

DEBUNKING SOME MYTHS ON REDUCING HARMS CAUSED BY ALCOHOL

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Harms caused by alcohol are a societal and not only a problem of individuals. Media reports on government's attempts to reduce harms caused by alcohol tend to be simplistic and focused on the individual, rather than on the harms caused to the broader population. In the light of forthcoming amendments to South Africa liquor legislation, a broader understanding is required.

Myths which emerge in the debates around alcohol include:

- *MYTH: Some people in government want to ban alcohol outright.* Besides it being untrue that government wants to ban alcohol, life has changed since the 1930s when prohibition in the USA prompted people to brew their own. Most South Africans who do drink alcohol aspire to branded high end (and often very expensive premium global brands), not home-made brews.
 - South Africans are amongst the highest imbibers in the world, and the highest in Africa:
But 60% abstain entirely, which means that many of the 40% who do drink, do so excessively.
- The legal age for drinking is 18 and should not be increased simply because one can vote and drive at 18, marry at 16 (T&Cs apply). Medical evidence shows that the brain – particularly the prefrontal cortex - only stops developing in one's early 20s.

WHY DO PEOPLE DRINK

- 'Alcohol relieves stress' - the truth is that binge and youth drinking is the main problem, not enjoying a glass of wine or two with a meal.
- 'Poverty is the problem – people drink to escape'. 'Solve poverty first then problem drinking will decrease'. Maybe, but unlikely, as seen in some Nordic countries where binge drinking is a major problem. In South Africa problem drinking adds to poverty – it takes food from families, disables workers and children grow up experiencing drunk parents as the norm. Reducing alcohol consumption would contribute positively, reducing the vicious cycle of poverty and intergenerational influences.

HISTORY

- 'The dop system' is so deeply entrenched in South Africa that 'there is little one can do'. It is never too late to turn the seemingly inevitable around, e.g. what stops farmers preventing bakkies loaded with cheap alcohol selling on their farms? What prevents tighter controls on liquor outlets in rural areas?
- 'Curbing alcohol harms is racist' – the new policy aims at all sectors of South African society which suffer from alcohol-related harms.
- 'Under apartheid Africans were not allowed to purchase alcohol' – not true; beerhalls were specifically established in townships by the Bantu Administration Boards to sell beer in order to finance township infrastructure. Beer brewed (mainly by women) in backyards was outlawed as this seen as competition to the beerhalls.

ENFORCEMENT

- ‘Police can’t cope with serious crime, let alone alcohol-related crime’. Evidence shows 60% of crimes involve alcohol – the perpetrator and often the victim having drunk too much. Alcohol abuse is part of a growing South African ‘culture of ignoring the law’, like crossing intersections in the face of red traffic lights, littering, driving and walking on highways while under the influence, gender-based violence, not to mention aggression and abuse. We did it with smoking – peer pressure is nowadays as important as the law in curbing smoking. It is now time to call out those who trade and drink irresponsibly.
- ‘One for the road’, ‘go on, have another glass of wine, no one will catch you’ (said to me by a waiter at a five star hotel in Cape Town not long ago). Everyone needs to be responsible.
- ‘The community’ is portrayed as not wanting regulation, but ‘communities’ are not homogeneous groups: toyi-toying shebeeners may live and work in townships and informal settlements, but they are an integral part of the industry. ‘Putting food on their tables’ takes food off other people’s tables... 86% of a large survey of Khayelitsha residents recently urged government to regulate alcohol better.
- Imagine if the authorities turned a blind eye to illegal liquor outlets in the leafy suburbs? – why should rules be different in densely packed disadvantaged areas? Why should there be double-standards? All our residents and citizens deserve a well-regulated liquor industry.
- ‘Why should my access be curtailed?’ Access is key to reducing harms – distance to points of sale (licensed or not), trading hours and price are the top three issues for intervention identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in reducing harms.
- ‘Sports (and arts) will collapse if the liquor industry is prohibited from sponsoring them’. The reality is that the liquor industry rarely sponsors amateur sports where the development need is greatest. Little funding currently trickles down from the few professionals who benefit to the thousands, especially young people who would benefit most from constructive sports programmes.
- ‘Advertising should be self-regulated’. Advertising effectively raises consumption, especially amongst young people and non-traditional drinkers (such as women in Africa). The liquor companies unashamedly target developing countries, mainly African youth and women for their growth markets. Why would the liquor companies spend so many billions on advertising if it was ineffective? Evidence shows self-regulation has not worked.
- ‘Research shows...’ well, it depends who paid for the research, who formulated the questions – not all research has been independently peer-reviewed. Globally, liquor companies sponsor ‘sweetheart’ research that finds the conclusions they favour.
- ‘Addiction should be treated, not regulated’. Some people are indeed addicted but by far the majority of those who drink and drive, or binge drink on pay days, are not alcoholics - they are irresponsible drinkers. There are support programmes for addicts, but this does not mean there should not *also* be more regulation.
- ‘Drugs are worse’ – not for their impact on society. Alcohol is legal, drugs are not. Alcohol causes much more social harm. The effects of drugs tend to cause harm to the individual, rather than to society broadly.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

- ‘But the industry creates jobs?’ While some jobs are created, any realistic cost/benefit analyses must calculate the costs of alcohol-related harms to households, to society and to the state. Currently the industry is effectively subsidised by the state in terms of costs of

emergency medical services, justice system, disabilities, rehabilitation, etc. We should aim to create jobs that benefit society, not cause further costs down the line.

- 'Job losses?' Export our premium wines. Create Western Cape rural jobs by raising the quality and earning foreign exchange from our fine wines
- 'Productivity is a problem, not only on Monday mornings.' Costs to firms, to the economy? Some companies are reducing harms by using breathalysers on their staff to encourage more moderate consumption.
- 'It's the big guys'. The 'liquor industry' is not just the really big global players but the whole supply chain through production, distribution to retail and this includes licensed outlets which supply unlicensed outlets. The industry depends on the whole chain, particularly binge drinking, for profit.

Reducing the harms caused by alcohol contributes to development. Taxpayers' money spent on mitigating alcohol harms could instead go to improving health and education. Household income drunk on alcohol could go to food, schooling, improved housing, even to savings, which would contribute to growing South Africa in our new dawn.