



# INTRODUCTION

The South African liquor landscape is incredibly polarised: from licensed venues in high-income city neighbourhoods, to illegal shebeens in low-income settings. These disparities stimulate and divide public opinion and debate. They also provoke conversations about rights, responsibilities and the freedom to consume alcohol, as well as how to best protect people from harms. These conversations are, more often than not, deeply divisive and inherently controversial.

But controversy does not always produce effective policy for the majority of South Africans living in working class townships. This document sets out to separate facts from fiction in five main areas of controversy. It does this with the aim of igniting new conversations, debates and thinking about how best to manage alcohol. In stimulating discussion, we aim to shed light on some of the main policy messages within recent published research by social scientists variously seeking to better understand the complexities of alcohol in our society. \_\_\_\_\_

# WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH ALCOHOL IN SOUTH AFRICA?

South Africa's alcohol problem has deep historical roots. Alcohol control was a significant component of the political, economic and social landscape under apartheid. The restriction of drinking among Black Africans helped catalyse the growth of illicit sorghum beer production and the mushrooming of shebeens. Today the majority of South Africa's estimated 200,000 shebeens still remain unlicensed and illegal.

Selling alcohol has become an important means of making a living in townships where alternative business opportunities are limited. Despite their illegal status, shebeens provide significant distribution channels for formal liquor as well as a source of employment for many. These small businesses then contribute towards an alcohol industry worth R40 billion a year in production, exports and domestic consumption.

The economic benefit and livelihood opportunities from alcohol must be reconciled with its significant negative social and health

impacts. Although many adult South Africans don't drink (28% of men and 54% of women report being lifetime abstainers), those who do drink, tend to do so in ways that precipitate health and socioeconomic harms. Over 30% of male drinkers report binge drinking [1]. These practices are both cause and consequence of a host of acute and chronic harms including: accidents; crime; violence; addiction; and having an impact on the prevalence and treatment of chronic disease.

In 2011, the Second Biennial Anti-Substance Abuse Summit, taking forward this mandate, passed 34 resolutions for government action, including the need to restrict the time and days on which alcohol could be sold and a call for the implementation of laws to reduce the number of liquor outlets, 'including shebeens, taverns and liquor stores in specific geographical areas' [2]. The scale of public and governmental concern is perhaps best reflected in the language of the National Drug

Master Plan 2013-2017 in which it is argued that alcohol is placing 'many communities under siege' [3]. This short publication then explores the controversies that underpin how best to address this siege. \_\_\_\_\_

## CONTROVERSY 1

# LIQUOR IS A THREAT TO DEVELOPMENT

Alcohol plays an “ambiguous” role in the social and economic development of developing countries [4]. On one hand, it contributes to local, regional and national economies through providing formal and informal employment and tax revenue.

On the other, excessive alcohol consumption is one of the four major risk factors for the chronic disease burden and contributory factor to violence, injury, crime, poor mental health and infectious diseases. In many rapidly-urbanising developing countries, alcohol-related harms are severely curtailing quality of life, wellbeing, personal safety and are a significant drain on limited household resources. For the poor, drinking alcohol may be a coping strategy when employment and leisure opportunities are curtailed and poverty makes life perpetually challenging and stressful.

This form of coping can ironically only worsen and reinforce vulnerabilities to alcohol-related

harms. Complicating matters further, rising incomes are also correlated with increased alcohol consumption. Alcohol may be a threat to development; but development itself may also worsen alcohol-related harms [5].

The most recent World Health Organisation Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health stresses that alcohol is an impediment to sustained social and economic development [6]. From a South African public health perspective, the association between alcohol consumption and liquor harms justifies a policy response of tightening regulation and controlling access to alcohol through retail and on-consumption outlets. It is argued that reducing harms could be achieved by regulating supply: closing unlicensed venues; reducing opening hours; and increasing the legal drinking age. However, in contexts where alcohol retailing has long formed a crucial source of subsistence household income, thought needs to be given to the provision of

alternative livelihood opportunities if such control policy is to be effective.

The key controversy then is how to reconcile the need for shebeeners who retail a legal product as a way of making a living under conditions of diminished opportunity with the public health aspiration of reducing alcohol-related harms. Questions need to be asked about the broader factors driving demand for both the retail and consumption of alcohol. Questions also need to be asked about how this demand may intersect not only with conditions of poverty and inequality, but also rising wealth. Addressing supply without examining demand risks putting unsustainable alcohol control measures in place that may only exacerbate inequalities. \_\_\_\_\_

## CONTROVERSY 2

SHEBEENS ARE  
DANGEROUS

In political, as well as popular rhetoric, shebeens have come to be synonymised with danger and are often characterised as ‘dens of inequity’. In reality, shebeens fulfil a more ambivalent role in society, supported and opposed in equal measure. Shebeens are an integral part of township life, providing venues for recreation around the consumption of liquor and hosting a range of entertainment and leisure services, including DJ events, dancing, bar games such as pool and table soccer, and offering a venue to watch televised sports events and food provision, especially braai meat.

As alcohol serving venues, shebeens are socially complex and contradictory. Whilst providing recreation and access to alcohol, shebeens also have an influence on drinking culture and conventions, with direct and indirect impacts on society. Yet the diversity of shebeens means that their impact is inevitably uneven and inconsistent. As drinking venues,

shebeens contribute towards harmful drinking behaviour in similar ways to bars and taverns [7], through the provision of branded drinks and much cheaper alcohol [8]. The direct external impact of shebeen drinking includes noise and public disturbance, litter (broken glass) and public urination [9]. Shebeen patrons can also face heightened risks of unsafe sex and, as a result, HIV infection.

When it comes to crime and shebeens, there is no simple correlation. Shebeen venues can provide opportunities for crime. This is mainly in the form of petty theft (phones, money and clothing), fighting between patrons over spilt drinks, lovers (especially men fighting over women), debts and verbal offences. The main protagonists in this violence are young men and women in their twenties. Whilst the range of harms that occur within shebeens is doubtlessly problematic, individual shebeens are also subject to a range of highly effective internal, self-regulatory control strategies (see

Controversy 4) that have been shown to have a profound effect on patron behaviour [10]. Shebeens can be dangerous, but they are also highly valuable public social spaces where bonds of solidarity, friendship and tolerance are cultivated. In some instances, shebeens may offer places of relative safety within deeply insecure township environments where too much violence, especially against women and children, occurs behind closed doors [11].

The controversy then remains of how best to manage these ambiguous spaces and their communities. This requires moving away from a policy of closure and asking different questions: How can police and the liquor authorities, for example, best serve the community's needs? And how might policing be linked into existing micro-scale safety strategies to produce safe and welcoming social spaces? \_\_\_\_\_



## CONTROVERSY 3

THERE ARE TOO  
MANY SHEBEENS

There are more than 200,000 unlicensed liquor retailers in South Africa [7]. An analysis of the StatsSA QLFS data found that 3.8% of all informal, home-based workers were engaged in shebeens and 6.2% in spaza shops (grocery stores) many of which have historically sold liquor [8]. Most shebeens are situated in black townships and rural areas. Shebeens thus have a significant role in providing business opportunities for home-based, start-up micro-enterprises and local employment. The great majority of shebeens trade liquor illegally because the trader cannot obtain a liquor licence as licencing laws are onerous and are designed to exclude the shebeen sector [9].

Under the social policy objective of ‘alcohol supply reduction’ liquor regulators have sought to exclude shebeen owners from accessing licences through three techniques: i) restricting hours and days of trading, ii) utilising municipal land use controls (requiring businesses to operate on commercial land)

and iii) public participation vetting. Through preventing shebeens from obtaining licences, it is hoped they will stop trading and the supply of alcohol in townships will be reduced.

The policy objective falls short in a number of respects. First, there is no evidence that restricting access to licences has resulted in a reduction of shebeens. On the contrary, evidence shows that new shebeens have started up [12].

Moreover, while police raids to close shebeens have succeeded in harming businesses economically, they rarely lead to shebeens closing permanently as the shebeen provides the main livelihood within a context of widespread unemployment and limited alternative business opportunities. There are strong historical continuities between the current alcohol regulatory strategies and the efforts of the Apartheid state to outlaw shebeens.

Second, the large number of shebeens is not a proxy indicator for alcohol harms. Research in eight townships revealed that over 80% of informal liquor venues sell less than 16.5 litres of liquor (almost exclusively beer) per week

[12]. Most shebeen owners are economic survivalist enterprises (predominately female run) which trade only in small quantities of liquor [13].

The survivalist nature of liquor selling partly helps explain the consistently high number of liquor outlets. But demand factors are also important. Most township families don't keep liquor at home; therefore in providing access to liquor, the shebeen serves the same role as the fridge in a middle class household. In a typical township neighbourhood, shebeens fulfil particular consumer niches, catering for different age groups, music, entertainment and food tastes. This is no different to the diversity of licensed venues found in metropolitan areas.

Reducing the number of shebeen outlets will most likely result in the concentration of these diverse social niches into single larger venues which may only exacerbate liquor harms.

Third, focussing on the number of shebeens means that we ignore the influence of rapid encroachment of supermarkets on the township liquor market. Whilst this development will lessen current dependence of the drinking population on shebeens for alcohol supply, it also takes valuable business away from small and medium enterprises, arguably only increasing the availability of cheap liquor and doing nothing to reduce demand. Questions must therefore be urgently asked about the ways in which supermarkets are shifting liquor purchasing and consumption habits, as well as their relationship to risks and harms. \_\_\_\_\_

## CONTROVERSY 4

SHEBEENS ARE  
UNCONTROLLED  
AND  
UNREGULATED

Shebeens are technically illegal and informal businesses [14], but this does not mean that they are uncontrolled and unregulated.

Shebeen owners (mostly females operating from family homes) are aware that violence within the venue and conflict with neighbours is not good for business or for their social standing in the community. Unlike drug dens and drug dealers, which are widely opposed, shebeens tend to operate with tacit community acceptance. This is because they function as places where people meet to socialise and recreate, with much drinking still undertaken in a manner that adheres to accepted cultural norms. Their acceptance also lies in their importance to neighbourhood informal economies. Many shebeen owners extend economic opportunities to neighbours, who operate street braais, take-aways, surveillance services, car washes, hair salons and bottle recycling [7]. Together, these micro-enterprises comprise a collective of

neighbourhood business that responds to local demands, whilst providing employment and business opportunities for the community. Shebeens owners use a diverse array of micro-control strategies to self-regulate their businesses and to create desirable environments for consumers [16]. Common strategies include the imposition of specific age restrictions, gendered door policies (men only), stated policies on weapons and conflict, and active surveillance within the venue. In some cases shebeen owners employ a 'red card' strategy to ban violent customers. Within the enterprise, shebeens often utilise a range of infrastructural measures such as drink shelves, security gates, seating arrangements, music control, and lighting in order to control patron use of space and limit conflict. These measures are put to the most effective use in smaller neighbourhood shebeens [10].

Shebeeners also engage in frequent negotiations with neighbours and

community groups to minimise the impact of their business and the likelihood of complaint [16]. Public concerns tend to focus predominantly on the issue of operating hours with community leaders often engaging with shebeens owners to agree acceptable closing times. However, community leaders have little capacity to enforce compliance with these agreements and to ensure that their positive effects are sustained in the longer-term [17]. This has instead been seen as a police matter. However, in township settings where state policing is at best sporadic; community efforts have played important roles in setting out collective forms of control and informal modes of regulation. How best to nurture and support these little-acknowledged self-regulatory endeavours is an important question for the design of equitable alcohol policy. \_\_\_\_\_

## CONTROVERSY 5

WE NEED MORE  
POLICING  
OF SHEBEENS

Policing is essential to enforce existing alcohol policies and regulations [14]. Indeed, without appropriate and effective enforcement, laws and regulations are meaningless. In township settings, the current approach to policing the liquor laws has placed considerable emphasis on targeting, raiding and forcing the closure of shebeens. This has detracted from and complicated existing community policing initiatives that might instead aim to ensure that shebeen patrons behave respectfully in public, streets are adequately-lit, patrolled and safe, and venue closing times are adhered to in compliance with local agreements. There is broad consensus that police raids will not achieve the aim of eradicating shebeens [15, 16, 17]. Where shebeens are successfully closed, others simply open to serve continued local demand [7]. But there is also evidence – such as evidence given in the recently launched Khayelitsha Commission Report - that the current approach to policing is unjust, transgresses human rights, encourages bribery

and harms relationships between the police and the wider community [18]. Shebeeners have also developed sophisticated coping strategies to avoid being caught. These include the age-old tactics of hiding liquor, engaging neighbours in surveillance, and altering the dynamics of the business such as shifting opening hours and endeavouring to operate more covertly. Whilst these measures may ensure the shebeen's survival, they also mean that these businesses are becoming ever smaller in size and ever more informal in character. This then only decreases the capacity of the state to regulate either shebeens or their internal drinking environments. For, as shebeens are pushed underground, the negotiated agreements between shebeeners and the community diminish. The result is less, not more, control.

It is not shebeens alone that need more policing, but the broader township environments themselves. While 91% of

people surveyed for the 2014 Khayelitsha Commission Report expressed feeling unsafe near a shebeen at night, it is perhaps more notable that 88% felt unsafe in recreational and community spaces, 91% on the street and 78% in their own homes [18]. Attention therefore needs to shift from isolated "operations" to close liquor outlets, to designing and implementing broad-based and community-centred empowerment and safety strategies [19]. In middle-class neighbourhoods where licensed venues operate, policing focuses on managing issues such as noise, anti-social behaviour and opening hour compliance. Shebeens cannot obtain licenses, but the same issues still need to be policed. The extreme paucity of liquor inspectors and the strict delimitations on SAPS and metropolitan policing responsibilities means that enforcement is patchy and, more often than not, inadequately resourced. More and better policing is needed, but not with the sole aim of eliminating shebeens. \_\_\_\_\_

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## Note:

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