The WHO’s Neo-Prohibitionism on wine shaping global policies

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In January 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) made a shocking revelation: there is no safe and healthy amount of alcohol consumption. This message followed a policy undertaken over the past five years in which the **WHO** has viewed moderate alcohol consumption as a serious public health emergency. We rely on an interesting article by journalist Felicity Carter published in WineBusiness Monthly to provide a closer look at how this situation has come about.

In 2015, more than 20 public health organizations resigned from the **Alcohol and Health Forum of the European Union**, a committee where legislators, representatives from the alcohol industry, and public health experts discussed how to reduce

the significant alcohol-related harm in the EU: more than 120,000 premature deaths and over 125 billion euros in various related costs, linked to crime, health, and social issues. The reason for this failure? Health organizations saw the Forum as fatally compromised by the alcohol industry, according to WineBusiness Monthly. The consequences soon followed, and the collapse of the Forum left a huge void in European alcohol policy. In the wake of this void, the WHO launched the SAFER initiative in 2018, a set of policy recommendations to reduce alcohol-related harm. As openly declared by the WHO at the time, SAFER was created in collaboration with international partners such as the UN and Vital Strategies, a New York-based nonprofit known for its effective anti-tobacco work. Other named partners included I.O.G.T. (later Movendi International), the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance, and the NCD (Non-Communicable Diseases) Alliance. These are all openly anti-alcohol groups, whose names have started to appear regularly in WHO documents.

Guidelines for journalists unfavorable to alcohol consumption

An interesting example cited by the journalist **Carter,** and which closely concerns us, is the “Guide for Journalists on Reporting on Alcohol” published by the WHO in April 2023, which also involved some communication professionals affiliated with Movendi International, the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance, the NCD Alliance, and Eurocare. The most significant of these anti-alcohol groups is Movendi International, based in Stockholm.

This guide for journalists aims to “**suppor**t understanding and reporting on the harms caused by alcohol consumption to individuals, families, and society.” Some of the highlighted points, taken directly from the guide, are:

No amount of alcohol is safe to drink, yet there is a lack of

global awareness of the overall negative impact of alcohol consumption on health and safety.

More than half of the adults worldwide **do not consume alcohol**; their perspectives are underrepresented in the media, maintaining the common misunderstanding that alcohol consumption is an inevitable part of life.

Claims widely publicized that drinking a glass of red wine a day can protect against cardiovascular diseases are **mistaken** and distract from the many harms of alcohol use.

Alcohol consumption causes considerable harm to millions of people around the world, not just to heavier consumers, which is why **strong global** action is needed to protect the entire population.

We believe it is enough to cite these points to understand how the **anti-alcohol action** is very evident and clear.

Numerous other actions have also been implemented at the social level, like the 2022 initiative by GiveWell, a non-profit organization, which awarded a **$15 million grant** to the New York agency Vital Strategies and its partners, including the WHO, Movendi International, and other anti-alcohol NGOs, to launch the RESET initiative aimed at pushing for increased taxes on alcohol and combating its availability and promotion. The message “no level is safe” is destined to spread and has already had an impact: in August 2023, Gallup revealed that 39% of Americans believe that even moderate drinking is harmful to their health.

A different communication is needed

“No safe level” is a simple message to deliver and understand, while the science is complex, writes Felicity Carter. According to Sanchez Recarte of the **CEEV** – Comité européen des entreprises vins – the European wine industry had already anticipated this scenario years ago and for this reason

founded Wine in Moderation in 2008 as a response to the threat of anti-alcohol legislation. Its aim is to promote moderate consumption.

“The problem,” says Recarte, “is that there has been **constant lobbying** by others to shift from seeking the best actions to combat alcohol abuse to entering a political discussion on how to eliminate alcohol consumption.” According to Recarte, anti-alcohol NGOs play a decisive role in all this and instead believes the best way forward is to talk about wine as an integral part of the Mediterranean diet, recognized as the healthiest in the world. He also thinks it’s important to talk about wine as a craft product from a specific time and place, made by specific people. “This brings the idea of culture,” he said.

The real question with which the journalist concludes is: perhaps the real question that should be asked is why abstinence groups are allowed to drive global health policy?