

WHO Foundation should not accept donations from the alcohol industry

Accepting such donations would place WHO at risk of industry influence

To protect the independence and integrity of WHO, WHO Foundation should not accept donations from the alcohol industry according to a commentary published in the journal **BMJ Global Health**.

WHO Foundation was created as an independent entity in 2020 to raise funding for WHO from sources with which WHO would not normally engage, including the private sector, as the failure of Member States to agree to increase their mandatory contributions has left WHO dependent on private sources of funding.

While WHO Foundation's Gift Acceptance Policy says donations should "not compromise WHO's integrity, independence, credibility and reputation," it does not specifically preclude donations from the alcohol industry.

In the initial version of the policy (dated March 2021), alcohol was categorised alongside the tobacco and arms industries in the 'red' category as 'strictly off limits' for the Foundation, but it was moved to the 'orange' category in a later version (May 2021), allowing WHO Foundation to determine whether acceptance of a gift was appropriate on a 'case-by-case basis,' and then the 'orange' category was removed (December 2021).

The authors question "whether this apparent failure by WHO Foundation to exclude the alcohol industry is appropriate, given the alcohol industry relies for its profits on the sale of products which impair consumers' abilities to control their use and are responsible for significant harm to drinkers and others."

The alcohol industry has longstanding and close relationships with the tobacco industry, they add, and adopts very similar strategies, such as corporate social responsibility activities to build credibility with policymakers, attempting to position themselves as partners in tackling alcohol harm.

The authors point to evidence suggesting that stronger safeguards against alcohol industry influence on WHO's alcohol policy are needed. WHO's global alcohol action plan (2022-2030) was produced following consultation with numerous stakeholders, including the alcohol industry. The consultative processes showed inadequate implementation of WHO's own policy to manage potential conflicts of interest in its interactions with non-State actors such as private sector and non-governmental organisations.

The authors write, "The alcohol industry's conflicting interests with public health means that WHO requires robust safeguards against industry interference and the resources needed to implement them. It remains unclear how WHO Foundation's policies can sufficiently protect WHO from industry interference."

From the information on its website, it is not possible to determine whether WHO Foundation has accepted any donations from the alcohol industry because its Gift Acceptance Policy allows donors to remain anonymous provided their identity is known to WHO Foundation. WHO Foundation has published a list of contributions through to 31 December 2021, totalling over US\$28million. Of the 42 donations on the list, 14 were anonymised, including 10 donations of over US\$100 000.

This lack of transparency is inconsistent with WHO's Framework for Engagement with Non-State Actors which requires WHO to make public disclosures on private sector and non-governmental organisations that it engages with.

“Irrespective of transparency, WHO’s reliance on private funding fundamentally places the agency at risk of influence by the conflicting interests of corporate actors, such as the alcohol industry,” the authors conclude.

“As improvements to the sustainability of WHO’s current financing model remain uncertain, safeguards against corporate influence must be strengthened. Clarification of WHO Foundation’s policy not to accept donations from the alcohol industry is an important first step.”