



Research paper

The politics of drug control in Nigeria: Exclusion, repression and obstacles to policy change



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ABSTRACT

Background: International agencies have viewed West Africa as a major player in the global trade in cocaine and heroin and in efforts to control that trade, as there have been reports of escalating arrests of drug smugglers, large-scale drug seizures and ‘narco-states’ in the subregion. It is claimed that a substantial share of the drugs available in Western markets transit through West Africa today and are increasingly used there as well. Notwithstanding this growing alarm, there is little serious scholarship addressing the issue of drugs and drug policy in West Africa.

Methods: The article assesses and challenges some of the existing depictions of drugs and drug policy in West Africa through an empirical case study of drug control in Nigeria – one of West Africa’s most notorious ‘drug hubs’ and recently hailed as a policy model by international experts. Based on previously inaccessible government documents, interviews with key officials in Nigeria, as well as ethnographic work at Nigeria’s key drug agency, the article provides a unique insight into the politics of drug policy-making and implementation in West Africa.

Results: After describing the dominant official narratives of Nigeria’s drug control, the article shows how the key political dynamics underlying drug policy remain obscured by these narratives. Nigerian drug policy has been characterised by a highly exclusive policy-making process, repression as the sole means of implementation and a strong bond with international drug agencies. This policy emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and has remained the unchallenged norm until today. The political processes underlying Nigerian drug policy also explain why policy reform has been and will be difficult to accomplish.

Conclusion: These domestic political processes have largely been ignored in the existing depictions of drugs in West Africa, as they have mainly focused on externally driven drug threats and foreign policy responses. Most importantly, they have ignored the role played by the state. Rather than being too weak, the Nigerian state has shown a clear tendency towards repressive and coercive drug policy, which has received little popular support.

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Introduction

International agencies have viewed West Africa as a major player in the global trade in cocaine and heroin and in efforts to control that trade. During the last 10 years there have been media and official reports of escalating arrests of West African drug smugglers, large-scale seizures and concerns about narco-states in the subregion (El Pais, 2009; New York Times, 2010; Observer, 2008; UNODC, 2008). It has been claimed that after decades of the subregion’s insignificant role in the global trade and its control, a substantial share of the drugs available in Western consumer markets transit through West Africa today and are increasingly

used there as well. The head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) stated in 2008,

Let’s be frank: Africa in general, never faced a drug problem – whether we speak about production, trafficking or consumption. Now the threat is there, on all these fronts (Costa, 2008).

By the end of the decade, increasing concern led to depictions of West Africa as the ‘coke coast’ and states such as Guinea-Bissau came to be labelled as ‘narco-states’, collapsing under the ‘invisible tide’ of drug trafficking and use (Cockayne & Williams, 2009; ICG, 2008; Vernaschi, 2010). International experts were certain about the ever-growing magnitude of West Africa’s role in the international drug trade. The head of the UNODC argued, ‘I have no doubt we’re going to see production [of cocaine]’ (Costa cited in Kirschke, 2008).

Such dramatic claims about West Africa’s drug markets – many of them based on little evidence – have helped to attract public and

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donor attention to Africa's drug problems. However, they have also hindered a better understanding of drug trends and policies in the subregion, as they describe West Africa's drug problems as largely driven by external factors and states in the subregion as too weak, porous and unprepared to withstand this external threat (Cockayne & Williams, 2009; ICG, 2008; UNODC, 2008; Vernaschi, 2010). This article assesses and challenges some of these depictions with a case study of the recent history of drug control in Nigeria – one of West Africa's most notorious 'drug hubs' that attracted attention long before the current concerns with cocaine trafficking in the subregion and a country now hailed as a drug policy model by international experts. In contrast to media and official depictions and by building on the limited drug policy research available on Africa (Bernstein, 1999; Klein, 1999; Obot, 2004), it aims to provide a rare empirically based analysis of the drug policy making and implementation process in West Africa.

The article begins by reconstructing dominant narratives of Nigeria's drug control, while the subsequent parts assess the political dynamics hidden by these narratives, drawing on an historically grounded and constructivist approach to analysing policy. First, rather than simply being driven by drug-related trends, drug control followed a broader institutional process of exclusion, typical under periods of military rule in West Africa and continuing into democratic Nigeria after 1999. Second and linked to this process, the Nigerian state – rather than being too 'weak' to react – showed a strong preference for repressive drug control sidelining the policy alternatives propagated by health officials. Finally, Nigerian drug officials, particularly in the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), have also begun to externalise their domestic political conflicts over resources and ideas in the last 15 years by drawing in international drug agencies – mostly as a means to prevent policy change and reform. In essence, drug control over the last 25 years has been driven more by concerns over state power rather than Nigeria's drug problems – evidence of which has been sparse since the country's earliest drug policies.

Data and methods

As with many other criminal markets outside North America and Europe, West Africa's illegal drug markets and their control remain largely unexplored and not well understood. The main reason for this gap in our understanding is the lack of available data on the most basic aspects of drug markets. Government studies on drug use and trade are largely unavailable in West Africa. In Nigeria, research and the collection of statistics is one of the lowest priorities of the national drug agency and usually conducted on the sidelines of law enforcement activities (NDLEA assistant director 6, 2005). The last large-scale UN research exercise in the country goes back to the 1990s, prompting an interviewed UN official to state his embarrassment about formulating policy in an evidence vacuum (High-level UNODC official, 2010). Even the highly unreliable drug seizure and arrest figures are rarely systematically collected and reported in most West African countries (Carrier and Klantschnig, 2012, p. 19). Notwithstanding this lack of most basic data, the media and officials have often made far-reaching statements about the nature of drug markets in the subregion.

In order to overcome the lack of easily accessible data, this article is based on previously inaccessible official documents collected in Nigeria, most of them unpublished reports, a limited number of mostly unpublished statistics and court case files provided by Nigerian and foreign government agencies. In addition, more than 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key Nigerian and foreign mid- to high-ranking drug policy-makers and implementers between 2005 and 2013, as well as a total period of 3 months of ethnographic work – observing the

day-to-day operations of Nigeria's major drug control agency, the NDLEA – in Lagos in 2005 and 2007.

As an analytical framework for this methodologically diverse and 'mixed' set of data (Cresswell, 2011), the article draws on research that has emphasised the framing of drug problems and their socially and historically constructed nature. Such an approach aims to uncover the political and institutional interests which shape drug problems and related policies. These interests are often not only the driving force behind drug policy but also influence the framing of drug problems, which are not seen as given but socially and historically constructed.

While there are various strands in this constructivist literature, one major strand focuses on the instrumental invention of crime and drug problems and related policy. According to this radical labelling theory, actual social conditions, such as drug use, are secondary compared to the interpretations of these conditions by policy-makers (Becker, 1966; Best, 2004). Uncovering this construction process highlights the interests of policy entrepreneurs who are based within or outside the state, and deconstructs their claims about crime and drug problems (Becker, 1966). In our case, Nigerian and UN officials' claims about West Africa as a new centre of the drug trade have helped to conceive a specific crime problem that has served their political interests (Costa, 2008).

More recent theorisation by criminological constructivists, as well as attempts to view drug policy from a historical sociology or problematisation perspective (Seddon, 2011; Bacchi, 2009, 2012), has differed from the above strand, as they have opted for a more historically grounded construction instead of stressing the invention of crime (Best, 2004). Social problems, such as drug use and trade, are not simply invented by policy entrepreneurs but are constructed by various actors over time based on actual social conditions. As this article will show, Nigerian and UN officials did not invent West Africa's drug problem, however, they framed the problem in a way beneficial to them and consciously ignored certain aspects of the drug market, such as drug use and treatment.

In fact, social historians have illustrated the complex construction and framing process of drug problems most effectively. Berridge, in her pioneering work on British opium, has described the intertwined history of opium use and anti-opium policy, arguing that the peculiar British approach to drug control and the framing of the drug problem was a compromise between the interests of the medical profession and governmental departments, such as the Home Office (Berridge, 1999). With no similar work available on illegal drugs in Africa, it is social historians of alcohol, who have provided comparable analyses of the construction of substance-related problems and policies (Akyeampong, 1996; Klantschnig, Carrier and Ambler 2014; Willis, 2002). Akyeampong, for example, has described the evolution of alcohol policy and narratives of alcohol problems in Ghana as a negotiation between the commercial interests of the colonial state and temperance supporters (Akyeampong, 1996). Essentially, these historical analyses have demonstrated the construction of drug policies and related narratives on drug problems within their wider social and political context, without which it would be difficult to explain the emergence and persistence of often 'irrational' and ineffective policies.

In order to apply this historical and constructivist approach to an analysis of Nigerian drug policy, the gathered data were, first, used for a reconstruction of the dominant narratives of drug control in the Nigerian 'drug policy community' since the late 1980s, drawing on drug laws, official reports, NDLEA newsletters (*Drugforce*, *Drug Salvation Force*) and interviews. In the subsequent part, these narratives are contrasted with the available evidence on drug markets, in particular the limited number of official Nigerian and UN statistics and reports on Nigerian drug trends, court case files as well as interviews with drug smugglers. Finally, a thematic

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