

## Calls for a radical change in West Africa's drug policy

*A new report by the West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD) has called for a radical rethink on how West African governments tackle the war on drugs.*

*The report, entitled **Not Just in Transit: Drugs, the State and Society in West Africa**, urges the decriminalisation of low-level and non-violent drug offences, choosing to view these offences as a public health issue.*

*LSE's Sasha Jesperson conducts research on organised crime on the security-development nexus and in this post, she outlines some of the factors at play in the drugs trade in West Africa.*

**Africa at LSE:** What is the current situation with the war on drugs in West Africa?

**Sasha:** West Africa became recognised as a significant transit hub for cocaine being trafficked from Latin America to Europe in the early to mid 2000's. This sparked considerable European involvement in the regional drugs trade as its member states were directly affected. Unlike the US government's heavily militarised war on drugs, the European response has been quite different. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) developed the West Africa Coast Initiative in response to the ECOWAS Political Declaration and Regional Action Plan on Drug Trafficking and Other Organised Crimes in West Africa. The key focus of this programme is the creation of Transnational Organised Crime Units in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote D'Ivoire and Guinea Bissau, to enhance cooperation across law enforcement and build capacity. The EU has also developed the Cocaine Route Programme in 38 countries across Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa to build law enforcement capacity and enhance trans-regional cooperation.



The international response is primarily focused on the transit of cocaine through West Africa into Europe. On this front the EU and others are actually quite engaged because they want to stop the flow of cocaine in West Africa before it gets to Europe. It appears that this is having an impact – there has been a significant decline in narcotics trafficking through the region since it peaked in 2008, if anything, it seems the Caribbean is favoured once again. There are some reports that

local consumption has increased, but cocaine remains expensive and even when traffickers pay in kind, it is much more lucrative to try and get it to Europe than sell it locally.

There are other issues at play in terms of drug use, trafficking and production. Cannabis production, trafficking – generally within the region, and use is more widespread. Cannabis is considered to be less dangerous than cocaine, as people rarely die or have serious health problems from cannabis consumption. But it is an issue from a food security perspective as many farmers are switching from rice and other food crops to cannabis because it grows quickly, does not need much attention and brings in a higher profit. Unless there are equally lucrative alternatives, eradication is unlikely to work as it punishes farmers that are acting according to their own business interests. This raises significantly different issues to narcotics trafficking as the impact is felt more heavily locally.

There is also evidence that production of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) is being produced in the region. ATS production and trafficking has shifted away from being a small scale industry to become much more organised and lucrative. This has the potential to strengthen growing organised crime networks within West Africa, again adding new challenges that differ from cocaine and cannabis.

**Africa at LSE:** A new report recommends a radical overhaul of drug policy in the region – what key points stand out for you in the report?

**Sasha:** The report by the West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD) engages with a broader debate that is going on globally about how to address the drugs trade. Many Latin American countries are already shifting away from the 'war on drugs' model, debating different approaches to drug policy including decriminalisation. As a key region in the global drugs trade, West Africa also plays an important role in this debate.

One of the key aims of the report is to point out that West Africa is not just a transit region, even though this is the primary focus of international actors working on the drugs trade in the region. The importance of cannabis production, trafficking and use, and the increasing role of ATS is also acknowledged.

In the same vein, the report recognises that any response to the drug trade needs to be holistic. This is the key failure of the 'war on drugs' – it was assumed that a militarised strategy that disrupted the production of drugs and arrested those involved in trafficking would bring the trade to its knees. From Latin America we have learned that this is not the case, and if anything the militarised strategy has resulted in increased violence and corruption.

These lessons from Latin America are drawn out in the report. Yet, there is a need to also engage with the positive lessons from Latin America and the Caribbean. Local and international actors in Latin America have been engaging in innovative strategies, such as USAID's programmes on citizen security, which shifts away from the protection of the state to acknowledge the local impact of the drugs trade. The report does recognise some of these successes – such as the growth of a vibrant civil society and academic community in Colombia that monitors the influence of drugs on politics. Given the long history of the drugs trade in Latin America, there are many lessons that can be taken, both from the good and the bad.

The debate on drug policy within the report raises some crucial issues specific to West Africa. Trafficking in the region has resulted in freelance traffickers. Local actors involved in the cocaine trade are often paid in kind, and individuals, often young men are then recruited to traffic small quantities of cocaine into Europe. These individuals are often the easiest to target for law enforcement. Yet they have rarely had any contact with wider trafficking operations. This means that they do not provide leads to pursue those at the top of the business. With high levels of unemployment across West Africa, those arrested are rapidly replaced. This ensures that the strategy does little to disrupt the cocaine trade. The WACD report recognises this and recommends that law enforcement focus higher up in the supply chain, investing energy and

resources targeting those that manage the flows of cocaine through the region. Within this context, it is recognised that there is a need for further specialised capacity development.

One area of concern is the priority given to drug use. While it is a valid issue, and the key focus of decriminalisation discussions globally, it differs significantly across drug types and countries, and there is no conclusive evidence that it is on the rise, or has reached significant levels. Data in the report is drawn from the World Drug Report, which reports a high level of use per capita. However, UNODC themselves acknowledge irregularity and incompleteness in reporting by member states, which casts doubt on these figures. While a rise in drug use would have a negative effect on the region, it does not yet justify the priority given to it in the report.

The importance given to drug use is used to justify a focus on public health. While this is an important issue, particularly as health services may be lacking in many West African countries, strategies related to public health need to be connected into the broader strategy to address drug trafficking, or there is likely to be unintended consequences. For example, in relation to cigarettes, public health concerns have resulted in taxation regimes that have pushed up the price of cigarettes, fuelling illicit trade.

**Africa at LSE:** You have done a significant amount of research in the region – what do your findings suggest?

**Sasha:** The report continues to discuss drug trafficking as a major threat to the region. While it is a continuing threat, particularly as many countries in the region remain unstable following prolonged conflict, statistics seem to suggest that since 2008, cocaine flows through the region have started to decline. This fits in with other reports that flows through the Caribbean have increased. However, many reports point out that if attention wavers, all of the conditions that made West Africa attractive as a transit hub will ensure that flows increase again. More focus needs to be directed at the factors that make the region conducive to drug trafficking and organised crime – such as poverty, unemployment, corruption and weak governance. This is recognised in the WACD. However, there is still limited discussion on how to bring the different elements together.

This has been the focus of my research – identifying the barriers to combining security and development approaches to drug trafficking and organised crime. Many of the actors responding to the problem recognise the need for a holistic approach that responds to the problem through law enforcement, but also engages with the underlying factors that make the region conducive to organised crime. However, among these actors there are varied understandings of what security and development are, and how they are linked. Actors with a security or development focus find it difficult to shift away from their traditional practices, and new approaches continue to be influenced by their institutional underpinnings. The motivations of the different actors also undermines at a holistic approach – if international security is the overriding priority, local priorities such as citizen security or public health are unlikely to receive significant resources. To achieve a holistic approach, more focus needs to be placed on overcoming these barriers.

Given the resounding recognition that the war on drugs has failed, West Africa is well positioned to engage in different strategies. The WACD report begins a discussion on what this would look like, engaging with the wide range of issues surrounding drug trafficking, production and consumption in the West Africa region. However, more analysis is needed to differentiate between different types of drugs and to ensure strategies don't have unintended consequences.

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