

Report: Conclusions and outcomes
of the DEEP SEAS Thematic Capacity Building Workshop 3

Alcohol Taxation and Pricing Policies



DEEP SEAS Topic: Alcohol Taxation and Pricing

The workshop and materials were prepared under the DEEP SEAS service contract (www.deep-seas.eu, Contract No. 20177113). The information and views presented during sessions cannot be considered to reflect the views of the European Commission and/or the Health and Digital Executive Agency or any other body of the European Union. The Commission/Agency do not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this study. Neither the Commission/HaDEA nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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Executive Summary

Europe has the highest level of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in the world. Alcohol consumption, even in moderate amounts, plays a significant role in the burden of disease, premature mortality, and costs to healthcare and society including from alcohol-related cancer¹ and other NCDs.

In the EU, the single market creates both opportunities and challenges for implementing effective policy at European and national level aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm.

The third DEEP SEAS Thematic Capacity Building Workshop brought together policymakers, expert scientists and civil society actors online, to look at interlinked issues around pricing and taxation, cross-border purchases and unrecorded alcohol consumption.

This report describes the event, gives an introduction to the topic and presents the main outcomes and conclusions arising from the workshop, as well as a detailed account of the presentations and discussions in the DEEP SEAS session.

Résumé

L'Europe a le niveau de consommation d'alcool et de dommages liés à l'alcool le plus élevé au monde. La consommation d'alcool, même en quantité modérée, joue un rôle important dans le fardeau de la maladie, la mortalité prématurée et les coûts pour les soins de santé et la société, y compris en raison du cancer lié à l'alcool et d'autres maladies non transmissibles.

Au sein de l'UE, le marché unique crée à la fois des opportunités et des défis pour mettre en oeuvre une politique efficace au niveau européen et national visant à réduire les dommages liés à l'alcool.

Le troisième atelier thématique sur le renforcement des capacités en EAUX PROFONDES a rassemblé des décideurs politiques, des experts scientifiques et des acteurs de la société civile en ligne, afin d'examiner les questions liées entre elles concernant les prix et la fiscalité, la consommation non enregistrée d'alcool et les achats transfrontaliers.

Ce rapport décrit l'événement, présente une introduction au sujet et présente les principaux résultats et conclusions de l'atelier, ainsi qu'un compte rendu détaillé des présentations et des discussions de chaque session.

Background to the workshop

Introduction

The DEEP SEAS workshop *Alcohol Taxation and Pricing Policies* aimed to facilitate discussion and knowledge exchange around effective policy options in these highly interlinked areas to reduce alcohol-related harm.

The workshop was co-hosted by the Lithuanian Drug, Tobacco and Alcohol Control Department (NTAKD), the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, and the Lithuanian Tobacco and Alcohol Control Coalition (NTAKK). Session 1 was devoted exclusively to the DEEP SEAS topic, and set the scene for the other sessions:

Session 1 8 th June 2021	Session 2 11 th June 2021	Session 3 15 th June 2021
Alcohol taxation and pricing policies	Cross-border alcohol purchasing, marketing and trade	Unrecorded and illicit alcohol
Under the DEEP SEAS contract	Under the FAR SEAS contract	Under the AIHaMBRA Project contract

The workshop was the third in a series of seven capacity-building events, within the frame of the prevention strand of [Europe's Beating Cancer Plan](#) which pledges action to address the burden of alcohol-related cancer through: supporting Member States in implementing best practices to reduce consumption, reviewing EU legislation on alcohol taxation and cross-border purchases, monitoring implementation of the Audio-visual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) and measures to reduce young peoples' exposure to marketing, and to support Member States implement evidence-based brief interventions.

The European context and topic background

Europe has the highest level of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in the world. Alcohol consumption, even in moderate amounts, plays a significant role in the burden of disease, premature mortality, and costs to healthcare and society including from alcohol-related cancer² and other NCDs^{3, 4, 5, 6}.

In the EU, the single market creates both opportunities and challenges for implementing effective policy at European and national level aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm. This workshop looked at interlinked issues around pricing and taxation, unrecorded alcohol consumption and cross-border purchases.

In spite of overwhelming evidence for the effectiveness of pricing policies, such as taxation, to reduce population alcohol consumption and harm,^{7, 8, 9} alcohol duties remain comparatively low in many Member States and there is substantial variation in levels and structures of alcohol taxation, with a significant number of countries levying no duties at all on wine.

Within the EU, the treatment of alcohol as an “ordinary” commodity and the concept of a single internal market means that there are very few restrictions on cross-border alcohol purchases,¹⁰ and a lack of coordinated response. Differences between EU countries, in how taxation and pricing policy is structured and implemented, can undermine efforts by individual Member States to reduce consumption and alcohol-related harm.

Workshop structure

Each workshop session was structured as: Introduction/Welcome, Evidence Update and Stakeholder Perspectives, followed by small group discussion of a specific policy question (see annex 1 for the workshop agenda including discussion questions).

Attendance

A total of 129 people participated in the workshop (excluding DEEP SEAS organisers); 67 participated in session 1 (Taxation and pricing policies), 62 in session 2 (Cross-border trade), and 58 in session 3 (Unrecorded alcohol).

A breakdown of participants by session, country and sector is shown in annex 2.

Workshop outcomes

The DEEP SEAS Process: During the 3 online sessions panellists presented their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, through short videosⁱ and live question and answer sessions. Then, in small-group discussions, with a pre-assigned moderator and rapporteur, participants were instructed to reach a level of consensus on responses to a concrete policy question. Their discussion and points for further consideration were reported back to and discussed with the whole group to arrive at key messages and proposed actions to address alcohol-related harm through action on policy and taxation, addressing cross-border issues, and unrecorded and illicit alcohol.

The main take-home messages raised and supported by participants over the three sessions are summarized in *Table 1* below. A more detailed account of the presentations and discussions relevant to the DEEP SEAS topic of *Alcohol Taxation and Pricing* (Session 1) is given in the next section.

ⁱ Workshop videos can be seen on the workshop web-page: <https://ds-fs-alh-thematic-workshop3-alcohol-taxation-pricing.siteonsite.es/contenidos>

Table 1. Main outcomes of the three inter-linked sessions

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">DEEP SEAS: Alcohol Taxation and Pricing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Alcohol taxation and pricing policies have been shown to reduce alcohol-related harm, especially for those in most marginalized groups. → Levels and structures of alcohol taxation vary greatly across Member States; but in general duties are very low, and many Member States levy no duty at all on wine. → This variation between neighbouring states also contributes to the availability of cheap alcohol and related harm → Protectionist arguments - that low duty rates are necessary to protect the European wine growers - are not borne out by the evidence → Economic stimulation/job protection arguments put forward by the industry are also not supported by the (limited) data available → Lack of political will and excessive corporate influence are the greatest barriers to strengthening alcohol taxation and pricing policy. → Stricter EU Directives in alcohol taxation and a Framework Convention on Alcohol could support member states in developing more effective policy
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Cross-border trade</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Alcohol is not an ordinary commodity. → Multi-country and multi-sectoral collaboration is vital to address this issue. → Stricter border controls and a revision of import quotas for personal use are needed. → Harmonising EU taxes at low levels is harmful to public health. → Multi-country agreements on tax rates show promise in reducing alcohol harm, but are scarce → It is necessary to develop standard ways to measure the scope of cross-border alcohol purchasing (<i>e.g., track & trace approach</i>)
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Unrecorded alcohol</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Unrecorded alcohol is a relevant portion of the alcohol consumed in the EU (approximately 25%). → The substitution argument (that increased taxes or price push customers to buy unrecorded) is not supported by evidence or case studies (e.g., Finland) → The main danger of unrecorded alcohol is cheaper price and higher strength, causing disproportionate harm among lower socioeconomic groups and young people (including minors). → There are many knowledge and research gaps in this area. Standardised methodologies and further national and international research are needed. → Sales of unrecorded alcohol via the Internet and social media is an area of concern, including counterfeit and sales to youth; requiring stronger policy on online marketing of alcohol.

Presentations and discussions

Each of the sessions of the workshop comprised 3 presentation slots – an introduction, evidence brief and stakeholder perspectives – followed by a discussion in small groups to tackle a specific policy question. Here we give an account of the presentations and feedback from the discussions relevant to the DEEP SEAS topic of *Alcohol Taxation and Pricing* (Sessions 1).

Session 1 (DEEP SEAS): Alcohol Taxation and Pricing Policies, 8th June 2021

Welcome and Introduction to the session: Toni Gual, FCRB (chair) / Lithuanian co-hosts

- Arūnas Dulkys, Lithuanian Minister of Health, welcomed all to the meeting on behalf of the Lithuanian hosts
- Hana Horka, Technical Officer, DG SANTE, discussed alcohol in the frame of the EU Beating Cancer Plan
- Hughes de la Motte, Head of Sector, horizontal excise legislation, EMCS, tobacco, alcohol and health taxes, DG TAXUD, gave the DG TAXUD perspective on alcohol taxation

Evidence update

- Colin Angus, Senior Researcher, Sheffield Alcohol Research Group, gave an overview of recent scientific developments and key messages in alcohol taxation and pricing policy.

Country/EU multi-stakeholder experiences

- Finland: Ismo Tuominen, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland discussed different perspectives on pricing options
- Scotland: Peter Rice, Addiction Psychiatrist and Chair of the Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP), updated the group on Minimum Unit Price in Scotland 3 Years On - expectations & outcomes
- WHO-EU: Carina Ferreira Borges, Interim Head of the WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases; and Programme Manager, Alcohol and Illicit Drugs, WHO/Europe, presented WHO-EU initiatives on alcohol control through taxation.

Breakout discussion

Participants were placed in small groups to discuss the question:

We have ample evidence for strong taxation and pricing policies but still weak policies in Europe? What are the barriers and how to overcome them?

Feedback from discussions

The following points were made by the group rapporteurs and moderators in the feedback and wrap-up sessions:

- A range of policy measures can effect change in the price of alcoholic beverages, not only taxation. Examples include minimum unit pricing, bans on discounts and bulk buys. It is necessary to look at the national context and existing legislation and culture to choose the most effective policy in each case.
- Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) is effective in reducing purchases and consumption, and seems to have the greatest impact on socioeconomic inequalities in alcohol-related harm; but does not increase state revenues
- More information would be needed for member states on a possible 'minimum excise tax' (going to the state revenue) and how this could be implemented effectively. One danger is that in harmonising such a tax across the EU, it could lose its potential to reduce harm.

- The international alcohol industry profits from the variation in EU tax rates; in response, international agreement is needed – e.g., an International Framework Convention for Alcohol (as we have for tobacco) could support more health promoting pricing across the bloc.
- A paradigm shift is needed (also a priority for the WHO-EU NCD council) to seeing health taxes as health promoting and an investment in the population, rather than as a punishment imposed; and also adopting a “polluter pays” philosophy.
- The impact of policies on specific groups must be considered, especially in relation to socioeconomic and health inequalities
- Public health needs to reach out and work with the media to highlight personal negative experiences with alcohol and poverty, to counteract the pervasive view that alcohol is an essential “part of our culture”.
- We need to broaden the perspective of the evidence presented to include multiple political streams (impact on children, older people), highlight return on investment arguments, and tailor information to different sectors (not only giving health priorities)
- There is a fear that the COVID-19 pandemic is already being used by the industry as a lobbying opportunity against raising taxes, but the economic race to recovery in the aftermath could also be an incentive for policy to push towards stronger health taxes.
- More research and data are needed to examine:
 - retail sector practices (such as deals between producers and retailers),
 - uncover all the stakeholders and influencers (media, education)
 - understand better the investment case for alcohol taxation (e.g., the impacts on employment and productivity, impacts on others)

Workshop evaluation

At the end of each session participants were invited to complete an online evaluation survey provided in the session and immediately afterwards in a follow-up email. The brief survey was designed to be quick and easy and participants could choose to remain anonymous. A summary of the workshop evaluation is shown in annex 3.

Participants were asked to give four quantitative scores to the session they had attended:

- Overall evaluation - How would you rate the session overall? (score between 1→10)
- The topics and aspects covered by the speakers were relevant for the overarching theme of the session (1→5)
- I learned actionable information for my work and/or consolidated my understanding/ knowledge (1→5)
- There was enough time and opportunities allocated for interaction with the speakers and between participants (1→5)

Participants were also invited to give feedback in three free text questions:

- Which speakers of the session did you find the most interesting/informative/engaging? (name, organisation or topic)
- Did you find any topic missing which you would have liked to see covered in relation to this session’s theme?
- Do you have any comments or suggestions you would like to share?

References

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- ⁸ Nelson JP. Meta-analysis of alcohol price and income elasticities - with corrections for publication bias. *Health Econ Rev*. 2013;3(1):17.
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- ¹⁰ Babor TF, Caetano R, Casswell S, Edwards G, Giesbrecht N, Graham K, et al. Alcohol: No ordinary commodity. Research and public policy. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010.

Annex 1: Workshop agenda

Session 1, Tuesday 8th June: Alcohol taxation and pricing policies – Game changers to reduce harm Organized under the DEEP SEAS Contract

Time (CET)	Topic (and format)	Chair/Speaker
13:50	<i>Participants admitted to the meeting</i>	
14:00	Welcome and setting the scene <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Welcome from hosting Member State Lithuania - Frame of EU Beating Cancer Plan - Introduction to the workshop sessions and the session topic 	Toni Gual, FCRB (chair) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arūnas Dulkys, Minister of Health, Lithuania - Hana Horka, DG SANTE - Hughes de la Motte, DG TAXUD
14:20	Evidence update <i>Topic 1: Alcohol taxation and pricing policies: recent scientific developments and key messages for policy</i>	Video presenter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Colin Angus, Sheffield Alcohol Research Group, UK
14:45	Stakeholder perspectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finland: Different perspectives on pricing options - Scotland: Minimum Unit Price 3 Years On: expectations & outcomes - WHO-EU: Initiatives on alcohol control through taxation 	Video presenters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ismo Tuominen, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland - Peter Rice, Addiction Psychiatrist and Chair, Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems Scotland, UK) - Carina Ferreira Borges, WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases
15:10	<i>10-minute break</i>	
15:20	Summary by sub-topic expert + introducing discussions (live)	Toni Gual + Colin Angus
15:25	Breakout discussions (small parallel groups of 8-10 people) Discussion question: <i>We have ample evidence for strong taxation and pricing policies but still weak policies in Europe? What are the barriers and how to overcome them? (3 main barriers and solutions)</i>	Moderators and rapporteurs pre-assigned to each group
16:00	Feedback to whole group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brief summaries by rapporteurs/moderators + Round of comments 	Rapporteurs and Moderators
16:45	Wrap up by hosts and sub-topic expert	Toni Gual + Colin Angus
17:00	End of afternoon 1	

Session 2, Friday 11th June: Cross-border alcohol purchasing, marketing and trade
Organized under the FAR SEAS Contract

Time (CET)	Topic (and format)	Chair/Speaker
13:50	<i>Participants admitted to the meeting</i>	
14:00	Welcome back, order of the day, messages from previous day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cross-border alcohol trade in the hosting Member State, Lithuania - Introduction to the session topic 	Toni Gual (chair) Gražina Belian (LT), Director NATKD Hughes de la Motte, DG TAXUD
14:20	Evidence update <i>Topic 2: Key scientific messages on Cross-border alcohol purchasing, marketing and trade – scope of the European problem</i>	Video presenters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nijole Goštautaitė, Lithuanian Tobacco and Alcohol Control Coalition (NTAKK) - Thomas Karlsson, Finnish Institute for Health Welfare
14:45	Stakeholder perspectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Estonia: Policy to tackle cross-border alcohol problems in the Baltics - Sweden: Pandemic experiences of cross-border alcohol trade 	Video presenters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Triinu Täht, Advisor to the Ministry of Health, Estonia - Håkan Leifman, Karolinska Institute, Sweden
15:10	<i>10-minute break</i>	
15:20	Summary by sub-topic expert + introducing discussions (live)	Toni Gual + Nijole Goštautaitė + Thomas Karlsson
15:25	Breakout discussions (4 small parallel groups of 8-10 active discussants) Discussion question: <i>How can EU Member States be supported to collaborate across sectors and reduce problems caused by cross-border alcohol purchases and consumption?</i>	Moderators and rapporteurs pre-assigned to each group.
16:00	Feedback to whole group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brief summaries by rapporteurs/moderators + Round of comments 	Rapporteurs and Moderators
16:45	Wrap up by hosts and topic experts	Toni Gual + Nijole Goštautaitė + Thomas Karlsson
17:00	End of afternoon 2	

Session 3, Tuesday 15th June: Unrecorded and illicit alcohol

Organized under the AIHaMBRA Project Contract

Time (CET)	Topic (and format)	Chair/Speaker
13:55	<i>Participants admitted to the meeting</i>	
14:00	Welcome back, order of the day, messages from previous day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unrecorded alcohol in the hosting Member State - Introduction to the session topic 	Toni Gual, FCRB (chair) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ramunė Kaledienė, Dean, Lithuanian University of Health Sciences - Hughes de la Motte, DG TAXUD
14:20	Evidence update <i>Topic 3: Key lessons from recent research on unrecorded alcohol, legal and illegal – Scale and scope of production and harm</i>	Video presenters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jürgen Rehm, Dresden University of Technology, Germany - Dirk Lachenmeier, Chemical and Veterinary Investigation Agency, Karlsruhe, Germany
14:45	Stakeholder perspectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lithuania: Effects of unrecorded alcohol on harm and mortality - Hungary: Experiences and policy to tackle unrecorded alcohol - Eastern Europe/Russia: Internet sales of unrecorded alcohol 	Video presenters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mindaugas Štelemėkas, Lithuanian University of Health Sciences - Zsuzsanna Elekes, Corvinus University of Budapest - Maria Neufeld, WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of NCDs
15:10	<i>10-minute break</i>	
15:20	Summary by sub-topic expert + introducing discussions (live)	Toni Gual + Jürgen Rehm + Dirk Lachenmeier
15:25	Breakout discussions Discussion question: <i>What are the most promising policy measures to reduce harm from unrecorded and illicit alcohol? (3 priorities + 3 process proposals)</i>	Moderators and rapporteurs pre-assigned to each group
16:00	Feedback to whole group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brief summaries by rapporteurs/moderators + Round of comments 	Rapporteurs and Moderators
16:45	Wrap up by hosts and sub-topic expert	Toni Gual + Jürgen Rehm
17:00	End of afternoon 3	

Annex 2: Participation by session, country and sector

Attendance by session

Post-workshop attendance statistics	08/06/2021	11/06/2021	15/06/2021
	Alcohol Taxation and Pricing Policies – Game changers to reduce harm	Cross-border alcohol purchasing, marketing and trade	Unrecorded and illicit Alcohol
Speakers	6	5	6
<i>Video only</i>	1		1
Attendees	64	57	54
Organisers (including Chairs)	8	8	8
<i>DEEP SEAS/FAR SEAS</i>	6	6	6
<i>External (cEvents)</i>	2	2	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>68</i>

Number of sessions attended

Recorded video input only (speakers who could not attend)	2
S1 only	13
S2 only	9
S3 only	13
S1+S2	15
S1+S3	9
S2+S3	7
S1+S2+S3	30

Total sessions attended (excluding organisers) 96

Attendance by country/region represented

EU27	Num
Austria	1
Belgium	5
Bulgaria	2
Croatia	1
Cyprus	
Czechia	2
Denmark	
Estonia	1
Finland	1
France	
Germany	5
Greece	
Hungary	1
Ireland	5
Italy	4
Latvia	2
Lithuania	4
Luxembourg	
Malta	1
Netherlands	3
Poland	4
Portugal	5
Romania	2
Slovakia	
Slovenia	1
Spain	12
Sweden	4
Total	66

Candidate countries	Num
Albania	
Montenegro	
North Macedonia	
Serbia	
Turkey	
Total	0

Potential candidate countries	Num
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
Kosovo*	
Total	1

Other European countries	Num
Andorra	
Iceland	
Liechtenstein	
Monaco	
Norway	2
Russia	3
San Marino	
Switzerland	1
United Kingdom	8
Vatican City	
Total	14

European Neighbourhood Policy	Num
Algeria	
Armenia	
Azerbaijan	
Belarus	
Egypt	
Georgia	
Israel	
Jordan	
Lebanon	1
Lybia	
Moldova	
Morocco	
Palestine	
Syria	
Tunisia	
Ukraine	
Total	1

Other intl. countries	Num
Chile	1
Sri Lanka	1
US	0
Canada	1
Total	3

Regional level	Num
European area (e.g., EC + WHO-EU)	9
International area (e.g., WHO)	2
Total	11

Attendance by sector

Primary Sector	Attended		
Public health agency/authority - EU Commission	3		
Public administration agency/authority (not health) - EU Commission	3		
Public health agency/authority - International experts	6		
Public health agency/authority - WHO	6		
Public health agency/authority - National	33		
Public administration agency/authority (not health) - National	3		
Public health agency/authority - Local-regional	5	Health	Non-health
Public administration total	59	53	6
Academia-higher education (European)	1		
Academia-higher education (international)	1		
Academia-higher education (national)	3		
Academia-higher education (national) - non-health	1		
Academia-higher education (regional/local)	3		
Academia-research (European)	3		
Academia-research (European) - non-health	1		
Academia-research (international)	3		
Academia-research (national)	3	Health	Non-health
Academia Total	19	17	2
Civil society - capacity building and advocacy (European)	2		
Civil society - capacity building and advocacy (international)	2		
Civil society - capacity building and advocacy (national)	1		
Civil society - NGO (European)	3		
Civil society - NGO (international)	2		
Civil society - NGO (national)	1	Health	Non-health
Civil Society Total	11	11	0
Healthcare - research (international)	1		
Healthcare - clinical practice (national)	2		
Healthcare - research (national)	2		
Healthcare - research (Local-regional)	1		
Healthcare - research (Local-municipal)	1	Health	Non-health
Healthcare Total	7	7	0
TOTAL excluding organisers	96	88	8

Annex 3: Results of workshop evaluation

	Overall evaluation (1=terrible → 10=excellent)	Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following items: (1=strongly disagree, 3=neutral, 5=strongly agree)		
	On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the session overall?	The topics and aspects covered by the speakers were relevant for the overarching theme of the session.	I learned actionable information for my work and/ or consolidated my understanding/ knowledge.	There was enough time and opportunities for interaction with the speakers and between participants.
Average score: Session 1 n=28	8.7 /10	4.7 /5	4.4 /5	4.5 /5
Average score: Session 2 n=19	9 /10	4.6 /5	4.5 /5	4.6 /5
Average score: Session 3 n=21	9 /10	4.6 /5	4.7 /5	4.6 /5

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