



South African Cannabis Policy: policy reform must balance public health, economic interests, and social justice.

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About the research

In recent years, African nations have witnessed substantial transformations in cannabis policy and the associated discourses. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Ghana, and South Africa have taken significant steps by easing criminal sanctions and establishing legal markets for medicinal and industrial purposes. Notably, South Africa has also legalised the private production of cannabis for personal use. In countries such as Kenya and Nigeria, cannabis prohibition remains firmly in place, though there is a growing and vigorous debate surrounding these policies. These changes in Africa parallel global reforms; however, the specific dynamics and nuances of cannabis policy in Africa remain distinctive and largely under-researched.

As part of the *Cannabis Africana* project, a policy workshop was convened in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2022 and another at Drug Policy Week in 2023. These workshops were organized in collaboration with key stakeholders and activists, including [Fields of Green for ALL](#). It brought together a wide array of participants, including prominent policymakers, practitioners involved in drug control, members of civil society, cannabis farmers, and community groups. The discussions and findings from these workshops have been instrumental in informing the basis of this policy brief, contributing to a deeper understanding and nuanced perspective on cannabis policy in South Africa.



Image credit: Gernot Klantschnig

Key findings

Cannabis Policy Evolution: South Africa's cannabis policy evolution has been marked by significant shifts, particularly following the 2018 Constitutional Court ruling and the passing of the Cannabis for Private Purposes Bill in 2024. The legal framework remains complex, with ongoing debates about the extent and nature of cannabis regulation.

Social and Cultural Dimensions: Cannabis has deep-rooted social and cultural significance in various South African communities. Traditional uses of cannabis for medicinal purposes and as part of cultural rituals highlight the extent to which the plant is embedded in local practices. Policy reforms must acknowledge and integrate these cultural dimensions to ensure community acceptance and participation.

Illicit Market Dynamics: Despite the legalisation of personal use, the illicit cannabis market continues to thrive. The persistence of this market is driven by economic incentives, regulatory gaps, and the slow development of a fully operational legal market. Illicit cannabis production remains a vital source of income for many, especially in economically marginalized areas.

Impact on Rural Economies: Rural areas in South Africa, particularly in provinces such as the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, have a long history of cannabis cultivation. The transition to a legal market offers opportunities for rural development but also poses risks.

Regulatory Challenges and Enforcement: There is a lack of a coherent policy that balances public health, economic interests, and social justice.



Policy recommendations

1. Coherent and collaborative ethos of policy development: Regulatory agencies must work collaboratively with local communities, industry stakeholders, and law enforcement to develop and implement effective policies.

2. Public Health Considerations: Public health remains a central concern in cannabis policy reform especially as there is no clear planning by those bodies responsible for public health. Ensuring the safe use of cannabis, preventing youth access, and addressing potential health risks are critical components of a comprehensive regulatory framework.

3. International Comparisons and Lessons: South Africa can learn from the experiences of other countries that have undergone cannabis policy reform. Examining models from countries like Canada, Uruguay, and various U.S. states can

provide valuable insights into best practices, potential pitfalls, and effective regulatory strategies. International collaboration and knowledge exchange are crucial for the ongoing development of South Africa's cannabis policy, especially as it pertains to regulatory efforts and oversight by government bodies.

4. Need for Comprehensive Research: There is a critical need for comprehensive research on the impacts of cannabis legalisation in South Africa. This includes studies on economic outcomes, social effects, public health implications, and environmental impacts. A robust evidence base enabled by public and private investment will support informed policymaking and help address the challenges associated with cannabis regulation.

Further information

The *Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa* project, based at the Universities of Bristol and Cape Town, explores the relationship between cannabis, cannabis policy and livelihoods across four African countries, as well as in the wider regional context. The project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

In South Africa, the project has conducted extensive research in various regions, including the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal. This research has utilised interviews, ethnographic research, and archival sources to delve into the socio-cultural dynamics of cannabis in the country. The diverse research sites have provided valuable insights into cannabis cultivation practices, rural and urban dynamics, with the aim of broadening our understanding of the cannabis landscape within the country.

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