

Contesting Cannabis Legalization in Nigeria: Hidden Narratives of Illicit Farmers and Traders

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This article examines narratives of cannabis legalization in Nigeria. While most existing research on cannabis legalization has concentrated on the global North, we focus on one of Africa's largest cannabis markets, as well as the views of actors heavily criminalized and excluded from policy debates. Based on in-depth interviews and long-time engagement with illicit cannabis farmers and traders, the article highlights the contestations in their hidden narratives, troubling extant views of cannabis legalization which uncritically laud its socioeconomic benefits, and revealing the potential downsides of legalization in the context of an exploitative legal neo-liberal economy rife with social inequities. The findings of this study also highlight a need for open policy debate that engages criminalized cannabis producing communities who have borne the brunt of both prohibition and economic marginalization to chart the way forward for more inclusive and meaningful cannabis policy reform.

Introduction

Cannabis policy liberalizations have been one of the most significant reforms over the last 15 years. These reforms have been a key part of what has been termed the fractured consensus of global drug control, which has meant a move away from dominant prohibitionist thinking (Bewley-Taylor 2012). Over this period, a wide range of cannabis policy reforms were implemented in many regions of the world. Yet, most of the popular and academic focus has been on cannabis reforms in the global North, especially in Europe and North America (Bodwitch et al. 2021; Decorte, Lenton, and Wilkins 2020; Hammond et al. 2020; Kalant 2016). Few studies have explored cannabis liberalizations in Southern countries, although examples from Uruguay (Corva and Meisel 2021) and Jamaica (Klein, Rychert, and Emanuel 2022) offer some insights. This article addresses this imbalance in existing research by adding a critical Southern perspective.

Research that emphasizes Northern jurisdictions ensures Northern experiences with liberalization dominate the global policy debate. While it is important to critically examine developments in Europe and North America, they are not necessarily always applicable elsewhere, especially in Southern countries exploring cannabis policy reform. This continued pre-dominance of Western-focused research and models is even more problematic when considering the history of global drug control, which has shown that Western and especially US-inspired models of drug control have led to considerable harm in the global South (Andreas and Nadelmann 2008).

African states and their experiences with cannabis policy reforms remain particularly under-studied, and existing knowledge on this topic is often based on official or corporate

gray literature (Prohibition Partners 2019; UNODC 2022). These publications frequently laud the economic benefits of cannabis legalization, especially for governments or corporations (Clemencot 2019; Ghana Web 2024; Prohibition Partners 2019), and rarely address the challenges associated with implementing legal markets. The paucity of critical academic research on cannabis policy liberalization in Africa has remained, even though countries such as Morocco, Nigeria, and South Africa are some of the largest producers of cannabis in the world. The research gap has also persisted despite the key role that cannabis has played in the livelihoods of communities in many parts of the continent (Bernstein 1999; Bloomer 2009; Carrier and Klantschnig 2016; Duvall 2019; Kepe 2003; UNODC 2019). Changes to cannabis policies in African countries are thus destined to have a significant effect not only on local economies but also on the global cannabis market.

To some extent, African experiences of cannabis policy liberalization remain understudied because relatively few countries have shifted away from the prohibitionist norm (Rusenga et al. 2024b). Furthermore, African countries (e.g., Egypt and Nigeria) are some of the staunchest supporters of the prohibitionist approach on the international level (IDPC 2024). Nevertheless, since 2017, a growing number of African countries (e.g., Ghana, Lesotho, Morocco, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) have made significant moves away from cannabis prohibition (Nelson 2021; Tagziria, Ane, and de Lugo 2023). These reforms have often been cautious and slow and have generally focused on legalizing medical and industrial cannabis for export markets.

In debates about these reforms in African countries, cannabis is often portrayed as the new “green gold,” and emerging reforms in the region are usually driven by potential economic benefits for governments (Nelson 2021), especially as these benefits are touted in the gray literature. On the other hand, due to the role that cannabis has long played in rural economies, there has been vigorous debate about cannabis policy reform in some African countries, including Nigeria, where there has been no change in cannabis laws yet. In Nigeria and Kenya, there have even been politicians who have included cannabis legalization in their campaign promises in recent elections (Peralta 2022; Shaban n.d.). While some of these debates have been described in the news and gray literature, they have not been studied systematically, and little is known about what African cannabis farmers, traders, and users think about proposed policy reforms. In fact, these key market actors have routinely been excluded from policy debates and reforms across Africa, with few exceptions (Rusenga et al. 2024a).

This article assesses the narratives of these key market insiders in West Africa’s major production and consumption center for cannabis, Nigeria (UNODC 2022). After describing the Nigerian illegal cannabis market as well as the research methods, the article presents the findings under three major themes: (1) the socioeconomic benefits that cannabis offers illegal market actors and the threats they face from repressive law enforcement under prohibition; (2) their hopes for legalization and freedom from state repression; as well as (3) their concerns about a future legal cannabis market fraught with inequities, which they know too well from other legal markets in Nigeria. The article brings these debates together by highlighting the contestations and contradictions in these narratives.

The article’s findings trouble extant views on cannabis legalization, which simply laud their economic benefits without understanding the broader context of socioeconomic marginalization that many current illicit market actors face and which is rarely addressed by policy reform. They also highlight a need for open debate that actively engages these market actors to chart the way forward for a more bottom-up policy reform process. As such, the

article's contributions are to, first, add a needed African perspective on cannabis policy reform; second, to empirically ground this perspective in the voices of currently criminalized and hard-to-access market actors; and, third, to advocate for a more inclusive policy reform process, which actively includes the views of these actors.

Nigeria's Illegal Cannabis Economy

Nigeria plays a prominent role in the international production and trade of cannabis today. According to the most recent national survey, there were an estimated 10.6 million past-year users (UNODC 2019). Cannabis has a long history in the country, and its use and cultivation expanded significantly since the 1960s in the context of changing consumer cultures (Klantschnig 2014, 2021). A recent survey conducted by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found an estimated 8900 ha of cannabis in six states in Nigeria, notably the Southwest region where we conducted this research (UNODC 2022).

Nigeria's role in the production and trade of cannabis further consolidated itself in the 1980s (Ellis 2009; Obot 2004), during a period of rapid economic decline owing to foreign donor-imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and government mismanagement (Olukoshi 1993). SAPs, which entailed drastic reductions in public spending and downsizing the public sector, plunged many Nigerians into poverty and incentivized illegal economic activities, which expanded as the state's regulatory capacity weakened. Illicit activities such as cannabis cultivation and trading became a livelihood strategy for many people struggling with unemployment and obtaining income. Reductions in government spending on agriculture and declining prices for key commodities also encouraged local farmers to resort to cannabis cultivation for income diversification (Carrier and Klantschnig 2016).

To date, the illegal drug market is still shaped by conditions of severe poverty and social marginalization that are a detriment to the lives of large segments of the Nigerian populace (Nelson 2023, 2024b). An estimated 82.9 million Nigerians live in poverty (World Bank Group 2022). In Nigeria, poverty is multi-dimensional and includes inadequate employment, food, healthcare, sanitation, education, and housing (Federal Government of Nigeria 2022). Felbab-Brown (2010) has described how, in Africa, endemic corruption, widespread poverty, and limited opportunities for upward social mobility have created a context where illegal activities are seen as legitimate undertakings to secure livelihoods in challenging circumstances.

The production and trade of cannabis by Nigerians has long been an issue of concern to international drug control agencies, which often view these activities through the narrow prism of drug trafficking (rather than as a livelihood strategy) and are often more concerned about the interests of Western consumer markets rather than those of the transit and producer countries (Klantschnig 2013). This concern buttresses international cooperation with the Nigerian state to interdict cannabis cultivation and trade. It also helps to explain international support for crop-substitution programs for illicit cannabis farmers (Abdalla n.d.), a top-down approach that involves replacing cannabis with other cash crops, which are often not as economically viable as cannabis.

Nigeria, a signatory to the three main UN drug control conventions, has historically relied on repression to control illegal cannabis markets. Nigerian drug laws promote punitive law enforcement, including raids on cannabis farming communities, burning of plantations, seizures of cannabis, and arrest of farmers and sellers (Ajayi 2020). Nevertheless, farmers and sellers can often negotiate with law enforcement by bribing officials (Nelson 2024a).

The Nigerian state and its National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) have remained vehemently opposed to cannabis legalization even though there have been reforms in other areas of drug policy, such as harm reduction services for people who inject drugs (Nelson 2024c). In fact, there has recently been an intensification of enforcement-based responses, including attempts to remove judicial discretion in sentencing for drug offenses, as well as an attempt to reintroduce the death penalty for drug trafficking (Obiezu 2024). Against this backdrop, we explore debates on cannabis policy liberalization based on the views of market insiders.

Methods and Data

In this study, we draw upon data from qualitative research conducted as part of a collaborative project on Cannabis and Development in four African countries (Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) between 2020 and 2024.¹ Our interest in eliciting in-depth accounts from an insider perspective led us to employ solely qualitative approaches. The main set of data used in this article are 60 in-depth interviews with cannabis farmers (16), cocoa farmers working in the cannabis cultivation area (5), cannabis transporters (4), cannabis traders (17), cannabis users (11), law enforcement officers (4), and drug advocacy NGO workers (3).² The data is based on fieldwork in illegal cannabis markets in the Southwest and South–South regions of Nigeria, both being key areas in the cannabis economy characterized by a long history of production, trade, and use (Klantschnig 2014). Fieldwork focused on three select urban neighborhoods in two major cities (Lagos and Ibadan) and three rural communities between 2022 and 2023.

Studying illegal markets and their regulation is a challenging undertaking. This is particularly the case in Nigeria, where illicit drugs, including cannabis, are heavily stigmatized, and their producers, traders, and users can face draconian penalties, including a minimum of 15 years' imprisonment for simple possession (NDLEA Act 2004).³ In such a context, those who engage in illegal drug markets have strong incentives to resist research into their activities. Nevertheless, research, especially when employing narrative approaches, allows these actors to tell their stories, thus humanizing them and de-stigmatizing their experiences (Bathish et al. 2024). Thus, our approach employed grounded theory by linking themes emerging from participants' narratives to the existing literature (Dunne 2011). Our research was specifically aimed at uncovering the hidden narratives of cannabis farming. In this way, this research disrupts the political and corporate perspectives that have held sway in drug policy circles, especially in Africa.

We began fieldwork with exploratory trips to agrarian communities with a reputation for cannabis farming. After initial difficulty accessing key participants (farmers, transporters, and traders), we eventually gained access through acquaintances developed by members of the research team in previous research. These local contacts (e.g., community health workers) facilitated our access to the initial set of participants as we were able to build on the trust they enjoyed with cannabis farmers in these rural communities. We also employed snowball sampling to recruit further participants by asking the participants to introduce us to others. The farmers were drawn from three agrarian communities, including in Southwest Nigeria's historic cocoa farming areas, where many farmers are now turning to cannabis due to declining incomes from cocoa (Akinloye 2019; Klantschnig, Nelson, and Ogundairo 2023). On the other hand, transporters, traders, users, and other key informants (e.g., law

enforcement officers and NGO workers) were recruited through referrals from existing contacts and community-based organizations in Lagos and Ibadan.

Interviews, the key source of data used for this article, were in-depth and conversational, an approach we adopted deliberately to allow participants to elaborate on pre-determined topics, as well as for them to introduce new topics (see also Nelson 2023). This relied on a topic guide which contained diverse topics and prompts, including the socioeconomic benefits of cannabis, impacts of law enforcement on the illegal cannabis trade, and alternative approaches such as crop substitution and legal regulation, among others. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the upsides and downsides of cannabis prohibition and legalization, based on experiences from elsewhere where policies have been liberalized, and to consider how these issues could affect them and their involvement in the cannabis economy. Interviews, which lasted between 20 minutes and 4 hours (60 minutes on average), were conducted in diverse settings (including primary healthcare centers, participants' homes, NGO offices, and a university campus), all of which were carefully selected to ensure the safety and anonymity of participants.

Interviews were recorded with a digital device with the consent of each participant. Since most of the interviewed farmers were not conversant in English, most of these interviews involved interpretation from Yoruba to English by a research team member fluent in both languages. All participants gave informed consent to participate in the interviews by signing a consent form after the purpose of the research was carefully explained to them. Each participant received a leaflet containing detailed information about the study and the researchers' contact details. Following standard ethics procedures, participants were assured of data anonymity and confidentiality. They were also reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer any question that made them feel unsafe or withdraw from the research at any moment. All participants received two thousand Nigerian Naira (US\$1.25 at the time of writing) to cover transportation. Interview data was triangulated with observation of illegal markets in rural and urban settings, documented in extensive field notes.

Interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim (and, where necessary, translated), and the transcripts were cross-checked with the recorded version to ensure accuracy. A series of standard research security protocols were followed to ensure the confidentiality and security of data and the participants. This included uploading recorded interviews to a protected cloud-based server, which could only be accessed by research team members. All interview files were subsequently deleted from the recording device. After transcription, all identifying information in the data were removed, and both interview transcripts and typed field notes were uploaded onto the secure server.

This article is based on a thematic analysis of the dataset on the economic benefits of the cannabis trade, impacts of law enforcement and perceptions of alternative policy approaches (crop substitution, legalization) drawn predominantly from interviews with market insiders. After gaining a broad overview of the data through immersion in the transcripts, we initiated a manual coding process using both deductive and inductive codes. Following Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), codes were generated directly from the data based on keywords and phrases. The research team met regularly to assess the codes and determine inter-coder reliability and validity of findings, which helped to improve analytic rigor and transparency (see Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). After coding all transcripts, we identified themes (e.g., economic benefits, legalization downsides) and sub-themes (e.g., livelihood

improvements). Next, we reviewed the themes, moving some coded data to more suitable themes or creating new ones as necessary. Following further refinements, we named the themes and sub-themes and recorded their patterns of meaning. The quotes used in this article are identified by participants' occupation, which we consider a crucial contextual identifier.

Results

Cannabis Livelihoods and Threats from Law Enforcement

Participants' narratives highlighted the socioeconomic benefits of cannabis, including that cannabis farming and trade served as a primary means of livelihood for many people in these communities. Participants, by their own accounts, described cannabis farming as a much better source of income than existing alternatives in the local economy (e.g., food crop farming). For some participants, the economic benefits of diversifying into cannabis farming went beyond being able to provide basic needs; it also enabled those who had become successful in it to acquire material assets (e.g., houses and cars), which are beyond the reach of most local people.

[T]he person I learnt from, when he started, we used to [tease] him that police will catch him. Not knowing that is what we will eventually do. We were his apprentices then. Our oga [boss] built the first house... he bought a car, two of his children entered the university, and this [cannabis farming] was the only thing he was doing. (Cannabis farmer)

This quote suggests that diversifying from other crops into cannabis farming was attractive, offering local people a livelihood and the potential for wealth creation. The individual referred to here was able to use the proceeds of cannabis farming to build houses, buy a car and send his children to university, recognizable indicators of social status in most local communities (see Nelson 2023). These accomplishments motivated others to learn the trade, which suggests that local people are attracted to cannabis farming because of the potential for wealth generation and upward social mobility. Another participant explained:

It [the money] is from ewé òlà [leaf of wealth]. The last supply I made before now people gave me an idea of the business, and I went into it to see ... If you buy a car, some people will think you did [a] ritual. They don't love you, and they can implicate you until NDLEA [gets] full details ... (Cannabis farmer)

The farmer quoted above, who referred to cannabis as the "leaf of wealth" (a Yoruba expression that aptly captures the economic significance of cannabis in local culture), noted that the "business" of farming cannabis was suggested to him by others, possibly those who had themselves profited from it. Having engaged in the business, he found it almost magical in its capacity to generate wealth (seen in the expression, "some people will think you did [a] ritual").

In participants' accounts, the exponential economic benefits of cannabis cultivation were contextualized by conditions of palpable poverty and material deprivation affecting many rural communities in Nigeria. These conditions, exacerbated by misguided economic policies, most notably SAPs of the 1980s, have long been known to incentivize illegal economic activities (Ellis 2009). Accounts underscored that cannabis farming and trade were driven by these socioeconomic dynamics, where people took recourse to illegal activities to generate income and secure their livelihoods in the context of poverty and a lack of viable,

legitimate alternatives. A law enforcement officer who vehemently opposed cannabis legalization nevertheless noted that cannabis will:

... stay with us until maybe such a time when the Nigerian economy becomes buoyant again, you know. The abject poverty is pushing a lot of people ... because if you ask my opinion what is pushing people to crime generally and why we have all this ... [it] is the level of abject poverty in Nigeria. I have traveled across the length and breadth of this country, and I have seen how people ... are devastated and ravished by poverty.
(Law enforcement officer)

Across the interviews conducted through this research, law enforcement was described as a major threat to the cannabis trade due to the risk of interdiction and arrest. Participants who acknowledged the economic and livelihood benefits of the cannabis trade nevertheless felt that law enforcement could jeopardize these benefits through seizure, confiscation of property, and arrest. The sentiment below was expressed often:

It is a big business ... It is money ... there is big money in it, big, big money ... But the problems and challenges we face are [because of] the NDLEA. Once you are arrested by them like this, you have 100 houses, 100 cars, 100, they are collecting everything.
(Cannabis transporter)

Farmers described the impacts of law enforcement on cannabis production, especially the burning of farms and constant harassment of farmers/traders by law enforcers. Transporters described how interception of consignments on the road by law enforcers prevented them from effectively transporting cannabis from the farms to destination markets, thus hindering their livelihoods. Harassment by law enforcers was seen as severe, recurrent and often affecting entire cannabis farming communities. A farmer explained:

[Y]ou see concerning the igbó [Yoruba name for cannabis] we are speaking of, the journey is far, and they [law enforcers] are at war with the world. If they hear that someone is planting igbó in an area and NDLEA should hear, everybody within that vicinity will be arrested, even if you know nothing about it. They won't exempt you.
(Cannabis farmer)

Conversely, law enforcement officers saw the destruction of cannabis farms and arrest of farmers as indicators of operational success, although these are measures of “outputs” rather than “outcomes”; that is, they leave the availability and consumption of cannabis unchanged (see Bewley-Taylor 2017). Many law enforcers explained that they focused on cannabis because it is the most widely available, affordable and consumed illegal drug in the country. In many interviews, law enforcers, often echoing an institutional policy position, opposed cannabis policy liberalization based on concerns about increased consumption and related harms, especially violent crimes.

Participants emphasized that law enforcement activities, such as raids on local cannabis farming communities, have greatly increased risks in illegal cannabis markets. For this reason, some local farmers, while recognizing the potential for wealth generation associated with cannabis, refrained from the trade when law enforcement pressures intensified locally. Instead, some chose to farm cocoa again, which, though less lucrative, is nevertheless devoid of this risk. We were told:

Yea, some people believe it [cannabis] has a lot of money also, but the risk that it has, that you are going to undergo is quite ... you can't just plant cannabis, but you can plant cocoa. Nobody is going to arrest you for planting cocoa. But you can't just plant cannabis in a legal way without getting a permit from the government ... So, there is a lot of money in cannabis, as people said ... But to me, I think cocoa is more okay. Like you don't even have to undergo all this kind of danger and stress.
(Cocoa farmer)

However, for many cannabis farmers and traders, the risks posed by law enforcement were not sufficient to make them quit the trade. Indeed, several farmers explained that they could not leave because they had become embedded in the trade, in part because it guarantees a steady and better income than legal alternatives.

[T]he work that someone knows is different from work that is new. It is a business that we are sure of the money that will determine if we can leave what we are doing . . . I make at least 100,000 Naira [ca. US\$63], will you now tell me to take 50,000 Naira to start work? Will that be possible? (Cannabis farmer)

The above quote highlights the importance of providing viable and comparable alternative means when seeking to address illegal cannabis farming and trade. Yet, drug policy-makers' search for alternative livelihoods has often been in vain (Ajayi 2020; Buxton 2015). This point on alternative livelihoods is further seen in the following exchanges:

Interviewer

So, if the government says you should stop planting igbó and they will give you something else to do, will you stop igbó planting?

Cannabis farmer

If they say there is something else to do, I will leave it [cannabis].

Interviewer

What can they do for you that will make you stop?

Cannabis farmer

If they can bring another business that my wife and children can be taken care of, I will leave it. But right now, that is what I am using to feed them.

Like some others, this participant indicated a willingness to stop farming illegal cannabis, but only if an alternative that would enable him to provide for his household was offered. On the other hand, participants expressed hopes that the government would legalize cannabis and thus enable them to benefit maximally from it. We now explore this theme in more detail.

Hopes for Legalization and Freedom

Participants generally recognized law enforcement as a threat to cannabis cultivation and trade. Many, therefore, expressed the hope that the government would liberalize cannabis policy, which in turn would obviate these risks and allow them to cultivate and sell cannabis undisturbed. In many interviews, participants responded in the affirmative when asked if they supported cannabis legalization, seeing it as a welcome development:

Interviewer

He said, do you know that in some countries, their law allows people to trade this, and there are conversations around this too in Nigeria . . . do you want them to make it legal in Nigeria as well?

Cannabis transporter

We want it, we will appreciate it, we will be very happy.

Another participant supported:

It's what we need to plant that will not cause too much trouble with the government. We want them to give us the opportunity [to produce cannabis legally].
(Cannabis farmer)

Many participants described cannabis legalization as “freedom,” suggesting that prohibition amounted to repression and was experienced as a restriction on livelihood opportunities. This was an interesting twist in the participants’ accounts, indicating a rupture between the rationale for law enforcement (putatively to “free Nigerian society of drugs”) and how the affected population experiences enforcement (Klantschnig 2016). A farmer told us:

I support it because I like it. It is just people’s behavior that did not allow the government [to] legalize it. Everyone keeps shouting that it is *igbó*, even when it is not the problem. And our prayer is for them to lift the ban so people can be free.
(Cannabis farmer)

As shown in this quote, it is the negative characterization of cannabis that upholds its criminalization and the oppression of those who earn a livelihood from farming and selling it. This helps to foreground participants’ hope of a future shift to legal regulation. Indeed, during some interviews, farmers asked us to lend a voice in calling for policy liberalization:

All I want to say is if you have a way to talk to the government to clamp down their powers so we can work freely, it will be good. May God help us with all we are doing. Tell the government that it is good, and it is very lucrative.
(Cannabis farmer)

In addition to freedom from oppressive law enforcement, legalization was also seen as a means of freeing those who farm and sell cannabis from exploitation and harassment by other community members. Farming and selling cannabis were said to be stigmatized in some communities. Legalization was described as one way of reducing stigma and making the trade more respectable. A farmer noted:

I think it will be the best because I think if they legalize it . . . there will be no more all these village people worrying you, because when you go to the bush [forests where cannabis is grown], most especially at the west [Southwest Nigeria], some angry youths can easily come to the bush and start to cause trouble. But I think if they legalized it, nobody will have interest to come and worry you when he knows that he can’t go to the drug [NDLEA] and arrest you, and he can’t go to the police and arrest you. I think everybody will be free.
(Cannabis farmer)

Others, including those who were not directly involved in the illegal cannabis market, also showed enthusiasm about legalization, seeing it as a way to create livelihoods and opportunities in local communities. An NGO worker stated:

Because of the poverty level in Nigeria . . . people are indulging because it’s basically the major source of income in Nigeria presently. . . that is something that is very worrisome . . . So, if we can see a way to maybe make it legalized or make it part of the community because it’s generating, it is a source of income generation for us.
(Drug advocacy NGO worker)

In many ways, these hopeful views of cannabis as a cash crop to potentially rejuvenate Nigeria’s struggling economy were quite similar to ideas promoted in the corporate and gray literature, especially depictions of cannabis as Africa’s “green gold” (Prohibition Partners 2019). Despite these hopeful views, there were acknowledged downsides to legalization, which we now explore.

Downsides of Cannabis Legalization

Participants' accounts at first reflected a narrow understanding of legalization as state authorization to produce, trade, and consume cannabis free from criminal sanctions and stigma. This narrow view informed some of the initial enthusiasm and hopes for policy liberalization. However, the realities of legalization, based on the experiences in some countries around the world, often reproduce, rather than reduce, inequities. In Africa, some observers have reconsidered their views (Rusenga et al. 2024a). This involves recognizing that while legalization is potentially a positive development, barriers to entering legal markets, particularly licensing costs, could prevent poor farmers from participating equitably in these markets:

If it is free for everybody to plant and sell and make money without paying for a permit, then it would be good . . . But if you legalize it and you are going to be paying for a permit, [it] will be so costly that the poor ones can no more plant. Only the rich will obtain the license and the permit, even if they don't know how to plant. . . . So, the poor people will just be working for the rich man who has money to obtain the permit. So, that is the disadvantage. (Cannabis farmer)

As this quote suggests, there is some concern that imposing large licensing fees would exclude poor farmers from participating equitably in the legal market. They would mostly participate as underlings of wealthy license holders, their expertise and labor exploited by the latter. These views did not only reflect what is happening in legal cannabis markets today, such as in Southern Africa (Grooten 2023; Rusenga et al. 2024a), but also what has happened in Nigeria's legal cocoa economy, where foreign investors have increasingly pushed small-scale farmers out of the trade or simply employed them as cheap labor on their farms (Ajiola 2018). As one would expect, most of our participants did not assent to such unfavorable arrangements. There was a fair level of consensus among the cannabis farmers that if they were unable to participate equitably in legal markets due to high licensing fees, they would continue to cultivate and sell cannabis through the illegal market, an outcome that has been witnessed in emerging legal cannabis markets elsewhere (Bodwitch et al. 2021; Rusenga et al. 2024a). A participant noted:

Even if the government legalizes it, getting the license is very [difficult] because [people] will definitely not have the money to buy it. They will still continue planting it illegally because they cannot leave it. He will not be able to afford the money, like 50 million Naira, to get the license. But they will still be selling and producing it because that cannot stop them from producing and cultivating it even if they don't have a license. (Cannabis farmer)

As shown in this quote, licensing fees could create barriers that exclude poor local farmers from legal markets, helping to perpetuate the illegal market. This is the conundrum facing cannabis policy in many emerging legal markets. Our interviews demonstrate how these concerns are already exercising the minds of market actors even when the policy has not yet been changed.

In some interviews, participants expressed the view that the financial cost of licensing and taxation under legal regulation might be higher and more suffocating than what they spend bribing law enforcement officers under the current illegal system, leading them to conclude that legalization would not necessarily be beneficial. A farmer stated:

It will not be beneficial for people in the business because there are a lot of taxes you will pay. You will pay a lot of tax, and when you want to produce it, ha, it will take you some good money to produce it. Not really, now that you can settle this and settle there [bribing law enforcement] and go free. (Cannabis farmer)

Conversely, others felt that bribing law enforcement agents might cost more than acquiring a license in a legal market. This was thought to be so because acquiring a license involves a one-off expenditure, unlike repeatedly bribing law enforcement officers (see Nelson 2022):

Yes, I think the money you will use to buy a license, I think it will not be higher than the money you use to settle [bribe law enforcers] because the drug [NDLEA] collects a lot of money . . . And sometimes you can easily settle the drug manager [NDLEA commander] now, [but] they transfer him to another place and bring another director. You need to resettle him again because they change . . . or you will not work in that bush. But if you have a license, even though they bring another person, you will only [need] your license. (Cannabis farmer)

Further to this, some rejected legalization on the grounds of the potential financial cost of participating in the legal market, including the potentially high costs of licensing and taxation. This prompted reflection on whether local farmers were, in some respects, not better off under prohibition rather than in a legal market fraught with inequities and barriers. A farmer stated:

If you do not settle with the government, they will seize your license, you will not operate again. You must pay your taxes every year. And then I don't know how much it is going to cost to pay taxes. . . . So, well, I don't buy the idea of legalization. (Cannabis farmer)

Others called for equity-based approaches to regulation that would help to secure the full participation of poor local farmers, including measures to regulate large-scale businesses. This echoed calls for affirmative action and other measures to ensure a fairer trade within emerging legal cannabis markets (Bewley-Taylor, Jelsma, and Kay 2020). An NGO worker opined:

If it's legally regulated, you know, like Akeredolu [a politician who promoted cannabis liberalization] started, it's going to be for the big players. They will make sure that they drive all of the small players out of the market . . . Maybe if they do legal regulation, they should also look at registering small farmers and license them to produce small quantities. Otherwise, the big farmers are going to use the police to drive the small farmers out of the market. (Drug advocacy NGO worker)

Altogether, participants' accounts revealed complex and contrasting perceptions of cannabis policy liberalization, which highlighted potential upsides and downsides.

Discussion

The findings underscore the inconvenient fact that illegal cannabis cultivation and trade offer a strong potential for socioeconomic empowerment in local communities in Nigeria. It serves as a primary means of livelihood for many marginalized people struggling in the rural or urban economy. It also offers a means for upward social mobility for some, enabling individuals to acquire material assets and achieve social goals that are beyond the reach of the average person in Nigeria. It is these benefits that make illegal cannabis markets attractive. Our study's first major contribution is to corroborate earlier studies that highlight the scope that illegal cannabis markets offer for employment, income generation, and livelihoods for

many in agrarian communities in Africa (Bloomer 2009; Carrier and Klantschnig 2016; Kepe 2003). In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, the livelihood benefits of cannabis cultivation and trade are situated within conditions of severe poverty and material deprivation, which is characterized by insecurity of livelihoods as well as inability to access basic services such as education, healthcare services, and decent employment. In this context, and as many agrarian communities experience a decline in income from traditional cash crops such as cocoa (Carrier and Klantschnig 2016), cannabis cultivation and trade have become a livelihood strategy in local communities across Southwest and South–South Nigeria to generate income and improve living conditions.

Our findings also highlight how legal prohibition and drug law enforcement undermine local livelihoods by creating challenges for the cannabis economy. Law enforcement often involved violent crackdowns on agrarian communities, burning of cannabis farms and arrest of farmers and transporters. Although law enforcement is meant to reduce the supply and consumption of cannabis, it has serious economic ramifications in agrarian communities where people depend on cannabis cultivation and trade for livelihoods. In Nigeria, a repressive approach to illegal drugs dominates, driven by an unrealistic goal of creating a “drug-free” society. Law enforcement takes the form of a crusade against drugs, particularly cannabis smoking and cultivation (Klantschnig 2009, 2016; Nelson 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Apart from failing to reckon with the wider economic ramifications of law enforcement, Nigeria’s drug agency is too invested in its own version of the “war on drugs” to notice that its enforcement strategies mostly achieve immediate outputs (e.g., eradicating farms) rather than long-term outcomes such as reducing drug consumption or associated harms. The fact that cannabis is still widely cultivated regardless of law enforcement is a salutary reminder that the long-term, perhaps more worthwhile, goals of drug policy cannot be realized through repressive approaches. As seen in this study, law enforcement has not deterred cannabis farmers and sellers; although it has made things difficult for them, it has also raised the price premium for cannabis through an increase in the level of risk.

The persistence and steady growth of cannabis cultivation and distribution in the face of repressive law enforcement underscores the importance of illicit livelihood strategies for communities facing challenges in accessing resources. Contemporary thinking in this field urges a development-centered approach that aims to mitigate the cultivation and selling of drugs by addressing the social and economic conditions that encourage and sustain these illegal endeavors rather than attempting to eradicate drug crops, which is merely a symptom of these systemic issues (Carrier and Klantschnig 2016; Nelson 2023). One way this problem has been addressed is through the provision of alternative opportunities for those who farm or sell drugs to earn income and secure their livelihoods in the legal economy. In Nigeria, this policy of “alternative development” has often been conceptualized as a crop-substitution approach focusing on replacing cannabis with legal alternatives, especially food crops (Abdalla *n.d.*). It is now well known that approaches that focus on crop substitution while leaving the socioeconomic root causes of illegal drug farming unaddressed are likely to fail (Buxton 2015). Our study broadly supports this concern. Participants expressed a willingness to accept alternatives to cannabis cultivation on the condition that they are economically viable and provide income comparable to cannabis. Our study thus adds to current policy debates on alternative development by highlighting the importance of alternatives that are appropriate, viable, and comparable to illegal cannabis cultivation and trade. As the accounts presented here have shown, this means that the alternatives should fit the capabilities and

needs of local farmers, possess market traction, and generate income sufficient to improve their living conditions.

In this study, alternative development was juxtaposed to cannabis legalization, which the market insiders often envisaged as affording them the freedom to cultivate and distribute cannabis for commercial profit without restrictions. Legalization was seen as being capable of unleashing the economic and livelihood potentials of cannabis for agrarian communities. Such optimistic narratives were, however, tamed by the realities of legalization unfolding in many emerging legal markets across the continent, where licensing and administrative challenges have created barriers to market entry and equitable participation for smallholder farmers (Grooten 2023; Rusenga et al. 2024a). While issues of equity and inclusion for smallholder farmers have been documented for emerging legal markets (e.g., Grooten 2023; Rusenga et al. 2024a), how these issues are imagined and debated in currently illegal markets are relatively unknown. Herein lies the second major contribution of our study, particularly to current research and discussions on cannabis legalization (Corva and Meisel 2021; Decorte, Lenton, and Wilkins 2020; Hammond et al. 2020). Our findings capture mixed reactions and contradictory narratives about cannabis legalization. On one hand, it was celebrated for its potential for social emancipation and economic empowerment, especially in poor agrarian communities. Conversely, it was seen as a neo-liberal policy that promotes the interests of the wealthy and powerful through the continued marginalization and exclusion of the poor. Legalization was also associated with capitalist downsides, including the exploitation of agrarian producers. Our study thus helps to foreground the tensions and contradictions surrounding cannabis legalization, in this way unsettling the naïve optimism that characterizes some of the advocacy for policy liberalization.

Research exploring contestations over cannabis policy liberalization in Africa is important. As the number of countries transitioning from cannabis prohibition to alternative approaches increases, research of this kind has the potential to stimulate critical reflections on the design of policy interventions in underexplored areas. In this article, we demonstrate that by foregrounding the perspectives and concerns of often excluded and currently criminalized actors, important insights emerge. Critical voices from civil society and academia have called for the adoption of measures toward ensuring that cannabis farmers, especially those in the global South who have borne a disproportionate burden of criminalization, successfully transition into emerging legal markets (Bewley-Taylor, Jelsma, and Kay 2020). In this context, there have been calls to go beyond a set of minimum legal standards toward an approach that promotes equity and fairness, as well as redresses the injustices experienced by local communities adversely impacted by prohibition (Koram 2022). Similarly, in most African countries where legal markets have emerged, mostly for medicinal and industrial cannabis, concerns have been expressed about inequity, especially in regard to licensing and the full participation of legacy farmers (Rusenga et al. 2024a). Licensing and other entry barriers have contributed to perpetuating parallel illegal markets that continue to serve smallholder farmers and illicit consumers even in the context of legalization, an outcome that our findings indicate is a distinct possibility should cannabis legalization be fraught with similar inequities. Beyond the purview of this paper, but of some interest, are the parallels between the findings here and those reported in Canada among cannabis insiders (Wheeldon and Heidt 2023). Our explicit focus on African experiences of cannabis policy liberalization creates new kinds of opportunities for comparative analysis, research partnerships, and critical

engagement. Other jurisdictions considering cannabis liberalization may consider the insights of the Nigerian experience explored in this paper.

The contestations over legalization described in this study suggest that legalization is not a quick fix for the inequities of drug policy. Cannabis legalization also does not mean that the shortfalls of legal economies, which have often been borne by smallholders (e.g., cocoa farmers), will be automatically remedied. Our participants spoke from personal experience of the exploitative nature of legal (export-oriented) agriculture. This shaped how they saw the potential and limitations of legal cannabis markets. Perhaps legalization is best seen as a platform for a more inclusive negotiation focused on alternative economic opportunities. However, a positive outcome is not assured. Without the participation of essential, but hitherto excluded market actors, legalization may reproduce what it seeks to disrupt. This is the third and more policy-relevant contribution of our research. Local cannabis farmers are not politically naïve. They understand that they may likely be better off under the existing prohibitionist framework, where the very illegality of cannabis provides a price premium and legal restrictions are maneuverable. They rightly worry that legal markets could eventually perpetuate the marginalization and exploitation of the past and may further hamper their livelihoods.

Conclusion

Dominant narratives on cannabis legalization in Africa frame it as an overly positive development which offers scope for redressing the harms associated with repressive law enforcement as well as for unleashing the economic potentials of the cannabis economy for agrarian communities and national governments. However, in settings across the continent and globally where legal markets have emerged, the initial optimism contained in these narratives is giving way to more thoughtful assessments as well as expressions of concern about the exclusion of local cannabis farmers due to structural and administrative barriers to equitable participation in emerging markets (Bodwitch et al. 2021; Corva and Meisel 2021; Rusenga et al. 2024a). Our study thus confirms and provides further evidence for the significance of these concerns from cannabis farmers and traders in an understudied global South context.

Exploring hidden narratives and insider perspectives on policy liberalization within the context of the currently illegal cannabis economy in Nigeria, our study also highlights broader contestations of policy change “from below.” These narratives bring to the fore concerns about the potential downsides of legalization, especially in an unchanged context of exploitative (legal) neo-liberal markets and the social inequities they perpetuate. While these structural limitations of legal cannabis markets have been described in the literature on the global North (Bodwitch et al. 2021; Corva and Meisel 2021), our study is one of the first to show how cannabis farmers and traders in Africa understand these structural impediments associated with policy liberalization.

These insider narratives also show some of the ways that illegal cannabis farmers and traders currently negotiate prohibition to their benefit, regardless of stigma and state repression. This is not to overestimate the “benefits” of prohibition, which has been a largely violent and disastrous state policy approach, especially in Nigeria (Klantschnig 2016). Rather, it is to challenge simplistic visions of cannabis legalization as framed in dominant policy reform narratives, including by African governments and powerful corporate actors (Duvall 2019). These narratives over-emphasize the economic benefits of revenue generation

and prioritize state-centric visions of economic development to the exclusion of small-holders' livelihoods and their visions of policy reform.

Finally, this study's findings echo calls for critical reflection and open dialogue about the types of cannabis policy liberalization possible in specific socioeconomic contexts (Bewley-Taylor, Jelsma, and Kay 2020). We suggest the inclusion of voices of currently criminalized cannabis market actors who have borne the brunt of prohibition and are now risking being further excluded from a liberalized market order. By highlighting the importance of bottom-up approaches to policy reform that pro-actively engage with the perspectives, experiences, and concerns of this critical group of actors, we seek to promote inclusion and equity.

Ethical Approval

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University of Bristol Faculty of Social Sciences and Law Research Ethics Committee (UoB/SSL/9147) and the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria (NHREC/01/01/2007–19/04/2022–25/07/2023B).

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ENDNOTES

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¹<https://cannabisafricana.blogs.bristol.ac.uk>.

²Note that most cannabis farmers and sellers were also using cannabis, but we did not include them in the user category here. The great majority (close to 90%) of interviewees were male.

³Note that Nigerian drug laws do not distinguish between different types of 'dangerous drugs' such as cocaine, cannabis or heroin, and they also do not indicate penalties for specific quantities of substances.

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