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## **Ships, Trucks and Clubs: The Dynamics of HIV Risk Behaviour in Walvis Bay<sup>1</sup>**

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**This paper summarizes the main findings for the Walvis Bay section of a much larger study done for the International Organisation on Migration. It looks at the dynamics of HIV risk behaviour among three groups of highly mobile sub-populations most at risk for HIV infections: fishermen, truck drivers and sex workers. In addition to discussing the nature of the interactions between the three groups, it draws attention to the spatial dimensions of the interactions. It also identifies the reasons why each of the groups is vulnerable, points to efforts to reduce their risk and the challenges faced by those who design and implement these programmes. It also draws attention to key attitudes related to risky activities.**

### 1. Introduction

Walvis Bay is Namibia's only deep-water port and is the focus point of a very large commercial fishing industry. In addition to being the commercial hub of the commercial fishing sector, Walvis Bay is a key node on the two major highways – the Trans-Caprivi Highway, and the Trans-Kalahari Highway - that link Namibia directly with Angola, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa. Indirectly, these highways link the town of Walvis Bay with destinations well beyond its immediate neighbouring states.

International contact with the harbour of Walvis Bay dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Portuguese seafarers first explored the coast of southwestern Africa. The town and surrounding areas were formally annexed as a British colony in 1878 and incorporated into the Cape Colony in 1884. Walvis Bay and the enclave became formally part of Namibia again hundred years later in 1994, some four years after Independence in 1990.

The lucrative fishing industry means that Walvis Bay is frequented by large number of foreign fishermen working on international vessels. They arrive on a regular basis, mainly from Europe (Spain, Russia) and Asia (China). The presence of these foreign fishermen and truck drivers provide additional incentives for commercial sex work, and brings a different dynamic to HIV risk behaviour and the way it relates to highly mobile populations. Under these conditions, the implications and consequences of risk behaviour are truly international, and the effects hereof would be felt thousands of miles away. Through their contact with local sex workers, foreign fishermen and truck drivers put their regular partners and many others at risk of infection, thereby providing new impetus to the ever-increasing pandemic. This study looks at the dynamics of these relations and highlights the challenges presented by them. It also offers a few recommendations for how these challenges should be approached.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a much larger report presented to the IOM: Lebeau D, 2006, [Turning Corridors of Mobility into Corridors of Hope: Mapping the Link between Mobility and HIV Vulnerability in Namibia.](#)

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Debie Lebeau was a senior consultant attached to the IPPR for the duration of this project, and is the author of the original research report submitted to the IOM.

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## 2. Background to the Study

The study on which this paper is based, was commissioned by the International Organization on Migration (IOM) and forms part of a much larger international project on HIV risk behaviour among highly mobile populations. The IOM contracted the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) to conduct the Namibian part of the study. The larger study included, in addition to the town of Walvis Bay (Erongo region), three other border towns: Katima Mulilo (Caprivi region), Oshikango (Ohangwena Region) and Rundu (Kavango region).

The study had two main objectives:

- To gather qualitative data on HIV risk behaviour among mobile sub-populations in four pre-selected towns, and present these in a written report.
- To map the spatial dynamics of HIV risk behaviour for each of the four towns, and present these by means of interactive digital and hand drawn maps.

## 3. Methodology

As a first step to the data collection four teams of mapping and research assistants were supplied with base maps and aerial photographs of the various localities and a semi-structured questionnaire for data collection. Mapping assistants walked the localities to collect base-line information about the “hot-spots” and other important locations and plotted these on the base maps. Research assistants conducted face-to-face interviews with key informants from the various sub-populations identified for the study. These included: fishermen, sex workers, truck drivers, business owners, law enforcement agencies, community leaders, HIV educators and program managers, as well as other stake-holders. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

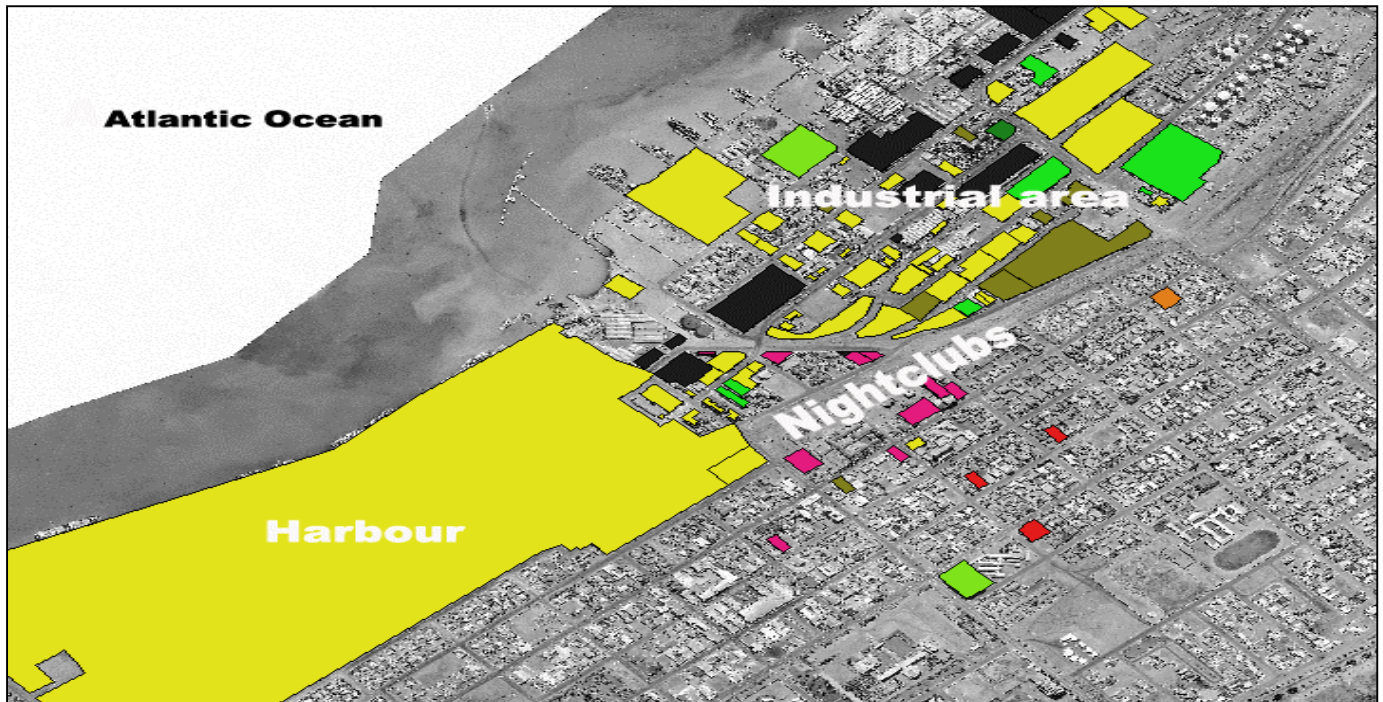
Once, the data collection was completed, the interviews were analyzed by researchers. A GIS service prepared a data base containing all spatial data, and linked these to shape files with spatio-analytical categories to produce interactive maps of the locations.

In addition to providing contextual information, key informants were also asked to produce hand-drawn maps of their locations and the areas of interest to the study. These maps also contain information about the various forms of HIV risk behaviour. These maps were scanned to be included in the written report.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Fishermen

Two types of fishermen use Walvis Bay as their port of call: foreign fishermen from Europe and Asia and local Namibian fishermen. The *foreign fishermen* do not reside in town other than for short periods of shore leave. Their overall stints of employment in Namibian waters are usually between three and six months, interspersed with short periods of shore leave which usually do not last for more than a couple of days, depending on the reasons for port calls. Typically, these fishermen come from areas with low HIV prevalence, and hence, as low awareness of and knowledge of the disease. They frequent nightclubs and discos close to the harbour area for entertainment and contact with high-end commercial sex workers (see Figure 1 below). Depending on their period of shore leave, sexual relations with the commercial sex workers do not last beyond the night of the initial contact. There are exceptions though. Some European fishermen (usually Spanish) engage in longer-term relations with local sex workers. These fishermen rent residential properties in town and set up the local sex workers as live-in girlfriends. These girls remain “faithful” when their partners are on shore leave and in town, but continue to solicit new clients when the men return to sea. These relationships could last for the duration of the fisherman’s stay in Namibia.



**Figure 1: Nightclubs in the Harbour Area of Walvis Bay**

The foreign fishermen’s vulnerability to HIV stems from a number of factors that include:

- Not having had any HIV education prior to their arrival in Namibia.
- Not receiving any HIV education during their stay in Namibia.
- Having low levels of knowledge and awareness, due the fact that they come from areas with low prevalence levels.
- Frequently engaging in unprotected sex and high-risk sexual activities with high-risk sexual partners (commercial sex workers).
- Engaging in short-term relationships with unfaithful partners (sex workers as girlfriends).
- Frequent abuse of alcohol.
- Inability to communicate in any of the local languages.

It appears as if there are certain ethnographic patterns around foreign fishermen and their relations to local sex workers. Spanish fishermen, for example, prefer high-end sex workers, and take them as girlfriends. According to one real estate agent interviewed:

*“[H]igh-end prostitutes get foreign fishermen to rent houses for them. The fishermen live with the women when in port and when they are at sea the women ‘have a good old time’ going to the nightclubs and having other men. They know when the boats come back and clean up for them. The foreigners think all is well and that they have a woman and a place to stay. For the men it is about having a place like home, while for the women it is all about security and using men for a place to stay. These are most foreigners, Spanish not Chinese”.*

Chinese fishermen on the other hand prefer once-off encounters with low-end sex workers and prefer unprotected sex. In the words of a local HIV educator from the Social Marketing Association (SMA):

*“The Chinese do no like condoms and do not want to pay so they have high-risk sex with low level prostitutes, other foreigners have high end girls, but also do not want to use condoms, while the local*

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*guys have girlfriends in Kuisebmond, so they are not using the prostitutes as much, but they go out and look for other women”.*

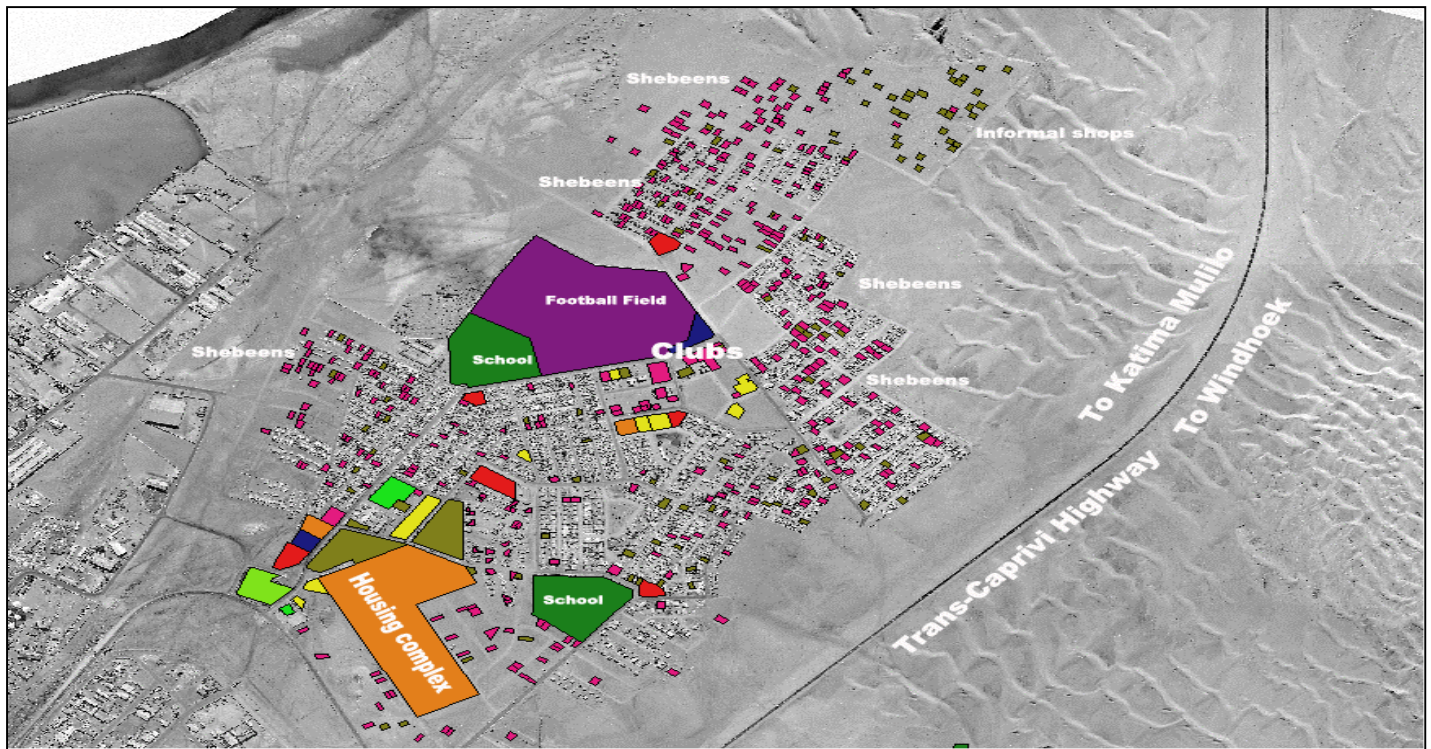
*Local fishermen* are usually permanent residents of Walvis Bay, and hence, spend more time on-shore than the foreign fishermen. They frequent the numerous shebeens in Kuisebmond (see Figure 2 below) and have sexual relations with the low-end sex workers who also frequent these establishments, and with women who engage in transactional sex<sup>4</sup>. Local fishermen do not frequent the same clubs and bars as the foreign fishermen, although some of the sex workers might move between the two sets of locations. It is, therefore, quite possible that local and foreign fishermen could have sexual relations with the same sex worker.

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<sup>4</sup> These women are not commercial sex workers per se. Although they might accept money for sex from time to time, they are just as likely to accept gifts, food, a place to stay or alcohol in exchange for sex.



**Figure 2: Shebeens in Kuisebmond**



Although local fishermen have had much greater exposure to HIV education and awareness campaigns, some have indicated that existing efforts are not sufficient. Their vulnerabilities stem from the following:

- Inadequate HIV education.
- Distrust in vessel owners and management.
- Unprotected sex with low-end sex workers and women who engage in transactional sex.
- Frequent abuse of alcohol.
- Absent spouses or partners.

Given the amount of time the men spend on-board their fishing vessels, it makes sense to provide HIV education whilst the fishermen are at sea. Although peer education programs have been implemented, some fishermen complain that they have not been included in such programs. For them the problem lies with vessel owners and managers. In the words of one local Oshiwambo fisherman:

*“[Y]ou know those who are supposed to give us that [HIV] information are our bosses, the boat operators. They are all foreigners, so they don’t really care about us. Their concern is just work and their fish. As you know, those foreigners are still having that wish that we should suffer so that they can come back in our country.”*

Local fishermen also carry distinctly negative attitudes toward safe sex, even though they might be well informed about HIV and AIDS. Some are of the opinion that paid sex is unprotected sex:

*“[W]hy do you want me to use a condom if I am paying you? ... No, I cannot have sex with you using a condom. I pay you or I can add some more money, so that we cannot use a condom”.*

Local fishermen’s perceptions of sex workers are rather positive and stem from the difficulties they have with sustaining normal, long-term, monogamous relationships due to their long periods of absence. Speaking on sex workers, one local fisherman was of the opinion that:

*“These girls, I think they are helping the fishermen. ... Because, one thing is that we fishermen do not have enough time to find a girl that is not paid for sex. Sometimes we come in here in the morning and*

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*then you will go back in [sic] the sea in the afternoon the same day. ... You don't really have time to struggle for a normal girl. That is the only option you have to be able to be with a woman".*

## 4.2 Sex workers

Commercial sex work is still illegal in Namibia and carries a hefty fine or prison term upon conviction. Sex work takes three forms in Walvis Bay: high-end, full time commercial sex work, low-end, part-time commercial sex work, and transactional sex. Many sex workers are young (between 18 and 30 years), poor and with dependents.

Most sex workers are recruited into the business by friends. Selma's<sup>5</sup> case is typical:

*"I stayed with my friend in her room. That friend was operating sex work. Then, we stayed and most of the time I stay [sic] in her bedroom, while she was gone for work. Sometimes she came home with her clients and I slept on the floor and she used the bed with her client. Sometimes she didn't buy food and I realized that I was suffering. So, I decided to do something for myself."*

Money and the "good life" are crucial drivers for entry into sex work, but only those at the upper-end ever get a taste of it. One high-end sex worker was quite proud of the changes in her life since she started sex work two years ago:

*"[Y]ou cannot believe how [sic] our house looks like and remember that I only came here 2003 ... and things that I got now, its unbelievable ... this is my own flat. I also have my own car, did you see it on the ground floor, there are two garages".*

Most want to leave the business, but claim that it is near impossible to do. They are aware of the risks involved in their life style, as they have had quite extensive exposure to HIV education programs. Although educators have reported an increase in the use of condoms among sex workers, interviews with the sex workers themselves revealed many instances of unprotected sex, either with regular partners or with clients. The opinions quoted below are from two commercial sex workers in Walvis Bay.

*"[Y]ou know that there are fishermen who are married. Who have their wives, so those, I think [sic] do not need to use condoms with them. Those with only girlfriends we must use condoms."*

*"I use condoms when my trusted boyfriend is not giving me anything and maybe there is no soap at home and I know that there is nowhere he can get money. So I will go without telling him where or tell him I will be visiting a relative or friend. That is where I will meet men [to have sex for money] which I will have to use condoms with and when I come back to my boyfriend we will continue doing it without".*

Interviews of clients also revealed that it is more than often up to the client (man) to instigate condom use. One local fisherman stated:

*"We are using condoms. But I met many of the girls who do not care or say anything like 'let's use a condom'. It comes from you yourself as a man. However if you did not say anything either, then you will end up having sex without a condom. The girls sometimes don't say if we are going we have to use a condom. Although there are those who have their own condoms in their rooms, but some of them, no, it is only you to say we must use a condom."*

Upper-end sex workers prefer regular, repeat clients. These clients remain in cell phone contact with the sex worker and often refer new clients to her. At the clubs, staff makes frequent calls to the harbour authority to check on the schedules of ships and vessels. Once they receive confirmation of a ship's arrival in the harbour, they phone the sex workers to inform them to visit the club that particular night.

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<sup>5</sup> Fictitious name.



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Low-end sex workers are largely excluded from these networks. They operate mainly in the shebeens of Kuisebmond or as streetwalkers. Among their clients it is only the Chinese among the foreign fishermen who makes use of these girls and for the most part their clients are either local fishermen or truck drivers. Although the various types of sex workers have different sources of vulnerability, one or more of the following all negatively affect them:

- Poverty that reduces their ability to negotiate safe sex.
- Cultural and gender practices that reduce their ability to negotiate safe sex.
- Frequent exposure to violence, victimization and stigmatisation.
- Frequent alcohol and drug abuse.
- Inability to communicate with foreign clients.
- Frequent exposure to unprotected sex and high-risk sexual practices.
- Frequent contact with high risk, highly mobile clients.

Of the three high-risk populations under discussion here, sex workers are possibly the best-informed group of all. This is mainly due to the fact that they are the least mobile and hence, easiest to reach with regular programs. They have frequent exposure to HIV testing, but some continue to work, despite having tested positive.

### **4.3 Truck drivers**

Walvis Bay is literally the first or last port of call on the Trans-Kalahari or Trans-Caprivi highways. It is estimated that up to 150 trucks visit Walvis Bay per day. Truck drivers often stay in town for only short periods (at most a couple of days at a time), whilst freight is loaded or off-loaded and it is during this time that they frequent the shebeens and meet with sex workers.

Like fishermen, truck drivers prefer relations with sex workers because of the difficulties of maintaining normal, normal, monogamous relationships due to their frequent and prolonged periods of absence. Although some truck drivers have regular girlfriends in various places along the routes they travel, most see this as too expensive in the long run, and hence, revert to using sex workers again.

Truck drivers see sex workers as “padkos<sup>6</sup>”, “a wife’s assistant”, or “sex helpers” suggesting that these women are perceived to render an ‘important’ service to the truckers. Clubs, shebeens and truck stops are all “hotspots” for meeting sex workers. Max<sup>7</sup>, a truck driver that frequently visits Walvis Bay describes his modus operandi as follows:

*“[W]e like to walk around and go to have a drink and enjoy ourselves. I like dancing in the clubs like in Walvis Bay. When I am in town, I like the Nova Night club”. ... There are only those friends you get if you meet in the clubs. You negotiate with them about giving them some small money once she accepts to have sex with you. You can say that you have only 100 or 200 dollars. Then you are finished that night with your things”.*

Another trucker interviewed in a bar echoed Max’s views:

*“I travel around this country, and if I come to a place, the first one I go for is a sex worker because I know I am going to buy a beer and, like you said, flowers and what, what. I just go pay the price [clap hands] and it’s a done deal”.*

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<sup>6</sup> An Afrikaans word that if loosely translated would mean “food for the road”.

<sup>7</sup> Fictitious name.



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Truck drivers have very mixed views on condom use. Namibian truckers often identify Angolan truckers for not wanting to use condoms. In this regard the opinion of Andreas,<sup>8</sup> a Namibian truck driver, is typical:

*“Angolans do not like to use condoms. Some will, but the majority do not”.*

Yet, interviews with various local and international truckers suggest the pattern might be the opposite. After accusing the Angolan of refusing condoms, Andreas explains his own (high risk) behaviour:

*“With the condom is not that tasty. But without a condom it is very good.”*

Another Namibian truck driver, Max, who claims to have never used a condom, reveals that he is aware that his high risk behaviour puts him at risk for infection:

*“I’m now scared because we’ve come a long time. I realised it sometimes, but I’m scared ... you got this girl there and there you are scared maybe you caught the disease”.*

Max also has a negative attitude toward HIV education programs.

*“I have no time with those things ... I am not interested in their stories”.*

On the other hand, Carlos, an Angolan truck driver, was adamant that his personal experience with HIV inspires him to practice safe sex.

*“But some of these ladies that sell themselves don’t like condoms, but for me I like condoms because many of my friends are dead because of AIDS and I do not want to follow, that’s why I use condom.”*

Truck drivers’ vulnerability stems from a number of factors. These include:

- Constant mobility causing highly unstable relationships.
- Frequent sexual activity with a high-risk group (commercial sex workers).
- Frequently exposed to unprotected sex or unsafe sexual practices with a high-risk group.
- Unwillingness to internalise HIV messages and change behaviour.
- Low levels of education.
- Frequent alcohol abuse.

## 5. The Spatial Dynamics of HIV Risk Behaviour

In Walvis Bay, fishermen, truck drivers and commercial sex workers are tied into a triangle of high-risk sexual behaviour. Given the mobility of truck drivers and foreign fishermen, Walvis Bay is an important node in an international web of risk behaviour. This web consists of both high prevalence areas (Walvis Bay, Katima Mulilo, Zambia and Botswana) and low prevalence areas (Spain, Russia and China). Given that truck drivers and foreign fishermen sometime share the same sexual partner in Walvis Bay, infections picked up along any of the main transport route may be carried all the way around the globe to cause new infections, often with new strands of the virus. Conversely, infections picked up elsewhere in the world may be brought to Walvis Bay, and through Walvis Bay, to other Namibian towns and neighbouring countries. The scope and dynamics of this network has important implications for those who run HIV prevention programs in any of the global and local locations visited by truck drivers or foreign fishermen.

Fishermen and truck drivers have a significant impact on the entertainment industry, and influence important decisions about location and services (e.g. short term rooms), and their presence presents important incentives for commercial sex work. It is not uncommon for shebeens to be erected next to main roads frequented by truck drivers, as is shown by Figure 3 below. Given the integral part played by the entertainment

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<sup>8</sup> Fictitious name.





industry, risk behaviour among any of the three groups discussed here, is closely connected to the availability and consumption of alcohol. To date this connection has largely been ignored and deserves much more attention from those who run risk reducing programs.

**Figure 3: Shebeens Along Trans-Caprivi Highway Outside Rundu**



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## 6. Special Challenges

Highly mobile populations present special challenges to program administrators and implementers. Those from Walvis Bay are no exception. These could be summarized as follows:

- Although local truck drivers receive HIV education, its impact is reduced, due to limited accessibility and unwillingness to change behaviour. Foreign truck drivers from Angola receive no HIV education, making them especially vulnerable.
- Foreign fishermen do not receive HIV education in Namibia at all. Language barriers and accessibility are the main problems. They also do not receive HIV education in their countries of origin – these are typically countries with low prevalence and little attention to HIV education, thus making them especially vulnerable.
- Both the language and accessibility problems have serious economic implications for local educators. They cannot afford to hire additional staff with the required language proficiencies, and hence, have no means to target foreign fishermen. Therefore, in the absence of sufficient funding, it is a case of “Namibians first”.
- Educating foreign fishermen and foreign truck drivers inside Namibia is also problematic, given their relatively short period of residence. When they depart, the newly acquired knowledge leaves with them and the process has to be repeated from scratch with new arrivals. Thus, their leaving means that HIV knowledge is exported and the local stock of knowledge is reduced. Local donors fund national programs and are reluctant to use limited funding on foreign nationals.
- Perhaps the most effective way to reach truck drivers and foreign fishermen would be through peers and at the sites at which they spend most of their time. In the case of truck drivers, this means at shebeens and bars, at truck stops and truck ports, at border posts, and at points of sleep over. In the case of foreign truck drivers, education programs have to start at their port of origin, preferably through the company that employs them. In the case of foreign fishermen, education must start in the country of origin, prior to their departure for Namibia. One or more of these fishermen could be given specialist training, in order to be able to act as peer educators on the vessels during their offshore periods.