Globalisation and the Myth of a Drugs Crisis in Africa

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Introduction

The alarmist rhetoric of the global "war on drugs" shapes contemporary ideas about the drug situation in Africa. Prominent diplomats like the former United States Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson (2009), have posited that drug trafficking will usher in a "tidal wave of addictions, drug-related enterprises, corruption, instability and conflict" overwhelming Africa's shores. This statement was issued amongst a recent flurry of policy statements, United Nations communiqués, Wikileaks cables, and journalistic accounts all warning of the increasingly grave threat that Africa faces from drug trafficking and abuse. Furthermore, several African countries have declared themselves to be at "crisis point" regarding drugs, which, in some cases, have reached the level of "national disaster" (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012). Yet, these narratives of "crisis" are theoretically and empirically problematic, merging a global securitisation agenda with Western development ideology and corporate interests and thus either ignoring or obfuscating the true scale and impact of harmful drug use on the continent based on solid engagement with local realities.

This essay reviews the recent literature on the "war on drugs" in Africa and seeks to deconstruct the "crisis" discourse to evaluate whether or not this characterisation is justified. To do so, the essay begins with a historical perspective placing drugs in Africa in the longue durée of globalised trade and the emergence of politico-legal taxonomies of psychoactive substances. It will then examine current hegemonic thinking about drugs in the Western political imagination and will demonstrate how this relates to Africa especially with regard to security and development. The essay will then go on challenge the key assumptions made about the impact of drugs in Africa and will argue that the "war on drugs" may, in fact, do more harm than good. This argument will allow room to disaggregate the category of drugs and will offer counter-narratives about how certain substances, such as cannabis and khat, may actually provide critical livelihood security. Finally, the essay will conclude by arguing that a more nuanced approach is essential to engage with the challenges and opportunities that drugs present to public health, poverty, political-economic inequality and social life on the continent.

Drugs and Imperialism in Africa: From European Expansion to the "War on Drugs"

The commodification and trade, or "trafficking", of drugs can be traced as far back as the transoceanic commerce and empire building of the early modern period, from about 1500 to 1789 (Courtwright 2002). Propelled by European overseas expansion, early modern entrepreneurs – merchants, planters and other imperial elites – traded globally in a diverse array of the world's psychoactive substances ranging from alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco to cannabis, cocaine, heroin, and many other semisynthetic and synthetic substances. Global trade in some substances thrived while in others it was suppressed or ignored based on factors such as shelf life and European cultural biases towards or against particular psychoactive effects (Courtwright 2002). In the African context, where historical records are not as far-reaching, there is evidence of the drug trade, specifically cannabis trafficking, in colonial West Africa during the 1920s and 1930s (Akyeampong 2005). Despite patchy records, it is apparent that the drug trade is deeply embedded in global history thus raising questions of the reasons and origins of more recent moral panic about drugs. Courtwright (2002) offers two overarching factors for considering the change in the political status of drugs. The first, he contends, is that as awareness of the pleasurable and consciousness-altering properties of drugs grew, their use was redirected from the therapeutic realm to that of popular consumption. As such, all large-scale societies began to differentiate in some way between the medical use and the nonmedical abuse of drugs and eventually they made this distinction the moral and legal foundation for the international drug control system (Courtwright 2002: 4). Secondly, he notes the long-standing relationship between drugs and political and economic power with its varied manifestations from the use of drugs to control labour, extract tax revenue or enact penetrating social surveillance.

The strict regulation of drugs as a contemporary phenomenon can be seen as a political and legal strategy of control, based, in part, on moral reasoning. It began apace in the wake of the Second World War to curb a burgeoning illegal trade in psychoactive substances (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012). The signal event in this period was the emergence of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs in 1961, which heralded a new wave of international drug policies and institutions oriented around a criminal justice-based approach to control (McAllister 2000). A decade later, Richard Nixon would declare a "total war" on drugs, further directing drug policy towards militaristic and harsh supply-control measures. As this mode of thinking became hegemonic, the term "drug" became increasingly sinister and ever more encompassing of vastly different substances, from cannabis to heroin, irrespective of the pharmacological properties or potential for harm of the individual substances. Meanwhile, other

substances – tobacco and alcohol – as great sources of corporate wealth, were categorised differently, thereby betraying betraying the political, economic and even moral biases of those who formulate the conventions and drug policies (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012).

The expansion of the "war on drugs" to Africa gained political impetus chiefly on the grounds of two ideological agendas: international development and global security. In a foreboding policy-oriented paper, Cockayne and Williams warn of the dangers that drugs pose to Africa's development and global security:

> "[T]he slowly rising tide of drugs and drug money … will corrupt governments, police and security forces. It will fuel crime, violence and perhaps even drug wars. It will skew … political econom[ies] to what we describe as 'junky economies'. It will fuel the spread of HIV/AIDS, exacerbate sexual violence, and encourage prostitution and sex trafficking. And it will fund illegal armed groups in Latin America and create pressures on European relations, immigration policies and law enforcement and military postures" (Cockayne & Williams 2009: 33-34)

In less dystopian terms, the anthropologist, Merrill Singer, describes how drugs can have a negative impact on developing countries, based on his research whichfocused primarily on Afghanistan, Colombia and the Caribbean. His analysis categorises the deleterious effects of drugs within the following domains: productivity, vulnerable youth, health problems, corruption and the breakdown of social institutions, violence, and environmental degradation (Singer 2008). The application of such an analysis to the African context has a potent intuitive appeal but there is, in fact, little empirical data to support the hypothesis that drugs impede development on the continent. As Carrier and Klantsching argue:

> "The most compelling case for a large-scale negative impact of drugs on development is surely that connected with their smuggling and the connected criminality and corruption. But even here it is unclear whether drugs trade has corrupted states such as Guinea-Bissau, when the criminality and corruption of the state pre-dated Africa's recent absorption into the international drugs trade. Furthermore, any impact that drugs have in impeding development and generating corruption begs the question of whether it is drugs themselves or drug *policy* that is the culprit." (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012: 57)

Given the limited empirical basis for asserting that drugs undermine development in Africa, how can the force of the "war on drugs" rhetoric be accounted for vis-à-vis the continent? Here, it is contended that the explanation lies, at least partly, in the post-1989 preoccupation with new security threats – such as environmental conflict, emerging epidemics and transnational crime – in the international system (Buzan 2007; Dalby 2007; McInnes & Lee 2012). Through the security paradigm, the African state is "described as being bought by powerful drug cartels, which gain official protection for their business or in even more extreme cases co-opt state acts into active positions within the trade" (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012). For example, utilising evidence from the 1990s in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo and Nigeria, Reno (1999) argues that, in these states, politicians and high-level officials deliberately seek involvement in commercial activities – many of them illegal – as a means of clinging on to power. Reno advances the idea that the end of the cold war led to decreasing levels of international aid and foreign political support for African leaders and their domestic patronage systems thus compelling them to turn to new illegal incomes, which have become integral for the rebuilding of political authority in African states.

An argument can be made for the drug "criminalisation" of the state in Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea-Conakry where reports of high-level state involvement in drug trafficking have surfaced (Bayart et al. 2009; Ellis 2009). However, the fear of African countries becoming "narco-states" is strongly inflected by Western security concerns that corrupt states incubate terrorist activity. An International Crisis Group report suggested that "[t]here is a real risk of [Guinea-Bissau] becoming a narco-state and a political and administrative no-man's-land, attractive to trafficking and terrorist networks in the Maghreb" (2008: 3) while others have claimed al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and the Colombian FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) had representatives in the country to profit from the flourishing drug trade (Vernaschi 2010). However, the scope and applicability of the notion of "narco-states" to Africa more broadly isextremely limited and largely unfounded. Even in the West African examples given, the media narratives linking drug crime to terrorism belie highly complex political situations and ignore the fact that political instability, in Guinea-Bissau for example, might actually make it more difficult for drug entrepreneurs to secure ties with corrupt officials in government. Somewhat ironically, "state weakness" might actually hamper rather than enable large-scale the drug trade (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012).

The "war on drugs" and its link to security ideologies extends its discourse to substances with no addictive narcotic reaction like the plant, khat (World Health Organization 2006). Consumed largely by Muslims from the Arabian

Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, khat has come to be linked, rather dubiously, with the "war on terrorism" in the Western imagination (Anderson & Carrier 2006). Moreover, having been labelled a "drug" in the classification systems of international drug-control institutions, khat has been brought into the "war on drugs" resulting in its stigmatisation and prompting campaigns for its prohibition. Garrison Courtney, a spokesman for the American Drug Enforcement Agency, captures this way of thinking when of he said of khat and its users:

> "It is the same drug used by young kids who go out and shoot people in Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan. It is something that gives you a heightened sense of invincibility, and when you look at those effects, you could take out the word 'khat' and put in 'heroin' or 'cocaine'. " (Quoted in Dizikes 2009).

Such facile comparisons linking khat consumption with cocaine "further assimilate what is essentially a mild social stimulant into a category of very different substances, ignoring the great differences between their respective effects and cultures of consumption". (Anderson & Carrier 2006: 163).

Thus far, this essay has argued that portraying the drug situation in Africa, as a "crisis" is an eminently political discourse, which is both theoretically and empirically problematic. The diverse experiences of different countries on the continent, the highly protean nature of the term "drug", and the lack of evidence causally linking drug trafficking and use to any large-scale social, political or economic challenges in the vast majority of the continent attest to this. The essay will now change focus and will argue that framing the drug situation in Africa as a "crisis" is not only too simplistic but is actually harmful for three principal reasons: i)it gives impetus to draconian drug-control measures, particularly on the supply side; ii) it obscures the underlying causes and true negative impact of drug consumption, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable; and iii) it ignores some of the social and economic benefits of drugs, particularly those that are cash crops.

Drugs in Africa: Re-considering the Source and Locus of Threat

African states that have shown a willingness to control the cultivation, trade and consumption of illegal drugs have often implemented repressive policies. Repression typically takes on the form of police or military-driven policy to contain the production, trade and use of drugs by force, which usually comes at the cost of people's human rights (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012).

Nigeria has one of the longest experiences of drug law enforcement in West Africa, with a specialised agency – the Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) - founded in 1989. In terms of drug control methods, the Nigerian government, through the NDLEA, has adopted a centralised and exclusive framework prioritising the repressive dimension of crime control. Klantsching (2009), having conducted empirical research on the NDLEA, reports that "[t[he most apparent, and within drug enforcement circles celebrated, repressive policies have been the execution of drug smugglers in the mid-1980s, and large-scale cannabis eradication schemes since the 1990s". In particular, he notes that the most common and most repressive drug law enforcement activities are anti-cannabis operations. These expanded immensely since 1994, so that cannabis seizures and arrests today account for most of the investigation activity of the NDLEA (Klantschnig 2009). The NDLEA uses violent methods in its anti-cannabis activities resulting in a high number of drug control-related deaths. The main reason for the violence of such operations is their intrusiveness in rural communities where the agency uses coercive methods of detection, confiscation, arrest and destruction of farmland causing severe harm and resulting in much local community (Klantschnig 2009). In this way, a significant portion of the agency's work justifies the name "war on drugs".

In addition to the repressive nature of state drug control in Nigeria, the sidelining of alternative actors in the drug control framework – including those from the medical, non-governmental and academic communities – closes avenues for many substances users to seek needed medical treatment and rehabilitation. Across Africa more widely, Tanzania remains exceptional in implementing more medically oriented drug policy including harm reduction strategies (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012). There is, however, a great need for medical treatment and social safety nets for substances users in Africa as Beckerleg and Hundt highlight starkly through an ethnographic study of drug use in the Kenyan coastal resort town of Malindi:

> "Women heroin users in Malindi suffer from physical violence and imprisonment, rely on sex work for incomes, are stigmatised by their way of life, and suffer ill health. They are victims of structural violence … By revealing structural violence [in such] ethnographic work … anthropologists makes an important contribution to drugs research. The main value of such work must be to provide insights into the lives and suffering of disadvantaged groups such as sex workers and drug users, but also to press for policy change in the treatment services provided for drug users and in the legislation regarding possession and dealing in illicit substances." (Beckerleg & Hundt 2005)

The "war on drugs" does further harm in its inconsistency. While demanding that urgent action is taken to control the production, trafficking and use of certain types of psychoactive substances, it turns a blind eye to others – notably tobacco and alcohol – despite the fact that "tobacco kills about half of the people who use it" while alcohol has been "identified as a cause of more than 60 types of disease and injury" (Stuckler et al. 2011: 12-13). The key argument here is that the interests of powerful actors often privilege particular ideas about what is and what is not a "drug", how it ought to be controlled and therefore what constitutes a "crisis". These framings are not neutral or objective. In as much as security concerns raise alarm about the dangers of illicit substances in Africa, the tobacco and alcohol industries actors downplay the risks posed by licit substances using tactics such as influencing legislation, arranging authorship of scientific papers, and arguing that corporate products create jobs for farmers in developing countries (Wiist 2011). The commonality in these framings is that Western parochial concerns are privileged over African interests.

To present a counter-narrative about drugs in Africa beyond the prism of harm, a number of scholars have called attention to the benefits of "drug" crops, particularly khat and cannabis. The great demand that exists for these crops actually creates economic opportunities for a number of small-scale traders, farmers and transporters and, in some cases, they can actually secure livelihoods from impoverishment (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012). In this respect, Beckerleg (2010: 182) goes as far as arguing that:

> "Khat is subversive because in East Africa it has improved the lives of millions of poor people who are not part of development programs. Khat, I contend, renders 'development' irrelevant to the lives and livelihoods of independent-minded producers and entrepreneurs."

Adding further perspectives on "drug" consumption, Laniel argues for the functional use of cannabis throughout much of Africa pointing out that its "users frequently report that it enables them to work harder at physically demanding jobs" (Quoted in Carrier & Klantschnig 2012: 36); while Weir (Weir 1985) argues that khat parties provide a forum for strengthening mutual support networks and sharing business opportunities.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the "war of drugs" and its rhetoric on a drug "crisis" in Africa has been driven much more by Western ideological, political and

corporate interests rather than local African realities. In a vast continent with very diverse experiences, sensationalising the drug situation in Africa is patently counterproductive in trying to address the real problems surrounding the production, trade and use of drugs. Furthermore, drug control measures that concentrate on the supply side have lead to repressive policies, increased corruption and violations of human rights; have failed to examine the underlying structural and global political-economic factors that foster drug trafficking; and have sidelined medically and socially oriented drug policies for substance users in need across much of the continent. Finally, this essay concludes that the drug situation in Africa does not merit its portrayal as a "crisis" and that what is required is a much more holistic and nuanced political, theoretical and empirical appraisal of drugs in Africa to address genuine security, development, health and social concerns.