Partnering Over the Legal Limit: The Global Fund's Brewing Crisis

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We strongly disagree with the recent comments from the Global Fund's new leader, Peter Sands.[1] In the face of serious concerns from civil society[2], researchers[3], journals[4] and national representatives[5,6] about the Fund's partnership with Heineken, Sands states that "the global health community needs to engage with the private sector more rather than less. […] Because if we really want to achieve the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] and build more resilient health systems, we need to partner with the private sector to leverage their resources and their capabilities to innovate." This unquestioningly reproduces a corporate logic that engagement with industry – all industries, regardless of their products and effect – is both inevitable and beneficial in all areas. This logic is highly questionable, and dangerous to global health.

The growing condemnation of the Global Fund is not about the public-private partnership model. It is about the Fund's specific partnership with Heineken. It is about the necessity for the Fund to scrutinize possible partnerships more closely and assess them in terms of the company's underlying interests and health impacts. The Fund's partners should not include private sector actors such as those in the alcohol industry, whose deleterious impact on health and pernicious attempts to shape policy in their interests are increasingly recognized. Instead they should be aligned with the Fund's mandate and the SDGs. Against these common-sense criteria, a partnership with Heineken is clearly unthinkable.

Since Sands issued those statements, The Global Fund has suspended its partnership with Heineken over concerns about its treatment of women, in its words, "until such time as Heineken can take appropriate action to address these issues".[7] However, this partnership needs to be terminated, not suspended.

Alcohol not only kills more than 3.3 million individuals annually (slightly more than HIV, TB and malaria combined), but also specifically negatively impacts HIV and TB and has broadly negative implications for health. Moreover, the SDGs include a wider focus than just HIV, TB and malaria. The SDG for health (SDG3) also includes targets to reduce traffic injuries and non-communicable diseases, both of which are exacerbated by alcohol. SDG3 explicitly targets the need to strengthen interventions to prevent the abuse of alcohol. With all of the targets, SDG3 aims to "ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages." The Global Fund cannot possibly say it is working towards the SDGs and maintain its partnership with the alcohol industry. The SDGs need to be reality, not rhetoric.

Sands' response in favour of partnering with the alcohol industry eerily echoes pro-corporate spin previously associated with another private sector pariah, the tobacco industry, the business model and political strategies of which are now mirrored by the alcohol industry.[8] These sorts of statements work against public health interests and damage The Global Fund's reputation, and should deeply concern the global health community. Given that The Global Fund Secretariat seems unable or unwilling to redress this brewing crisis, we recommend that the Board take action immediately, both to protect The Global Fund's standing within the global health community before the next replenishment, and to ensure the continuation of The Global Fund's mandate in line with the SDGs.

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