

The Cook Islands Report: Sugary Drinks and Alcohol

Summary Recommendations, June 2025

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Background

The 2021-2023 National Health Bulletin revealed that over 50% of the Cook Islands population has at least one NCD, a major concern for the Ministry of Health Cook Islands. This is supported by the findings in the Cook Islands NCD Risk Factors STEPS Report 2022. The Pacific Community's SPC MANA Dashboard also indicates that there is still significant work to do in tackling the harms that alcohol cause people in the Cook Islands, particularly in the area of pricing, advertising, marketing and sponsorship.

The MANA Dashboard indicates the successful achievement of unhealthy food marketing to children (green light with three stars) observed in the Cook Islands. However, the most recent WHO STEPS Survey 2022 indicated that the population was predominantly overweight (BMI \geq 25) with men 89.8% and women 87.1% (both sexes 88.5%). An extremely high prevalence of obesity (BMI \geq 30) was observed with men 57.4% and women 65.7% (both sexes 61.4%).

The Cook Islands has one of the highest overweight and obesity rates for both adults (+18 years) and adolescents (5-19 years) in the world with limited data available for children under 5 years. Unfortunately, the Cook Islands does not have surveillance data on monitoring childhood obesity.

A comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to reducing sugary drink and alcohol consumption is essential for reducing the socio-economic burden of NCDs, improving health and reducing pain and suffering of those living in the Cook Islands.

1. SUGARY DRINKS

Background

Excessive intake of sugary drinks is a major public health issue in the Cook Islands and is closely linked to increasing rates of obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, tooth decay and other NCDs, along with compromised learning and education outcomes. Recent health data indicate that the Cook Islands has one of the highest rates of sugary drink consumption in the Pacific region. Over two thirds of the population regularly consumes sugary drinks, often exceeding the recommended daily sugar intake.

Situation Analysis

The Cook Islands are saturated with cheap and unhealthy sugary drinks. Every dairy, petrol station, market, supermarket, alcohol store, hotel, resort, restaurant and some schools sells sugary drinks.

The Cook Islands' legislation, regulations and Customs Tariffs Orders that target sugary drinks were reviewed. Currently there are no restrictions on advertising, marketing or sponsorship of sugary drinks. Outside most dairies and petrol stations are signs and flags displaying the logo of a major foreign sugary drink company.

Tariff on Sugary Drinks

The 2017 Tariff Schedule 22 states that ‘waters, including mineral waters and aerated waters, containing added sugar or other sweetening matter or flavoured, and other non-alcoholic beverages, not including fruit or vegetable juices have a Tariff of \$9.37 per kg of sugar’. For example, a small 330ml can of soft drink containing 10.6gms of sugar per 100ml contains 35gms of sugar which would amount to a Tariff of 33 cents. A 1.25l of soft drink contains 132gms of sugar would have a Tariff of \$1.24.

Artificially sweetened beverages incur no Tariffs and neither do fruit juices. This is a major flaw as artificially sweetened beverages are not a healthy alternative and fruit juices often contain more sugar than traditional soft drinks. Juices still actively contribute to tooth decay, weight gain, obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Under the Tariff Schedule sugar containing products such as sugar, chocolate, milo, sugar confectionery containing cocoa, sweet biscuits, cakes and ice cream are currently exempt from attracting a Tariff.

Healthy Food and Drink Policies for Schools

The Ministry of Education does not have a nationwide Healthy Food and Drink Policy covering schools. The Ministry of Education does require that schools have their own policy; however, no guidance is provided by the Ministry of Health. TMO provides guidance to schools via the Health Promotion Unit, Public Health Nurses and the Oral Health Team.

Evidence of Impact of Regulations

The WHO recommends that all member states tax sugary drinks in order to reduce consumption and reduce the burden of NCDs. Currently, at least 85 countries implement some type of sugary drink tax. There is unequivocal evidence that taxes (tariffs) on sugary drinks are an effective and cost efficient means to promote health, save lives and prevent NCDs, while advancing health equity and mobilizing revenue to realise universal health care.

Considering the evidence of effectiveness on policies to restrict food advertising and marketing, WHO also recommends countries implement comprehensive mandatory policies to protect children from the marketing of sugary drinks and foods that are high in fats, sugars and/or salt.

Recommendations to Tackle Sugary Drinks

Priority Recommendations

- 1. Update and amend the 2017 Tariff Schedule 22 to:**
 - i) Increase the Tariff on sugary drinks by 100% to \$18.74 per kg of sugar
 - ii) Add a Tariff to all artificially sweetened beverages and fruit juices at the same rate as sugary drinks per volume of liquid
- 2. Restrict all forms of advertising, marketing and sponsorship** of sugary drink companies from the Cook Islands, including signs and flags from outside all shops, dairies, supermarkets, restaurants, petrol stations and sports centres.
- 3. Mandate** the creation, adoption and enforcement of a single “gold standard” nationwide **Healthy Food and Drink Policy** for all ECEs, schools and learning institutions, ensuring that it contains a water and no drink only section.

2. ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM

Situation Analysis

The Cooks are saturated with cheap, readily available and accessible alcoholic beverages. Every dairy, petrol station, market, supermarket, alcohol store, hotel, resort, and restaurant sells alcohol. Alcohol is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease, several types of cancer, diabetes, hypertension and injuries. The risk increases with the amount and frequency of alcohol consumed. There is no safe level of alcohol consumption.

According to the latest data obtained from the WHO STEPS Survey 2022, alcohol use is a growing concern in the Cook Islands, with significant health, social, and economic impacts on local communities. The STEPS Survey indicates that 57% of men, 42% women are current alcohol drinkers. The highest proportion of current drinkers occurred in the 18-44 years age group: men 62% and women 47%. On a single drinking occasion on any day in the past 7 days men consumed on average 9 standard drinks and women 6.2 standard drinks. The Cook Islands has one of the highest rates of alcohol consumption in the Pacific region. These statistics are alarming.

Tariff on Alcohol

The 2017 Tariff Schedule 22 states that alcoholic products containing less than 23% alcohol attracts a \$29.00 Tariff per litre of alcohol. For example, a small can of 330ml beer containing 5% alcohol will have Tariff of only 48 cents (based on the 16.5ml of pure alcohol contained within the can).

Evidence of Impact of Regulations

The WHO recommends increasing taxes on alcohol in order to create healthier populations, less disease and debilitation along with providing governments revenue to offset alcohol-related harm. Taxes on alcohol also help prevent violence and road traffic injuries. Evidence also exists that taxing alcohol helps reduce sales and consumption of alcohol while at the same time preventing injuries and NCDs.

Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) is another cost effective alcohol control measure. MUP targets price increases on the cheapest alcohol and is an effective way at targeting heavier drinkers, particularly those on low incomes and consequently reducing health inequalities.

Recommendations to Tackle Alcohol-Related Harm

The recommendations below are prioritised in terms of impact and feasibility with the first three being the ones to adopt urgently, ideally by end of 2025. It is suggested that the remaining recommendations be adopted in a stepwise fashion over the next 2 year period.

Priority Recommendations

- 1. Implement Minimum Unit Pricing** to increase the price of alcoholic beverages, particularly targeting low-cost, high-alcohol content products
- 2. Increase the Tariff** on alcohol by 100% to \$58.00 per litre of alcohol
- 3. Restrict** alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion to minimise exposure, especially among young people.

Summary

The implementation of the recommended strategies will result in a significant reduction in sugary drink and alcohol consumption and their associated harms. This will lead to improved public health outcomes, reduced rates of NCDs and a decrease in the social and economic burdens on the Cook Islands community.

Fortunately, political will and commitment to tackle the NCD epidemic in the Cook Islands already exists. There is a major opportunity for the Cook Islands to strengthening laws through regulations via multisectoral engagement, strong policy coherence within the government and, whole-of-society collaborations.

A challenge that remains in the Cook Islands is how to translate “political commitment” into real “actions” for meaningful changes with high impact.