

Cannabis and livelihoods in Africa: a call for policy reform that is inclusive, equitable and evidence-based

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About the research

Cannabis has a complex history in Africa having been grown, traded and consumed in many societies before and after it was made illegal in the early 20th century. Despite its illegality, cannabis has also become an important source of livelihood for many African households. Some African countries have witnessed transformative debates and policies pertaining to cannabis, such as Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe, which have eased criminal sanctions and established legal markets for medicinal and industrial cannabis. South Africa has also legalised the private production of cannabis for personal use. In countries like Kenya and Nigeria cannabis prohibition remains in place although there are growing debates surrounding their policies.

This report presents key findings of the 'Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa' research project (October 2020-September 2024), based at the Universities of Bristol and Cape Town. The project examined the nexus between cannabis, cannabis policy and livelihoods, highlighting the impact of changing policies on people in the cannabis trade in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe and the wider regional context. It shows that cannabis is an important source of livelihood for many African households, and that prohibition has been ineffective in curbing the cannabis trade although it negatively affects people's lives.

The study used in-depth interviews, ethnography, archival research and co-produced policy workshops to gather data from a range of actors, including illicit and licensed cultivators, traders, consumers, regulators, policymakers and civil society members.

This report highlights the limits of the policy reform process to date, and makes recommendations for regulators, legislators and policymakers. For findings and recommendations for specific national/regional contexts, please see our policy briefings on Kenya, South Africa, West Africa and Zimbabwe.

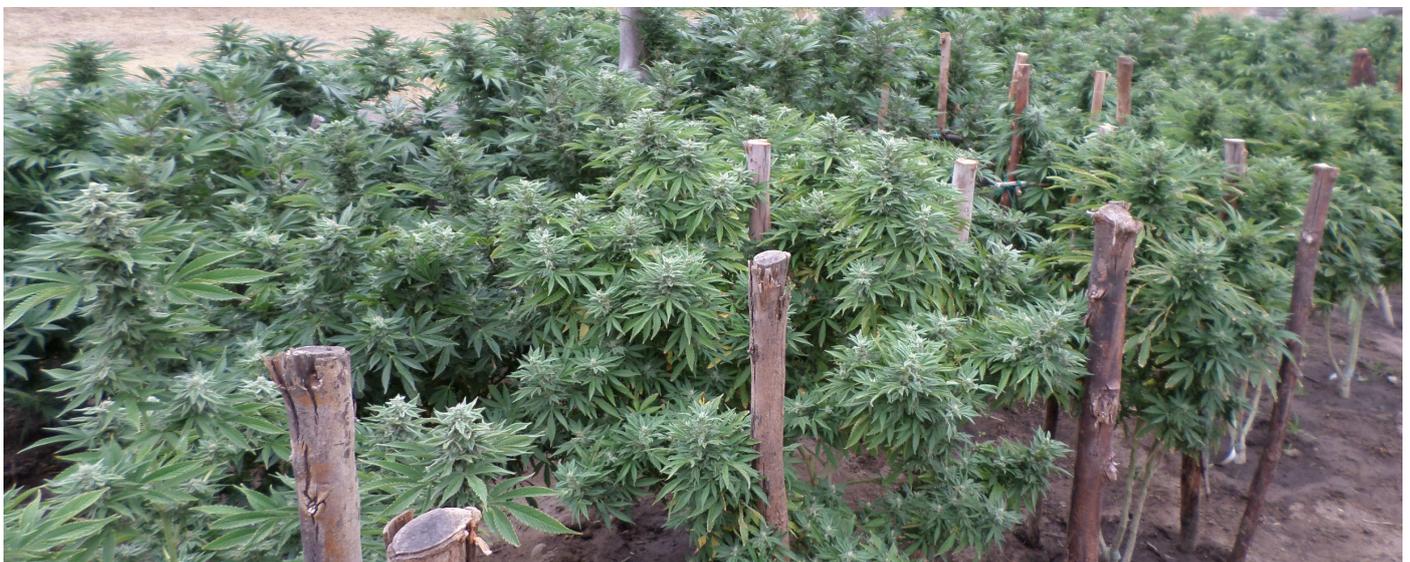


Image: Cannabis farm, by Gernot Klantschnig

Key findings

1. Cannabis has social and cultural significance: Cannabis consumption in Africa has historical, deep-rooted social and cultural significance in various communities where it is used traditionally for medicinal and cultural purposes.
2. Cannabis is an important source of livelihood: Illicit cannabis production, transportation and trade is a means of livelihood 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).
3. Illicit markets 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.
4. Prohibition is not effective but affects lives: 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.
5. Cannabis policy debate is growing, but it is not inclusive: Debate about cannabis policy has grown strongly over the last decade but it tends to exclude the voices of certain actors such as illicit cultivators, sometimes leading to benefits 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.
6. Legal markets framed as economic medicinal or adult use issue: Policy changes in Africa have focused on either creating medicinal/industrial hemp markets or adult usage depending on country context. Medicinal/industrial cannabis is more socially acceptable in conservative African societies but often excludes traditional medicinal uses.



Image: Cannabis plant, by Gernot Klantschnig



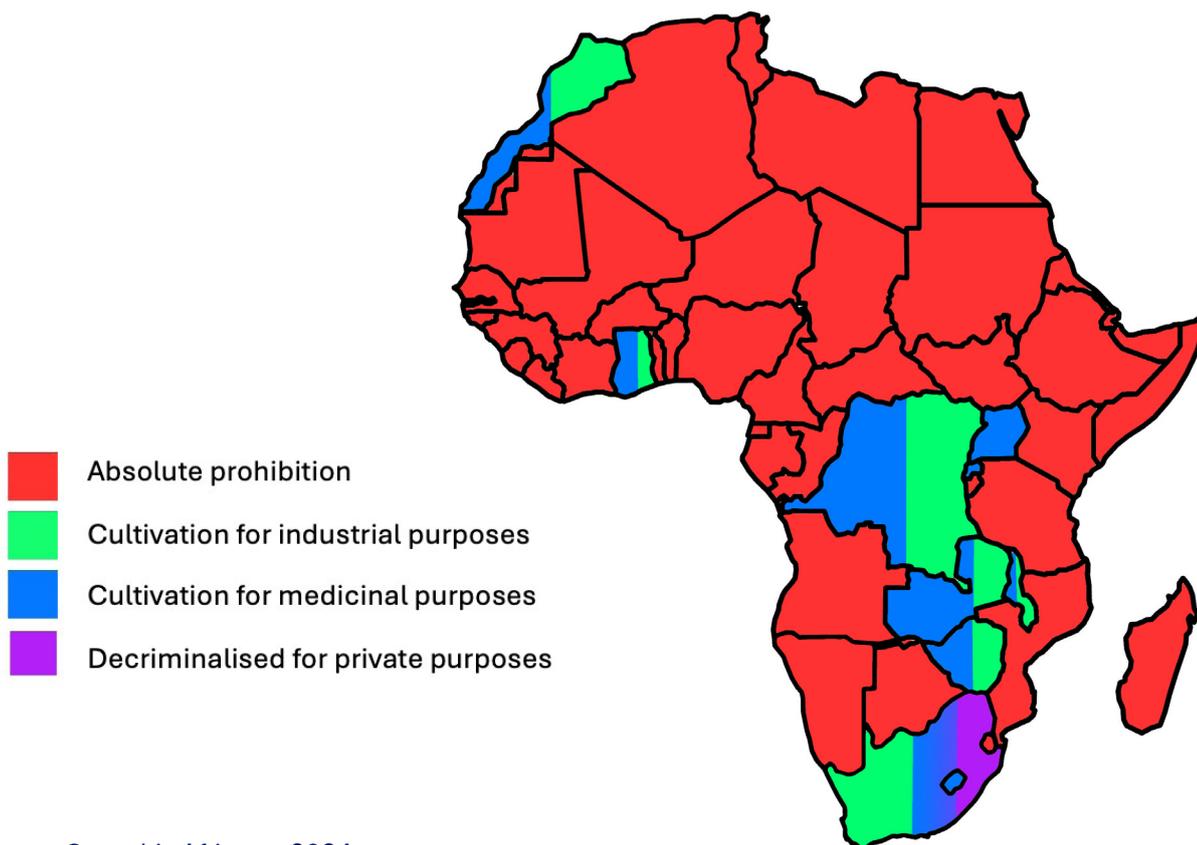
Image: Cannabis cigarette in Kenya by Neil Carrier

Key findings continued

7. Reforms have diversified cannabis regulatory models across Africa, but small-scale farmers are excluded most often. Entry barriers include high license fees (e.g. US\$50,000 for a medicinal license in Zimbabwe), and they position local business classes and foreign investors as primary beneficiaries of reforms. Four market categories have emerged in Africa:

- **Illicit cannabis markets:** Cannabis cultivation, trade and use is banned and exists illicitly in most African countries. Where legal markets exist, illicit markets continue to also exist.
- **Medical cannabis markets:** Cannabis is legally cultivated for export to mostly global north pharmaceutical markets for manufacture of medicine (Lesotho, Malawi and Morocco).
- **Industrial hemp markets:** Cannabis with Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content ranging between 0.3% and 1% (depending on national laws) is grown for fibre, seeds and cannabidiol (CBD) flower (e.g. Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe).
- **Adult use markets:** This market allows for the cultivation and use of cannabis with high THC levels for personal/recreational purposes. South Africa is the only country in Africa with this market, following the Constitutional judgement in 2018 which affirmed adults' rights to privately produce cannabis for personal use.

Cannabis legal status in Africa



Source: Cannabis Africana, 2024

8. Research informing policy reforms should be inclusive and accessible: Viewpoints of diverse actors, including illicit producers, should be included in research that informs policy reforms in Africa. This will help to make policies more effective. Research and data also need to be presented in more accessible formats to enable broad usage (e.g. in pictorial formats).



Policy Recommendations

1. Legislators and policymakers should recognise the importance of religious, medicinal and cultural uses of cannabis which will help to ensure community participation and acceptance of policies. They also need to understand that illicit cannabis markets will not be reduced unless policy reforms are responsive to local concerns.
2. Legislators, policymakers and advocates need to ensure that those who have historically depended on cannabis for their livelihoods participate and benefit from ongoing policy reforms. This will help them to transition from illegal to legal production.
3. Legislators and policymakers should re-evaluate existing laws, which are ineffective in curbing the cannabis trade, to ensure they are not disproportionately repressive nor perpetuate stigma, marginalisation and police corruption.
4. Policymakers and regulators should take an inclusive policy reform approach, i.e. actively engage cannabis users, producers and traders to ensure that diverse voices are heard and considered in decision-making. They must also work collaboratively with local communities, industry and law enforcement to develop and implement inclusive and effective policies.
5. Legislators and policymakers need to recognise the real dangers of corporate capture of new legal cannabis markets and promote the interests of small producers at every stage of the legalisation process and its implementation. Participation of small-scale farmers can be enhanced through tiered licensing (e.g. Canada) and the promotion of small producer cooperatives (e.g. Malawi and Morocco).
6. There is a need for comprehensive research on cannabis legalisation, including economic, social, public health and environmental impacts. A robust evidence base will support informed policymaking and help address the challenges associated with cannabis regulation.

Further information

<https://cannabisaficana.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>

The Conversation: [Cannabis policy changes in Africa are welcome. But small producers are the losers](#)

The Conversation: [Cannabis is illegal in Nigeria but provides a living for families](#)

Rusenga, C., Klantschnig, G., Carrier, N., & Howell, S. (2024). '[Business as usual? Cannabis legalisation and agrarian change in Zimbabwe.](#)' The Journal of Peasant Studies, 51(4), 982–1001

A series of policy briefings highlights the particular context and challenges specific to each case study area.

These can be found here: [Cannabis Policy in Kenya](#), [South African Cannabis Policy](#), [Cannabis Policy Reform in West Africa](#), [Cannabis Policy Reform in Zimbabwe](#)

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