

A PUBLIC HEALTH  
PERSPECTIVE ON  
ZERO-AND LOW-  
ALCOHOL BEVERAGES

**BRIEF 10, 2023**

SNAPSHOT SERIES ON  
ALCOHOL CONTROL  
POLICIES AND PRACTICE

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CONTROL POLICIES AND PRACTICE



A public health perspective on zero- and low-alcohol beverages. Brief 10  
(Snapshot series on alcohol control policies and practice)

ISBN 978-92-4-007215-2 (electronic version)  
ISBN 978-92-4-007216-9 (print version)

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**Suggested citation.** A public health perspective on zero- and low-alcohol beverages. Brief 10. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (Snapshot series on alcohol control policies and practice). Licence: [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/igo).

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Layout and design: Alberto March

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# ABOUT THE SERIES

In 2023, more than a decade after adopting the WHO global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol (1), attention has been called to accelerate the implementation of high-impact interventions for alcohol control. A global action plan for 2022–2030 (2) aims to leverage the available evidence and policy know-how and quicken progress in tackling alcohol consumption and its effects. Making evidence accessible and spotlighting real-world experiences is a core component for advancing the implementation of effective policy interventions. Doing so requires a multipronged approach that addresses the social and cultural acceptability of alcohol consumption, its availability and affordability.

In 2021, WHO launched a series of advocacy briefs about blind spots related to reducing alcohol consumption. The resulting topic-specific briefs were considered starting points for navigating the evidence and its use in practice, forming the first edition of the “Snapshot series”. [Topics covered](#) included socioeconomic inequalities, unrecorded alcohol, conflicts of interest, labelling, digital marketing and per capita alcohol consumption.

In 2022, the series continues its aim to create topical “snapshots”, serving as a compass for navigating critical topics related to high-impact and innovative interventions to accelerate progress in reducing alcohol consumption. The second edition of the series provides a portfolio of policy, system and practice guidance for tackling the determinants driving the acceptability, availability and affordability of alcohol. It explores, among other topics, no- and low-alcohol beverages, alcogenic settings and adolescents, gender-responsive alcohol control policies and policy options to respond to emergencies and pandemic situations.

## How was this brief developed?

The series has evolved in its approach to best meet the information needs of its readership, applying a four-step

process to explore each topic. First, leading experts were engaged in searching and consolidating the available scientific evidence. Second, the first-hand experiences of countries related to the topic were sampled and documented. Third, stakeholders were brought together in webinars to discuss the evidence and country experiences. Lastly, the literature, experiences from countries and insights from discussions were synthesised in a brief report that forms the varied issues of the “snapshot” series.

## Audience

The series is intended for a wide audience, including people working in public health, as well as those working in local and national alcohol and tobacco policy; policy-makers from national, regional and local administrations; government officials; researchers; civil society groups; consumer associations; the mass media; and people new to alcohol control policy, research or practice.

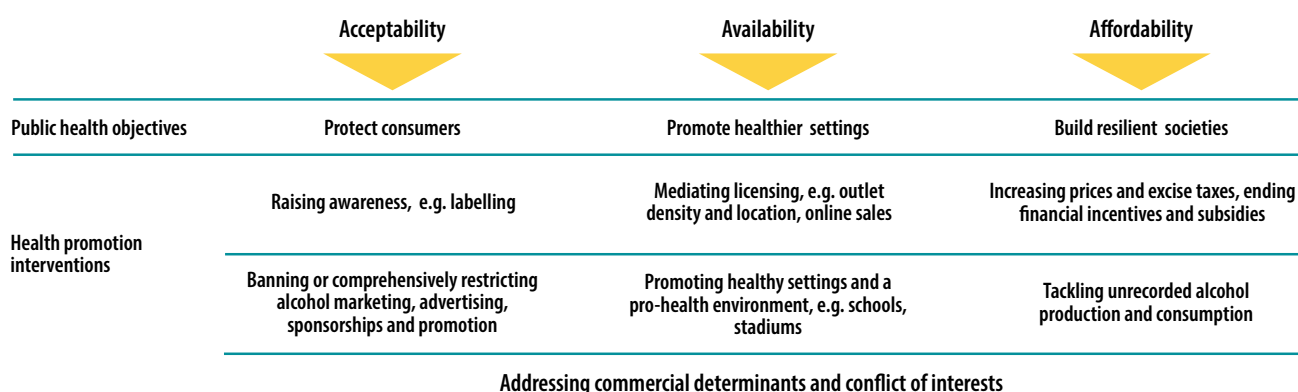
## What is a health promotion approach to reducing alcohol consumption?

Alcohol use has multidimensional connotations. Robust and growing evidence demonstrates that cultural, social and religious norms influence alcohol consumption, as well as its acceptability, ease of purchase (availability) and price (affordability). Addressing this multidimensional causality chain requires a portfolio of health promotion interventions to moderate the determinants driving alcohol consumption and, in turn, enable populations to increase control over and improve their health to realise their full potential.

## Interested in other topics?

Visit the [Less Alcohol webpage](#) for other briefs in this series and upcoming webinars. Subscribe to our [newsletter](#) to be informed about releases of new briefs and notified of webinars to take part in these conversations. If you have a suggestion for a topic that has yet to be explored, contact the team at [lessalcohol@who.int](mailto:lessalcohol@who.int) ■

## Determinants driving the consumption of alcohol



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*This work has been made possible thanks to the financial contribution of the Government of Norway.*

# BRIEF AT A GLANCE

**THE PROBLEM.** There is an expanding market of no- and low-alcohol beverages (NoLos), but they remain a small share of the alcohol market. Often, NoLos are portrayed as a solution for alcohol use or a harm reduction strategy for heavy alcohol users. Instead, NoLos normalise a culture of alcohol consumption and blur potential conflict of interest in developing public health policies. NoLos' effects on global ethanol consumption and overall public health are still in question. Policies and regulations about their availability, acceptability and affordability are lacking, and evidence about the benefits of NoLos is limited. Concerns have been raised about the impact of NoLos in reducing alcohol consumption and its associated harm and about the possible drawbacks and implications, such as misleading minors, pregnant women, abstainers or those seeking to stop consuming alcohol about their actual ethanol content. Further, there are concerns about the implications of NoLo branded products being displayed close to the brand's main alcoholic beverages and their potential to subtly lead to new occasions of consuming alcohol. The governance of NoLo products is fragmented and inconsistent, with no standards for labelling and marketing across countries.

**THE EVIDENCE.** There is a lack of evidence about the production, consumption and potential health impact of NoLos. Labelling and marketing of NoLos are weakly regulated, inconsistent across countries and present an opportunity for alibi marketing and for misleading consumers. The availability of NoLos can drive consumer choice and consumption and normalise alcohol consumption serving as gateway

products. Heavy users seem to consume NoLo on top of their regular alcohol consumption. On the other end, NoLo beers did not seem to act as a gateway to regular beer consumption but rather replaced the purchase of the higher ethanol beverages, especially when made relatively more available. The extent to which substitution between NoLos and higher strength beverages occurs remains unclear. Fiscal and pricing policies based on ethanol content may drive consumption towards lower-strength alcohol products and may support changes on both the production and consumption side, but a culture of "consuming to get drunk" limits these measures.

**THE KNOW-HOW.** Experiences from the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway and Thailand provide insights into the possible directions for policy interventions, particularly to address the marketing, labelling and taxation of NoLos.

**THE WAY FORWARD.** To understand the public health implications of NoLos, there is a need to monitor their consumption and impact on aggregated alcohol consumption. The alcohol by volume content of NoLos must be defined, harmonised and clearly labelled. NoLo marketing needs to be regulated to protect children, pregnant women and those seeking to stop consuming alcohol, for example, by extending existing marketing bans to include NoLo products. Fiscal and pricing policies to reduce the affordability of products with higher strengths of ethanol may favour a shift towards lower alcohol strength beverages; however, their effectiveness and safety should be further investigated ■

# WHY NOLOS ARE OF PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERN

This section provides a brief overview of why this issue matters to the health of populations and why it is worth further examining within global alcohol policy

The term “NoLos” refers to no- and low-alcohol content beverages<sup>1</sup>, a product category which has grown considerably in the last decade (3). In 2021, NoLos grew by more than 6% in volume in 10 key global focus markets (Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States of America) and representing 3.5 % of the global market share for alcohol. NoLos’ volume share is expected to grow by 8% between 2021 and 2025, while regular alcohol products are estimated to grow by 0.7% in the same period of time (4). Industry reports note that this is being driven largely by younger consumers who are interested in lower-calorie and non-alcoholic variants (5). Besides these health drivers, a report finds that European Union (EU) consumers of NoLo beverages seem attentive to similarity with the alcoholic beverages of reference, product quality, variety of choice and product innovation (6). The report also states that EU NoLo beverages producers are making substantial investments, especially in innovative technological solutions, to meet emerging consumption needs, considering that NoLos that mimic the organoleptic qualities of the reference alcoholic products still presents significant technological and economic challenges (6). Box 1 provides more details about the situation of NoLo products labelling in the EU.

At the individual level, NoLos have the potential to improve health through reduced levels of alcohol consumption. The more incisive promotion of products with a lower alcohol concentration has been proposed as a desirable strategy to reduce alcohol-related harms (7). However, the exact role of NoLos and the potential risks accompanying their proliferation is unknown. Further, there are several concerns related to the variable definitions of what qualifies

as a NoLo product, as well as the lack of regulations around their advertisement, purchasing and consumption that contribute to public health concerns.

At present, NoLos comprise a broad spectrum of products, ranging from 0% to 3.7% alcohol by volume (ABV). Many countries do not have an established definition for these beverages resulting in ineffective regulation for consumers’ information, international commerce and taxation purposes (8). For example, alcohol-free products could contain up to 2.8% ABV and low-alcohol products could contain between 0.05% and 3.7% ABV (8).

An additional category to consider is de-alcoholised beverages, which are products that originally contained alcohol and were processed to reduce their content. It is often unclear what alcohol content they reach after this processing (9).

Furthermore, “reduced alcohol” refers to beverages with an alcohol content lower than the average strength of that drink category. For instance, a wine with a 6% ABV is called a “reduced alcohol wine”, as wines typically have an ABV of between 11% and 14% (10). In Spain, there have been released “lower strength” gin and whiskey which are “only” 20% ABV instead of 40% ABV (11). Marketing these beverages as “reduced alcohol” or “lower strength” does not emphasise that they still contain a relatively high percentage of ABV.

Definitions and labelling are heterogeneous across products, producers and countries, resulting in misleading information to consumers and unclear ethanol content.

These terms have critical public health implications given the different regulations applied to alcoholic beverages compared to NoLo products, particularly as this pertains to issues of their advertising, marketing, labelling and availability.

<sup>1</sup> Mixed products obtained by combining alcoholic beverages with other ingredients or beverages other than water (e.g. mixed spirit drinks and wine-based drinks, as well as alcopops) are not included in the scope of the document.



## Box 1. The challenges in the European Union

In the EU, there is no specific harmonised legislation for NoLos, so member states remain free to regulate this area. The principle of mutual recognition allows goods legally sold in one country of the EU to be marketed and sold in any other. In this way, NoLo products can be imported and sold in other countries even if their description is not adherent to the receiving country's guidelines (3). As a result, there are significant differences concerning some critical aspects of NoLos, e.g. thresholds to define different categories of NoLo beverages across countries. However, these national differences in regulating NoLo products across the EU might increase barriers to trade and pose challenges between the EU and its key trading partners as the NoLo market and trade increase (6).

Some EU rules may also generate barriers to trade and challenges to informing consumers. For example, EU Regulation N. 1924/2006 prohibits any health claims on labels of beverages with more than 1.2% ABV, except those related to low alcohol levels, reduced alcohol content or reduced energy content. This provision allows the use of alcohol-related descriptors, but it does not define what a low alcohol level is. On the other side, EU Regulation N. 1169/2011 on food information to consumers exempts alcoholic beverages above 1.2% ABV from providing the list of ingredients and nutritional declaration. However, since NoLos are subject to the general rules of this regulation, they must display ingredients and nutritional information, which shows that alcoholic beverages can be labelled, regardless of the alcohol percentage and even though the alcohol industry claims that it is costly and complicated.

Few regulations are in place that control the advertising and marketing of NoLos compared to those with higher ABV. This is of particular concern for NoLos from well-known, large alcohol brands who can use alibi marketing (i.e. the use of core elements of a brand's identity) and brand stretching to promote their products and brand names in places that have otherwise restricted the marketing of alcoholic beverages. Whether the consumer can differentiate the NoLo product from the brand's flagship alcoholic product remains to be investigated. Further, the marketing of NoLo beverages may strengthen or change traditional social norms related to alcohol consumption in situations where alcohol is expected or should not be consumed usually (12, 13).

The governance of labelling requirements for NoLo products is fragmented, inconsistent and frequently voluntary rather than mandatory. As a result, the limited awareness about the differences among alcohol-free, non-alcoholic, reduced alcohol and low-strength beverages could lead consumers that cannot or do not want to consume alcohol to do so.

With respect to availability, NoLos may be purchased at a broader range of retail outlets than typical alcoholic beverages, further normalising alcohol consumption.

There are also implications for the affordability of alcohol through NoLo products. In many instances, taxes are applied by ABV percentage, resulting in higher taxes on products with higher ethanol concentrations. This allows industry, and consumers, to pay lower taxes for NoLos, resulting in cheaper products on the market, reducing the overall effectiveness of these taxes. A webinar about this topic is available on <https://www.who.int/multi-media/details/v>.

The following sections of this brief provide an overview of what we know from the evidence base about the effects of NoLos on public health, followed by country case studies that provide an overview of how some of these concerns have been addressed. The snapshot ends with considerations that should be further explored to ensure the conversation about NoLos continues beyond this brief ■

# WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT THE ACCEPTABILITY, AVAILABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY OF NOLOS

This section provides a summary of what is known about the issue and identifies gaps in the existing knowledge

**E**vidence about NoLos is, overall, scarce. This section scopes the recent literature on this topic and analyses it in terms of their acceptability, availability and affordability (see About this series).

Systematic searches were run in two databases – Health Systems Evidence and PubMed to retrieve evidence on the topic. Since there is a relative dearth of published literature on the topic, manual searches of cited references from each of the included reviews and studies were also completed. The collected material was synthesised according to the overall determinants driving alcohol consumption: acceptability, availability and affordability of NoLos.

Despite the growing market for these products, relatively little is known about the overall effects on public health, and additional independent studies should be conducted to grow the evidence base.

## Impact of NoLos on overall alcohol consumption

There is limited evidence on the effects of NoLos on overall alcohol consumption. Research to date has described both positive and negative effects on population health. However, some studies argue that NoLos may help individuals move away from stronger alcohol choices and facilitate “cutting back” through substitution. Other studies argue that NoLos further normalise an alcohol culture and may promote the “taste for alcohol”, particularly among populations for whom consumption is particularly risky (3, 14, 15).

One study in a systematic review found that household purchase data demonstrated that when substitution took place, it was associated with a reduced purchase of grams of alcohol overall (16). In addition, small, randomised

trials included in the review found that no-alcohol beers and wines are beneficial for health compared to higher-strength alcohol products (16). However, these findings are dependent upon substitution taking place and it remains unclear the extent to which consumers are substituting or supplementing their consumption patterns with NoLos.

One scoping review found that few policies have been implemented at a national or supranational level to support substitution by introducing new or promoting NoLos products (16). The review also notes that the purchase and consumption of NoLos remain relatively low, with large differences observed between countries (16).

In addition, the reformulation of existing alcoholic beverages by reducing 10% of their alcohol strength was modelled in six European countries. It showed it would avert thousands of deaths yearly (17). The study shows that introducing beer and wine with alcoholic strength below 0.5% would lead to some substitutions of higher-strength beverages but did not show a marked public health impact (17). However, the approaches by which these gains would be achieved are not straightforward. The alcohol industry has shown no inclination towards reducing alcohol strength on a large scale and increasing excise taxes to accomplish an equivalent public health gain would result in markedly increasing prices – a situation unlikely to happen (17).

Another found that the reformulation of existing regular-strength beer to have less alcohol in it was associated with an overall reduction in grams of alcohol purchased. However, the latter finding may be more closely related to brand loyalty than explicit efforts to reduce alcohol intake (18).

Among individuals with alcohol use disorders, one systematic review found that NoLo products increased cravings and triggered other physiological responses

similar to those experienced when using alcohol (7). Overall, alcohol consumption as ABV percentage has been shown to increase among heavy users when using products marked as lower in alcohol concentration since NoLos are used in addition to regular alcohol consumption (7). A review examining methods used among heavy users to reduce consumption noted that using NoLos was among the least common techniques (19).

Overall, there has not been sufficient evidence about the health effects of NoLo products to inform policies. Further data and research are needed to address these knowledge gaps (3, 20). Studies are also needed to compare regular-strength alcohol products and NoLos along the life-course and evaluate their impact on health and the environment (20).

## Acceptability: how NoLos are marketed and labelled

Two crucial components of the acceptability of NoLos are how the products are labelled including the information that consumers have about them and how the products are marketed. One study in Canada found that almost a third (29%) of the tested beverages contained ethanol levels higher than what was declared on the label, and 6 beverages claimed to be non-alcoholic despite greater than 1% ethanol (21).

Turning first to the issue of labelling, while WHO has long recommended the labelling of alcoholic beverages to increase awareness and ensure that consumers can make informed decisions, its application to NoLos is inconsistent across countries (22). A recent study showed NoLo products marketed as alcohol-free could contain between 0.0% and 2.8% ABV and products sold as low alcohol between 0.5% and 3.7% ABV, with many countries not having the latter designation (8). In addition, the study reported significant variation in the nutritional information provided, including the total number of carbohydrates and other additives that can impact consumer health, which may include other alcohol in addition to ethanol (8). In the EU, beverages under 1.2% ABV need to display the complete nutritional information, i.e. ingredients list and nutritional values, including energy content, according to Regulation 1169/2011. Alcoholic beverages above 1.2% ABV are exempted from displaying a list of ingredients and a nutritional declaration. This leads to many non-alcoholic beers and other products being better labelled with nutritional information than with their alcoholic contents (23).

With respect to marketing, recent reports have noted that different approaches have been used with NoLo products

than with their higher ABV counterparts. In particular, one case study examining the marketing practices of one big alcohol brand and one smaller artisanal brand found that the use of addition marketing and alibi advertising was central to both brands' communication efforts (13). Addition marketing refers to campaigns that are designed to encourage people to consume NoLo beverages at times when they would not usually be consuming alcohol. In contrast, alibi advertising refers to the potential to bypass regulations that limit alcohol marketing through the marketing of non-alcoholic products under the same name. For example, many addition marketing practices associate NoLos with a healthy lifestyle and with occasions suitable for their consumption, such as sports and exercise contests or for consumption during lunchtime or outdoor events (20, 24). Similarly, for alibi marketing, one particular brand circumvented typical regulations at the UEFA European Football Championship 2016 finals by advertising its NoLo beverage and using well-known catchphrases such as "Probably" and "...the best in the world" (13, 25). While the case study noted that addition marketing was relatively ineffective at changing perceptions among a small group of participants, alibi advertising was a significant concern perpetuating existing norms that everyone consumes and that it can be associated with a healthy lifestyle (13).

In November 2022, Movendi International conducted an online survey among its member organizations and other civil society organizations in the public health field to scope the marketing of NoLos. The survey received 50 responses, representing 30 different countries. According to the survey results, NoLos are sold in 73% (22/30) of responding countries, and the alcohol industry was reported to be actively marketing NoLos in 83% (25/30) of responding countries. In half of the countries where NoLos are sold, the alcohol industry used NoLo marketing to promote alcohol brands in spaces it would otherwise have been banned from. As some respondents described:

***"There is no brand differentiation. TV ads are promoting non-alcoholic versions of the same brand, even when promoting an alcoholic version is prohibited", survey respondent from Slovakia.***

***"Brand sells 'Brand zero' in Ghana. There is no visual difference between the regular and zero products, the zero products closely mimic the 'regular' version of the brands", survey respondent from Ghana.***

***"These products are advertised close to schools and public places, as bus stops", survey respondent from Lesotho.***

The Movendi International survey also indicated that this marketing took place despite regulation for NoLos existing in 47% (14/30) of the responding countries, although it was not determined what restrictions applied.

Brand sharing between alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions of a drink has also been documented in Ireland as a grey area (26, 27). Box 2 illustrates the normalization of alcohol consumption among kids through attractive marketing practices and easy availability of champagne for kids.

### Availability: who consumes NoLos and where

Despite the increasing consumption, data on the availability of NoLos products, their relative market share and consumption remain scarce. One study used Eurostat data to extract information on sold production of non-alcoholic beer between 2013 and 2019 in the 27 EU countries and the United Kingdom and reported increased availability of non-alcoholic beer. Still, overall changes seem to be driven by a few countries (28).

One study from the United Kingdom reported that the availability of 46 new no- and low- (ABV  $\leq$  3.5%) alcohol beers and of 33 existing beers reformulated to contain less alcohol (of 1903 available beer brands) was associated with reductions in purchases of total grams of alcohol across more than 64 000 British households (29). Another study in the United Kingdom concluded that greater availability of NoLos online, compared to regular-strength alcoholic beverages, increased their selection and purchase by consumers. However, further studies are needed to confirm this finding (30).

Mixed evidence has also been found concerning whether NoLos reduce or exacerbate inequalities in alcohol-related harms. One study from the United Kingdom found that NoLos reduced overall ethanol consumption among more affluent households, and, as a result, they increased inequalities between income groups (31). In Finland, men and older people purchased non-alcoholic

beer more often than women and younger people did between 2017 and 2018. Non-alcoholic beer purchases were most common among the highly educated and high-income consumers. In addition, non-alcoholic beer purchases were most prevalent in the groups with the highest volumes of regular beer purchase (32).

Current NoLos consumption is driven by non-alcoholic beer. Monitoring at the population level and studies examining other aspects of the NoLos' availability are needed. In particular, the extent to which alcohol brands control the market for NoLos and how regulations on licensing the sale of NoLos would change their consumption and relative effect on the substitution of higher ABV beverages.

### Affordability: could pricing and taxing measures shift alcohol consumption?

Minimum unit pricing, whereby a floor price is set for a unit of alcohol (28) is an effective tool for reducing alcohol consumption (33). One specific study on NoLos showed that the implementation of minimum unit pricing had an impact on shifting purchases from higher to lower strength beers in Scotland and Wales (34), suggesting that relatively higher tax rates based on ABV in beer reduced consumption of higher strength beers and may be considered as a policy option to support substitution (29). Similarly, one study conducted in Australia (35) and another conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States of America (35, 36) showed that higher tax rates introduced for alcohol resulted in the substitution towards less expensive products and increased purchases and consumption of low-tax beverages.

Based on these results, it has been hypothesised that taxes based on the dose of alcohol across all products may incentivise producers to reduce the levels of alcohol by volume and may lead to more considerable reductions in alcohol consumption than those based on the volume of the beverage (16) ■

#### Box 2. Attractive colours and images are used in champagne for kids are displayed at supermarkets

Display of champagne for kids at a supermarket, with attractive colours and images. Marketing practices exploit the lack of restrictions.



# INITIATIVES ADDRESSING KEY ISSUES AROUND NOLOS

This section provides examples of country experiences that can be used as evidence and inspiration as to what policy approaches may be possible in different settings

The following cases were chosen based on four considerations. The first was the availability of data and documentation about each case, as it was critical to ensure enough information was available to write up the experiences. The second was the recommendation of field experts who provided input based on their experiences of which cases should be included. The third was coverage across the acceptability, availability and affordability driving alcohol consumption. Finally, the fourth consideration related to geography and ensuring different global contexts were captured.

## Norway. How extending marketing bans can help tackle alibi advertising

In 1975, Norway banned alcohol marketing. The ban initially applied to all beverages with an alcohol content above 2.5%. Civil society organizations and public health officials noted that alcohol companies adopted a practice whereby they advertise so-called “light beer” products with low alcohol content. These products share brands and names with beers containing alcohol well above the marketing limit, making it an effective way of conducting alibi marketing.

In 1997, the Norwegian government decided to extend the ban on alcohol marketing to include marketing of all brands for which there are products with an alcohol content above the limit. This extension was an attempt to stop alibi marketing of NoLo products that share a brand with alcohol products.

An evaluation of the complete ban on alcohol marketing in Norway showed that alcohol sales had fallen, indicating that the law has a protective effect. The analyses showed an immediate and lasting reduction of 7.4% (37).

According to IOGT, one of the most active civil society organizations in the alcohol control policy field in Norway,

alibi marketing using NoLo products disappeared as a result of the extension of the law in 1997<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, there are still attempts towards alibi marketing, for example, with alcohol company trucks being painted in brand colours.

Compared to the 1970s when the marketing ban was introduced in Norway, alcohol companies today have even more effective tools available to market alcohol. Social media and global digital marketing pose new challenges to the total ban. Cross-border alcohol marketing remains a global challenge (38).

At present, the Norwegian beer producers association is pushing for a removal of the ban on the marketing of NoLo products that share names and/or brands with alcohol products, arguing that the ban is hindering the growth of NoLo products (39). In a letter to the government, the beer producers admit that alibi marketing is a problem but also say that this is “a practice they distance themselves from today”<sup>3</sup>.

## Nigeria. Are NoLo companies targeting women to increase profit?

The lower-alcohol beverage market in Nigeria has expanded in recent years, following the targeted marketing of sweetened beverages towards women. Alcohol consumption in Nigeria has typically been gendered and dominated by men (40, 41). Before the first local brewing plant was established in Nigeria in 1946, which commercialised alcohol production, especially beer, adult men occupied alcohol use spaces (41, 42), and women and youth were culturally restrained from using alcohol in most communities. In recent years, in addition to reformulating

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication by Evensen Jan Tore, IOGT Norway

<sup>3</sup> Alkoholstrategi. R. Innspill fra Bryggeri- og Drikkevareforeningen [Alcohol strategy. R. Input from the Brewery and Beverage Association]. Letter to the Norwegian government obtained via IOGT Norway, 2022 (in Norwegian).

existing brands, multinational alcohol corporations and others that have joined them in the last 13 years – have put much effort into developing and importing new products targeted at women and young people (43, 44). While some new products are full-strength alcoholic beverages, others are low-strength alcohol (44).

Among the low-strength alcohol products, a new beverage was launched in 2014. This low-strength alcohol beverage contains 3.99% ABV, and is marketed in 45 cl bottles instead of the 60 cl bottles used by most conventional beers and stouts in Nigeria (45, 46). Another low-alcohol beverage, introduced in 2015, describes its contents as a refreshing blend of the standard-strength beer and natural fruit juice flavours containing only 2% alcohol. The low-strength alcohol beverage is available in two flavours, and comes in 45 cl bottles and 33 cl cans. Both low-strength alcohol beverages are reformulations of a standard-strength beer that was first launched in 1949.

The first ready-to-drink alcoholic beverage targeting women was introduced in 2012. This flavoured beverage with 5% ABV is currently sold in 30 cl bottles and 33 cl cans (42). Although this product is not necessarily a low-strength alcohol, it is noteworthy to highlight that its introduction facilitated competition among other alcohol companies in Nigeria to launch similar beverages that target women and youth. There are only two identified alcohol-free beer/spirit/stouts: one is the alcohol-free version of a popular spirit-based beverage (45), while the other is a reformulation of a popular stout.

NoLo beverages seriously impact alcogenic environments in several ways (45). First, NoLos facilitate brand availability and accessibility by expanding the options from which those who use alcohol may choose. That is, the availability of NoLos provides an alternative opportunity for those who may not consume full-strength beverages, and this reinforces alcohol use norms. Relatedly, NoLos fuel the affordability of alcohol because they are packaged in small bottles and cans, thus making them cheaper than regular beers (45).

Secondly, NoLos reinforce and normalise alcohol use among young men and women. Culturally, young people are not expected to consume alcohol in Nigeria. Except for the 0.0% beverages, all other alcoholic beverages with lower ABV (compared to similar products) in Nigeria are flavoured or sweetened beverages (47). Given that men regard sweetened alcoholic beverages as women's drinks (48), women may be attracted to consuming them. A recent study suggested that most women initiate alcohol consumption with low-strength beverages and

prefer these to full-strength beer brands because of their sweet taste and low strength (45).

Another implication is that low-strength alcohol may facilitate unintended gendered risks peculiar to Nigerian women. For example, given that sweetened beverages are associated with women in Nigeria, some men buy them for women, encourage them to consume them above their limit, and engage in unsolicited sexual advances when intoxicated (48). Thus, due to the marketing of NoLos to Nigerian women, the level of sexual violence and other alcohol-related problems may increase.

## Thailand. Can a new tax close the loophole for alibi advertising?

In Thailand, advertising of alcoholic beverages is banned, where alcoholic beverages are defined as those containing more than 0.5% ethanol. Nonetheless, alcohol-free beer, which looks like alcoholic beer, is used as a way for the alcohol industry to promote its alcoholic products. According to community observations, alcohol-free beer's presence and availability are still low. But alcohol outlets increasingly use promotional material, such as posters on the front of shops, to promote zero-alcohol beer products.

In September 2022, Thailand announced plans to apply the alcohol tax to non-alcoholic beer (0%). Non-alcoholic beer is not regarded as an "alcoholic beverage" but is categorised as a "malt drink". The new taxes on non-alcoholic beer aim to create fairness (equal treatment) in the tax system across beverages and prevent young people from increasing their consumption of non-alcoholic beer (49). The new tax regulation needs to introduce a system for categorising non-alcoholic beer products. Ideally, this would mean a higher tax rate than applied to sugar-sweetened beverages but lower than that used for alcoholic beverages. This tax system could be applied to beverages with less than 0.5% ethanol.

Non-alcoholic beer could become an entry point for non-alcohol consumers to be attracted to later consume higher-strength alcoholic beverages. Public health experts support the new tax system and encourage closing the legal loophole of alcohol advertising control (surrogate advertising). Observational evidence suggests that many shops do not have non-alcoholic beer for sale, but they display posters about such beer at the front of their shops.

Specific national and global studies are needed to explore the positive and negative, short and long-term impacts of the new tax systems for non-alcoholic beer on alcohol users, including heavy alcohol consumers, and

non-alcohol users, including young people. For instance, South Africa applies a specific tax on alcohol by volume. Therefore, the prices of NoLos are competitive compared to regular strength beverages. While this may have an effect over the long term, many people consume alcohol to get drunk, so NoLos and their relatively low price may not satisfy expectations.

The excise tax department could study the potential effects of the new tax system on other similar products, such as cough syrup and explore possible measures for regulating the packaging of non-alcoholic beer, often similar to that of regular alcohol-strength beer. Systematic data collection about the relationship between non-alcoholic beer advertisements in front of shops and the absence of the product in the shops should also be carried out (49).

## The Netherlands. Surveillance of the alcohol industry's responsible marketing

In the Netherlands, national statistics point to a fall in alcohol consumption between 2014 and 2021, with a fall in the number of excessive users and an increase in non-users or those consuming alcohol in line with the low-risk guidelines. Dutch brewers report beer sales falling by over 8% between the 2019 and first half of 2021, although it is not clear to what extent this is a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (50).

According to the Dutch brewers' data, sales of non-alcoholic beer increased from over 125 000 hectolitres in 2010 to 740 000 hectolitres in 2020 (490%) (51). The Dutch online newspaper nu.nl reported that alcohol-free beer consumption increased by 3% between 2020 and 2021, while regular beer consumption fell about 8% in the same period, according to industry data (50). The Dutch authorities are aware of the increased NoLos consumption, and monitor and evaluate its implications.

In 2018, a National Prevention Pact (52) was launched to promote urgent action against smoking, alcohol consumption and being overweight, the most significant causes of disease burden in the Netherlands (53). The Pact refers also to NoLo products.

Outcomes of the goals set out in the National Prevention Pact include an advertising code (54) and an investigation of the impact of advertising (55). In 2020, the Advertising Code for Alcohol-Free and Low-Alcohol Beer was enacted (54). This voluntary code stipulates that advertising for alcohol-free and low-alcohol beer may not target young people under 18 and that advertising for low-alcohol beer may not target pregnant women and those driving. The code applies to Dutch advertising for all beers with an alcohol content of up

to 0.5% ABV and applies to all organizations that advertise, such as brewers, supermarkets and the hospitality sector. Examples include radio and television commercials, social media posts, beer labels and supermarket flyers.

However, the National Prevention Pact has been criticised for the alcohol industry involvement, which diminished the effectiveness of the measures and slowed progress in the consultations. In 2022, two signatories stepped out of the Pact in protest (56).

The Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) included no- and low-alcohol beer consumption questions in their lifestyle monitor (57). It also produced a report accounting for the different aspects of spending on advertising non-alcoholic beverages and the attitudes of young people and parents (55). The report found that manufacturers spend about €10 million a year on advertising for alcohol-free products – equivalent to around 9% of all the funds spent on advertising. However, the significant increase in sales of alcohol-free products does not appear to be prompted by a substantial rise in marketing budgets for these products, at least not in traditional media outlets (advertisements on radio and television). The report also notes that the content of advertisements for non-alcoholic products is different from that for alcoholic beverages. Non-alcoholic products emphasise that they are new, are healthier than alcohol, that you can drive and that you can stay fit (no hangover). The traditional themes of alcohol commercials, such as “partying”, “quality”, and “masculinity”, also appear in non-alcoholic beverage commercials, but less frequently. More often than for alcoholic beverages, advertisements for non-alcoholic beverages target women.

The sample of Dutch young people and adults mentioned above was also surveyed on their perceptions and attitudes about alcohol-free beverages and the impact of their advertising (55). About three-quarters consider alcohol-free products harmless and comparable to water, tea, soft drinks or juices. Of the young people surveyed, 35% thought marketing could stimulate people to consume alcoholic beverages. Further, 15% of those surveyed agreed that marketing alcohol-free products would normalise alcohol consumption. In contrast, almost 60% thought it could encourage people to consume alcohol-free alternatives instead of alcoholic beverages. Participants indicated that they came into contact with advertising for non-alcoholic beverages most often via radio and television (58%), in supermarkets (44%) and via the internet (34%). Most parents had a negative attitude towards their children consuming non-alcoholic products ■

# THE WAY FORWARD

This section provides directions to explore to ensure the conversation continues beyond this brief

**T**ackling the challenges in this brief undoubtedly requires a coordinated multistakeholder approach, with each partner playing to their comparative strengths. Some examples are provided below for policy-

and decision-makers, civil society and community-based organizations, and researchers and research institutions. Given the specific challenges of NoLos, possible actions are suggested at a supranational level.

## Policy- and decision-makers

### *Addressing acceptability*

- ▶ At the national level, policy-makers should focus on preventing alcohol marketing circumvention by prohibiting advertisement or marketing to children (e.g. through colourful or playful images) and by banning advertising associating NoLos with full-strength similar brand products (13).
- ▶ At the national level, policy-makers should facilitate consumer choice by standardizing the labelling of NoLo products, and synchronizing labels across different types of NoLos (e.g. non-alcohol, low alcohol, reduced alcohol, and de-alcoholized) (3).
- ▶ At the supranational level, policy-makers should consider ways to work together to limit social media marketing of NoLo products that circumvent existing advertising and marketing bans.

### *Addressing availability*

- ▶ Policy-makers should consider developing guidelines for where NoLos can be sold at the national and regional levels to ensure that some settings remain free from alcohol and alcohol-related beverages.

### *Addressing affordability*

- ▶ Policy-makers should consider applying taxes to NoLo products that vary according to the ABV content to favour shifts towards lower-strength beverages at the national and regional levels (20).

## Civil society and community-based organizations

### *Addressing acceptability*

- ▶ Civil society and community-based organizations should focus informational campaigns and associated efforts on increasing consumer awareness about the potential risks associated with NoLos consumption and their varied ethanol content (3).
- ▶ Civil society and community-based organizations should advocate extending marketing and advertising bans on high-ABV alcohols, including NoLo products.
- ▶ Civil society and community-based organizations should monitor and raise awareness about using NoLos as a corporate responsibility initiative and monitor instances of alibi marketing.

### *Addressing availability*

- ▶ Civil society and community-based organizations should advocate for regulations around the sale of NoLo beverages to ensure that some settings remain alcohol-free.



## Researchers and research institutions

- ▶ Researchers and research institutions should undertake exploratory, policy-relevant studies and monitor the use of NoLo products to address existing gaps in research with no funding from the alcohol industry to ensure independence and avoid conflict of interest (20).
- ▶ Researchers and research institutions should monitor the possible impact on potentially vulnerable groups – such as people in recovery, young people and pregnant women.

## International and intergovernmental organizations and institutions

- ▶ Organizations should develop and promote a common nomenclature for science and consumer information to harmonise the use of the terms “low alcohol” and “no alcohol” for beverages, based on the same ABV thresholds across products.
- ▶ Organizations should promote the use of health warnings and a clear indication of the ABV content on beverage labels.
- ▶ Organizations should systematically monitor the evolution of the markets for NoLo beverages, including the trade flows, proposing a set of indicators.
- ▶ Organizations should strive to ensure more consistency in the fiscal treatment of NoLo beverages ■



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## TAKEAWAY MESSAGES

1

Significant uncertainty remains about the effects of NoLos on alcohol consumption at the population level and their effects on public health, more generally.

2

The definitions and regulations applied to NoLo beverages vary significantly, which challenges consumers' ability to make informed decisions.

3

Significant alibi marketing and brand stretching takes place through NoLo products.

4

Relatively little is known about the effectiveness of policy-levers to address the availability of NoLo products.

5

At individual level, substitution of higher- with no or lower-strength alcoholic beverages should be further explored and studied as an approach for cutting back consumption.

6

Some countries are exploring the expansion of alcohol-marketing bans to also include NoLo products, particularly when they share the same brand as higher ABV products.

7

Implementing taxes based on the dose of alcohol may incentivise producers to reduce the levels of ABV and may incentivise consumers to purchase lower ABV beverages.

8

Additional research, independent from the alcohol industry, is needed to determine viable policy solutions to NoLo products.

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There is an expanding market of no- and low-alcohol beverages (NoLos). However, their effects on global ethanol consumption and public health are still questioned. Policies and regulations about NoLos' availability, acceptability and affordability are lacking and evidence about their benefits is limited. Concerns have been raised about the impact of NoLos in reducing alcohol consumption and its associated harm and the possible drawbacks and implications, such as misleading minors, pregnant women, abstainers or those seeking to stop drinking about their actual ethanol content. Further, there are concerns about the implications of NoLo branded products being displayed close to the brand's main alcoholic beverages and their potential to subtly lead to new occasions of drinking. There is a need to monitor their consumption and impact on aggregated alcohol consumption to understand the public health implications of NoLos. The alcohol by volume content of NoLos must be defined, harmonised and clearly labelled. NoLo marketing needs to be regulated to protect children, pregnant women and those seeking to stop drinking. Fiscal and pricing policies to reduce the affordability of products with higher strengths of ethanol may favour a shift towards lower alcohol strength beverages.

## Less alcohol



- ✓ More taxes
- ✓ Less availability
- ✓ No advertising

Less Alcohol Unit  
Department of Health Promotion

**Website:** <https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/reduce-the-harmful-use-of-alcohol>

**E-mail:** [lessalcohol@who.int](mailto:lessalcohol@who.int)

**connect, share, practice**

**#WHODrinksless**

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