

Cannabis policy reform in Zimbabwe should prioritise small-scale producers

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About the research

African countries have experienced significant changes in cannabis policy and debate in recent years. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Ghana and South Africa have lifted some criminal sanctions and created legal markets for medicinal and industrial uses, while the latter has also legalised the private production for personal use. Legal markets in Zimbabwe were created through the Dangerous Drugs (Production of Cannabis for Medicinal and Scientific Use) Regulations of 2018. Elsewhere, including Kenya and Nigeria, cannabis prohibition remains in place, though debate about such policy has grown strong. These shifts align with reforms in other parts of the world, but the dynamics of cannabis and policy in Africa are unique and understudied.

The Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa research project, based at the Universities of Bristol and Cape Town, examined the impact of changing policies on the rights and livelihoods of people in the cannabis trade.

A workshop was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, on 24th October 2023 in partnership with Kutsaga Research, a government institute mandated to conduct cannabis research and development. The workshop brought together key policymakers, practitioners involved in drug control, members of civil society, cannabis farmers and community groups. The discussions and project findings form the basis of this policy brief.



Image: Cannabis farm.

Credit: Gernot Klantschnig

Key findings

1. Cannabis consumption in Zimbabwe has a long history, particularly in the northwest (Binga), where smoking cannabis holds cultural significance as a social activity and where there are medicinal uses for cannabis.
2. Prohibition has limited the scale of cannabis cultivation but has failed to effectively curb illegal production, trade and use. Prohibition reinforces stigma, marginalisation, and facilitates extortion by law enforcement officers empowered to control the trade.
3. Production, transportation, trade and consumption of illicit cannabis is a means of livelihood for many local people amidst economic hardship and declining living standards. Illicit cannabis often generates more income than legal activities, and the income earned is frequently reinvested in legitimate activities such as food production, shelter and children's education.
4. The legalisation of cannabis is not primarily aimed at providing alternative livelihoods for illicit producers, but rather at attracting foreign and local investment and promoting the legal industry as a key economic sector. Many people, including illicit cultivators, are unable to participate in the legal market due to barriers such as high license fees.
5. License holders struggle to produce due to high production costs, regulatory and market hurdles, and the political and economic complexities. At the Harare workshop, it was revealed that very few medicinal license holders qualify for license renewal, as the majority struggle to meet production requirements.
6. The ban on recreational cannabis, coupled with the legal sector's focus on export markets, perpetuates a domestic illicit drug market with negligible competition from legal producers.

Policy recommendations

1. The regulatory oversight for medicinal cannabis should be transferred from the Medicines Control Authority of Zimbabwe (MCAZ) to the Ministry of Agriculture which is better equipped to manage the agricultural aspects of cannabis cultivation. MCAZ oversight should be restricted to the production of cannabis medicines and related products.
2. Regulatory authorities should work with all stakeholders to address the regulatory, production, and market challenges faced by producers and new entrants into the legal sector.
3. Policymakers and advocates need to recognise the cultural and economic importance of cannabis for local communities. They should be made aware that illicit cannabis markets will persist unless policy reforms address local concerns.
4. Policymakers should actively engage cannabis users, producers and traders to ensure that diverse voices are heard and taken into account in decision-making processes.
5. Legislators and policymakers should be mindful of the risk of large corporations dominating newly legalised cannabis markets. They should prioritise the interests of small producers and support their participation at every stage of the legal process and its implementation (e.g. through the formation of small producer cooperatives).
6. Policymakers, advocates, the media, educators, and researchers should collaborate to present a more balanced perspective on cannabis. Cannabis research should be designated a National Priority Research area with strong collaboration between academia and civil society.

Further information

The project explored the relationship between cannabis, cannabis policy and livelihoods across four African countries, as well as in the wider regional context. In Zimbabwe the project has primarily operated in Chiredzi (South), Binga (North-west) and Harare, conducting interviews, ethnographic and archival research on the history of cannabis in Zimbabwe. These sites offer diverse insights into cannabis cultivation, rural practices, and urban dynamics, providing a comprehensive understanding of cannabis in the country.

Websites:

<https://cannabisaficana.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>

<https://www.kutsaga.co.zw>

X (Twitter): @CannabisAfrican @KutsagaResearch

Rusenga, Klantschnig, Carrier, Howell. 2022. [Cannabis Policy Changes in Africa are Welcome – But Small Producers are the Losers](#). The Conversation.

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