

Cannabis policy reform in West Africa needs to be inclusive

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About the research

African countries have seen major shifts in cannabis policy in recent years. Countries, such as Ghana and Zimbabwe, have lifted some criminal sanctions and created legal markets for medicinal and industrial uses, while South Africa has also legalised the private production for personal use. Elsewhere, including Nigeria and Kenya, cannabis prohibition remains in place, though debate about such policy has grown strong. These shifts are in line with reforms in other parts of the world, yet cannabis and policy in Africa has important and understudied local dynamics.

The 'Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa' research project, based at the Universities of Bristol and Cape Town, studies the impact of changing policies and what they mean for the rights and lives of people in the cannabis trade. It is the first empirical study to examine the nexus between cannabis, cannabis policy and livelihoods across four African countries, as well as in the wider regional context.

As part of the project, and in partnership with the West Africa Drug Policy Network (WADPN) and the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), a policy workshop was held in Accra, Ghana on 8 and 9 November 2023. It engaged key policymakers, practitioners and cannabis market insiders with research on cannabis and recent policy reforms in Africa. The workshop discussions as well as the project findings, especially from Nigeria and Zimbabwe, are the basis of this policy brief.



Key findings

- Cannabis production, transportation, trade and consumption, is a means of livelihood for many local people amidst economic hardship and declining conditions of living in West and Southern African countries.
- Illicit cannabis often generates more income for local producers than legitimate crops (e.g. cocoa), and helps them meet basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, children's education) and supports their family and relatives.
- Prohibition has negative effects on the livelihoods of local cannabis producers and traders, including perpetuating stigma and marginalisation, and enabling extortion and violence by law enforcement officers.
- Regulation is supported by many local people as a way to combat stigma and make cannabis production and trade more legitimate, but concerns exist about exclusion and inequities linked to ineffective regulatory systems and corporate dominance.
- The discussions at the Accra workshop also highlighted the need for inclusion and equity in emerging legal cannabis markets through adoption of regulatory frameworks that protect the market from corporate capture (i.e., legal cannabis mainly benefitting large corporations), and ensure the participation of local producers.
- Collaboration is critical between academia and civil society in the production of knowledge on cannabis, including research that informs and guides policy development and implementation.

Image credit: Gernot Klantschnig



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Policy recommendations

- Legislators and policymakers should re-evaluate existing laws on cannabis, as they are disproportionately repressive and largely ineffective. To be effective, the reformulation of law needs to be inclusive, i.e. actively involve different stakeholders especially cannabis market insiders, advocates and researchers.
- Legislators, policymakers and advocates need to recognise the socio-cultural and livelihood significance of cannabis for local people. They also need to understand that illicit cannabis markets will not diminish unless policy reforms are responsive to local concerns.
- Legislators and policymakers need to recognise the real dangers of corporate capture of newly legalised cannabis markets, and they need to promote the interests of small producers at every stage of the legal process and its implementation (e.g. through the formation of small producer cooperatives).
- Policymakers and advocates should favour cannabis policies based on public health and sustainable development goals over repressive law enforcement, especially when dealing with illicit cannabis production and trade, and when supporting cannabis users in need of drug treatment.
- Policymakers, advocates, the media, educators and researchers need to make stronger efforts to work together and represent cannabis use, trade and production in a more balanced manner, especially by giving voice to people who use cannabis as well as producers and traders making a livelihood from cannabis.

Further information

[https://cannisafricana.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/](https://cannabisafricana.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/)

<https://www.wadpn.org/>

<https://www.idpc.net>

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