

HCC Press Release

Caribbean Alcohol Reduction Day 2024: Unmasking Influence: Regulating Alcohol Marketing in the Caribbean

On **Friday 29th November, 2024**, the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), in partnership with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), hosted a webinar in recognition of the ninth annual Caribbean Alcohol Reduction Day (CARD) 2024. This year's CARD was centered around the theme - **Unmasking Influence: Regulating Alcohol Marketing in the Caribbean**. The webinar aimed to build awareness about the dangers of alcohol consumption and the extent of alcohol marketing in the region especially targeting young people and women; and build support for the implementation of evidence-informed alcohol policies recommended by PAHO/WHO outlined in the [WHO Safer Technical Package](#) and the [Global Alcohol Action Plan 2022-2030](#).

From the lyrics of catchy, popular kaiso 'soca' songs to a high demand commodity at sporting events and Carnival 'fetes', alcohol is heavily ingrained in the fabric of Caribbean society, culture and entertainment, and marketed everywhere. Stemming from its deep-rooted origins in the sugar industry, the Caribbean has emerged as one of the major alcohol producers and distributors globally - home to some of the household names in the alcohol industry trade.

As one of the five modifiable risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), alcohol consumption contributes to a range of health and social conditions including mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorders, interpersonal violence and suicides, several types of cancer including esophagus, liver, breast and colon¹, liver and cardiovascular diseases, and increased risk of infectious diseases². Globally, around 2.6 million deaths were caused by alcohol consumption in 2019, of which 1.6 million deaths were from NCDs³. In the Americas, alcohol was responsible for 5.5% of all deaths and 6.7% of all disability-adjusted life years⁴.

Dr. Juan Tello, Unit Head, Less Alcohol at the World Health Organisation (WHO), emphasised that *"All or any level of alcohol consumption carries risks - because it is a psychoactive, addictive and carcinogen substance. The language around these perceived risks needs to change, particularly cancer risks - there is no safe level of alcohol use for our health."* Since 1988, alcohol has been classed as a Group 1 carcinogen/cancer-causing agent by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)²; the highest risk which also includes asbestos, tobacco, radiation and processed meats.

Despite this, there appears to be a general lack of public awareness about the dangers of alcohol consumption, specifically its link to cancers and other NCDs. *"I don't think that people in the region are even aware of the association between alcohol and cancer,"* noted Dr. Tamara Remy, President of the Saint Lucia Cancer Society, Consultant General Surgeon and member of the Board of Directors of the HCC.

¹ NCDA, "Trouble Brewing: Making the Case for Alcohol Policy," 2018, https://ncdalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/TroubleBrewing_Draft_Final_small_v2.pdf.

² WHO, "Global Alcohol Action Plan 2022 - 2030," 2024, <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/376939/9789240090101-eng.pdf>.

³ WHO, "Alcohol Use," accessed November 18, 2024, <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/fact-sheets/item/alcohol-use>.

⁴ "Alcohol - PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization," October 31, 2024, <https://www.paho.org/en/topics/alcohol>.

Dangers of Alcohol Marketing in the Caribbean

Marketing is a powerful tool used by industries to drive consumption and the alcohol industry is no exception. Alcohol marketing increases intention to drink, levels of consumption and normalizes consumption. The early onset of alcohol use in adolescence and young adulthood increases the risk to adverse health and social outcomes, as well as NCDs later in life⁵, fuelling their likelihood of developing alcohol dependence than those who begin at a later age⁶. The unregulated nature of alcohol marketing drives its use and related harm among vulnerable groups, such as young people and women. Like other unhealthy commodities such as ultra-processed products (high in saturated fats, trans-fats, sugar or salt) and tobacco products, the alcohol industry strategically targets these groups as key growth sectors. Under the guise of 'Corporate Social Responsibility', they continue to capitalize on public crises and sports as evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when popular alcohol brands donated [branded sanitizer](#) to high school students and [sponsorship of young athletes](#).

Through contradictory attempts to demonstrate their commitment to women's issues, several popular alcohol brands across the region recently exploited October Breast Cancer Awareness Month 2024, through the promotion of [pink-coloured alcohol beverages](#) or paraphernalia, and the provision of free [breast cancer screening to the public and monetary donations](#) to national cancer societies. These tactics not only aim to exploit the mandates of vulnerable, financially constrained NCD-focused civil society organisations (CSOs) but propel the growing trend of alcohol consumption among women by encouraging them to 'drink pink' and 'have cocktail for a cause', and distract from its health harms. This calls for conscious decision-making by CSOs in recognizing and avoiding these predatory partnerships. Dr. Remy cautioned that, *"the thrust for getting funding and sponsorships should never take priority over what our [CSO's] mandate is."* Dr. Asante VanWest - Charles le Blanc, Director on the Board of Directors for the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society shared that, *"The Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society has taken a stance a few years back on such partnerships not being acceptable as a conflict of interest. CSOs have to make a decision...we can't talk the talk and not walk the walk."*

The Power of Regulation

Competing commercial interests and deficit of comprehensive and reliable data on alcohol consumption and related harm, weaken political will and further delay the implementation of alcohol control policies in the region, at the expense of public health and well-being. Despite international guidance and regional advocacy, progress is lagging behind. Professor Rohan Maharaj, HCC Alcohol Policy Advisor shared that at present no CARICOM country has implemented comprehensive alcohol regulations and no country has bans or restrictions on alcohol marketing⁷. Notably, the WHO SAFER Technical Package, outlines five (5) cost-effective best buys or interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm which include restrictions on alcohol availability, and on alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotion. Professor Maharaj pointed to a glimmer of hope - a commendable example of mitigating conflicts of interest from Jamaica's Minister of Health

⁵ UNICEF, "Generation Unlimited: Well-Being of Young People in the Eastern Caribbean Final Report," 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/easterncaribbean/media/2981/file/GenU%20full%20report.pdf>.

⁶ NCDA.

⁷ HCC, "NCD Progress Indicators," 2022, <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NCD-progress-monitor-Caribbean-Countries-2022.pdf>.

& Wellness, Dr. the Honourable Christopher Tufton, who in 2021 issued an internal memo stating that public health institutions in Jamaica should not associate or use public health platforms to promote alcohol brands. The memo is still in effect today.

The Bigger Picture

Guided by the Global Alcohol Action Plan 2022-2030, the Caribbean region must move away from the 'drink responsibly' mindset and adopt a renewed focus on the harmful use of alcohol as a public health priority. Through the commemoration of CARD 2024, the HCC is calling on **CARICOM governments** to implement bans or comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotion especially those targeting young people and women; **CSOs** to be mindful of such partnerships and prioritize raising awareness of the harms of alcohol consumption and reshaping cultural acceptance; **individuals** to be aware of the dangers of alcohol consumption and follow the guidance - if you don't drink don't start, if you do drink, drink less; and the **alcohol industry** to cease alcohol marketing specifically targeting young people and women, especially through sport and during Breast Cancer Awareness month respectively.

For more information about Caribbean Alcohol Reduction Day, and to see the webinar recording visit HCC's website at: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/9th-caribbean-alcohol-reduction-day-card-2024/>