



Research Paper

“The difference is in the tomato at the end”: Understanding the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs

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ABSTRACT

Background: In Belgium, Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) collectively organize the cultivation and distribution of cannabis for the personal use of their members. In this paper we seek to improve understanding of the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within CSCs, shedding light on the cultivation process.

Methods: We draw on data gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the directors of seven active Belgian CSCs ($n = 21$) and CSC growers ($n = 23$). These data are complemented by additional fieldwork and a review of policies relating to CSCs, including bylaws and growing protocols.

Findings: The Belgian CSCs rely on single and multiple in-house grower arrangements. Most CSC growers had been cultivating cannabis prior to joining their current CSC, albeit growing in different contexts (non-commercial and commercial). The CSC growers discussed both ideological and pragmatic motives for operating within a CSC. Cultivation took place indoors and followed organic practices. Despite their small-scale (20 plants on average), the grow sites used specialized equipment. The growers reported receiving financial compensation to cover production costs.

Conclusion: This paper offers new insights into a particular sector of domestic cannabis cultivation – CSC growers and their practices within those collectives – which has not been studied previously. The Belgian CSCs have decentralized production among small-scale grow sites, at a size comparable to that found in other small-scale cultivation studies. In terms of motivations and practices, CSC growers share some features typically ascribed to small-scale cannabis cultivators. At the same time, CSC growers seemed particularly engaged with the CSC model and willing to adhere to the (self-)regulated practices developed by the organizations. This had implications for the way cultivation was organized and for the role of the grower within the CSC.

Background

Over the past three decades, the production of cannabis has increasingly shifted from traditional producer countries to a larger number of developed Western countries, which are able to supply their internal market, albeit to different degrees (Alvarez, Gamella, & Parra, 2016; Athey, Bouchard, Decorte, Frank, & Hakkarainen, 2013; Barratt et al., 2012; Belackova & Zabransky, 2014; Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hough et al., 2003; Potter et al., 2015; Potter, Bouchard, & Decorte, 2011; Willis, 2008). The upsurge in domestic production has also been noted in the Belgian cannabis market, especially since the early 1980s, when reliance upon external production reportedly diminished (Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b). This phenomenon, which has been termed ‘import substitution’ (Jansen, 2002; Potter, 2008, 2010b; Reuter, Crawford, & Cave, 1988), can be explained

through factors including continued demand, the relatively simple cannabis cultivation process, technological advances (including lighting, irrigation, and temperature control technologies), the presence of ‘grow-shops’, and the availability of information about cultivation techniques (Alvarez et al., 2016; Barratt et al., 2012; Belackova & Zabransky, 2014; Hammersvik, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2012; Hough et al., 2003; Jansen, 2002; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Potter, 2008, 2010b).

While economic considerations are important drivers for cannabis cultivation, it has been noted that other non-financial motives may also play an important role and could help explain the emergence and development of cannabis cultivation across Western countries, especially among small-scale growers (Potter, 2010b; Potter et al., 2015; Potter et al., 2011; Weisheit, 1991a, 1991b). Previous qualitative research, drawing primarily on interview and ethnographic data, has analysed

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the motivations of cannabis growers, as well as the size and scope of their operations. Weisheit (1991b) interviewed cannabis growers and police officers in the US (Illinois) and developed a typology of commercial cannabis growers. The author identified three broad types of growers: ‘communal growers’, who cultivate on a relatively small-scale for their own consumption, but who may also give away or sell part of their production (and in some cases drift towards larger-scale cultivation); ‘pragmatists’, whose involvement in cultivation is driven by economic necessity; and ‘hustlers’, who are profit-oriented and generally large-scale growers, with an entrepreneurial attitude. Bovenkerk and Hogewind (2002) conducted interviews with police officers in the Netherlands, and constructed a four-tiered typology of growers. Accordingly, the authors identified two groups of home growers: the ‘small home growers’, who tend to grow for their own personal consumption (generally up to five plants), but who may also direct any possible surplus towards friends or coffee shops; and the ‘large independent home growers’ – these growers supply cannabis to coffee shops, dealers or other regular customers. Bovenkerk and Hogewind (2002) referred also to two other groups of large(r) scale growers: the ‘large industrial producers’ and the ‘organizers of industrial cultivation’. The main difference between these last two groups is that the ‘organizers of industrial cultivation’ build on contacts with other illegal entrepreneurs to arrange for growing locations and may also be involved in other types of criminal activity. In the UK, Hough et al. (2003) identified five types of growers, on the basis of 37 interviews with cannabis growers. The authors discussed the role of the ‘sole grower’, who cultivates as a hobby to cover his/her own personal consumption; the ‘medical grower’, whose motivation relates particularly to the perceived therapeutic value of cannabis; the ‘social grower’, who grows for his/her own personal use as well as for friends; the ‘social/commercial grower’, who relies on the cultivation of cannabis to supply him/her-self and friends as a way to secure additional income; and finally, the ‘commercial grower’ who is generally motivated by profit and supplies cannabis outside the friends’ group. Potter (2010a) distinguished also between non-profit and for-profit oriented growers, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among cannabis growers in the UK. The author identified, for instance, personal use growers, medical cultivators (for their own use or that of others), and activist growers, as non-financially motivated growers. As regards for-profit growers, Potter (2010a) pointed to ‘one-off opportunists’, who start by growing for personal consumption but who are drawn by the perceived potential for profit; the ‘self-employed grower’, who essentially grows for personal consumption and sells the surplus to friends; and the ‘corporate grower’, who runs larger operations and relies on a range of individuals taking different roles within the ‘enterprise’, and who may also engage in other criminal activities. In addition, Potter (2010a) discusses also the role of ‘cooperatives’ (i.e. growing circles, equally sharing profits) and ‘franchises’ (i.e. where one grower provides expertise and equipment to a starting grower, who in turn returns part of the profit to the supervising grower, until eventually becoming independent), which are the result of joint efforts of a group of growers.

While these typologies are generally built upon an explicit or underlying distinction between commercial and non-commercial oriented growers, that boundary is often difficult to establish. Hough et al. (2003) have for instance suggested that one could be considered a commercial grower when most of the cannabis produced is sold. Potter (2010a) also placed the different motivations of growers on a spectrum, “with ‘altruism’ at one end and ‘greed’ at the other” (p. 164). Primarily among non-profit oriented growers, some of the common drivers for cultivating cannabis identified in the literature include being able to source one’s own supply (or that of friends and family) and ensuring control over the quality of the cannabis (Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hakkarainen, Frank, Perala, & Dahl, 2011; Hough et al., 2003). At the same time, by growing their own cannabis, ideological or non-commercial growers seek also to avoid contact with the illegal distribution market (Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012;

Hakkarainen et al., 2011; Hough et al., 2003). The high price of cannabis has also been considered a driver for some cannabis users to begin cultivating (Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hough et al., 2003). Finally, enjoying gardening has been reported as another important factor for the initiation of cannabis cultivation by non-commercial growers (Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hakkarainen et al., 2011; Hough et al., 2003). An online survey among mainly small-scale cannabis cultivators in eleven countries (including Belgium)¹ seems to have confirmed these earlier findings, noting that “cost, provision for personal use, and pleasure were among the top reasons for growing across all countries” (p. 232) (Potter et al., 2015).

The size or scale of the grow sites has been another aspect often explored in the literature on cannabis cultivation. As to the size of the plantations, previous research has often referred to a cut-off point of 20 plants to distinguish between small-scale and large-scale cultivation sites (Bouchard, 2007; Hough et al., 2003; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Weisheit, 1991b). However, as noted in an EMCDDA (2012) report, there are differences in the way European countries officially classify cannabis plantations (for law enforcement purposes), and in some cases no clear divide or criteria are applied (Wouters, 2013). For instance: “a ‘small’ plantation may have 50–249 plants in Belgium, 20–99 in Germany, 1–10 in Hungary or 1–50 in Poland” (EMCDDA, 2012, p. 80).

Prior research into cannabis cultivation in Belgium suggests that “small-scale growers may constitute a significant segment of the cannabis market” (Decorte, 2010a, p. 273). It is in this context that, although not formally allowed by domestic law (Pardal, 2016a), a number of collectives of cannabis users, usually registered as non-profits in the national registry of associations, have emerged in Belgium (since 2006) (Decorte, 2015; Kilmer, Kruihof, Pardal, Caulkins, & Rubin, 2013; Pardal, 2016b).² The associations, Cannabis Social Clubs (hereinafter CSCs or Clubs), have the particularity of gathering under the same entity as adult cannabis users and cannabis growers, and seek to collectively organize the production and distribution of cannabis among their members (Decorte et al., 2017; Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2012). For that purpose, CSCs typically rely on in-house cannabis growers, who are also members of the associations, to produce the cannabis that is supplied to the members. The Belgian CSCs report cultivating one plant per member, and have adopted a system where each plant is identified and associated with his/her respective member (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017). Adherence to this notion of ‘one plant per member’ is justified by CSCs’ own interpretation of a 2005 Ministerial Guideline which attributed the lowest priority for prosecution to the possession of a maximum of three grams or one cannabis plant, in the absence of aggravating circumstances or public nuisance (Pardal, 2016a). The Belgian CSCs have since argued that they should not be prosecuted if operating on a one plant per member basis, although this interpretation has not been supported by the domestic public authorities (Pardal, 2016a; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), and the cultivation and distribution of cannabis remain prohibited in the country. In fact many CSCs (and their representatives) have faced legal issues, and a recent press release from the Belgian College of Public Prosecutors has explicitly noted that the possession and supply of cannabis by an association (regardless of how supply is organized in that context) constitutes criminal activity and should not be equated with the provisions of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline (College van Procureurs-Generaal, 2017; Pardal, 2016a, in press). While growers cultivating cannabis within the context of a CSC have not been explored

¹ The eleven countries covered in that analysis were: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, German-speaking Switzerland, the UK, and the US (Potter et al., 2015).

² CSCs have appeared in other countries too, notably in Spain – which is often considered the birthplace of the model; as well as Uruguay, where CSCs constitute one of the legal and regulated models for the supply of cannabis (Barriso, 2011; Belackova, Tomkova, & Zabransky, 2016; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017; Queirolo, Boidi, & Cruz, 2016).

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