**Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa**

**RESEARCH AND METHODS**

1. Research project

The project ‘Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa’ ran from October 2020 to September 2024 and examined the following key question: ‘What are the historical and contemporary roles of cannabis in Africa?’ The project examined the history of cannabis in Africa, its various socio-economic roles (including livelihoods), cultures of consumption and the impact of drug policy on drug production and distribution, highlighting the impact of changing policies on people in the cannabis trade in 4 case study countries (Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe) as well as the wider regional context. It showed that cannabis has historically been an important source of livelihood for many African households, and that its prohibition has been ineffective in curbing the cannabis trade although it negatively affects people’s lives.

Main findings: The project used in-depth interviews, ethnography, archival research and co-produced policy workshops to gather data from a range of actors, including illegal and licensed cannabis farmers, cannabis traders, consumers, regulators and civil society members. Below we summarise the key findings that have emerged from the research.

1. Cannabis consumption in Africa has historical, deep-rooted social, economic and cultural significance in various communities where it is used traditionally for medicinal and cultural purposes. Economically, illicit production, transportation and trade provides valuable income for many local people amidst economic hardship and declining living conditions in African countries. It often generates more income for producers than legitimate crops (e.g. cocoa), and helps them meet basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, children’s education).
2. While governments continue efforts to curb illicit markets they persist and thrive but are not perfect. Illicit cannabis markets are driven by economic needs, regulatory gaps, and the slow development of fully operational legal markets, but these markets also pose serious risks to insiders. Further, the research showed that legal markets are being framed as an economic medicinal/industrial hemp or adult use issue depending on country context, with the former more socially acceptable in conservative African societies. However, the legal markets have limited participation of small-scale producers due to various licensing and production barriers.
3. The research also found that legal prohibition is ineffective in curbing cannabis production, trade and use but has a real effect on people in the cannabis trade and beyond – perpetuating stigma, marginalisation, police corruption and imprisonment for those arrested.
4. Debate about cannabis policy has grown strongly over the last decade but it tends to exclude the voices of certain actors such as illicit farmers, sometimes leading to benefits from legal markets being restricted to wealthy segments of society. Legal regulation is supported by some to combat stigma and make cannabis production and trade more legitimate, but concerns exist about exclusion and inequities linked to ineffective regulatory systems and corporate dominance. To promote inclusive debate, the project co-hosted 9 policy workshops in 5 African countries and in the UK allowing a diverse pan-African network of researchers, policymakers, drug policy activists etc to debate cannabis policies and their impacts in Africa.
5. Research data

The foundation of the project was pioneering and ethically rigorous fieldwork on insider perspectives of actors in the il/legal cannabis trade and its regulation. This was done through in-depth interviews with difficult to access market insiders and regulators in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

We shared/archived a key component of this interview data in the form of redacted interview transcripts. Interviews were of diverse lengths, from a few minutes to up to 1.5 hours. Interviews used a general interview topic guide with open questions; but they explored different elements of this guide depending on the expertise of the interviewee. Due to geographical focus of the research, the archived transcripts are categoried by country of origin (Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. In the four countries, interviews were conducted in different languages spoken by the local and international research teams, including Swahili, Yoruba and Tsonga. All interviews were translated and transcribed into English.

Note that from the outset of this project, it was clear that we would not be able to publicly share all the data gathered for ethical and safety reasons. Given the small sample sizes, especially in certain localities known for the cannabis trade and cultivation, as well as the small number of gatekeepers through which they were obtained, we assessed the risk of our research participants being identifiable as moderate to high. In turn, identification would likely lead to repercussions for these research participants as government agencies have been steadfast in its prosecutions of market insiders. Nonetheless, we have attempted to archive and share as much of our interview data (45 out of 193) as possible.

1. Research methods

The project drew on a mix of documentary and interview methods. The first exploratory stage of the project drew on documentary data, which was primarily garnered from publicly available contemporary sources, including government and international organisation reports, statistics, as well as a few small-scale empirical studies on drugs in Africa. We also collated as much of the publicly available archival material on the history of cannabis in national archives in the four case study countries, as well as media reporting on related issues. This existing documentary data on cannabis had its limitations, primarily as it did not provide an understanding of insider views, and it was thus used primarily for a broad historical and geographical description of the drug trade in Africa and to provide a context for our exploration in interviews.

The main focus of our project, the reconstruction of the roles of cannabis in people’s lives, came from two major sources. The first source for data collection was through semi-structured interviews with key state officials and civil society members, such as NGO workers or community leaders, with an interest/stake in the issue (ca 5-8 in each study site). This was primarily focused on mid-level state officials focussing on cannabis and its control. The investigators’ prior contacts as well as snowball sampling helped to identify and interview this group of informants. The second part involved interviews and observation with what we call ‘market insiders’, i.e. individuals active in the cannabis economy, such as cannabis farmers (illegal and legal), cannabis transporters, cannabis retailers, as well as users of cannabis. This involved the great majority of the semi-structured interviews in the four study sites. These interviews were conducted in places considered safe by the participants and the researchers, such as the rural healthcare centres or on university campuses. All interviews and related observation occurred under the observance of strictest ethical guidelines (designated by the Universities of Bristol and Cape Town and by local ethics committees in the four countries, all of which approved the research.

**Study site selection and access**: The four main study sites were chosen purposely, as they are both major cannabis production, trade and consumption hubs in Africa. Nigeria and South Africa are two major producers of cannabis and we focussed our research especially in areas that had a history for large-scale production of cannabis, such as Southwestern Nigeria. In Kenya and Zimbabwe there was less production of cannabis and local markets relied more on imports from neighbouring countries. Yet, also here we focussed on areas with a history for involvement in the cannabis trade, such as western Kenya. In addition, it is also in these four countries and local areas that the project team had extensive research experience. This previous experience also helped to make research on illicit activities and gaining access to research informants possible. In the four study sites, the investigators also already had good research connections to some of the potential interviewees for the project and based on these connections a wider net of interviewees was recruited, largely through snowballing.