

The demand for cocaine in Europe has doubled over the past decade, triggering a rise in interdiction and law enforcement operations that have made it increasingly difficult for Latin American traffickers to export their product directly to the continent. To resolve this issue, smugglers have used a number of West African states as hubs to transport the drug before smuggling north to Europe, writes N.J. Watts.

The existence of weak and politically unstable states, widespread corruption, porous borders, poor law enforcement practices and capacity, existing networks for trafficking a variety of illicit substances, and a ready and inexpensive workforce have resulted in an estimated 30-35 tons of cocaine being moved through West Africa annually. Valued at \$1.25 billion, this dwarfs the annual budget of a number of countries in the region and plays a direct or indirect role in political upheaval in countries such as [Guinea-Bissau](#) and [Mali](#), contributing to the funding of extremist groups in some of the most marginalised areas of West Africa.

The groups, which are believed to obtain a proportion of their funding from the West African drug trade include, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which is allegedly paid large sums to ensure safe passage of cocaine shipments across the Sahara. Intelligence reports suggest that this money is used to purchase weapons to fight the on-going Mali insurgency, and may now be being funnelled to ISIS commanders in Iraq and Syria. Illicit funds may also be channelled to Hezbollah, the Shia militant group in Lebanon, and Boko Haram, the Islamist group that notoriously kidnapped 276 Nigerian schoolgirls in April 2014.

Fears of the region being overrun by 'narco-jihadists' and the creation of a 'drug-terror nexus' however, rest on a simplistic analysis of the situation. Rather than the trafficking being orchestrated by the groups as a whole, they are more likely to be coordinated by individuals and groups within the organisations, which have multiple, and often conflicting interests.

The opaque nature of the trade is compounded by an over-reliance on the analysis of the metrics of arrests and seizures made, which tell us very little about trafficking patterns, or the composition and nature of the criminal organisations involved. These include numerous other players that have no link to Islamist groups, such as political leaders and members of secular armed groups. According to Wolfram Lacher, a North Africa expert at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, this "Obscures the role of state actors and corruption in allowing organised crime to take root and grow".

Such actors have a vested interest in overstating the role that Islamist groups play in the drug trade in West Africa, as it helps them to secure funding and foreign support for operations that target the groups. This not only provides an opportunity for corruption and personal gain, but also helps conceal the role that government actors themselves play in the trade. Predominantly, West African states pursue a punitive, law enforcement centric, strategy that leaves little opportunity for more constructive forms of intervention, such as education and health initiatives.

The primary mechanism used to facilitate this approach is the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI), which supports capacity building in law enforcement and the criminal justice system, and runs concurrently with the U.S led West Africa Cooperative Security Initiative (WACSI). These programmes have annual budgets of \$13.7 million and \$60 million respectively, sums that pale in significance when compared to the value of the illicit drug market in the region, severely limiting their effectiveness. There are simply neither the resources, nor the political will available in the region to tackle drug trafficking solely by pursuing a law enforcement centred approach.

It is for these reasons that calls for the decriminalisation of drugs in the region have grown increasingly strident over recent years. The ever-expanding list of advocates now includes the West Africa Commission on Drugs, former secretary general of the United Nations Kofi Annan, the World Health Organisation, and numerous others, many of whom have previously opposed such a move.

In practice, the decriminalisation of drugs means that users found in possession of small amounts of illegal substances will no longer face prosecution. Instead, those caught may face civil penalties, such as a fine, or receive an order to attend a drug awareness course. In some cases, the user will face no sanctions at all. This approach helps reduce the strain on over-stretched law enforcement agencies, and encourages those who need to seek medical help to do so without fear of arrest and imprisonment.

The evidence shows that the potential costs of this approach are far lower than those incurred by criminalising drug users, as it allows police forces to concentrate their time and resources on tackling large-scale traffickers and organised criminals.

West African leaders should take note of the oft-cited example of Portugal, a country that decriminalised all drugs in 2001. Over the following thirteen years, levels of drug use have fallen below the European average. This includes a reduction in use by 16-24 year olds, and a

decrease in problematic and injecting drug use. Subsequently, the annual rate of HIV transmission has declined dramatically, from 1,016 to 56 between 2001 and 2012, and the number of those arrested and sent to criminal courts for drug offences has more than halved since 2001. Currently, only 21% of Portuguese prisoners are incarcerated due to offences committed either under the influence of drugs, or to fund drug consumption, a fall from 44% in 1999.

The benefits for West African societies of following a more enlightened and progressive approach to drug use are hard to overstate. If the Portuguese example holds true, there is a real chance that reform could catalyse a reduction in consumption, dependence, recidivism and HIV infections.

Although this is undoubtedly a positive step, such a move will only be effective in alleviating some of the damaging side effects of the 'war on drugs'. It will still fail to tackle the root of the problem, namely that organised criminals, including armed Islamist groups, continue to retain control of incredibly lucrative illicit drug markets. State legislatures must be realistic when formulating drug policy, by taking into account the highly inelastic nature of the demand for drugs such as cocaine. This ensures that successful interdiction campaigns serve only to increase the revenue of suppliers, perversely enriching those that such operations purportedly weaken.

The only constructive and effective method for West African leaders to reform this self-defeating strategy is to legalise the trade in illicit substances, by creating a highly regulated market from manufacture to retail. The industry will thus be snatched from organised criminals and militants, and placed in the hands of law-abiding entrepreneurs. Taxes will be paid, and strict regulations followed regarding when, where and to whom they may sell their products. There is no doubt that drug use can constitute extremely risky behaviour, yet such risks are only exacerbated by prohibitionist policies. West African leaders must stop wasting their extremely limited resources criminalising otherwise law-abiding citizens, in a futile attempt to eradicate the drug trade.

Instead, a far more productive strategy would concentrate efforts on tackling the minority of problematic drug users who harm others through their use. This includes those who steal from others to fund their habit for example. Regional leaders should utilise the potential millions collected through taxation to promote education and harm reduction strategies, to ensure that relaxed regulations do not result in increased drug use, nor associated harms.

Only when the trade is taken out of the hands of militant Islamists and organised criminals, will countries like Mali, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau be free from the drug related violence, corruption and instability perpetuated by Islamist militants and organised criminals.

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