

West Africa – the Region’s Pivotal Role in International Drug Trafficking

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1. Introduction

The international community is now paying greater attention to the trafficking of drugs across the African continent. On 28 May 2009, the Woodrow Wilson International Centre held an international conference devoted to the implications of this phenomenon and a good number of conferences on this topic have followed since.¹ Drug trafficking through African countries has been developing for nearly a quarter of a century, and many cross border linkages have emerged: Nigeria, for instance, is serving as an intermediary in this illicit trade.² The first significant contacts between West African criminal organizations and Latin American countries apparently emerged between 2000 and 2003, in tandem with broader globalization processes.³ Since then, this field of organized crime has developed on many levels.

The international community understands just how widespread this phenomenon has become, as is confirmed by the amount of research devoted to quantifying the amount of drugs which have transited the African continent since 2005. The intensity and amplitude of this illicit and destructive activity have reached unprecedented levels. Any in-depth analysis must take this into consideration, especially in the light of the political, social and economic implications of the trade.

Africa is a pivotal continent for international drug traffickers and criminal organizations. According to UNODC estimates, approximately 40 to 50 tons of cocaine destined for the European market passes through the African continent each year.⁴ The illicit profits from such activities amount to at least 1.8 billion dollars, but it could be much larger according to some estimates. Such profits provide drug traffickers with the financial means to destabilize already weak governmental structures and law enforcement institutions in various African countries. This massive profits fuel a trade that has far reaching consequences for

Africa and the destination countries for these illegal drugs. This article analyses the impact of the illicit drug trade on Africa and the response of the international community?

In order to understand the overall magnitude of this problem, it is necessary to review the data on the trafficking of cocaine, the drug which accounts for the largest share of this illegal market.

The UNODC estimates that between 40 and 50 tons of cocaine passed through Africa in the years 2010-2012, generating profits of approximately \$1.8 billion. It is estimated that just over one fourth, or 27%, of the 146 tons of cocaine which entered Europe during this period arrived there through Africa (based on various sources, the demand for cocaine in Europe has almost doubled compared to earlier estimates since mid-2000). Profits from the transit of drugs through West Africa are significant in comparison with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of regional countries.⁵ According to research, the net profit margin of drug dealers is 25%, a figure which would give them an income of \$450 million every year, i.e., greater than the GDP of countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Cape Verde and Sierra Leone and comparable with the estimated European wholesale value of the cocaine transiting the region.⁶

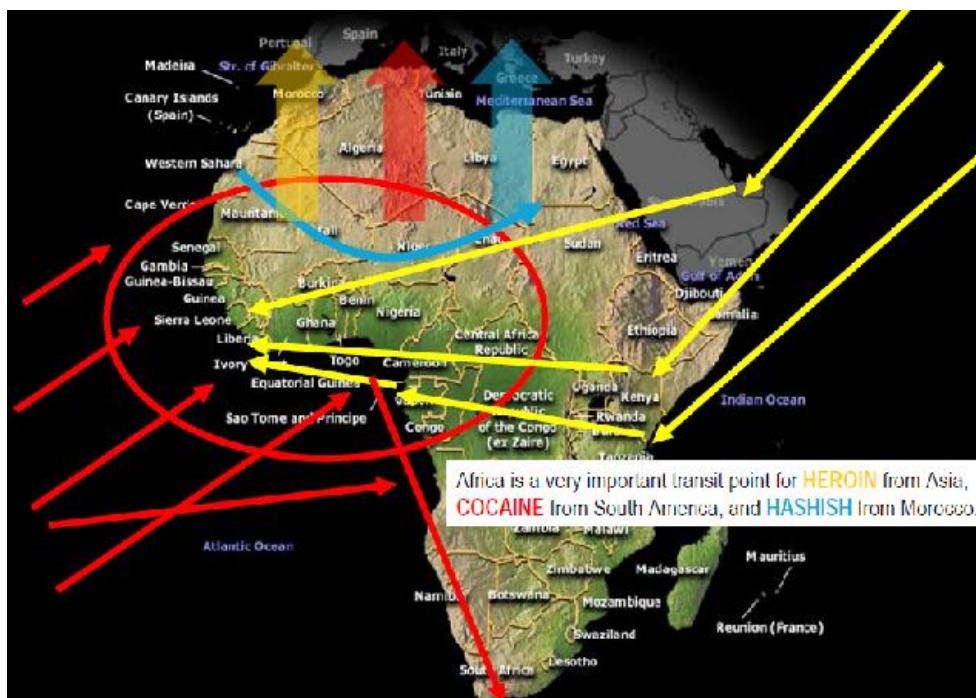
Cocaine is the second most profitable commodity traded between West African countries, behind oil from Nigeria but ahead of the cocoa from the Ivory Coast, gold exports from Ghana and Mali, bauxite from Guinea, fish from Senegal, cotton from Benin and Burkina Faso, uranium from Niger, and diamonds from Sierra Leone.⁷ In fact the actual situation could be even more disturbing, as most experts concur that the UNODC data represents only the tip of the iceberg. The problem has far-reaching implications and is of such magnitude that police and policymakers alike are highly concerned. It is estimated by some drug enforcement experts that approximately one-third of the total cocaine produced in Colombia is transited through Africa to European and other markets, that is, approximately 600 tons per year.⁸

2. Production Side

It is interesting to note that the production of various drugs, apart from cannabis, is concentrated in well-defined areas. Pakistan and Afghanistan,⁹ for instance, account for the vast majority (95%) of the opiates cultivated, while Colombia, Peru and Bolivia serve as the three major international 'cocaine processing factories'.¹⁰ However, when these products are exported to their eventual end users

they become a transnational issue. The drug industry is often defined by the extent of its international distribution networks and how these change over time. Drug transit through Africa follows different routes depending on the drug trafficked, but even these routes are not fixed, being continually regenerated on an as-needed basis. Traffickers have learned to quickly alter, extend or combine routes, based on their immediate needs and economic and security considerations, when adjustments can bring about higher profits and reduce security risks.

Figure 1



Source: Antonio L. Mazzitelli, *Global Drug Trade: Africa’s expanding role*.¹¹

West African countries are also key transit points for Latin American cocaine (particularly that from Colombia and Venezuela) destined for the European market, especially Spain and the United Kingdom. These two countries consume 50% of the merchandise arriving in Europe). Cocaine arrives from South America on ships docking in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and Ghana and private flights landing in Mauritania, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. Once in Africa, part of each consignment is distributed through private air carriers which offer commercial and cargo flights to other West African countries. Finished products are transported to Europe on commercial flights from Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, Togo, Benin

and Gambia, or from the ports in Guinea-Bissau,¹² and Ghana, and first arrives in the Canary Islands before being sent onward, often to the Netherlands, especially Amsterdam.¹³

Cocaine is trafficked through Africa via two parallel streams: one is run by drug traffickers and organized crime syndicates in Latin America (especially Colombia) and the other in Africa itself. The drug traffickers work hand-in-hand with South American criminal organizations and rebel groups. Such players need secure transit routes and logistical support, which are best provided by those experienced in operating in parallel illegal markets. The routes are run by criminals who can adapt to changing needs and customer requirements when necessary. African cocaine is often bartered or purchased for resale and has become the preferred currency of exchange in weapons-for-drugs swaps.

Trafficking in heroin and other less-processed opiates produced in Central or South West Asia (mainly in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Thailand) enter eastern or southern Africa through either direct flights to airports in places like Nairobi (Kenya) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) or the Gulf of Aden, from where it reaches the ports of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and Mombasa (Kenya).¹⁴

Most of the heroin is then transported to West Africa and its final destination, the United States. Only a limited amount of this trafficked heroin is destined for the European market, as Europe is already well supplied by Balkan and other established routes. It is estimated that about 2.4 tons of heroin has been imported from West Africa to Europe since 2000. Although there is limited information on who is actually running this trade, it appears that different African organized crime interests are in control.

Hashish is shipped from Morocco to the states of Central and West Africa (Mali and Niger) and onward to Egypt and the Middle East. However, this hashish market has been severely restricted in recent years due to a significant drop in the consumption of that drug by Europeans. Cannabis is the only drug actually grown in Western Africa (at least 4 tons of it in 2005). The vast majority of this amount is consumed on the African continent. Based on 2010 data, 8% of the African population uses the drug. However, it has been noted in recent years that a cannabis market between Ghana and the United Kingdom has evolved.¹⁵

3. Why is Africa a transit point for drugs?

A number of factors explain why Africa has become a key crossroads for drugs bound for Europe and the United States, but the primary one is attributed to market forces and an increase in the effective rate of cocaine use and trafficking on the African continent. Furthermore, the U.S. market has lost some of its attraction for South American producers and exporters, especially for Colombian drug dealers.

Several reasons account for the decline of the U.S. market:

- The Mexican cartel has now monopolized the traffic of cocaine into the United States, forcing the Colombian cartel to turn to new markets¹⁶
- The rate of cocaine consumption in the United States is on the decline
- The ability of U.S. drug enforcement officials to curtail flows has improved; interceptions have significantly increased as a result of the controls now in place

By contrast, the European market remains a focus of attention:

- Because it is increasing in size (from 3.5 million consumers in 2006 to 6 million in 2011)
- Because the euro has almost replaced the dollar as a preferred currency for drug trafficking due to its continuing strength against the dollar

The geographical factor must also be factored in. Africa is halfway between Asia and Latin America and in close proximity to Europe. The physical makeup of the continent itself, with its large number of islands, makes the control of its surrounding coastline and sea very difficult. The transit of drugs (especially cocaine) through Africa circumvents the well-established surveillance systems on the direct routes between South America and Europe (it is virtually impossible to find cocaine concealed in a container arriving from Africa).¹⁷ An additional advantage of moving drugs through Africa is that narcotics traffickers are able to open up and expand already existing markets for their drugs in Africa and beyond.

The third factor is the political instability and the inherent weaknesses of security controls in the vast majority of African countries. The latter lack of resources and resolve to deal with drug trafficking. They have intractably fragile or corrupt legal systems and corruption in general is notoriously endemic. Enforcement efforts are further complicated by the fact that many African states do not have the necessary means to control their own territory. The absence of radar coverage of the sea and airways means that control of the borders is *de facto* difficult, thus making the movement of drugs through the continent an easy task. The 250 kilometres of

coastline belonging to Ghana has no radar coverage whatsoever, and the Coast Guards have only one patrol boat with which to intercept drug shipments.¹⁸ The irony is that the drug dealers are better financed than many African states. In 2007, Nigeria's budget, which is incidentally far higher than that of other Western African countries, allocated a mere \$800 million for police training. In comparison, drug trafficking generated a \$1.8 billion revenue for dealers, according to various estimates.¹⁹

The lack of effective control in these African states is largely linked to mass poverty and corruption. Most states involved in drug trafficking rank low on the United Nations' Human Development Index.²⁰ Yet, although poverty normally acts as a social driver of illegal activities, it cannot be regarded as the only factor contributing to the emergence of the drug trade. Rather, it is merely an additional element fuelling its persistence and expansion.

African states generally have weak or even dysfunctional judiciary systems, so that even when drug traffickers are arrested they are often released within days. Only in very rare cases are convicts serving full prison terms, or serving terms at all. This near-immunity conferred to drug traffickers is linked not only to weak judicial systems but also to the limited number of prisons available in many African countries. It is also easy for drug traffickers to bribe government officials or those working in the security services. In countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Senegal and Togo, controls on corruption are not only below the global average levels but have even deteriorated between the mid-1990s and 2007.²¹

Drug trafficking on the African continent has a highly destabilizing effect as it undermines national security and encourages the development of organized crime, terrorist factions and rebel groups. Put simply, it increases the level of corruption in any given country. In Africa, the relationships between drug traffickers and terrorist and rebel groups develops in a predictable fashion²²:

- The high profit potential draw the attention of various criminal organizations in the region
- Terrorist groups can develop transport routes, provide logistical support, and ensure appropriate security to drug traffickers²³
- Drug traffickers' and terrorist groups' activities generate mutual benefits if they take place in weak or 'failed' states. Therefore, these groups have mutual interests in destabilizing these states.²⁴

Those structurally weak countries that have joined the war against drug trafficking and terrorism have experienced an almost immediate increase in the level of

violence and corruption on their territory. First, the money earned through drug trafficking is instrumental in influencing governments; it plays an important part in the decision-making processes of many African and Latin American states, swaying politicians, inspectors, customs officers, police, army, judges, etc.²⁵ For instance, the largest cache of drugs confiscated in New York City was found in a cargo originating from Africa and connected to a member of the Ghanaian Parliament. Corruption also extends to the private sector in Africa. There have been many documented instances of cooperation between drug traffickers and local private enterprises, especially in laundering profits from the illicit drug trade.²⁶

Second, drug trafficking in Africa creates social instability. Many Africans look for an easy way out of poverty, and participation in illegal activities is thus perceived as expedient. The civilian population becomes involved in drug trafficking because it is more profitable than almost any form of legal activity. The accompanying increased rate of drug use among locals only fuels further crime and poverty. There is now an increase in the domestic consumption of heroin and crack cocaine in African countries because these drugs are cheap and easily accessible. In Ghana, for example, there are 155,000 (50,000) cocaine users out of population of 25.9 million, while Nigeria (population of 173 million) has approximately 415,000 users.²⁷

Third, the huge flow of funds derived from drug trafficking has a series of destructive and destabilizing impacts on national economies, interfering with normal economic operations:

- First, the creation of a false, drug-induced economic boom leads to an increased flow of foreign money into the country, thus creating a distorted and artificial perception of economic prosperity. This flow of investment is usually unstable, since the transit of drugs through a certain state can easily be terminated as soon as more favourable conditions for drug trafficking are found in other regional states. In addition, the money made from such illegal activity is not used to develop the country’s economy.
- Second, socio-economic disparity endures as drug profits remain in the hands of a few well-connected criminals and the proceeds are not deposited outside the country and even the African continent.
- Third, fragile economies home to major trafficking networks are exposed to the destruction of legitimate business activity. Under the influence of drug trafficking money, they can be exposed to the so-called 'Dutch Disease', i.e., the development of a new and profitable system of buying and selling (in this case, drug trafficking,) which brings about a large reduction in other forms of trade. Normal economic activities are not pursued as a result of this

large influx of 'easy money'. Moreover, an increase of trade in narcotics, which are connected with criminal acts, violence and corruption, ultimately reduce the entry of legitimate Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and the possibility of subsequent reinvestment, and the benefits of the economic multiplier effect, deriving to any given country. In addition, the growth of narcotics trade, and its spill-over effects such as increased crime, violence and corruption, reduces the entry of foreign direct investment in the country.

4. The responses of the international community

In recent years many African states have pursued national, regional and international initiatives designed to deal with the problem of drug trafficking. This was the main focus of the Revised African Union Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2007-2012) adopted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2007.²⁸ This plan outlined various mechanisms to ensure prevention of, and more effective control on, drug trafficking through joint action by the Regional Economic Community (RECS), the UNODC, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the United Nations African Institute for Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders (UNAFRI). In January 2013, the heads of states of the AU adopted a new and substantially modified plan of action on drug control (2013-17). It aims to 'improve the health, security and socioeconomic well-being of people in Africa by reducing drug use, illicit trafficking and associated crimes... It places particular emphasis on the health-related aspect of drug policy by incorporating drug use prevention and drug treatment into public health programs'.²⁹

In October 2008, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in collaboration with the UNODC, also adopted for the first time two strategic documents which identified five main key policy areas susceptible to contribute to the eradication of drug trafficking and the activities of criminal organizations in West African countries: 'mobilization of political leadership; increased law enforcement cooperation; criminal justice; drug use and related health problems; and reliable monitoring systems'.³⁰ In 2013, member states of ECOWAS supported an extension of the plan until the end of 2015 'in order to sustain the fight against drug trafficking and consolidate the financial support base for its effective implementation'.³¹ These initiatives have produced some results. In 2012, a Joint Police Simultaneous Operations in the Benin/Togo/Ghana borders, sea and airports, organized by the ECOWAS Commission and the INTERPOL, helped seize approximately 8 tons of illicit drugs and dismantle a drug trafficking network.³²

In 2013, the Kofi Annan Foundation, an independent and not-for profit organization established in 2007 by the former general secretary of the United Nations, set the West Africa Commission on Drugs composed of 12 African personalities, from the worlds of politics, civil society, health, security and the judiciary. Released in June 2014, the report reached four general conclusions about how to face the problems of drug trafficking and use. The first is that giving help to drug users is a better approach than punishing them. Drug consumption must be regarded as a 'public health problem'.³³ The second conclusion contends that the 'law should not be applied disproportionately to the poor, the uneducated and the vulnerable, while the powerful and well-connected slip through the enforcement net'.³⁴ Third, to counter drug trafficking the commissioners believe that a collective effort is necessary because West Africa 'neither produces nor consumes most of the drugs that transit the region'.³⁵ Fourth, political leaders in West Africa must let civil society engage in combating all forms of illicit trafficking.³⁶ Only in this way can we protect our people, as well as our political and judicial institutions, from the harm that illicit drugs can inflict'.³⁷

The United States continues to be active in the fight against drug trafficking and transnational crime.³⁸ In 2011, the State Department launched the West Africa Cooperative Security Initiative (WACSI). With a \$60 million budget for the period 2011-2015 and serving as the primary U.S. counter-narcotics assistance program in West Africa, WACSI consists of a Coordination Group of high level officials and an inter-agency Working Group that 'targets foreign assistance to West Africa by selecting so-called "spotlight projects"'.³⁹ The Working Group established in August 2012 a Regional Training Centre in Ghana, a Vetted Unit in Nigeria and an Anti-Corruption Commission in Sierra Leone.⁴⁰

These programs assist in developing strategies for WACSI and building institutions to fight the drug trade. Since January 2013 approximately four hundred officials from ten West African countries have been trained by the West Africa Regional Training Centre in cooperation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The latter has opened two offices in the region, one in Lagos, Nigeria and another in Accra, Ghana, with a total budget of \$5.6 million in 2012.⁴¹ For its part, the Nigerian Vetted Unit was responsible for seizing 640 kilograms of methamphetamine concealed in a container probably shipped from Jamaica. In Sierra Leone, the Anti-Corruption Commission put much emphasis investigations and helped double the number of convictions in local courts.⁴²

There have been some successes in the last ten years. Nearly 6.5 tons of cocaine that had come through Africa was seized only in 2007, and since 2004 at least 1,400 consignments of drugs have been intercepted on aircraft flying from Africa

to Europe.⁴³ Pierre Lapaque, the UNODC Regional Representative for West and Central Africa, stated in February 2013 that recent trends have confirmed the previously suspected decline in cocaine trafficking in West Africa (as measured by seizures, arrests and closed operations), which may have been caused by internal political measures, the drug networks being destroyed, or external factors, such as pressure from the press and international organizations.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the shortage of accurate data about the actual level of drug trafficking in Africa makes it difficult to determine whether or not any concrete and significant results have been achieved in the battle against it.

5. Conclusion

The flow of illegal drugs through Africa has undeniably had a significant impact on the countries of West Africa, even if the full extent of it cannot be quantified. This problem concerns Africa, but also other regions of the world, as the vast majority of the drugs transited through Africa are eventually sold in Europe,⁴⁵ the Americas and Asia. The solutions developed in some states may mitigate these problems, although they remain incapable of completely halting the flow of drugs, especially in Western Africa.⁴⁶ There the cocaine trade challenges society and law enforcement agencies alike. All the while the problem is being further exacerbated by a shortage of funds for anti-trafficking programs. The risk is that the destabilizing effects of drug trafficking will eventually result in the emergence of 'failed states' – technically sovereign states effectively managed by criminal groups by various means: corruption, intimidation, violence, etc.

Due to the transnational nature of the business and the massive revenues generated by it, the trafficking of narcotic substances has the potential to generate a 'contagion' of crimes that could sweep the whole African continent. One of the causes of the widespread instability among African states is that criminal organizations seek to expand the sale of their drugs in order to increase their financial returns and improve the security and efficiency of their operations and transport routes. An appropriate intervention by one individual country will not bring significant domestic results if similar actions are not being taken by neighbouring states. Drug smugglers operating in one country simply shift their operations to nearby countries with weaker institutional structures and even fewer resources and less resolve to tackle the problem.⁴⁷ Consequently, there is a clear need to enhance cooperation among states in the same geographical area and to reach a multilateral agreement on how best to find solutions. Only by making a

concerted effort, and through much determination, can the routes and networks of drug traffickers and money launderers be blocked.

Developing a common database for information sharing between the security forces of various African countries is one short-term option. Also, continental coordination of security forces would go far in making the work of national polices more organized and targeted. However, the problem has many aspects and the most effective measures will most certainly be those which bring about a reduction in drug demand, which is unlikely to occur in the mid-term based on data on the European market.⁴⁸

Experts agree that the best approach is to combine various initiatives. Diminishing the supply of drugs will best be achieved by increasing the costs of trafficking drugs through Africa, which could be achieved not only through an increase in effective drug intervention but also a reduction in the level of corruption amongst police and government officials. It is necessary to imprison drug dealers and hold criminally responsible the many others involved in the trafficking business, including those working in money laundering and financial services. However, the internal structures of the African states through which the drugs flow also need to be improved.

In spite of all efforts made to date, drug traffickers continue to exploit the structural weaknesses of African countries with a sense of impunity due to weak and corruptible law enforcement and political structures. There continues to be a lack of any *de facto* effect on the trade, due to the overall inability of various stakeholders to co-ordinate transnational responses, and this continues to threaten Africa. West Africa is ill-prepared and poorly equipped to tackle the problem of drug use and dependency.

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Summary

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Africa is a pivotal continent for international drug traffickers and criminal organizations. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates, approximately 40 to 50 tons of cocaine destined for the European market passes through the African continent each year.¹ The illicit profits from such activities amount to at least 1.8 billion dollars, but it could be much larger according to some estimates. Such profits provide drug traffickers with the financial means to destabilize already weak governmental structures and law enforcement institutions in various African countries. This massive profits fuel a trade that has far reaching consequences for Africa and the destination countries for these illegal drugs. What is the impact of the illicit drug trade on Africa?

Key Words: Africa, Drug Trafficking, UNODC, Europe, International Community