



Alcohol: Lessons from the Lockdown

1. Introduction

One of the dominant narratives throughout the Covid-19 lockdown has been around the various bans and regulations regarding the purchase of alcohol. These had enormous socio-economic consequences but they also had a considerable psycho-social impact. Some have argued that the ban on alcohol was beyond what was reasonable and necessary, while many have contended that alcohol wreaks havoc on our society. "This is not news, but COVID has shone a spotlight on this issue, and it's one that needs to be dealt with and not shoved back under the carpet when the virus has been tamed."¹

The lessons learnt during the lockdown about the differing roles played by alcohol in our society are significant.² Journalist Sasha Planting points out that "the lockdown, apart from being an unprecedented intervention in the interests of public health, is also one of the largest uncontrolled experiments ever to be conducted — and it presents South Africa with unique challenges and opportunities."³

2. Incidence of Alcohol Consumption

Well over 50% of South Africans do not consume alcohol. However, those that do drink, regardless of their race or socio-economic background, drink heavily and this frequently leads to behaviour that is harmful both to themselves and to others. This reality motivated the strict introduction of the ban on the sale of alcohol in an effort to limit the intake of trauma patients at hospital emergency units and thereby ensure sufficient beds for COVID-19 patients. Joan van Dyk points out that as a society we seem to tolerate the high number of injuries and deaths

resulting from motor vehicle accidents, gang violence, and gender-based violence, in the majority of which alcohol plays a part, and that little has been done to address this harsh reality.⁴

The number of trauma cases has tended to fluctuate with the severity of the lockdown regulations, hence the need for the reintroduction of these measures at various times. But there is presently no regulatory framework to promote responsible drinking so, without appropriate interventions which are discussed below, the carnage will continue.

3. Historical Background and Social Impact

There is nothing inherently wrong with the consumption of alcohol.⁵ However, the production, sale and consumption of alcohol has played, and continues to play, a complex role in our society. The systemic legacy of the 'dop system' whereby farm workers were partially paid their weekly wage with cheap wine, continues with the cynical sale of cheap wine in large containers which enables binge drinking, chiefly at weekends, amongst farm workers in the Western Cape (which produces most of South Africa's wine and spirits). Exploitative labour practices continue, and in this context alcohol is an alternative to hardship and the lack of structural change.⁶ Alana de Kock points out: "Alcohol formed part of the creation of the rural labour force and the use of alcohol amongst farm works is now a feature of farm worker life. Alcohol consumption is part of the farm workers' response to the suffering that permeates their lives."⁷

The wine and spirits which are the product of these workers' labour is also consumed in excess by those who can afford to buy it. The World Health Organization has noted that South Africa has the world's highest rate of alcohol-related road deaths, where as much as 58% of deaths can be attributed to alcohol consumption.⁸ Homicides and those injured in violent crime frequently have high blood alcohol readings.

Urbanization, in which "millions of black people moved from rural to urban areas searching for jobs and 'a better life' also encouraged a 'dangerous' relationship with alcohol. In this environment, beer halls were born and commercial alcohol was introduced. The stress of apartheid on the (mainly black) work force was a likely contributing factor to deepening the relationship between alcohol and South Africans."⁹ The more liquor outlets there are, both formal and informal, the more people consume alcohol. Furthermore, the money spent on alcohol impacts on the household income and can compromise the well-being of the family.

Alcohol abuse has many negative economic, social and health consequences which include unemployment, violence, crime, sexually risky behaviour, and disruptions to family life and work performance.¹⁰ It is instructive to remember that during the student uprisings of 1976, beer halls and bottle stores were destroyed as symbols of exploitation and oppression. While alcohol makes a valuable contribution to the economy, it also costs the country a great deal both in financial terms and in terms psycho-social misery and trauma. Gender-based violence is often associated with alcohol abuse. We know that there was a veritable explosion of domestic violence during the hard lockdown, so the ban on the sale of alcohol did not prevent domestic violence from occurring. Ground Up reported that a recent study conducted at Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg showed an increase in female trauma admissions during hard lockdown.¹¹ Close confinement and economic distress during the lockdown could also be contributing factors. Helplines for both women and children received an unprecedented number of calls, probably because both women and children were literally locked up with their abuser.

4. Alcohol and the Economy

As is clear from the above, alcohol plays an ambiguous role in our socio-economic life. The production, sale and consumption of alcohol constitutes an important industry that contributes substantially to the fiscus, and one that supports hundreds of thousands of people up and down the value chain. These include farm workers, glass manufacturers, truck drivers, retailers, packers, and many more. Therefore, the total ban on the sale of *all* alcohol from *all* liquor outlets under the lockdown had far-reaching and immediate consequences. And it was the smaller people lower down that chain who bore the immediate hardship stemming from the regulations that closed informal alcohol serving establishments, known as 'shebeens' and 'taverns', as they had few financial safety nets.

The ban on the sale of alcohol impacted significantly on the wages of workers and the informal liquor sector, and the state lost millions of rands in taxes. However, the illegal sale of alcohol amongst those who could afford it was largely unchecked. The Liquor Traders Formation, which represents liquor outlets, said that they had proposed "curfew measures and alcohol restrictions that would still allow off-premise sales for home consumption." This was because a complete shutdown of liquor sales would mean "an end to the tavern market and the 250 000 direct jobs linked to the sector."¹² On the other hand there is "the irrefutable point that alcohol wreaks havoc on our society and, some would say, detracts more from our GDP than it contributes."¹³

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 7.8% of South Africa's GDP is lost due to accidents on the country's roads.¹⁴ Others have commented that "alcohol abuse in South Africa is also eroding our economy in countless direct and indirect ways and can be likened to the grim reaper, here to take the soul of the country in the dead of night, encouraged by each nonchalant alcoholic gulp."¹⁵

The industry, of course, sees the issue from a different perspective. Earlier this year, South African Breweries (SAB) challenged the alcohol ban in court, arguing that it was unconstitutional; SAB supported a reduction in trading times, but contended that complete prohibition was "beyond what is reasonable and necessary". According to SAB, the first two bans (which

together lasted more than three months) led to more than 160 000 job losses. They also demonstrated that restricting the legal trade of alcohol fuelled the growth of the illicit market. Lucky Ntimane, head of the Liquor Traders' Association, said that a million people in South Africa have jobs tied to the alcohol industry.¹⁶

5. What is to be Done?

The experience of the lockdown has made laid bare the shocking damage caused by the abuse of alcohol. However, it has also shown that the liquor industry is an important source of employment. Recently, the country's biggest trade union federation, Cosatu, said that government needs to introduce more permanent changes around the sale of alcohol; however, any outright ban on the sale of alcohol, which has happened on three different occasions in the last year, was untenable because of the harm it did to the economy and to jobs.¹⁷

The introduction of new legislation and regulations around the sale of alcohol is timeous if alcohol abuse is to be reduced. The Draft Liquor Amendment Bill,¹⁸ which has been approved by the President, is now set to be introduced in 2021. Among the changes introduced by this Bill are: increasing the drinking age to 21 years; the introduction of a 100-metre radius limitation of alcohol trading around educational and religious institutions; the banning of any alcohol sales and advertising on social and small media; and the introduction of a new liability clause for alcohol-sellers.

Other measures include further limits on advertising, regulation of trading hours and an additional tax on alcohol, with the additional money used to improve the country's healthcare infrastructure. Furthermore, there will be regulation with regard to population density and the location of liquor outlets. The more liquor outlets there are, both formal and informal, the more people consume alcohol. "It is an indictment on government that 26 years after the democratic breakthrough, taverns are one of the

few venues for economic activity in townships and rural areas."¹⁹ The opening up of other areas of economic activity might go some way to reduce the plethora of shebeens and taverns.

All these measures would do much to address the carnage wrought by the excessive consumption of alcohol. However, what is also desperately needed is public education programmes about what alcohol is; what the consequences of drinking are; and why it can be dangerous in the immediate term and damaging in the long term. Socialization has a strong bearing on people learning to drink. The process of learning to drink occurs both within the home and in the broader context of social interactions. "Although adults give children the verbal message that they may not drink, adult patterns of behaviour provide a template on which young people build their drinking patterns."²⁰ Patric Solomons emphasises the importance of adults modelling responsible drinking behaviour to their children.²¹ Moreover, there is a desperate need for a 'cultural shift' around alcohol consumption.

6. Conclusion

Distell CEO Richard Rushton²² asserts that "we are all on the same side and we want to help find solutions. We are very clear that alcohol abuse is unacceptable and causes harm. Our view is that the focus must be on finding ways to deal with high-risk drinkers, rather than using blunt instruments that penalise all South Africans."²³ The South African Medical Research Council concurs, saying that there needs to be "a clear, multi-sectoral national approach to guide its liquor strategy, along with competent and empowered leadership to drive the plan."²⁴ A viable solution to South Africa's alcohol problem will have to find the right balance between public health and individual freedom.²⁵ The great lesson of COVID-19 has been how our behaviour impacts on the well-being of others and the need to take responsibility for this. It is an important lesson that should inform responsible drinking behaviour.

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- ¹<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-01-18-taking-a-big-stick-to-beaches-and-booze-does-not-inspire>
- ² On Thursday, 11th March the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office held a Webinar on 'Alcohol and the Lockdown'. The speakers were Patrick Solomons from Molo Sonogolo and Joan van Dyk from the BHEKISISA Centre for Health Journalism
- ³ <https://bhekisisa.org/opinion/2020-04-28-south-africa-coronavirus-covid19-alcohol-ban-lockdown-trauma-admissions-violence-koot-kotze/>
- ⁴ Joan van Dyk at CPLO Webinar
- ⁵ Alexandra resident Collins Khosa was assaulted and beaten to death in his garden while drinking an alcoholic beverage by four SANDF Troops. The SAPS officials who witnessed the incident did nothing to intervene.
- ⁶ Joan van Dyk at CPLO Webinar
- ⁷ *'Fruit of the Vine, Work of Human Hands: Farm Workers and Alcohol on a Farm in Stellenbosch, South Africa'*, Alana de Kock, Unpublished Master's Thesis, UCT, 2002
- ⁸ <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/101626/south-africa-worst-in-the-world-for-drunk-driving/>
- ⁹ <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-10-27-00-effects-of-alcohol-consumption-in-south-africa-from-the-cradle-to>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.sajcn.co.za/index.php>
- ¹¹ <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/study-shows-effect-alcohol-ban/>
- ¹² <https://www.biznews.com/global-citizen/2021/01/21/angry-sas-alcohol-ban>
- ¹³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-01-18-taking-a-big-stick-to-beaches-and-booze-does-not-inspire-confidence/>
- ¹⁴ <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/101626/south-africa-worst-in-the-world-for-drunk-driving/>
- ¹⁵ <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-10-27-00-effects-of-alcohol-consumption-in-south-africa-from-the-cradle-to-the-grave>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200917-the-impact-of-banning-alcohol-during-covid-19>
- ¹⁷ <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/465102/pressure-mounts-on-government-to-make-permanent-changes-to-alcohol-laws-in-south-africa>
- ¹⁸ https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201609/40319gon1206.pdf
- ¹⁹ <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/463582/unions-call-for-eased-alcohol-restrictions-in-south-africa-with-more-permanent-changes-to-be-put-in-place-inst56t4>
- ²⁰ *'Fruit of the Vine, Work of Human Hands: Farm Workers and Alcohol on a Farm in Stellenbosch, South Africa'*, Alana de Kock, Unpublished Master's Thesis, UCT, 2002
- ²¹ Patric Solomons, CPLO Webinar
- ²² Distell Group Limited is a producer and marketer of spirits, wines, ciders and ready-to-drink drinks.
- ²³ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-04-07-lockdowns-curfews-or-booze-bans-whats-really-ca>
- ²⁴ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/alcohol-consumption-in-sa-is-off-the-charts-samrc/>
- ²⁵ <https://bhekisisa.org/opinion/2020-04-28-south-africa-coronavirus-covid19-alcohol-ban-lockdown-trauma-admissions-violence-koot-kotze/>

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