drink

In 2015, AB InBev launched the Stella Artois campaign “Buy a Lady a Drink”, in partnership with the non-profit organisation Water.org, to “help end the global water crisis”.<sup>36</sup> When customers purchase certain Stella Artois products, AB InBev donates money to Water.org.

This campaign is an example of cause-related marketing, where a cause is linked to a marketing tactic.<sup>37</sup>

As discussed further in Chapter 2, an exceptional amount of water is required in the production of alcohol – a non-essential product – contributing to drought in some countries.



Similarly, Carling Black Label's #NoExcuse campaign in South Africa positions itself as helping to "put an end to violence against women".<sup>38</sup> It too fails to recognise the strong relationship between alcohol and domestic abuse.

Another example is the Pernod Ricard India Foundation's 'COVID-19 Solutions – WOMEN Accelerator Program'.<sup>39</sup> Its aim was to provide "women entrepreneurs and women-led enterprises with access to mentorship, deployment, technology support and up to Rs 25 lakhs [approximately £25,000] grant to fight back against COVID-19". It has been argued that this is driven by the commercial opportunity of increasing sales to women, as highlighted by Pernod Ricard India's Chief Marketing Officer:

“ It is quintessential for brands to create products that appeal to them [women]. And if they don't have more women in senior leadership roles, they are not likely to have the significant insights needed to tap into the highly sensitive minds of their ever-growing numbers of female consumers ”

**Kartik Mohindra, CMO, Pernod Ricard India<sup>40</sup>**

As with the 'Buy a Lady a Drink' campaign, associating alcohol consumption with female empowerment, especially in emerging markets, can be seen as an attempt to grow that market.



### Case Study 3: Shaping and reinforcing gender norms

Alcohol companies help shape and reinforce gender norms and stereotypes through their marketing. There are various examples for how marketing strategies have been adapted over time to accommodate changes and social expectations over gender.

In the 1940s-1960s, drinking was very much seen as a masculine activity. Alcohol marketing, such as in **Image 1** from 1947, reflected this, and portrayed women largely as hostesses.<sup>41</sup>

With the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, advertising moved to targeting women as consumers, and linked alcohol consumption to sexual attractiveness and women's freedom – see **Image 2**. With second-wave feminism moving into the 1980s, alcohol advertising moved towards celebrating female empowerment.<sup>41</sup>

Since the 1990s, there's been a clear “feminisation of alcohol products, drinking spaces and drinking cultures” and alcohol companies have targeted women with various strategies.<sup>42</sup> This has included the development of new products and lifestyle messages that appeal to gender stereotypes – see **Image 3**. These often focus on weight/low calorie options, pink products, female friendships and motherhood, as exemplified by concepts such as ‘mummy juice’ and ‘wine o'clock’.

While these changing marketing techniques reflect developments around gender norms and expectations in society, they also reinforce and shape problematic, idealised and often unattainable gender norms and stereotypes, entrenching gender inequality. Inevitably, even under a guise of empowerment, targeting women with unhealthy commodity marketing can increase consumption and harm.

Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



## CSR as a lobbying tactic

In addition to being used as a marketing tool, engaging in CSR activities allows the alcohol industry to delay, change or prevent introduction of effective alcohol control policies. The alcohol industry does this, for example, by setting up and promoting voluntary agreements as part of CSR activity.

Voluntarily engaging in apparent harm-reduction attempts allows companies to shape the narrative and the terms of debate. An example is the 'responsibility' messaging, which provides the centrepiece of drinking guidelines. Studies have shown that 'responsible drinking' is not clearly defined, rarely references evidence-based low risk guidelines, and is used to protect industry interests by avoiding more effective policies.<sup>15</sup> 'Responsibility' messaging does not inform consumers about the risks of alcohol consumption; instead, consumers are left to make up their own minds about what 'drinking responsibly' means. Surveys have shown that even a third of those who describe themselves as 'heavy' drinkers believe they are drinking responsibly – although their drinking pattern puts their health at risk.<sup>43</sup> The phrase also offers a narrative against more effective, population-level harm reduction policies: if most people think they are drinking responsibly, this means only a small minority of 'irresponsible' individuals are experiencing and causing alcohol harm. This framing allows the alcohol industry to claim that evidence-based population-based policies, such as minimum unit pricing or marketing restrictions, would be an 'overreaction'.<sup>15</sup>

Other voluntary commitments have included self-regulatory marketing codes, product labelling requirements, and pledging to cut the number of units of alcohol sold. Such CSR commitments continue despite there being "no robust evidence that alcohol industry CSR initiatives reduce harmful drinking".<sup>4</sup> A 2018 study found only 0.1% of CSR activities by the alcohol industry were consistent with the WHO's 'best buy' policies for prevention of noncommunicable diseases.<sup>14</sup>

### Case study 4: Voluntary marketing codes in Brazil

Brazil intended to implement an alcohol advertising strategy. However, this was dropped after the alcohol industry created a voluntary code of marketing. This code did not define beer or wine as alcoholic beverages for marketing purposes.<sup>44</sup>

## Responsibility Deal in the UK

In 2011, the UK Government launched its Responsibility Deal, a partnership between food and drink industries and the Government. It aimed "to tap into the potential for businesses and other organisations to improve public health and tackle health inequalities".<sup>45</sup> As part of the deal, the industry promised to remove one billion units of alcohol from annual consumption by incentivising the production and consumption of lower strength drinks. In 2014, the alcohol industry's 'social responsibility body' the Portman Group claimed the industry had achieved and exceeded the target in half the time.<sup>46</sup> However, a 2015 analysis showed that most of the units removed were not attributable to the pledge.<sup>47</sup> 870 million of the 1.3 billion units quoted as being removed were accounted for by a change in how HMRC recorded beer data. The researchers said: "we believe the data used in the [Portman Group] analysis may not be fit for purpose, that the report makes simplistic assumptions about consumer responses to the pledge, and takes insufficient notice of confounding factors."

“ There is substantial evidence to suggest that the industry concocted the pledge as a cynical repackaging exercise – presenting the commercially pragmatic development of new product lines designed to expand the overall size of the alcohol market as an exercise in corporate social responsibility ”

**Jonathan Gornall, journalist<sup>48</sup>**

Another high-profile pledge was that by 2013 the industry would “ensure over 80% of products have labels with clear unit content, NHS guidelines and a warning about drinking when pregnant”. 156 labels analysed in 2016 found that these three elements were present on 77.6% of products, just short of the target.<sup>49</sup> However, it was how this pledge was met that is problematic. The average font size was tiny – 8.17 – far smaller than for optimal legibility. Many of the colours used made information very difficult to read. Moreover, pregnancy warnings were on average under 6mm in size and significantly smaller on wine, despite wine being more likely to be consumed by women. Since then, labelling information has not improved, with a 2022 study finding only 65% of products include the up-to-date CMO drinking guidelines.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

As alcohol consumption undermines the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, effective policies are required to reduce alcohol consumption and harm. The alcohol industry has for many years presented itself as part of the solution, by aligning with development goals within CSR activities. However, this can be both a marketing tactic to sell more products, and a lobbying tactic aiming to change, delay or prevent effective policy implementation. The strategic use of voluntary commitments, including those relating to sustainability, clearly highlights the potential for the industry to use CSR activity to undermine or avoid effective alcohol control policies. There is a poor track record for the effectiveness of voluntary commitments. Due to this and conflicts of interest, policies should be developed, introduced and evaluated free from industry involvement.

### Further reading

[“Signalling Virtue, Promoting Harm: Unhealthy Commodity Industries and Covid-19”](#) – NCD Alliance, 2020

[“Fool Me Twice”](#) – Vital Strategies, 2019

[“Protecting noncommunicable disease prevention policy in trade and investment agreements”](#) – WHO Bulletin, 2022



## Chapter 2: The Alcohol Industry's Impact on the Environment

As human-caused climate change continues to grow in severity, it becomes more urgent to assess and reduce the impact of products upon the environment.

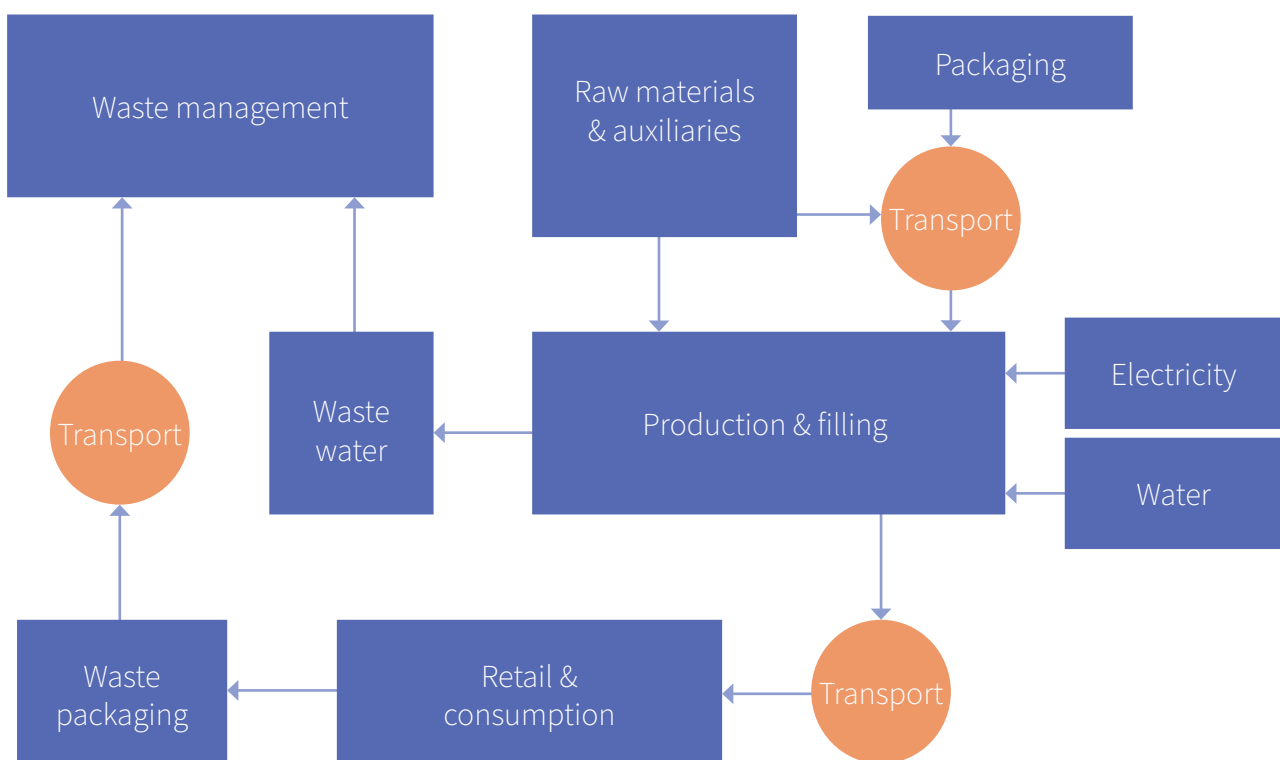
As a relatively under-studied field, evidence regarding the environmental impact of alcohol production is scarce, and estimates vary widely due to a range of factors, such as farming techniques, packaging, distance transported, and waste and recycling policies. Therefore, it is difficult to compare products and the range of carbon dioxide emissions can significantly vary.

However, available evidence shows that alcohol production has a significant adverse impact on our environment: the growing of raw materials for alcohol displaces essential food production; exorbitant amounts of clean water are required

during production; and the release of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) within a product's lifecycle contributes to global heating. This environmental damage needs to be looked at within the context of alcohol being a non-essential product, unlike food and water.

Effective alcohol control policies will reduce consumption, improve human health and reduce production. This reduced production will also benefit planetary health. At an individual level, people are already changing their consumption habits to make more sustainable consumption decisions, for instance by reducing their meat and dairy intake.<sup>51</sup> A better understanding of how alcohol contributes to environmental damage could alter consumption behaviours, producing gains both for public health and the environment.

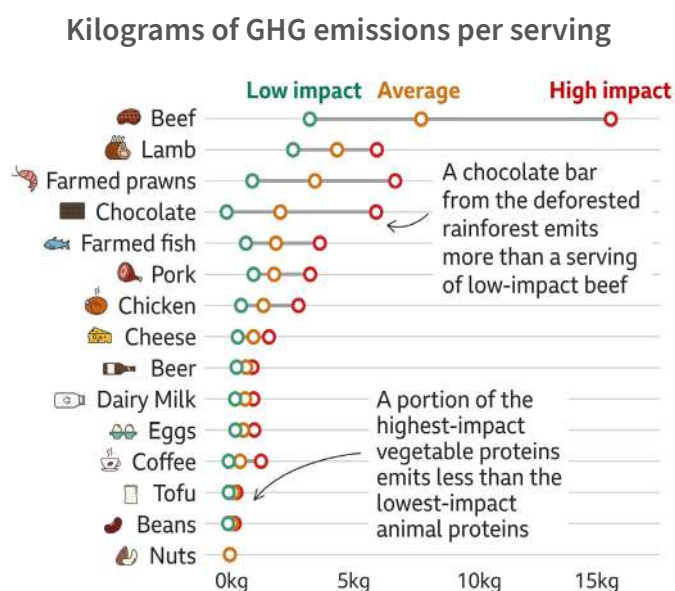
**Life cycle environmental impacts of beer production and consumption in the UK<sup>52</sup>**





## How does the alcohol industry contribute to greenhouse gas emissions?

The food and drink industry contributes to approximately 25% of all GHG emissions. In the UK, alcohol was estimated to cause just under 1.5% of total emissions in the most recent study of its type from 2007.<sup>6</sup> The impact of different foods and drinks varies widely, even within product types, as seen below.<sup>53</sup> Beer has a higher carbon footprint than both dairy milk and eggs per serving, and it is one of very few products on this list that does not have nutritional value.



Note: The figures for each food are based on calculations from 119 countries. Serving sizes are from the British Dietetic Association (BDA) and Bupa.  
 Source: Poore & Nemecek (2018), Science | Credit: BBC - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-46459714>

Consuming one pint of beer every day for a year is the equivalent, in GHG terms, of driving a petrol car 622 miles – almost the entire length of the UK – or heating a home for 38 days. In comparison, a glass of wine produces about half the GHG emissions of a pint of beer.<sup>53</sup>

## Farming and manufacturing

Alcohol production uses raw agricultural materials including barley, hops and other grains for beer and spirits, and grape vines for wine. The farming of these crops has intensified in recent decades as alcohol companies have merged to form a smaller number

of global mass producers.<sup>54</sup> In a time of global food shortages, the growth of ingredients for alcohol production displaces land use for essential food, wildlife, and natural flora.<sup>55</sup>

For beer, conventional hop farming uses a lot of pesticides. This leads to the ground between and beneath the hops remaining barren and dusty and damages natural habitats for wildlife. Pesticides can poison bird species and deplete their food supplies.<sup>56</sup> The majority of hops are also imported to the UK from the US after being processed into pellets, which can be an energy intensive process.<sup>6</sup>

Many other processes used in the manufacturing of alcoholic products are also energy intensive. These include mashing and crushing grains and grapes, boiling, fermenting, filtering and keeping products at controlled temperatures. Waste products from alcohol manufacturing can have a detrimental effect on local environments, with reports of pollution contaminating local drinking sources in low-income countries such as Uganda.<sup>57</sup>

## Water use

Alcohol production uses a significant amount of water. Producing one litre of wine requires 870 litres of water and one litre of beer requires nearly 300 litres of water – the latter is as much as two people's total daily water use in the UK.<sup>18, 58</sup> Drinking a glass of wine every day equates to about one and a half additional showers (at 8 minutes) each week.

Water is scarce in many areas of the world. By 2025, an estimated 1.8 billion people will live in areas plagued by water scarcity, with two-thirds of the world's population living in water-stressed regions.<sup>59</sup> Currently 70% of the world's water resources are used for agriculture and irrigation.<sup>60</sup>

Some regions have seen disputes between local communities and multinational alcohol companies due to the perceived prioritisation of alcohol production over clean drinking water and sanitation for citizens. For example, in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2018, the drought was so severe that the municipal water had to be turned off. Meanwhile, the wine

industry spread over ever larger land areas and used more and more of the water reserves.<sup>18</sup>

“They export our water in the form of wine”

**Vanessa Ludwig, Surplus People Project,  
South Africa**

In Mexico in 2017, local residents protested against the development of a brewery in the Mexicali Valley.<sup>61</sup> The factory, which was to be built by the American producer Constellation Brands – who make Corona – was expected to use 6.4 billion litres of water from the Colorado River each year. Water shortages and drought issues were already occurring in the region. The protests eventually halted the building of the brewery. However, Constellation continued to fight, despite the National Human Rights Commission determining that building the brewery would violate the human right to water.

## Packaging and transport

Emissions relating to the production of beer cans in the UK alone come to over 340,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year.<sup>6</sup> This is the equivalent of 43,000 homes' annual energy use.<sup>62</sup> It would take 402,000 acres of forest a year to store that amount of carbon dioxide – five times the size of the UK's New Forest. The total amount of carbon dioxide released due to all alcohol packaging in the UK in 2007 was estimated at 1.4 million tonnes.<sup>6</sup>

The carbon footprint of different product packaging varies widely. The proportion of carbon dioxide emissions in the production of glass wine bottles ranges between 14-46% of total emissions across the product's lifecycle. New World wine bottles tend to be heavier than European bottles and travel much further. However, they are transported in bulk far more often than 'Old World' wines, so it is very difficult for consumers to determine which releases more carbon dioxide in transportation.<sup>6</sup>

Pubs and restaurants tend to use reusable kegs and casks, which use less packaging per litre of alcohol.

Due to a shift from drinking in pubs and restaurants to drinking at home over the past 20 years,<sup>63</sup> alcohol packaging has become a far more significant contributor to environmental damage. Furthermore, about half of UK alcohol containers are estimated to be thrown into general waste bins rather than being recycled.<sup>6</sup>

With the emergence of more global brands, most products require transporting longer distances. Within the UK alone, the average distance a bottle of Scotch Whisky travels is 546 miles, which driving by car would get someone from Dundee to Brighton.<sup>6</sup>

## Refrigeration

The final contributor in the pre-disposal lifecycle of alcoholic products is refrigeration, which has become more important in recent years with the growth of home drinking and domestic refrigeration appliances such as wine fridges. An increase in commercial refrigeration storage and the emergence of 'ultra-cold' beers and ciders has also contributed. Drinks that are served chilled, such as lagers, white wine, sparkling wine, spirits and pre-mixed cocktails, have an additional element of environmental damage due to energy requirements for refrigeration.<sup>6</sup>

## Disposal and recycling

Not only does the production, transportation and refrigeration of alcoholic products have a significant negative impact on the environment, but also the disposal stage.

Up to 50% of all alcohol containers are not recycled and end up in landfill.<sup>64</sup> In addition to this unnecessary burden on landfill sites, it also means new glass and aluminium needs to be extracted and developed into new containers, as opposed to using the material from previous containers. Recycling aluminium uses 95% less energy than producing aluminium from raw materials and produces 97% less GHG emissions. Recycling one tonne of aluminium saves nine tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions and four tonnes of bauxite – the raw material from which aluminium is made.<sup>65</sup>

## Reducing alcohol's environmental impact

Population-based policies such as those recommended by WHO – including measures on pricing, marketing and availability of alcohol – are the most effective and cost effective ways of reducing alcohol consumption and harm from alcohol, and the same policies will also reduce alcohol's negative impact on the environment by driving down production.

Beyond reducing consumption, the environmental impact of alcohol could be reduced through requiring greater transparency about the true cost of alcohol production, including using a true value approach, and introducing mandatory environmental labelling. Such approaches would likely lead to companies changing their practices to look less environmentally damaging.

### A True Value Approach

A 'True Value of Alcohol' metric would draw on the 'True Value of Food' approach proposed at the UN Food Systems Summit.<sup>66</sup>

Currently, a company's profitability does not reflect the value it creates for society. Likewise, how much a consumer pays for a product does not reflect the product's true costs to society. These costs – including environmental damage, poorer health outcomes, unfair wages, and excess waste – are paid for in another way, often by the least advantaged segments of society and future generations.

“ The value of food must also be understood as far more than a mere commodity. The economic, social and environmental impact and externalities must be better assessed, and mitigated or leveraged as required ”

**António Guterres, UN Secretary General<sup>67</sup>**

The 'hidden costs' of global food and land use systems are estimated to be over \$19 trillion a year: \$7 trillion of environmental costs, \$11 trillion of costs

to human life, and \$1 trillion in economic costs.<sup>66</sup> The global alcohol sector also has hidden costs.

The True Value of Food initiative aims to create transparency about the real costs and benefits across food systems, in order to ensure more sustainable, healthy and fairer systems, and to help guide choices across policy, finance, and business that are good for people and the planet.<sup>66</sup>

This initiative, which could be utilised across the alcohol industry, consists of three core elements:

1. True cost accounting: to quantify and value impacts and dependencies across the full chain, to enable decision-making and policies based on true value.
2. True value business strategies: to implement successful models that create true value to society.
3. True pricing policies: to internalise the externalities, to make sustainable food and drink more affordable and align market incentives with true value. Alcohol-related examples of externalities include drink driving, costs to healthcare, and lower economic productivity.

If a 'True Value of Alcohol' metric was introduced, it would consider the impact of alcohol across its full lifecycle, such as GHG emissions, waste produced, displacement of essential food production, employment conditions and pay, health harms, and impact on healthcare and other public services. Those costs would be reflected in the price of alcohol, instead of being paid for in other ways, as is the case currently where the costs of the health consequences of alcohol are borne by the healthcare system.

This wouldn't necessarily equate to higher consumer costs – although alcohol duty rates covering the economic cost of harm would be a positive step. Instead, dietary shifts, a reformulation of products, more resource-efficient business practices, and technological innovations would all contribute to addressing the true cost of alcohol.<sup>68</sup> More direct measures, such as increasing duty rates or introducing a direct harm levy on producers, would also lead to a more accurate true cost of alcohol and could provide appropriate incentives and

disincentives to ensure a more sustainable, health-focused, and fairer alcohol sector in the future.

### Eco-labelling

Labelling products with their environmental impact would help consumers better understand the impact of the products they are buying.

Several such initiatives already exist in the food and drink sector, albeit at a small level currently. Eco-Score is a joint labelling effort by a French consortium of companies and has been rolled out or piloted by various companies, including Lidl GB.<sup>69</sup> The initiative assesses the environmental impact of the whole lifecycle of a product, through production, fabrication, transport and packaging, and gives a score out of 100. This is then given a designated score in a traffic light system that can be used to help guide customers.

Foundation Earth has a similar traffic light system, with ratings from A-G that appear on the product, with further information available on their website.<sup>70</sup>

This further information breaks down the impact into four measures – carbon, water usage, water pollution, and biodiversity – and allocates these across five categories within the product's lifecycle – ingredients, processing, transport, packaging, and retail. The example below shows that the majority of the environmental impact of Meatless Farm Plant-Based Sausages occurs at the beginning of the product's lifecycle.



**Meatless Farm Plant-Based Sausages Ecological Impact - proportion of impact across five categories<sup>71</sup>**



The alcohol producer Avallen, which makes a type of apple brandy, states on its labels that it removes 2.73kg of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere with every bottle it makes – without external offsetting – by locking up CO<sub>2</sub> during the growth of their trees. Avallen scores 9.2/10 on the sustainability review platform Wherefrom.org.<sup>72</sup> In March 2022, it launched a bottle made from 94% recycled paperboard, which is lighter than glass bottles, lowering the environmental impact of this particular product further.<sup>73</sup> On their product label they detail much of this on an environmental facts panel, which displays carbon emissions, water use, recycled material use and charitable donations.

Tim Etherington-Judge, the co-founder of Avallen, said: “The spirits industry has a total lack of labelling transparency, with brands not even required to list ingredients on the bottle, let alone their ecological impact. We want to change that and lead from the front, communicating our environmental footprint as clearly as possible for people looking to understand more about the effect of the products they buy. Our new label represents that desire, and we hope that we’re the first of many brands to take this action.”<sup>74</sup>

However, there are also clear risks to effectively implementing labelling schemes, especially the risk of companies using the schemes as a cynical CSR and marketing ploy. Such initiatives cannot be industry-led schemes, as these have been consistently shown to be ineffective or weaker, such as with sugar cut-offs for food labels. If brought in, eco-labelling needs

to be consistent across products and evaluated independently of the industry.

Following a recommendation during the webinar series, the following elements should be included in sustainability labelling to ensure the schemes are effective:

1. Data on the impact of individual ingredients and assessments going all the way back to raw materials
2. Packaging considerations, such as size and recyclability
3. Biodiversity, habitat loss and endangering species
4. Social impacts, such as working conditions and fair pay

Eco-labelling minimum standards should be set and monitored by an independent body, to ensure labels are consistent across products and brands.

Eco-labelling also needs to be balanced against other aspects of product labelling, such as product information, nutritional information, and health warnings. There is a potential risk that purported environmental benefits are promoted, losing focus on the health-harming aspects of alcohol (**Case study 5**). It is therefore important to ensure that other mandatory labelling requirements are included alongside eco-labelling – such as product and nutritional information including calorie information, the CMO’s low risk guidelines, and health warnings.

### Case study 5: Brewdog’s ‘Lost Forest’<sup>75</sup>

Brewdog recently bought a 3,700-hectare estate in Scotland to use for native woodland establishment and peatland restoration. Renaming it ‘Lost Forest’, Brewdog has used this for cause-related marketing. For example, sales of a limited-edition ‘Lost Forest lager’ have been linked to the planting of new native trees.

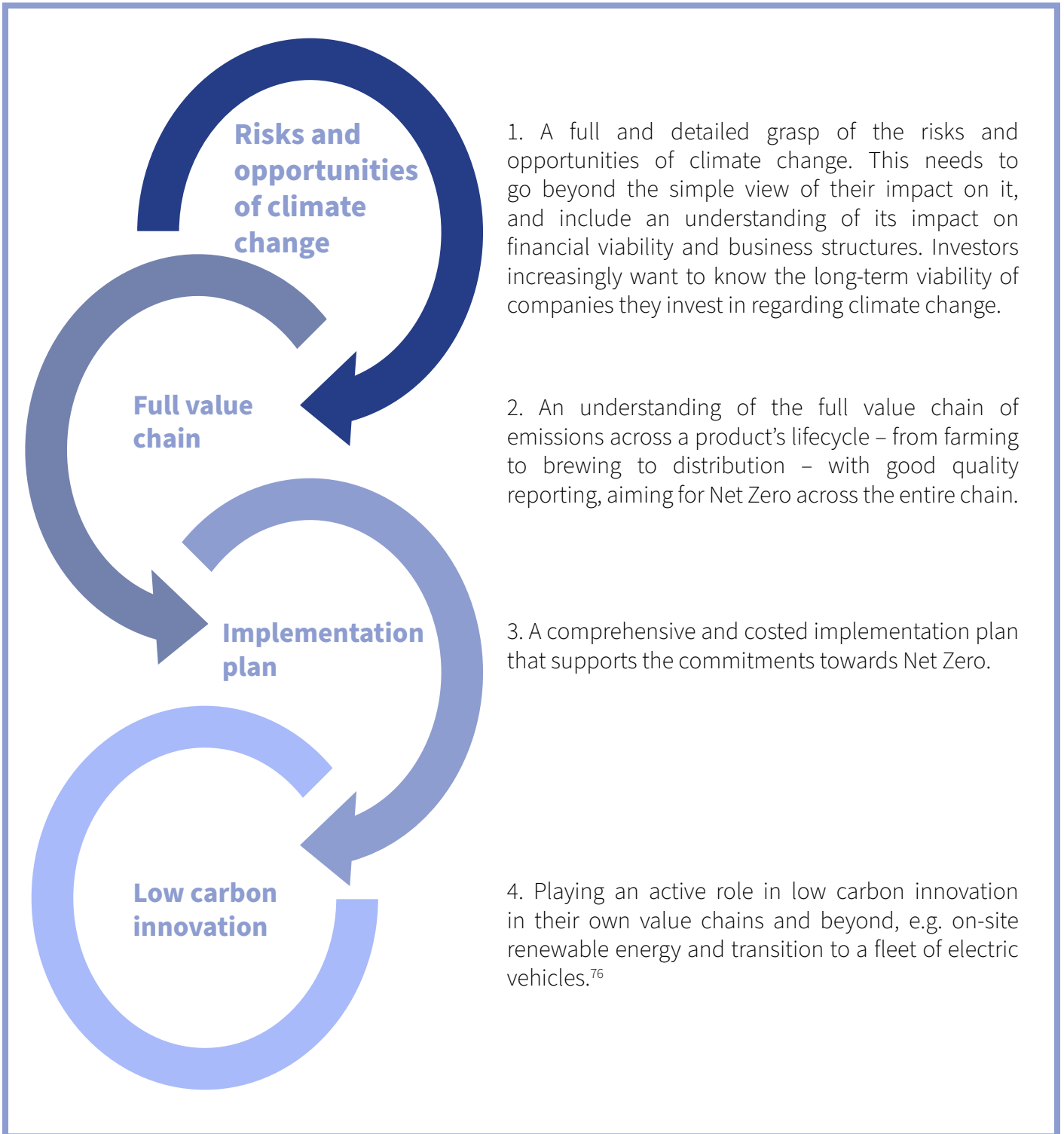
However, Brewdog received financial support from the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme to replant the forest, which could be up to £1.25 million. Buying the forest has thus created a win-win for Brewdog, in which it receives payments for woodland creation while appearing to demonstrate corporate commitment to sustainability and using this as a marketing opportunity for its unhealthy commodity.



## What can and should companies do?

From 2023, all UK listed companies will be required to publish Net Zero transition plans detailing how they will decarbonise to meet 2050 Net Zero targets. There are four core areas that companies need to focus

on. This only starts to address the carbon emissions of alcohol production, and does not include other issues such as water use, biodiversity impacts, or displacement of essential food production:



## Conclusion

The production, packaging, transporting, and storing of alcoholic products contributes a significant amount to greenhouse gas emissions around the world, as well as contributing to various other environmental harms. Companies and individuals should change their practices in order to reduce this impact and work towards a more sustainable approach. Various strategies and approaches already exist and are being developed in other industries, and should be adopted in the alcohol sphere too.



## Chapter 3: Alcohol industry and human rights

“ Human rights are standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings. Human rights govern how individual human beings live in society and with each other, as well as their relationship with the State and the obligations that the State have towards them ” - UNICEF<sup>77</sup>

Human rights are an essential part of sustainable development. As the UN states, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development “is firmly anchored in human rights principles and standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights treaties”<sup>78,79</sup>

Human rights are legally binding. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) distinguishes between negative rights – which oblige inaction such as not restricting speech or freedom from violent crime – and positive rights – which oblige action such as the right to food, good health, or public education.<sup>80</sup> A human rights-based approach – which uses human rights arguments to hold private or public institutions accountable for infringements – could be transformative to advocate for effective alcohol control policies. Such an approach is grounded in law, brings together human rights and public health communities, and allows a reprioritisation between health and economic policies.

There is an inherent conflict between the commercial goals of alcohol companies and the protection of individuals and their health, with the sale and promotion of alcohol directly harming individuals' right to health, and the right to life, survival and development. The WHO's Global Alcohol Action Plan therefore specifically states that “access to prevention and treatment of alcohol use disorders is part of the right to health”<sup>81</sup>

### Human rights abuses by the alcohol industry

There is evidence that some alcohol companies, typically powerful multinationals, have violated

human rights during the production and distribution of their products. Over the past few decades, several investigations have highlighted human rights abuses by alcohol companies, particularly in the Global South.<sup>82,83</sup> This has ranged from illegal levels of pay and poor health and safety, to the sexual assault of ‘promotion girls’.<sup>84</sup> Meaningful change and attempts to improve conditions have often only been made after companies have been called out for their bad practices. And in South Africa, despite issues being raised numerous times in recent years, human rights issues persist among the wine-growing regions.<sup>85,86</sup>

#### Case study 6: Italy's vineyards<sup>87</sup>

In 2021, Oxfam worked with the Swedish monopoly alcohol retailer Systembolaget – which is wholly-owned by the Swedish state – to run a human rights impact assessment of its Italian wine supply chains.

The assessment found substantial human rights issues across all regions assessed. For example, low wages were prevalent, and a significant number of workers were unable to meet their basic needs without working overtime. Migrant workers, especially in southern Sicily, were highly vulnerable to exploitation and forced labour.

Health and safety risks were seen particularly in Tuscany, Piemonte and Puglia. This included exhaustion, heat, and toxic fumes, with many workers saying they receive no or inadequate protection.



## A timeline of human rights abuses in South Africa's wine industry

2009

War on Want reports that UK supermarkets “squeeze suppliers to ensure low prices” leading to wine producers increasingly only paying workers for grapes picked not hours worked.<sup>82</sup>

The report goes on to show that this power imbalance leads to a lack of formal employment contracts, a deterioration of working conditions, women being paid less than men and experiencing sexual harassment at work.

2015

The International Labour Organisation reports that very few farmworkers across the Western Cape Winelands have pension schemes, paid sick leave, or maternity leave.<sup>85</sup> Although banned in 1960, the report shows some people are still paid part of their wage in wine – known as the Dop System.

The report highlights serious alcohol harm among farmworkers and that the rate of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in the Winelands is 52 times higher than in the United States.

2011

Human Rights Watch reports that farmworkers on South African vineyards earn among the lowest wages in the country, work long hours in harsh weather often without drinking water or toilet access, and are exposed to toxic pesticides.<sup>83</sup>

The report states that steps by government and private actors have not been sufficient to bring standards up to scratch. One family spoken to lived in a pig stall with no electricity.

2016

A documentary called Bitter Grapes reports on the terrible working and living conditions in the Western Cape, with people living in cardboard shelters, earning \$4 a day, and being increasingly displaced by even worse paid migrant workers: “a global race to outsource work to some of the poorest people in the world”.<sup>86</sup>

In the documentary a then board member of the Wine and Agricultural Ethical Trade Association is quoted as saying “For me personally, it seems as if modern day slavery is practiced on many farms, and the farmworker is almost viewed as ‘the property’ of the employer.”<sup>88</sup>

## Farmworkers in South Africa spraying pesticides without personal protective equipment<sup>88</sup>



### Heineken's practices in Africa

In his book, *Heineken in Africa: a Multinational Unleashed*, journalist Olivier van Beemen investigates some of Heineken's practices in Africa. While focused on Heineken, van Beemen states the intention is not to single out one company, but is more of a case study for how multiple alcohol multinationals are doing business across Africa.

Van Beemen shows that Heineken consistently points out how difficult it is to operate and produce in the African market.<sup>84</sup> Within that narrative, the company positions itself as being good for development, especially in terms of economic and community growth. Any wrongdoings - as laid out in this section - are put down to the difficulties of the market and environment, rather than the company itself.

However, the damage that the company does to the economies of countries across Africa outweighs any benefit it may bring, argues van Beemen. Not only does alcohol lead to a range of health harms and associated costs and loss of productivity, but van Beemen's investigation also suggests Heineken contributes to entrenching gender inequality and has been complicit in crimes against humanity.<sup>89</sup> Weak

governments mean Heineken can avoid meaningful regulation, while low levels of education mean Heineken's messages about the supposed positive properties of beer can be spread easily.

By establishing itself as one of the main economic forces in African countries, it can be argued that Heineken has also indirectly sponsored human rights abuses. For example, Burundi, officially the poorest country on Earth, receives 10% of its GDP and 30% of tax revenues from Heineken.<sup>89</sup> Van Beemen writes that the country's Finance Minister told him that monthly payments of alcohol duties from Heineken subsidiary Brarudi effectively paid the salaries of civil servants. Van Beemen argues that "This means that Heineken pays the salaries of the police officers, soldiers and security services that are repressing the civilian population and committing crimes against humanity."<sup>90</sup>

Other human rights infringements van Beemen records relate to workers' rights and the treatment of women hired to promote their products. Heineken increasingly uses zero-hour contracts and subcontractors, and often does not offer pension schemes. In many countries, the income of a day labourer or temporary worker does not amount to the "decent standard of living" that the company says is its goal. Workplace safety has also been a concern: from 2005-2016, 150 people died in work-related incidents.<sup>84</sup>

In the early 2000s in Nigeria, Heineken hired over 2,000 sex workers to help boost beer sales.<sup>91</sup> According to van Beemen, the general manager who launched the plan made it clear that these women were supposed to have sex with customers to increase sales.

Slightly less explicit has been the hiring of 'promotion girls' to promote alcohol in bars in both Asia and Africa. Many of these women, who are often young and vulnerable, experience sexual harassment at work.<sup>84</sup> In 2000 in Cambodia, a group of aid organisations raised the issue, writing that these women were being treated akin to "indirect sex workers". In response, Heineken eventually issued a set of guidelines entitled 'Promotion Girls Policy:

Selling Beer Safely' and started running trainings for women.<sup>92</sup>

Van Beemen's investigation uncovered more examples of the same practice in more recent years, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria and Rwanda. He found an internal document which showed that, in 2007, Heineken was using 15,000 promotion women globally. This included 70 markets which were considered risky for those women, as the work involved little pay, forced them to wear sexualised clothing, and could lead to sexual assault.<sup>93</sup> The internal report recognised that "the enormous uncertainty of keeping a job combined with the absence of employee rights of legal status makes PW [promotion women] vulnerable for misuse from several stakeholders".<sup>84</sup> This included women having sex with managers to keep their jobs. A salesman in DRC's capital Kinshasa confirmed this view, telling van Beemen: "Of course these girls are harassed, they are filles à tout faire [girls who can do multiple jobs]. It's part of the profession."

Responding to the revelations in Heineken in Africa, the company said in 2018 that it would stop employing promoters if they "can't guarantee good working conditions ... in certain markets by the end of June". However, little had changed by the summer of 2018 when van Beemen revisited the continent. Moreover, Heineken's then CEO Jean-François van Boxmeer backtracked on the previous commitment, saying in an interview that Heineken "cannot be responsible if a customer treats a promoter inappropriately", as they "can't control everything". Instead, he blamed the intermediary agencies that hired promotion women.<sup>84</sup> He had previously referred to the #MeToo movement as "a Western phenomenon" and admitted to having an affair with a beer promoter when he worked in Kinshasa in the 1990s.<sup>94</sup> Van Beemen says that this "sheds light on Heineken's indifference" to the situation.<sup>91</sup>

This example highlights well how some multinational alcohol companies have little regard for the social dimensions of sustainability, for instance worker conditions and pay or women's rights. They present themselves as being good for the development and economy of less-developed countries, yet in truth

undermine human rights and hinder sustainable development. As these abuses mainly take place across the Global South, it highlights how such companies will harness and manipulate situations in countries where there is less structured governance and accountability. Rather than supporting countries to develop sustainably, the ultimate aim of their activities is to increase market share and therefore product sales. The long-standing nature of some of these patterns shows how little is being done by governments to improve the situation.

## Alcohol harm reduction: a human rights-based approach

The WHO's Global alcohol action plan 2022-2030 specifically calls for a human rights approach within the development and implementation of alcohol control policies.<sup>95</sup> The tobacco and unhealthy food and drinks policy areas provide good examples of how human rights can be used to regulate health-harming products.

Discourse and action on the control of unhealthy food and drinks has progressed significantly in the last few years, with the primary concern relating to children's rights. The UK's Obesity Strategy, which aims to "tackle childhood obesity", set out plans to restrict the marketing of products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS).<sup>96, 97</sup> This is an example of how the rights of the child to good health have led to specific action on marketing, and similar legal arguments can be made for alcohol control. Alcohol Focus Scotland's 2022 marketing report specifically calls for a human rights-based approach, with regard to restricting alcohol marketing.<sup>98</sup>

Within tobacco control, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) was derived from previous international human rights conventions. The FCTC has been described as "the most potent tool for implementation of tobacco control laws across the globe".<sup>99</sup>

A Framework Convention on Alcohol Control (FCAC), similar to the FCTC, would provide an evidence-based treaty that reaffirms the right of all people to the highest standard of health. Negotiated under the auspices of an international agency, such as

the WHO, it would provide the legal dimension for international health co-operation and could help shift the paradigm to prioritise human rights above commercial interests.<sup>100</sup>

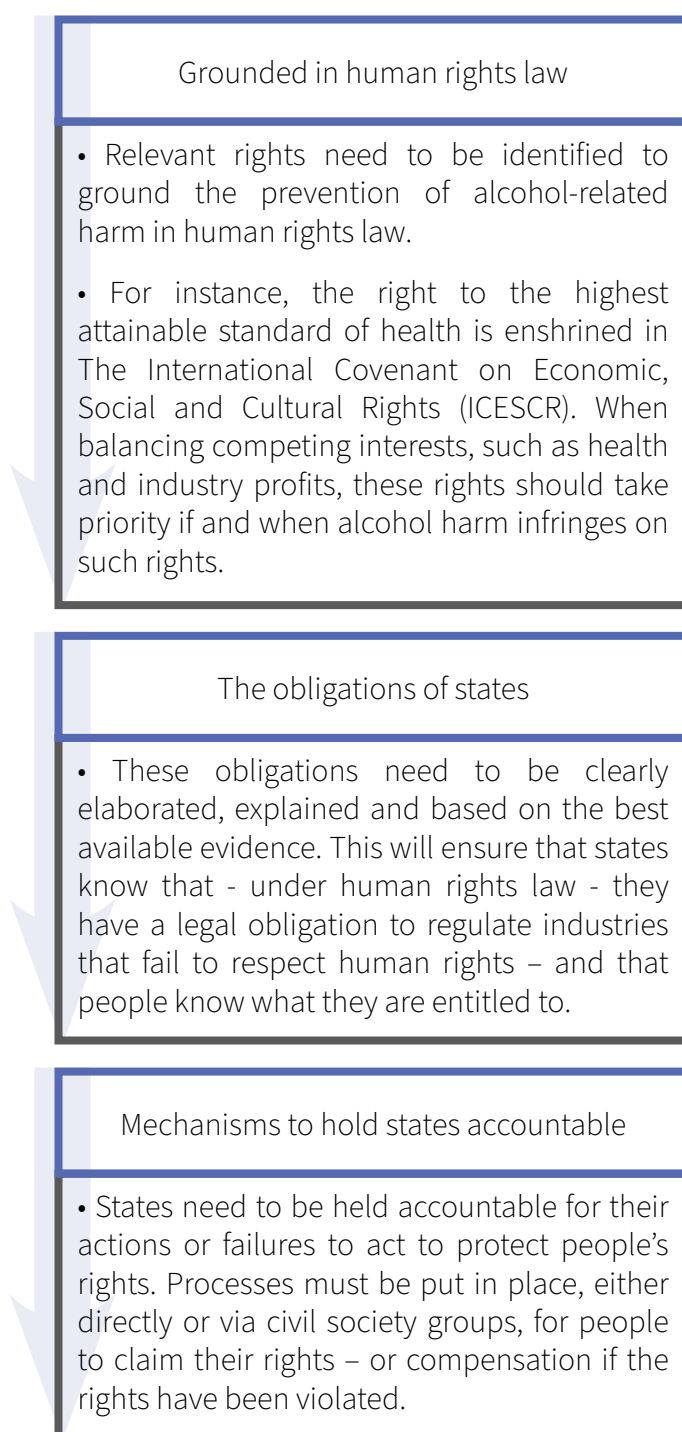
The intention of setting up such a treaty would be to reach an international consensus on alcohol control, as was achieved by the FCTC in relation to tobacco. An FCAC should prioritise the obligation of states to protect public health and should include measures on controlling the alcohol market, restricting alcohol promotion, and on public education and training.<sup>100</sup> The alcohol industry must not be involved in the treaty's development given its conflict of interest.

To move towards an FCAC, the WHO should work with Member States and other UN agencies to highlight alcohol harm as a major human rights concern, as it has done with other non-communicable disease factors, such as smoking and poor diet. Resources should be allocated towards academic research into the role human rights can play in the prevention and treatment of alcohol harm, as well as highlighting the barriers and steps needed to move towards this approach.

Following a human rights-based approach and establishing an FCAC has the potential to be transformative. To be effective it must:

1. Be grounded in international human rights law and draw on global and regional treaties and conventions.<sup>101, 102</sup>
2. Place legal obligations on states to uphold people's rights.<sup>102</sup>
3. Have a mechanism to ensure human rights are realised to human rights holders (the people) and that states are held accountable when rights are not respected, protected and fulfilled.<sup>102</sup>

The following diagram explains these steps in more detail.



## Conclusion

There have been many reported cases of human rights abuses within the alcohol industry in recent years, particularly in the Global South. A human-rights based approach to alcohol control policies, and moving towards an FCAC, could be transformative in the alcohol harm reduction sphere.

## Conclusion

This report provides an argument for implementing effective alcohol control policies to reduce consumption and subsequent harm, beyond the more frequently discussed arguments of direct health harms, harm to others, and the economic cost. It argues that we must also consider alcohol's impediment to sustainability, within the context of alcohol being a non-essential product.

Global alcohol production damages our environment by emitting greenhouse gases, reducing biodiversity, using excessive clean water, and contributing to huge amounts of waste. The health harms caused by alcohol widen socioeconomic inequality, and human rights abuses by alcohol multinationals have been documented. Many of these issues help explain why alcohol is an impediment to 13 of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Therefore, the UK and other countries need to include the role of alcohol in discussions regarding sustainability. There are many proven, effective alcohol control policies that can and should be implemented to reduce alcohol harms, from raising excise duty on alcohol and introducing minimum unit pricing, to a comprehensive restriction on alcohol marketing and promotion, including CSR activity. These policies would improve both public health and sustainability.

Additional recommendations include taking a human rights-based approach to alcohol control, so that public health is always prioritised above commercial interests. Moreover, a True Value of Alcohol metric should be developed, to ensure the external costs of alcohol harm are included within its price.

Countries can only hope to achieve sustainability targets by taking a holistic approach to the many factors and harms that prevent or slow their progress towards those targets. By understanding how these factors and harms are interlinked, and the action

that can be taken to tackle them, the health of our people and planet can be prioritised and improved.



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