



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Global Fund suspends partnership with Heineken

The Global Fund has backed out of its partnership with Heineken — but not, apparently, for the reasons you might think.

On 29 March, the Fund said in a brief [announcement](#) that it was suspending its partnership with Heineken “because of recent reports of the company’s use of female beer promoters in ways that expose them to sexual exploitation and health risks.”

On 23 March, Dutch journalist Olivier van Beemen published an [article](#) on the website of the newspaper NRC in which he stated that Heineken uses “promotional girls” to sell beer in 10 African countries, and that the women often face “unwelcome intimacies, abuse or prostitution during their work.”

“Although we don’t know all the details,” Global Fund Executive Director Peter Sands said in a message to the Board, “it is evident that the practice of employing ‘beer girls’ is common across the industry. In the context of 2018 this is just not acceptable — and really never should have been.”

As a result, Sands said, “I have decided that we should suspend the Global Fund’s partnership with Heineken until they demonstrate that they are prepared to act decisively to tackle these issues. Doing this now enables us to be on the front foot in response to the inevitable questions about what we are doing about the claims. It could also potentially spur Heineken to lead the industry in making positive changes — which would be a good thing in itself and could enable us to renew the partnership.”

[Van Beemen](#), who has just published a book about Heineken’s use of beer girls, said that Heineken has [illustrated](#) by [Roland Blok](#) for many years, but has done little about it. In 2007, he said, a large internal [study](#) showed that Heineken was deploying some 15,000 promotional women in over a hundred countries. In 70 markets, the use of these women as beer girls was characterized as risky because of sexual abuse,

underpayment, mandatory drinking or provocative uniforms.

Asked to comment on the story, Heineken told van Beemen that “the described practices completely contradict what we stand for as a company and we strongly condemn these abuses.” Heineken said that “this topic deserves more attention in Africa than it has received from us and other stakeholders in recent years. We will therefore, together with our local operating companies, promotional agencies and other relevant parties, take further steps to tackle these abuses and prevent them in the future.”

The Global Fund and Heineken [announced](#) a partnership to fight infectious diseases in January 2018. The Global Fund has come under criticism from a number of public health advocates and other observers for aligning with a product that they said can be detrimental to people’s health. (See [here](#) and [here](#).)

Reactions

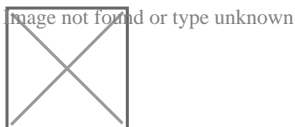
It can’t have come as a big surprise to officials at the Global Fund that advocates and observers were quick to conclude that the Fund was looking for a pretext to end the partnership.

“This announcement is good news for global health and development. It is obvious that the Global Fund needs a way out of this ill-advised partnership and latest news provided a face-saving opportunity,” said Kristina Sperkova, International President of IOGT International in a [blog](#) on the IOGT website. (IOGT was one of the three NGOs that sent an open letter to the Global Fund earlier this year protesting the partnership.)

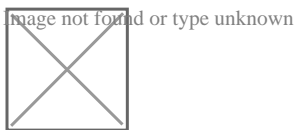
But “suspension is not termination,” Sperkova added. “The whole drama also exposes the failure of the Global Fund to conduct a thorough analysis before entering into a partnership with an alcohol industry giant.”

“The Global Fund’s inability to understand the fundamental conflict of interest between its core mission and partnering with the alcohol industry,” Sperkova said, “must raise serious doubts about the Global Fund’s commitment to pursue evidence-based action to end HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.”

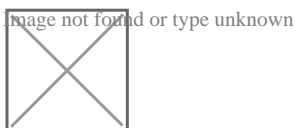
Many people weighed in using the Twittersphere. For example:



Helen Clark is a former Prime Minister of New Zealand and, more recently, former Administrator of UNDP.



The NCD Alliance was another of the NGOs that sent the open letter.



Katie Dain is CEO of the NCD Alliance.

