• The topic: Global governance of alcohol
  – nearly all countries experience many serious harms from alcohol
  – the sources of the harm – both promotion and the product -- cross borders, more now with the internet
  – alcohol needs to be seen and dealt with as a global health problem
  – whereas now it is not:
    • alcohol is the only widely-used psychoactive substance for which there is no international treaty to limit harm
Impediments to a global response

– Vested interests successfully lobby against attention & resources for alcohol issues
– Challenge of multisectoral nature of alcohol problems – across global agencies, government departments, societal response institutions, professions
– Cultural position of alcohol: “our drug” for the affluent (harm per litre greater for the poor); international symbol of luxury, celebration for elites

• No coherent response from 34 of the 35 intergovernmental agencies in the UN family

• World Health Organization
  – Program on alcohol in early 1950s, then more or less continuously since 1970s, but with meagre resources
  – Global Strategy on alcohol from 2010 onward
  – But limited by tiny staff and budget
The process: reviewing the Global Strategy and “ways forward”

- 4 Nov.: Web-based consultation with NGOs ended;
- 11 Nov.: Informal consultation with Member States;
- 12 Nov.: WHO Secretariat to submit an updating Addendum 1 to WHO Governing Bodies Secretariat;
- 3-8 Feb. 2020: WHO Director-General to report to Executive Board on the implementation of WHO’s global strategy and the way forward; EB to provide further guidance;
- 17-21 May 2020: World Health Assembly discussion of and resolution on the issues.
...and in another part of the forest: the conference

- Research relevant to global governance of alcohol
  - Discussions at the Kettil Bruun Society (KBS) June 2018 meeting in Chiang Mai: limited research on the topic
  - Inherently interdisciplinary: both alcohol social & policy researchers and international law scholars need to be involved
  - “let’s have a conference” – as a thematic conference of the Kettil Bruun Society
  - But we had no inkling of how topical it would be, with the WHO’s wide consultations now about what the Global Strategy had accomplished and on “ways forward”
Public Health and the Global Governance of Alcohol

- a thematic meeting of the Kettil Bruun Society
- co-hosted by the Centre for Alcohol Policy at La Trobe University and Melbourne Law School at Melbourne Uni.
- with support from VicHealth, FARE, and La Trobe’s Centre for Health, Law & Society
- and an organising committee from CAPR, Melbourne Law School, La Trobe’s Public Health, McCabe Centre for Law & Cancer, and the Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education
- research meeting set for 30 Sept. – 3 Oct. 2019
- with a public session and discussion after, on 3 October
- papers to be sent in, precirculated to attendees, discussed at meeting
Observations on main conference topics

• Alcohol in trade and investment agreements and disputes:
  – Treated as an ordinary commodity in World Trade Organization treaties & disputes; public health exceptions interpreted narrowly, rarely applied
  – New regional and bilateral trade agreements are pushing government health warnings on wine and spirits bottles to “supplementary labels”
  – Australian government is acting for industry in trade talks and disputes

• Continuing trend in beer, spirits, and now wine industries:
  consolidation into fewer supranational corporations, successfully pushing their interests in trade and investor-state agreements

• Lessons from the history of tobacco and other parallel issues
  – Documenting contribution to the burden of harm is crucial; harm to others is particularly persuasive
  – Public health policy needs to be decided without economic interests at the table
  – A Framework Convention on Alcohol Control would be in the public interest -- but it will not happen quickly, and there is much can be done in the meantime
So where are we heading? 1.

- Research -- mapping and analysing the territory:
  - Three clusters of papers revised from the Melbourne conference, aiming for publication in three scholarly journals
    - Options for and provisions needed in international treaties and other instruments for alcohol control (*European Journal of Risk Regulation*)
    - Alcohol as a public health issue in trade and investment treaties and disputes (*Drug and Alcohol Review*)
    - The alcohol industry and international governance (*Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*)
  - Some other papers to be published individually
  - Introductory essays with suggestions for further research
So where are we heading? 2.

• Public health policy goals:
  – A legally binding international instrument, maybe like the Framework
    Convention on Tobacco Control, as an eventual goal
  – But meanwhile let’s specify what it needs to include, and push for these:
    • A strong symbolic statement, denormalising alcohol as commodity &
      foodstuff;
    • Creating a normative baseline, fostering cooperation in controlling the
      market;
    • A counterbalance to trade law, providing for controls on trade and
      promotion
      – though silent on trade, FCTC’s existence has influenced trade adjudications;
    • Creating an institutional framework – a regularly meeting
      intergovernmental forum (“Conference of Parties”);
    • Creating a Secretariat with resources to demonstrate, consult on and
      coordinate effective preventive laws, institutions and practices
      (acknowledgements to Gian Luca Burci)
Thanks for your attention!

R.Room@latrobe.edu.au