

A STUDY OF CANNABIS SOCIAL CLUBS IN BELGIUM

Insights into the supply model, the movement, and its key actors

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Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Tom Decorte, Prof. Dr. Letizia Paoli (KU Leuven)

Dissertation submitted to obtain the academic degree Doctor (Ph.D.) in Criminology

Academic year: 2017 - 2018

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Acknowledgments

I first learned about Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) in 2013 while conducting research at RAND Europe. I was intrigued by both the idea of this cooperative-like, grassroots model of supply for cannabis and by the lack of visibility of the model in the scholarly and policy debates about potential scenarios for cannabis legalization. Five years on, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to deepen my understanding of the model, and I am deeply indebted to all the Belgian Cannabis Social Club representatives, cannabis growers, members, and all other individuals who have allowed me to enter the Belgian CSC field and tolerated my many questions during the past three years, often in very trying circumstances. Thank you for your trust.

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Summary

This doctoral study focuses on the phenomenon of Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs), understood here as both a model for the supply of cannabis and as a manifestation of the cannabis movement, as well as the key (individual) actors who play a role in its coming to being and further development.

The first known CSCs emerged in Spain during the 1990s. These were grassroots initiatives of cannabis users which developed a particular model for the production and distribution of cannabis based on cooperative and non-profit ideas, exploiting a legal loophole in domestic legislation. Following those first initiatives, the CSC model has been adapted and introduced in many other settings, including in Belgium. Typically, CSCs have been described as being registered associations, non-profit, with the cannabis produced (by members of the associations) being distributed exclusively among the registered adult members of the associations. As such, the supply model has been considered a 'middle-ground' alternative option, alongside other theoretical or already implemented models of supply (e.g. self-supply, government monopoly, license models, competitive or commercial models).

While CSCs' core goal relates to the supply of cannabis, the associations pursue also the goal of contributing to a reform of cannabis laws that would formally allow and regulate the model of supply they have put forward. In fact, with the exception of Uruguay, no other national jurisdiction has enacted legislation sanctioning CSCs. Most CSCs have been operating in unfavourable legal regimes, and many of their representatives have faced criminal charges. As such, CSCs and other actors within the broader cannabis movement have also taken a varying number of other actions in an attempt to contribute to a legal change. Both perspectives, i.e. a consideration of cannabis markets and the design of supply models, as well as an understanding of social movements' theoretical perspectives, are mobilized in our analysis.

Against this background, and recognizing the as yet limited body of knowledge about the phenomenon, our analysis was driven by the following broad questions: 1) how did CSCs emerge and develop their presence in Belgium?; 2) how are Belgian CSCs structured and how do they organize their activities?; 3) what is the role, profile, and motivation(s) of different individual actors involved with(in) Belgian CSCs?. This inquiry is built on a mixed methods approach (with a qualitative focus), drawing on four major data collection strands: documentary sources (CSCs' internal documents, and 164 domestic news items), semi-structured interviews among different Belgian CSC actors (n=65), field observations, and an online survey among Belgian CSC members (n=190).

In a nutshell, this study found that the activists driving the first CSC initiatives in Belgium succeeded in exploiting a perceived opening in the institutionalized structures, which has since been contained. The movement has remained somewhat divided internally, but transnationally

connected to other activists and a range of other actors. The domestic media seems to have played a role in mobilizing participants and has been used by the CSCs to articulate or frame their messages. The CSCs are characterized by some degree of formalization, having produced self-regulatory codes. CSC leaders are central actors within the associations, and cumulate a broad range of functions. In contrast, members' involvement in the broader repertoire of action of CSCs is rather modest. As a supply model, CSCs seemed to have appealed primarily to regular, middle-class, middle-aged, and male users. Some of the core features of the model as discussed above have been confirmed by our research, but we uncovered also a diversity of other practices, which we sought to capture in a first CSC typology. The study unveiled also the figure of the CSC grower, adding to the existing literature on small-scale cultivators.

As such, the study makes a contribution to the criminological literature as well as to expanding social movement studies. It provides also important insights for the further development of cannabis policies.

Samenvatting

Dit doctoraat focust op Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs), wat zowel een bevoorradingsmodel voor cannabis als een manifestatie van de cannabisbeweging inhoudt. Daarnaast worden binnen het concept van Cannabis Social Clubs ook de belangrijkste (individuele) actoren die een rol spelen in de opstart en ontwikkeling van de organisatie in acht genomen.

In de jaren 1990 ontstonden de eerste gekende CSCs in Spanje. De cannabisgebruikers ondernamen *grassroots initiatives* en ontwikkelden een specifiek model voor de productie en distributie van cannabis. Dit model baseerde zich op coöperatieve ideeën zonder winstoogmerk, gebruikmakend van de mazen in de nationale wetgeving. Naar het voorbeeld van deze initiële initiatieven, werd het CSC-model in een aangepaste vorm geïntroduceerd in verschillende andere contexten/landen, waaronder in België. CSCs worden doorgaans omschreven als geregistreerde verenigingen zonder winstoogmerk (vzw's), waarbij de (door de leden) geproduceerde cannabis exclusief verdeeld wordt onder de geregistreerde meerderjarige leden van de associaties. Bijgevolg wordt het bevoorradingsmodel gezien als een alternatieve 'middenweg' naast andere theoretische of reeds toegepaste bevoorradingsmodellen (bijv. zelfvoorziening, overheidsmonopolie, vergunningsmodellen, concurrerende of commerciële modellen).

Niettegenstaande dat het hoofddoel van CSCs cannabisbevoorrading betreft, pleiten deze associaties ook voor een wijziging van de cannabiswetgeving, waarbij het CSC-model formeel wordt toegelaten en gereguleerd. Met uitzondering van Uruguay zijn er tot op heden geen andere nationale jurisdicties die CSCs wettelijk erkennen. In de huidige context opereren de meeste CSCs in wettelijk ongunstige omstandigheden. Dit heeft in de praktijk onder meer geleid tot strafrechtelijke vervolgingen van vertegenwoordigers van de CSCs. Omwille van hun onzekere wettelijke positie hebben CSCs en andere actoren binnen de bredere cannabisbeweging tal van andere acties gevoerd om te pogen het wetgevend kader te veranderen. Onze analyse berust op brede invalshoeken wat betreft de beschouwing van cannabismarkten en het ontwerp van bevoorradingsmodellen, maar ook de theoretische visies van sociale bewegingen worden aan de hand van een breed perspectief benaderd.

Voortbouwend op deze benaderingen en door erkenning van de beperkte kennis over dit fenomeen, wordt onze analyse gedreven door de volgende vragen: 1) hoe ontstonden de CSCs in België en hoe ontwikkelden ze zich in deze context?; 2) hoe structureren Belgische CSCs zich en hoe organiseren zij hun werkzaamheden?; 3) welke rol spelen verschillende individuele actoren in Belgische CSCs en door welke profielen en beweegredenen worden zij gekenmerkt?. Dit *mixed methods-onderzoek* (met een kwalitatieve focus) berust op vier essentiële dataverzamelmethode: documentaire bronnen (interne documenten van CSCs en 164 binnenlandse nieuwsberichten), semigestructureerde interviews met Belgische CSC-actoren

(n=65), veldonderzoek en een online vragenlijst met Belgische CSC-leden (n=190) als respondenten.

Kort samengevat concludeerde dit onderzoek dat de activisten die aan de basis stonden van de eerste CSC-initiatieven in België gebruik konden maken van een *opening in the institutionalized structures*, die hen later weer ontnomen werd. De CSC-beweging wordt gekenmerkt door een enigszins interne verdeeldheid, maar heeft grensoverschrijdende banden met andere activisten en met tal van andere actoren. De binnenlandse media lijken een rol gespeeld te hebben in het mobiliseren van deelnemers en werden door de CSCs aangewend om hun boodschappen te kaderen of uit te dragen. CSCs worden gekenmerkt door enige vorm van formalisering door het opstellen van zelfregulerende richtlijnen. CSC-bestuursleden worden beschouwd als centrale actoren binnen de associaties en nemen diverse taken op zich. De betrokkenheid van de CSC-leden in het breder *repertoire of action* van CSCs bleek echter eerder beperkt. Als bevoorradingsmodel bleken CSCs voornamelijk aantrekkelijk voor regelmatige, mannelijke gebruikers van middelbare leeftijd uit de middenklasse. Ons onderzoek bevestigt enkele van de belangrijkste eigenschappen van het model die hierboven besproken werden. Hiernaast stelden we ook diverse andere praktijken vast, die we trachtten onderbrengen in een eerste CSC-typologie. Bovendien beschrijft dit onderzoek het profiel van de CSC-kweker, wat een relevante aanvulling is op de bestaande literatuur over kleinschalige telers.

Het onderzoek draagt vervolgens bij aan de criminologische literatuur, maar breidt ook het onderzoek naar sociale bewegingen uit. De studie biedt tevens essentiële inzichten voor de verdere ontwikkeling van het cannabisbeleid.

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Overview of publications emerging from this study

Pardal, M. (2016a). Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: growing in a legal haze? In J. d. Maillard, A. Groenmeyer, P. Ponsaers, J. Shapland & F. Viannello (Eds.), *GERN Research Paper Series* (Vol. 4, pp. 13-29). Antwerp: Maklu. **[Chapter 3]**

Pardal, M. (2016b). Cannabis Social Clubs through the lens of the drug user movement. *Tijdschrift over Cultuur & Criminaliteit*, 6(2), 47-58. **[Chapter 1]**

Decorte, T., & Pardal, M. (2017). Cannabis Social Clubs in Europe: Prospects and Limits. In R. Colson & H. Bergeron (Eds.), *European Drug Policies: the ways of reform* (pp. 285-299). New York: Routledge.

Decorte, T., Pardal, M., Queirolo, R., Boidi, M. F., Sanchez, C., & Pares, O. (2017). Regulating Cannabis Social Clubs: a comparative analysis of legal and self-regulatory practices in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, (43), 44-56. **[Chapter 2]**

Pardal, M., & Tieberghien, J. (2017). An analysis of media framing of and by Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: making the news? *Drugs: education, prevention and policy*, 24(4), 348-358. **[Chapter 7]**

Pardal, M. (2018a). The Belgian Cannabis Social Club landscape. *Drugs & Alcohol Today*, 18(2). **[Chapter 6]**

Pardal, M. (2018b). "The difference is in the tomato at the end": understanding the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 56, p. 21-29. **[Chapter 11]**

Pardal, M., & Bawin, F. (2018). The supply of cannabis for medical use through Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium. *Contemporary Drug Problems*. **[Chapter 9]**

Pardal, M. (in preparation). A work in progress? An analysis of the Cannabis Social Club model in Belgium. **[Chapter 8]**

Pardal, M. (in preparation). The leadership of Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium. **[Chapter 10]**

Tieberghien, J., & Pardal, M. (in preparation). Cannabis Social Clubs on YouTube: a qualitative content analysis. **[Annex]**

PART I: General Introduction

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (hereinafter CSCs or Clubs) are the cornerstone of this doctoral study, which focuses in particular on the developments in Belgium. CSCs have been described as a model for the supply of cannabis, based on the idea of collective cultivation and distribution of that substance among a closed circuit of adult members (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Kilmer, Kruihof, Pardal, Caulkins, & Rubin, 2013b). The first known CSCs emerged in Spain during the 1990s as a result of users' grassroots initiatives, and can be found in many other countries today. Generally, the Clubs are registered associations operating on a non-profit basis (Decorte & Pardal, 2017). The model thus has the particularity of being user-driven, constituting a closed system of supply, and as such has been thought of as a 'middle ground' option for alternative cannabis policies (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte, 2014a).

Nevertheless, the CSC model has only been legalized and regulated nationwide in Uruguay (Queirolo, Boidi, & Cruz, 2016), so most CSCs remain operating in a vulnerable legal position – a circumstance they seek to change. As such, CSCs have been conceptualized as part of a broader movement that demands a reform of current cannabis laws, i.e., a cannabis movement (Marín, 2008). Earlier research into the Spanish context has highlighted the role played by CSCs as central actors of that movement, implementing a range of actions to mobilize participants and arguing for a departure from current prohibitionist policies (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011; Marín, 2008, 2009; Martínez, 2015).

This research is motivated by and seeks to contribute to the scholarly and policy debate about the range and design of models for the supply of cannabis. There is some concern that the 'middle ground' options might remain under-researched, and a number of scholars have sought to bring attention to or called for further research into those (Caulkins, 2018; Cerdá & Kilmer, 2017; Decorte, de Grauwe, & Tytgat, 2016; Wilkins, 2018). While this research project (funded by the Research Foundation Flanders– FWO)¹ did not aim to directly address (or evaluate) a particular policy or policy problem we hope that our analysis will contribute to strengthen the base of knowledge on the CSC model, which could be informative for the development of future policies in this area.

This doctoral dissertation is anchored in the long tradition of criminological inquiry into illicit drug markets and of the actors active in those (e.g. suppliers, producers, users). Recognizing the "*disciplinary hybridity*" characteristic of the field of criminology (Carrabine, Cox, Lee, Plummer, & South, 2009), the study integrates also a social movement perspective. Doing so allows us to acknowledge and better understand the particularity of CSCs as actors pursuing

¹ The FWO funds fundamental and strategic scientific research in Flanders. This research project was supported by grant number G.0A85.15N.

change, as well as the processes contributing (or not) to that (sought after) change. This interdisciplinary stance has been encouraged and/or adopted by a number of authors conducting research into other fields of criminology - such as 'green criminology' or 'queer criminology', which have also been linked to bottom-up movements (Lynch & Stretsky, 2003; Nurse, 2016; South, 2014; Woods, 2014).

2. Goal of the study and research questions

The aim of this study is to better understand the genesis, development and practices of Belgian CSCs. Earlier work into CSCs in Belgium is limited to an exploratory analysis conducted circa 2014 (Decorte, 2014a, 2015), which identified a number of areas for further research. The author highlighted the lack of knowledge with regards to the actors engaging with CSCs, namely cannabis growers and members, as well as to the nature of the relationship between them and CSCs, and between CSCs and other actors active in the cannabis field. We were conscious of those research gaps when designing this study, and sought to provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, tapping into three different dimensions: a more macro-level/contextual consideration of how CSCs have emerged and developed in the country – captured in research question 1; at a meso-level, we focused on CSCs' organizational structure and activities, in particular the ways in which Belgian CSCs organize the supply of cannabis (research question 2); and finally, at an individual level, we focused on three groups of actors who participate in Belgian CSCs: CSC directors, cannabis growers, and members. The full list of research questions and sub-questions driving our analysis is presented below (Textbox 1).

In so doing, we generally follow the comprehensive approach taken by Marín (2008, 2009). Similarly, in his doctoral dissertation, Marín (2008) studied Spanish CSCs (their organizational structure, size, development, claims and repertoire of action), as well as their relationship with institutionalized actors (e.g. political parties, other organizations defending a different position, the media). The author enquired also about CSC members' profiles, an aspect we also consider in our analysis. Differently, our study's starting point and central focus is on CSCs (while Marín's scope of analysis, although analysing CSCs' role and action within the movement, was broader – as he set out to study the cannabis movement in Spain, including other actors beyond the CSCs). In addition, the present dissertation pays special attention to the supply model CSCs represent, which had not been subject to in-depth analysis by Marín (2008).

Textbox 1: List of research questions and sub-questions.

| Research Questions | Sub-Questions |
|---|---|
| 1. How did CSCs emerge and develop its presence in Belgium? ² | <p>1.1 When and how have CSCs been introduced in the country?</p> <p>1.2 How has the CSC presence evolved in the country since its first emergence?</p> <p>1.3 How have the Belgian CSCs been represented by the Belgian media?</p> |
| 2. How are Belgian CSCs structured and how do they organize their activities? ³ | <p>2.1 What is the formal structure adopted by Belgian CSCs?</p> <p>2.2 What are the key CSC activities?</p> <p>2.3 How is cannabis supplied via a CSC in Belgium?</p> |
| 3. What is the role, profile, and motivation(s) of different individual actors involved with(in) Belgian CSCs? ⁴ | <p>3.1 ... of CSC directors?</p> <p>3.2 ... of CSC growers?</p> <p>3.3 ... of CSC members?</p> |

As discussed in more detail in PART III), at its inception there was a fourth dimension to this study: we were also interested in learning more about the type of cannabis being supplied by the Belgian CSCs (e.g. its typical potency, purity and quality), drawing primarily on a toxicological analysis of samples of cannabis produced by the CSCs participating in the study. However, our request to carry that analysis was rejected by the authority competent to issue it (i.e. the Federal Agency for Medicines and Health Products), and thus we were unable to integrate it in the current study.

3. Research approach

With a view to addressing the research questions listed above, we adopted a mixed methods approach (with a qualitative focus), rooted in a pragmatist viewpoint. It proved to be the best suited design for this study, as it enabled the inclusion and triangulation of diverse sources and voices, and facilitated the enquiry into the different dimensions of the analysis. As discussed in more detail in PART III, seven active and one former Belgian CSC participated in this study. In particular, four different data collection efforts were undertaken. We relied on documentary sources, including CSCs' self-produced documents (e.g. bylaws, house-rules, etc.) and 164 news

² This research question is primarily addressed in Chapters 6-7.

³ This research question is primarily addressed in Chapters 8-9 and 13.

⁴ This research question is primarily addressed in Chapters 10-13.

articles from 12 key Belgian print media outlets (in Dutch and French). In addition, we conducted 65 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with different groups of actors: with CSC directors of the seven active CSCs, as well as from a former CSC (n=23), with CSC growers from the active CSCs (n=23), and with representatives of other organizations with whom the CSCs reported collaborating (n=19). We also attended and made field observations during different CSC activities (e.g. internal meetings, public protests, etc.). Finally, we ran an online survey among Belgian CSC members, which generated 190 valid responses.

4. Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation comprises five parts. Following this General Introduction, we provide an overview of the relevant literature concerning the object of the study, and the scholarly contributions that inform our analysis (PART II). To that effect, we include five chapters, two of which are published articles meeting the requirements for a PhD dissertation by articles by the Faculty of Law and Criminology at Ghent University:

Chapter 1: Pardal, M. (2016). Cannabis Social Clubs through the lens of the drug user movement. *Tijdschrift over Cultuur en Criminaliteit*, (6), 2, 47-58.

Chapter 3: Pardal, M. (2016). Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: growing in a legal haze?. In: Maillard, J. et al., (eds.), *Crime and order, criminal justice experiences and desistance: today's security issues*, Vol. 4, 13-30. Antwerpen: Maklu.

Following that, in PART III, we present in detail the research strategy and methodological choices made in this study. Throughout that section of the dissertation, we offer also some reflections on ethical issues and other research challenges affecting the study. Next, PART IV, includes eight chapters which essentially address the research questions presented above. The following chapters have either been published or accepted for publication, thus meeting the requirements for a PhD dissertation by articles (Faculty of Law and Criminology, Ghent University):

Chapter 6: Pardal, M. (2018). The Belgian Cannabis Social Club landscape. *Drugs & Alcohol Today*.

Chapter 7: Pardal, M., & Tieberghien, J. (2017). An analysis of media framing of and by Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: making the news? *Drugs: education, prevention and policy*, 24(4), 348-358.

Chapter 9: Pardal, M. & Bawin, F. (2018). The supply of cannabis for medical use through Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium. *Contemporary Drug Problems*.

Chapter 11: Pardal, M. (2018). "The difference is in the tomato at the end": understanding the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 56, p. 21-29.

Finally, PART V presents and discusses the conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis. In that section, we reflect also on the relevance of the study for the criminological and social movement fields, and lay out the emerging key policy implications. We conclude by considering further avenues for future research.

PART II: A review of the literature and theoretical perspectives informing the study

The following chapters situate the object of analysis of this doctoral dissertation within the existing literature on CSCs and the broader scholarly contributions underpinning the study. Chapters 1-3 offer a state-of-the-art overview of the literature on Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs), focusing on their emergence, key features, and legal framework(s). **Chapter 1** introduces the CSC model, and integrates CSCs within the history of other drug user organizations, reflecting on its legacy. **Chapter 2** reviews the limited body of literature on CSCs, zooming in on the known CSC practices in three key settings where the model has developed so far: Belgium, Spain, and Uruguay. The chapter provides not only an historical overview of the development of the model, but also highlights the similarities and differences within and across the three settings. **Chapter 3** builds on a review of previous legal analysis to consider the compatibility of the CSC model with Belgian and international legal frameworks (especially in light of the applicable United Nations Conventions). Following these introductory chapters, we then turn to consider the theoretical perspectives and scholarly contributions in which this study is rooted (Chapters 4-5). As the study is underpinned by an understanding of the range and design of supply models for cannabis, **Chapter 4** provides an overview of the thinking on these issues. In turn, **Chapter 5** explores the theoretical contributions from the field of social movement studies, following a review of past research into CSCs that applied that perspective. This and other more specific scholarly inputs are also explored in the individual results chapters.

Chapters 1 and 3 have been published and meet the requirements for PhD dissertation by articles established by the Faculty of Law and Criminology at Ghent University. Full references can be found at the beginning of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Cannabis Social Clubs through the lens of the drug user movement

This chapter has been published as:

Pardal, M. (2016). Cannabis Social Clubs through the lens of the drug user movement. *Tijdschrift over Cultuur en Criminaliteit*, (6), 2, 47-58.

*[This publication **meets the requirements** for PhD dissertation by articles approved by the Faculty of Law and Criminology at Ghent University]*

Abstract

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are a model of non-profit production and distribution of cannabis among a closed circuit of adult cannabis users. The CSC model can thus be seen as a middle-ground option between prohibition and full (legal) commercialization. Initially founded in Spain during the 1990s, this form of collectives has emerged elsewhere in Europe (notably in Belgium), mainly as a result of grassroots initiatives and self-regulation. Uruguay remains the only jurisdiction to have legalized and regulated the CSC model. This paper discusses the goals and practices of CSCs against the backdrop of the drug user movement. Our goal is to draw a comparison to other drug users' organizations and to identify knowledge gaps to be addressed in future research into CSCs. In this analysis, we rely on a review of the relevant literature in this field and on preliminary findings from an ongoing study examining CSCs in Belgium. A preoccupation with reducing the harms associated with drug use seems to be an underlying guiding principle for CSCs and other drug users' organizations, but further research into CSCs' practices is needed to understand whether and how those are implemented. We found other common points between the broader drug user movement and the efforts of CSCs, both in terms of potential pitfalls and areas for positive impact. We suggest that the model warrants additional attention from both the research and policy-making community.

Keywords: Cannabis Social Clubs, supply, cannabis policy, self-organization, drug user movement.

1. Introduction

In what follows we introduce the Cannabis Social Club (CSC) model, drawing on desk research and a review of relevant peer-reviewed and grey literature on this topic, which has been undertaken in the context of an ongoing study into CSCs in Belgium.⁵ We aim to present this model of supply of cannabis and contextualize it within the drug user movement. In particular, we describe and compare the CSC model with other drug users' organizations, pointing also to some of the strengths and weaknesses that have been identified in previous literature with regards to the activities and progress achieved by both. It should be noted that the available empirical data on the functioning of the CSC model and its impacts in different settings is nevertheless very limited. We encourage further research into the model, which could be helpful in better understanding the potential of CSCs as an alternative model for the supply of cannabis.

We start by providing a description of the model, its emergence and current presence in Europe and elsewhere (§2). In section 3, we introduce the discussion of CSCs in light of other drug users' initiatives, which we expand in the following section. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks in section 5, reflecting on some of the likely common barriers to the action of CSCs and other drugs users' organizations, as well as areas for further impact, particularly in relation to other health and harm reduction services – an area where other drug users' organizations have typically had a strong presence.

2. The Cannabis Social Club model

The CSC can be understood as a model for the supply of cannabis which rests upon the principle of collective cultivation and distribution of cannabis among a closed circuit of adults, who are members of the Club (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; EMCDDA, 2013b; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Marks, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015; Reuter, 2010; Room, Fischer, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter, 2010; Transform, 2013, 2015). The CSC model was founded in Spain as a result of a grassroots movement during the 1990s, but nowadays CSCs can be found in many other countries. In Europe, in addition to the CSCs operating in Belgium, we found accounts of Clubs operating in the Netherlands, and in Slovenia (Apfel, 2014; Bewley-Taylor, Blickman, & Jelsma, 2014; Blickman, 2014; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; EMCDDA, 2013b; ENCOD, 2015a; Reuter, 2010; Room et al., 2010; Transform, 2015). Beyond the CSC operating in Amsterdam,⁶ there have also been some attempts by the city of Utrecht to run a pilot project with CSCs (Transform, 2013; X, 2014).⁷ There are also reports of Cannabis Social Clubs in the UK, Italy, and France but

⁵ For more information about this study, please see: <http://www.ugent.be/re/cssr/en/research-groups/isd/projects.htm/cannabissocialclubsbelgiumfwo.htm> (last accessed 5 October 2015).

⁶ At the time of writing it is not clear whether this CSC has initiated the production and supply of cannabis among its members.

⁷ A 2011 study of the opinions and expectations of coffee shop visitors in the city of Utrecht found that while two out of three coffee shop visitors had not heard about the CSC model, there was some receptivity among coffee

these seem to be associations of users and activists, which are not engaging in collective cultivation at the moment (Blickman, 2014; Decorte, 2015; ENCOD, 2015). Beyond Europe, the reviewed literature pointed to the presence of CSCs in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and New Zealand (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte, 2015; Transform, 2015). Additionally, Uruguay is the first jurisdiction to have legalized and regulated the functioning of CSCs at the national level (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Martínez, 2015; Montañés, 2014; Transform, 2015).

In previous literature analysing this model, the CSCs have been described as a way of obtaining cannabis for personal use ‘without having to turn to the black market’ – despite the fact that this model of supply has not, in most cases, been formally recognized by the relevant public authorities. In fact, a striking common characteristic of most CSCs established and/or currently operating in the contexts mentioned above (i.e., with exception of Uruguayan CSCs) relates to the fact that they have been doing so in the absence of formal regulations, exploring any potential leeway in the domestic legislations or jurisprudence (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte, 2015). The emergence of this model has thus generally been the result of bottom-up initiatives and self-regulation rather than the product of the legislator’s activity, and remains an area characterized by legal uncertainty. For instance, some Clubs in Spain and in Belgium have had their crops confiscated and have been brought to Court – with mixed results for the Clubs involved (Aerts, 2008; Belga, 2007, 2009; Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Marks, 2015; Neve, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015).

In general, the first steps in the foundation of a CSC seem to include the Club’s registration in a registry of associations, with the members typically drafting a collective agreement concerning the cultivation practices of the Club (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Blickman, 2014; Martínez, 2015). The CSCs normally appoint a Board of Directors (e.g., President, treasurer, etc.), but it has been noted that the General Assembly of Members may also play an important role in the decision-making process of the Clubs (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2015; Queirolo, Boidi, & Cruz, 2015). Some of the Clubs rely on volunteer members to assist with the administrative tasks and/or the cultivation of the Clubs’ cannabis, while others hire paid staff for those activities (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2015). The literature on the model suggests that, particularly in Spain and in Belgium, new CSCs members are prior users of cannabis, adults and citizens/permanent residents of the country at stake (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2015). Some CSCs focus exclusively on the supply of cannabis to users with a given medical condition (including cancer, epilepsy, or multiple sclerosis patients, among others), and who have received a positive recommendation by their physician advising the use of cannabis. Other CSCs supply cannabis for non-scientific and non-medical purposes, i.e., for recreational use. Finally, other Clubs allow membership of both medical and recreational users. The CSCs tend to impose a membership fee and charge their members for the cannabis

shop visitors to become member of a Club (about 42% would consider joining a CSC) once an explanation about the functioning of the model was given by the interviewer (Wouters & Korf, 2011).

supplied⁸ – nevertheless, reduced fees may be applied to those members who contribute to the cultivation of the plants (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2015). It has been reported that the CSCs usually operate on a non-profit basis,⁹ with any financial gains being reinvested in the Clubs, for instance to support lobbying efforts, other social activities as well as legal and medical consultancy fees (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Transform, 2013, 2015). With regards to the cultivation of cannabis by the CSCs, this seems to have taken place indoors as well as outdoors, and the amount produced tends to be based upon the number of members of the Club and/or an estimate of the members' consumption levels (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Transform, 2013, 2015).¹⁰ The Clubs organize specific moments for the distribution of cannabis among their members¹¹ or guarantee a constant supply of cannabis. The quantity of cannabis supplied varies among Clubs, and across countries. It is worth noting that there are important differences in the ways in which the Clubs manage their operations – which may be related to the different contexts in which the CSCs have been established and the applicable legal provisions.

Albeit not known to many, the CSC model has been described as one of the possible middle ground options for alternative policies in this field (Caulkins et al., 2015a, 2015b). In theory, it has the potential to weaken an important part of the illegal market as it offers a stable prospect of supply for (regular) cannabis users, while discouraging diversion of the cannabis supplied into the illegal market (given that the quantities distributed within the CSCs are relatively small, and destined for personal use) (Caulkins et al., 2015a, 2015b; MacCoun, 2013).¹² It is also noteworthy that in comparison to other policy options, the CSC model is perhaps less prone to some of the risks associated with large-scale supply models, such as stronger marketing approaches and further incentives to harmful consumption (Caulkins et al., 2015a, 2015b; MacCoun 2013). To some extent, the CSC model lends itself to the implementation of quality control and labelling processes too, which can be an important factor in protecting public health. These assumptions need however to be further assessed through empirical research.

3. CSC: a concept in context

When thinking about the CSC model as described above, a number of definitional features seems to bear some resemblance to other types of collectives or groupings. One could for

⁸ For example, according to a previous study by Decorte (2014, 2015), the price per gram supplied by the Belgian CSCs to its members ranged between 6 and 8€, circa 2013.

⁹ According to recent accounts, some more commercially-driven CSCs may have appeared in particular in Barcelona (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Blickman, 2014; Páres & Bouso, 2015; Transform, 2013, 2015).

¹⁰ Uruguayan legislation imposes a limit of 99 plants (corresponding to a maximum annual crop of 480 gram per member), with any surplus to be administered by an overseeing Institute (IRCCA) (Montañés, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2015).

¹¹ In Belgium, the so-called 'exchange fairs' where members receive their supply of cannabis tend to take place every 4-6 weeks or every 2-3 months, depending on the production cycles of the Clubs (Decorte, 2014, 2015).

¹² The implementation of this model would nevertheless require continued control efforts by the Government to curb the remaining illegal sectors of the cannabis market.

example think of parallelisms with other consumer associations, or with other types of cooperatives (e.g., agricultural or bulk-buying cooperatives).¹³ However, and while the above areas may also be relevant and reveal interesting pointers for our understanding of the CSC model, in what follows, we explore some of the similarities and differences between the CSC and other collective initiatives undertaken by drug users – within the broader drug user movement. This is of course an exploratory discussion, that aims to offer a contextual view of the space in which the CSC model emerged and operates, reflecting on the nature and structure of such collectives.

Drug users' organizations have been defined as "*organizations of users of prohibited drugs or organizations in which these people can play an important role*" (Montañés & Oomen, 2009, p. 7). While the authors identified three broad types of organizations based on the profile of the users and the setting where the drugs are used (i.e., cannabis users, party drug users; and users of street drugs including opiates and cocaine), it is their general peer-driven, bottom-up experiences that we wish to highlight here. We consider the drug user movement mainly because of one of the key defining characteristics of the CSC model: the fact that the Clubs are formed exclusively by (current) users of cannabis. This seems to be the case in the key settings where the model has been studied to date. In Belgium and in Spain new membership is typically based upon invitation from a current member of the Club and/or intake interview of the candidate, together with some form of declaration that the candidate is already a cannabis user (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Blickman, 2014; Coombes, 2014; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Transform, 2013, 2015). In Uruguay, candidate CSC members will have to register in a national database for cannabis users, indicating that the CSC is their preferred form of supply (Albrecht, 2014; Pardo, 2014).¹⁴

But perhaps more significantly, most CSCs have been founded upon the initiative of a group of cannabis users, as a result of grassroots initiatives which sought to (self-)organize the supply of cannabis for themselves and other fellow cannabis users – despite the lack of a firm legal basis for their action.¹⁵ The CSC model can thus be integrated within the wider drug user movement, and (user-based) harm reduction responses (Efthimiou-Mordaunt, 2015; Friedman et al., 2007; Hunt, Albert, & Montañés, 2010). More specifically, Hunt et al. (2010) grouped CSCs under 'user-driven market interventions', as the CSCs have the particularity of putting forward "*a much wider user-driven, market-level approach: a model for the production and distribution of cannabis for adults' personal use*" (p. 346). Also Montañés and Oomen (2009) have emphasized

¹³ With regard to bulk-buying cooperatives, the case of cannabis buyers' clubs for instance in the US and in Canada – which supply cannabis to patients on the basis of a medical prescription or recommendation, is an interesting example. These Clubs have only focused on medical use of cannabis, and are not necessarily set up by users nor based on principles of collective cultivation – as is the case with CSCs, but the role of social interaction seems to be an aspect characteristic of some buyers' clubs and CCSs (Feldman & Mandel, 1998; Grinspoon, 2003; Mead, 1998; Reiman, 2008).

¹⁴ Uruguayan citizens and permanent residents in the country may alternatively opt (and register) for domestic cultivation of cannabis (up to 6 plants) or to obtain up to 40grams of cannabis per month in a licensed pharmacy (Albrecht, 2014; Kilmer, Kruihof, Pardo, Caulkins, & Rubin, 2013).

¹⁵ With exception of CSCs operating in the context of the Uruguayan regulatory framework.

the role of CSCs as user organizations that are developing “*proposals to elaborate drug policies that are based on the regulation of access to adults, establishing mechanisms to limit the access of minors*” (p. 21). We discuss the goals and activities of CSCs and other drug users’ organizations in more detail below.

4. The legacy of drug users’ (self-)organizations

The first clear example of user involvement or user self-organization can be traced back to the late 1970s-early 1980s, when the first Junkie Union was created in Rotterdam (the Netherlands) (Bennett, Jacques, & Wright, 2011; Dam, 2008; Frank, Anker, & Tammi, 2012; Friedman, Jong, & Wodak, 1993; Friedman, Schneider, & Latkin, 2012; Hunt et al., 2010). This activist group of drug users distributed information about methadone prescription programmes, organized protests and awareness events, argued against compulsory treatment, and set up an underground needle exchange initiative to help reduce the health risks for injecting drug users (Bennett et al., 2011; Efthimiou-Mordaunt, 2015; Friedman et al., 1987; Friedman et al., 2007).¹⁶ According to Friedman et al. (2007), despite the volatile nature of this and other Junkie Unions, which “*did not last long [...] due to organizational weakness and discontinuity in the efforts of members*” (p. 6), their efforts were important in promoting safer injecting practices and may have contributed to the later formal adoption by the Dutch authorities of needle exchange programmes across the country (Bennett et al., 2011). During this period and throughout the 1990s, other drug users’ organizations appeared also in the US (1985), in Australia (late 1980s), in Canada (1997), mainly as a grassroots (‘micro-social’) response to curtail HIV transmission amongst injecting drug users (Bennett et al., 2011; Friedman et al., 1987; Friedman et al., 2007; Friedman et al., 1993; Kerr et al., 2006). By 1994, such organizations could be found in 11 European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark, Slovenia, France, Belgium, Italy, Lithuania and Spain) (see also Dam, 2008; Hunt et al., 2010).¹⁷

As their presence increased, so did their scope of intervention – going beyond the initial focus on tackling the spread of HIV (Bennett et al., 2011). Other examples from user involvement include outreach initiatives by groups of users of MDMA and other ‘party drugs’, through the distribution of information about the different substances and associated risks at raves and other events, as well as facilitating crisis intervention support (Allott & Redman, 2006; Camilleri & Caldicott, 2005; Hunt et al., 2010; Weir, 2000) In some cases, these organizations have also provided on-site pill testing at these events (i.e. , to check the actual content of the pills and detect any unexpected or particularly hazardous substances) (Camilleri & Caldicott, 2005; EMCDDA, 2001). Harm reduction remains thus an important feature of drug users’

¹⁶ Also in the Nordic countries, in particular in Norway and Denmark, the first drug user initiatives were closely connected to substitution treatment for heroin users (Anker, Asmussen, Kouvonen, & Tops, 2008).

¹⁷ For an earlier overview, please see: Friedman, S. R., Jong, W. d., & Wodak, A. (1993). Community development as a response to HIV among drug injectors. *AIDS*, 7, s263-s269.

organizations work, even if “*drug users’ organisations have multiple aims, and use many methods to engage with harm reduction*” (Efthimiou-Mordaunt, 2015; Frank et al., 2012; Hunt et al., 2010, p. 348).

With regards to CSCs, their general aim is, as mentioned above, to ensure the self-organized cultivation and distribution of cannabis so that the members can have access to potentially better quality cannabis for their own personal use, at the same time reducing members’ contacts with the street market (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Marks, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015). The CSCs have also sought to promote a controlled or responsible use of cannabis, by for instance limiting the amounts of cannabis supplied (corresponding to personal use), by providing information leaflets about sensible use and contacts to prevention and treatment centres during the moments of distribution of cannabis, or by monitoring the consumption patterns of the Clubs’ members (Barriuso, 2011; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Transform, 2015). Although we are not assessing the actual merits and weaknesses of the model, and it is also not clear whether or not these goals have been met by the Clubs, it is striking that the CSCs have articulated their *raison d’être* in such terms - making, at least apparently, a commitment with reducing some of the harms associated with the supply and use of cannabis.

Generally, in terms of the key activities of users’ organizations, advocacy seems to be the main priority, according to a 2007 online survey by the International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD) and the European Correlation Network (EMCDDA, 2013a; Goossens, 2008; see also: O’Gorman, Quigley, Zobel, & Moore, 2014).¹⁸ Drug users’ organizations hope to increase the involvement of drug users in public policy discussions that affect them, bringing “*the voice of users’ into mainstream political discourse*” (Frank et al., 2012; Friedman, 1996; Kerr et al., 2006, p. 63). Other areas of interest reported include peer support, educational and awareness raising initiatives (Friedman, 1996; Goossens, 2008).

As discussed above, the main focus of CSCs remains the supply of cannabis to their members, which is not generally the most important aspect of other drug users’ organizations work. Nevertheless, the CSCs have also to some extent engaged in advocacy and lobbying efforts and seek to contribute to policy change (Decorte, 2014a, 2015). While it has been noted that some Belgian CSCs may have opted to maintain a relatively low profile, i.e., keeping the contact with the media and public authorities to a minimum, others have hosted workshops and other events, arranged meetings with local authorities, and actively sought media attention (Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Trekt Uw Plant, 2015). Also in Spain, a number of CSCs have actively sought to raise discussion around the CSC model and pushed for the introduction of a regulatory framework that can add clarity and legal certainty to the activities of the Clubs (Barriuso, 2005; Marks, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015). More broadly, user organizations’ activities aim to produce a change in terms of the perceptions of drug use and drug users and thus “*stigmatization and*

¹⁸ About 38 drug users’ organizations from 21 countries took part in the survey, including organizations from 14 European countries (Goossens, 2008).

marginalization are among the key issues addressed" (Anker et al., 2008, p. 32). We can observe efforts to produce such a change particularly in Spain, where the CSC model has been described as a 'normalizing alternative' (Barriuso, 2011) to some extent tolerated by the general population (Martínez, 2015).

Umbrella organizations and international networks have played also an important role in supporting drug users' organizations and creating platforms for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and practices (Frank et al., 2012; Grosso, 2008; Hunt et al., 2010). In the context of CSCs, a number of Federations of CSCs have sought to represent the CSCs at the regional and/or national level, promoting also the harmonization of practices among the different federated CSCs. In Spain, for example, the Federation of Cannabis Associations (FAC) was established in 2003 and has issued guidelines about the foundation and functioning of a CSC and has been active supporting the federated CSCs with legal assistance, presenting the model in several parliamentary commissions, among other activities (Barriuso, 2011; Federación de Asociaciones Cannábicas, 2014). In Belgium, in February 2015, MEDCAN was established as a national organization directed specifically towards medicinal users of cannabis, bringing together patients and doctors, and lobbying with relevant public authorities (including the Ministry of Health) (MEDCAN vzw, n.d.). At the international level, the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD) has also been an active actor (EMCDDA, 2013a; Frank et al., 2012; Hunt et al., 2010), developing a (non-binding) Code of Conduct for CSCs, gathering information about active CSCs in Europe, and engaging also in the debate around the CSC model (ENCOD, 2011, 2015a; Montañés & Oomen, 2009).

A number of barriers to the action of drug users' organizations have been identified (Hunt et al., 2010; Montañés & Oomen, 2009). It has been noted for instance that there are difficulties in generating a common vision, and in introducing democratic practices and norms (Frank et al., 2012). As a result, competition (and conflict) within and among different groups of users may arise, with *"all claiming to speak on behalf of all drug users"* (Anker et al., 2008, p. 33; Kerr et al., 2006; Montañés & Oomen, 2009). Another important weakness relates to the instability and ephemeral nature of some of these organizations: *"new organizations are founded at the same time as others are closed down"* (Anker, 2007; Anker et al., 2008p. 33, ; Frank et al., 2012; Friedman et al., 1993; Hunt et al., 2010). Lack of economic resources to maintain and further develop the organizations' activities is a significant challenge as well (Frank et al., 2012; Friedman et al., 1993; Hunt et al., 2010; Montañés & Oomen, 2009; O'Gorman et al., 2014). Some of these issues seem to have affected the CSCs too, as noted in a previous SWOT analysis by Decorte (2015). In that analysis of Belgian CSCs, the author referred to discussions within and between Clubs about several aspects (e.g., house rules, goals and vision of the Club, media strategy, etc.) that *"sometimes result in conflicts, such as the exclusion of members or groups splitting off"* (Decorte, 2015, p. 129). The Clubs' often difficult relationship with growers and their vulnerability to external pressures, including the action of law enforcement authorities and competition from other players in the field (such as drug dealers, and other criminal

entrepreneurs) may have also led to the closure of some CSCs or to the departure of some members (Decorte, 2014a, 2015).

Previous research has pointed to three key areas where drug users' organizations may have yielded positive impacts (Goossens, 2008; Hunt et al., 2010). Firstly, at the individual level, contributing towards more prudent use practices and risk reduction. As mentioned above, the reduction of risk and harms to the users has been an underlying message articulated by the CSCs, but further research is needed to understand whether and how this has been pursued, and with which effects. Secondly, drug users' organizations may produce an impact at the societal level, in terms of the social normalization of drug use,¹⁹ and finally, their activities may also contribute to a change in the types of services offered to drug users. For example, Goossens (2008) refers to an expansion of outreach interventions, and of treatment options as examples of impact in this area. The role and potential impact of CSCs in these terms still remains to be analysed – but it has for example been reported that some Belgian Clubs have occasionally made contacts with local prevention and treatment centres (Decorte, 2015). Despite some examples or proposals by the CSCs to engage in such practices, it will be important to learn more about how those are implemented, in order to understand the extent to which this model can contribute to reducing individual and societal harms, and increase the health and well-being of cannabis users. This is in line with the broader *“need for a more nuanced appreciation of the contribution of drug user involvement and organizing to harm reduction and its greater potential”* (p. 351), as suggested by Hunt et al. (2010).

5. Concluding thoughts

CSCs are an alternative model for the supply of cannabis, based on non-profit principles. The presence of the model has increased and expanded to different countries since the first collective cultivation experiment in the 1990s. However, these developments have mostly been the result of grassroots initiatives and self-regulation, as (so far) only Uruguay has legalized and introduced regulation applicable to the CSC model. Against this backdrop, given how CSCs have emerged and developed, we have discussed and contextualized the model within the broader drug user movement – and drug users' (self-) organizations more specifically. There are certainly common aspects with regards to the goals and practices of CSCs and other drug users' organizations, despite the particularity of CSCs representing a 'market-level approach' that focuses on the supply of cannabis among a closed group of users. In both cases, these are groups of users who have made collective efforts to self-organize themselves, and which as a result may have accumulated important field knowledge and an insiders understanding of the

¹⁹ Normalization is understood in that report by Goossens (2008) as “treating the phenomenon drug use as any other socio-sanitary problem that society takes care of” (p. 45). The author does not refer to the concept of normalization as put forward by Parker et al. (2002) - which encompassed 5 dimensions: availability/access, drug trying rates, use rates, *“accommodating attitudes to ‘sensible’ recreational drug use especially by non-users”*, and the *“degree of cultural accommodation of illegal drug use”*.

specific groups they are part of and seek to represent. In the case of CSCs, this suggests that the Clubs, as key developers of the model, could be important sources of knowledge about the particular aspects of the functioning of the Clubs (e.g., quantity supplied, fees applied, etc.) and their members (e.g., patterns of use, etc.). It may thus be important for the research community and policy-makers to engage with these groups and to gather first-hand insights about the model. Beyond this, and in a similar vein to the previous work of other users' organizations, the CSCs may also be able to play an important role in terms of facilitating and strengthening the contact between users and other health and harm reduction services. This is an aspect that warrants further investigation. Important lessons for the future development of the CSC model can be also drawn from the barriers faced by other actors in the drug user movement. It remains nevertheless unclear, as with some other drug users' organizations' initiatives, whether CSCs will eventually be formally recognized and regulated by the competent public authorities (i.e., following the path taken by Uruguay) or if other policy options along the policy spectrum between prohibition and full commercialization will be preferred. Further research into this area could shed light into the potential impacts of the CSC model and help informing the cannabis policy debate.

Chapter 2: Regulating Cannabis Social Clubs: a comparative analysis of legal and self-regulatory practices in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay

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²⁰ An additional comparative review, focusing on the European context can also be found in: Decorte, T., Pardal, M. (2017). Cannabis Social Clubs in Europe: prospects and limits. In: Colson, R., Bergeron, H., *European Drug Policies: the ways of reform*, 285-299. Oxford: Routledge.

Abstract

Background: Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are a model of non-profit production and distribution of cannabis among a closed circuit of adult cannabis users. CSCs are now operating in several countries around the world, albeit under very different legal regimes and in different socio-political contexts. Aim: In this paper we describe and compare the legal framework and the self-regulatory practices of Cannabis Social Clubs in three countries (Spain, Belgium, and Uruguay). The objective of our comparative analysis is to investigate how CSCs operate in each of these countries. To foster discussions about how one might regulate CSCs to promote public health objectives, we conclude this paper with a discussion on the balance between adequate governmental control and self-regulatory competences of CSCs.

Methods: The data used for this analysis stem from independently conducted local studies by the authors in their countries. Although the particular designs of the studies differ, the data in all three countries was collected through similar data collection methods: analysis of (legal and other documents), field visits to the clubs, interviews with staff members, media content analysis.

Findings: We identified a number of similarities and differences among the CSCs' practices in the three countries. Formal registration as non-profit association seems to be a common standard among CSCs. We found nevertheless great variation in terms of the size of these organisations. Generally, only adult nationals and/or residents are able to join the CSCs, upon the payment of a membership fee. While production seems to be guided by consumption estimates of the members (Spain and Belgium) or by the legal framework (Uruguay), the thresholds applied by the clubs vary significantly across countries. Quality control practices remain an issue in the three settings studied here. The CSCs have developed different arrangements with regards to the distribution of cannabis to their members.

Conclusions: By uncovering the current practices of CSCs in three key settings, this paper contributes to the understanding of the model, which has to some extent been shaped by the self-regulatory efforts of those involved on the ground. We suggest that some of these self-regulatory practices could be accommodated in future regulation in this area, while other aspects of the functioning of the CSCs may require more formal regulation and monitoring. Decisions on this model should also take into account the local context where the clubs have emerged. Finally, the integration of medical supply within this model warrants further attention.

1. Introduction

While the debate on cannabis policy has often been polarised around either total prohibition or legalisation, such positions tend to draw on an oversimplification of what ‘legalisation’ and ‘prohibition’ entails and do not capture well the range of options available (Caulkins et al., 2015a, 2015b; MacCoun, Reuter, & Schelling, 1996; MacCoun & Reuter, 2011; Transform, 2013). Caulkins et al. (2015a) identified and compared twelve broad supply models, which could be alternatives to the current prohibition regime. They referred to a range of middle ground options, including ‘locally controlled retail sales’ in line with the so-called Dutch coffee-shop model, which relies on non-enforcement against retail selling and possession (drawing on a expediency principle), under certain conditions (Korf, 2011; MacCoun, 2013; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001a; MacCoun & Reuter, 2011; Room et al., 2010). Domestic cultivation or a ‘grow your own’ model which allows users to cultivate their own cannabis has also been formally introduced or tolerated in several jurisdictions (MacCoun, 2013; MacCoun & Reuter, 2011). The introduction of a government monopoly with direct control of the supply of cannabis or the allocation of that role to a public authority are other possible avenues – with a view to reduce the involvement of for-profit firms in the market. Other middle ground options may be based on a license-system, granted for instance to a restricted number of for-profit firms.

The focus of this paper is on yet another possible middle ground option: the Cannabis Social Clubs. A Cannabis Social Club (CSC)²¹ is a legally constituted non-profit association of cannabis consumers. Cannabis Social Clubs collectively cultivate cannabis plants for their adult members, to meet their personal needs (Barriuso, 2005, 2011; Room et al., 2010). According to the ‘Code of Conduct’ of the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD, 2011), Cannabis Social Clubs are a model initiated by cannabis users, *“to prevent cannabis consumers from being involved in illegal activities and assures that certain requirements concerning public health and safety are being fulfilled. Cannabis Social Clubs (CSC) are registered, non-profit associations that are formed by adult people who consume cannabis. They can be set up legally in any country where cultivation of personal amounts of cannabis has been decriminalised. In countries where this is not yet the case, CSC’s can operate as an experiment in order to prepare for the moment when the laws on cannabis cultivation for personal use will change”*. The definition proposed by ENCOD underlines that transparency, democracy and non-profitability are essential characteristics of the model, and points at its potential for harm reduction: *“Cannabis Social Clubs apply an active policy of prevention of harms and risks and promotion of safer methods of consumption of cannabis by its members”* (see also: Belackova, Tomkova, & Zabransky, 2016).

Although CSCs can be found in many countries, the label often covers very different empirical realities. In fact, they have emerged as part of bottom-up (grassroots) initiatives (in Spain and Belgium, and several European countries), but they have also been part of top-bottom policies

²¹ The terms ‘club’, ‘organisation’ or ‘association’ are used interchangeably to refer to Cannabis Social Clubs throughout the paper.

(as in Uruguay). Uruguay has adopted a legal framework for CSCs since December 2013. In the absence of a clear legal framework in European countries (such as Belgium and Spain), these organisations continue to operate at best in a grey zone (as discussed below). Many of such clubs chose to self-regulate and adhere to the five main principles as laid out in the above mentioned 'Code of Conduct': supply should follow demand, the CSCs should be non-profit, transparent, health-oriented and open to dialogue with authorities. However, other CSCs have adopted practices that diverge from those principles (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte, 2015).

Any discussion of possible regulatory approaches starts with a clarification of the main objectives of regulation. In this paper we explicitly adopt a public health perspective: we assume that the debate about whether and how Cannabis Social Clubs should be regulated, should primarily seek to fulfil public health objectives: minimizing access, availability, and use by youths; minimizing drugged driving; minimizing dependence and addiction; minimizing consumption of cannabis products with unwanted contaminants and uncertain potency, and minimizing concurrent use of cannabis and alcohol, particularly in public settings (Pacula, Kilmer, Wagenaar, Chaloupka, & Caulkins, 2014). Our starting point is that any regulatory approach of CSCs should help to ensure their transparent and safe way of working, and to constitute a healthier alternative for the illicit market, enabling CSCs to apply an active policy of prevention of harms and risks and promotion of safer methods of consumption of cannabis by its members (Ritter, 2010).

In this paper we aim to describe and compare the legal frameworks and (self-) regulatory practices of CSCs in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay (see also: Pardo, 2014). We use the normative definition put forward by the cannabis movement (in this case, ENCOD) as a starting point. Aspects included in our comparative analysis are the domestic legal framework, the establishment procedures or practices, the characteristics of the formal organisation and management of the clubs, and their cannabis cultivation and distribution procedures. The objective of our comparative analysis is to investigate how CSCs operate in each of these countries, taking into account both the legal framework and the self-regulatory practices. To foster discussions about how one might regulate CSCs from a public health perspective, we conclude this paper with a discussion on the balance between adequate governmental control and self-regulatory competences of CSCs.

Spanish cannabis activists established the first cannabis associations in the early nineties,²² and in the first decade of the 21st century the number of Cannabis Social Clubs increased in a linear fashion, with the model spreading throughout Spain (Parés & Bouso, 2015). While no official source has, to our knowledge, information on the exact amount of operating CSCs in Spain, based on previous estimates (e.g., Muñoz Sánchez, 2015), informal sources and expert interviews we estimate that there may be between 800 and 1.000 CSCs currently open and

²² The first known association of this type was ARSEC ("Asociacion Ramon Santos de Estudios del Cannabis") which was established in 1991, adopting the designation of 'association for the study of cannabis' (Marín, 2008).

distributing cannabis and other cannabis derivatives (January 2016).²³ Catalonia and the Basque Country are the autonomous regions where CSC presence is more extended. The Spanish model soon began being introduced by activists in other European countries, in particular Belgium, but also in the United Kingdom, and even in France (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014) – although little is known about the functioning of CSCs in the two latter countries. In Belgium, a first mapping by Decorte (2015) pointed to the existence of five CSCs active as of February 2014. While some of those clubs have meanwhile ceased their activities, new CSCs have emerged. An ongoing study by Pardal (forthcoming) has, at the time of writing, identified seven active CSCs. In Uruguay Cannabis Social Clubs are now allowed under the new cannabis law approved in December 2013 (Montañés, 2014). In Uruguay, at November 2016, there are 27 CSCs that fully comply with the regulations and therefore are completely legal. Other clubs are currently undergoing the process of formalisation before the governmental cannabis regulation body, i.e. the Institute for the Regulation and Control of Cannabis (hereinafter IRCCA). There might also be other clubs operating by-passing the regulation entirely, but it is virtually impossible to determine their number.

The data used for this analysis stem from independently conducted local studies by the authors in their respective countries, with different research designs. Therefore, data were not collected through identical data collection methods. The data on the Spanish CSCs (collected by co-authors Sanchez and Pares) are based on an analysis of the multiple regulatory proposals recently developed in Spain, a review of the literature, interviews with relevant political and social representatives, media content analysis and the monitoring of the recent CSCs evolution – conducted since January 2014. Beyond regular conversations in the context of that monitoring fieldwork, the authors conducted 10 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with directors of CSCs in Catalonia between March to December 2015. The data on the Belgian CSCs (collected by co-authors Decorte and Pardal) are based on an exploratory study conducted by Decorte circa 2014 (Decorte, 2015), based on a review of the international literature, of the internal documentation and media reports on the Belgian CSCs, as well as on face-to-face interviews with the directors of the five CSCs operating at the time, and field visits to those clubs (see also Decorte, 2015). These data have been complemented with additional desk research in the context of an ongoing study by Pardal (forthcoming). The data on the Uruguayan CSCs (collected by co-authors Boidi and Queirolo) are based on a series of eight interviews (seven of them face-to-face and one by phone) with CSCs members and authorities and on documentary research (see also: Queirolo et al., 2016). Data were collected from March to August 2015. Despite CSCs being legal in Uruguay, there is no public directory that allows one to directly reach them. In order to gain access to as many clubs as possible, the Uruguayan team followed different strategies: personal networks, existing bonds with pro-cannabis regulation activists, references from other clubs, and previous contacts with frequent cannabis consumers that were made during a previous study (Queirolo et al., 2015). A standardised

²³ In addition, we have also consulted the national registry of legal associations and identified nearly 1000 registered CSCs so this estimate seems plausible.

questionnaire was used in the interviews, based on the instrument developed by Decorte (2015).

2. The domestic legal framework for CSCs: the case of Spain, Belgium and Uruguay

In order to better understand some of the characteristics the clubs have adopted in these three different countries, which we turn to in Section: The CSC model, it is important to consider the specific the legal context in which they have emerged and developed to date. In Spain there is no nation-wide regulation applicable to the activities of the CSCs. Nevertheless, the Spanish drug regulatory framework has several peculiarities that have allowed the emergence and development of the CSC model in the country (Marín, 2008) (although jurisprudence has recently pointed in a different direction). The CSCs have based their activities on two legal arguments: (1) that personal and private drug use has no criminal relevance within the Spanish legal system, and (2) the so-called 'shared consumption doctrine' developed by the Supreme Court (Barriuso, 2011; Díez & Muñoz, 2013). The use and possession of cannabis (as with the rest of controlled substances) is not punishable under Spanish criminal law (in the case of possession, as long as it is intended for personal consumption).²⁴ It is the commercialisation of those substances that effectively constitutes a criminal offence, according to article 368 of the Spanish Criminal Code. The CSCs thus have built on these premises to produce cannabis that is distributed on a non-profit basis among a closed circuit of adult users. While a number of autonomous regions and municipalities have sought to introduce guidelines or local regulation of certain aspects of the activities of these organisation, no legislative change has been introduced at the national level (Parlamento de Navarra, 2014; Parlamento Vasco, 2014; X, 2015; Generalitat de Catalunya Departament de Salut, 2015; Reyerer & Carra, 2014).

The CSC model has also not been object of regulation to date in Belgium (Decorte et al., 2013). In fact, there is some uncertainty as to the legality of the activities of the clubs operating in the country, as these have been exploring the flexibility and ambiguity within the domestic drugs legislation (Decorte et al., 2014b; Gelders & Vander Laenen, 2007; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016a). In Belgium, the possession, cultivation and trade of cannabis is prohibited (1921 Law on Narcotic Drugs). Nevertheless, a 2005 Ministerial Guideline attributed the lowest priority for prosecution to the possession of cannabis under specific circumstances. Accordingly, an 'user amount' of up to 3 g or one cannabis plant may be tolerated (i.e., receive the lowest priority for prosecution), where this possession does not result in disturbance to the public order and in the absence of aggravating circumstances.²⁵ The Belgian CSCs have argued that they are

²⁴ Under the Organic Law 4/2015 on the Protection of Public Security, drug use and possession in public places, are punishable with fines that might range from 600 to 30.000s, even if not intended for traffic.

²⁵ The possession of cannabis in prison, in youth protection institutes, in educational centres and surrounding area, or the blatant possession of cannabis in a public space are examples of situations that are understood to disturb the public order (Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013). The possession of cannabis in the presence of minors, the involvement of a criminal organisation or causing harm/death to another individual constitute aggravating circumstances (Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013).

operating within the limits established by that Ministerial Guideline by cultivating one plant per member and that therefore their activities should receive the lowest priority for prosecution. However, the application of the Ministerial Guideline to the clubs' collective cultivation remains disputed.

Cannabis clubs are legal and completely regulated by the government in Uruguay. They are one of the three ways in which the Cannabis Law (Law 19,172) regulating the production, distribution and consumption of cannabis allows nationals who are at least 18 years old to obtain cannabis. The CSCs need to go through a series of steps to be granted authorisation to operate by the Institute for the Regulation and Control of Cannabis (IRCCA), which is the government institution overseeing all (legal) cannabis operations in the country. The clubs must first constitute a non-profit organisation (stating as its sole purpose the cultivation and distribution of cannabis among its members), and complete the mandatory registry with the Registry Office at the Ministry of Education and Culture (i.e., the government body that keeps record of non-profits of all sorts). Once the Ministry of Education approves the registry, the clubs must register with IRCCA (2014), which will ultimately approve the club opening after inspecting their premises and crop plan. In comparison with the other two cases under study in this article, only Uruguayan CSCs follow such an authorisation procedure.

3. The CSC model: self-regulatory practices in Spain and Belgium, and legislative requirements in Uruguay

In the following sections we describe the known practices of CSCs in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay. We address both the supply cycle of the clubs, from the recruitment of growers to the distribution of cannabis to the members, as well as the internal structure, organisation, and house-rules of the CSCs in the three contexts.

The establishment of a CSC

Spain

The path of creation and development of a CSC generally follows a set of steps. It begins with the CSC foundation and recording in the national/regional registry of associations, a requirement that any other association must fulfil (minimum 3 people involved). The CSCs formally adopt a non-profit status, and the clubs' bylaws explicitly include the shared cultivation and distribution of cannabis among their members as one of the association's goals. The next step is the approval of a collective cultivation agreement by its members. As there is no specific formal regulation for CSCs in Spain, as explained above, there are no nation-wide criteria with regards to the CSCs locations. With that said, a few city councils (mainly in Catalonia) have developed municipal ordinances that do regulate some aspects of the CSC model, including the distance among the various clubs, as well as between CSCs and education and health facilities.

The criteria used by the different municipal ordinances are not homogeneous, and the distances requested differ: for instance, from 1 km to 100 m, in the case of the distance imposed between CSCs.

Talking about a “*Spanish CSC model*” is thorny. In a context of legal uncertainty and in the absence of a specific and comprehensive regulation, multiple versions of the model have emerged and coexist. Reliable data and empirical studies on this/these realities are also missing. Over the years, several CSC leaders and activists have formed CSC federations, and developed good practice codes and self-regulation initiatives (Arana, 2013; CATFAC, 2014; FEDCAC, 2013). There are at least 12 regional CSCs’ federations in Spain. It is difficult to estimate the proportion of active CSCs that are federated, but those seem to be a minority. The autonomous region most known by the authors, Catalonia, has two CSC federations which gather around 25 CSCs each – this while the estimated total number of clubs in that region is at about 400. Some of the guidelines issued by the CSC federations, including those of Federació d’Associacions de Cànnabis de Catalunya, the Basque Institute of Criminology and Federació d’Associacions Cannàbiques Autoregulades de Catalunya (Arana, 2013; FEDCAC, 2013; CATFAC, 2014) address aspects such as the maximum total number of members per club (e.g., according to the most restrictive guidelines that would correspond to 650 members), the maximum quantity of cannabis distributed monthly to each member (e.g., between 60 and 90 g, approximately), including a residence criterion for membership of the clubs (e.g., in some cases, members must be current residents in the city where the clubs are based; in others, membership is open to residents of the Schengen area,²⁶ with a waiting period of two weeks, in order to avoid tourists), and defining protocols for cannabis transportation, and security. Despite those efforts, the lack of regulation has also fostered opportunism and excess, such as CSC promotion among tourists, the sale of cannabis beyond the typical CSC practices, or the neglect of good relations with the community. Disputes among CSC leaders about some of those practices have sometimes occurred too.

Belgium

In Belgium, CSCs have tended to register as non-profit associations in the national registry of associations. While this is of course not a mandatory requirement, all the five CSCs identified by Decorte (2015) had been formalised as such. Ongoing research by Pardal (forthcoming) has confirmed this tendency also with the more recent CSCs. The clubs are generally founded by at least three individuals who constitute the ‘board of directors’ of the club (e.g., President, treasurer, secretary). In their bylaws, the CSCs generally make explicit reference to the goals and key activities of the association, including the cultivation and distribution of cannabis among their members. No particular formal rules with regards to the location of the CSCs are

²⁶ The Schengen Area is the area composed of 26 European states that have officially abolished passport and any other type of border control at their mutual borders. The area mostly functions as a single country for international travel purposes with a common visa policy. The area is named after the Schengen Agreement. States in the Schengen Area have eliminated border controls with the other Schengen members and strengthened border controls with non-Schengen countries.

applied in the Belgian context. While circa February 2014 most clubs reported officially renting buildings or parts of buildings for the official seat of the organisations (Decorte, 2015), at the time of writing, we encounter a different picture. We found that all but one CSC has its own separate premises Pardal (forthcoming). The remaining clubs operate from the personal address of one of the directors, or rent a location for specific gatherings and activities of the clubs (e.g., internal meetings, cannabis distribution moments). In the absence of legislation or regulation specifically applicable to the CSC model (see Section The domestic legal framework for CSCs), the development of working practices and rules has mainly been shaped by those involved in the management of the CSCs (Pardal, 2016). To date, no federation of CSCs has been created in Belgium, but there have been plans to do so in the future (Decorte, 2015). Most Belgian CSCs are also members of ENCOD.

Uruguay

Uruguayan regulation requires each CSC to first register as a non-profit organisation, for which it needs to comply with an extensive list of legal requirements. For instance, the club needs to select a name which must include the expression 'cannabis club' in it, and it must also provide a valid address. The non-profit organisation must be established by a foundational assembly constituted by at least 15 (and no more than 45) members. That assembly appoints the management structure of the CSC: the Board and the Auditing Committee. All the proceedings from the foundational assembly must be registered in the club's official record books and certified by a public notary. The notary certification, together with the club's original record books and proof of address must be submitted to the Registry Office at the Ministry of Education.

Only once the Registry Office approves the application and grants the club the status of legally registered non-profit, the CSC can apply for registration before the IRCCA. The registry with IRCCA does not actually take place at IRCCA offices, but rather it begins at the Uruguayan Postal Service, where the CSC authorities must submit all the documentation and certification granted by the Ministry of Education, together with their 'Crop Plan' describing the technical and safety features of the plantation, as well as a description of the club premises and security measures. Due to their widespread presence throughout the territory, the Postal Services offices were chosen by the government as the go to spot for cannabis registration: cannabis growers must also register there. The Postal Office serves only as a more accessible entry point for the registry, but it is actually IRCCA who will receive and analyse the submitted application, and grant the authorisation to operate upon inspection of the club premises.

Cannabis clubs are just becoming official, with only two of them having received complete approval to date (March 2016). By law, a federation must be constituted by several organisations (at least 3). Since most Uruguayan CSCs have not completed the process of becoming formal organisations, therefore they cannot form a federation (yet). However, there is a cooperative spirit among those involved, and members of some cannabis clubs are grouped under the Federation of Cannabis Growers. This federation reunites self-growers, members of

CSCs and representatives of NGO's working in risk reduction. The federation representatives are in touch with government officials and they claim to inform the cannabis policy implementation process (X, 2014). The operation of the clubs is heavily regulated by law, leaving little space for self-regulatory practices. For instance, CSCs cannot be located within 150 m of education or addiction treatment centres, and they must be at least 1.000 m away from other cannabis clubs' headquarters.

House-rules and internal organisation of a CSC

Spain

Generally, the clubs have adopted several membership requirements: the candidate members need to complete and sign a membership form; they are also asked to declare being over 18 years old (and in some cases, over 21), and being a regular cannabis user. The application must be supported by a person who is already a member of that association. There is no actual restriction to becoming a member of more than one CSC. Most of these members use cannabis for recreational purposes. Medical cannabis users have also sought to join CSCs. While there is no specific requirement for one to enrol as a medical user of a CSC (for instance, no special accreditation from a doctor is requested), it is common that medical users present a medical certificate including their clinical history or showing that they suffer from one of the pathologies recognised by the International Association for Cannabinoid Medicines (IACM). It is also a common practice for CSCs to grant the medical members a discount on the cannabis price or to allow them to receive larger amounts of cannabis than recreational users (if necessary). To our knowledge, there are very few clubs who admit only medical cannabis users. Generally, Spanish law does not impose any limit of members to associations in Spain. This helps explain why nowadays there are CSCs in the country with more than several thousand members (Mumbrú, 2015). As mentioned above, some of the good practice codes recommend a maximum number of 650 members (Arana, 2013; FEDCAC, 2013; CATFAC, 2014).

In general, CSCs do not admit non-residents, although it is well known that some of them (e.g. in Barcelona) advertise among tourists (ABC, 2014). There is usually an annual fee that ranges between 10–30 euros, although some clubs do not charge any fee. Most CSCs allow their members to consume inside the premises of the clubs. While it seems that the CSCs may have adopted different practices with regards to opening hours, or the consumption of alcohol within the clubs' premises, more research is needed to shed light into these aspects. Advertisement or promotion of cannabis consumption is explicitly prohibited by the Spanish Criminal Code. Most CSCs do not have a dedicated website, and in the cases where they do, the contents of such webpages tend to be limited to information about the name, location and contact details of the club. Some of the CSCs use social networks like Facebook or Twitter for activism purposes, sharing information about the detention of staff members, trials, or about policy developments. In some cases, the clubs keep only internal communication with their members, for instance through an internal mailing list or newsletter, using WhatsApp groups,

or through closed groups on Facebook. Other clubs do not maintain such (online) lines of communication with their members.

Belgium

Membership of a CSC in Belgium is open to adult users (at least 18 years old) of cannabis (recreational and/or medical) residing in Belgium Pardal (forthcoming). Some Belgian CSCs have limited membership to users who are at least 21 years old (Decorte, 2015). The admission process includes the completion of a membership form, where candidate members are asked to confirm that they are cannabis users (prior to joining the CSC), and declare that they are aware of the applicable drugs legislation in Belgium and that they are voluntarily applying to join the CSC (Decorte, 2015). The candidate members are also invited for an intake interview, where a representative(s) of the board of direction provides information about the functioning of the club, and discusses the patterns of cannabis use of the candidate members. CSC membership is only possible for one club at a time – although the Belgian CSCs acknowledge that this exclusivity criterion is difficult to implement in practice Pardal (forthcoming). New members are informed that the sale of all or part of the cannabis received through the club to non-members would violate the club regulations, and would thus lead to the exclusion from the CSC. All the Belgian CSCs admit medical users of cannabis as well (Decorte, 2015). In 2015, two new clubs were established in Belgium that focus exclusively on the supply of cannabis for medical users (Pardal, forthcoming). Specific requirements as to the membership of medical users vary among clubs. In some cases, the clubs request a medical prescription and/or a medical file which support the use of cannabis in the treatment of a specific medical condition. During the intake interview, these issues are also discussed. One of the larger clubs organises a separate intake interview for candidate members who use cannabis for medical reasons. Some clubs (including one of the new medical CSCs) organises also regular follow up sessions with their medical users (Pardal, forthcoming).

The CSCs tend to define a minimum of three members, but no maximum limit has been established so far. The actual number of members varies per club, with smaller clubs gathering over 10 members, and the largest one counting with 237 members (circa February 2014) (Decorte, 2015). Most clubs tend to have a waiting list of candidate members, and thus these CSCs are likely to increase size. Circa February 2014, the active CSCs in Belgium requested an annual membership fee of 25s (Decorte, 2015). CSCs members who also contributed to the cultivation process were in some cases granted a reduction of their membership fee. Only members and accompanying adults are allowed to enter the premises of the CSCs. According to Belgian law, providing a location for the consumption of prohibited substances constitutes a punishable offence, and thus it is perhaps unsurprising that the official policy of most CSCs does not allow for the consumption of cannabis inside the premises of the clubs. It should be noted though that there may be differences between smaller and larger clubs, in that the former may allow for the shared consumption of cannabis at a members' private house for instance (Decorte, 2015). It is not clear whether such practices are presently taking place. Typically, the Belgian CSCs have websites where the purpose of the organisation is outlined, including

references to the cultivation and distribution of cannabis, and other information (e.g., membership form, CSC by-laws, etc.) is publicly made available (Decorte, 2015). The clubs also keep communication with their members through social network platforms (such as Facebook) and through mailing lists.

Uruguay

The Uruguayan cannabis law is very restrictive in terms of access to the substance. Membership of CSCs in Uruguay is open to nationals with 18 years or more, and all users must be registered with IRCCA in order to legally obtain cannabis. There are three ways of acquiring cannabis: self-grown, through CSCs and by purchase in pharmacies. These three ways of access are mutually exclusive: individuals registered as self-growers cannot become members of CSCs nor become registered for purchasing at pharmacies. Likewise, individuals cannot belong to more than one CSC at a time. The IRCCA keeps record of all registered users in order to prevent individuals from registering under more than one form of access or in more than once CSC. The main objective of this feature of the cannabis policy is to cap consumption of cannabis, currently set at a maximum of 40 g per individual per month. Admission processes are not well defined, but trust and recommendations are the two main criteria mentioned for the admission of new members. In most CSCs, a candidate member must be introduced by an existing member. As a result, CSC membership in Uruguay is essentially composed by friends or relatives. Some clubs have medical members, but these are just a few individuals in only a couple of clubs. The regulation of the cannabis market was mainly devised for recreational cannabis, and it is only recently that the protocols for medical cannabis have started being developed. To our knowledge, there are no clubs specialised in medical cannabis, although some of them cultivate strains and (illegally) produce by-products (such as tinctures) for medical purposes.

The law establishes a minimum ($n = 15$) and a maximum ($n = 45$) number of club members, as well as a maximum of flowered plants allowed in the club premises at any given time (i.e., 99 plants). The regulation also establishes a maximum amount of cannabis per club member (480 g per member/year) and the mandatory disposition of any remaining produce. Fees vary significantly depending on the club, from 26 to 92 US dollars monthly, a price that guarantees access to 40 g of cannabis per month (prices in August 2015). In several clubs fees are fixed and mandatory, but in others members pay differential fees depending on the amount of cannabis they receive. In some clubs fees can be reduced based on members workload for the club. Consumption is allowed in CSCs facilities, and interviewees declare that while that is a frequent practice, the clubs do not really have a policy or rules guiding the consumption in the premises of the CSC. Consumption in the CSCs happens mostly when Clubs organise parties and meetings to test the product; when that is not the case, most consumers choose to take the product home. Club representatives were unable to reliably estimate the number of members who consume in the premises nor the frequency with which they do it. However, the general impression they convey is that the Uruguayan CSCs are primarily sought for obtaining cannabis, and the possibility of consuming it in the premises is not one of the most valued features of the clubs. There are no clear rules about consumption of other substances in the premises of the

clubs, but it is clear from the interviews that consumption of alcohol is allowed, at least during parties.

The clubs' activities are promoted among members by email, Facebook or the free instant messaging application WhatsApp, which is very popular in Uruguay. By regulation, advertising of club activities to non-members is not allowed. It is also prohibited to advertise or promote the activities of the club on facades or in any other public spaces. None of the clubs surveyed owns a website, but two of them have Facebook accounts. Of those, only one is a public Facebook profile and it is not devoted to the specific activities of the club but rather to raise awareness about cannabis consumption in general and the Uruguayan regulation in particular.

Management of a CSC

Spain

By law, Spanish associations should have a democratic, horizontal management structure, according to which all the important decisions are to be taken at general assembly meetings. The associations should also organise at least one general assembly meeting per year. While these practices were followed by the first CSCs (constituted until 2010), since then new actors have emerged and those criteria have had a more relaxed interpretation. Nowadays, there is thus a wide range of views with regards to the management of CSCs. For instance, it is quite common that the CSCs are managed by a small group of people, and that the annual general assembly is not really the place where important decisions are discussed. In those cases, the group of CSC managers tend to be the one who initially (financially) invested in the setup of the CSC. Most clubs hire paid staff who work on the various activities of the clubs, ranging from cultivation, transportation and distribution tasks, to the day-to-day maintenance of the CSCs (e.g., cleaning, security and entrance control). Approximately, a CSC with 700 members tends to employ 10 staff members.

While all CSCs are registered as non-profit associations in the official registry of associations, there have been several cases of malpractices and lack of transparency regarding the real make of profit, especially during the period of expansion of the model. This has been the root of some tension between the representatives of clubs that try to work on a non-profit basis, and employ a more horizontal decision-making structure, and the representatives of other clubs which do not necessarily adhere to such practices. Again, while some CSCs follow the good practice codes promoted by the federations of CSCs (FEDCAC, 2013; Arana, 2013; CATFAC, 2014), most apply their own rules.

Belgium

While the administration of the Belgian CSCs has been described as democratic, the extent to which members participate in the decision-making process of these clubs may vary across clubs. Formally, all clubs appoint a board of directors, which should report to the general

assembly of members at least once a year. In previous research we have found that smaller clubs tended to concentrate the administrative, organisational and financial management work on a few founding members, while the largest and oldest club was able to allocate certain tasks to specific working groups within the club (Decorte, 2015). The CSCs have in most cases relied on the assistance of volunteer members, and generally do not hire paid staff to assist with administrative tasks and/or the cultivation process, with exception of the larger club which has contracted staff. The growers, as described in Section Cannabis cultivation within a CSC are usually compensated for their labour by the CSCs.

The clubs have reported operating on a non-profit basis, in accordance to the by-laws of the organisations, with any financial gains being reinvested in the clubs to support the organisation's activities (e.g., lobbying efforts, social activities, medical and legal consultancy fees, etc.) (Decorte, 2015). To date, there has been one known case of a CSC which arguably misused its non-profit status (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 11 December 2015). Nevertheless, some of the CSCs have voiced concern about the possible emergence of 'shadow clubs' oriented by other (for-profit) principles (Pardal, forthcoming; Decorte, 2015).

Uruguay

According to the law, Uruguayan CSCs must have a board of directors that executes the guidelines provided by the general assembly of members, which must reunite with certain periodicity. In reality, the general assembly of members rarely meets (with the exception of the first foundational assembly where the protocol is signed), and there are only a few club members involved in the club's daily activities. These highly involved members might or might not be part of the board of directors. The majority of the members only gather to collect their share of cannabis when it is available. This is a case of strict regulation that has not (yet) been met by equally strict control and enforcement – it does not however represent a major challenge for policy implementation. The bigger issue at stake here is diminished participation which posits burdens that are practical – not legal – to the clubs daily operation.

Most clubs surveyed do not have paid personnel, and therefore the workload is shared among the most committed members (which in some cases are waived their membership fees in exchange for their service). Exceptionally, clubs may call all members to collaborate in key activities such as during the harvest period. The clubs that have paid personnel count with a gardener and an administrative staffer. In those cases, they are the ones responsible for the CSC daily functioning. The general assembly of members is called when a major change must be discussed (e.g., moving the club premises) or once a year for the mandatory accountability meeting. By definition, Uruguayan CSCs are non-profit organisations, as they are constituted as civic associations, not as business entities. None of the club representatives we interviewed expressed intention to make profit from the clubs' activities.

Cannabis cultivation within a CSC

Spain

The CSC rents or buys everything needed for growing and harvest, including land, buildings and equipment. The quantity that should be cultivated is estimated with basis on the predicted amount consumed by each member per month. In Spain, when a new member joins a CSC, he/she has to indicate a quantity of cannabis that he/she normally consumes during one month. The total amount of plants harvested is calculated with basis on these individual estimates in order to provide sufficient cannabis to the members. As some CSC have more than 5.000 members, it is perhaps unsurprising that some CSCs may have vast plantations sites, with more than 1.000 plants. The majority of the CSCs grow the cannabis in hidden venues, with high security controls. While some of the CSCs' growers are members of the club, others are formally hired as gardeners (which is the official legal figure). However, in practice there may be some flexibility in terms of the formalities with growers. The crops and the transport of the cannabis remain an aspect of CSCs' work which is the most vulnerable to police intervention. It should be noted that not all the CSCs grow their own cannabis at all times, as the CSCs base their activities on the 'shared consumption doctrine' (discussed in Section The domestic legal framework for CSCs) which leaves the users unpunished under certain circumstances, regardless of the way the substance (cannabis, in this case) is obtained. In some cases the clubs buy the cannabis in the illicit market. Those CSCs and their lawyers have claimed that such practice does not constitute a legal offence as no profit is generated from the initial purchase and distribution of cannabis among the associate members. More information about the number of clubs engaging in such practice is not available. Every CSC has its own chart of cannabis products, with dozens of strains, many types of cannabis derivatives, extractions, edibles, etc. The CSC main product remains herbal cannabis, either from indoor or outdoor cultivation. However, in some cases the clubs also produce cannabis resin (mainly hashish, but also other resins – extractions with butane gas and/or other dissolvent, reportedly containing a THC concentration of 80 or 90%). The clubs increasingly prepare other cannabis products such as alcohols, creams, oils, tinctures or sweets, fostering alternative methods of use. Most clubs offer vaporizers as well. Regarding the quality control processes of the clubs, a few CSCs test their cannabis in specialised labs, but the majority of them do not (see also: Belackova et al., 2016). The CSCs analysing their products usually test the percentage of cannabinoids, the presence of additives and contaminants, as well as other microbiological tests.

Belgium

In Belgium, each plant grown by the CSC has an individual record, a so-called 'grow card', indicating its ownership by one of the members of the club (Decorte, 2015). The cultivation of cannabis has been organised in different ways by the Belgian CSCs, with some opting for synchronous production (i.e., growing all the plants at one time and distributing the harvest among the members every 3 months for instance) and others cultivating the cannabis asynchronously, in order to being able to provide (smaller amounts of) cannabis on a more

frequent basis. The Belgian CSCs report cultivating a number of plants corresponding to the number of members (i.e., one plant per member), which relates to the legal framework in which the CSCs operate in Belgium, as discussed in the Section: The domestic legal framework for CSCs. The cultivation of cannabis by the CSCs is generally a task for which some of the clubs' members volunteer. The growers are thus members of the CSCs, and are generally compensated for their activity as growers. The clubs tend to draft a protocol and/or contract with their growers, defining for instance the number of plants to be grown per cultivation site and per m², the minimum conditions for each cultivation site (e.g., cultivation site must be a private and enclosed space, not accessible to third parties or minor), or the growing process (e.g., organic cultivation, technical equipment to be checked by the club) (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, forthcoming). Growers are not allowed to grow cannabis for others, but may grow one plant for their own personal use.

Circa February 2014, all the CSCs were growing cannabis indoors, and kept several small cultivation sites (Decorte, 2015). Key reasons for dispersing production across different sites include reducing the risk of shortage due to plant disease or theft, and minimizing potential law enforcement and judicial impacts, as according to the classification used by the Belgian police, plantations containing up to 49 plants are seen as 'micro-plantations' or 'mini-plantations' (Decorte, 2015). The clubs' decisions on which strains of cannabis are cultivated are based on growers' and members' preferences. The Belgian clubs focus on the production of herbal cannabis, but in some instances (mainly involving medical users) the CSCs provide also information about how to prepare other cannabis-based products to their members (e.g., cookies, tea, oil). The CSCs tend to produce several strains of cannabis. A few of the active clubs offer also vaporizers at wholesale prices (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, forthcoming). The clubs have reported experiencing problems with growers in several occasions. Thefts, non-adherence to the production protocol, low quality cannabis, have been some of the issues mentioned by the CSCs with regards to their relation with growers (Decorte, 2015). Most clubs use somewhat rudimentary quality control mechanisms, but would like to introduce more standardised quality control practices. Generally, a representative from the CSC visits and inspects the cultivation sites at different points in time during the growing process (Decorte, 2015).

Uruguay

CSCs are allowed to cultivate up to 99 flowering plants at a time according to Uruguayan law. This threshold relates to an estimate of how many plants may be necessary to produce up to 40 g for each of the 45 members that a club is authorised to have. However, interviewees from most clubs declared that they have fewer plants than that. Clubs decide on their cannabis production based on the number of members: they all target to produce enough cannabis to supply 40 g per member per month, which is the maximum amount allowed by law. The regulation also establishes a mandatory disposition of any remaining produce. In all the clubs surveyed the gardener is a member of the club. In some cases this person receives a small salary for the job (but it is unclear whether the gardener is in fact registered for social security, following all the official formalities).

Most CSCs in Uruguay combine indoor and outdoor cultivation. Indoor cultivation is mainly used during winter, and outdoor during the summer. The clubs prefer to combine both to minimize the risk of a drought period, a plague or simply a bad harvest. Most clubs are still quite inexperienced in cannabis cultivation and therefore their productivity varies a lot: from 50 to 200 g per plant in indoors facilities, and from 350 g to 3 kg for outdoor cultivation. The Uruguayan law only allows clubs to produce cannabis, not derivatives. The clubs decide what to plant either based on their members' expressed preferences (for the most sophisticated and well-organised clubs) or on whatever seeds or strains they have available (e.g., from the members own self-grown plants, or from seed banks). Most surveyed clubs report having only a few strains (between 5–8), while others – again, the well-organised ones – report having 15 or even more than 20 strains. Two of the clubs surveyed organise tasting events where members get to try and evaluate the products. In those cases, the next plantation is decided based on the members preferences expressed during those tastings events. Despite one of the stated advantages of being a CSC member usually is knowing the characteristics of the consumed cannabis, there is little knowledge to date about the levels of THC and CBD among the Uruguayan CSCs. Only a few clubs have sent their plants to be tested, and members are only aware about the information that the seed banks provide. Even members that consume cannabis for medical purposes do not have information about the cannabis they are using.

Cannabis distribution within a CSC

Spain

Members can generally collect cannabis from the CSCs at any given moment during the opening hours of the club, without the need for a prior request or notice. The CSCs allow the provision of a range between 60 to 90 g per member, per month. Most of them allow 90 g/month, which corresponds to 3 g/day for each member. Exceptions for medical users in need of a higher amount of cannabis may be permitted in some cases. The CSCs' members pay a proportionate fee depending on the quantity they collect at each withdrawal. The fees are used to cover CSC production costs, storage and management. Being non-profit organisations, all economic revenues are reinvested in the associations (Barriuso, 2011), although there actually have been multiple cases of misconduct in which the clubs have actually generated revenues. The price per gram varies significantly, from 4.50 to 15 Euros per gram. The extractions are more expensive, from 15 to 80 Euros per gram. Only a few clubs, most of which are part of a CSC federation, provide additional information about the cannabis being distributed or cannabis use in general.

Belgium

The distribution of cannabis to the CSCs' members mainly takes place in bulk, at so-called 'exchange fairs'. Depending on the production cycles, CSCs organise exchange fairs every 4–6 weeks (asynchronous production) or every 2–3 months (synchronous production) (Decorte,

2015). CSCs supplying medical users have in some cases adopted different distribution practices, to ensure a more regular supply and/or facilitate distribution for those users who are not able to travel to the clubs' distribution points (Pardal, forthcoming). The Belgian CSCs impose different limits with regards to the quantity of cannabis supplied (varying from 10 g to 30 g per month). Additionally, some clubs have introduced a different (i.e., higher) threshold for their medical members. Members contribute to the production, storage and administrative costs by paying a fee of 5–8s per gram of cannabis received (Decorte, 2015). Some of the Belgian CSCs distribute information about the type of cannabis supplied (genetic composition, physical and mental effects, description of odour, reviews from members, etc.) as well as the house-rules (Decorte, 2015). Additionally, information about sensible use of cannabis and treatment centres are provided by some of the clubs.

Uruguay

The law establishes a maximum amount of cannabis per club member (480 g per member/year). Under the Uruguayan model, clubs do not charge members per gram of cannabis; they charge a fixed monthly membership fee which grants individuals access to up to 40 g of cannabis per month. Among the clubs surveyed for this study, only one does not collect monthly fees but charges members per gram, at a price of around USD2 per gram of cannabis (for a maximum of 40 g per month). In other words, no matter how much you use, you pay the same in the majority of CSCs. This is a procedure that can certainly motivate more individual consumption, or a grey market by means of buying cooperatives: just one person is registered as a member but they share/sell their allotted monthly 40 g with/to other people. There are three main ways in which CSCs distribute cannabis to their members. The most common one is to dispense cannabis in bulk at harvest. In those cases, all the yields from a given harvest are evenly distributed among the club members. Most clubs are at early development stages, and therefore they do not produce enough cannabis to reach the maximum of 480 g per year per user. To mitigate against this, they distribute all of what they produce each time. A second form of distribution is the monthly delivery. The more organised clubs establish a monthly date for distribution, and club members go to the premises to collect their share. Finally, one of the surveyed clubs delivers cannabis on demand: each member can access a maximum of 40 g per month, and pays according to the quantity received. To date, clubs have been designed to provide mainly recreational cannabis. Some medical users complain that this is an important limitation of the model, especially in what regards the maximum amount allowed per member/year, which makes it difficult to develop by-products for medical use. Some of the clubs surveyed declared their commitment to raise awareness within society on cannabis consumption and risk reduction among members. They provide information on responsible consumption and harm reduction strategies.

4. Discussion

Having described the different practices adopted by the CSCs operating in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay (Section: The CSC model), with reference to the legal context in which these have been developed (Section: The domestic legal framework for CSCs), in this section we highlight some of the common practices and emerging issues. While this analysis reveals important aspects which could inform potential future regulation of the model, a more comprehensive assessment of the functioning and effects associated with the model in each country is lacking. Our analysis is thus limited to the data collection efforts of the three research teams, and we acknowledge that some CSCs and their practices may not have been captured. Finally, we are also aware that the perspectives of CSCs' members (and growers) were not included in the country-research on which this analysis was based. Table 1 below provides an overview of our findings in each country, which we discuss in the following paragraphs.

Table 1: An overview of CSCs' practices in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay.

| Country | SPAIN | BELGIUM | URUGUAY |
|--|---|---|--|
| Legal status | Unregulated | Unregulated | Regulated |
| Number | Approx. 800 – 1.000 | Approx. 5 - 10 | Approx. 20 |
| Establishment | | | |
| Formal registration | National registry of associations | National registry of associations | Registry Office at the Ministry of Education Registry and IRCCA |
| Official legal form | Non-profit association | Non-profit association | Non-profit association |
| Number of people needed to start | 3 | 3 | 15 |
| Location | Different location restrictions in place across municipalities | No restrictions in place | At least 150 meters from education and treatment centres At least 1km from other CSCs |
| Federations and self-regulatory practices | Several federations Good practice codes ENCOD Code of Conduct | No federation ENCOD Code of Conduct | No federation (but some joined the Federation of Cannabis Growers) |
| House rules and internal organization | | | |
| Membership criteria | At least 18 or 21 years old Sign membership form Prior regular cannabis users Introduced by an existing member Only Spanish residents (but in Barcelona tourists have also joined CSCs) | At least 18 or 21 years old Sign membership form Prior cannabis users Only Belgian residents Awareness of Belgian legislation Membership of one club only (despite difficult implementation) | At least 18 years old Registered in IRCCA database as users acquiring cannabis through a club Introduced by an existing member Membership of one club only |
| Membership by medical users | Medical users accepted No specific requirements (but some members provide medical certificates) | Medical users accepted In some cases based on medical prescription and/or medical file | Medical users accepted No specific requirements |

PART II: A review of the literature and theoretical perspectives informing the study

| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| | | New CSCs exclusively for medical users | |
| Minimum/maximum number of members | No limit applied CSCs up to thousands of members | No limit applied CSCs up to over 200 members | 15-45 members |
| Membership fees | Annual fee (with some exceptions) Between 10-30€ | Annual fee Approximately 25€ | Monthly fee 26 – 92USD(includes up to 40 grams of cannabis) |
| Cannabis consumption at the CSC | Yes | No | Yes |
| Advertising | No Internal communication with members | No Internal communication with members | No Internal communication with members |
| Management of CSCs | | | |
| Decision-making structure (de facto) | Board of Directors At least annual general assembly meeting (sometimes pro forma) Different management styles Paid staff is common | Board of Directors At least annual general assembly meeting (sometimes pro forma) Different management styles CSCs rely mostly on volunteer work from members | Board of Directors At least annual general assembly meeting (de facto GA rarely meets) Management mainly by a few members CSCs rely mostly on volunteer work from members |
| Profit vs. Non-profit | Non-profit (with exceptions) | Non-profit | Non-profit |
| Cannabis cultivation | | | |
| Planning of production | Based on consumption estimate by the members | One plant per member Each plant receives a 'grow card' identifying ownership | Up to 99 flowered plants at a time |
| CSC growers | Mix of hired growers and members Some clubs buy also from black market | Members of the clubs | Members of the clubs |
| Location and size of cultivation sites | Indoor and outdoor cultivation Cultivation sites of different sizes (larger clubs may have more than 1.000 plants per site) | Indoor cultivation Several (small) cultivation sites | Indoor and outdoor cultivation |
| Plants cultivated per club/member | Cultivation corresponding to the sum of members' consumption estimates | 1 plant per member | Max 99 flowered plants per club (at a time) |
| Types of products / strains of cannabis | Various cannabis products Various strains | Mainly herbal cannabis Various strains | Herbal cannabis only Various strains |
| Quality control | Rarely tested via laboratory methods | Rarely tested via laboratory methods Growing protocol (contract between CSC and grower) | Rarely tested via laboratory methods "Crop Plan" (including legal requirements regarding growing methods, phytosanitary management, use of fertilizers, etc.) |
| Cannabis distribution | | | |

PART II: A review of the literature and theoretical perspectives informing the study

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| Frequency of distribution | During opening hours of the club No prior notice needed | Mainly at exchange fairs (every 2-3 months), but different practices within medical clubs | Different modes of distribution: after harvest; monthly delivery; on demand |
| Quantity limits | 60 – 90 grams / per month (approx. 3 grams / per day) | 10 – 30 grams / per month | 40 grams / per month (480 grams /per year) |
| Price per gram | 4,5 – 15 € / gram | 5 – 8 € / gram | In most cases, included in membership fee |
| Additional information provided upon distribution | Some provide information about responsible consumption and harm reduction strategies | Some provide information about responsible consumption and harm reduction strategies | Some provide information about responsible consumption and harm reduction strategies |
| Public Profile | | | |
| Media strategy | Most low profile Federated clubs have more public profile | Both low profile and high profile | Both low profile and high profile |

The establishment of a CSC

We found, for instance, that CSCs in the three countries have tended to complete a formal registration as associations in the relevant domestic registries – both as a result of a legal requirement (Uruguay) or on their own initiative (Spain, Belgium). While the clubs have also generally adopted a non-profit status, recent developments particularly in Spain suggest that formal controls may be necessary, especially with a view to promote public health objectives. Pacula et al. (2014) argue that the density of tobacco outlets is positively associated with smoking rates, particularly among youths, and that studies have shown a strong positive relationship between alcohol outlet density and alcohol misuse. Given the very different number of CSCs present in each country (see Table 1), it is difficult to conclude as to whether the number of possible CSCs should be capped by the legislator, and if so, at which range. Limitations with regards to the location of the CSCs (for instance, distance to schools and medical centres) as already included in Uruguayan legislation may be also considered.

House rules and internal organization of a CSC

With regards to membership criteria, the clubs have to some extent developed similar practices, for instance admitting only adult cannabis users. The experience in the three countries indicates that restricting membership to nationals or residents of the country may help reducing ‘drug tourism’. The creation of a centralised database of CSCs and their members (as it is the case in Uruguay) could be helpful for the application of that criteria, as well as to ensure that each cannabis user can enrol as member of only one club. At the same time, we are aware that creating such a registry may also bring an additional layer of bureaucracy for the CSCs and their members, and that cannabis users may be reluctant to complete the registration (for instance, for privacy reasons). The ongoing experience in Uruguay may provide additional information as to the feasibility and further design of this requirement. The total number of

members allowed per CSC is another issue to be considered in future regulation. It is likely that if clubs enrol thousands of members, they may lose sight of their non-profit goals and merge into large(r) enterprises, which is to some extent what has occurred particularly in Barcelona. However, it is also not clear if the limit currently imposed by the Uruguayan legislation (i.e., a maximum of 45 members) is practicable.

The CSC model emerged essentially with a focus on recreational use of cannabis, but in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay medical users have sought to join CSCs and many clubs have sought to accommodate their needs. In some cases these medical users must present a medical certificate or a prescription from a doctor – but this is not necessarily common practice among most CSCs. Often the clubs apply other (less stringent) rules related to minimum age, maximum consumption limits, or they offer particular strains or cannabis products. In the absence of stringent quality controls of the cannabis distributed through CSCs to patients and in the absence of solid collaboration and information exchange between CSCs and medical specialists, it remains an open question whether it is a good idea to join medical cannabis and recreational cannabis under one setting. On the other hand, the debate about separate and differential regulation of recreational and medical cannabis clubs may also be complex, especially if one takes into account the conceptual confusion related to the use of medicines (i.e., pharmaceutical drugs) and drugs (i.e., illegal psychoactive substances), the wide range of medical conditions and symptoms that seem to be instigating medical cannabis use, and the phenomena of self-declared (but undiagnosed) medical cannabis use and self-medication practices. Moreover, some countries may have a regime for cannabis based on medical prescription that could be in conflict with the (medical) CSC model. Whether or not the supply of cannabis for medical purposes should and could take place in specialised CSCs is an important issue for future research.

CSC members in the three countries contribute to the running of the organisation with a membership fee. With regards to this aspect, two different practices have developed: on the one hand, clubs in Spain and Belgium have opted for an annual membership that covers the internal costs of managing and maintaining the CSC; on the other hand, the membership fee in Uruguay is paid on a monthly basis and covers also the amount of cannabis that each member will receive. Advertisement of the CSCs activities is not allowed nor a common practice in any of the three contexts studied, a practice that could be confirmed and further supervised in future regulatory frameworks.

Cannabis cultivation and distribution within a CSC

Another set of issues which merit attention relate to the cultivation and distribution of cannabis by the CSCs. The quantity supplied by the clubs in the three countries seems to be somewhat related to the consumption estimates made by their members (although within the quantity limit imposed by law in the case of Uruguay), which is consistent with the ‘supply-follows-demand’- philosophy of ENCOD’s Code of Conduct mentioned earlier. However, as we noted,

in practice there might have been deviations to this principle. Introducing a maximum quantity per member – the route taken by the Uruguayan legislator, may thus be one possible way to formalise the ongoing practices of (often federated) clubs adhering to the ‘Code of Conduct’ for European CSCs. Determining such a threshold will nevertheless be a difficult exercise, and could be based on a number of plants or specific quantity (in grams) per month/year. The Belgian experience which is based on one plant per member (mainly due to the clubs’ interpretation of prosecution guidelines applicable in that country) or the limit of 40 g per month set out by the Uruguayan legislation could be useful starting points for thinking about such thresholds. Production limits, corresponding to the quantity thresholds mentioned above may also be introduced. At the moment, only Uruguay has introduced a concrete limit for production, which is set at 99 plants (at one given time). In Belgium, the total number of plants corresponds to the total number of members (as clubs report cultivating one plant per member).

Additionally, decisions about the number of cultivation sites authorised per club and the size of each of those cultivation sites should also be considered. While the practices in the three countries have shown that the clubs draft agreements with their growers (in Belgium) or have to prepare a crop plan (in Uruguay), the relations between clubs and growers have at times been troublesome. CSC members often see high product quality, purity and control of content among the biggest benefits the CSCs provide (Belackova et al., 2016). However, we found no unified system of quality control in place in any of the three countries. The monitoring of cultivation practices remains a point for attention, even in the case of Uruguay, where regulation applicable to the model has been introduced. An important obstacle to implement standardised toxicological analyses to ensure the quality, potency and purity of cannabis supplied by the clubs, would be its considerable cost (see also: Belackova et al., 2016) and the current domestic legal frameworks. Our analysis has also uncovered a number of different modes of distribution of cannabis adopted by the clubs. In some cases, the cannabis is distributed to the members in bulk, for instance after harvest (see for instance the ‘exchange fairs’ organised by some Belgian CSCs, or monthly deliveries by Uruguayan CSCs). In other instances clubs accept on demand orders, and finally other clubs have a permanent stock of cannabis and allow members to collect their desired amount during the opening hours of the club, without the need for any prior notice (this is the standard practice by Spanish clubs). Whether and how these modes affect the consumption levels of the cannabis users members of the clubs remains to be further assessed.

5. Conclusions

This paper identifies the ways in which the CSC model has developed in three different contexts, under different domestic legal frameworks. As discussed throughout, many similarities and differences in terms of the practices of the CSCs within and across countries emerged (Pardo, 2014). Understanding these aspects provides important pointers which could inform potential

future regulation in this field. In our view, such a regulatory framework will need to strike a balance between sufficiently allowing and accommodating the self-regulatory efforts of those involved in the CSC model to date, but at the same time ensuring adequate governmental control with a view to protecting and promoting public health goals. As the CSC movement expands, sole reliance on self-regulatory practices and a non-profit ethos becomes, in our view, difficult without more formal controls – a lesson learnt from the Spanish experience, where some large, commercial CSCs have emerged, despite the presence of CSC federations. A legal framework complementing self-regulatory efforts may help prevent CSCs from morphing into profit-driven organisations and the emergence of ‘shadow clubs’ which seek to produce and distribute cannabis in a commercial way (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte, 2015). Such regulatory model could remove incentives for profit-motivated efforts by clubs to increase cannabis consumption by banning any advertising and marketing practices by clubs (such as on pack branding) – which seems to already be the case in the contexts studied herein; and again, by imposing a maximum number of members and a maximum production limit (monthly/annually). Keeping in line with public health objectives, access, availability and use by youths should also be minimised (Kilmer, 2014; Pacula et al., 2014).

At the same time, CSCs could retain their current autonomy to shape the decision-making structure of the club, make decisions on membership fees, the choice to hire paid staff, the planning of cannabis production, the selection of strains to be produced, or the decision to form a federation with other clubs. At the same time, legal regulation could define the procedure for formal registration and establishment of the club, establish a maximum number of members per CSC, the club’s maximum production capacity (in kg? number of plants?), the maximum number of grams a member can receive in a given period, the minimum membership criteria (such as age and a residence criterion), and procedures to ensure transparency of the activities and the finances of the clubs (e.g. a crop plan as required in Uruguay, or external accountability checks). With regards to the registration of cannabis users, other experiments imposing a registration system – such as the implementation of the ‘weed pass’ for coffee shops in The Netherlands, seem to suggest that many users are reluctant to formally complete such registration. Current experiences in Uruguay (where a users’ registry has also been introduced) can further shed light into this issue.

Belackova et al. (2016) have argued that the Cannabis Social Club model has the potential to diminish the adverse health risks resulting from cannabis use through educational activities, dissemination of information on reducing mental health risks, and promotion of safe smoking practices. However, there may be risks associated with sole reliance on self-regulatory practices of CSCs, given the inherent potential conflict of interest between profit-making (which is the goal of at least some groups and individuals in the CSC movement) and accountability (as a crucial element in the ‘Code of Conduct’) (see: Ritter, 2010). Similarly, Pacula et al. (2014) have warned for a laissez-faire approach, which could generate an increase in cannabis misuse and consequent health and social problems. In order to protect and ensure public health, a regulatory framework could contain minimal quality standards for growing cannabis within a

club, establish a maximum THC-content (and a minimum of CBD and CBN content?) of cannabis products, packaging controls (e.g. childproof containers) and obligatory information on packaging (based on established norms for pharmaceutical drugs, and also containing information about responsible cannabis use, how to minimize risks, and where to find more information or help).

Unlike cannabis distributors who operate on the illegal market, many Cannabis Social Clubs are willing to enter into dialogue with authorities to provide insight in their working methods, in the framework of the elaboration of a legal regulation of cannabis. Public health regulations would enable authorities to control the CSCs in order to ensure their transparent and safe way of working, and to create an alternative for the illicit market, preventing the access of minors to cannabis, help to reduce public expenditure and generate tax revenue (see also: Pacula et al., 2014). Public health regulations could also enable the clubs to apply an active policy of prevention of harms and risks, and to actively promote safer methods of consumption of cannabis (Ritter, 2010). Any experiment with regulated Cannabis Social Clubs should also be tailored to the local context. This implies a discussion about the location and density of clubs per area (a point taken up in Uruguayan legislation), about whether or not it is good practice to allow consumption of cannabis (and/or alcohol) at the venue of the clubs, and about the distribution procedures (during opening hours, by order only, through frequent 'distribution fairs', etc.). CSCs too have an interest in such a regulation as it will ensure legal availability of cannabis to their members, their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the legal status of their organisation and activities.

The study presented here obviously has important limitations: the data used for this analysis were not collected through identical data collection methods, and stem from local studies in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay with different research designs. Some of the issues we mentioned above require more in-depth descriptions of how CSCs operate on a daily basis. Not all the CSCs in the three countries were included in our studies; some clubs are of difficult access or reluctant to participate in empirical research, and it is well worth trying to find out why. In order to better understand the strengths and the weaknesses of the CSC model and the lessons for regulation, analysis of the sociodemographic background, and consumption patterns of CSC members (before and during CSC membership) would be very useful, as well as their personal views and experiences with (one or more) clubs. Furthermore, it seems important to know which 'type' of cannabis users clubs are attracting today (regular or daily cannabis users, and/or irregular and occasional users) and to reflect on how legally regulated cannabis clubs should target different groups of cannabis users. Similarly, a better knowledge of the background of current cannabis growers in CSCs would be of added value, as any transition from a criminalised to a legally regulated framework will raise important issues with regards to the previous illicit cannabis growers.

Chapter 3: Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: growing in a legal haze?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a non-commercial model for the supply of cannabis: the Cannabis Social Club (CSC). In particular, we aim to understand whether and how this model is compatible with Belgian legislation as well as with current obligations in the context of international drug treaties. This analysis draws on a review of the literature conducted as part of a wider study examining CSCs in Belgium. While the CSC model has been present in the country since 2006, there is some degree of uncertainty about its legal status. We found that the toleration of the model may be permissible within the current international legal regime, though its legalisation and the adoption of further regulation would likely constitute a breach of the international drug treaties. The potential room for development of the model within the current domestic and international legal frameworks thus seems somewhat limited.

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs or Clubs) are an understudied model for the supply of cannabis. This model first emerged in Spain during the 1990s and has since expanded to other contexts. CSCs are based on the idea of collective cultivation and distribution of cannabis within a closed group of cannabis users. In practice, this has meant that adult cannabis users have established not-for-profit associations with a view to ensure their own supply of cannabis (Caulkins, Hawken, Kilmer, & Kleiman, 2012a; Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b). While the CSC model has been described as one of the possible intermediate supply models between prohibition and full commercialization, there is a dearth of knowledge about its functioning and potential impacts (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Caulkins et al., 2012a; Decorte, 2014a).

To help fill this gap, we are conducting a study analysing CSCs in Belgium, with the support of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO). This study focuses on three key areas important to building a more comprehensive understanding of the model, as developed in Belgium: 1) the internal structure, organisation and functioning of the CSCs *per se*; 2) the socio-demographic characteristics and drug use profile of CSCs' members; and 3) the cannabis produced and distributed by the Clubs in Belgium. This research project relies on several data sources. We are conducting interviews with the staff members of all Belgian CSCs, and reviewing their internal documentation (e.g., membership forms, cultivation and distribution protocols, etc.), as well as the wider literature on the model and related topics. We will also conduct an online survey among CSCs' members. Specimens of cannabis produced by the Clubs will be subject to analysis to shed light as to the purity, potency and overall quality of the cannabis supplied by the CSCs in Belgium.

This paper addresses a sub-set of issues concerning the legal status of the model in Belgium and at the international level – with reference to the relevant international legislative instruments. Specifically, the paper seeks to discuss the interpretations of the United Nations (UN) drug conventions, and of national drug policies offered by both the competent authorities for those jurisdictions as well as by other independent (academic) parties concerning the CSCs' conformity with those conventions and policies. Further, the paper will present and discuss the ways in which the international and national competent authorities have dealt with the CSCs active in Belgium. This paper draws on preliminary findings from a literature review conducted in the context of the above mentioned study. Searches were conducted in Ebsco Host, Elsevier Science Direct, GoPress and Web of Science. Further searches were also run through Google Scholar, and specialized websites were consulted (e.g., websites of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, of the International Narcotics Control Board, of relevant Government agencies and of CSCs). The paper is structured as follows: the next section introduces the key features of CSCs and the contexts where these have emerged. We then present the legal framework within which CSCs have operated in Belgium, as well as any official statements made with regards to the legal status of the model by public authorities. Next, the paper provides an overview of the international legal regime in this field and of interpretations of the relevant legal instruments concerning the CSC model. We then discuss some of the issues

arising from this review and the implications for the development of the model. Some concluding remarks and pointers for further research are then offered.

2. What do we know about CSCs

The body of knowledge on the CSC model is rather limited. To our knowledge, only two empirical studies have analysed the development and functioning of the model in Belgium and Uruguay, respectively (Decorte, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2015). The former study by Decorte (2015) was based on interviews with the board members of Belgian CSCs, and an analysis of the internal documentation and websites of those CSCs, as well as of Belgian media articles. The author identified five active CSCs (as of February 2014), described their formal organization, their practices with regards to the cultivation and distribution of cannabis, and undertook a SWOT analysis²⁷ of the model as present in Belgium. The latter study, an ongoing research project by Queirolo et al. (2015) draws on interviews with staff from the CSCs, as well as a survey of their members with a view to describe the characteristics of the Clubs operating in Uruguay. These researchers plan also to undertake an analysis of samples of cannabis produced by the Uruguayan Clubs. Beyond these empirical studies, other publications have addressed different issues concerning the model, documenting its presence in various contexts, discussing their legal status, and several other aspects concerning the functioning of the Clubs (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Blickman, 2014; Marks, 2015; Martínez, 2015; Montañés, 2014).

While there may be differences as to the way the CSCs develop their activities within and across different jurisdictions, and much is not yet known about their specific operations and impacts, the reviewed literature has put forward a number of general common features of the CSC model. Firstly, it has been suggested that CSCs tend to be established as formal associations, often registered in the relevant local, regional or national registries of associations (Barriuso, 2011; Decorte, 2015; Martínez, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2015). Secondly, these are associations set up and run by cannabis users, who seek to collectively organize the cultivation and supply of cannabis. The cultivation of cannabis is carried out by volunteer members or by paid staff, and may take place indoors and/or outdoors (e.g., in rented locations, members' houses, etc.) (Barriuso, 2011; Decorte, 2015; Transform, 2013). The quantities and types of strains/cannabis-products produced may vary across Clubs, as these are generally adjusted to the particular needs and preferences of the Clubs' members. Thirdly, CSCs are generally described as not-for-profit organizations, where any financial surplus is reinvested in the Clubs (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2015; Transform, 2013, 2015). The members contribute with a membership fee (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2015). It has also been noted that the CSC model operates on a closed circuit basis, i.e., the supply of cannabis through a Club is restricted to its members. What is more, only adults who are prior users of cannabis, and who

²⁷ This type of analysis sets out to identify the internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats of a given organization or programme.

reside in the country where the CSC is based, may be admitted as members of the Clubs (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Blickman, 2014; Decorte, 2015; Marks, 2015). In some cases, the CSCs exclusively accept candidate members who use cannabis for medicinal purposes (based on a prescription or recommendation letter issued by a doctor to that effect), others take only recreational cannabis users, and some accept both. Further, the CSCs supply only small amounts of cannabis, based, to the extent possible, on the personal consumption levels of its members. The distribution of the cannabis usually takes place on a regular basis (ranging from daily supply to distribution every two months, etc.) (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Decorte, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2015).

The first known CSC, *Asociación Ramón de Estudios Sobre el Cannabis* (ARSEC), was founded in Barcelona (Spain) during the early 1990s (Barriuso, 2011; Martínez, 2015). Spain is therefore seen as the birthplace of the model, and has witnessed a significant increase in the number of CSCs in the following decades (Marks, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015). It is estimated that currently about 400-600 Clubs are operating in Spain, mainly in the regions of Catalonia and the Basque Country (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Blickman, 2014; Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Marks, 2015; Martínez, 2015; Transform, 2015). The CSC model has also been implemented in Belgium since 2006. Decorte (2015) had previously identified five CSCs active in Belgium circa 2014, and based on our ongoing study we have accounted for six Belgian CSCs (three of the previously identified CSCs have ceased their activities, and four new ones have meanwhile emerged). In Uruguay, as of August 2015 about 20 Clubs were seeking to complete the registration process (Queirolo et al., 2015). For different reasons, these are the contexts where the CSC model is most prominent: the model first emerged in Spain, and may have inspired the later development of CSCs in Belgium (Decorte & Pardal, forthcoming); Uruguay has recently become the first jurisdiction to legalize and introduce regulation concerning CSCs²⁸.

3. The legal framework for CSCs operating in Belgium

The general characteristics described above are better understood in relation to the way the model was founded. It was the result of a grassroots movement that developed in Spain during the 1990s, exploring a grey zone in the national law and court jurisprudence. In that country, a number of Supreme Court rulings supported a policy of decriminalization of possession (and cultivation) for personal use²⁹. Inspired by the Spanish CSC-movement, Belgian activists have

²⁸ Nevertheless, we have also found accounts of a few other CSCs operating in other countries. CSCs may have been present in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and New Zealand (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte, 2015; Transform, 2015). In Europe, a few CSCs are operating in the Netherlands and in Slovenia (Apfel, 2014; Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Blickman, 2014; Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2013; ENCOD, 2015; Reuter, 2010; Room et al., 2010). While there have been accounts of CSCs in other countries, such as for instance in the UK, Italy and France, the limited information available seems to suggest that those organizations advocate for the interests of cannabis users in other ways, not being openly involved in the supply of cannabis. Further research would be necessary to clarify this and other aspects related to the functioning of CSCs in those contexts.

²⁹ Subsequent legal analysis by Munoz & Soto (2000) and Diez & Munoz (2013) examined the compatibility of the establishment of such outlets with the domestic legislation and case law, and identified a number of criteria that

sought to introduce the model in the country, exploring the lack of clarity in the domestic drug laws (Decorte, 2015; Gelders & Laenen, 2007). Belgian legislation in this area has been much debated since the late 1990s onwards, but the different legislative pieces brought forward since then have tended to remain vague and unclear (Gelders & Laenen, 2007).

The possession, cultivation and trade of cannabis is prohibited in Belgium, according to the 1921 Law on Narcotic Drugs (*Drugswet van 24.2.1921*)³⁰ (Decorte et al., 2014b; Kilmer et al., 2013b). However, the 2001 Federal Policy Note on Drugs (*Federale Beleidsnota Drugs*) included a number of recommendations to be implemented with regards to drug policy, following the work of a 1996-1997 Parliamentary Workgroup on Drugs (Decorte & Tuteleers, 2007; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Kilmer et al., 2013b). In this strategic document “*a depenalization de facto (no criminal sanction due to lack of prosecution) was put forward as one of the priorities*” (Gelders & Laenen, 2007, p. 105). The recommendations resulted in a reform of the 1921 Law on Narcotic Drugs. The new 2003 Drug Law (amending the Law of 1921)³¹ introduced a differentiation between the possession of cannabis and that of other substances (EMCDDA, 2015; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Kilmer et al., 2013b). Accordingly, in the absence of evidence of problematic drug use and public nuisance, possession of cannabis for personal use by adults would no longer be prosecuted. The notions of ‘problematic drug use’ and ‘public nuisance’ were however of difficult interpretation, and the Belgian Constitutional Court annulled the provision of the 2003 Drug Law (Article 16) that introduced that change (Decorte & Tuteleers, 2007; EMCDDA, 2015; Gelders & Laenen, 2007).

The annulment resulted in the resurgence of the old law (i.e., concerning the possession of cannabis only), which created some uncertainty and a “*highly inconsistent law enforcement policy*” (Decorte et al., 2014b, p. 23). In 2005, a new Ministerial Guideline (*Ministeriële Richtlijn*)³² assigned the lowest prosecution priority to the possession of cannabis when the ‘user amount’ (which corresponded to a maximum of 3 grams or one cannabis plant) is respected. In cases of disturbance to the public order or of aggravating circumstances full prosecution should be pursued. Under the 2005 policy, circumstances that disturb the public order include the possession of cannabis in prison, in youth protection institutes, in educational centres and surrounding area, or the blatant possession of cannabis in a public space (Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b). As aggravating circumstances, the Ministerial

should be met by the Clubs for that purpose. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that some Clubs may have adapted their functioning to meet those criteria, many CSCs have had their crops confiscated and have faced criminal proceedings - although some resulted in a positive outcome for the CSCs (Marks, 2015; Pares & Bouso, 2015).

³⁰ In full: Wet betreffende het verhandelen van giftstoffen, slaapmiddelen en verdovende middelen, psychotrope stoffen, ontsmettingsstoffen en antiseptica en van de stoffen die kunnen gebruikt worden voor de illegale vervaardiging van verdovende middelen en psychotrope stoffen.

³¹ We refer here to the Law of 03.05.2003 amending the Law of 24.02.1921 (De wet van 03.05.2003 tot wijziging van de wet van 24.2.1921 betreffende het verhandelen van de giftstoffen, slaapmiddelen en verdovende middelen, ontsmettingsstoffen en antiseptic).

³² In full: Gemeenschappelijke richtlijn van de Minister van Justitie en het College van procureurs-generaal omtrent de vaststelling, registratie en vervolging van inbreuken inzake het bezit van cannabis.

Guideline pointed to possession of cannabis in the presence of a minor, the involvement of a criminal organization, or causing harm to or resulting in the death of another individual (Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b).

Nevertheless, while the 2005 Guideline addresses the cultivation of one cannabis plant for personal use, other issues related to the supply-side of cannabis were not further addressed in that policy document, and thus some level of uncertainty remains (Backer, Maebe, Legrand, Colman, & Theunis, 2010; Decorte et al., 2014b; Decorte & Tuteleers, 2007). For example, while the cultivation of one plant receives the lowest priority for law enforcement and prosecution, it is at the same time not clear which approach would be followed in cases where that one plant yields more than the 3grams indicated in the policy documents as the maximum threshold for personal use (Backer et al., 2010; Decorte & Tuteleers, 2007). Some degree of inconsistency across the different judicial districts in the application of the drugs legislation has also been noted (Decorte & Tuteleers, 2007).

The first Belgian CSC, *Trekt Uw Plant* was established in 2006 in Antwerp. This CSC, as well as other Clubs established afterwards, have argued that the threshold of one plant which corresponds to the lowest enforcement priority according to the 2005 Ministerial Guideline, could be extended to those collectives. That is to say that when operating on a one-plant-per-member basis, and in the absence of relevant aggravating circumstances or public nuisance, the activities of the CSCs would be in line with the Ministerial Guideline and should thus receive the lowest priority for law enforcement and prosecution. This interpretation is however not a straightforward one (EMCDDA, 2013b), and it has by no means been supported or confirmed by the competent Belgian authorities.

Since its establishment, *Trekt Uw Plant* has been involved on two occasions in legal proceedings, albeit not necessarily related to its core supply activities as a CSC. In a first case, members of the Club were initially condemned for possession of cannabis with aggravating circumstances and acquitted for participation in a criminal organization. The process was then brought to the Court of Appeal, which was unable to pass judgement as by then the criminal prosecution had become time-barred (Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b). The second court case related to charges for the encouragement of drug use, in the context of two public demonstrations by the Club in Antwerp in 2008 (where some board members of the Club planted cannabis seeds in pots). The defendants were later acquitted (Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b). While *Trekt Uw Plant* has operated without further interference from law enforcement or judiciary since then, other CSCs have also been involved in criminal proceedings. For instance, the police have seized over 1kg of cannabis from *Mambo Social Club*, as representatives of the Club transported the cannabis to the location where it would be distributed to the Club's members (X, 2013). In the latest decision from the Court of Appeal on this case, representatives from *Mambo Social Club* have been convicted for the cultivation and possession of cannabis. The Court noted that such cultivation and possession could not be understood as meant for personal use, as it was in fact destined for others (i.e., the members of the CSC). The Court of Appeal has nevertheless acquitted the Clubs' representatives for the

offence of facilitating the use of cannabis. Other CSCs (*MaWeedPerso*, *WeedOut* and *Sativa*) seem to have ceased or suspended their activities following law enforcement interventions (Neve, 2015).

Official representatives of the Belgian government (since 2006) have, on a few occasions, reflected or commented on the presence of the CSC model in the country. For instance, following the announcement of a first collective plantation by *Trekt Uw Plant* in 2006, the Minister of Justice commented (prompted by questions from three members of parliament) that the drug laws in place allowed no cannabis plantations and that “consequently the cannabis plantation of the association *Trekt Uw Plant* was illegal” (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2006, own translation). In another session of the Belgian House of Representatives in 2011, the Secretary of State from the Ministry of Justice noted that the 2005 Ministerial Guideline was directed at the possession of cannabis for personal use, and did not address possession of cannabis for the personal use of others (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2011). The Secretary of State suggested also that the activities undertaken by *Trekt Uw Plant* could be seen as facilitating the uptake of cannabis by others (which would be in breach of Article 3 of the 1921 Law on Narcotic Drugs) (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 2011). According to the Secretary of State these issues go beyond the remits of the Ministerial Guideline (Kilmer et al., 2013b). In 2014, the Minister of Justice acknowledged, during an interview, that other alternative policies for a limited supply of cannabis were worth investigating (Eckert & Tegenbos, 2014). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the fact that the Belgian government has not introduced any regulation applicable to the model, we could not find any official considerations or comments on the compatibility of the CSC model with the existing international drug treaties – which is in line with previous findings by Kilmer et al. (2013b).

4. More clarity at the international level?

The limited flexibility of the United Nations (UN) Conventions

The current international regime applicable to cannabis is mainly prohibitionist, as several restrictions to cannabis are in force, prohibiting the production and distribution of that substance for recreational purposes (DuPont & Voth, 1995; McBride, Terry-McElrath, Harwood, Inciardi, & Leukefeld, 2009). The approach followed³³ under the UN Conventions on drugs³³ established and supports a prohibition regime (Levine, 2012; Room et al., 2010). Scholars analysing the above mentioned UN Conventions legal framework often refer to the room for manoeuvre or the latitude within that system (Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; de Ruyver, Vermeulen, Vander Beken, Vander Laenen, & Geenens, 2002; Krajewski, 1999). However, while

³³ The present system of international drug control is based upon a suite of UN treaties: the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs as amended by the 1972 Protocol (Single Convention), the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971 Convention), and the 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances (1988 Convention).

“the autonomy of domestic law is stressed within all the conventions [...] states are required to remain true to the UN Conventions”(Bewley-Taylor, 2003, p. 173), and thus the room for manoeuvre is not unlimited (Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; de Ruyver et al., 2002)³⁴.

On the demand-side, with regards to the use of cannabis, it seems uncontroversial to admit that the conventions do not require its criminalization, as the use of drugs is not included among its ‘punishable offences’ (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; de Ruyver et al., 2002; EMCDDA, 2005). Nevertheless, pursuant to the conventions, signatory parties must seek to limit the use of cannabis to medical or scientific purposes. The possession of cannabis for personal use is treated in a more restrictive way in the conventions, and has generated substantial discussions since the introduction of Article 3.2 of the 1988 Convention³⁵ (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; EMCDDA, 2005; Room & Reuter, 2012) - which *prima facie* seems to request the application of criminal sanctions to possession, purchase or cultivation of drugs for personal use. However, as some authors have noted, there remains some room for interpretation. Firstly, Article 3.2 includes a safeguard or ‘escape clause’ (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; EMCDDA, 2005) inasmuch as the requirement to establish possession for personal use as a criminal offence is subject to the *“constitutional principles”* and *“the basic concepts of its legal system”* (Article 3.2). Secondly, it has been noted that the 1988 Convention deals specifically with possession for personal use in Article 3.2 which may suggest that a less stringent regime should apply. Hence, according to an EMCDDA report this *“suggests that countries are legitimate to both criminalize drug use offences or choose other kinds of sanctions of non-criminal nature”* (EMCDDA, 2005, p. 8). De Ruyver et al. (2002), while arguing that there is no room for decriminalization - i.e., that parties are in fact required *“to criminalize possession, purchase, and cultivation for personal consumption”* (p. 62), noted that states may adopt a *“differentiated policy”*. Krajewski (1999) acknowledged also that there may be some flexibility with regards to *“consumption-related activities”* (p. 337). To some extent, the use of an expediency principle seems to be possible within the context of offences related to personal consumption (de Ruyver et al., 2002; Krajewski, 1999).

On the supply-side, there also seems to exist some degree of consensus about *“the very limited room to relax what are deemed to be trafficking and commercial supply related offences”* (Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012, p. 16). The establishment of a legally regulated market for the supply of cannabis (including production and distribution of that substance) for non-medical and non-scientific purposes would thus be in clear contravention to the conventions (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Kempen & Fedorova, 2014). The case of the Dutch coffee shop model is perhaps less clear-cut (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012), as it rests upon an expediency principle,

³⁴ It is also worth noting that the UN Conventions are not self-executing, i.e., they are not directly applicable, but must be integrated into domestic law by the signatory parties (Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; EMCDDA, 2005; Krajewski, 1999). This indirect applicability has raised issues in terms of how different parties interpret its provisions, and how that is translated into domestic legislation (Barrett, 2008; Bewley-Taylor, 2003).

³⁵ In its Article 3.2, the 1988 Convention refers to *“possession, purchase or cultivation of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances for personal consumption”*.

which allows for non-prosecution of commercial distribution and trade of cannabis (for recreational purposes) within coffee shops (according to specific regulations) (Korf, 2008). One of the arguments is that the UN Conventions' requirements are being met by the Dutch domestic legislation (i.e., by the law on the books). The application of an expediency principle to the shared cultivation and consumption of cannabis in the context of CSCs may be reasoned on the basis of its link to personal cultivation. Nevertheless, there seem to be limitations to such interpretation (Fijnaut & Ruyver, 2014), as noted by Kempen & Fedorova (2014):

“Although such cultivation cannot be equated with cultivation for private personal use, the connection is such that states are at liberty to refrain from prosecution based on expediency considerations. However, this does not discharge those states from applying the other, mostly non-criminal obligations to combat the cultivation and possession of cannabis” (p. 241).

Thus, even admitting that the activities of the CSCs can be interpreted in light of Article 3.2 of the 1988 convention as falling in the sphere of personal consumption, as suggested by some authors (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Marks, 2015; Transform, 2013, 2015), the flexibility permitted within this framework seems to be limited to the waiving of prosecution to the members of the Clubs (Kempen & Fedorova, 2014). The introduction of regulation allowing the cultivation of cannabis to supply coffee shops and/or CSCs would thus be at odds with the conventions (Kempen & Fedorova, 2014).

The International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) silence

The INCB is one of the UN's key agencies responsible for the monitoring and implementation of the international drug conventions (Heilmann, 2011; Legac, 2010). It was established by the Single Convention, and its role has been confirmed and further strengthened in the following conventions (Carstairs, 2005; Fazey, 2003; Legac, 2010). Within the context of its monitoring mandate, the INCB collects statistical data concerning drug production, trade and use, and prepares an annual report on the global drug situation. This body works closely with Governments, and may *“request explanations”* or urge signatory parties to take *“remedial measures”* (Fazey, 2003), censuring non-compliance with the conventions (Fazey, 2003; Heilmann, 2011; Legac, 2010). It may go as far as to call the attention of the signatory parties, the UN's Economic and Social Council or the Commission on Narcotic Drugs to cases of non-compliance, and may propose a drugs embargo to the party concerned – in what has been characterized as a ‘name and shame’ procedure (Bewley-Taylor & Trace, 2006). Considering the INCB's competences we sought to investigate whether and how this body has offered any statements with regards to the compatibility of the CSC model with the international drug conventions, or if it has made any other comments concerning the presence of CSCs in some of the signatory parties to the conventions.

The INCB's position on the implementation of the UN Conventions with regards to cannabis has been voiced on several occasions in its annual reports (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Bewley-Taylor & Trace, 2006; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Kempen & Fedorova, 2014). For example, in relation to the Dutch coffee shop policy, while initially not criticized by the INCB (INCB, 1983), later reports have taken a more critical stance towards that policy (INCB, 1994, 1996). The INCB has also criticized proposals for policy experimentation by various Governments. For instance, in the annual report for 1996, it commented on the plans from a German regional government, which intended to establish a system for the distribution of cannabis through pharmacies: *"the Board is concerned about such plans, since the distribution of cannabis would not serve scientific purposes, would be a contravention of the 1961 Convention and would be a way of legalizing cannabis"* (INCB, 1996, p. 57). The UK's reclassification of cannabis (moving it from a Class B to a Class C drug), making its possession a non-arrestable offence (Room et al., 2010), was also contested in the report for 2002 (INCB, 2002). The INCB's annual reports have also included critical reflections on other drug policies that, in the INCB's view, deviate from the provisions of the UN Conventions (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Kempen & Fedorova, 2014). For instance, in the report for 2001, the INCB noted *"some shifting towards a more liberal cannabis policy in several developed countries, particularly in recent years"* (INCB, 2001, p. 34). The report referred in particular to the decriminalization regimes introduced in four European countries: Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain. More recently, in the report for 2012, the INCB has expressed its concerns for the, at the time, proposals for legislative changes in Uruguay, Washington and Colorado, declaring that these would be *"in contravention to the provisions of the 1961 Convention as amended by the 1972 Protocol"* (INCB, 2012, p. 63). When discussing the Uruguayan legislative proposal, the INCB further warned that: *"non-compliance by any party with the provisions of the international drug control treaties could have far-reaching negative consequences for the functioning of the international drug control system"* (INCB, 2012, p. 36). However, in that annual report, the INCB did not comment on the compatibility of the CSC model (which was one of the options for the supply of cannabis introduced by the Uruguayan legislation) with the UN Conventions. We searched the annual reports produced by the INCB since 1993 (i.e., the date when the first CSC was founded in Spain) and did not find any comments to the presence of the CSC model in Belgium (nor elsewhere). To our knowledge, this body has not made any other formal statements with regards to this matter (Kilmer et al., 2013b; Transform, 2013, 2015).

5. Discussion

While the CSC model can be understood as a complete (alternative) model for the supply of cannabis, in the sense that the CSC organises and has, in principle, direct control over the production and distribution of the cannabis, the model bears at the same time close links to personal cultivation and possession of cannabis. For instance, we found that the cannabis cultivated by the Clubs is intended to correspond to the collective sum of what would be the amount of cannabis otherwise individually grown by each of the members of the CSC. The Clubs

hence do not seek to be an open source of supply, but instead aim to cover only the personal use needs of a closed group of users (i.e., the members of the CSC). The model has also distanced itself from for-profit oriented goals. While further research is needed to assess the extent to which such ideas inform the functioning of the CSCs in practice, these self-claimed core principles of the model arguably bring it closer to the remits of personal cultivation, possession and use of cannabis. As discussed above, despite the strong link, personal cultivation *stricto sensu* and collective (personal) cultivation may not necessarily be equated.

Nevertheless, this link to personal cultivation, possession and use has clearly been mobilized by the Belgian CSCs, and forms the grounds on which the Clubs justify their activities, in the context of often unclear domestic legislation and complementary policy guidelines. Despite such claims, the few comments we identified from policy-makers on this topic have not been very favourable – these are, of course, not binding. At the same time, no concrete measures, policies or guidelines specifically tackling the CSC model have been adopted. The outcomes of judicial proceedings involving CSCs have also offered a somewhat mixed picture, in the sense that while some cases have had a negative outcome for the CSCs, in other cases those involved have been acquitted. It is in this context that the CSC model has developed in Belgium for about a decade, operating at best at the margins of the domestic legislation, testing the limits of the applicability of personal cultivation and possession policies to the activities of the Clubs. As a result, the functioning of the Clubs remains completely unregulated beyond the self-regulatory efforts of those directly involved in the management of the CSCs.

At the international level, the CSC model seems to inhabit also a somewhat unclear area. There has not been much discussion of whether the model could fit within the legal limits imposed by the international drug treaties. The INCB has not in any way acknowledged nor criticized the model in its annual reports. While this can be in part expected, given that, with the exception of Uruguay, no other government has given a clear indication of recognizing or supporting the model, the INCB has also not made any specific comments with regards to the legalisation of the model in Uruguay. It seems possible for signatory parties to tolerate to some extent the presence of CSCs in their respective jurisdictions based on an expediency principle. Nevertheless, the formal legal recognition of the model and the introduction of further legislation to regulate these collectives would most likely be in contravention to the international drug treaties. Within the current legal *status quo* the potential (legal) development of the model seems thus somewhat constrained. Other avenues for its development may hence require more comprehensive reforms of the current international legal framework, most of which have been extensively discussed elsewhere (see for instance: Room et al., 2010).

6. Concluding remarks and questions for further research

The CSC model has emerged as a grassroots initiative, based on the efforts of cannabis users to self-organize and ensure the supply of cannabis among a closed group of adult users. With

exception of Uruguay, where the supply of cannabis through this model has been legalized and further regulated, the CSC model remains 'growing on its own'. In Belgium, despite claims about its closeness to the remits of personal cultivation and possession, the Clubs have not been recognized nor regulated by the competent public authorities, and have been challenged in court – some cases resulted in the conviction, others in the acquittal of the Clubs involved and/or their representatives. With respect to the international drug treaties, there seems to be some room for governments to tolerate the presence of the model, but any legislative efforts would constitute a breach of those international obligations. It remains thus unclear whether and how the model will develop in the future: will other governments follow the path taken by Uruguay and introduce legislation applicable to CSCs, disregarding the UN Conventions? Will a more concerted reform action be pursued by a group of nations? Or yet, will the model remain somewhat ignored, existing at the margins of domestic/international legislation?

Decisions on each of these (and other possible) scenarios could benefit from further research on a range of important topics. For instance, in-depth insights about the ways in which those involved in the foundation and management of CSCs have sought to self-organize and self-regulate their activities could be valuable in informing our thinking about the potential design of a regulatory framework for the model. What is more, learning about the motivations and the willingness of the existing CSCs to comply with any (external) regulation may be crucial to understanding the likelihood of success of any future policy experiments in this area. As Decorte (2015) noted, while the introduction of regulation may help strengthen the potential of the CSC model, it may also represent an important challenge for those who have until now almost exclusively shaped it. Both issues should be taken into account and further explored in future research and policy discussions.

Chapter 4: Considering the range and design of models for the supply of cannabis

1. Introduction

In the last decades, scholars in the field of drug research have considered how the supply of cannabis could be organized, often with consideration also to public health goals (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015b; Haden & Emerson, 2014; Pacula et al., 2014; Spithoff, Emerson, & Spithoff, 2015; Wilkins, 2018). In recent years, a diverse range of cannabis supply laws for both medical and non-medical purposes has emerged (Kilmer & Pacula, 2016), and cannabis activists have developed alternative mechanisms of supply (Marín, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017). A number of cannabis supply models can thus be identified today, as the product of scholarly design, actual policy implementation or grassroots initiatives. These models foresee different arrangements with regards to the production and/or distribution of cannabis (e.g. who is producing and supplying cannabis and under which conditions, or what types of products are supplied) and access to the product (e.g. age, quantity limits, etc.), as well as to other technical aspects such as the price of cannabis, eventual taxation, quality control requirements, the possibility of advertisement, among others (Kilmer, 2014; Kilmer, Caulkins, Pacula, & Reuter, 2012; Kleiman & Saiger, 1989; Neustadter, 1998). The current study draws on this knowledge with regards to the range of ways in which the supply of cannabis can be structured and operationalized, i.e. on an understanding of the various models for the supply of cannabis. As the previous chapters have suggested, CSCs - the cornerstone of this study - constitute one of such models and it is thus important to consider the broader spectrum of supply models available. While the following paragraphs present some of the key thinking in this area, this is not necessarily an exhaustive overview.³⁶

2. Key contributions to the design of supply models

Earlier notions: Kleiman's 'grudging toleration' and Nadelmann's 'right of access'

Kleiman (1992) explored several aspects that bear importance for the design of supply models, including taxation and other technical aspects. In that context, the author discussed the introduction of a limit to the use of a specific substance for medical purposes only, which would in turn correspond to the establishment of **prescription models**. Those could be based on a prescription from a physician and administered in the context of a medical treatment, or in the treatment of drug abuse/dependency itself (i.e. the case of maintenance programmes). In

³⁶ For instance, in addition, Evans (1998) discussed also what he termed 'decriminalization plans', 'limitation plans', and 'regulation and taxation plans'. These would constitute alternatives between full prohibition and a free market in drugs ('the tomato model'). More recently, a publication by the EMCDDA (2015) has also offered an overview of current developments with respect to models for the legal supply of cannabis, making reference to the coffee shop model in the Netherlands, the regulated production and distribution of cannabis (in the context of several US states and Uruguay), and production without retail sale in the context of CSCs.

addition, Kleiman (1992) referred to a middle ground option between legalization and prohibition: *“a category of grudgingly tolerated vices”*. While the concept was not further developed in that analysis, Kleiman (1992) suggested that a model of ‘grudging toleration’ could be applied to the use of specific substances, if and when that provides *“a better mix of advantages and disadvantages than flat prohibition”* (p. 103).

Nadelmann (1998) discussed a spectrum of drug policies with a strict prohibitionist model at one end, and an **unregulated free market** (or what the author referred to as the ‘supermarket’ model)³⁷ at the other. In addition, the author suggested an alternative third model which he termed ‘the right of access’ or ‘mail-order’ model. Such a model draws on the idea that *“adults should be entitled not merely to the right to possess small amounts of any drug for personal consumption but also to the right to obtain any drug from a reliable, legally regulated source responsible (and liable) for the quality of its products”* (p. 110-111). According to Nadelmann (1998), this model would ensure direct availability and access to the drug while at the same time ensuring that additional measures to curtail drug abuse could also be applied.

MacCoun et al.’s alternative models

MacCoun et al. (1996) identified eight existing and theoretical control models, which they grouped along a ‘spectrum of restrictiveness’. These were not specific to cannabis, but applicable to the issue of illicit drugs more generally. The different alternative models proposed built on a users’ perspective, focusing on the different ways possession and use could be controlled and regulated. Nevertheless, this categorization can in some cases be extended to the supply-side, and yields useful insights for our thinking about models for the supply of cannabis. The authors considered a number of options relating to a therapeutic context (and thus fall under the overarching **‘prescription’ model**). Firstly, we find the so-called ‘prohibitory prescription’, which would foresee the administration of psychoactive substances by medical professionals in very specific circumstances (e.g. cannabis administered for the relief of glaucoma symptoms). Differently, a ‘maintenance’ model would be primarily target the management of withdrawal symptoms, under medical supervision (for instance, similar to the methadone programmes implemented in several countries). Finally, the authors included a different model, ‘regulatory prescription’, with reference to those cases where specific psychoactive substances (e.g. Valium) are used in the treatment of a range of conditions (e.g. anxiety, depression, etc.), where despite the associated health and addiction risks, the benefits of its therapeutic use justify its prescription.

Four other models were put forward: a model of ‘positive license’, a model of ‘negative license’, an ‘adult market’, and finally a ‘free market’. The two **license models** are theoretical

³⁷ This was described as follows: *“imagine that ‘supermarkets’ existed all around the country in which drugs of every variety could be purchased at prices reflecting nothing more than retailers’ costs plus reasonable profit margins and sales taxes”* (p. 97).

constructions based on previous work by Kleiman (1992). Within a ‘positive license’ model adult users are granted a license which gives them access to the substance, including for recreational purposes. The license would be granted upon the successful completion of a “*drug safety*” course or an assessment of “safe use”. In a ‘negative license’ system, the drug is “*available for any reason to any adult who has not forfeited the right by violating conditions of eligibility*” (p. 333). The ‘**adult market**’ model would make available the supply of the substance to adults, in a similar vein to the alcohol market. The final model presented, the ‘**free market**’ model, would allow any individual to obtain the substance (similarly to Nadelmann’s ‘supermarket’ model).

Duke and Gross: forms of legalization

Duke and Gross (1998) proposed several options with regards to the regulation of the distribution of drugs. For instance, within a **model of ‘unfettered distribution’** there would be no restrictions to the trade in drugs. The authors thus noted that “*the unfettered option also would possess many of the disadvantages of the present [prohibition] regime*” (p. 626). Differently, another possible model would entail the establishment of a **state monopoly**, with the state directly and exclusively running the drug distribution system – what the authors termed as ‘government as sole distributor’. Duke and Gross (1998) considered also a ‘**prescription** system’ which would be intended for medical purposes only. Finally, the authors discussed also a **model of ‘licensed suppliers’**, which would allow for the commercial distribution of drugs by licensed distributors. The authors suggest a number of requirements for the granting of the distribution licenses (e.g. proof of insurance or financial responsibility, etc.) as well as the introduction of additional regulation around labelling, packaging, purity, potency, and quantity, among others.

Room’s ‘regulatory alternatives’

Room (2008),³⁸ reflecting also on lessons learned from policies adopted with regards to other addictive substances (including alcohol and tobacco) identified four ‘regulatory alternatives’. The first two of those models concern mainly distribution systems from a user perspective. Accordingly, the author discussed a “*prescription or permit system*” where some level of screening would be introduced (by physicians and pharmacists) – following which individuals would be granted a license to obtain cannabis. A “*rationing system*” was also discussed (based on prior practices in alcohol policy). Accordingly, under such a system a “*maximum purchase amount*” (p. 126) would be allocated to the user for a determined period of time. Room (2008) referred also to a “*government monopoly system*” where the state could monopolise one or

³⁸ In a later publication (Room et al., 2010) the author discussed also the emergence of home cultivation, the Dutch coffee shops and CSCs. Issues concerning production and distribution of cannabis were not explored in detail in this analysis though, which focused on an assessment of the limits of the applicable international conventions.

multiple stages of the supply process. The author pointed to similar current and past practices in the field of alcohol, cannabis, and opiates. The Dutch programme for medical distribution of cannabis was featured as one of the examples of a “*government monopoly system*”. Finally, a “*licensing system*” was the fourth option considered, within which private commercial enterprises would be granted a license to distribute the substance (according to specific regulation). The Dutch policy was here also mobilized as an example, in this case with regards to coffee shops which operate based on a system of licenses.

MacCoun’s ‘low(er) risk alternatives’

Reflecting on ‘lower risk alternatives’ to full market legalization of cannabis,³⁹ MacCoun (2013) identified and discussed three key models: **home cultivation**, ‘**Dutch-style cannabis coffee shops**’, and **buyer or grower clubs**. In this case we find primarily direct references to existing supply models for cannabis. The home cultivation model is seen by the author as a way to avoid the full market approach, while the ‘Dutch-style cannabis coffee shops’ represent a partial market approach. Finally, the ‘buyer or grower clubs’ are described as an “*intermediate [option] between home cultivation and the Dutch approach*” (p. 42). With regards to CSCs, the author points to the idea, also present in his previous work (MacCoun et al., 1996), of licensing in the sense that the supply of cannabis through those outlets is only possible for members: “*those without a license can still seek cannabis in the black market, but the clubs have the potential to weaken the illicit supply chains*” (p. 51).

Caulkins et al.’s ‘supply architectures’

Caulkins et al. (2015a) identified and discussed twelve alternatives to status quo cannabis supply prohibition. The authors presented two models which were described as “*commonly discussed models in the United States*” (p. 49): a form of prohibition with decreased sanctions (for example, based on the decriminalization of possession or reduced fines), and a **standard commercial model**. The latter is mainly characterized by the fact that production and distribution of cannabis are left to the competitive free market – albeit subject to specific regulations. Alternatively, two other “*extreme options*” (p. 50), less likely to be pursued, were also presented. One of those would retain the prohibitionist regime and increase the associated sanctions, the other would remove prohibition altogether, treating the cannabis market like any other general commerce (i.e. without introducing a regulatory framework specific to the production and trade in cannabis). In addition, Caulkins et al. (2015a) referred to a range of “*middle ground*” models (p. 49), including home cultivation or a ‘**grow your own**’ model which allows users to cultivate their own cannabis, as well as the **Cannabis Social Club** model. The

³⁹ With reference to California’s 2010 Proposition 19 which, if approved, would “*have allowed local jurisdictions to legalize the production, sales, purchase and possession of cannabis for California adults, as well as small-scale home cultivation*” (p. 40).

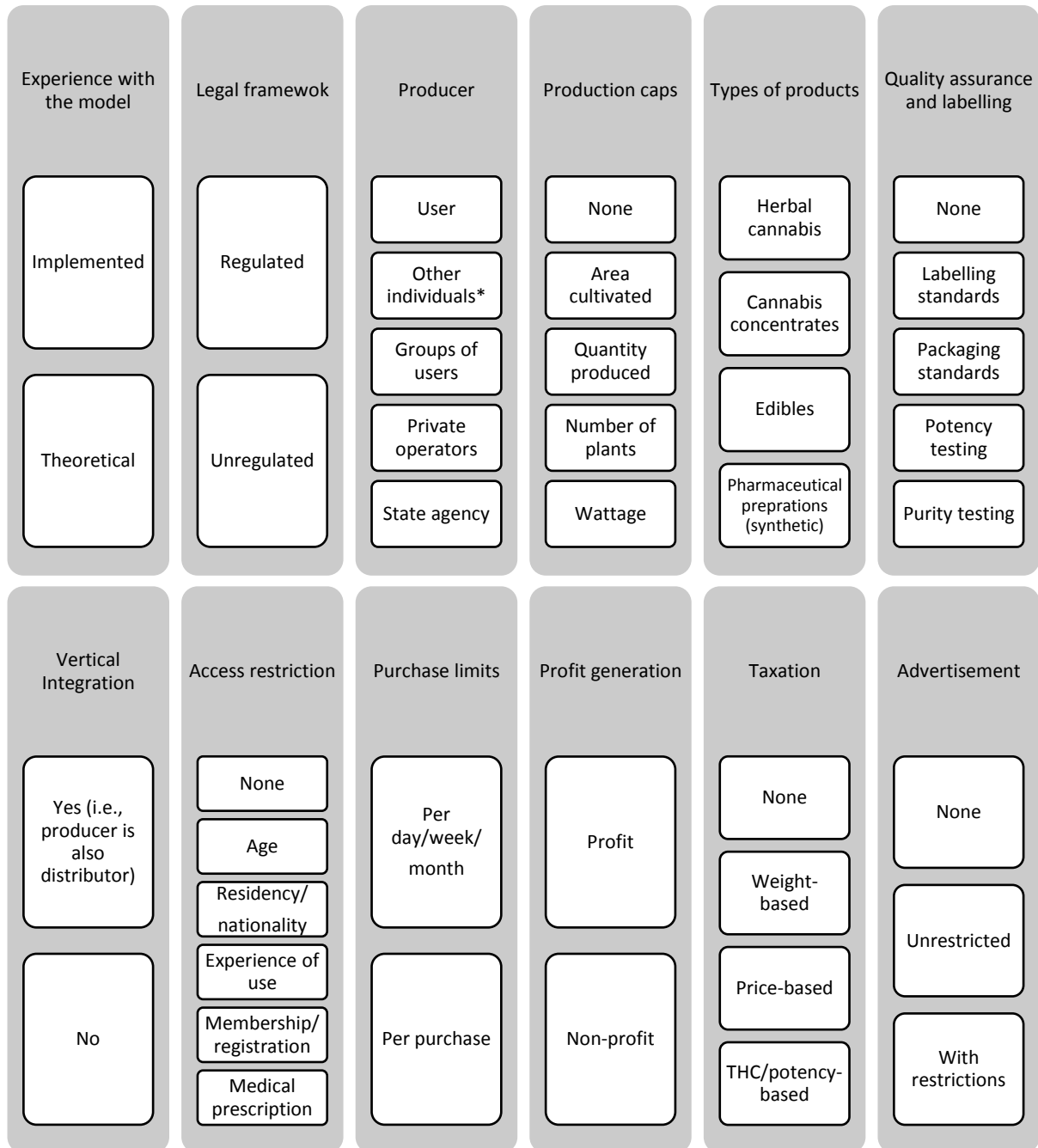
Dutch coffee shop model, which relies on non-enforcement against retail selling (drawing on an expediency principle) was also included. The introduction of a **government monopoly** with direct control of the supply of cannabis or the allocation of that role to a public authority (i.e. **near monopoly**) are two other possible avenues – seeking to reduce the proliferation of for-profit firms in the cannabis market. Finally, other middle ground options presented were based on a **license-system**, granted to non-profit and for-benefit organizations only, or to a restricted number of for-profit firms.

3. An overview of seven models for the supply of cannabis

Borrowing from some of the notions discussed in the literature in this area as presented above, as well as actual practices, we discuss now in more detail seven possible models for the supply of cannabis. Each of these models have distinguishing features (but also similarities) across a number of design options. Furthermore, the particular implementation of a given model may result in practices different than those ascribed to that model or as implemented in other jurisdictions. Although Figure 1 does not offer an exhaustive overview, nor does it aim to list all the regulatory aspects (e.g. outlet density, distance between outlets, etc.) to be considered when introducing a legal framework for the supply of cannabis (for such ‘regulatory checklists’ please see, for instance: Caulkins et al. (2015a) or Decorte (2014b)), it highlights some of the features that will be discussed below in relation to the different models in the next sections.

PART II: A review of the literature and theoretical perspectives informing the study

Figure 1: Selected key features of cannabis supply models.



Source: Based on literature reviewed in this chapter.

Note: This is not an exhaustive overview of the characteristics of supply models. While some of the elements listed under each broad characteristic are often exclusive (e.g. implemented vs. theoretical), that is not always the case (e.g. with regards to access restriction, multiple criteria may apply). * This refers to instances where individuals may grow cannabis and share it/gift it to others.

The self-supply model

A model of self-supply would allow for the home production of cannabis for one's own consumption – corresponding to what has been described as 'home growing' or 'grow-your-own' models (Caulkins et al., 2015a; MacCoun, 2013; Room et al., 2010). The legislator may introduce restrictions upon the number of plants that may be cultivated, their weight, but also the area dedicated for that purpose, or even the wattage of lights used in the process (Caulkins, Cohen, & Zamorra, 2013a; Hough et al., 2003b). The scale of cultivation would be relatively small as the cannabis produced would be destined for one's own consumption only.⁴⁰ While this model is not likely to contribute to a significant increase in the levels of use, it would at the same time not have a significant effect in reducing the size of the illicit market (Caulkins et al., 2012a; MacCoun, 2013). It would also be difficult to introduce quality controls within this model. Caulkins, Kilmer, MacCoun, Pacula, and Reuter (2012b) pointed to potential difficulties in introducing a model of self-supply at the same time as other commercial options are also pursued "*because someone caught in possession of contraband could claim that it had been grown legally at home*" (p. 869). While taxation is an important element to the design of supply models (Caulkins et al., 2013c; Oglesby, 2017), it has primarily been discussed in relation to for-profit or commercial models (as noted further below). Oglesby (2015) noted indeed that introducing taxation to home grown cannabis would be difficult to implement and would generate negligible revenues.

Models of self-supply of cannabis have been introduced in several jurisdictions. For example, we found references to different variants of self-supply in Australia (e.g. South and Western Australia), in Europe (e.g. Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Spain), and in North and South America (Chile, Uruguay, and several US states including Alaska, Colorado and more recently, Vermont) (Caulkins et al., 2012a; EMCDDA, 2015; MacCoun, 2013). While in some instances, self-supply has been introduced on the basis of (*de jure* or *de facto*) decriminalization or depenalization policies (e.g. South and Western Australia; the Czech Republic; the Netherlands; Spain) (Filipkova, 2015; Hough et al., 2003a; MacCoun, 2013; Room et al., 2010), in others this has been the product of formal legalization processes (e.g. Colorado, US; Uruguay) (ADN Noticias, 2015; Pardo, 2014; TNI, 2015). In some jurisdictions, self-supply is only possible for medical purposes (e.g. this is the case in several US states, including Washington State) (Blickman & Jelsma, 2009; Caulkins et al., 2012a; Clarke & Mentkowski, 2015; Weisheit, 2011).

⁴⁰ A variant to a strict self-supply model consists of allowing one to share his/her production with other users. For instance, beyond growing for one's own use, in Washington DC a legal loophole has generated a 'gifting system', where one can grow for one's own consumption but also share it as a 'gift' (i.e., commercial sales are not allowed) with other adults (up to one ounce or about 28grams). It has been reported that a "*gift economy marijuana industry*" has emerged though, where stores sell a variety of overpriced items and 'gift' cannabis to their clients (Khalil, 2017).

The Cannabis Social Club model

The Cannabis Social Club is another possible model for the supply of cannabis featured in previous analyses, and the principal subject of this study. Under this model cannabis users are able to join a non-profit collective and in that context (self-) organize the cultivation of cannabis, which is distributed exclusively among the respective members of each Club. Key to both self-supply and the CSC model is the idea that the production and distribution of cannabis takes place in a somewhat domestic and closed sphere. While in the case of self-supply this occurs at an individual level (i.e. one adult grows his/her own), it is developed in a shared or collective way in the context of the CSCs (i.e. several adults, members of the CSC, grow their own cannabis). In principle, both models rely on (relatively) small-scale production, limited by the number of members or with restrictions being introduced in terms of the number of plants cultivated at a time. However, as noted in Chapter 2 (and throughout this dissertation), in practice there might have been deviations from that notion, with some CSCs relying on larger plantations (Decorte et al., 2017).

The model has been only subject to nationwide regulation in Uruguay (Queirolo et al., 2015), and remains the product of bottom-up initiatives of users in most other jurisdictions (Blickman, 2014). Advertisement is not allowed, or is not a common practice among CSCs (Chapter 2). It has been noted that the CSC model *“appears to have the potential to undercut a meaningful segment of the illegal market while nonetheless confining the industry to traditional craft or artisanal production methods that avert the sort of price collapse that could accompany legalization of large-scale commercial production”* (Caulkins et al., 2015a, p. 59; Pardo, 2014). It would be possible to introduce quality control and labelling processes within this model, although these seem to be lacking in current practices (Decorte et al., 2017). Based on the literature reviewed, there seem to have been applications of the model to both recreational and medical markets, but there is a dearth of knowledge about how the supply of cannabis for medical purposes takes place in those outlets. Taxation has not been much discussed in relation to the CSC model (although Barriuso (2011) noted that some CSCs may have, voluntarily, applied VAT taxes on the distribution of cannabis among their members).

The government monopoly model

Within a government monopoly model, the government would assume the tasks of operating the supply chain – i.e. a step further from licensing and regulating (Caulkins et al., 2015a). A number of authors have suggested the introduction of this model as, drawing on lessons from alcohol and tobacco regulatory experiences, it might fulfil public health goals (Haden & Emerson, 2014; Pacula et al., 2014; Room, 2008). It would facilitate enforcement as *“if only the government is allowed to grow marijuana, then anything else that is produced would clearly be illegal”* (Caulkins et al., 2013c, p. 1049). Different strategies with regards to pricing and taxation could also be foreseen. Another likely advantage of this model is that it would allow states to artificially keep prices high, which in turn could help reduce consumption – if combined with

“aggressive deterrence against underground market suppliers” (Caulkins, 2017; Pacula et al., 2014, p. 1023). This model would allow for the introduction of quality control practices and could be a way to avoid the risks associated with product promotion and advertising, if the states opted to restrict advertisement (Caulkins et al., 2013c; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014). A potential issue arising from this model relates to the limited product selection and innovation in comparison to what would be expected in a commercial and competitive model (Caulkins et al., 2013c).

One example of the implementation of this model is the state-controlled supply of cannabis enabled by recent Uruguayan legislation (Law 19.172 and subsequent regulation) (Delgado, 2015; Espectador, 2015; Graham, 2015; La Nacion, 2015a, 2015b). While the production of cannabis is not directly undertaken by the government or by a designated public body – as the broad definition above would suggest - only a very limited number of licenses will be granted to private companies.⁴¹ To date, two licenses have been issued (Corda & Fusero, 2016). The operators cultivate cannabis in state-owned properties, with 24/7 security also being guaranteed by both the licensed operators and the state (Cibils, 2014; Corda & Fusero, 2016; IRCCA, 2014, 2015). What is more, the strains, packaging and price of the cannabis produced under this scheme are to be set by the Institute for the Regulation and Control of Cannabis (IRCCA) (Cibils, 2014; IRCCA, 2014). The distribution of the cannabis is taking place at licensed pharmacies since July 2017 (Law 19.172; Decree 120/014), a proposition which was initially met with some resistance by representatives of the pharmacy sector (Eduardo Savio, as cited in Wang, 2014). There are currently 12 pharmacies distributing cannabis to registered users in Uruguay, five of which are based in Montevideo (IRCCA, 2018b). Access is restricted to adult users, Uruguayan citizens or permanent residents in the country, who must register in a national database (and select one of the three supply models legally available: self-supply, CSCs, or sales through pharmacies) (IRCCA, 2018a). Registered users can acquire up to 10grams per week or 40grams per month (IRCCA, 2018a).

In the specific case of Uruguay, the state is not the only producer nor the only distributor of cannabis. However, there is tight control by the state, which determines the quantity being produced and sets the price per gram, oversees all stages of the supply chain, and does not allow any branding or advertisement (Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Graham, 2015; Pardo, 2014; Walsh & Ramsey, 2015). As the model has recently been introduced, many important aspects about its functioning are still not known. Canada plans also to introduce, in the summer of 2018, a legalized framework for the supply of cannabis which may include (at least in some provinces) some elements of a monopoly model (as government retailers may be the only cannabis distributors).

⁴¹ According to Pacula et al. (2014) *“this model could still allow privatized production and, in the case of marijuana, cultivation and processing if the state monopoly focused entirely on distribution and retail sales”* (p. 1023).

The non-profit license model

We refer also to a model based on non-profit licenses, drawing on the notion brought forward by Caulkins et al. (2015a). Within this model, the government would grant licenses only to organizations that do not seek to maximize profits. These licenses could allow both the production and distribution of cannabis, or a system of separate licenses for each of these supply phases could be introduced. Additional conditions could be required, for instance ensuring that any surplus revenue would be applied in drug treatment or use prevention programmes (Caulkins et al., 2015a). A common feature between this model, self-supply and CSCs relates to their non-profit nature. While in the context of the CSC model, supply is only guaranteed to members of those organizations, under a non-profit license system distribution is not necessarily restricted by membership. This model has a relatively low potential of increasing the incentives to advertising and harmful use (Caulkins et al., 2015a). To our knowledge, this model has not been implemented to date.

The for-profit license model

Within a model of for-profit licenses both production and distribution of cannabis would be regulated – even if separate licenses for production only or distribution only could also be conceived. The government could introduce specific requirements, making the licensing process more or less restrict, and limiting the size of the market - in what would correspond to a “*structured oligopoly*” (Caulkins et al., 2015a). By reducing the number of licensees, monitoring and inspection of the operators would be facilitated (Caulkins et al., 2013c). The small number of licensees constitutes the key difference between this model and a competitive regulated model, which although based on a licensing system generally does not introduce a limit to the number of licenses granted or allows for a larger number of licenses to be attributed.

The Dutch coffee shop policy can be seen as an example of a for-profit license model where only a part of the supply chain, i.e. retail sales, have been authorized on the basis of a license system, with the licenses being capped at the municipal level (Bieleman, Mennes, & Sijstra, 2017). The municipalities allowing the establishment of coffee shops have adopted different maximum thresholds for the number of coffee shops that can be licensed but overall the number of coffee shops active in the country has declined in recent years (Bieleman et al., 2017). This model first emerged following a revision of the Opium Act in 1976 and the 1979 Guidelines for Investigation and Prosecution (Blickman & Jelsma, 2009; Chatwin, 2003; Decorte & Solinge, 2006; Korf, 2002; Korf, 2008; Ooyen-Houben, 2006). The Guidelines defined as key priority the dismantling of large scale production and trafficking, and granted discretionary powers to the law enforcement and judicial authorities to refrain from enforcing violations concerning small scale possession or sale of cannabis (to a maximum of initially 30grams, reduced in 1995 to 5grams) (Loo, Hoorens, Hof, & Kahan, 2003; Monshouwer, Laar, & Vollebergh, 2011a; Ours, 2011).

A formal policy was introduced to regulate the activities of the coffee shops, the so-called AHOJ-G rules: no advertisement (“*gffichering*”); no sale of hard drugs (“*harddrugs*”); no nuisance (“*overlast*”); no sale to minors (“*jongeren*”); and no sale of large quantities (“*grote hoeveelheden*”), i.e. up to 5 grams per transaction, as mentioned above (Grund, 2013; Korf, 2002; Korf, 2008; MacCoun, 2013; Monshouwer et al., 2011a; Ours, 2011). The coffee shops are allowed to stock up to 500grams of cannabis (MacCoun & Reuter, 1997). At the coffee shops, users can acquire herbal cannabis and cannabis resin (hashish) (Rigter & Niesink, 2017). The production of cannabis is not addressed by this policy, an ambiguity often termed the ‘back door’ problem (Grund & Brecksema, 2017; Korf, 2008, 2011). Grund and Brecksema (2017) argued that a shift in law enforcement prioritization, from an earlier focus on larger cannabis growers (since 1969) to small-scale growers (since the early 2000s) (Belackova, Maalsté, Zabransky, & Grund, 2015),⁴² contributed to an increased presence of criminal organizations’ involvement in the production of cannabis that is in turn supplied by the coffee shops.

In 2012, the government piloted additional changes to the coffee shop model in the three southern provinces of the country (Limburg, Noord-Brabant and Zeeland) (Ooyen-Houben, Bieleman, Korf, & De Witte, 2017). New criteria for the functioning of coffee shops were then introduced, which sought to limit access: coffee shops would be accessible for members only (the B criteria - “*besloten*”), and could only admit local residents as members (the I rule - “*ingezetenen*”). The new rules, also termed the ‘weed club pass’ received much critique,⁴³ which pointed to issues concerning users’ reluctance to register as members and increased nuisance and street dealing (Brouwer & Schilder, 2012; Grund, 2013; Maalste & Panhuysen, 2015; MacCoun, 2013; Ooyen-Houben et al., 2017). Later in 2012, the membership criteria was abolished (Ooyen-Houben et al., 2017). The residency criteria remains applicable but decisions around its enforcement are left to the local municipalities, which may also introduce further requirements and regulations (Grund, 2013; Loo et al., 2003; MacCoun & Reuter, 1997, 2001a; MacCoun, 2011; Ooyen-Houben, Bieleman, & Korf, 2014).⁴⁴

A competitive regulated market

A competitive regulated market for cannabis can also be introduced. This model has often been associated with the regime applied to alcohol, in the sense that although production and distribution may be developed in an open market, as with other economic activities, additional rules would apply to the production and commerce of cannabis (Caulkins et al., 2015a). These

⁴² Korf (2011) clarified that: “*although the number of plants is commonly the most important criterion for the police to distinguish these [small and large cultivation sites], and locations with over 500 plants generally being considered ‘large’ cultivation sites, there is no clear dividing line: technical equipment present at a site is also taken into consideration*” (p. 184).

⁴³ Even before its implementation, research among coffee shop visitors in Amsterdam and Utrecht reported that most were against the registration criteria foreseen in the then forthcoming policy (Korf, Doekhie, & Wouters, 2011; Wouters & Korf, 2011).

⁴⁴ For instance, some mayors of municipalities near the Dutch border have ordered the closure or relocation of coffee shops (e.g. Maastricht, Roosendaal) (Monschouwer, et al., 2011).

could address quality control, packaging, introduce limits to quantities sold per user, among many other technical aspects. This type of cannabis-specific regulations that would be introduced in a competitive regulated market constitute precisely the main difference distinguishing this model from the extreme option of an unregulated (but legal) cannabis market – as in the latter the removal of the prohibition on the supply of cannabis would not be replaced by a dedicated regulatory structure.

A competitive regulated market model for the supply of cannabis has been passed by voters in eight US states: Colorado and Washington in 2012, Oregon and Alaska in 2014, Nevada, Maine,⁴⁵ Massachusetts and California in 2016 (Caulkins et al., 2013c; Cerdá & Kilmer, 2017; Crick, Haase, & Bewley-Taylor, 2013; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Marshall, 2013; McGreal, 2014; Room, 2014). Given that more information is available about the initiatives in Washington and Colorado, we will focus on those two cases.

Two different state agencies received the task of overseeing and regulating the industry: in Colorado, this is the responsibility of the Department of Revenue, while in Washington the state Liquor Control Board is the competent agency (Caulkins et al., 2015a; Crick et al., 2013; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardo, 2014). While Colorado adopted a vertical structure (i.e. one operator may operate as grower and as retailer), this is not possible under Washington legislation (Graham, 2015, p. 155; Pardo, 2014). Washington has also introduced production caps, in terms of the area allocated to production (Crick et al., 2013; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardo, 2014). ‘Seed to sale’ monitoring is introduced in both states, which means that *“growers, processors and retailers must inform the board [the Liquor Control Board in the case of Washington] of all transactions and keep records as to when plants are destroyed or harvested”* (Crick et al., 2013; Pardo, 2014).⁴⁶ In the two jurisdictions, the cannabis retail outlets are not allowed to sell other goods, and consumption on the premises is not permitted (Caulkins et al., 2015a; Pardo, 2014; Room, 2014). Colorado and Washington impose also certain requirements with regards to labelling, for instance requesting the inclusion of warning statements or an indication of THC content, among others (Room, 2014). Some restrictions on advertisement have also been introduced, for instance forbidding misleading statements or by allowing only one sign per retail outlet (Room, 2014).

With regards to taxation, Washington initially foresaw a 25% tax at production level, another 25% at processor level, and finally an additional 25% at the retail level (Caulkins, Andrzejewski, & Dahlkemper, 2013b; Crick et al., 2013; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Room, 2014). In addition, state and local sales taxes applied. As of July 2015, that tax scheme was replaced with a single 37%

⁴⁵ In Maine, no regulatory framework has been introduced to date and as a result the implementation of cannabis sales has been postponed (Zhang, 2018).

⁴⁶ Developing regulatory frameworks for pesticide use and cannabis testing remains challenging, although, for instance, according to Subritzky, Pettigrew, & Lenton (2017) Colorado has taken steps to list a number of acceptable pesticides that may be used in cannabis cultivation, and licensed a number of facilities to test the quality of the cannabis produced, although none of these has yet been certified to specifically test for the presence of pesticides or other harmful chemicals.

excise tax at the retail level (Smart, Caulkins, Kilmer, Davenport, & Midgette, 2017). In Colorado, the first tax scheme included a 15% excise tax at wholesale level as well as a 10% tax on retail, in addition to any existing local sales taxes (Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardo, 2014). Since July 2017, the retail tax was increased to 15% as well, but sales were exempted from state sales tax (Colorado Department of Revenue, 2018). The prices of cannabis in these contexts are defined by the market (Caulkins et al., 2013b; Crick et al., 2013). Neither Colorado nor Washington have developed a user registry and so *“it is possible that individuals, both in state and out of state, could drive to multiple retail establishments, purchasing the maximum limit at each and bundle the product for export out of state”* (Pardo, 2014, p. 734). The minimum age to acquire cannabis in both states is 21 years old. In Colorado and Washington, users can purchase 28grams (1 ounce) of herbal cannabis. Differentiated thresholds have been applied for other types of products (for instance, in Colorado, individuals seeking to purchase cannabis concentrates can acquire up to 8grams only). Research into Washington’s legal market has found an increase in sales of herbal cannabis with more than 20% THC, as well as the proliferation of other high potency cannabis products (extracts or concentrates) and methods of consumption (e.g. dabbing) (Carlini, Garrett, & Harwick, 2017; Smart et al., 2017).

An unregulated free market

The option of an unregulated free market for cannabis would bring us back to what McBride, Terry, and Inciardi (1999) referred to as ‘commercialism’, i.e. a *“virtually unlimited acceptance of free market distribution of goods and services”* (p. 11), without any regulatory framework establishing the conditions for the operation of that market for cannabis.

A note on the medical model(s)

Several medical models may be developed, as suggested by previous analysis (Belackova, Shanahan, & Ritter, 2017; Duke & Gross, 1998; Kleiman, 1992; MacCoun et al., 1996; Pacula, Powell, Heaton, & Sevigny, 2015), and thus this label in reality may encompass several different options. On the one hand, there could be an entirely separated model based on a prescription by a qualified medical professional, where the cannabis would be produced by specialized companies exclusively for this purpose and distributed also in specialized outlets (for instance, through authorized pharmacies), apart from recreational supply. For instance, Israel has developed, since the late 1990s, a medical program within which private companies are granted licenses by the Department of Health to produce cannabis (Kilmer et al., 2013b). In the Netherlands, one company (Bedrocan) has been contracted by the Dutch Ministry of Health to produce herbal cannabis for medical use since 2003 (Kilmer & Pacula, 2016). The cannabis is distributed in pharmacies throughout the country and is also exported by the Ministry of Health to other countries (e.g., Germany, Finland, Canada and the Czech Republic). As such, with regards to production, this can be seen as another example of the government monopoly

model outlined above, in this case exclusively applied to cannabis supplied for medicinal purposes. Another interesting development is the establishment of compassion clubs or medical dispensaries which have emerged predominantly in the US and in Canada. These clubs sought to provide a range of cannabis strains to medical users, offering also in some cases a space for social interaction and consumption on site (Feldman & Mandel, 1998). These outfits did not necessarily produce the cannabis supplied but predominantly participated in its distribution. On the other hand, some of the other models discussed above might be adapted to supply cannabis for both medical and non-medical purposes. This seems to have occurred in practice already, i.e. for instance, parallel to a CSC model for recreational purposes there are also accounts of CSCs integrating both recreational and medical users (and even exclusively serving medical users) (Decorte et al., 2017).

4. Conclusion

The current study is informed by previous scholarly contributions about the development of structures, 'supply architectures' or 'forms of legalization' for cannabis, as that allows us to have a more comprehensive oversight of the range of options, and to position CSCs alongside other supply models. Furthermore, it provides a strong basis for understanding the key traits and choices associated with the design of the various models. For instance, the level of government involvement in the supply chain will differ in light of the chosen model, ranging from control over production and/or distribution (in a government monopoly model), to playing an oversight function (in most other models). Different models will include also different types of producers (e.g. individual users, groups of users, the government, private operators), and a scale of production (small vs. large scale). Another important distinction relates to whether the models are profit driven or not. Potential risks associated with the commercialization of cannabis include increased and/or more aggressive marketing and advertisement (particularly targeting daily or heavy users, who account for most of the total consumption of cannabis) (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016). It may also allow for the development of a strong industry, from which it might be more difficult to retract (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016). For those (and other) reasons a number of authors have argued for the consideration of non-profit models, including the CSC (Caulkins, 2018; Decorte et al., 2016; Wilkins, 2018). Taking into account the known practices and key features of the CSC model as described in this and previous chapters, the current study will further analyse how the model has been operationalized in Belgium.

Chapter 5: Another green movement?⁴⁷ Lessons from the social movement field

1. Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, CSCs can be integrated within the broader efforts of the drug user movement, but remain distinctive in the sense that they also represent an user-driven market intervention or approach for the supply of cannabis. In Chapter 2, when providing an historical overview of the emergence of CSCs, we noted also the role of users - cannabis activists - in launching the model. There are also multiple references⁴⁸ in the scientific and grey literature which seem to allude to the presence of a ‘cannabis movement’ seeking reform of current prohibitionist cannabis laws, but the origins of the movement, its actors, and claims are often only superficially addressed or lack a clear articulation of social movement theories. In what follows, we consider the key theoretical directions from the study of social movements that will be mobilized in our analysis. In §3, we provide a review of previous accounts of the emergence and development of a cannabis movement in Spain and Uruguay (the key settings explored in previous research into CSCs), focusing particularly on the (as yet) meagre body of literature with a focus on CSCs’ involvement. The prior exploratory CSC study conducted in Belgium (Decorte, 2015) did not explicitly articulate a social movement perspective so the current analysis will make a first contribution to expanding that field of knowledge.

2. Considering a social movement perspective

Although social movements have been defined in different terms, Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2004) argued that that conceptualization typically integrates three or more of the following aspects: 1) collective or joint action, 2) change-oriented goals or claims, 3) extra- or non-institutional collective action, 4) some degree of organization and 5) temporal continuity (p. 6). Blending those aspects together, the authors proposed the following definition:

“social movements can be thought of as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part” (p. 11).

Also della Porta and Diani (2014) have highlighted particularly the emergence of conflictual collective action, in which individual and organized actors pursue or oppose social change

⁴⁷ Typically, the term ‘green’ is associated with environmental or ecological currents within criminology and social movement studies (Garner, 1996; Nurse, 2016).

⁴⁸ These range from somewhat generic references to a ‘green rush’ or ‘green revolution’ in media accounts and other publications (e.g., Fine, 2012), to more in-depth analysis of for instance the ‘medical cannabis movement’ (Heddleston, 2013; Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013).

through different actions or initiatives (dense informal networks), developing a sense of common purpose, connectedness and collective identity (similarly, also: Diani, 1992). The notion of collective identity in turn implies that social movements are more than multiple episodes of protest, and instead, a sense of “*shared commitment to a cause*” arises: “*as a result, organizational and individual actors involved in collective action no longer merely pursue specific goals, but come to regard themselves as elements of much larger and encompassing processes of change – or resistance to change*” (della Porta & Diani, 2014, p. 22).

Social movements have been classified on the basis of different criteria, and there is no consensus around one particular scheme (Marín, 2008; Marín, Hinojosa, & Allen-Perkins, 2015). An important aspect of such classifications relates to a historical criterion, which allows the distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements (Marín et al., 2015). Some authors have contended that there has been a shift in the type of contention of contemporary movements, as instead of the earlier focus on economic growth, and ‘material reproduction’, social movements of the new type are more concerned with cultural values (Habermas, 1981; Offe, 1985). According to Touraine (1985) “*new social movements are less socio-political and more socio-cultural*” (p. 215). Other authors have offered some critique of this perspective, noting that ‘new social movements’ do not imply a structural transformation, but instead represent the continuation of the evolution of protest (della Porta & Diani, 2014). della Porta and Diani (2014) have also warned against over-generalization, noting that “*it is important to be aware that not all examples of collective action in recent decades are automatically of the new type*” (p. 61). Four core elements may help make that distinction. Offe (1985) maintained that ‘new social movements’, despite addressing a wide range of *issues* (e.g. environment, sexual identity, the urban space, etc.), seem to be rooted in common *values* accentuating autonomy and identity (which as the author noted correspond at an organizational level with “*decentralization, self-government, and self-help*” p. 210). Also in terms of the ‘*modes of action*’, the author argued that groups in ‘new social movements’ are more informal, ad hoc and egalitarian, and rely on more ‘unconventional’ action. Finally, although Offe (1985) noted that the *actors’* socio-economic status was not as defining as in previous movements, the social base for ‘new social movements’ consists primarily of individuals from the middle class (particularly from the ‘new middle class’), as well as other groups, normally not active in the labour market (e.g. unemployed, students, retired). Other authors have also emphasized the role played by the new middle class and high-educated individuals in contemporary social movements (Habermas, 1981; Marín et al., 2015). Examples of social movements typically considered ‘new’ include the environmental movement, the peace movement, or urban movements, among others (Kriesi, 1996; Marín et al., 2015).

Theoretical directions from the study of social movements

The field of social movement studies is underpinned by a theoretical pluralism (Garner, 1996; Marín et al., 2015; Ruggiero & Montagna, 2008a). However, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald

(1996) pointed to an “*emerging consensus*” among social movement scholars with regards to the importance of three perspectives, which the authors sought to integrate (see also: Tarrow, 2011). Accordingly, in order to study the emergence and development of social movements,⁴⁹ three theoretical perspectives can be combined: **political opportunity structures** – to consider “*the structure of political opportunities and constraints confronting the movement*”, **mobilizing structures** – “*the forms of organization (informal as well as formal) available to the insurgents*”, and the **framing processes** – “*the collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action*” (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 2). These scholars recommend the integration of these three lenses as they would enable a comprehensive understanding of the origins and development of social movements:

“[...] most political movements and revolutions are set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to challenge. But these ‘political opportunities’ are but a necessary prerequisite to action. In the absence of sufficient organization – whether formal or informal – such opportunities are not likely to be seized. Finally, mediating between the structural requirements of opportunity and organization are the emergent meanings and definitions – or frames – shared by the adherents of the burgeoning movement” (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 8).

As such, the political opportunity structures perspective focuses on the dynamics between the movement and the institutionalized political system, guided by the idea that social movements are shaped by the broader context of ‘political constraints and opportunities’ in which they are embedded. In turn, at a meso-level of analysis, considering the mobilizing structures⁵⁰ will shed light on the organizational dynamics of social movements. In that regard, the resource mobilization theory developed by McCarthy and Zald (1973) focuses particularly (as discussed in more detail below) on the formal organizations active within social movements. Finally, the third perspective pays particular attention to the shared definitions and meanings that legitimate and drive collective action, or frames (Snow, 2004). As Marín et al. (2015) argued, rather than theoretical incompatibility among the different perspectives, the differences lay primarily on the specific problems being studied, and the levels or dimensions of that analysis: micro, corresponding to the individual level, meso, with a focus on the organizational aspects of the movement, and macro, considering the broader context of opportunities and restraints.

Political opportunity structures

The central premise informing the political opportunity structures theory is that “*the timing and fate of movements is largely dependent upon the opportunities afforded insurgents by the shifting institutional structure and ideological disposition of those in power*” (McAdam, 1996a, p. 23). As such, Tarrow (1996) offered the following definition of political opportunity structure:

⁴⁹ The authors noted that this perspective is particularly well-suited for comparative analysis across national contexts as well.

⁵⁰ McAdam et al. define mobilizing structures as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (p. 3).

“consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national – signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements” (p. 54). To refine and add clarity to the concept, several authors have discussed the key dimensions of a system’s ‘structure of political opportunities’ (p. 26) (Rucht, 1996; Ruggiero & Montagna, 2008b; Tarrow, 1996). McAdam (1996a) synthesized those views in the following list of relevant dimensions: “1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; 2) the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; 3) the presence or absence of elite allies; 4) the state’s capacity and propensity for repression” (p. 27).⁵¹ Accordingly, if formal or informal power is concentrated and not responsive to a group’s demand, the opportunity structure is relatively closed (Eisinger, 1973). At the same time, if changes in the legal or institutional systems occur, these are likely to be exploited by a movement, and so would comprise the emergence of new influential allies within the political system. These allies’ realm of influence can be diverse, as Tarrow (1996) noted: *“allies can act as a friend in court, as guarantors against brutal repression, or as acceptable negotiators on behalf of constituencies which – if left a free hand – might be far more difficult for authorities to deal with”* (p. 55). It should also be noted that while research underpinned by this perspective has tended to focus on the domestic level of political institutions, the international context can also play an important role, adding pressures or opportunities to social movement actors (McAdam, 1996a).

As McAdam’s (1996) notion suggested (by alluding to a *“shifting institutional structure”*), the political structure is not static or unchanging. According to this perspective there is an intentional or unintentional interaction between the political system and movements (Eisinger, 1973; Garner, 1996). Tarrow (1996) specified four ways of ‘making opportunities’: a group can shape the political opportunity structure by its own action, opening up the system; this expansion of opportunities can also affect other groups or movements (e.g. *“protesting groups put issues on the agenda with which other identify, and demonstrate the utility of collective action that other copy or innovate upon”*, p. 59); differently, groups can also unintentionally create opportunities for their opponents, or for the elites, for instance when their actions are subject to repression or, in a positive way e.g. *“when opportunistic political elites seize the opportunity created by challengers to proclaim themselves as tribunes of the people”* (p. 60).

Mobilizing structures

Having considered the context of political opportunities, mobilization is here understood as *“the process of creating movement structures and preparing and carrying out protest actions which are visible movement ‘products’ addressed to actors and publics outside the movement”* (Rucht, 1996, p. 186). The study of the ‘mobilizing structures’ typically involves moving away from the structural context and instead focuses on the (meso level) social movement organizational forms and repertoires of action (Garner, 1996; Marín et al., 2015; McCarthy,

⁵¹ With the exception of ‘repression’ all other elements were consensual among the contributions reviewed by McAdam (1996).

1996). Organizations play an important role within a social movement, as they mobilize resources such as people and their time and efforts, and financial resources, among others (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Rucht, 1996),⁵² they help develop a movement's sense of identity, and ensure continuity of the movement claims through time (della Porta & Diani, 2014). McCarthy and Zald (1977) advanced an often cited definition of social movement organization as a key concept to their resource mobilization theory. Accordingly, a social movement organization *"is a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals"* (p. 1218). Social movement organizations (SMOs) are thus important building blocks within a social movement (Kriesi, 1996), and have been described as 'formal movement-mobilizing structures' (McCarthy, 1996, p. 145).⁵³ Nevertheless, a social movement should not be equated with its social movement organizations (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Lofland, 1996).

At least two broad forms of SMOs have been discussed in the literature (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Lofland, 1996; McCarthy & Zald, 1973). On the one hand, SMOs may take the form of professional social movement organizations. In such cases, they are characterized by:

"1) a leadership that devotes full time to the movement; a) a large proportion of resources originating outside the aggrieved group that the movement claims to represent; 2) a very small or nonexistent membership base or a paper membership [...]; 3) attempts to impart the image of 'speaking for a potential constituency'; 4) attempts to influence policy toward that same constituency" (McCarthy & Zald, 1973, p. 20).

On the other hand, participatory movement organizations can emerge, which assume stronger participation from their constituencies, and may have different degrees of formal structuration (della Porta & Diani, 2014). The organizational form taken by different groups can also be understood as a movement frame, as it defines a specific way individuals act together (Clemens, 1996). As Clemens (1996) put it: *"Answers to the pragmatic question: 'how do we organize?' reverberate inward to the shaping of collective identity and outward to link movements to institutions or opportunity structures"* (p. 209).

Kriesi (1996) identified three other types of formal organizations (beyond SMOs) which may also be involved in a social movement, even if in different capacities. Service organizations such as restaurants, print shops, and educational institutions, may contribute to a movement even if not directly engaged in the mobilization of participants. Secondly, movement associations may mobilize a movement's constituency but only indirectly through the provision of services as they do not engage in the movement's actions. This is the case of self-help organizations or other types of groups created by the movement to attend to specific needs of its constituency. Finally, parties or interest groups may also be active in a social movement, although they are

⁵² Edwards & McCarthy (2004) developed a typology of social movement resources which included moral, cultural, social-organizational, human and material resources.

⁵³ McCarthy & Zald (1977) also put forward the notion of social movement industry, corresponding to *"all SMOs that have as their goal the attainment of the broadest preferences of a social movement"* (p. 1218).

typically legitimate actors within the political system and, more importantly, pursue goals through institutionalized means (e.g. lobbying)⁵⁴ – which does not correspond to the main nor the only strategy adopted by SMOs (Rucht, 1996).

An important aspect of studying SMOs is to understand their development and changes. In early phases of a movement, SMOs are typically weak and informal, and with limited resources: *“the only resources available tend to be the active commitment, courage and imagination of the movement’s activists and adherents”* (Kriesi, 1996, p. 154). As their resources increase and SMOs begin to grow, internal structuration will become more complex, especially in terms of: 1) formalization, i.e. adoption of formal statutes or bylaws, and internal procedures, formal leadership, and office structure; 2) professionalization, mainly by including paid staff who can build a movement ‘career’; 3) internal differentiation, by developing a functional division of labour and creating territorial subunits (decentralization); 4) integration, for instance through horizontal coordinating structures or oligarchization (i.e. the power is concentrated in a minority of activists within the SMO) (Kriesi, 1996). The increase of internal structuration across these four parameters will contribute to the stabilization and longevity of SMOs (Kriesi, 1996).

At the same time (in accordance with the Weber-Michels model), SMOs’ trajectory is likely to be associated with increased conservatism, and a more moderate, and institutionalized repertoire of action. Nevertheless, the inevitability of those changes has been questioned, and a number of scholars have suggested that other transition courses are possible. Among them, Kriesi (1996) argued that SMOs can evolve and adapt features characteristic of the other types of organizations active in social movements. For instance, if an SMO becomes more institutionalized, implementing a more conventional repertoire of action, it moves closer to an interest group (Snow et al., 2004). Differently, if the provision of paid services for members becomes the primary focus of the SMO, this progression towards commercialization corresponds to the description of supportive or service organizations. In turn, an increasing focus on solidary services or social activities would correspond to self-help organizations. Radicalization can also occur, often with reinvigorating mobilization.

Tilly (1995) coined the term ‘repertoire of action’ to refer to the different actions and strategies employed by protest groups. A wide variety of actions has been identified in the literature, and the repertoire of action as evolved across social movement over time (e.g. with the advent of technology, online platforms have also been used to mobilize and engage with the movement’s constituencies – see for instance: Earl, Hunt, Garrett, and Dal (2015), Garrett (2006)).⁵⁵ Some actions may be more conventional such as lobbying, voting, petitioning, but SMOs often also resort to confrontational tactics, including marches, strikes, demonstrations or violent acts, as well as to cultural forms of action (e.g. rituals, spectacles, music, poetry) (Taylor & Dyke, 2004).

⁵⁴ As Garner (1996) explained: *“to say that practices and discourses are institutionalized means that they recur on a regular basis, persist over time, are to be found throughout a society, and encounter relatively few social controls to prevent them from taking place”* (p. 12).

⁵⁵ With Tieberghien, J. (forthcoming), we also conducted an exploratory analysis of YouTube videos concerning Belgian CSCs (please see Annex).

Taylor and Dyke (2004) argued that while SMOs are more likely to draw on actions or tactics with which they are familiar, the use of innovative actions may be more successful in achieving policy change. An effective repertoire seems to relate also to the variety of forms of protest implemented by the groups, militancy (i.e. the use of disruptive tactics), size (e.g. large-scale protests), and cultural resonance (Taylor & Dyke, 2004). The different tactics employed may change through the course of the movement, and stem from different strategic options or logics (della Porta & Diani, 2014). For instance, marches and protests seek to demonstrate the numerical strength of and support for the movement, while actions implying serious risk or cost for participants usually follow a logic of ‘bearing witness’ (e.g. *“civil disobedience, knowingly breaking what are considered to be unjust laws, rests on this logic”*, p. 177).

Framing processes

The concept of frame and framing has long been integrated in social movement thinking (at least since the 1970s) (Gamson, 2004). Scholars in this field have typically drawn on Goffman’s (1974) work on frame analysis. In Snow and Benford’s (1992) words, a frame is an “interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions with one’s present or past environment” (p. 137). According to Snow and Benford (1992), frames can serve three functions: 1) they are used by activists to single out a particular social condition which is considered unjust or problematic and in need of correction (punctuating function); 2) they are used to not only identify the problem but also propose a resolution for it (attribution function); and 3) they allow for the articulation of a range of events (articulation function). Frames are not only constructed at an individual level but also developed by organizations, and thus a line of investigation in this field has focused on framing processes at the meso, organizational level of analysis (Snow, 2004).

Indeed, following the emergence of the movement, a key challenge facing social movements is how to confront the established political environment, and framing processes play a key role in that regard (McAdam, 1996b). Framing is an ongoing process (Snow, 2004), which targets different arenas of public discourse in an attempt to influence public policy, including the general public, the media, the electoral and governmental arenas (McCarthy, Smith, & Zald, 1996). Thus, although not the only arena for communicating movement frames, the media is certainly a major target for SMOs, as they often lack direct access to decision-makers, and the media allows them to reach a larger audience (Gamson, 2004; Klandermans & Goslinga, 1996; McCarthy et al., 1996). Although many SMOs at times communicate through the media even when lacking a clear media plan (McCarthy et al., 1996), a successful framing strategy can increase the movement’s ‘mobilization potential’, both among the core constituency of the movement, as well as by other possible supporters (or ‘bystanders’) (Gamson, 2004). Gamson (2004) noted that such framing through the media has also the potential of neutralizing or discrediting the framing efforts of opposed parties. The media can also be instrumental in linking movements with other political and social actors (Klandermans & Goslinga, 1996). Nevertheless, media access is often also difficult to achieve, and there are other issues with

regards to news production that might hinder SMOs efforts (Gamson, 2004). Beyond the tendency to focus on negative, short-lived or spectacular events, as well as the necessary selectivity imposed by media outlets (given the limited space available for the potential material), the information is also transformed, as noted by Klandermans and Goslinga (1996):

“In short, mass media do not transmit information without transforming it. Space limitations alone introduce selectivity in the production of media discourse. Mass media select and interpret available information according to principles that define news value. In so doing they produce a transformed reality which diverges from the reality as a social actor defines it” (p. 320).

3. A review of the ‘cannabis movement’ in Spain and Uruguay

Echoes from Spain

Research into the Spanish context explored the *“activist movement of people using cannabis in Spain”* (Arana & Montañés, 2011, p. 168), which opposes the current prohibitionist cannabis laws and seeks to contribute to a legislative change in that regard. In particular, Marín (2008, 2009) work should be highlighted here. The author’s doctoral dissertation focused on the cannabis movement in Spain, which he considered as a new social movement. Some of that study’s goals resonate with our own research objectives (as outlined in PART I): for instance Marín aimed to capture the history and development of the movement in Spain, and to examine the profile of the *“most direct participants in the movement”* (Marín, 2008, p. 116, own translation). The author also analysed the repertoire of action of the movement, and policymakers’ (and other stakeholders’) reaction to and relationship with the movement.

While there had been earlier activist efforts around cannabis, Marín (2008, 2009) as well as other scholars situate the emergence of a cannabis movement in the country in the 1990s (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Calafat et al., 2000; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017). Accordingly, the passage of the Law 1/1992, which foresaw administrative sanctions (usually fines up to around 6000EUR) for the public consumption and possession of cannabis (among other substances) was a precipitating factor for the eruption of the cannabis movement in Spain:

“The vast majority of users considered it deeply illegitimate. So it can be argued that it [the new law] played the role of precipitating factor for the cannabis movement” (Marín, 2008, p. 163, own translation).

Another important mark for the start of the movement was the establishment of the first formally registered cannabis association (in 1991): the ARSEC (‘Asociación Ramon Santos de Estudios sobre el Cannabis’). Two years later, this association organized the first collective cultivation for their members, after being informed by the public prosecutor (upon their request) that the cultivation of cannabis by and for a group of adult cannabis users would, in

principle, not constitute criminal activity (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Montañés, 2017). Although the plantation was later seized by the police and some of the representatives of the association were convicted in the Supreme Court, this first initiative has been termed the 'Catalan breach' (Barriuso, 2011; Martínez & Arana, 2015), as in subsequent years other cannabis associations were established, adopting similar bylaws and activities (Marín, 2008). Marín (2008) considered that the cannabis movement entered a second phase between 1994 and 2001. During that period the cannabis associations and individual activists tried to coordinate efforts and the first supra-organization to represent several cannabis associations was created ('Coordinadora Estatal de Asociaciones por la Normalización del Cannabis'). The experiments with collective cultivations continued during this period, and the first association explicitly including in its bylaws the goal of cultivating and using cannabis was established in 2001 ('Club de Catadores de Cannabis de Barcelona') (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Martínez, 2015). This is usually considered the first registered CSC, and marks a departure from the first phase associations (which referred only to the 'study of cannabis') (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Martínez, 2015). In a third phase (2002-2004), facing increasing scrutiny and pressure by the central government - which was considering the introduction of legislation concerning 'drugs propaganda', likely to affect several actors of the cannabis movement, including grow shops (many of which were run by individuals engaged with CSCs) and the specialist magazines about cannabis which had been launched - a first CSC Federation was created in 2003 ('Federación de Asociaciones Cannábicas') to coordinate and centralize efforts (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2012b; Marín, 2008; Martínez, 2015; Montañés, 2017). Both this CSC Federation as well as many CSCs integrated also the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD) (Montañés, 2017). Although Marín's analysis only considers the movement's progress until 2007, other authors have noted that the number of CSCs has increased, and their practices have diverged in recent years (see also Chapter 2), and since 2011 multiple CSC federations have been created to represent them (Martínez, 2015; Montañés, 2017). Applying the theory of political opportunities structure, Martínez (2015) pointed also to some opening at the regional and municipal levels to debate and to introduce legislation regulating CSCs' functioning (particularly in the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Navarra). Montañés (2017) noted that while there were some signs of consolidation and professionalization of the movement, such as for instance the creation of the first Spanish think-tank specializing in cannabis policy in 2012 (Fundación Renovatio), as well as the platform Regulación Responsable in 2014 (echoing an Uruguayan initiative, as noted in the next section) which gathered over 100 cannabis activist organizations, the movement seems to have entered a period of crisis:

"The diversification of CSC models has also been accompanied by a certain dispersion of the activist milieu" (p. 153, own translation).

The author reviewed previous analyses of the challenges affecting the movement and identified six key weaknesses that, in her view, helps to understand this current phase, namely: 1) an over-focus on the leaders of the movement (described as a "cult of personality"), who are

typically white, middle-class men; 2) limited reflection and self-criticism among activists; 3) some degree of authoritarianism; 4) limited use of participatory methods in drawing movement proposals; 5) internal disputes, power conflicts and difficulties in joining efforts; 6) 'endogamy'; and 7) gender imbalance with limited women's participation (Gálvez, Amiguet, & Obradors, 2017).

The CSCs have been described as "*central actors of the movement*", given that they generate the collective identity of the movement, implement their repertoire of action, and guarantee a lasting presence through time (Alvarez, Gamella, & Parra, 2016; Calafat et al., 2000; Marín, 2008, 454). Marín (2008) built on the typology of social movement organizations developed by Diani and Donati (1999), and considered CSCs as being participatory movement organizations, given the participative focus of these associations, the decentralized governance structure which engages in confrontational and resistance action. But the movement has gathered other actors as well. Arana and Montañés (2011) have, for instance, noted the engagement of specialist magazines dedicated to the cannabis culture,⁵⁶ of grow shops, as well as other networks and groups, and individual users. The authors noted for instance the efforts of the so-called Platform for Legalization, which presented a manifesto signed by 500 professionals from diverse areas in the Basque Country arguing for legislative reform. As noted above, multiple supra-organizations such as CSC Federations played a role in the movement. At the same time, as noted by Calafat et al. (2000), alongside these actors, other groups defending the broader goal of legalization of all drugs emerged too.

Drawing on the notion of repertoire of collective action, Marín (2008) identified and classified a range of actions developed primarily by the CSCs: 1) the collective cultivation of cannabis, which sought to provoke a judicial reaction, as noted also by Alvarez et al. (2016): "*these forms of cannabis production were perceived by activists as a form of resistance, affirmation and protest for legal change. Hence cannabis cultivation took on an unexpected meaning. It became an innovation in the repertoire of non-violent collective actions by militants in a new social movement*" (p. 78). But other actions were also pursued, such as 2) competitions among cannabis growers such as 'Cannabis Cups', which established quality standards for the field, promoted home cultivation and challenged the current legislation (Calafat et al., 2000); 3), study meetings, including roundtables, seminars or symposia focusing on cannabis-related issues (Calafat et al., 2000); 4) legal representation of growers facing legal challenges; 5) protests; 6) informative campaigns (Calafat et al., 2000); and 7) proposals for alternative legislation (Barriuso, 2005).⁵⁷ While some of these actions are common to other social movements (e.g. protests), others are rather novel forms of contention (e.g. collective

⁵⁶ Among these, the magazine *Cáñamo*, first launched in 1997 and still published on a monthly basis today, has remained close to the cannabis movement (Calafat et al., 2010).

⁵⁷ While initially the CSC model was included in some of these proposals as a transitional option, in later claims the model was considered as a stand-alone and definitive alternative for the cannabis market, defended by the movement (Barriuso, 2005, 2011).

cultivation, Cannabis Cups). As the author noted, the repertoire was flexible and adapted to the changing political opportunities.

Echoes from Uruguay

As noted in preceding chapters, Uruguay has recently passed legislation (Law 19.172) which legalizes and regulates three models for the supply of cannabis, including CSCs. The presence of CSCs in the country is a novelty that emerged only after the new law was approved, but some of the clubs have roots in other organizations which had been previously involved in the cannabis movement (Queirolo et al., 2016).⁵⁸ Hoffmann (2016) noted that no consensus has emerged from previous analyses of the process leading to that reform in terms of the role played by the different actors involved. Accordingly, some authors have emphasized the role played by the Uruguayan executive branch, describing the policy reform as a result of a top-down decision, while others have acknowledged cannabis activists as the key drivers of change (thus corresponding to a bottom-up process). Yet others have incorporated both approaches (Castro, 2014; Hoffmann, 2016), confirming the complexity of the converging factors on the basis of the change, as Castro (2014) noted: *“the complexity of the Uruguayan case suggests that radical change in marijuana regulation might not spread easily”*.

While the first activist efforts in the field of cannabis can be traced back to the late 1980s (following the end of the civic-military dictatorship in 1985), especially driven by youth groups (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Arocena & Aguiar, 2017), it is only during the 2000s that references to an actual social movement can be found in the literature. In particular, 2005 has been described as a turning point in this process. On the one hand, Aguiar and Musto (2015) highlighted the (first) electoral victory of the coalition of left-wing parties Broad Front (*Frente Amplio*), which according to the authors represented an opening of the political opportunities structures. Arocena and Aguiar (2017) also referred to this notion, suggesting that this change was explored by civil society, not only in relation to the claims around cannabis, but also with regards to legislation on abortion and same-sex marriage (Aguiar & Musto, 2015).⁵⁹ On the other hand, Castro (2014) identified also an “episode of contention” in 2005 which, in his view, truly ignited the rise of the ‘cannabis movement’ in the country. The event was a protest in the centre of Montevideo, which gathered hundreds of people demanding the legalization of cannabis. Castro (2014) argued that the event *“offered a glimpse into what a collective, organized around a common grievance, could look like”* (p. 9), and may have motivated activists, seeing that the police did not intervene during the event (nor in a subsequent protest in 2006). Another element considered in the literature to explain the genesis and development of the cannabis movement relates to a framing (or re-framing) process in relation to the way cannabis

⁵⁸ A study by Queirolo et al. (2016) found that such CSCs show a stronger engagement in other activities besides the supply of cannabis (such as educational events, workshops, and risk reduction activities).

⁵⁹ In 2013, Uruguay passed legislation legalizing same-sex marriage (Law 19.075), and had also legalized abortion (before twelve weeks of gestation) in 2012 (Law 19.807) (Arocena & Aguiar, 2017).

and cannabis users were perceived (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Castro, 2014). In previous years (particularly around 2001-2002), the country had experienced an increase in the consumption of cocaine paste which, against a background of economic crisis, became an issue of social concern. Somewhat in contrast to that, cannabis activists sought to frame cannabis as a 'soft drug' or as the "*least bad' drug*" and cannabis users as 'responsible consumers' (Aguiar & Musto, 2015, p. 304; Castro, 2014), a shift that may have aided the movement's claims. Some authors discussed also a second phase of the movement since circa 2010, when the discussion of the cannabis bills was initiated (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Arocena & Aguiar, 2017).

In terms of the individuals and organizations participating in the movement, the literature has pointed to the creation of formal organizations, gathering groups of growers, users and other activists (Castro, 2014; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012). In addition, some of these organizations joined efforts and formed supra-organizations such as the 'Coordinator for Cannabis Legalization' (*Coordinadora por la Legalización del Cannabis*), or the even broader 'Responsible Regulation' (*Regulación Responsable*) – an organization gathering not only organizations from the cannabis movement, but also from the LGBT and environmental movements, as well as student unions, and several individual Uruguayan public figures (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Castro, 2014; Corda & Fusero, 2016). Hoffmann (2016) claimed that 'Responsible Regulation' represented an increase in terms of the professionalization of the cannabis movement in Uruguay, and highlighted the role and support of transnational activists to that effect. Accordingly, the Uruguayan movement benefited from both the financial support of other organizations (such as Open Society Foundations), as well as from field expertise, as some of the individuals and organizations teaming up with Uruguayan activists had been involved in successful campaigns for the legalization of cannabis in US states (Albrecht, 2014; Hoffmann, 2016). The repertoire of action of the organizations engaging in the cannabis movement in Uruguay has been described as innovative, and included the use of social network platforms to launch campaigns, public interventions through the media, protests and marches, concerts, but also workshops about cannabis cultivation or other cannabis-related themes, Cannabis Cups, and political debates, among others (Arocena & Aguiar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012). The cannabis activists also lobbied and tried to deepen connections with key political actors. Some of the organizations were actually able to play an advisory role in the development of the legislation (Arocena & Aguiar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016). For instance, it has been noted that the initial draft of the bill did not foreseen the possibility of legal home cultivation nor CSCs, but through the negotiations cannabis activists (especially those associated with ENCOD) pushed for its inclusion (Castro, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016).

4. Conclusion

A consideration of social movement perspectives in our analysis seems relevant, attending both to the conceptual tools and analytical focus developed by that discipline, as well as attending to previous research into CSCs and the broader cannabis movement (in Spain and Uruguay)

which has also, to some extent, been rooted in that tradition. For instance, some authors discussed openings in the political opportunities structure in both Spain and Uruguay to explain the emergence or local developments of the movement (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Martínez, 2015). At the same time, many authors explored the role played by the different mobilizing structures within the cannabis movement, considering a range of formal and informal actors. In this regard, the CSCs were described as important social movement organizations, and their repertoire of action was often analysed (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Castro, 2014; Marín, 2008; Montañés, 2017; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012). Finally, the framing processes adopted by Uruguayan cannabis activists to advance their goals were also subject to analysis (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Castro, 2014). Our analysis will draw on this body of knowledge and theoretical directions.

PART III: Research design and methods

1. A foreword: positioning within philosophical worldviews

This study departs from a pragmatist viewpoint.⁶⁰ Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the late decades of the 19th century, in a first phase driven by the work of American scholars (Peirce, James, and Dewey, among others), and which has had a resurgence from 1960 to present (the so-called neo-pragmatic period) (Cameron, 2011; Maxcy, 2003; Menand, 1997). Today's understanding of pragmatism gathers elements from both historical periods (Maxcy, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Maxcy (2003) summarized its central tenet as follows:

“As a group, pragmatists are convinced that human thought is intrinsically linked to action. Theory was joined with practice. Ideas operate as instruments rather than ideals. Reality is in process, undergoing change at every turn of events” (p. 63).

As such, pragmatism treats knowledge as historically and culturally bound (Morgan, 2014) (a similar stance to that of constructivism), and it is interested not only in what ‘is’ but also on what ‘might be’ (Goldkuhl, 2004). Further, pragmatism moves beyond the separation between (the two broad views of) positivism and constructivism. Positivism posits that reality exists independent of human activity, and sees the role of research as testing theories, establishing and explaining causal relationships (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2009). This perspective assumes that science can be value-free (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2009). Very differently, proponents of constructivism (or interpretivism) assert that reality is enacted by our conceptions of it, allowing for multiple accounts of that reality (Goldkuhl, 2004; Morgan, 2014). It focuses on the understanding of reality (or ‘*verstehen*’), which is socially constructed and situation-specific – as Schwandt (1998) noted:

“Proponents of these persuasions [interpretivism and constructivism] share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. This goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for Verstehen” (p. 221).

Pragmatism takes a ‘dual position’, calling for convergence (Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2014), as noted also in the following:

“It [pragmatism] takes a realistic position in saying that reality exists as an actable and affordable world. It also takes, however, a constructivistic position in saying that we live in a common world created through social interaction and dependent on intersubjective

⁶⁰ There are of course several variants of pragmatism, and we will outline our positioning within that approach in the following paragraphs.

knowledge and language, i.e., an accountable and socially meaningful world" (Goldkuhl, 2004, p. 22).

Pragmatists thus put that debate aside and avoid the use of metaphysical concepts or ideals (what Dewey described as "*the epistemological industry*" – as noted in Morgan (2014)) (Howe, 1988; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Our position, in line with pragmatism, is to move beyond the arguments about the nature of truth and reality as the key criterion to distinguish approaches to research, and instead recognize the value of those approaches as offering guidance to our choices in doing research (Morgan, 2014). As such, we integrate and share some of the concerns typical of constructivism, such as an interest in capturing participants' conceptions of reality, but focusing also on their actions. In order to do so, and avoid a narrow interpretivism, we rely on multiple sources and methods, remaining close to the empirical phenomena being studied (Goldkuhl, 2004; Marshall, Kelder, & Perry, 2005). We adhere to the view, rooted in a pragmatist perspective, of remaining uncommitted to one system of philosophy, theory of truth, or to a uniform method of inquiry (Creswell, 2009; Howe, 1988). It is the research questions and the context of inquiry (i.e. "the demands, opportunities, and constraints of the situation in which the [inquiry] will take place", Datta (1988) as cited in Greene and Caracelli (2003), p. 101) which occupy a central position within pragmatist-oriented research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). As the attention falls primarily on the research problem (the "*empirical puzzle*", as Small (2011) put it), pragmatist researchers often build on diverse approaches, methods and techniques (Creswell, 2009; Greene & Caracelli, 2003).

And so we arrive at a particularly important aspect of pragmatism in light of our research. Also in terms of methodology, this perspective rejects the idea of an 'incompatibility thesis' according to which qualitative and quantitative methods would not and should not be mixed (Cameron, 2011; Denscombe, 2008; Howe, 1988; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Differently, pragmatism posits that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in the same study as epistemology and method are not seen as synonymous or intrinsically linked, even if the two (for instance, positivism and quantitative methods or constructivism/interpretivism and qualitative methods) are often associated (Bryman, 2012; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). To that effect, Bryman (2012) noted that "*the idea that research methods carry with them fixed epistemological and ontological implications is very difficult to sustain*" (p. 629), as they can have multiple applications. From this perspective, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches does not result in epistemological incoherence and might in fact be advantageous in providing a more holistic understanding of the issues under investigation (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism and mixed methods have thus often been associated, with pragmatism commonly being mobilized as the philosophical underpinning within mixed methods studies, a positioning to which we adhere (Cameron, 2011; Denscombe, 2008; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Lisle, 2011; Small, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

2. The research strategy

With pragmatism as the philosophical underpinning, this study adopted a mixed methods approach. While there are differences in the terminology used – some authors refer to it as multimethod, mixed methodology, multi-strategy research, hybrid or combined research - recent writings have tended to adopt the term ‘mixed methods’, which we also use in this dissertation (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib, & Rupert, 2007). The emergence of mixed methods is often associated with research by Campbell and Fiske (1959) which for the first time explicitly applied multiple (quantitative) methods to measure psychological traits (Creswell, 2009; Hanson et al., 2005; Small, 2011). But its development as a ‘third methodological movement’ occurred some decades later only, and can be contextualized within the so-called ‘paradigm wars’ (Brannen, 2005; Creswell, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), i.e. succeeding a period when the positivist paradigm (associated primarily with quantitative methodologies) prevailed (1950s-70s), which was followed by a growing interest in the constructivist paradigm (applied mainly through qualitative methodologies) (1970s-90s) (Denscombe, 2008). It is thus from the mid-1990s onwards that mixed methods gained momentum, were increasingly integrated in research studies and achieved scholarly recognition as an alternative, stand-alone research approach (Cameron, 2011; Denscombe, 2008; Small, 2011). As discussed earlier, this development is grounded on the view that different research methods are not inherently rooted in specific paradigms and thus are also not mutually exclusive or irreconcilable (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Howe, 1988) – in contrast with a more purist view and the ‘incompatibility thesis’ which claim that, for instance, quantitative methods derive from a (post)positivist paradigm and thus can only be combined with that worldview (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Hanson et al., 2005; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

Multiple definitions of mixed methods have been offered by different scholars, but we take as reference the contribution made by Creswell and Clark (2011), due to its comprehensiveness:

“Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in many phases of the research process. As a method, it focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone” (p. 5).

As the worldview informing the research design (corresponding to the first element integrated in Creswell and Clark’s (2011) definition) has already been discussed in §1, we now turn to discuss the ways in which, in the context of this study, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches was of added-value to understanding the problems at stake. This approach has widely been used in the field of social movement research, which is also characterized by some

degree of ‘methodological pluralism’, bridging the quantitative and qualitative research divide to better understand the problems under analysis (Ayoub, Wallace, & Zepeda-Millán, 2014; della Porta, 2014b; Klandermans, Staggenborg, & Tarrow, 2002). Although not the dominant approach in criminological research, past studies have also brought together different methods and approaches (Brent & Kraska, 2010; Noaks & Wincup, 2004).

According to the often cited classification developed by Greene et al. (1989), mixed methods research is generally used with a view to ensuring one or more of the following goals: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion. With triangulation, authors seek to corroborate the results from different methods. Complementarity relates to the enhancement or clarification of the results from one method with another, and is also a common rationale for employing a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Denscombe, 2008; Driscoll et al., 2007). Greene et al. (1989) note that in such instances *“qualitative and quantitative methods are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon”* (p. 258). A mixed methods approach may also be used with a ‘development’ purpose, i.e. to build on the results of one method to further develop or inform the application of the other method (e.g. in the context of sampling, or to develop the instrument used in the second method). Greene et al. (1989) highlighted also ‘initiation’, as studies might seek to uncover contradictions or paradoxes, discover new perspectives or reformulate questions or the results by using multiple methods. Finally, an important goal within mixed methods research is to increase the breadth and depth of the inquiry, by applying different methods to better understand different elements of the study (i.e. ‘expansion’).

In the present study, the strategy to employ a mixed methods approach is also justified with reference to the above mentioned reasons.⁶¹ In fact, since the outset of the study we were, to some extent, interested in being able to triangulate the results emerging from the qualitative data collection (and even within that strand, by triangulating the interview data from different groups of actors, for instance) with those of the quantitative data collection. The study was also designed to ensure that the quantitative data collection phase, namely the development of the survey instrument, could be informed by the preliminary findings emerging from the core qualitative data collected first, mainly the interview dataset. Some degree of ‘complementarity’ and ‘expansion’ were also sought with the combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods. To answer the research questions driving this study, and given the different levels of the analysis (please see: Part I), it was important to ensure that a diversity of views were included. The most adequate way to meet that goal and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issues at stake was by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. For instance, by conducting interviews with individuals occupying key positions within CSCs (i.e. CSC leaders, cannabis growers), as well as making observations in the field we were able to gather rich data, and build a rapport with the organizations and key actors participating in the

⁶¹ With exception of ‘initiation’ as described by Greene et al. (1989), which was not a central nor explicit goal for using a mixed methods approach in the current study.

study (Beyens, Kennes, & Tournel, 2016). At the same time, with a view to gathering primarily descriptive information from a larger number of CSC members, developing an online survey constituted a more adequate option (Beyens et al., 2016; Bryman, 2012). The different methods were applied to answer somewhat overlapping questions, but also targeted specific aspects. For instance, the online survey was the primary data collection instrument used to study the profile, role and motivations of the Belgian CSC members (although some preliminary findings were known from the interviews conducted with representatives of the clubs and from the field work), but also provided relevant complementary data to better understand several aspects of the functioning of the CSCs (e.g. with regards to how members entered a CSC, about the activities organized by the clubs, etc.).

A mixed methods design is commonly classified on the basis of timing (i.e. whether the data is collected in phases or at the same time), weighting (i.e. whether the study emphasizes a qualitative or quantitative approach, or both equally), and mixing considerations (i.e. when and how the qualitative and quantitative data are brought together in the study) (Creswell, 2009; Driscoll et al., 2007). Nevertheless, as other scholars have noted (Bryman, 2006; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), the classifications⁶² developed to capture those differences are not necessarily exhaustive, and thus the specific mixed methods design might be adapted to the particular goals and setting of each study. This study has an embedded (but sequential) design, relying primarily on qualitative methods, and with the data being mixed both during data collection (i.e. by drawing on the results of the qualitative strand to build the subsequent quantitative data collection) and interpretation (i.e. the results were combined and synthesized following the collection and analysis of both datasets) (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In our study, the embedded design thus combines both qualitative and quantitative data collection within a primarily qualitative research design, with the collection and analysis of the second dataset taking place after the implementation of most of the qualitative data collection.⁶³ At the same time, part of the qualitative research strand continued to be undertaken throughout the quantitative data collection phase.

3. The research methods

In the next sub-sections we delve further into the more specific and technical design aspects of the current study.

⁶² Many typologies have been developed by mixed methods scholars (Creswell et al., 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morse, 2003). We draw on Creswell's typology, which includes six prototypical mixed methods designs: 1) the convergent parallel design; 2) the explanatory sequential design; 3) the exploratory sequential design; 4) the embedded design; 5) the transformative design; and 6) the multiphase design (Creswell, 2009).

⁶³ According to Creswell & Clark (2011) in an embedded design *"the collection and analysis of the second data set may occur before, during, and/or after the implementation of the data collection and analysis procedures traditionally associated with the larger design"* (p. 90-91).

Entry into the field

Entry into the field was prepared on the basis of an initial review of research into CSCs (please see: PART II), particularly focusing on the Belgian context. Earlier exploratory work by Decorte (2014a, 2015) offered important insights into the CSCs active and formerly active in the country. The representatives of those CSCs were contacted for participation in this study, and based on their additional input (i.e. through snowballing) we were able to reach out to other CSCs that had emerged since (Chapter 6). Between November and December 2015 individual meetings with each of the CSCs initially identified were held. During those meetings, which were replicated later on when another active CSC was identified, we offered information about the research team, and discussed the goals and different phases of the research project, as well as CSCs' participation throughout.

No specific inclusion/exclusion criterion beyond CSCs' own self-representation as such (i.e. if an organization considered itself a CSC, that sufficed for taking part in the study) were applied, as we did not want to restrict the analysis to a particular type of CSC, but rather valued learning about the phenomenon (in all its possible facets) from the participants in the field. During data collection and until October 2016 (when the last participating CSC entered the study), all known CSCs were invited to participate in the study. Seven active CSCs and one inactive CSC agreed to take part.^{64 65} As noted in relation to research with activist groups, the CSCs were generally open to participate in the research project, which represented an opportunity to “*make their voices heard in a different arena*” (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014, p. 156; Klein & Potter, 2018). Given the volatile nature of the CSC landscape in Belgium (further explored in Chapter 6), it is possible that new CSC initiatives have occurred since then, and some (2-3) of the CSCs have meanwhile ceased their activities. This is noted in each of the results chapters, and where possible, further information on these changes is provided.

The CSC representatives, directors or leaders⁶⁶ were crucial gatekeepers in gaining access to the field and in subsequent data collection procedures: not only did they provide documentary information and took part in an interview, but they also fulfilled a very important function in ensuring the participation of other individuals (i.e. CSC growers and members) within and beyond the CSCs – as detailed further below. They also enabled us to make observations in different moments of activity of these organizations. The fact, known to at least the core group of gatekeepers, that this study was being supervised by Prof. Decorte was a positive ice-breaker

⁶⁴ We met with representatives from another CSC, which initially had shown an interest in participating in the study but soon after withdrew from the research project. At the time that CSC's representatives offered an explanation for the change of position: the CSC was considering closing down in the near future, and participation would be too time-consuming. The CSC indicated also not being willing to share or allow us to gather data about the CSC and their members in the context of this study. The CSC indeed closed down some time after.

⁶⁵ Although the focus fell on recruiting active CSCs, in order to learn about CSCs' current practices, all known inactive CSCs were contacted as well. These CSCs were less willing to participate in the study, possibly because in many cases the organizations had closed down due to fear of or actual police interventions.

⁶⁶ The terms are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation when referring to those individuals who play a leadership role within a CSC.

for the first exchanges, and may have also increased the openness of participants during course of the project. Differently than noted by Maalsté (2008), awareness of the funding source of the project (by the Research Foundation – Flanders), which was communicated to all participants at the outset of the study (see also §5) seemed to resonate well among the study participants. Building a good rapport with these key individuals was thus an important aspect in guaranteeing the further running of the research project (Beyens et al., 2016; Bryman, 2012; Maalsté, 2008; Silverman, 2010; Zaitch, Mortelmans, & Decorte, 2016). We are aware that reliance on gatekeepers, who volunteered to assist throughout the study, may raise self-selection issues. However, we attempted to attenuate that potential bias by drawing on multiple sources (including an online survey which was administered on a larger scale). The specific recruitment process for each data collection procedure, where applicable, is outlined in more detail in the respective sections below.

Data collection

Data collection relied mainly on qualitative procedures, although the more quantitative element of the study is also discussed below. In trying to build a holistic view of the issues being studied, multiple sources of data were gathered, including documents, interviews, observations, and survey data, which are the topic of the next sections. A common factor throughout those data collection efforts was the focus on capturing participants' meanings, in most cases in their 'natural setting' (i.e. at the CSC sites or where CSC-related activity was taking place) (Creswell, 2009). Study participants did not receive any financial compensation for taking part in the study.

It should be noted that the Belgian CSCs are in a rather vulnerable position from a legal point of view (for more, please see Chapter 3). At the outset of the project, some new CSCs had emerged (corresponding to the second wave of CSC activity as discussed in Chapter 6). However, nearly all these (and former) CSCs did at some point experience legal difficulties: some had their crops confiscated by the police, several CSC representatives were detained, and some among them faced criminal charges. Beyond the impact on the development of the model/movement, this raised also additional challenges to the implementation of this research project, which we touch upon in the following sections, and in particular in §6. An overview of the different data collection steps is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Timeline of data collection.

| 2015 | | 2016 | | | | | | | | | | 2017 | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep |
| First meeting with CSCs | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Collection of documentary sources | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Field observations | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Interviews w/ CSC directors | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Interviews w/ other stakeholders | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Interviews w/ cannabis growers | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | Online survey | | | | | | | | | |

Documentary sources and media reports

Documentary material has commonly been a data source mobilized in qualitative research, often in combination with other data collection methods (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Noaks & Wincup, 2004). While a variety of document types might be of added value in research projects, in the current study we gathered two broad types of documents: organizational documents (both public and private) produced by six of the seven active CSCs participating in the study, and domestic print media output concerning those CSCs. One of the CSCs participating in the study was identified after the media reports were collected, and at the time was still in the process of formalizing its existence and producing internal codes and guidelines. Given that shortly after the interview phase (see more below) the CSC ceased its activities (due to personal reasons concerning the directors) it was not possible to collect any written documentation from that CSC.

While obtaining access to organizational documents might be challenging (Bryman, 2012), we were able to gather a variety of documents, some of which are not available in the public domain. These included: CSCs' bylaws, membership and ownership forms, grower's agreement and cultivation protocol, CSCs' formal notes exchanged with various stakeholders, information given to members about the cannabis supplied, as well as other documents. Again, developing a good rapport with the study participants was helpful in gaining access to this data. All six CSCs had been formally registered (see also Chapter 8), and did send us a copy of their official bylaws as published in the Belgian Official Journal (*'Het Belgisch Staatsblad'*) (starting from the first meetings with CSC representatives in November 2015). A membership form was commonly produced by the Belgian CSCs and included in the analysis as well. This document typically contained an outline of the house-rules of the CSC, indicating that candidate members must be 18 years old or older, aware of the current Belgian legislation and that the decision to enrol with a CSC is voluntarily made. The candidate members wishing to enrol are expected to sign that document, filling in some personal details as well (e.g. name, date of birth, address, etc.). We also collected a so-called 'statement of ownership', i.e. a document produced by the CSCs and signed by each member to clarify that they own (each) one cannabis plant (which is in turn given to the care of the CSC grower – as discussed in more detail in Chapter 11). Other

guidelines developed by the CSCs with regards to both members and growers, as well as other documentation concerning the activities of the CSCs (e.g. information concerning the cannabis distributed by the CSC, CSCs' annual reports, etc.) were collected as well (Table 2).

Table 2: Documentary materials used in the study.

| | CSC1 | CSC2 | CSC3 | CSC4 | CSC5 | CSC6 | CSC7 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Bylaws | x | x | x | x | x | x | |
| Membership form | x | x | x | x | x | x | |
| Ownership form | x | x | x | x | x | x | |
| Growers' agreement and cultivation protocol | | x | x | | x | | |
| External correspondence (law enforcement and criminal justice, health practitioners, etc.) | x | | x | | x | x | |
| Information about cannabis (distributed to members) | x | x | x | | | | |
| Other documents | x | x | x | x | x | x | |

Note: Other documents include: CSCs' annual reports, proposals for regulation, other information to members, among others.

Drawing on Bowen's (2009) list of five key uses of documents within qualitative research, CSC-produced documents primarily provided background information on the functioning of the CSCs, complementing and raising issues that were further analysed through other sources (for instance, CSCs' cultivation practices were discussed in detail during the interviews with both CSC directors and growers, with the analysis of the growers' agreements and cultivation protocols providing information about some of those issues as well). Most importantly, it allowed for a better understanding of the language used by the CSCs (Creswell, 2009), and to consider CSCs' (written/formalized) self-regulatory efforts in this analysis.

In addition to the CSCs' organizational documents, we gathered the domestic media accounts of the Belgian CSCs from 2006 (when the first CSC was established in the country) until June 2016. Searches using mainly the names of the known CSCs (combined with their respective locations and/or other terms such as 'cannabis', 'social club', 'non-profit') were run in the database 'Go Press Academic'.⁶⁷ Both Dutch and French written press were consulted to guarantee a comprehensive coverage of media activity in the country, amounting to a total of 12 key Belgian newspapers and magazine (i.e. 'De Morgen', 'De Standaard', 'Gazet van Antwerpen', 'Het Belang van Limburg', 'Het Laatste Nieuws', 'Het Nieuwsblad', 'Humo', 'Knack', 'La Libre Belgique', 'Le Soir', 'Le Vif', and 'L'Avenir'). Where available, the CSCs' own websites were consulted and any media articles posted through those channels were collected as well. After removing irrelevant and duplicate papers, a total of 164 media articles were included for analysis.

⁶⁷ This database offers access to all the Belgian newspaper and magazine publishers.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing methods have widely been used to gather first-hand information in the fields of social, criminological, and social movement research (Beyens et al., 2016; Blee & Taylor, 2002; Bryman, 2012). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) noted, in qualitative research interviews *“knowledge is produced socially in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee”* (p. 82). Within criminological studies, the rationale to use this method has often been related to capturing the ‘insiders’ view’, and to gaining an in-depth understanding of the ‘how’ and ‘why questions’, uncovering motivations and the context in which the behaviour or activity took place (Beyens et al., 2016). Similarly, from a social movement perspective, conducting interviews has been described as *“a means of generating data about the motives of people who participate in protest and the activities of social movement networks and organizations”* (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 92). It is also in light of these reasons that we resorted to interviews in the current study.

In particular, three groups of knowledgeable actors (Beyens et al., 2016) who participated in the CSC model and broader cannabis movement in different capacities were interviewed (Blee & Taylor, 2002): CSC leaders of both active and inactive CSCs, CSC growers, and individuals or representatives of other organizations with whom the CSCs participating in the study reported collaborating. The interviews with 21 members of the Board of Directors of the seven active CSCs, as well as with the two ex-directors of a former CSC took place between February 2016 and January 2017. With the exception of one CSC which counted at the time of the interview with only one director in place, in all other instances at least two members of the board of directors of each CSC participated in the interview. Among the interviewees were also a former director of a currently active CSC, and four managers of CSC sub-divisions. Recruitment of the other groups of interviewees occurred with the assistance of current CSC leaders. A section of the interview guide used during the interviews with the CSCs’ board of directors focused on the Clubs’ relations with other actors and organizations, and thus based on those responses we could identify different stakeholders with whom the CSCs had contact or pursued collaboration. The 19 interviewees included representatives of foreign CSCs, of lobbying organizations active in the cannabis movement (in Belgium and abroad), of grow shops and seed banks, of laboratories and other organizations providing cannabis testing, of lawyers and other consultants, of treatment centres, and a politician. These interviews took place between March 2016 and August 2017. Finally, upon request, the CSC directors of the seven active CSCs shared information about the research project among all the cannabis growers cultivating cannabis for the CSCs, and those who indicated an interest in participating in the study were then contacted by the research team for an interview. In the period between April 2016 and February 2017, 23 cannabis growers from the six Belgian CSCs that were, at the time of the interview, actively involved in the production and distribution of cannabis among their members were interviewed (from a total of about 31 growers, according to CSCs’ estimates). At least one grower per CSC was interviewed, and in the cases where CSCs relied on multiple growers, we spoke also with several growers (with exception of one of such CSCs, where we interviewed only one of the two growers).

Prior to the interview, all participants were informed about the overall goals of the study, the purpose of the interview and potential benefits and risks from participation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviewees were also given the opportunity to raise any questions or request clarifications, and it was emphasized that participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any moment. Consent was given in written or oral form as discussed further below. The preference was to record the interviews as that allows the interviewer to be more alert about what is being said and react more promptly during the conversation (Beyens et al., 2016; Bryman, 2012; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It also ensures that the interviewees' words are kept intact (Bryman, 2012). Most interviewees across the three groups granted permission for the audio-recording of the interviews. In total, only three interviews were not recorded, but in these cases that decision related to pragmatic reasons. For instance, one of these interviews took place in a cannabis testing facility, and the conversation happened while a sample of cannabis was being tested as we wanted to learn more about the type of cannabis testing run for the Belgian CSCs. Given the use of protective and safety equipment (e.g. gloves, masks), the focus on observing (e.g. the equipment used, the testing process, etc.), as well as the more unstructured flow of the conversation, it was more convenient to take short notes throughout (and in full after the conversation) rather than make an audio-recording. The interviews were conducted in English, French or Dutch, in accordance with interviewees' stated language preference.⁶⁸ With three exceptions (phone call interviews with stakeholders), given that interviewees were based in other countries/unable to meet in person, all interviews took place face-to-face. When audio-recorded, all interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible.

The interviews were semi-structured, as this type of interview is supported by a topic list or interview guide (listing questions or themes to be addressed during the course of the interview), but at the same time foresee some degree of flexibility, as the interviewer can depart from it and change the order in which the questions are asked, or may also pick up on other issues raised by the interviewee (Beyens et al., 2016; Bryman, 2012; della Porta, 2014a; Evers & Boer, 2012). Four different interview guides were developed, which were adapted in the course of the conversation, but included opening questions about interviewees' background, then addressed aspects specific to each group of interviewees, and finally closed with some open questions, probing about interviewees' views on the CSC model and cannabis policy more generally. The guide used in interviews with current CSC directors built on previous interview protocols used in interviews with CSC representatives in Belgium (Decorte, 2015) and in Uruguay (Queirolo et al., 2016). It included questions about the foundation and general background of the CSCs; about the membership process and house-rules of the CSCs; about the internal structure, governance and financial aspects of the CSCs; about the supply cycle of the CSCs, addressing both the cannabis production and its distribution, as well as the quality

⁶⁸ All the quotes included in PART IV are presented in English. When using quotes from interviews conducted in a language other than English, we translated those and typically checked the translation with a native Dutch or French speaker.

control practices applied by the CSCs. In addition, the questionnaire addressed the relation of the CSCs with other relevant stakeholders (i.e. police and judiciary, policy-makers, media, health professionals, criminal entrepreneurs, and others), and the CSCs' views about the model and cannabis policy more generally. All three other interview guides (for interviews with former CSC directors, other stakeholders, and growers) were loosely inspired by and adapted from the initial guideline for interviews with CSC directors. In the interviews with directors of former CSCs a shorter version of this interview guide was used which focused on the reasons for the closure of the CSC. The guide used in interviews with other stakeholders was relatively short and more flexible, as due to the variety of backgrounds of the interviewees and the nature of their relations with the CSCs, having a more unstructured conversation proved more useful. In any case, these interviews were centred mainly on the goals of those actors and their relationship with the Belgian CSCs. The interviews with CSC growers focused on the general background of the cannabis cultivator, on the cultivation process within a CSC, and the relationship between the grower and the CSC, as well as other relevant actors (e.g. seed banks, grow shops, etc.).

Field observations

With a view to gaining a deep(er) knowledge of the Belgian CSCs and the individuals associated with them (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014), we sought to keep close contact with those organizations, and where possible interact further with them. Beyond maintaining regular contacts with representatives of the CSCs via e-mail, and phone, and multiple conversations in person, we were also present at other moments of activity of the CSCs – some of which were public events, and others which are generally only open to members of the CSC. These included: events on cannabis not organized by the CSCs (but in which they participated/attended), public events organized by the CSCs (such as protests and marches), court sessions (concerning CSCs and/or CSC representatives), internal CSC meetings (e.g. General Assembly meetings and growers' meetings), other members-only events (for instance, a 'CannaCup' competition among growers of a CSC), and visits to cultivation sites. This approach follows from Balsiger and Lambelet (2014), who described the usefulness of (participant) observation in capturing the public actions of social movements, but primarily in tapping into "*all the aspects that take place offstage, behind the scenes, before and after protest actions*" (p. 149). Given the range of activities listed above, rather than in one field or setting, the observations took place in multiple sites (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014).

During those moments, which mainly took place in the period between November 2015 and August 2017, we made observations, listened to and engaged in informal conversations with various individuals participating in the CSC life. Although we do not claim to have immersed fully or for an extended period in the daily-life of those settings, the 'visits' as non-participant observer were insightful sources of data that complemented the interview and documentary materials, and were also instrumental in building the rapport with the gatekeepers – an often challenging aspect when seeking to collect qualitative data (in an under-studied field and) among hard to reach groups (Bachman & Schutt, 2008; Bryman, 2012; Zaitch et al., 2016). Being

an ‘outsider’ to the setting and the movement could pose some challenges, but in the current context, study participants were generally willing to share the daily-life and activities of the setting with us. For instance, they would often take the initiative in contacting us to provide an update or share any recent event related to the CSC.

The position as a researcher was known to the study participants (overt observations), although it is plausible that some individuals taking part in the activities under observation were unaware of that (Bryman, 2012; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Marvasti, 2004; Thorne, 1980; Zaitch et al., 2016). For instance, when attending CSC-organized marches or protests, although we talked to the CSC representatives or gatekeepers, and a number of the members present on those occasions did recognize us, it was of course unpractical to announce our presence and role to all attendees. In most cases during the observations, we took brief jotted notes, including keywords, phrases or general impressions of the setting (Emerson et al., 1995). Immediately after leaving the setting or at the end of the day, the notes were written in full, including as much detail as possible (Bachman & Schutt, 2008; Emerson et al., 1995). No structured framework was used for the writing of observations, but we tried to gather as full a depiction of the events observed as possible (including contextual information, participants present, quotes from interactions, a general narrative of the event, and other impressions). Beyond descriptive and analytic notes, we also wrote down instructions, for instance with regards to issues or events to pay attention to in future observations, and about other individuals/organizations to contact (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014).

Online survey

An online survey was administered among the Belgian CSC members, in order to have also numeric description of trends, and features of that population (Creswell, 2009). Web surveys have become rather popular in recent years, as with the currently available software (such as LimeSurvey, which was used in this study), they are fairly easy to program online, they allow for flexibility in terms of how the questionnaire is administered to participants, and the results can be quickly transferred to quantitative data analysis software (Bachman & Schutt, 2008; Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003). It is thus a cost- and time- efficient mode of survey administration, which allows access to a potentially large group of research participants (Andretta & della Porta, 2014; Hewson et al., 2003). It is also a well-suited mode for enquiries about sensitive issues, given that they are self-administered (Andretta & della Porta, 2014). Within social movement research, surveys are commonly used both at the individual as well as organizational level of analysis (Klandermans & Smith, 2002). In the drugs field, this is also a commonly used tool, especially when seeking to capture patterns of use (or cultivation), and trends associated with those, as well as further insights into demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of a given group (Barratt et al., 2012; Kilmer et al., 2013a; Potter et al., 2015; van Laar, Frijns, Trautmann, & Lombi, 2013). In the present study, the survey mainly aimed at tapping into the individual level, to better understand CSC members: personal characteristics and demographics, knowledge of and participation in CSCs’ activities and attitudes towards

them. It thus had a primarily descriptive function (in line with other studies, according to Klandermans and Smith (2002)).

We drew particularly on the following questionnaires (Textbox 2) to build the survey instrument used in this study.

Textbox 2: List of questionnaires informing the development of the survey instrument.

- International Cannabis Cultivation Questionnaire (Decorte et al., 2012)⁶⁹
- Medical Cannabis Survey (Swift, Gates, & Dillon, 2005)⁷⁰
- Washington Cannabis Consumption Survey (Kilmer et al., 2013a)⁷¹
- Drug Use Disorders Identification Test
- European Social Survey (Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, 2014)⁷²
- European Values Study (Tilburg University & Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2008)⁷³
- Activism Orientation Scale
- Flash Eurobarometer Series #202

In addition, other questions tailored particularly to the CSC context and the issues being analysed here were developed. The survey questionnaire was also tested by eight respondents (in Dutch, English, French), during a 2-month pilot phase. These participants were former CSC members and cannabis users familiar with the CSC model who were not eligible to participate in the actual survey, but who were able to provide helpful feedback with regards to the survey instrument (on the inclusion and order of a number of questions, on the way questions were phrased and how they were to be presented to respondents). In addition, the draft questionnaire was shared with colleagues and experts in the drugs and survey field who also helped fine-tuning the questionnaire. The final core survey questionnaire contains 66 items, including sections on: membership within a CSC, cannabis supply through a CSC, patterns of consumption, socio-demographic characteristics, views on drugs policy and political engagement. The survey included also two items to test eligibility: only 18 years old or older respondents, who were also currently members of a Belgian CSC were allowed to complete the survey. An additional, (4-item) optional module was also included at the end of the survey.⁷⁴ The questionnaire was available online (using LimeSurvey) between February and September of 2017, and participants could select between taking it in Dutch, English or French.

⁶⁹ Nine questions from this questionnaire were integrated in the survey instrument used in the study (seven questions were directly taken from the questionnaire, 2 others were adapted).

⁷⁰ Four questions from this questionnaire were integrated in the survey instrument used in the study (one question was directly taken from the questionnaire, 3 others were adapted).

⁷¹ Eight questions from this questionnaire were integrated in the survey instrument used in the study (all were directly taken from the questionnaire).

⁷² Five questions from this questionnaire were integrated in the survey instrument used in the study (all were directly taken from the questionnaire).

⁷³ Two questions from this questionnaire were integrated in the survey instrument used in the study (all were directly taken from the questionnaire).

⁷⁴ This brief module included questions about whether respondents' friends and acquaintances were also CSC members, about who was aware of their CSC membership and what was their general view on that, as well as an open question about whether there are any specific aspects of their CSC that could be changed or improved.

As mentioned in previous sections, the survey participants were also recruited with the assistance of the directors of the active Belgian CSCs. The lack of a public or reliable list of participants is an issue common to other social movement studies (Klandermans & Smith, 2002), which we sought to overcome (as much as possible) by relying on CSC directors to in turn engage with the CSC members about it. During the pilot phase the CSC directors were briefed about the goals and content of the survey and received a preliminary version of the questionnaire for feedback. At that meeting we also handed out promotional materials about the study and the survey, including flyers, posters (and later on also QR-cards with a link to the survey website), and asked the CSC representatives to further distribute those among the members. At our request, the CSC directors informed also all their respective members about the launch of the survey, forwarding an email with additional information about it and links to the website. The (separate) project website and Facebook page were also used to disseminate information about the survey and encourage participation. During the months when the survey was active, we also contacted the CSCs to send reminders to their members with a view to boost response numbers. By combining the two recruitment strategies (indirectly, through the CSCs, and directly, via social media) we sought to reach out to a larger number of potential participants, while at the same time limiting the opportunity for fraudulent completion of the survey by non-members. To that effect, in the survey, when enquiring about which CSC the participants were affiliated with, we purposely included a fictitious CSC name to rule out participation by non-members (only one returned questionnaire had selected that option, and it was removed from our dataset – as discussed further below).

As presented in Table 3, the sample includes CSC members from all the seven active CSCs participating in the study. The Belgian CSCs have very different sizes in terms of membership base, which also fluctuate quite often (Decorte, 2015). This to some extent helps explain also the differences in the number of participants across CSCs. In addition, one of the CSCs closed down around the time the survey was launched, and one other had had its crop confiscated by the police a few months before the start of the survey. During the time the survey was running, the latter CSC as well as one other were also subject to a large scale police intervention, resulting in the detention of several CSC directors and other individuals involved with those CSCs. These law enforcement interventions are likely to have had a negative impact on the response rate, and although about 27% of the total known CSC members in Belgium did complete the survey, it is possible that those who volunteered to participate in this context are different than those who did not, thus affecting the representativeness of the sample (we come back to this point in §6).

Most respondents indicated being current members of CSC3 (72.1%). This CSC is also the longest-running and largest Belgian CSC (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of the Belgian CSC landscape). CSC3 has also a system of smaller sub-divisions which, despite belonging to the primary club, are run somewhat independently. Close to one-quarter of the respondents from CSC3 were part of one of the local divisions, and about 9% were part of that CSC's medical sub-division. Most were not part of a sub-division but only affiliated with the primary CSC (65.1%).

Generally, the surveyed had no particular function (i.e. they were not growers, did not play a leadership role, nor were they responsible for other administrative tasks) within the clubs they belonged to (89.8%).

Table 3: Overview of the survey sample.

| | Distribution of survey respondents by CSC (%) | Distribution of survey respondents by CSC (frequency) | Estimated number of members by CSC |
|------------------|---|---|------------------------------------|
| CSC1 | 8.4% | 16 | 60* |
| CSC2 | 8.4% | 16 | 45* |
| CSC3 | 72.1% | 137 | 400* |
| CSC4 | 1.1% | 2 | 10 |
| CSC5 | 4.7% | 9 | 81 |
| CSC6 | 0.5% | 1 | 10* |
| CSC7 | 1.1% | 2 | 70* |
| CSC(s) not known | 3.7% | 7 | n.a. |
| Total N | | 190 | 676 |

Note: The figures included in the table concerning the number of members per CSC correspond to the estimate made by the CSC representatives during the data collection phase. We are aware that these might have changed since then. In particular, the cases of CSCs marked with * are likely to have seen a substantial decrease in terms of the size of their membership base as those CSCs closed down or faced legal issues around the time of the launch of the survey.

Given the small number of participants from some of the CSCs (Table 3), and due to ethical considerations (i.e. to avoid potential identification of participants, and to limit direct comparisons between CSCs – which, in a landscape characterized by some divisiveness and tensions among some of the actors as discussed in Chapter 6, could be problematic), the survey data is presented in aggregate form throughout this dissertation. This follows the recommendations and practices of previous research with regards to the handling of sensitive information (Adler & Adler, 2002; Milan, 2014; Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Vikki, 2008), which we detail further in §5.

Data analysis

As the overview of the data collection procedures already suggests, a significant amount of the data is prose-based (i.e. documentary materials, interview transcripts, field notes, and open-ended survey responses), which can make for a cumbersome dataset (Bryman, 2012). However, this potential challenge was somewhat circumvented by initiating analysis as soon as the data began being collected (rather than at the end of all data collection), as given also the research strategy of the study outlined in §2, subsequent data collection efforts were informed and driven by the preliminary data analysis (Decorte, 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003; Silverman, 2010). As there is no fixed formula for qualitative data analysis (which formed the bulk of our analytical task) (Bachman & Schutt, 2008; Decorte, 2016), nor for mixed methods

research (as it tends to relate to *“the type of research strategy chosen”*, Creswell (2009) p. 218), we drew on an adapted version of the data analysis process proposed by Creswell (2009), which we describe next. This was a cyclical process, that was repeated for each new data set, allowing for comparison and triangulation of data.

Firstly, as the raw data was collected, we began organizing and preparing it for analysis. The next step was reading through all the data to gain a certain degree of familiarity with the dataset and a *“general sense”* of the data (Creswell, 2009; Decorte, 2016). Following these steps, and building on the coding work and descriptive results already generated, we started identifying (a small number of) themes, connected to the research questions posed at the outset of the study, which were described and preliminarily analysed in written form. At this stage, it is worth clarifying that elements of induction and deduction were combined as strategies of analysis, in the sense that we drew on themes, categories, codes, constructed *a priori*, but allowed also (and primarily) for the analysis to build on the new empirical data collected (Decorte, 2016). These steps were revisited every time new data was collected, and as more and more data was preliminary analysed as described, we began triangulating the emerging findings from each strand, and reading those in light of the knowledge accumulated from the review of the literature, with a view to addressing the research questions driving the study.

Qualitative data analysis

The organization and preparation of the qualitative data first involved transcribing interviews as close to verbatim as possible,⁷⁵ reviewing transcripts and fieldnotes, and ordering the organizational documents and media reports for analysis (Bachman & Schutt, 2008). These materials (including answers to open-ended survey questions) were then inserted into NVivo 11, a software package for analysis of qualitative data. This software is helpful in organizing and managing textual (among other types of) data, and a tool for further consolidation and rigorous analysis of the data (Bazeley, 2007; Decorte, 2016; Silverman, 2010). The qualitative data was then manually coded using NVivo. Creswell (2009) cited Rossman & Rallis (1998) in defining coding as *“the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to the information”* (p.186). In a first coding phase, we used a brief qualitative codebook, with a few pre-determined general codes, building on the aspects captured in previous literature (e.g. the codebook included broad categories such as ‘becoming CSC member’, ‘cultivation’, ‘distribution practices’, among others). This constituted merely a preliminary stage of the coding, as many other codes emerged inductively from the data.

⁷⁵ For the transcription work, we counted upon the assistance of a few students, to whom we are very grateful. Before receiving the interview data to be transcribed, the students were briefed on the goals of the study, and the need to handle the data carefully (this issue was also explicitly mentioned in the form/agreement they were asked to sign). The students received the audio-files in an encrypted USB, and were further instructed on how to proceed with the transcriptions (e.g. including regular indications of time, highlighting unclear passages or terms, etc.).

Throughout that process, new codes were added, and the codebook was reviewed and fine-tuned, until reaching saturation of the data (Bryman, 2012; Decorte, 2016).

Quantitative (descriptive) data analysis

The survey data was downloaded from LimeSurvey and directly brought into SPSS 25. Due to an earlier hacking of the survey (which we return to in §6), 30 responses were manually inserted into the SPSS file as well. A number of steps were taken at this stage to prepare the file for analysis. From an initial sample of 231 returned questionnaires, we excluded those where no answer was given to the eligibility questions⁷⁶ (n=35), as well as repeated entries where at least one of the questionnaires returned was incomplete (n=4). Finally two other returned questionnaires were excluded from analysis: the first indicated being a member of an organization which is not a CSC (as per that organization's own self-definition), and the second selected 'CSC Green Leave' as their current CSC. This CSC does not exist but was included as a response option purposely to rule out that participants who were not members of Belgian CSCs would try to participate in the survey.

Next, we manually checked for errors or inconsistencies, and where appropriate recoded those. For instance, in several questions including an 'Other' option, participants' responses (under 'Other') could actually be attributed to one of the response options included in the question, and so those were recoded. In other cases, some data was grouped to facilitate further analysis (for instance, answers to the question concerning the number of times members received cannabis from their CSC in the past 12 months were recoded into two groups: 1-6 occasions and 7 or more) (Bachman & Schutt, 2008). Descriptive statistics of each variable of interest were generated through SPSS. In order to show relationships between variables, some cross-tables were also constructed. The goal of this analysis was primarily of a descriptive nature, seeing also as this constituted the first examination of Belgian CSC members.⁷⁷

4. A reflection on quality

It is good research practice to consider the procedures used to ensure the quality of the data, the results, and interpretation thereof (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The specific procedures, however, tend to vary according to the research approach employed in the study (Creswell & Clark, 2011). In studies relying on quantitative research methods, quality is typically discussed in relation to the notions of validity and reliability. Creswell and Clark (2011) define quantitative validity as meaning that *"the scores received from participants are meaningful indicators of the construct being measured"* (p. 210). In turn, quantitative reliability corresponds to the

⁷⁶ We had set up the survey to automatically do that but it did not seem to function in all instances.

⁷⁷ Although beyond the scope of the current dissertation, we hope to carry out a more complex exploration of the relationships between different variables in subsequent analysis. As noted in PART V, we encourage further comparative analysis between our survey results and those of research conducted in other settings with a CSC presence.

consistency of results over time. Within qualitative research, where the *“primary focus is for researchers to capture authentically the lived experiences of people”* (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006, p. 49), different understandings of quality (usually with reference to terms such as trustworthiness, credibility, authenticity, etc., rather than validity), and different criteria to assess it have been developed (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Reliability plays a relatively minor role in qualitative research, although it remains popular *“when there is interest in comparing coding among several coders”* (i.e. intercoder agreement) (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 212).

Within mixed methods, discussions about validity remain *“in their infancy”* (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 238; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). No consensus as to the most adequate way to consider a mixed methods study’s quality has emerged so far, with a number of scholars proposing different procedures. For instance, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) discuss ‘inference quality’ (instead of validity, as *“the mixed methods terms for the accuracy with which we have drawn both our inductively and our deductively derived conclusions from a study”*, p. 36), and ‘inference transferability’ (a term encompassing both the ideas of external validity from quantitative approaches, and transferability, from qualitative studies). Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) posit the notion of ‘legitimation’ (as a common term for mixed methods, instead of the qualitative- or quantitative-driven nomenclature), and developed a typology of procedures to consider validity (during different research phases, i.e. data collection, analysis, interpretation) specific to mixed methods.

In the present study, a number of steps were also taken to ensure accuracy, transparency and credibility of the data, of the emerging results, and of the conclusions drawn. We build on the criteria proposed by Creswell (1998, 2009) for studies applying a qualitative approach – which is also the dominant method within the mixed methods design of this study, and the more encompassing framework proposed by Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) for mixed methods research. At the data collection stage, and in particular with regards to the qualitative data collection procedures, we are aware of the bias that the researcher may bring into the study (Creswell, 1998, 2009). As noted throughout this chapter, the researcher’s role was known to (most) participants, and due to our ‘outsider’ position this could have resulted in some reluctance from participants to discuss somewhat sensitive issues (certainly from a legal point of view) or that only members with particular characteristics acceded to participate. That position was, nevertheless, a positive factor in managing the relationship with the different gatekeepers and respective CSCs. We tried also to counter the potential researcher bias by investing in a trust-based rapport with study participants, and by spending time in different settings relevant to the CSCs and their activities (Creswell, 1998, 2009).

With regards to the survey, as noted above, a number of steps were taken with a view to enhance the quality of the instrument: the design of the survey instrument built on previously used questionnaires, a brief pilot phase was also implemented, and experts (in the field of drug research and survey-based research) were also consulted and provided helpful input to the further development of the instrument. The mixed methods design and associated

triangulation of data sources contributes also to adding validity to the study (Creswell, 1998, 2009). For instance, the potential weaknesses of relying on either interview or survey data only (i.e. gathering rich data from key individuals only vs. gathering descriptive information from a somewhat larger group of CSC members) was offset by combining both approaches (in what Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) termed ‘weakness minimization legitimation’).

In the analysis and reporting, rich (or ‘thick’) descriptions were used to convey the findings (Geertz, 1973), providing (multiple) insider’s views, as well as the researcher’s own view as observer – in line with the ‘inside-outside’ criteria proposed by Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006). Where discrepant views emerged, these were also reported (Creswell, 2009). For instance, in introducing and discussing the results of the study, not only the ‘majority’ practices or views are noted, but we tried also to reflect where there were differences or contrasting practices/views emerging from the data. The analysis was, as described above, an iterative process, in which the analysis of the various datasets was examined and re-examined, also alternating between the (various strands of) qualitative data and the later collected quantitative dataset (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Another procedure suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) to improve the quality of data analysis in a mixed methods study foresees the complementation of narrative descriptions with counts of observations (‘conversion legitimation’). While this technique is not suited to all types of data or contexts, we did rely on it - for instance by counting the occurrence of a given theme within the media dataset.

As noted also in Chapter 7, the coding (and recoding) of media articles on CSCs was reviewed by the co-author of the paper, confirming intercoder reliability. Given the nature of this (sole) research endeavour, it was not possible to apply that procedure to the remaining data under scrutiny, but we did rely on various forms of ‘peer debriefing’ (Creswell, 1998, 2009), consulting colleagues and experts (including the Guidance Committee of this research project) about both the development of the data collection instruments, and to gain feedback on the various stages of the analysis. What is more, the principal study participants (mainly, CSC representatives) had an opportunity to comment on the findings, as they received early drafts of the analysis (this was also driven by ethical considerations, as discussed in §5) and thus we were able to apply ‘member checks’ as well (Creswell, 1998, 2009).

5. Ethical issues

The protection of research participants is a central duty of every researcher, and a safeguard that contributes to the integrity of research projects (Creswell, 2009). This notion of ‘do no harm’ has been integrated in the codes of ethics for professionals in various fields (Creswell, 2009; Finch, 2001; Lowman & Palys, 2001; Vander Laenen & O’Gorman, 2016), and it is also explicitly noted within the ‘European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity’ (ALLEA, 2017) and

the ‘Ethical Code for Scientific Research in Belgium’ (Bogaert et al., 2009).⁷⁸ However, this is not always a straightforward task, and in fact criminological and social movement studies raise particular ethical challenges and dilemmas in the sense that these address illegal activities and/or uncover (protest) events or strategies which could be subject to repression (Bachman & Schutt, 2008; Lowman & Palys, 2001; Milan, 2014; Vander Laenen & O’Gorman, 2016). In this study in particular, bringing CSCs under the spotlight, considering the legal context in which the organizations currently operate in Belgium (Chapter 3), could expose participants in a way that might result in organizational and/or personal harms. Ensuring confidentiality, i.e. that *“identifiable information about individuals collected during the process of research will not be disclosed without permission”* (Wiles et al., 2008, p. 417) is one important tool in preventing or minimizing the harms for research participants associated with their involvement in research projects. But many threats to the preservation of full confidentiality and to the overall protection of study participants can emerge throughout the course of a research project – even during the publication of research findings (Israel, 2004; Vander Laenen & O’Gorman, 2016). In the next paragraphs we further delve into such issues, and discuss the measures adopted to prevent or minimize them.

At the outset of the study

Even before the start of the research project, an initial reflection was made with regards to the potential ethical issues that could arise throughout the study. To that effect, an outline of the study (title, state-of-the art of the literature, research questions, methods, and relevant references), a brief first discussion of the role of research participants, as well as of the safeguards introduced for their protection was sent for review by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Law, which approved the plan (please see Annex). Although the measures described in that document were preliminary and to be further fine-tuned by the researcher, it was already noted that the researcher should seek to obtain informed consent, and that the data collected in the course of the study would be stored in the internal server of the Faculty of Law at Ghent University. It was also acknowledged that given the scope of the research project, *“by participating in the questionnaire or interviews, respondents run the risk of incriminating themselves”*. To counter that risk, and anticipating the need to build a relationship with research participants based on trust, it was proposed that the information gathered would be treated as confidential.

Against this backdrop, before the first meetings with the CSCs as described in §3, we prepared a brief information sheet about the research project (Vander Laenen & O’Gorman, 2016). This document was handed out to all the CSC representatives attending the meetings, and served as the starting point for the introduction of the research project. Indeed, during the meetings we shared information about the research project, the questions driving the study, the different

⁷⁸ As noted by Vander Laenen & O’Gorman (2016) there are currently no ethics guidelines or standards for criminological research in Flanders, an issue we return to in this section.

phases of data collection, and the involvement of research participants in those, should they wish to take part in the study. At that stage, based on the input from the CSC representatives attending the meetings, we discussed how the contacts with CSC members and other key individuals within the CSCs (i.e. growers) should take place. With a view to protecting their privacy, it was suggested that all communication would be channelled through the CSC representatives in a first phase, who would then notify us of the interest of CSC members in participating, and liaise between us and them. While this was a more burdensome and slow communication strategy (which could have also introduced selection bias), it was hoped it would enhance the protection granted to most research participants (but not necessarily to the CSC representatives who acted as gatekeepers, as discussed further below). As a result, we did not collect any contact details or personal information of most participants, and only in a second phase communicated directly with CSC growers (in order to schedule interviews).⁷⁹ At the initial meetings, we also provided information about the agency funding the study (i.e. the Research Foundation – Flanders), and discussed any questions CSC representatives had at that point. This constituted a first effort towards ensuring transparency and the informed consent of research participants, which was continued in subsequent phases, as described next.

During data collection and storage

In line with the ethics plan mentioned earlier, a written informed consent form was designed and shared with CSC representatives and growers prior to the start of the interview. Both groups were asked to read it and if they had understood the information and agreed to take part, they were told not to sign the document with their real name but to make some sort of drawing, such as a cross, or to sign under a code name. Although some participants preferred to use their typical signature, our request was of course to avoid collecting any personal details that could be used to identify research participants (Vander Laenen & O'Gorman, 2016). The form was available in English, Dutch and French, and research participants were given a copy that they could keep as well. The forms provided information about the research team, the goals of the study, and the purpose of the interview. It also included a note about the possible benefits and risks of participating in the research project. With that regard, our promise of confidentiality was not an absolute one, as we feared that it would be impossible to guarantee that the CSCs participating in the study would not be identified. As such, and in line with Snyder (2002) we sought to individualize or at least differentiate the degree of confidentiality granted, by noting that at an individual level, no personal identifiers would be included in the outputs of

⁷⁹ At that stage, CSC growers were informed that they could use a pseudonym, and should not reveal the location of cultivation sites, or other personal details throughout the (e-mail or phone) communication. Different degrees of caution were exerted by the research participants, and we sought to adhere to their requests. For instance, in some cases, the research participants asked to meet in a public place (e.g. train station) to avoid disclosing personal addresses or the location of cultivation sites. In other cases, those details were communicated beforehand during the scheduling of the interview.

the research, but that at an organizational level (i.e. with regards to the CSC *per se*) we were not able to exclude some degree of identification.

At that point in the research project (Figure 1), we did not anticipate that CSC leaders' involvement would be so pervasive (the role of CSC leaders is the main topic of Chapter 10). On reflection, given the small number of individuals involved and the extensive role they played within the organizations and the broader movement, our confidentiality promise, even at an individual level, might have been phrased differently. This difficulty was felt particularly during the analysis and reporting phases, which we discuss next. The third group of interviewees, i.e. stakeholders, were also informed about the study, and the advantages and risks of participation prior to the interview, and informed consent was given orally. The online survey included a first page/screen with information about the research project (research team, goals of the study, financing), about the content of the survey and the eligibility criteria (i.e. be a member of a Belgian CSCs and be at least 18 years old), and a note on confidentiality as well. By proceeding to complete the survey respondents agreed to being adequately informed about the study and willing to participate.

All the collected data was stored in the internal server of the Faculty of Law at Ghent University. As noted in §3, a few students assisted in the transcription of interviews, but we took measures to ensure that that data would be handled with respect to participants' privacy. Following transcription, we sought to anonymize those written records as far as possible. Again, due to the small number of organizations active in Belgium, the anonymized files may still contain information that could be used to identify organizations or individuals (e.g. references to locations or other individuals, etc.). As far as possible, we tried to protect participants by attributing them and the CSCs a random code. The key to those codes was listed in a password protected file (which was also saved in the Ghent University's internal server). Both measures are standard practices recommend and applied by other scholars (Creswell, 2009; Israel, 2004; Vander Laenen & O'Gorman, 2016). As per what had been foreseen in the ethics plan, once the transcripts were reviewed and we felt confident the coding could proceed without the need to consult the original files, the audio-files of the interviews were deleted. Similarly, the survey data originally gathered through LimeSurvey (which contained participants' IP addresses) was destroyed (as well as any existing backups of the survey stored within the University server) once the analysis reached an advanced stage. While this could pose a risk to the researcher if faced with allegations of scientific misconduct, the destruction of this data seemed to be the best guarantee of the protection of research participants' confidentiality.

During data analysis and reporting

The analysis and write up of the data raised also important ethical challenges. Although we used codes to anonymize research participants (and ensure confidentiality), we were concerned that particular individuals might still be identifiable by peers in their setting, or by others (a difficulty common in qualitative research, as noted for instance by Bachman and

Schutt (2008), Israel (2004), and Wiles et al. (2008)). In particular, given the legal context in which the CSCs were operating, we were conscious that identification of individuals and their actions within those organizations could expose them to police investigation.⁸⁰ This was especially so in relation to the qualitative data collected with CSC directors and growers, and some of the observations of CSC activity. What is more, some of the data collected could be seen as incriminating, and thus the possibility of identification was certainly problematic from a ‘do no harm’ perspective.

We tried to address this issue in three different ways. Firstly, we tried to report aggregate results as much as possible, to avoid attributing particular features or actions to individuals (who might be identifiable). For instance, when reporting the findings concerning growers’ practices (please see Chapter 11), while initially we had considered including an overview of each grower’s features (e.g. indicating how many plants each grower was cultivating, the motivations given for joining a CSC, growers’ pre-CSC experience, etc.), we became concerned that this would pose additional risks to participants and reported the findings in more general terms instead. Secondly, specific information, where not essential for the analysis of the issues at stake or to answer the research questions, which could be incriminating for research participants was not included in the research outputs, in line with Wiles et al. (2008): *“in some cases, researchers may feel it is necessary to avoid publication altogether or to omit certain aspects of their data or individual cases in order to protect people’s identities”* (p. 422). ‘Self-censorship’ was thus at times employed, when and if the particular information was not essential to the understanding of the problems under analysis (Adler & Adler, 2002; Milan, 2014) – otherwise it was reported in aggregate form. The study demanded careful consideration of the need to balance between using enriching details and at the same time safeguarding research participants’ protection (see also: Adler, 1985; Israel, 2004). Finally, we shared the preliminary drafts of the analysis with the CSC representatives, as also promised in the informed consent form for interviews with CSC directors. When a new draft article was submitted to a journal for publication, we contacted the CSC directors, and sent them a copy of the draft in which any quotes attributed to the CSCs or individuals affiliated with them were also highlighted (each CSC was told which was the corresponding colour). Although no changes to our analysis were made as a result, we allowed participants to indicate if any sensitive/incriminating information was disclosed in the paper that could place them in an (even more) vulnerable position, a strategy recommended also by Snyder (2002).

The ‘what if’ question: problems yet to come

Beyond the practices and challenges discussed in the previous sections, considering that four of the seven active CSCs that participated in the study (and several of their representatives) faced legal issues (i.e. were subject to police raids and/or tried in court for criminal offenses)

⁸⁰ Even if some might not have minded being identified, in line with their ‘activist personas’, as noted in other research (Klein & Potter, 2018).

during the course of the research project, there was/is also a risk that criminal justice officers might compel us to hand over data collected in the course of the study. It goes without saying that this would run counter the confidentiality arrangements outlined above, and would breach the relationship of trust built with research participants throughout the study. A number of cases have been reported where other researchers were indeed asked to disclose research data, with various outcomes, in particular within common law jurisdictions (some of those cases were discussed in the following: Crabb, 1996; Hoonard, 2002; Israel, 2004; Lowman & Palys, 2000; Palys & Lowman, 2012). For instance, in a case involving a criminology graduate student at Simon Fraser University (Canada) who was conducting a study of assisted suicide and euthanasia among AIDS patients, the researcher was subpoenaed to testify in court (Israel, 2004; Lowman & Palys, 2000). In that case, the researcher had offered absolute confidentiality to study participants (which was approved by the University ethics committee), and thus refused to disclose the names of the research participants, which resulted in charges being brought against him. The researcher eventually won the case⁸¹ but received limited support from his University or the ethics committee which had reviewed and approved his research plan and confidentiality arrangements (Lowman & Palys, 2000). Other cases where researchers were asked to divulge confidential research data have also been reported, particularly in the US (Crabb, 1996; Israel, 2004; Palys & Lowman, 2012).

The literature reflecting on this and other ethics issues offers a number of suggestions on how to address such challenges. On the one hand, there are a number of steps that researchers ought to take in order to minimize, as far as possible, the harms emerging for study participants. According to Lowman and Palys (2001), the researcher should actually discuss with research participants the possibility of a court-ordered disclosure at the outset of the study, and communicate his/her intention should such a threat arise in practice, as in the authors' view, this should be an element of informed consent. On reflection, this is something we could have discussed with CSC representatives at the outset of the study. A second suggestion relates to a strategy we already discussed (and implemented) earlier: *“researchers can pre-empt the possibility of legal challenge and the prospective consequences of refusal to obey a subpoena or other court order to divulge confidential research records by removing identifiers or destroying the records before governments or courts express interest in them”* (Palys & Lowman, 2002, p. 2-3). In addition, it has been suggested that researchers should recognize that a guarantee of absolute confidentiality might not be possible, and instead should be sensitive to the ‘law of the land’ and offer partial or qualified assurances of confidentiality only (Israel, 2004). This is the position recommended by several ethics codes and professional organizations, including the Code of Ethics issued by the British Society of Criminology (Finch, 2001; Israel, 2004; Lowman & Palys, 2001).

On the other hand, the relationship between researcher and research participants and the safeguard of confidentiality is treated differently across jurisdictions (Finch, 2001; Lowman &

⁸¹ The decisive legal argument was based on the idea that the research met a common law test (the Wigmore criteria) which is used by courts in Canada to assert research-participant privilege (Lowman & Palys, 2000).

Palys, 2001). Both in the US and in Australia, there is no federal legislation addressing the issue, and so the level of protection researchers enjoy may vary from state to state (Finch, 2001). In the US, an interesting system has been developed in several states which “*permits a researcher to apply for a certificate that gives advance immunity from having to break confidentiality*” (O’Neill, 2002, p. 23). By registering the research in advance, researchers are thus guaranteed immunity from subpoena (Finch, 2001). In Canada, a case-by-case assessment is based on the so-called Wigmore criteria: i.e. in order for communication/information to be considered privileged it must originate from a relationship where there was an expectation of confidentiality, which is central to the relationship between the two parties; that relationship is one that should be fostered by the community; and finally it should be shown that the disclosure of that information would produce greater harm than benefit (Lowman & Palys, 2001).

In Belgium, there are currently no standards or guidelines specific to criminological research and the Flemish Association for Criminology, Criminal Law and Forensic Welfare Work (*Vlaamse Vereniging voor Criminologie, Strafrecht en Forensisch Welzijnswerk*) plays a limited role (Vander Laenen & O’Gorman, 2016). While the ethics plan produced before the start of the study indicated that “*the researcher has no judicial obligation to inform judicial instances of any illegal activities mentioned by respondents*”, in an extreme case, the researcher could be compelled to do so. The advice received from the Faculty legal services, which were contacted after two of the CSCs participating in the study were raided in May-June 2017, was to hand over the data, if asked by the police to do so (on instruction of the public prosecutor or demanded by the examining magistrate). We agree with Lowman and Palys (2001), who have noted that “*while confidentiality is essential to many different types of research, nowhere is it more important than in research where subjects are asked to divulge information about criminal activity and criminal justice processes*” (p. 1). Within the criminological field, the inability to guarantee confidentiality could in fact alienate research participants and render it (near-) impossible to conduct research on illicit activities (Wiles et al., 2008). The protection of research participants and researchers remain challenging, and there is a need for implementing a more adequate protection system. The new EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR),⁸² which will come into force in May 2018, foresees clearer rules with regards, for instance, to the assessment of risks of data management and storage (Chassang, 2017).⁸³ For instance, it establishes a data protection impact assessment (expanding on what are the typical requirements from most funding agencies), which aims to enhance risk identification and the implementation of appropriate safeguards, determining whether a prior consultation of the supervisory authority appointed by each Member State must take place (in instances where

⁸² In full: Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC.

⁸³ We are aware that the GDPR has much broader implications, and has also received criticism for instance with regards to the restrictions to information flow across countries or the use of big data for instance in medical research.

there is a high risk for research participants) (Bieker, Friedewald, Hansen, Obersteller, & Rost, 2016). It introduces also the figure of a data protection officer, which is due to play an advisory and monitoring role with regards to the protection of personal data (and which will be mandatory in certain cases). Whether the new regulation will positively affect research practices will to a great extent depend on its implementation at the national level (for instance, in relation to the development of Codes of Conduct, certification and monitoring – as per Section 5 of GDPR).

6. Other research challenges

Throughout the course of the study, a number of other challenges emerged. The next sections provide a reflection on how those issues might have come into play and/or affected the research project.

Changes to the research plan

The initial research plan of the study included also a toxicological test of cannabis samples produced by the active Belgian CSCs. By doing so, we wanted to learn more about the potency, quality, and purity of the cannabis cultivated and supplied within the CSCs, as this is an important aspect of CSCs' functioning and supply function. This phase of the research would have been implemented in collaboration with Prof. Jan Tytgat and Prof. Eva Cuypers at the Laboratory of Toxicology and Pharmacology of the KU Leuven (hereinafter, the Laboratory). We aimed to collect about 30 specimens of full grown and female cannabis plants among the (producing) CSCs. The samples would have been transported and delivered in closed paper bags to the Laboratory, where they would be stored at -20°C. This Laboratory is equipped with and has extensive expertise in a wide range of analysis apparatus, and would have tested the cannabis samples for the presence of THC, CBD and pesticides, using UPLC-MS/MS state-of-the-art equipment. The research plan foresaw also the development of a database, available electronically, where all the samples collected and analysed would have been registered, including detailed information about the results of the analysis. All samples would have been destroyed at the Laboratory following the testing.

As these procedures would involve the transport and possession of a prohibited substance, as well as its analysis by the Laboratory, we applied for a formal authorization from the competent Belgian authority, the Federal Agency for Medicines and Health Products (particularly with the Authorizations Division).⁸⁴ A detailed proposal, outlining the steps to be undertaken in the context of the toxicological analysis, as well as about how this procedure would fit with the overall goals and research methods applied in the study were included. We provided also

⁸⁴ In line with the applicable Belgian legislation (Koninklijk besluit houdende regeling van verdoevende middelen, psychotrope stoffen, 6 September 2017).

information about the research team, and completed the standard form for this type of permit. The agency's response was negative, due to a number of formalities concerning the proposal (e.g. the request should have been processed using a new form, which entered into force one day before our request was formalized; the criminal records from some members of the research team were missing). But even if those issues would have been addressed (which we were in a position to do) in a subsequent (re-)submission of the request, it was highly unlikely that the permit would have been granted, as the key substantive argument mobilized reads as follows (the full notification is included in Annex):

“Moreover, the request can never be accepted, given that the cannabis social clubs are in breach of the drugs law, and as a result cannabis from this illegal source can only be analyzed in the context of a judicial investigation” (notification from FAGG, own translation).

The impossibility of conducting the laboratorial testing of CSC-produced cannabis constitutes a limitation of the study, as it would have yielded novel findings with regards to the substance at stake. Although the response to our request seems to suggest that in the current legal context similar requests for a permit will be denied, we hope that this is an area that can be explored in future research as it would provide important data on some of the issues often discussed in relation to this (and other) model(s) of cannabis supply: the quality, purity, and potency of the cannabis being distributed through these outlets.

(Avoiding) the struggles in the field

An issue emerging throughout the whole data collection process relates to the volatility of the CSC landscape (Chapter 6), often associated with the legal context in which these organizations were operating (Chapter 3). This was reflected in a number of ways in the recruitment process and volume of response. Firstly, we should note that from the group of five CSCs identified circa February 2014 by Decorte (2014a, 2015), only two remained active at the time when data collection was initiated. Most of those CSCs ceased activities following a police intervention or court case involving the organization and/or some of their representatives. While including the views and experiences of those involved in the former CSC initiatives would have been of added-value, only two representatives of a former CSC agreed to being interviewed.⁸⁵ What is more, the subsequent police interventions involving the active CSCs included in our sample, and which took place over the course of the study, arguably had also a negative impact in terms of the number of participants, especially in terms of survey response, as noted in §3. As we found in our analysis (please see Chapter 7) the legal issues affecting CSCs were often depicted in the domestic print media, which might have contributed to a negative perception of the model and some reticence among potential participants to share their CSC-involvement and

⁸⁵ The other representatives of former CSCs did not respond to our requests so we are unaware of the reasons for refusing participation in the study.

experiences. While it is difficult to estimate the number of potential participants that might have felt discouraged from, or uncomfortable about, taking part in the research project in these circumstances, it is plausible to think that some among them might have otherwise engaged in the study. Not only is the volume of participants likely to have been affected, but also those who participated might share particular features (e.g. for instance, strongest involvement with the model/movement), as despite the increased external pressure on the model and potential distrust, these individuals still volunteered to take the survey.

In addition, given the snowball approach adopted, some CSCs were identified and entered the study at a later date: three of the seven active CSCs participating were contacted throughout 2016 (while the other four had already been briefed about the study at the end of 2015). We met with the last CSC taking part in the study in October 2016. While new CSCs may have been established since then,⁸⁶ it would have been very challenging (and it would have delayed subsequent data collection procedures) to continue including new CSCs in the study. In any case, we tried to stay up to date with the changes in the landscape and informally contacted new emerging CSCs that came to our attention.

A second challenge relates to the struggles within the CSC landscape. Since an early stage of the research project, we became aware of the existence of factions or cliques among those involved in the CSC movement in Belgium (which are explored in detail in Chapter 6). For instance, in our first encounter with CSC representatives, we were commonly asked about whether we were also going to reach out to ‘person X’ from ‘CSC Y’ (an issue we discuss elsewhere as well: Pardal (2016c)). Some CSC representatives did not trust one another, and in some instances (mutual) accusations of theft of plants or of foul play among the different individuals participating in the movement were communicated to us during fieldwork. Blee and Taylor (2002) noted that this is an issue commonly experienced by social movement researchers:

“Nearly all social movements contain factions. It would not be overstating the matter to say that the researcher who does not encounter differences of opinion, cliques, and conflicts in the course of doing field research on protest groups has probably failed to obtain accurate information about the movement being studied. [...] For nonparticipants, it is particularly important to avoid making alignments with factions during the early stages of fieldwork when a researcher is seeking entrée and trying to build rapport with participants” (p. 98).

As suggested by these and other authors (see also: Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014), we tried to avoid any alignment with a particular faction throughout the study. Since the first meetings with the CSC representatives, we stressed we would not take sides, and would invite all the known CSCs to participate in the study. During the course of data collection, we re-emphasized the positioning as independent researchers, keeping a neutral stance towards the different

⁸⁶ We know of 2-3 new CSCs, but it is plausible that other initiatives have taken/are taking place.

groups and study participants (Beyens et al., 2016). Throughout the study, we and Prof. Decorte were also contacted by CSC representatives who wished to tell us about recent events or concerns. In those instances, we often welcomed them in our offices at the University and heard their updates, again indicating that that was a courtesy we would extend to all participants, and that we would not interfere or support one CSC vs. another. In this case, the position as a non-participant ‘outsider’ in the field was actually a positive element in gaining the trust of the different actors involved. While this became less of an issue as the fieldwork progressed, it nevertheless required awareness of the sensitivities at play and alertness to avoid any misperception which could have had repercussions for the further implementation of the study. The relationship with the various study participants demanded careful management as, echoing Bachman and Schutt (2008), *“every action the researcher takes can develop or undermine this relationship”* (p. 186).

‘Help, I’ve been hacked’

Another problem emerged during data collection, which had not been anticipated: the LimeSurvey account of the Faculty of Law & Criminology at Ghent University, which was used to run the online survey, was hacked (on May 8th 2017). According to the IT services of the Faculty, this was a random hack and other colleagues’ surveys were also affected. A complaint was filed with the Federal Cyber Emergency Team, and we also communicated the issue through the social network platform of the project as this was the more immediate way to reach participants. The IT department was then able to retrieve the latest back-up file which had been automatically saved into the University’s internal database, dating from March 17th 2017. While that file contained most of the data, about 50-60 other questionnaire responses were missing. As during the time the survey was running we kept a separate back-up⁸⁷ (of completed surveys only, i.e. of questionnaires where participants exited the survey having gone through the whole questionnaire, even if not responding to all items), it was possible to later on manually insert about 30 responses into SPSS. The survey was restored and launched again on May 12th 2017, and participants were alerted to the re-launch through the same channels. While survey response was already slowing down at the time of the incident, after the hack the volume of new responses was rather small (n=3 valid entries). Following the communication of the issue through social media, we did receive some comments raising the question of whether the hack was ‘really a coincidence’ or if it was related to the ongoing police investigations affecting some of the CSCs at the time. It is thus plausible that some potential participants might have felt discouraged from, or uncomfortable about, taking part in the survey in these circumstances.

⁸⁷ This back-up file as well as the original files generated through LimeSurvey (which contained IP addresses) were destroyed (with assistance from the IT department) once the data was analysed – and as noted in §5.

Risks for the researcher

During fieldwork, researchers can be confronted with situations that might result in psychological or physical distress/harm (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001; Vander Laenen & O'Gorman, 2016).⁸⁸ Some researchers have also developed strategies for personal protection (Vanhaelemeesch, 2015). We did not have such a plan, and while the research project evolved generally without any significant incidents affecting the researcher, a few instances of perhaps near-risk did occur. For instance, one of the interviews could not take place as planned as we felt somewhat compelled to exit the setting. This interview was to be conducted at the interviewees' house, a setting we were familiar with since we had previously been there to introduce the study and research team. Upon arrival, we noted some disarray, as furniture and other objects seemed to have been thrown onto the ground. The interviewee was visibly upset and shouting, apparently in the middle of an argument with a family member. As this family member approached the setting, the situation escalated and the interviewee began throwing objects through the window. While the interviewee was not violent towards the researcher, the exchange between the two was verbally and physically aggressive, so we looked for an opportunity to leave the setting. We did not feel personally threatened, but conscious of the tense situation, it seemed appropriate to leave the setting (after speaking with the individuals involved in the argument), as it would not have been possible to carry the interview. A few weeks later, we managed to complete the interview with that CSC representative. In addition to this, and echoing also the experience of other researchers (Adler, 1985; Lee, 1995; Maalsté, 2008), the fieldwork entailed other moments of potential personal risk, as the researcher was at times present in locations where activities in breach of the law were possibly taking place (such as cannabis cultivation) – but this is a common issue in other drug research, and less problematic in cases of overt fieldwork (Zaitch, 2002). On other occasions, we trusted (until that moment unknown) study participants to drive the researcher to the (also unknown) location of the interview, often in very rural contexts across the country.

⁸⁸ These and other harms (e.g. legal, social, etc.) can certainly also emerge for study participants too, as extensively discussed in the literature, and are addressed in the context of the current study in §5.

PART IV: Results

The following chapters provide an overview of the findings from this study. The specific status of each paper is indicated throughout PART IV. **Chapter 6** offers a first gaze over the CSC landscape in Belgium since its inception, the inter-organizational relationships among CSCs, and between them and other supportive actors. **Chapter 7** focuses on CSCs' media representation during the first decade of presence of the model in Belgium, analysing both how CSCs have attempted to frame public debate through the domestic media, and how they have been represented throughout that time-frame. As such, these articles seek to answer research question 1 (i.e. how did the CSC model develop in Belgium?) and respective sub-questions. In turn, the following two chapters (8-9) zoom in on the organizational level to examine CSCs' functioning and activities (research question 2). **Chapter 8** provides a detailed view on how Belgian CSCs organize the supply of cannabis among their members, and **Chapter 9** gives particular attention to Belgian CSCs' features as suppliers of cannabis for medical use. Finally, **Chapters 10-13**⁸⁹ consider the roles, profiles and motivations of key individuals within Belgian CSCs (research question 3): their leaders, the growers cultivating cannabis for CSCs, and the members of the associations.

Chapters 6, 7, 9 and 11 have been published or accepted for publication and meet the requirements for PhD dissertation by articles established by the Faculty of Law and Criminology at Ghent University. Full references can be found at the beginning of each chapter.

⁸⁹ Chapter 13 focuses also on CSCs' repertoire of action (research question 2).

Chapter 6: The Belgian Cannabis Social Club landscape

This chapter has been accepted as:

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*[This publication **meets the requirements** for PhD dissertation by articles approved by the Faculty of Law and Criminology at Ghent University]*

Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to map the presence of the Cannabis Social Club (CSC) model in Belgium since its emergence in the country and to analyse the inter-organizational relations among CSCs and between the CSCs and other supportive actors engaged in the wider cannabis movement.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This analysis draws on qualitative interviews (n=42) with directors of seven currently active and one former Belgian CSC(s), as well as with organizations or individuals reportedly collaborating with the Belgian CSCs. That data is complemented by fieldwork observations and a review of CSC internal documents.

Findings: Despite an uninterrupted presence in the country over the last decade, CSC presence in Belgium remains rather volatile and vulnerable to external control pressure. The CSC landscape is a somewhat segmented field as cooperation among CSCs remains limited. At the same time, the support base for the movement is diverse, encompassing different types of secondary organizations ranging from national and international advocacy groups, to cannabis industry entrepreneurs and other consultants.

Originality/value: This paper contributes to the yet limited body of knowledge on CSCs, by providing a first comprehensive overview of the presence of CSCs in one of the key settings associated with the model, by shedding light into the interplay between CSCs, and between other organizations supportive of the cannabis movement.

Keywords: Cannabis Social Club, cannabis, supply model, cannabis movement, Belgium, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are registered non-profit associations that put forward a user-driven model for the supply of cannabis among adult users (Pardal, 2016b). Although CSC practices differ among CSCs and across countries (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017), core to this model is the creation of a closed system of supply of cannabis, produced by and distributed to cover the personal use of the adult members of the associations - which are typically run in a non-profit way (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Pardal, 2016b). The emergence of these associations can be traced back to Spain during the 1990s (Barriuso, 2011; Val, 2017), as cannabis activists sought to exploit a perceived grey zone in the domestic legal framework, which does not criminalize personal drug use (in private) and has tended to allow 'shared consumption' (Díez & Muñoz, 2013; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Muñoz & Soto, 2000). The CSC presence in that country has grown since then, and currently an estimated 800-1000 CSCs are active across the different Spanish regions (Decorte et al., 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015).

Research into the Spanish CSC model noted that these associations are in fact part of a larger movement which comprises individual users and growers, grow shops and seed banks, specialist media (dedicated to the cannabis culture), other types of associations as well as umbrella organizations representing various CSCs – such as CSC Federations (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Montañés, 2017). Such analyses have applied a social movement perspective, considering that the various actors active within this broader 'cannabis movement' share the end goal of achieving reform of the current prohibitionist cannabis legal framework and advocate for a "cultural change that would imply the toleration of the use of cannabis in everyday's life" (Marín & Hinojosa, 2017, p. 124, own translation).

The Spanish grassroots efforts were followed with attention by activists in other settings, who sought to develop similar experiments in their own countries (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Blickman, 2014; Decorte & Pardal, 2017). In Belgium, while domestic legislation prohibits the cultivation and/or distribution of cannabis (Pardal, 2016a), the model has emerged as well. Previous research documented some of the Belgian CSCs' practices (Decorte, 2015), but little is known about how the model developed in the country, as well as whether and how the Belgian CSCs have interacted and gathered the support of other like-minded actors. This paper contributes to filling that knowledge gap by mapping the evolution of the CSC presence in the country, and the nature of the relationships between Belgian CSCs. In addition, we aim to explore the broader landscape of the movement, by identifying and discussing the role of other secondary actors which engage with the Belgian CSCs.

2. Methods

This analysis draws primarily on semi-structured interviews with key actors within the CSC landscape in Belgium. Firstly, we interviewed 21 members of the Board of Directors of the seven active Belgian CSCs participating in the study (see Figure 3 below).⁹⁰ An interview session was organized at each CSC, in which at least one director participated. Secondly, we conducted interviews with two directors of a former CSC. The CSCs were identified firstly on the basis of a previous account by Decorte (2015). Drawing on that initial group of CSC contacts, through snowballing and ongoing fieldwork, we were able to map and reach the other CSCs in the country, both active and inactive. The interview questionnaire was adapted from instruments developed for interviews with CSC representatives by both Decorte (2015) and Queirolo et al. (2016). We draw particularly on the interview data concerning CSC foundation and general background, and on CSCs' relationships with other actors. Finally, we interviewed organizations or individuals with whom the Belgian CSCs reported having a collaborative tie (n=19). These interviews focused mainly on the goals of those actors and their relationship with the Belgian CSCs. All interviews took place between February 2016 and August 2017, and were conducted in Dutch, English or French, in accordance to the language preference of each interviewee. With three exceptions, all interviews were recorded and transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. This data was analysed using NVIVO software. Each CSC and other organization interviewed received a random identifier (CSC1-CSC7 and O1-O19). When directly citing interview data we add a -D (for interviews with CSC directors) or -R (for interviews with other actors) suffix per respondent, numbered consecutively.

To complement these materials, we conducted additional fieldwork, during which we were able to observe several moments of internal as well as public CSC activity, and hold informal conversations with different participants. Key documents produced by the CSCs (e.g., CSC bylaws) were also analysed.

3. Results

The Belgian CSC landscape since its inception

The introduction of the CSC model in Belgium (2006-2012)

The first Belgian CSC emerged in 2006 in Antwerp (Decorte, 2015), marking the beginning of the movement in the country (Figure 3). The founders of this CSC had previously participated in local drug user groups' initiatives (e.g., the Support Centre for Antwerp Drug Users), as well as in other international initiatives such as the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD), and closely followed the development of the CSC model in Spain.

⁹⁰ Including heads of CSC sub-divisions (n=4) and one former director of a currently active CSC.

Figure 3: A snapshot of the Belgian CSC landscape, 2006-2012.



Key to the onset of this initiative in Belgium seems to have been the publication of the 2005 Ministerial Guidelines, which indicated that the possession of one cannabis plant or three grams of cannabis should receive the lowest priority for prosecution. This policy document was perceived by Belgian activists as providing the opening to introduce the model in the country, as one of our interviewees explained:

“From this it started, like ‘hey, it’s a good idea in Spain, it’s possible there, these are the expectations, these are the experiences with the judges, with the law, with so on and so on’. How can we implement this in other countries in Europe? And suddenly, because of these Ministerial Guidelines we saw a possibility” (CSC3-D21).

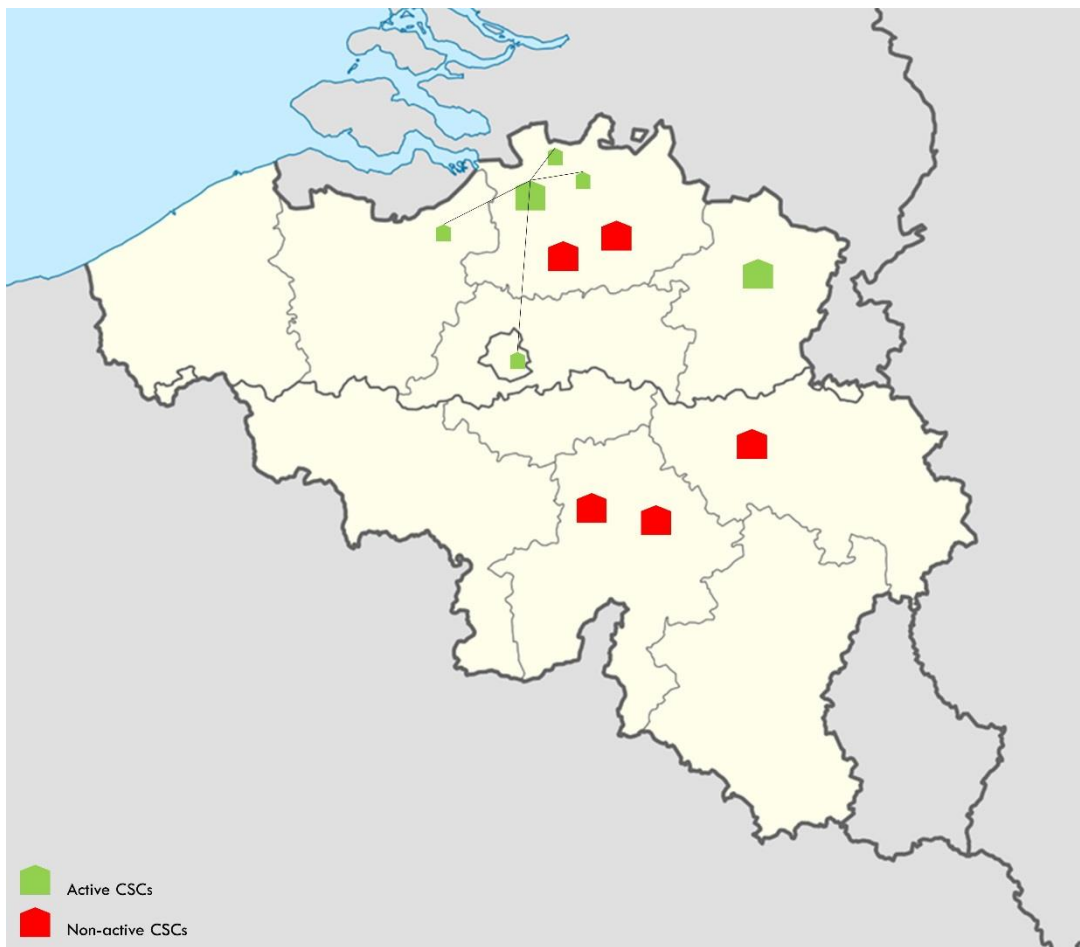
The first CSC thus devised a working system (which is followed by all other Belgian CSCs) based on the allocation and cultivation of one plant per member – arguing that by doing so, the association would respect the threshold introduced by the 2005 Ministerial Guidelines. At the same time, the CSC representatives behind this first initiative were aware of the limitations and uncertainty imposed by that policy, and thus sought to “test” it (CSC3-D21), to provoke a reaction from policy-makers and obtain more clarity as to what was allowed under the new policy. In 2006 and later in 2008 the CSC representatives thus organized several public initiatives and demonstrations to introduce themselves and “present the model” (CSC3-D6),

during some of which the police intervened, leading to two court cases (Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). While initially condemned by a lower court in both cases, the Court of Appeal dismissed the first case in 2008 as the criminal prosecution had become time-barred. In 2010, the CSC representatives were acquitted in the Court of Appeal with regards to the second case, as that court considered that the public demonstrations organized by the CSC had been provocative but did not encourage drug use (Kilmer et al., 2013; Pardal, 2016a). Although in those cases the Courts did not (directly) examine issues pertaining to CSCs' supply function (i.e., cultivation and distribution of cannabis among the members), these first legal proceedings constituted a positive result for this CSC, as well as for the initial development of the model in the country. It is only after these court decisions that the first CSC's collective cultivation took place.

The first wave of Belgian CSCs (2013-2014)

Another important milestone for the growth of CSC presence in the country was the change of policy in the Netherlands in 2012, which imposed additional restrictions for Belgian users seeking to purchase cannabis in Dutch coffee shops (Grund & Breeksema, 2017; Ooyen-Houben et al., 2014). One of our interviewees noted a quick increase in the number of CSC members and candidate members following that change. In 2013, six other CSCs were established in Belgium. Most of these new CSCs did, however, soon after encountered legal problems (n=5). Following a police intervention or court decision (n=4) or due to other reasons (n=1) five of the new CSCs closed down, as illustrated in Figure 4 (Nève, 2015; Pardal, 2016a).

Figure 4: A snapshot of the Belgian CSC landscape, 2013-2014.



Nevertheless, this phase was characterized by experimentation in a number of aspects. Firstly, this phase saw the appearance of the first CSCs in the French-speaking region of the country ($n=3$). In addition, during this time-period, the first attempt to establish a ‘medical’ CSC (i.e., a CSC admitting only members using cannabis for medical reasons) was made. During this phase, the first known case of a ‘shadow club’ occurred in Belgium. This phenomenon was described by Decorte (2015) as follows: *“individuals or groups of individuals who consciously use a CSC’s name and outward appearance as a front for criminal entrepreneurs who try to produce and sell cannabis”* (p. 128). The CSC at stake was uncovered during a police check, during which significantly more cannabis plants were found than the number of members of that CSC (Decorte, 2015; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). Finally, another innovation is that the oldest CSC started developing a structure of sub-divisions. Two different types of sub-divisions emerged: the first type seeks to gather the members of the CSC who use cannabis for medical reasons ($n=1$); the second type corresponds to regional chapters of the primary CSC, located in other cities for the convenience of a group of members ($n=4$). While the long-term goal is for these sub-units to become fully independent CSCs in the future, as it was the case of one of the regional chapters during this phase, the ambiguous legal framework has discouraged most managers from moving into that direction, as the following illustrates:

“We have discussed becoming independent in several occasions. I always see our lawyer for this kind of questions, and he told me it was safer to stay under the umbrella... I really call it the legal umbrella of [CSC3]. That’s what we have decided” (CSC3-D18).

Although these sub-divisions are formally part of the primary CSC, they have some degree of independence in terms of its day-to-day running and the arrangements concerning the supply of cannabis.

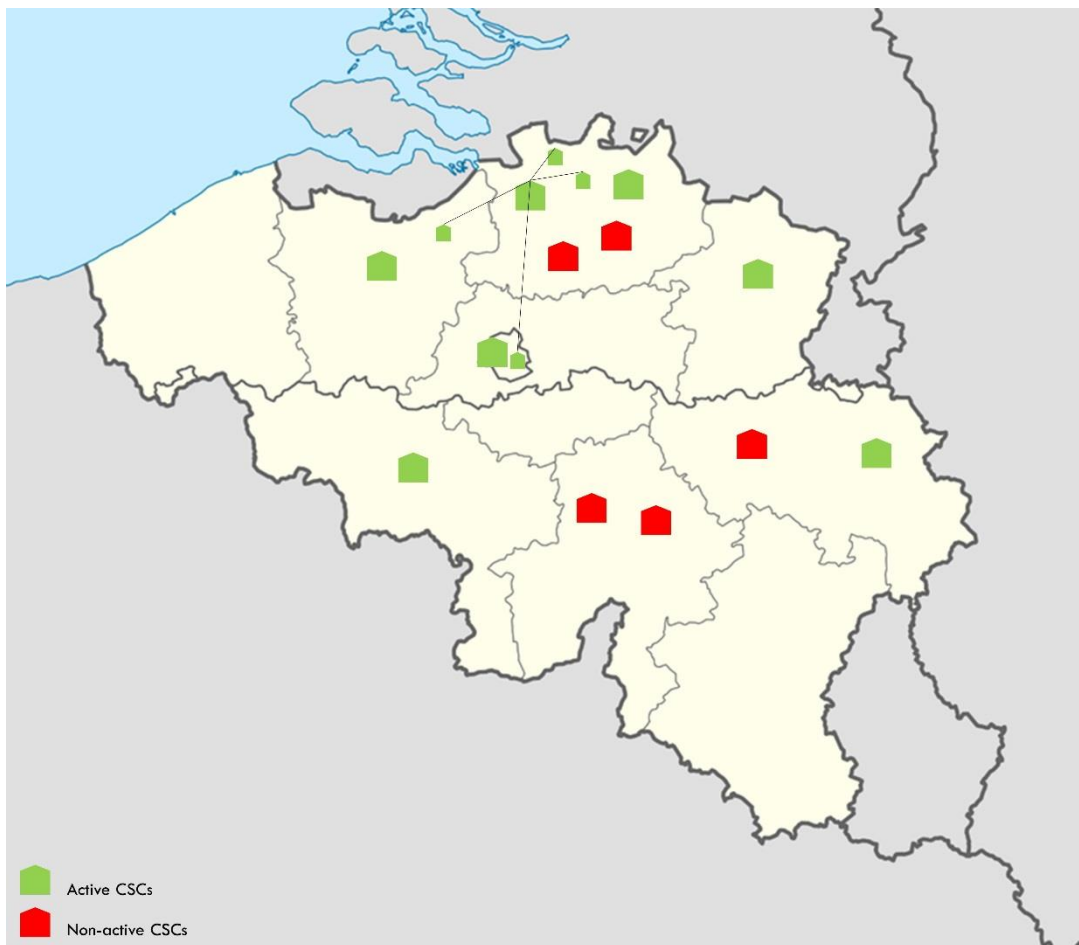
The second wave of Belgian CSCs (2015-present)

A second wave of CSC initiatives took place since 2015, when four new CSCs were established in the country, and one other appeared in 2016. The outcome of two court proceedings involving one of the CSCs active in this phase had, again, repercussions for the development of the model. Firstly, a 2016 Court of Appeal decision acquitted two CSC representatives for the charge of inciting the use of others, but concluded that the quantity of cannabis being transported to the distribution point could not be equated with possession for personal use (Pardal, 2016a). In addition, in the context of a separate civil proceeding involving the same CSC, in which the public prosecutor asked for the dissolution of the association (based on the claim that the CSC’s self-defined goals, as per its bylaws - which clearly refer to the supply of cannabis, were in breach of domestic laws), the CSC decided to change its bylaws, removing supply of cannabis from the core activities pursued by the organization. The CSC at stake remains active as an organization representing cannabis users – but not playing a supply function. One other CSC which was established in 2015 has also decided to postpone the start of the first collective cultivation, while seeking contacts with local public authorities to explain their goals, and reach some form of agreement to fully initiate their supply activities.

Throughout this phase some of the previous developments were consolidated. For instance, as illustrated in Figure 5 below, the CSC model remains present in both the Flemish as well as the French-speaking regions of the country (Flanders and Wallonia, respectively). In addition, some of the new CSCs appearing during this second wave were formed by individuals who had acquired experience (as members or growers) within the oldest Belgian CSC. A second ‘medical’ CSC was also established during this period. At the time, new legislation allowing the distribution of Sativex® (for the treatment of spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis) had been introduced (see also: Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017).⁹¹

⁹¹ Royal Decree legalizing the sale of Sativex® for pain alleviation was signed by Health Minister Maggie De Block, B.S., 25 June 2015.

Figure 5: A snapshot of the Belgian CSC landscape, 2015-present.



Bearing in mind how volatile the CSC landscape has remained since its inception, it is expected that the present landscape depicted in Figure 5 might continue to change in the future. In fact, we are aware that other groups are trying to form CSCs at the moment. At the same time, recent police interventions affecting two of the active CSCs (and resulting in the preventive detention of several CSC representatives) might have an impact to their future functioning and the wider Belgian CSC landscape.

Of “brothers in arms” (CSC2-D3) and “war on drugs between the Clubs” (CSC1-D1)

Now focusing particularly on the current group of active CSCs (Figure 5 above), we found one case of close and mutual collaboration between two CSCs (one was a former sub-unit of the other CSC). The nature of the relationship was confirmed by the directors of both Clubs. For instance, a CSC3 director commented that: *“we are one”* (CSC3-D7), and a CSC2 director told us that: *“we have a very close cooperation”* (CSC2-D3). Examples of this collaborative relationship include the shared design and dissemination of a proposal for cannabis legislation. CSC3 has also financially helped CSC2 to cover some of its legal costs during a court proceeding – this was possible in part due to an increase on the price of the cannabis distributed to CSC3’s members (a decision that CSC termed as the ‘CSC2-tax’). Two other CSCs, despite not having

any collaborative tie with each other, were somewhat aligned with CSC2 and CSC3. For example, one of these CSCs planned to collaborate with CSC3 in the organization of social events in the future, such as the Cannabis Liberation Day.

Three other CSCs seem to be working somewhat independently, with little or no collaboration among themselves or in relation to other active CSCs. One of such CSC directors told us that: *“everybody is building his own organization. You feel that. Even if they want [to collaborate] now it’s one for oneself, it’s difficult”* (CSC1-D2). Although many of those currently managing CSCs have previously been members and/or growers of the oldest Belgian CSC, that earlier involvement has not always evolved into collaborative relationships between the emerging organizations. Generally, the limited collaboration among Belgian CSCs was associated with general distrust of the working methods and goals of other CSC representatives which were described as being *“too amateuristic”*, or not *“serious”* enough, or simply *“different”*. Personal conflicts between these activists were also an important factor, as the following illustrates:

“There are some people that I don’t want to be in the room with, end of the line. Let them do their thing. I wish them all the luck but I think I operate from a different moral and a different point of view, and as far as I’m concerned that’s it, good luck to them and good luck to us... live and let live, you know?” (CSC2-D3).

The CSC landscape in Belgium thus seems to be characterized by some divisiveness, as an interviewee put it: *“it’s actually a little bit of war on drugs between the Clubs”* (CSC1-D1). In fact, in several instances accusations of theft of cannabis plants, or of foul play by some Belgian CSCs’ representatives were reported to us during fieldwork. While wider collaboration among all CSCs was not seen as a real possibility by those involved, there was nevertheless some agreement that building closer ties would be helpful, by for instance setting up a coordinating unit or organization, similar to the CSC Federations active in Spain (Decorte et al., 2017; Montañés, 2017).

Beyond the CSCs: other actors in the movement?

During our interviews with CSC directors we sought to find out more about the Belgian CSCs’ engagement with other organizations or individuals. The following is not a comprehensive overview of the actors involved in the movement in Belgium nor does it list CSCs’ (one-way) efforts in reaching out to key stakeholders such as policy-makers, health professionals, or others (as these have not necessarily evolved into actual collaboration or regular interaction). It nevertheless provides important insights into a complex landscape where multiple players meet, as one of the CSC directors explained:

“It’s a whole spectrum of people that play in that playfield. You have the bona fide entrepreneurs, also the male fide entrepreneurs who are running businesses for criminal activities, you know. You have naive activism in there, you have money-making people,

then you have normal businesses like lawyers and renting services and whatever runs in between that...” (CSC2-D3).

A first group of actors with whom the Belgian CSCs have built ties with have been other CSCs outside of Belgium. As discussed earlier, the introduction of the CSC model in Belgium was inspired by earlier Spanish grassroots initiatives. In turn, the Belgian CSCs have now informed and supported other activists, for instance in the Netherlands (but in Italy too), seeking to set up similar associations, as a representative of a Dutch CSC admitted: *“that [Belgian CSC] was a bit of an inspiration in the beginning”* (O11-R14). More generally, several CSC representatives maintain informal contacts with representatives of other CSCs abroad. To some extent there seems to be both awareness and willingness to exchange information among some of those directly involved in the CSC model across different countries.

In addition, some of the Belgian CSCs have joined larger organizations that share information and lobby for the legalization of cannabis, such as ENCOD - at the European level, or the Alliance for the Abolition of Cannabis Prohibition (*Verbond voor Opheffing van het Cannabisverbod*, VOC) at a more regional level. ENCOD, while active beyond representing and promoting the CSC model, gathers CSCs from different European countries (e.g., Belgium, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain) (ENCOD, 2015a). It has issued a Code of Conduct for European CSCs highlighting that those should be set up *“to protect the rights of cannabis consumers and producers and help establish cannabis policies that benefit society as a whole”* (ENCOD, 2011). The Netherlands-based VOC represents *“organizations and individuals who oppose the ban on cannabis”* (VOC, 2017). While both Belgian and Dutch CSCs are VOC members, the organization represents also Dutch coffee shops and other cannabis entrepreneurs. There have been noteworthy relations between some of the Belgian CSCs and organizations focusing specifically on cannabis for medical purposes. For instance, Medcan, an organization seeking to represent medical users of cannabis in Belgium, and to support and liaise with health professionals, collaborated for some time with one of the Belgian ‘medical’ CSCs.

Grow shops and seed banks in Belgium and abroad have played an important role too, engaging both with the CSCs as well as with a number of its individual members (mostly with CSC growers). In particular, the Belgian CSCs were able to obtain discounts, and often received products or materials for free (which they were asked to review). In some cases, the grow shops and seed banks offered advice (in relation to growing practices), as well as financial support (in particular when the CSCs faced court proceedings). A representative of one of these seed banks described the collaboration in terms of contributing to a common goal, noting that:

“We are also in a bit of a luxury position of course, because we are able to support other initiatives. It is very hard for people to break through, especially given the law. And again, it is our main objective as well, but you can’t do that on your own, so it’s a group effort” (O10-R12).

Laboratories or organizations providing some form of cannabis testing or selling test kits form another group of actors which have ongoing collaborations with some of the Belgian CSCs. The

involvement of this sector is closely linked to the CSCs' supply function and the (limited) quality control procedures they currently have in place (Decorte et al., 2017). A representative of one of the laboratories explained its participation in the field as fulfilling a need felt by the CSCs:

“This request came from the Clubs. They want to show that their product is good, they are proud of their product, and they want to show it's good, that it's better than the street product” (O1-R1).

Finally, another group of individuals with whom the CSCs had built ties with were the lawyers representing them. Taking into account the vulnerable legal context in which the CSCs operate (Pardal, 2016a), it is not surprising that a number of legal experts have been called upon to support the CSCs from the outset of the initiatives and in the events of criminal prosecution. Two lawyers (one based in Flanders and one other in Wallonia) represented most Belgian CSCs.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper offers an overview of the Belgian CSC landscape since the onset of the movement, exploring the inter-organizational relations among the Clubs, as well as their engagement with other actors supportive of the model. The results of this mapping exercise show that the first CSC initiative in Belgium emerged shortly after the publication of the 2005 Ministerial Guidelines - which can be described as a precipitating factor, despite its applicability to the CSC model remaining disputed (EMCDDA, 2013b; Pardal, 2016a). In Spain, the introduction of new legislation foreseeing fines for public consumption of cannabis has to some extent ignited the establishment of the first CSCs (Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017). While in Spain the emergence of the movement was something of a counter-response to that new legislation, in Belgium the new policy was perceived by CSC activists as increasing the room for manoeuvre and experimentation.

Since its emergence, the Belgian CSC model has had an uninterrupted presence in the country, with (at least) three phases of renewed activity. Nevertheless, the CSC landscape has been populated by a relatively small number of associations – especially in comparison to the expansion in number of CSCs in Spain (Decorte et al., 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015). While the Belgian CSCs have managed to exploit the perceived opportunities (such as the 2005 Ministerial Guidelines or the changes to the Dutch coffee shop policy), no significant legislative reform in this area has taken place in Belgium. The fact that nearly all CSCs have faced legal issues at some point might thus help explain the limited and unstable growth of the movement in Belgium. This ‘criminalization’ of the model has curtailed CSC development in other ways too. For instance, we noted that the CSC sub-divisions have put off transitioning into fully independent CSCs for fear of criminal prosecution. In addition, one of the CSCs has suspended its supply function, and one other has not initiated production as a way to avoid further sanctions. Taking into account a recent public statement by the Belgian College of Public Prosecutors (College van Procureurs-Generaal, 2017), rejecting the interpretation of the 2005

Ministerial Guidelines as permissive of CSC activities, as well as the ongoing police investigations affecting several CSCs, it becomes clear that the CSC presence in the country remains very vulnerable to external control forces.

While previous analyses of social movement inter-organizational relations suggest that *“the recognition or perception of an external opposition helps diverse movement groups to unite”* (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Gerlach, 2001, p. 299; Zald & McCarthy, 1980), we only found a few instances of collaborative efforts among the Belgian CSCs. What is more, a number of CSCs are operating somewhat isolated from one another, and there is some degree of tension among several CSC representatives. This lack of cooperation (common to other drug user organizations too – (Anker et al., 2008); Montañés and Oomen (2009); Pardal (2016b)) is primarily a result of personal conflicts, as well as distrust with regards to the ‘true’ motivations (e.g., non-profit vs. profit oriented) and tactics employed by other activists. A ‘supra-organization’ (Zald & McCarthy, 1980), such as a CSC Federation (a form of alliance-building tried in Spain and, more recently, in the UK⁹² – see, for instance: Belackova et al. (2016) or Decorte et al. (2017)), which would congregate and represent the Belgian CSCs in pursuing their goals, has not yet been created. At the same time, the segmentary nature of the CSC landscape in Belgium can nevertheless be a protective factor for the movement in the sense that if the CSCs are indeed separate and autonomous associations some *“are likely to survive the destruction of others”* (Gerlach, 2001, p. 303). To some extent, it helps explaining the successive cycles of new CSC upsurge, once the previous associations closed down.

Della Porta and Diani (2014) noted that a myriad of supportive organizations may integrate *“the social movement organizational structure”* (p. 144), contributing to the movement goals while often operating in the open market. Earlier research into the Spanish cannabis movement highlighted the co-existence of different secondary actors, ranging from grow shops, to specialized media, or political parties with a focus on cannabis (Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Montañés, 2017). Our analysis shows that also the Belgian CSC landscape is interconnected with different types of supportive organizations. The CSCs have benefited from regular contacts with the cannabis industry (e.g., grow shops, cannabis testing facilities, etc.), and secured legal counselling and representation. In addition, the Belgian CSCs built ties with organizations directly active in the cannabis movement, such as other CSCs abroad, as well as advocacy groups with a broader agenda (e.g., ENCOD, VOC) or focusing on a specific aspect related to the CSC model (e.g., the case of associations representing medical cannabis users). The involvement of Belgian CSCs with these actors is in line with ENCOD’s proposed principles for European CSCs, which should stimulate and support (inter)national platforms of cannabis activism (ENCOD, 2015b). It points to the potential development of transnational networks of

⁹² While the CSC movement in the UK remains a relatively new (the first known initiatives occurred in 2011) and scarcely documented phenomenon, many of the active CSCs in that country have also been drawn together by a platform called UK CSC (UKCSC, 2017).

activism in this field (analyzed for instance in the context of Uruguayan drug reform by Hoffmann, 2016).

In conclusion, although weakened by domestic divisions among activists and external forces seeking to suppress its presence, the CSC model is entering its second decade of development in Belgium, and has gathered the support of various other national and international actors which may play an important role in supporting the model going forward. At the moment, and although this and other research (Pardal and Tieberghien, 2017) suggest that there has been little opening of the 'political opportunity structure' (Tarrow, 2011), it remains unclear how the groundwork laid by the Belgian CSC activists has been perceived by domestic policy-makers. Additional research capturing the views of those stakeholders could complement this analysis and provide useful indications concerning the potential for future development of the CSC model in the country.

Chapter 7: An analysis of media framing of and by Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: making the news?

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Abstract

Aims: Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are non-profit organizations that supply cannabis among their adult members. The goal of this paper is twofold: (1) to understand how Belgian CSCs have attempted to frame public debate through the media, and (2) to examine the ways in which the Belgian CSCs have been framed by that same domestic print media.

Methods: We draw on semi-structured interviews with 15 CSC directors and a qualitative content analysis of Belgian print media (2006-2016), including 164 media articles. This dataset is complemented by a review of various Belgian CSCs' internal documents.

Findings: Most Belgian CSCs engaged with the domestic media. While the framing of the CSC model often focused on legal issues, the news articles offered also some detail on CSCs' functioning, in line with their self-defined practices. We noted a subtle shift in the framing over time.

Conclusions: CSCs' efforts in engaging with the media seem to have been somewhat successful, as they were able to contribute to the news production about the model. The media reporting was also generally less biased than previously anticipated. However, a public or political debate on the CSC model does not seem to have yet been initiated in Belgium.

Keywords: Cannabis Social Club; framing; media; qualitative content analysis.

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (hereinafter CSCs or Clubs) are collectives of adult cannabis users who organize the cultivation and distribution of that substance among themselves, generally on a non-profit basis (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016b). CSCs thus bring together cannabis producers and users under the same roof. As such, CSCs have been considered as an intermediate model for the supply of cannabis, allowing for a closed circuit distribution of cannabis, not driven by profit considerations (Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte, 2014a, 2015). The potential role played by CSCs in terms of minimizing harms for cannabis users has also been noted in previous research (Barriuso, 2011; Belackova et al., 2016; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2016b).

CSCs are currently present in several countries, operating under different legal frameworks (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b). While a number of common practices have emerged within and across some of those contexts, specific practices have also been adopted by the CSCs and thus some degree of variability within the model remains (Decorte et al., 2017). The birth of the model is linked to grassroots initiatives taking place in Spain during the late 1990s, which resulted in the appearance of the first of such associations (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011; Parés & Bouso, 2015). Since then the CSC model has been introduced by activists and groups of cannabis users in other European countries, notably in Belgium (since 2006) (but also in Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia, the UK, among other countries). CSCs have also been introduced across Latin America and in New-Zealand (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017; EMCDDA, 2013b). As of December 2013, the model has been for the first time formally recognized and regulated by national law in Uruguay (Law 19.172) (Queirolo et al., 2016). In Belgium, while the possession, cultivation and trade of cannabis remains prohibited, a 2005 Ministerial Guideline, which includes guidance to the Public Prosecutors' office, assigned the lowest priority for prosecution to the possession of up to 3 grams of cannabis or of one cannabis plant, in the absence of aggravating circumstances or disturbance to the public order (Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016a).⁹³ Belgian CSCs have since argued that their activities should be understood in light of that policy document, and thus receive the lowest priority for any prosecution on the grounds that Clubs function in line with the threshold of one cannabis plant per member. However, this interpretation remains disputed. In fact, some CSCs have seen their harvest being seized by the local police and various cases have been brought to court (Pardal, 2016-a). Despite this context of legal uncertainty, the CSC model has developed in Belgium over the past decade, and remains currently active (Decorte, 2014, 2015).

⁹³ Accordingly, the possession of cannabis in the presence of a minor, the involvement of a criminal organization, or causing harm to or resulting in the death of another individual constitute aggravating circumstances (Kilmer et al., 2013, Decorte 2015). In addition, the possession of cannabis in prison, in youth protection institutes, in educational centers and surrounding area, or the blatant possession of cannabis in a public space constitute instances considered to disturb the public order (Kilmer et al., 2013, Decorte 2015, EMCDDA 2015).

In addition to these national developments, the CSC model has become a recurrent subject in the international debate about drug policy reform, especially as a meaningful middle ground between cannabis prohibition and commercial legalization (Caulkins et al., 2015a, 2015b; Decorte, 2014a, 2015). At the same time, the activities of the CSCs have featured increasingly in the local and national media in several countries (Albrecht, 2014; Barriuso, 2011; Decorte, 2014a, 2015; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014). Communicating with the public about their activities via the media was reported to be one of the most important tools used by drug advocacy organizations, including by CSCs,⁹⁴ in their ambitions to influence the attitudes and beliefs of both the public and policymakers, as well as to develop drug policy discourses in line with the standpoint of the organizations (Decorte, 2014a; EMCDDA, 2013a; O'Gorman et al., 2014). In this context, the question of whether and how CSCs make the news, as well as how they perceive that media framing takes on additional significance.

The nature and extent of the effect of media messages upon audiences has been studied by drug researchers for decades (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). According to key media theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the media may direct drug discourse ('framing') and precipitate drug policy development or change ('agenda-setting'). The idea of media framing is based on the notion that the media provides a focus or a frame for reporting a story, in turn, influencing how audiences will understand or evaluate it (Davis, 2000; Tuchman, 2002). In fact, the media constructs the problem as frames communicate an interpretation of the issue at hand, including a definition, an explanation, and a proposed policy solution. Several researchers argued that the media may fuel 'drug scares' as well as increase curiosity in a new drug or stigmatise particular drug users (e.g., Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Reinerman & Levine, 1997). Within this framework, a number of common concerns about the role of media have been highlighted, including sensationalism, biased reporting and narrow framing (Coomber, Morris, & Dunn, 2000; Tieberghien, 2014). For instance, numerous studies have demonstrated that the print media over-represents illicit drug use, particularly in terms of the depiction of drug-related deaths or criminality (e.g., Decorte, 2009; Forsyth, 2001; Frost, Frank, & Maibach, 1997). Furthermore, the media can intentionally try and influence what people think by advocating a particular ideological position through its editorial policy. This can also happen in less direct ways through the particular format, the extent of its commercial obligations and the general characteristics of news production (e.g. limited space in which to broadcast news reports, tight deadlines) (Belackova, Stastna, & Miovský, 2011; Entman, 1989; Lancaster, Hughes, Spicer, Matthew-Simmons, & Dillon, 2011).

Agenda-setting expands on the issue of framing. In particular, agenda-setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the attention that media spend on certain issues, in terms of content and frequency, and the importance attributed to these issues by the general

⁹⁴ Many CSCs have also been supported by other umbrella organizations which play a role in promoting CSCs' interests, such as for instance the CSC Federations active in Spain, or international networks as it is the case of the European Coalition for Justice and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD), which represents many European CSCs (Barriuso, 2011; Montañés & Oomen, 2009; Pardal, 2016-b).

public and by policy-makers (McCombs, 2014). Here, several drug researchers have emphasized how media coverage may lead to the prominence of new and emerging substances in the political agenda demanding action from the government (e.g., Bright, Bishop, Kane, Marsh, & Barratt, 2013) or that the media may act as a 'linking mechanism' between those who wish to influence policy and the actual policy-makers (Lenton, 2004).

This paper addresses the issue of media framing by examining two different components. Firstly, it considers how Belgian CSCs have attempted to deliberately frame public debate about this model of cannabis supply through the media and, secondly, the ways in which the Belgian CSCs have in turn been framed by the domestic print media. The importance of better understanding these issues should not be understated. There is remarkably little systematic data relating to CSCs and their (media) communication strategies, if only because they are, in most cases, operating in an uncertain legal context (Decorte, 2015). Furthermore, the way in which the media frame the CSC model, support or oppose policy options concerning illicit drugs, and thereby define issues for public consumption may potentially influence public perceptions and even political acceptability of the CSC model. While attention to the CSC model in the international policy and scholarly debate seems to be increasing, this is, to our knowledge, the first comprehensive analysis of media framing specific to CSCs. We illustrate the two components of media framing by drawing upon the development of the CSC model in Belgium over the past decade. The paper starts by outlining the research design, before examining the specific findings in more detail. In the final section, we offer some concluding thoughts and make recommendations for further research in this area.

2. Methodology

This analysis is part of a wider study that aims to improve understanding of the CSC model in Belgium. In this paper, we draw upon a qualitative methodological approach, including a qualitative content analysis of newspapers published between 2006 and 2016, and semi-structured interviews with 15 members of the Board of Directors of the then six active CSCs participating in the study. This dataset was complemented by a review of the key internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs. It should be noted that our analysis focuses on CSCs as organizations, and thus does not explore how (individual) cannabis users who are members of such CSCs have been represented in the media.

A content analysis, commonly used in media and communications studies to systematically examine the nature of media portrayals, is a general term for a number of different strategies used to analyse text (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Krippendorff, 2013). While content analysis is essentially seen as a quantitative method consisting of counting the numbers of occurrences per category, its qualitative counterpart pays attention to unique themes illustrative of a phenomenon (Mayring, 2000), and aims to describe the characteristics of the document's content by examining who says what, to whom, and with what effect (Bloor & Wood, 2006). While our analysis was qualitative in nature, we do refer to the number of articles in which a

particular issue was mentioned ($n = X$) as a way to contextualize the narratives. Finding that a few, some, or many articles showed a certain pattern, or that a pattern was common, thematic, or unusual in a group of articles, may imply something about the frequency, typicality, or even intensity of a finding (Sandelowski, 2001).

Although the media can be seen as a rather ambiguous concept which includes several forms of communication (e.g., newspapers, television, radio, internet, social media, etc.) (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009), in this paper we use the term 'media' to refer specifically to the print media, newspapers and magazines in particular. The selection of newspapers and magazines offers practical advantages: for example, they are easier to collect than audio-visual data, and they have a more permanent character than web material (Mautner, 2008). Furthermore, newspapers are deemed a useful proxy for news reporting, as they often set the agenda for other news formats (Hughes, Lancaster, & Spicer, 2011). The media data used in this paper was collected through the Belgian online press database 'GoPress Academic'. As the first known CSC was established in the country in 2006, the searches were run for the period between January 2006 and June 2016. We included 12 key Belgian newspapers and magazines, encompassing both Flemish and Walloon print media outlets to ensure coverage of both regions of the country. We are aware that the way in which an issue is framed may vary considerably between media type and format. For instance, newspapers operating from different political perspectives or targeting different audiences may address a given issue in a different way (Belackova et al., 2011; Coitiño, Queirolo, & Triñanes, 2017). However, the focus of this paper is on understanding the overall newspaper coverage of Belgian CSCs, rather than the (potential) diversity of framing by media type or format. As such, we included the principal Belgian newspaper outlets in our analysis (not focusing on a particular market segment). Specifically, the following Flemish print media were considered: '*De Morgen*', '*De Standaard*', '*Gazet van Antwerpen*', '*Het Belang van Limburg*', '*Het Laatste Nieuws*', '*Het Nieuwsblad*', '*Humo*', '*Knack*'. Additionally, we included also the following Walloon newspapers and magazines: '*La Libre Belgique*', '*Le Soir*', '*Le Vif*', '*L'Avenir*'. The keywords used in the searches mainly consisted of the names of the known Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs (e.g., '*Trekt Uw Plant*', '*Medicinale Cannabis Club*', etc.), combined with their respective locations, and/or other general terms (e.g., 'cannabis', 'social club', 'non-profit').⁹⁵ In addition, we also collected the media articles posted by the Belgian CSCs on their websites. In total, after removing irrelevant and duplicate papers, 164 media articles were included in our analysis.⁹⁶ These newspaper articles were analyzed systematically (using the software package NVIVO 11), based on a combination of predetermined and inductive codes. Themes emerged during the careful reading of the newspaper articles as well as through reviewing the literature on media framing of illicit drugs (e.g., Hughes et al., 2011). The analysis particularly focused on: the textual elements that characterize explicit or implicit messages about the CSC model and its characteristics (i.e., how

⁹⁵ Translated terms in Dutch and French were used during the searches.

⁹⁶ We were not able to get access to twelve newspaper articles (from '*La Libre Belgique*' and '*Le Soir*'), and thus those were not assessed for relevance nor included in our analysis.

the CSCs were framed or discussed); how the framing was constructed (i.e., the principal sources of information referring to or discussing the CSC model in print media); value dimensions such as the overall tone adopted by the journalist (i.e., positive evaluation of policy, growing problems or fears, balanced opinion) and the positive/negative connotation of the model (i.e., “risky”, “good”, “neutral”). The process of codebook development, revision and recoding was carried out by the authors, verifying the accuracy of the codes with constant comparison, in order to improve the breadth and depth of the analysis and subsequent findings (Silverman, 2010).

In addition, between February and June of 2016, one of the authors conducted face to face semi-structured interviews with 15 members of the Board of Directors of the then six active CSCs participating in the study.⁹⁷ An interview session was organized per CSC,⁹⁸ in which one or more members of the Board of Directors took part.⁹⁹ The starting point for the identification of the Belgian CSCs, and to the recruitment of their representatives, was a previous study by Decorte (2015), who identified five active CSCs in Belgium circa 2014. However, since then the landscape of CSCs in the country has evolved, with some of the CSCs previously identified ceasing their activities (mainly following police interventions and/or judicial proceedings), and with new ones emerging. Based on ongoing fieldwork by one of the authors, as well as through snowballing (Farquharson, 2005) from the initial group of CSC contacts, it was possible to map and reach all other known CSCs. While the interviews addressed a wide range of issues pertinent to the functioning of the CSC model that go beyond the scope of this paper, the interview schedule included a small group of questions about the CSCs’ strategy to engage with the media, as well as their perception of how their activities were portrayed by the media. We draw on that section of the interviews in the analysis presented here. The interview data was coded inductively by one author, using the NVIVO 11 software package.

Finally, during field visits to the Belgian CSCs, one author collected also the key internal documents from the 6 active CSCs mentioned above, including their by-laws, membership forms and house-rules. Although the Belgian CSCs are operating (at best) in a zone of legal uncertainty, they have tended to register in the national registry of associations (as non-profit organisations) and they have also developed their own codes of conduct. As such, the CSCs’ internal documents were important sources of complementary information as to their formally stated goals, and to the set of rules they adopted in terms of membership (i.e., admission and exclusion), house-rules, and wider functioning. The content of these internal documents was thematically analysed also via NVIVO 11. This data informs our understanding of the ways in

⁹⁷ One other CSC active at the time decided not to take part in the study.

⁹⁸ Each CSC received a random code (CSC1-CSC6), which we use to refer to both the data from interviews with CSCs’ Board of Directors (adding a -D1 to -D15 suffix per respondent), as well as to the internal documents produced by each of the CSCs.

⁹⁹ With exception of one interview session with CSC6, all other CSCs had two or more members of their Board of Directors participating in the interview (i.e., two CSC representatives took part in the interview sessions of CSC1 and CSC5 respectively; three Board members were interviewed in the corresponding interview sessions of CSC2 and CSC4; the interview session of CSC3 counted with the participation of 4 members of the Board of Directors).

which the Belgian CSCs have self-defined and self-regulated their functioning, and allows us to better grasp the extent to which the media coverage reflected those practices.

The key findings emerging from the interviews and internal document analysis are first discussed to provide the necessary context on the key features and media strategies adopted by the CSCs. The general characteristics of the actual media framing are then presented, followed by the main themes identified in the newspaper articles.

3. Introducing the Belgian CSCs: key features and framing strategies

The CSC model has been present in Belgium for about a decade, despite some fluctuation in the number of active organisations (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017). Throughout this period, the CSCs have appeared in different regions of the country, spread almost evenly across the Flemish and the Walloon regions (6 in Flanders and 5 in the Walloon region).¹⁰⁰ While the functioning of the Belgian CSCs has been presented and discussed to some detail elsewhere (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017), the analysis of the internal documents of the CSCs revealed some further features of their operations and provided vital context to understanding the accuracy of their media coverage (explored in the next section). Drawing on our analysis of the CSCs' internal documents, we found that in every case the CSCs explicitly pointed to the 2005 Ministerial Guideline as the legal reference for their establishment and, likewise, all the CSC bylaws mentioned that the supply of cannabis (including the cultivation of one plant per member) for the personal use of their members was a main goal of the organizations, which confirms the findings from previous research (Decorte, 2015). In addition, all CSCs have produced a so-called 'statement of ownership' outlining how all registered members own one cannabis plant which is to be cultivated by the Club on their behalf (cfr. statement of ownership from CSC1-CSC6; see also Decorte et al. 2017).¹⁰¹ Three CSCs explained in similar terms being *"a response to the legal insecurity and other problems faced by cannabis consumers"* in the regions where those CSCs were established (bylaws CSC3, but also CSC2 and CSC5). One of the CSCs' bylaws also included lobbying for the regulation and legalization of cannabis as one of the purposes of the Club (CSC2). Another, meanwhile, stated how the CSC was established with the purpose of supplying cannabis solely to medical users, something that was also reflected in the Clubs' stated goals and functioning – for instance, candidate members to this CSC are asked to present a medical file (cfr. membership form CSC1). According to their internal documents, the Belgian CSCs admit adult Belgian residents (18+ or 21+ in some cases), who are asked to contribute to the CSC with the payment of an annual membership fee (membership form CSC1-CSC6). In some cases, the candidate members are explicitly asked to declare being cannabis users prior to joining the Club (membership form CSC2, CSC3, CSC4, CSC5). One of the CSCs has also drafted a brief interview guideline which was used during the intake moment, where a

¹⁰⁰ However, most of the active CSCs are currently based in the Flemish region of the country.

¹⁰¹ Most CSCs have also drafted a protocol outlining the arrangements between the CSCs and the cannabis growers (who are also members of the Clubs), an issue we further explored elsewhere (Decorte et al., 2017).

representative of the Club has a conversation with the candidate member, in order to understand his/her cannabis patterns and motives to join the CSC, as well as to provide information about the house-rules of the Club (cfr. 'questionnaire for intake conversation' CSC3).

In accordance with literature analysing the strategies of drug policy advocacy organizations in Europe (EMCDDA, 2013a; O'Gorman et al., 2014), it is clear that participation in media debates is considered useful in representing and communicating the positions of CSCs. The interviews with the Board of Directors of the Belgian CSCs offered interesting insights on the relationship of the Clubs with the media. Of the six CSCs, five reported having had some form of contact with the Belgian media at the time of the interview. Among these, two had both instigated the contact themselves, and also been approached by news reporters on other occasions. Two other CSCs told us that their relationship with the media had been exclusively a result of their own initiative. The remaining CSC had been contacted by the media only.

With regards to their attempts to deliberately frame the public debate around the model, the Clubs seem to have taken different approaches. While one of the CSCs initially proactively sought for media attention, this was seen as very labour-intensive and the Club has since discontinued this form of engagement. Another CSC had initially planned to keep a low profile, but has since been contacted by reporters, and also attempted to reach out to the media on other occasions. CSCs reported that this strategy was not without difficulties. For instance, this CSC representative thought that they were somewhat unprepared for that media involvement: *"We are activists [...] because we don't have sufficient resources we don't have professional communication strategies or people who have studied and that think along with you on the topic like our opponents do. Because that's what we need I think here in Belgium"* (CSC2-D3). While some of the CSC directors had told us they had taken the initiative in engaging with the media, one of them acknowledged that there were benefits in being contacted by the media as well: *"We found out that when they come to you... it's easier to get them to write in the right way, to portray you in the right way, than when you go to them. When they get to you, they need something. They need to be friendly, they need to be cooperative"* (CSC3-D6).

However, the Belgian CSCs were at the same time concerned about how their activities would be perceived by the public (and policy-makers). Generally, the CSCs had mixed views about the media representation of the CSC model in Belgium. This is in line with the findings from previous research into Belgian CSCs which noted that while positive media coverage may help boost the volume of membership applications, *"negative media articles (e.g., about police interventions or negative court rulings) have caused members to leave the club or withdraw their membership application"* (Decorte, 2015, p. 125). The CSCs in our sample were mainly critical of what they considered as a sensationalist stance adopted by the Belgian media. For example, a representative of one of the CSCs commented that *"they always put something in it to make it explode, you know? That's why I want to stay out of it"* (CSC1-D1). Another CSC representative noted that the complexity of the issues involving the CSCs was often not captured by the media *"because you don't have the time and the space to explain what is playing out"* (CSC2-D3). This

is consistent with the potential of unintended ‘framing’ to occur, as a result of the intrinsic characteristics of news production. Directors of two CSCs also suggested that the media mainly focuses on what they perceived as the more criminogenic elements of cannabis supply precisely because of its potential for sensational coverage. For instance, one of the CSCs’ representatives commented that: *“in general, if you get caught or there is sensation... a police action or those things, it’s much more interesting, then they are immediately all there”* (CSC2-D3). Echoing earlier research on CSCs (Decorte, 2015), a director of one other CSC commented that the coverage of the legal process involving CSC *Mambo Social Club* has had a negative impact on how CSCs are generally perceived, and considered it *“a step back”* for the development of the model in Belgium (CSC5-D13). A representative of another CSC described this type of media involvement as follows: *“they come when there is a cannabis plant. When they can show a plant, when they can make a picture of somebody smoking. And they are very quick in down-bashing it [...] we were taken by the police, the next day in the newspaper it says ‘They failed’, ‘Effort to legalize cannabis fails’, when it was not yet clear [if that was indeed the case]”* (CSC3-D6).

4. Media representation of the CSC model in Belgium

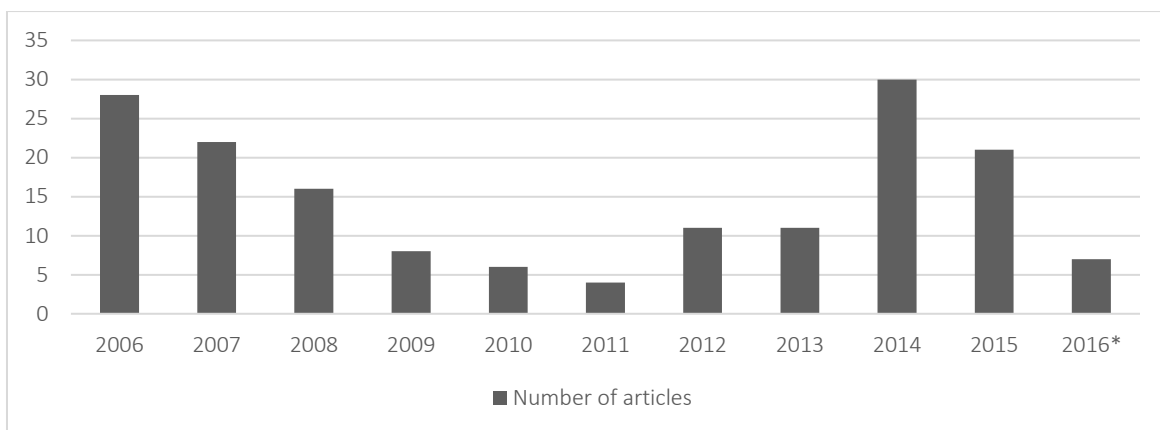
General characteristics of the media articles

Our searches yielded 164 relevant results for a time period of 10 years. In particular, very limited attention seems to have been given to the CSC model and related issues in the French-written press in Belgium (n= 25 vs. n= 139 in Dutch-written press), despite nearly half of the Belgian CSCs being located in the French-speaking region of the country. However, there are currently only two active CSCs in Wallonia (as opposed to five in Flanders), and these are relatively recent initiatives – established in 2015 (Pardal, forthcoming). The former CSCs in that French-speaking region seem to have also had a short existence, ceasing activities within 1-2 years (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, 2016-a; Pardal, forthcoming), which may help explain the relatively smaller volume of news on the topic in the French-written press in Belgium. What is more, we found that most publications essentially focused on the activities of one or two CSCs, mainly *Trekt Uw Plant* and *Mambo Social Club* – which are also the longest standing CSCs in the country, and which have told us, during the interviews, that they had both actively contacted and been contacted by the Belgian press. Only in a few instances did the media explicitly reveal awareness of other CSCs operating in the country at that time, as is the case in the following account: *“In the past years, five of those Clubs were established in Belgium. One in Hasselt and one in Antwerp, Liege, Andenne and Namur”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 September 2014, own translation). Even so, two other Belgian CSCs received no mentions in the Belgian print media (i.e., *The Herb Club*, *Oost West Thuis Best*) – one of these CSCs had, at the time of the interview, not established any contacts with the Belgian media.¹⁰² Beyond Belgium, we found references to one CSC in Slovenia, and to the presence of the CSC model in

¹⁰² The other CSC did not participate in the study.

Spain, particularly in the Basque Country, which was seen as the inspiration for the organizations established in Belgium: “TUP [CSC *Trekt Uw Plant*] is inspired by the initiatives in Spain, in Bilbao in particular. In April, cannabis users, who were members of a similar organization, were not convicted” (Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, 13 December 2006). In terms of coverage per year, as illustrated in Figure 6, a relatively high number of articles were published in 2006 (n= 28), which corresponds to the year when the first Belgian CSC, *Trekt Uw Plant*, was established (Decorte, 2014, 2015). The media coverage of the CSC activity in Belgium has since decreased with only four articles published in 2011. The volume of media articles on this topic reached its maximum in 2014 (n= 30), a year when law enforcement interventions and a legal case involving one of the CSCs received significant coverage. In 2015 the number of publications declined again.

Figure 6: Number of news articles covering the CSC model in Belgium, published per year.



Note: As the searches were run until June 2016, the total number of articles devoted to the CSC model during that year is not known.

(Over-)focus on police interventions and court cases

The print media’s coverage of the CSC model tended to focus on law enforcement or criminal justice issues, which may in part reflect the uncertain legal context in which the CSCs are operating in the country. This could also be seen as ‘involuntary’ media coverage for the Belgian CSCs in the sense that it is not necessarily the result of proactive framing from their side. We found that ten specific police interventions relating to the activities of the CSCs were covered by the Belgian newspapers, the majority of which involved the CSC *Trekt Uw Plant*. This correlates with the sense that *Trekt Uw Plant* was also the CSC most openly engaging in public initiatives. On two occasions, the media reported on the presence of the police at the Cannabis Liberation Day, an event organized by the CSC *Trekt Uw Plant*, in its 2006 to 2008 editions. Particularly in the events of 2007 and 2008, it was noted that the police confiscated some cannabis plants and arrested a few CSCs’ representatives. But it was primarily a public action launched by CSC *Trekt Uw Plant* in two different moments in 2006 that gathered the most traction (n=17). These events were also mentioned at the time of the interview as an example of instances where the CSC reached out to the media to ensure visibility of their activities. To

announce the setup of a shared cannabis cultivation initiative, representatives of CSC *Trekt Uw Plant* symbolically planted in public the seed of what was meant to be the mother plant of the future CSC cultivation. Later that year, and “with huge media attention” (Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, 13 December 2006, own translation), a cannabis plant was presented to the members to mark the beginning of the collective cultivation. As the local police intervened in those events, the media coverage around those quickly re-focused on the ongoing law enforcement investigations and subsequent court proceedings. We identified also 17 other articles which discussed another police intervention resulting in charges against one other CSC, *Mambo Social Club*. In this particular case, the police interceded when that CSC’s director was allegedly carrying cannabis to the location where the ‘exchange fair’ (i.e., the distribution moment among the members of the CSC) was going to take place: “It was the fourth time that an exchange fair was held by the Mambo Social Club. While there had not been any problems before, the police have now confiscated all our plants” (Flemish newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg*, 20 December 2013, own translation). A smaller number of articles (n= 5) covered police interventions in other CSCs, namely involving the CSC *Bon Pied*, *Bonne Herbe*, and the CSC *Sativa*.

In the period considered, five court cases were featured in the print Belgian media. The first two involved representatives of CSC *Trekt Uw Plant*, and related to the public initiatives (and police interventions) discussed earlier – a total of n=42 articles disclosed information on those. The third court case, which concerned CSC *Mambo Social Club* received also considerable media attention (n=17). We found also one brief mention to the outset of criminal proceedings against the CSC *Ma Weed Perso*. Finally, a more recent case involving the director of the CSC *Eureca* was also depicted (n=4). Here the representative of the CSC was convicted for the sale of cannabis, which the Court considered was being organized for for-profit reasons. While these court cases have been heavily depicted in the media, it is also worth noting that in the cases where a favourable result for the CSC involved was reached, this outcome was also mentioned by the media. For instance, it was noted that both trials involving representatives of CSC *Trekt Uw Plant* resulted in their acquittal at the Court of Appeal.

Given the dominance of a criminal justice and law enforcement focus in the print media, it is unsurprising that the most commonly denoted concerns regarding the CSC model presence in the country were of a legal nature. Beyond capturing specific events, many of the articles (n=39) incorporated a more general call for the introduction of legislation which would legalize and regulate the CSC model. In these cases, journalists referred to the role and position of these organizations, which were described as constituting a “plea for the regulation of a cannabis market for adults” (Flemish newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, 5 May 2012, own translation). In other cases, a legal representative of the CSC or its spokesperson were quoted and proactively sought to frame the issue as follows: “The current cannabis legislation in Belgium is well-meant but ambiguous. We are in favour of adults having the right to cultivate cannabis for personal use. The commercial sale of cannabis should be regulated in a similar way to that of tobacco and alcohol” (Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*, 13 December 2006, own translation). The perceived

ambiguity of the domestic legal framework was a recurrent issue brought forward by CSC representatives in their media interventions. At the same time, the CSCs often argued that their activities adhered to the Ministerial Guideline, as the following comment of a CSC representative illustrates: *“We adhere to the 2005 Ministerial Guideline which determined that, provided there were no aggravating circumstances or public nuisance, an adult is allowed to possess 3 grams or 1 cannabis plant. Our activities did not provoke public nuisance and still they try to criminalize us.”* More recently, in May 2016, a march for the legalization of cannabis organized by *CSC Peace Liège* also received some press coverage. Similarly, in June 2016, a joint initiative by CSCs *Trekt Uw Plant* and *Mambo Social Club*, which developed a proposal for the regulation of cannabis in Belgium, arguing for an allowance of up to five plants for home cultivation and CSCs, was also picked up by the Belgian media. The critique of the current domestic legislation in Belgium, which was portrayed as *“unclear”* was also included in several articles, mainly by giving voice to the complaints of the CSCs and those affiliated to the model. At the same time, in the coverage of the court cases involving CSCs, there were references to the position of the judge and/or public prosecutor who generally supported the current legislation: *“The legislation is clear. The confusion is caused by politicians and the media”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 26 April 2007, own translation).

While most articles about the Belgian CSCs were devoted to law enforcement and criminal justice matters, there has been a subtle shift in the framing over time. Of note are changes to the portrayal of the CSC model around 2010. In fact, although the first article about CSCs in Belgium dates back to April 2006, it is only four years later (April 2010) that the term ‘Cannabis Social Club’ explicitly appears in the print media, by the words of a spokesperson of *CSC Trekt Uw Plant* with reference to groups already active in Spain: *“The Spanish Cannabis Social Clubs exist with the approval of the authorities”* (Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*, 28 April 2010, own translation). In subsequent articles the term is more commonly used also in relation to Belgian CSCs. Until this point, the print media favoured the terms *“cannabis plantation”*, *“cannabis farm”* and *“cannabis garden”*. Furthermore, in the context of the debate about, and the eventual the approval of, a legal framework for the distribution of Sativex® (i.e., a cannabinoid medicine used in the treatment of spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis) in Belgium in 2015,¹⁰³ the Belgian CSCs were also portrayed differently in media coverage around that period. When the focus was on the medical aspects of cannabis, we found that the print media increasingly characterized the CSCs with more positive connotations referring to *“users’ organizations”* open to medicinal users of cannabis: *“Many members of the social clubs are medicinal users. The advantage is that they can avoid the illegal circuit [...] these organisations made clear that cannabis cannot only be used for recreational purposes but also for medicinal purposes”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg*, 29 November 2014, own translation). The establishment of the *Medicinale Cannabis Club*, one of the Belgian CSCs open only to medicinal users of cannabis, was also noted.

¹⁰³ A Royal Decree legalising the sale of cannabis (Sativex®) for pain alleviation was signed by Health Minister Maggie De Block (B.S., 25 June 2015).

Knowledge of the functioning of the CSC's

A sizeable number of articles was devoted to aspects concerning the functioning of a CSC. Media coverage in this respect was predominantly neutral and descriptive. It was noted since the initial publications that CSCs were formally constituted organizations, which adopted a non-profit statute, which is in line with what is stated in the by-laws of these organizations (as discussed above). In fact, the reference to the non-profit character of the CSCs was very common throughout the whole period considered (n=109 articles), and there was only one report of a CSC (*Eureca*) possibly misusing that statute and allegedly seeking to make profit (as mentioned above): *"The vzw [non-profit organisation] was a good cover to make profit of 250.000 euro"* (Flemish newspaper *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 11 December 2015, own translation). In terms of the internal functioning of the CSCs, the print media picked up on a number of aspects ranging from how one can become a member of a CSC, to the growing phase and the distribution of cannabis to the members. Often the articles included quotes from CSC representatives, who succeeded in explaining the working of the organization in their own words (see also below). For example, with regards to the admission process, we found a few references to an intake interview, where the candidate members receive information about the CSC and discuss their use of cannabis and motivations to join such an organization. For instance, a CSC representative was quoted as follows: *"We organise an intake-interview and ask them if their general practitioner knows they use cannabis. We also distribute information brochures"* (Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*, 21 March 2011, own translation). Also the main membership criteria, i.e., being an adult (18+), residing in Belgium, and being a cannabis user prior to membership, were discussed in a number of articles (n=10). These features of the CSCs were portrayed in line with what had generally been formally stated in their internal documents (see above), and noted in prior research (Decorte, 2015). The payment of a membership fee was an issue also captured by some of the print media (n=22). The description of these issues was generally in agreement with the general characteristics identified in previous research (Decorte, 2015, 2014). Key notions driving the organization of the cultivation phase by the CSCs were also portrayed in the media, such as the principle of one plant per member, which we referred to earlier (n=57), and the idea of developing a shared cultivation (n=28), where the ownership of each individual plant is to remain with the respective member (n=16). In some articles the notion of an 'exchange fair', where the cannabis is distributed to the members was also discussed (n=8). Information about the price per gram of the cannabis acquired via the CSC was, in a few cases, also included (n=12). Clearly, these processes were described in some detail, and the general aspects of the functioning of the CSCs are broadly in line with what has been presented in previous research in Belgium (Decorte, 2015, 2014) and with the internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs. However, it is worth noting that the media picture of the functioning of the CSC model may not be fully comprehensive, due to the characteristics of news production (e.g., limited space, driven by publicity and economic concerns) and to some reserve by the CSCs to reveal some details which might be sensitive in view of their

uncertain legal situation. For example, some of the particulars around the cultivation process were kept out of the news articles, as it was the case with information about the location of the growing sites of the Belgian CSCs which remained *“secret for safety reasons”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 September 2014, own translation).

The CSCs as key sources of media framing

Typically, descriptions of the CSC model were brought forward by a spokesperson or representative of the Club (n= 104). This is perhaps unsurprising, given that with one exception, all Belgian CSCs have had some form of contact with the Belgian press, either or both following their own initiative or that of the reporters. Other sources explicitly mentioned in significantly fewer instances included judges and public prosecutors (n=29), as well as a limited number of policy-makers (n=20) or scientific experts (n=5). While the few scientific experts critically discussed the advantages and shortcomings of the CSC model (for instance, noting that: *“The CSC model offers an alternative between total prohibition and the commercial sale of cannabis. By prohibiting CSCs, the whole circuit will go underground again. There is need for a legal framework first”* - Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*, 8 September 2014, own translation), some of the policy-makers who commented on the Belgian CSCs seemed more reluctant towards the emerging model. For instance, the Secretary of State attached to the Minister of Justice argued that *“[CSC Trekt Uw Plant] TUP needs to be prosecuted as they facilitate cannabis use”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, 14 April 2011, own translation), and the Mayor of the city of Antwerp voiced also his concerns by expressing that *“drug problems are not solved by facilitating its availability”* (Flemish newspaper *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 13 June 2013, own translation). These examples of the limited presence of Belgian policy-makers on news reporting about the CSC model, illustrates the mainly reactive stance they have adopted. Indeed, politicians’ participation in media debates was frequently reduced to responding to public activities of the Belgian CSCs, and thus the initiative to discuss these issues remained with the journalist and/or the CSCs themselves. Nevertheless, the contributions of policy-makers to these news articles shows some degree of political awareness of the presence of the model in the country and may instigate further political or public interest in the model – despite the negative views which have predominantly characterized their interventions to date.

5. Discussion

Although the Belgian CSCs may have taken somewhat different approaches in their contacts with the media, or even adapted those through time, we found that nearly all the CSCs in our sample have engaged with the media to construct a framing of the CSC model in line with their viewpoints. Previous research has also documented similar attempts to deliberately frame public debate undertaken by other advocacy and social movement groups, especially in times when the issues of contention were not on the political agenda (Decorte, 2014a; EMCDDA, 2013a; O’Gorman et al., 2014; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012). At the same time, the CSCs in

our sample revealed some caution in their contacts with the media, and the representatives of the CSCs shared some disbelief about the willingness or ability of the media to report on Cannabis Social Clubs in a non-sensationalist way, and to understand the complexities of their functioning.

Our analysis also shows that the introduction and development of the CSC model in Belgium was accompanied with attention by the domestic print media. This has been seen in other instances too, where new or alternative policy options or proposals are introduced in the public arena (MacGregor, 2013; McArthur, 1999; Monaghan, 2011; Tieberghien, 2014). Notwithstanding the changes in volume of reporting over time, the Belgian print media were most likely to report on the law enforcement or criminal justice issues associated with the CSCs (i.e. arrests, court cases), generally resulting in ‘involuntary’ coverage for the CSCs, as noted with concern by the CSCs’ representatives we interviewed. This finding is also in line with previous research which has suggested that the media conveys a mainly negative impression which may ‘demonize’ drugs or certain drug policy options (Goode & Yehuda, 1994; Lenton, 2007; MacCoun & Reuter, 2001b). By putting forward this particular portrayal, it can be argued that the Belgian media may have consciously or unconsciously reinforced prohibitionist views.

However, there were also subtle shifts in the framing of the CSC model in the period between 2006 and 2016. The most remarkable change is associated with the overall tone regarding the CSCs and how they were reported in pro- rather than anti-social ways. Later on, from 2010 and especially from 2015 onwards, they are portrayed as “*users’ organizations*” open to medicinal users (even though most Clubs serve only a small number of ‘medicinal users’ according to Decorte, 2015). These changes in the treatment of the topic indicate that the way the model is framed can shift with changing events and agendas. The legalisation of the sale of Sativex® for pain alleviation in Belgium is illustrative here.

Furthermore, our analysis of the media articles in this context also captured important aspects of the internal functioning of the CSCs, including information about the admission process, some of the basic house-rules of the Clubs and other administrative features, as well as broad descriptions of issues related to the cultivation and distribution processes of the CSCs. These descriptions are broadly in line with what has been described in previous research (Decorte 2015, 2014), and the internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs which we analysed. This suggests that media reporting on the actual functioning of the CSC model may be somewhat more neutral and less biased or narrowly framed than previously anticipated. What is more, given that those descriptions were mainly enunciated by a spokesperson or member of the Club, the CSCs’ strategy to communicate with the public about their activities and influence the media framing of the model seems to have been successful.

Nevertheless, we should note that only data from major Belgian newspapers was collected for our analysis. Including the coverage of the CSC model in other forms of media such as television, radio or social media, or examining other awareness raising tools used by the CSCs such as networking or exchanging information with like-minded groups, may also reveal interesting

insights on the issues considered here. Given the overall scope of the study, this paper examined Belgian data only. The extent to which the patterns observed here are generalizable to other countries where the CSC model has been implemented requires further research. For instance, a comparable analysis of media framing of CSCs in Spain or Uruguay could be of particular added value, considering the different historic evolution and legal frameworks in force in those contexts, and is recommended. In addition, future research could also explore whether, and how, the ways in which the CSC model is represented in the media has had implications in terms of the stigma associated with cannabis use/cultivation, seeing as CSCs have the particularity of gathering both cannabis users and growers within the same entity.

Finally, news media reporting may have ramifications for policy responses too ('agenda-setting'). By identifying the key sources referring to the CSC model and thus constructing the frame in the Belgian print media, we noted a very limited political or expert involvement in media reporting. At the same time, we are aware that a number of scholars have made important contributions to the academic body of knowledge about cannabis policy and the development of the CSC model in Belgium (Decorte, 2015; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Kilmer et al., 2013). This suggests that a public or political debate on the model was not yet initiated in Belgium. On the one hand, this may be the result of the somewhat unstable nature of the Belgian CSC landscape, which has seen some CSCs emerging and closing down after a relatively short period of time (Pardal, 2016-a; 2016-b). On the other hand, previous studies have also pointed out that policy processes may be bedevilled by reluctance by policy-makers to debate what are seen as more radical reforms, especially when these touch upon issues that concern law enforcement or the international prohibitive framework (Houborg & Frank, 2014; Monaghan, 2014). As discussed elsewhere, to date neither the Belgian government, nor the International Narcotics Control Board have formulated official statements about whether or how the CSC model fits in with existing international drug conventions (Kilmer et al., 2013; Pardal, 2016-a).

Nevertheless, there is a lesson to be learned from the policy change that occurred in Uruguay, where the CSC model has been formally recognized and regulated by national law since 2013. In this case, the presence of international groups advocating for legalization (such as the Open Society Foundations) has been decisive, not only financially but also in terms of adding respected (international) academic and political voices to the policy-making process (Albrecht, 2015). However, at the outset of the process, the press coverage and public initiatives of cannabis activists have been one of the key forces in promoting and keeping cannabis policy as a public agenda issue in Uruguay, even despite public opinion surveys showed that the majority of the Uruguayans did not support such policies (Cruz, Queirolo, & Boidi, 2016; Coitiño, Queirolo, & Triñanes, 2017). Questions remain as to the applicability (and outcomes) of similar initiatives elsewhere (Decorte, de Grauwe, & Tytgat, 2014a; Edwards & Galla, 2014; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2011). It is thus important to understand whether and how the 'middle ground' options for policy in this area such as the Cannabis Social Club model are being framed in the domestic and international media.

6. Conclusion

We offered a rich description of how the emerging CSC model has been framed in Belgian print media between 2006 and 2016, and analysed the media strategies adopted by the Belgian CSCs, which have in most cases had some form of contact with the domestic media (on their own initiative and/or when approached by journalists). Drawing on the analysis presented here, we can conclude that, despite CSCs' efforts and the increasing academic and international drug policy reform discussion, the public and policy debate on this issue has not yet fully emerged in Belgium. Even though the CSC model is maturing in Belgium, it is difficult to foresee whether drug policy development or change will be precipitated. As the recent Uruguayan cannabis policy change (and past research) illustrate, the media may contribute to generating (or otherwise thwart) public and/or political support for policy changes. Understanding how alternative options for cannabis policy, such as the CSC model, are featured in both the domestic and international media is thus of importance and worthy of further investigation.

Chapter 8: An analysis of Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs' supply practices: a shapeshifting model?

This chapter has been submitted for publication at the *International Journal of Drug Policy*. It is currently under review.

Abstract

Background and research questions: Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are associations of cannabis users that collectively organize the cultivation and distribution of cannabis. As this middle ground supply model has been active in Belgium for over a decade, this paper aims to examine CSCs' supply practices, noting any shifts from previously reported features of the model.

Methods: We draw on interviews with directors of seven currently active Belgian CSCs (n= 21) and their cannabis growers (n= 23). This data was complemented by additional fieldwork, as well as a review of CSCs' key internal documents.

Results: Most Belgian CSCs are formally registered non-profit associations. One of the Belgian CSCs has developed a structure of sub-divisions and regional chapters. The Belgian CSCs supply cannabis to members only, and in some cases only medical users are admitted. CSCs rely on in-house growers, ensuring supply in a cooperative and closed-circuit way, despite changes to the distribution methods. The associations are relatively small-scale and non-commercially driven. The introduction of formal quality control practices remains challenging.

Discussion: As the CSC model is often included in discussions about cannabis policy, but remains in most cases driven by self-regulatory efforts, it is important to take stock of how CSCs' supply function has been implemented in practice – as doing so will improve our understanding of the model and of the wider range of cannabis 'supply architectures'. This paper highlights the continuity and changes in CSC practices, noting the emergence of several different variants of the CSC model, which are classified in a first CSC typology.

Keywords: Cannabis Social Club; supply model; cannabis; cannabis policy; typology; qualitative research.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, a diverse range of cannabis supply laws for both medical and non-medical purposes has emerged (Kilmer & Pacula, 2016). At the same time, drug analysts have considered additional ways in which the supply of cannabis could be organized, especially pursuant to public health goals (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015b; Pacula et al., 2014). These cannabis supply models foresee different arrangements with regards to the production and/or distribution of cannabis (e.g. who is producing and supplying cannabis and under which conditions) and access to the product (e.g. age, quantity limits, etc.), as well as to other technical aspects such as the price of cannabis, eventual taxation, quality control requirements, and the possibility of advertisement, among others (Kilmer, 2014; Kilmer et al., 2012; Kleiman & Saiger, 1989; Neustadter, 1998). For instance, under a ‘grow your own’ model adults are generally allowed to cultivate cannabis for their own consumption. This model has been introduced in several jurisdictions on the basis of decriminalization or depenalization policies or as a result of formal legalization processes (Caulkins et al., 2012a; EMCDDA, 2013b; MacCoun, 2013; MacCoun & Reuter, 2011; Pardo, 2014; Room et al., 2010). Differently, under a government monopoly model (Caulkins et al., 2015a; Duke & Gross, 1998; Room et al., 2010) the state would monopolize one or multiple stages of the cannabis supply chain, and quality control practices as well as restrictions to commercial advertisement could be introduced (Caulkins et al., 2013c; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014). Several variants of a license-based model have also been discussed in the literature: e.g. allowing non-profit vs. for-profit licenses, granting licenses for production and/or distribution, or allowing a small number of licenses vs. increasing the size of the market (Caulkins et al., 2015a; Duke & Gross, 1998; Kleiman, 1992; MacCoun et al., 1996). Beyond these ‘middle-ground’ models (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a), competitive commercial options have also been discussed and introduced in a number of jurisdictions, particularly in the US (Caulkins et al., 2013c; Crick et al., 2013; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Marshall, 2013; Room, 2014). In addition, variants of these models or other specific medical programmes designed to address patients’ needs have also been designed (Belackova et al., 2017; Clarke & Mentkowski, 2015; Feldman & Mandel, 1998; Pacula et al., 2015; Penn, 2014).

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs), as formally registered non-profit associations of adult cannabis users collectively organizing their own supply of cannabis (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011; Decorte et al., 2017; EMCDDA, 2013b), constitute another ‘middle-ground’ model for the supply of cannabis (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a). A key feature of this model is its typically non-profit ethos, with the cannabis produced by those associations being supplied close to/at cost price (Barriuso, 2011; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte et al., 2017). Similarly to a ‘grow your own’ model, within CSCs the cultivation of cannabis is also generally ensured by (a group of) the members themselves. CSCs typically ensure vertical integration of the supply chain, as distribution of cannabis to the registered members is organized by the CSCs as well. Membership is open to adult users, typically residents/nationals, but additional requirements may apply (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017). As such, the model has

the potential to weaken a segment of the illegal market by ensuring supply to regular cannabis users, though arguably not creating significant incentives for consumption due to its non-profit character, small-scale production, closed-supply system, as well as the absence of advertisement or other marketing strategies (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte, 2015; MacCoun, 2013; Transform, 2013). CSCs play also a social role, as they allow for interaction among members, and may also help minimize some of the risks associated with cannabis use, for instance by educating the members about the effects associated with cannabis use, with particular strains or consumption methods (Belackova, Tomkova, & Zabransky, 2016). In addition, the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD), an organization which aims to mobilize and represent European CSCs, produced a CSC Code of Conduct. These (non-binding) guidelines highlight indeed that within CSCs supply should follow demand, that these organizations should operate in a non-profit manner, remain transparent and health-oriented, while open to dialogue with local authorities and supportive of (inter)national cannabis activism (ENCOD, 2011).

Nevertheless, and despite several calls and attempts to develop regulation in different jurisdictions (for an overview of such efforts please see: Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Kilmer, Kruithof, et al., 2013), the CSC model has to date only been formally (nationwide) allowed and regulated in Uruguay, following the passage of Law 19.172 in December 2013 (Decorte et al., 2017; Queirolo et al., 2016). In most other jurisdictions, CSCs (or supra-organizations such as CSC Federations) have thus developed their own body of self-regulatory practices, often risking infringement of domestic cannabis laws (Belackova & Wilkins, 2018; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; EMCDDA, 2013b; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016a). As a result, different practices may have been adopted within and across the various contexts where the model is present (Decorte et al., 2017), and these may have also changed through time.

In fact, in Spain – the setting where the CSC model (also known as ‘the Spanish model’) first emerged during the 1990s, important deviations from some of the key features of the CSC model as described above have been documented. These changes have been particularly evident in Catalonia, where the number of CSCs has increased exponentially over the last few years, and where larger Clubs (enrolling several thousand members, including foreign tourists) have appeared (Barriuso, 2012b; Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte et al., 2017; Martínez, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015). It has also been noted that the cannabis distributed by Spanish CSCs might in some cases not have been produced by the CSCs themselves, but purchased in bulk from the illicit market (Barriuso, 2012a, 2012b; Decorte et al., 2017). What is more, there have also been accounts of CSCs operating in a commercial way and/or not pursuing formal registration (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte et al., 2017; Martínez, 2015). Such CSCs function very similarly to ‘membership-only coffee shops’, and have been termed as ‘Cannabis Commercial Clubs’ (Barriuso, 2012a; Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Martínez, 2015; Parés & Bouso, 2015). While it remains unclear how widespread these practices are, this development suggests that the (unregulated) CSC model may be somewhat vulnerable to illegal producers and other

cannabis entrepreneurs, who might utilize the CSCs to develop large plantations and create profitable enterprises (Alvarez et al., 2016; Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Decorte et al., 2017).

This issue has also been identified as a potential risk in an earlier analysis of the CSC model in Belgium (Decorte, 2015). In that country, CSCs have not been formally recognized by the legislature, thus operating away from government oversight (Pardal, 2016a). Cannabis possession, cultivation and trade remain prohibited in Belgium (Drugswet van 24.2.1921), although a 2005 Ministerial Guideline assigned the lowest priority for prosecution to the possession of cannabis when a ‘user amount’ (corresponding to up to 3 grams or one cannabis plant) is not exceeded, and in the absence of other aggravating circumstances or public disturbance (Kilmer et al., 2013; Pardal, 2016a). While the Ministerial Guideline did not address the supply of cannabis, the Belgian CSCs have built their practices upon their interpretation of that document, cultivating one plant per member only, for instance. Many of the CSCs have nevertheless encountered legal issues, and a recent public statement by the College of Public Prosecutors has clarified that the provisions of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline do not cover cases of cannabis cultivation and/or possession in the context of an association (College van Procureurs-Generaal, 2017).

The CSC model has been present in Belgium for over a decade, with at least three phases of renewed activity, shaped by the contributions of multiple CSCs and the groups of users/activists driving those (Pardal, 2016b, 2018a). To date, Belgian CSCs’ practices have only been analysed circa 2014, in the context of an exploratory study by Decorte (2015) published in this journal. Our analysis builds on that knowledge, and aims to examine the ways in which the Belgian CSCs currently organize the supply of cannabis. Furthermore, based on the insights from the Belgian CSC context and a review of the literature on the CSC model, we aim to develop a first CSC typology in order to capture CSCs’ diverse practices.

By taking stock of the current practices of Belgian CSCs as cannabis suppliers and noting whether these have deviated from the core features typically associated with the model we hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the CSC model (and by extension to the knowledge of broader ‘supply architectures’ – e.g.: Caulkins et al., 2015a). Such analysis may be informative for the development of future policies in this area.

2. Methods

Seven active Belgian CSCs participated in the study. The CSCs were identified firstly on the basis of a previous list of CSCs included in Decorte (2015). As the Belgian CSC landscape has been characterized by some degree of volatility (Pardal, 2018a), some of the CSCs identified in that previous exploratory study were no longer active when we initiated data collection. Those that remained active were included in our analysis, and through snowballing and further fieldwork, we were able to map and reach out to the new active CSCs (Pardal, 2018a). We did not apply any specific inclusion/exclusion criterion beyond CSCs’ own self-representation as such. To gain

rich insights into the functioning of the CSCs, data collection included a total of 44 qualitative interviews, observations, and documentary materials produced by Belgian CSCs.

During the initial field visits to the active Belgian CSCs, their key internal documents were collected, including the CSCs' bylaws, membership forms, house-rules, code of conduct and protocol for plant caretakers, etc. These documents constitute important sources of complementary information as to CSCs' own self-stated goals and codes of conduct.

Semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted with 21 members of the Board of Directors of the seven active Belgian CSCs participating in the study (including one former director of a currently active CSC, and four managers of CSC sub-divisions). An interview session was organized per CSC, in which one or more members of the Board of Directors took part.¹⁰⁴ Prior to the interviews, the CSC representatives were briefed on the purpose of the study, and informed about the topics addressed during the interview. The interview schedule was designed building on previous instruments developed for interviews with CSC representatives by both Decorte (2015) and Queirolo et al. (2016). In the analysis presented here, we draw particularly on the interview data concerning: the foundation and general background of the CSC; CSC membership and house-rules; cannabis production; quality control; and cannabis distribution by the CSC.

We interviewed also 23 cannabis growers from all the (at the time) cannabis-producing CSCs (n=6). According to CSCs' own estimates a total of 31 growers were actively producing cannabis within Belgian CSCs (Pardal, 2018b). We interviewed at least one grower from each of the six CSCs; in CSCs with multiple growers, we interviewed two or more (with exception of one CSC relying on two growers, where we interviewed only one). With regards to cannabis growers' interviews, we draw here mainly on growers' views concerning cannabis cultivation within a CSC.

All the interviews took place between February 2016 and February 2017, and were conducted in Dutch, English, or French, in light of the language skills/preference of each interviewee. All interviews were recorded, and transcribed as close to verbatim as possible.

The interview data was complemented by additional fieldwork, during which we were able to observe different moments of CSC activity (between November 2015 and August 2017). These have included, for instance, attendance of court sessions involving CSC representatives or of demonstrations, General Assembly meetings, among other internal and public moments of activity. Subsequent informal conversations with representatives of the active CSCs have been held, and were a mean of staying up to date with the more recent CSC developments. Generally, we took brief jotted notes during the observations, and wrote those in full at the end of each observation or at the end of the day, including as much detail as possible (e.g., contextual

¹⁰⁴ Each CSC received a random identifier (CSC1-CSC7). When directly citing data from the interviews with the CSCs' Board of Directors we add a -D suffix per respondent, numbered consecutively.

information, participants present, quotes from interactions, a general narrative from the event observed, and other impressions) (Bachman & Schutt, 2008; Emerson et al., 1995).

All the qualitative data was coded using NVIVO software. In a first phase of the coding process we relied on a brief qualitative codebook, which included general codes building on the aspects captured in the literature previously reviewed (e.g., ‘becoming CSC member’, ‘distribution practices’, etc.). The bulk of the codes, however, emerged inductively from the data, in the course of subsequent coding exercises. Through this process, the codebook was expanded and fine-tuned until reaching saturation of the data (Bryman, 2012; Decorte, 2016).

The seven active CSCs included in the study have quite different sizes in terms of their respective membership base (Table 4). The smallest CSC has about 10 members, and the largest one counts with about 400 members. Most CSCs reported having less than 100 members.

Table 4: Number of members of Belgian CSCs.

| | CSC1 | CSC2 | CSC3 | CSC4 | CSC5 | CSC6 | CSC7 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| CSC establishment date | 2015 | 2013 | 2006 | 2015 | 2015 | 2015 | 2016 |
| Number of CSC members | 60 | 45 | 400 | 10 | 81 | 10 | 70 |

Source: Bylaws, interview data with CSC representatives, fieldwork notes.

Note: The figures included in the table correspond to the estimate made by the CSC representatives during the data collection phase. We are aware that these might have changed since then.

We should note that the CSC landscape in the country remains rather unstable (Pardal, 2018a). For instance, we are aware that some of the CSCs included in our sample might have ceased their activities since the period when the interview data was collected, and that, at the same time, new CSCs have emerged. In any case, we report primarily here on the basis of the interview data and fieldwork conducted at that time, although noting, where relevant, whether significant developments have taken place after that period.

3. Results

In what follows we present current Belgian CSC practices. To allow for more direct comparison with the previous analysis by Decorte (2015), these practices are grouped under similar broad categories as those used by that author. For each aspect, we introduce the continued or changed practices and discuss them in light of CSC representatives’ views.

Organizational characteristics

A common feature among current Belgian CSCs is **registration** as non-profits in the national registry of associations, which is in line with earlier practices among Belgian CSCs as reported by Decorte (2015). Only one of the most recent CSCs had not fully completed the registration process at the time of the interview, but planned to do so in the near future. In addition, we

are aware that other recent CSC initiators might have also begun operating without pursuing registration. Nevertheless, the CSC directors we interviewed discussed a number of advantages they associated with this formal registration. For some, registering as formal associations added legitimacy to the CSCs, distinguishing them from other cannabis suppliers, as one of our interviewees noted: *“you cannot be a Social Club if you are not registered. Then you are just like an ordinary drug grower”* (CSC5-D13). Others thought that registration could be used as an attenuating factor in the case of eventual legal actions against the CSC.

In addition, opting for a **non-profit** statute has been associated with the idea of increasing the resonance and acceptance of the model among the broader public and policy-makers, as the following illustrates:

“as initiators we said: ‘we have to be an association without profit, in order to gain the confidence of the public and the politicians’” (CSC3-D6).

The CSC representatives sought indeed to distance the model from the idea of ‘making money’ from the supply of cannabis, and stated for instance that: *“the CSC is not a commercial model”* (CSC2-D4). This point was also raised by other interviewees, who suggested that any income generated by the associations should be used to bring a positive impact to society, for instance by creating social employment, or by promoting research into the medical use of cannabis. To date, there has been one documented case of a Belgian CSCs which misused its non-profit statute and was found to be in fact selling cannabis commercially (Decorte, 2015; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017).

One of the Belgian CSCs has developed a structure comprising smaller **sub-divisions and regional chapters** which, despite remaining part of the primary CSC, enjoy some degree of independence. One of the sub-divisions is dedicated exclusively to serve the members of the primary CSC using cannabis for medical reasons, offering more regular contacts between those users and CSC representatives, as well as a different arrangements concerning supply (e.g., more frequent distribution, larger amounts available, etc.). In addition, three other regional sub-divisions were set up for the convenience of the members living in specific regions of the country, and seek to ensure the production and distribution of cannabis to their (unit) members. The long-term goal of these sub-units is to transition into fully independent CSCs, but so far only one regional chapter has succeeded in making that shift (Pardal, 2018a).

The CSCs and respective sub-divisions are managed by a small group of individuals, who are generally not remunerated and participate on a volunteer basis. Only one of the CSCs gives a **remuneration** to two of its directors, although initially that was not the case. In addition, and as discussed further below, the cannabis delivered by the Belgian CSCs is produced by members of the CSCs (Pardal, 2018b). The presence of trained staff is not common among Belgian CSCs, and only the medical sub-division of one of the Belgian CSCs counted with a (volunteer) nurse in its structure (Pardal & Bawin, 2018).

The differences and similarities discussed above with regards to the organizational features of Belgian CSCs are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Organizational features of Belgian CSCs.

| | Earlier practices (Decorte, 2015) | Current practices |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Formal registration | All CSCs are registered organizations | Most CSCs are registered organizations » A few unregistered CSCs |
| Official legal form | All registered CSCs adopt non-profit statute » One case of 'shadow'/commercial CSC | All registered CSCs adopt non-profit statute |
| Organizational differentiation | Single unit* | Most CSCs are single units » One CSC has structure of subdivisions/regional chapters |
| Employment | Most are volunteers » One CSC has paid staff » Growers receive payment | Most are volunteers » One CSC has paid staff » Growers receive payment |

Note: *Decorte (2015) indicated that a CSC subdivision had become an independent CSC, but the issue was not further explored in his analysis.

Access to cannabis via a CSC

The Belgian CSCs reported supplying cannabis to members only, and impose a number of **criteria that candidate members need to fulfil** in order to become members - which are also explicitly mentioned in the CSCs' internal documents. The general criteria seem to follow earlier practices (Decorte, 2015) and relate to the age of the candidate, place of residence, and whether or not the candidate has already used cannabis prior to initiating the admission process. The main rationale behind these criteria is to ensure a closed supply system, as one of the CSC directors explained: *"to make sure that we have a closed circuit of consumers and producers living in a determined territory"* (CSC3-D6).

In particular, four CSCs define 18 years old as the minimum age to access a CSC. Three others impose a higher threshold, and only admit candidates who are at least 21 years old. This was justified by one of the directors of the latter clubs as follows:

"Technically or by law you are mature at 18 years old, but we raised the level up a little just to be sure... I don't want to have the reputation that all the students start joining, and that I am the one luring the young people in" (CSC2-D3).

The nationality and residency criteria applied by the Belgian CSCs were introduced to avoid creating a stimulus for drug tourism, as another director explained:

"We have seen in the Netherlands that if you open up a legal possibility to distribute cannabis, you attract people from everywhere. Because people are desperate. So we wanted to avoid that" (CSC3-D6).

While the CSCs adopting the nationality criteria (n=2) only admit adult Belgian cannabis users, the CSCs applying a residency criteria (n=5) are also open to foreign cannabis users as long as

they have an official permanent residence in Belgium. The latter was the typical requirement applied by the first CSCs (Decorte, 2015).

Finally, the CSCs are only open to admit individuals who have previously used cannabis – and who must declare that upon enrolment. This criterion builds on the notion of CSCs as “*cannabis consumers’ organizations*” (CSC3-D6), as further discussed by one of the CSC representatives:

“We are using the right that every European citizen has to associate as a particular group in society - in our case, as cannabis consumers. We have the right to grow for our own use. So we collectivize that right. People who are not cannabis users can support us, but cannot take cannabis from the club because we do not want to incite people to use” (CSC3-D6).

The Belgian CSCs admit both **recreational and medical** cannabis users, although specific requirements may apply to the latter. Some may ask for a prescription from the candidate’s doctor, but in general this is not a *sine qua non* condition as these Clubs also admit recreational users. Differently, one of the CSCs exclusively accepts candidates using cannabis for medical reasons (Pardal & Bawin, 2018), who are typically asked to present a medical prescription – as presented in Table 6. As mentioned earlier, a CSC sub-division is also exclusively serving the medical cannabis users of that CSC, who must provide a doctor’s note in which the physician declares being aware of the patient’s cannabis use in the treatment of a specific medical condition or symptom.

In addition to fulfilling the admission criteria, candidate members wishing to join a CSC participate in an **intake interview** (Decorte, 2015). On the one hand, this is a way for the CSCs to provide the candidates with general information about the organization and its functioning: “*how the system works, so they know what they can expect, which kind of requests we make during the process*” (CSC3-D6). On the other hand, it is also an opportunity for the Clubs’ representatives to get to know the candidates and understand their motivations to join the CSCs, as well as their past experience and current use patterns.

If the candidate members are accepted, they are asked to sign a declaration **confirming enrolment**, and to provide a copy of their national identity card. CSC members are expected to register with one CSC only. This is a way to guarantee that CSC members have access to one plant only (or more generally, to a quantity of cannabis corresponding to a personal use amount). In practice, however, the CSCs noted that it is difficult to verify whether members adhere to this rule, as there is no central database and not all CSCs are willing to collaborate or share such sensitive information among themselves (Pardal, 2018a).

The accepted members are expected to respect **other rules imposed by the CSCs**, beyond the due payment of the annual membership fee. CSC members are asked not to distribute the cannabis received from the CSC to others and to avoid creating nuisance in or around the CSC. Misuse of the name or goals of the CSC constitute also grounds for dismissal from the association. These guidelines are also included in the internal documentation of the CSCs, and

are in line with earlier findings (Decorte, 2015). With one exception, all CSCs apply an annual membership fee of 25€, which was described mainly as a “symbolic thing” (CSC3-D6), “just to put a number on it” (CSC1-D1). One CSC applied an annual membership of 40€ but envisioned reducing that amount in the future: “it’s just to have a small financial buffer to ensure the smooth running of things in the beginning” (CSC4-D10).

Table 6: Access and size of Belgian CSCs.

| | Earlier practices (Decorte, 2015) | Current practices |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Access | Recreational and medical cannabis users | Recreational and medical users » One ‘medical’ CSC and a CSC subdivision exclusively for medical users |
| Membership criteria | Age, residence/nationality, prior use of cannabis | Age, residence/nationality, prior use of cannabis » Additional criteria for medical users |
| Enrolment | Intake interview Formal registration | Intake interview Formal registration |
| Other requirements | Single CSC membership House-rules Annual membership fee | Single CSC membership House-rules Annual membership fee |
| CSC size | Smallest CSC has 13 members Largest CSC has 237 members | Smallest CSC has 10 members Largest CSC has 400 members |

Cannabis cultivation

Most CSCs were active suppliers at the time of the interview, as only one of the CSCs participating in the study had not yet initiated cannabis production. Since then we are aware that one other CSC has suspended production (in the context of a court case against that association). As noted elsewhere (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), the Belgian CSCs typically list two key goals in their bylaws: the supply of cannabis, and the pursuit of a legal change that would recognize and regulate that supply model. Indeed, a director from one of the CSCs told us: “that is our main preoccupation: to get a legal framework for cannabis” (CSC3-D6). As a result, CSCs play also an activist role within the broader cannabis movement (Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017). At least two of the CSCs are currently focusing exclusively on activist action, as a CSC director of one of those CSCs indicated: “we are not really in action at 100%. We only do activism” (CSC4-D1). This interviewee further explained the motivation for postponing the start of cultivation with the CSC’s strategy to first build political alliances, in an attempt to open the political opportunity structure (McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1996):

“As long as we have not started cultivating, we will not get in trouble. Now, having reflected well on this, and talked about it with other people, other CSCs, all of those that have done like that [i.e., immediately started producing cannabis], they all fell in the end, they are all closed and they lost. We want to be on the winning side of history and so we will not take that path, but will really continue searching for collaboration with politicians, or with others who may be open to the project and can help it move forward” (CSC4-D1).

The Belgian CSCs have organized cannabis production drawing on their understanding of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline discussed above, therefore operating on the basis of **one plant per member**. While that interpretation has not been supported by Belgian public authorities (for instance, the 2017 statement by the College of Public Prosecutors mentioned earlier explicitly rejects it), that threshold has also been described by the CSCs as a way to raise public acceptance for the model, distinguishing it from other cannabis market operators (Pardal, 2018b). This has been a key principle guiding cultivation within Belgian CSCs since the emergence of the model in the country (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2018a), and has several practical implications. For instance, CSC members are asked to sign a form declaring that they retain ownership of the plant that will be cultivated by the CSC for them. In turn, the CSC growers, usually termed ‘plant care-takers’ by the CSC representatives receive this document, as well as a copy of the members’ national IDs, which they are asked to attach to their respective plants (Pardal, 2018b). Beyond this form of plant identification, we did not find any evidence of a system relying on a barcode identifier per plant, as described elsewhere (Decorte, 2015).

The Belgian CSCs rely on **in-house growers**, who must also register as CSC members, to cultivate the cannabis plants for the Club. This membership requirement has become a more common practice among Belgian CSCs in comparison with earlier reports (Decorte, 2015). In most cases, CSC growers receive a financial compensation for the costs they are expected to incur during the cultivation cycle (e.g., electricity, water, seeds, labour, etc.), and are asked to follow a number of guidelines with regards to the location of the cultivation site, the equipment used, among other cultivation practices (in some cases these requirements are formally outlined in a so-called Code of Conduct and Protocol for plant care-takers) – these issues as well as the role of the CSC grower are explored in more detail elsewhere (Pardal, 2018b). The growers’ compensation is calculated per gram of cannabis produced and returned by the grower to the CSC and amounts to 4-4.50EUR per gram (instead of 2-4.50EUR per gram reported by Decorte, 2015). In most cases, it is the responsibility of the growers to acquire the necessary equipment for the growing site (e.g., lamps, ventilators, tents, soil, seeds, etc.) (Pardal, 2018b).

Cannabis cultivation is mainly taking place indoors, although some of the growers reported also cultivating outdoors during the summer period (Pardal, 2018b). The size of the CSC growing sites varies among growers, but has remained within the 2-49 plants range, in line with earlier findings – Table 7 (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, 2018b). The self-imposed upper limit of 49 plants per growing site seems to derive from the consideration of the classification used by the Belgian police, according to which plantations of up to 49 plants are considered ‘micro-’ or ‘mini-’ plantations (EMCDDA, 2012). Officially, the CSCs are producing and supplying herbal cannabis only, and providing the members with information about how to make cannabis derivatives themselves. However, we found that in exceptional cases some of the Clubs provide also other cannabis-based products to their members, including cannabis oil, butter and cookies. The Belgian CSCs seek also to offer some degree of variety to their members, distributing different

cannabis strains. Although members' preferences are often taken into account, decisions on which strains are cultivated are usually left to the growers (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, 2018b).

All producing CSCs emphasized that cultivation follows **organic** principles in order to achieve what was described as a “*clean product*” (CSC2-D4). Currently, the CSCs run somewhat rudimentary tests, visually analysing the cannabis produced by their growers using a microscope, doing smell tests as well as actually trying the product. Such checks had also been reported earlier (Decorte, 2015). In addition, four CSCs have resorted to external assistance to run occasional further analysis of a number of cannabis samples. In these cases, the Clubs have sought to gather more information about some of the key cannabinoids present in the samples, drawing on thin-layer chromatography (TLC) methods.¹⁰⁵ The CSCs also regularly ask for feedback from their members about the perceived quality of the cannabis supplied. Most CSCs would like to introduce more regular and accurate **testing practices**, which they recognize not being able to do at present, due to the costs associated with such testing, and to the legal context in which they are operating.

Table 7: Cannabis cultivation within Belgian CSCs.

| | Earlier practices (Decorte, 2015) | Current practices |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Active producer | All CSCs are producing and supplying cannabis to their members | Most CSCs are producing and supplying cannabis to their members » Two CSCs are currently not playing a supply function |
| Caps to cultivation | Threshold of one plant per member | Threshold of one plant per member |
| Traceability | Each plant receives ‘grow card’: statement of ownership; copy of member’s ID; barcode identification | Each plant receives ‘grow card’: statement of ownership; copy of member’s ID |
| Grower | Some are registered members of CSC | All must register as members of CSC |
| Grow site features | Mainly indoors 2-49 plants per site Organic cultivation | Mainly indoors 2-49 plants per site (on average, 20 plants) Organic cultivation |
| Quality testing | Mostly non-professional testing | Mostly non-professional testing |

Cannabis distribution

Although cannabis cultivation within Belgian CSCs is organized on the basis of the threshold of one plant per member, CSC members do not directly receive the full amount of cannabis yielded from his/her plant at the end of the cultivation cycle.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the cannabis produced is collected by the CSC, and the members have the possibility of ordering the quantity they wish to obtain at the next distribution moment. The Belgian CSCs have adopted two different **distribution methods**. Some of the CSCs distribute the cannabis to the members during a social

¹⁰⁵ TLC methods allow for a qualitative or semi-quantitative analysis of cannabis (United Nation, 2009).

¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, it has been a somewhat common practice for Belgian CSCs to symbolically return a part of the leftovers from the plant (e.g., leaves and stems) to the members (Decorte, 2015).

event organized by the CSC in which the members come together, i.e. an ‘exchange fair’. This was the typical distribution method adopted during the first wave of Belgian CSCs as reported by Decorte (2015). However, in order to organize such ‘exchange fairs’, CSC representatives have to transport all the cannabis available/ordered by the members to the place where the distribution takes place. This has been problematic for at least one of the CSCs, as the police intervened during the transport of the cannabis. Following that incident, that CSC began individually distributing the cannabis to the members. In fact, presently, most CSCs tend to distribute the cannabis to each member individually, directly at the members’ house, in a public location where a representative of the CSC meets with one member at a time, or at the CSC premises. Reducing exposure and vulnerability to police interception are key reasons for this choice, as one of the interviewees explained:

“Every time a new CSC starts with an exchange fair it gets busted by the cops. That’s why I want to do it this way [i.e., individual delivery], because if they stop me, the most I will have with me is maybe 60grams, so what are they going to do?” (CSC1-D1).

In addition, this type of distribution was also considered more convenient for CSC members, in particular for those with mobility limitations.

The **frequency of distribution** varies significantly across CSCs. As more Clubs resort now to individual delivery, it seems that supply takes place more frequently, in comparison to what was typical during the first wave of CSCs in the country - when CSCs reportedly arranged for monthly to trimonthly ‘exchange fairs’ (Decorte, 2015). The introduction of more regular distributions of smaller quantities stemmed, in some cases, from members’ demands, as one of the directors explained:

“The members voted that they wanted their cannabis quicker because then it is not such a big amount, you know. For the members it’s easier because then they have access more regularly to smaller quantities” (CSC2-D3).

Two CSCs now arrange weekly/bi-weekly distribution, for instance (Table 8). The **price per gram** of cannabis supplied by a Belgian CSC currently ranges between 6.5-9EUR per gram (instead of 5-8EUR per gram as reported by Decorte, 2015). Some of the CSCs reported applying a lower price per gram for the medical users (Pardal & Bawin, 2018). Based on 2016-2017 data, a gram of cannabis costed on average 11.82€ at a Dutch coffee shop (Rigter & Niesink, 2017).

According to previous findings concerning CSC practices circa 2014, most Belgian CSCs imposed a **maximum quantity limit** to the distribution of cannabis per member corresponding to between 10 and 30grams per month (Decorte, 2015). Current Belgian CSCs have also imposed limits as to the maximum amount of cannabis a member can obtain from the CSC at each distribution moment. If we convert the current thresholds to monthly quantities, we find important differences among CSCs: ranging from a low maximum of 15grams per month to a high maximum of about 60grams per month. These limits are often associated with the production capacity of the CSC at each supply cycle, and are thus likely to change over time.

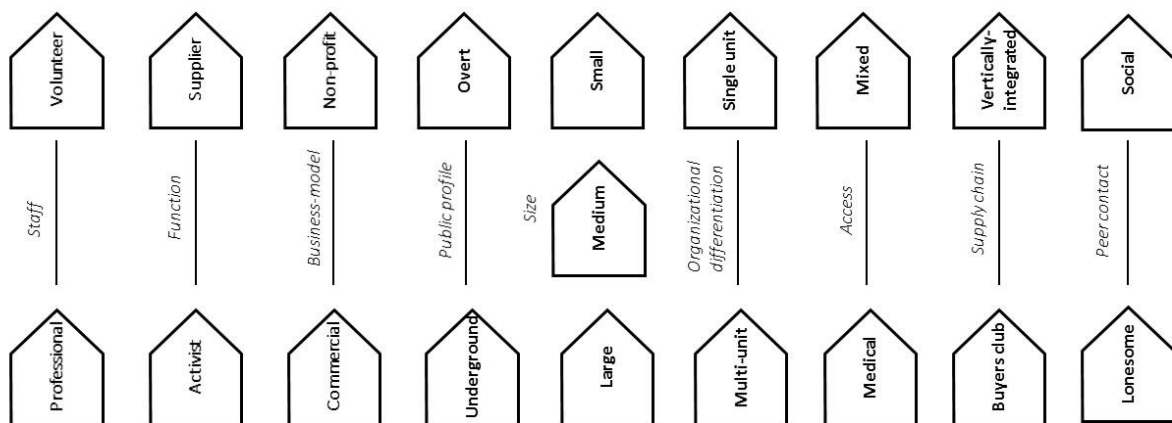
Most producing CSCs also pass along some **information about the cannabis supplied** during the distribution moment. This practice has become more widespread among Belgian CSCs, as in the past only the larger CSCs had been found to share information leaflets to their members (Decorte, 2015). Currently, three CSCs explicitly mentioned providing a document with each bag of cannabis supplied, with an indication of the type of strain and generic information about the typical THC and CBD levels characteristic of that strain. However, as discussed earlier, the CSCs' knowledge of the potency and quality of the cannabis produced is limited, which was also acknowledged by one of our interviewees: *"We have to rely on information that is given to us by seed companies and those are not really exact test results. So we do what we can, but the information is far from complete"* (CSC2-D3). On-site consumption is officially not allowed by any of the Belgian CSCs (although in practice there might be some exceptions). At the moment, most CSCs do not have their own premises but are based at the personal address of one of the Board members, so socialization among members during the supply moments remains limited.

Table 8: Cannabis distribution within Belgian CSCs.

| | Earlier practices (Decorte, 2015) | Current practices |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Method of distribution | Exchange fair | Exchange fair Individual distribution |
| Frequency of distribution | Monthly at best | Weekly/bi-weekly at best |
| Quantity distributed | Max. 10-30gram per month | Max. 15-60gram per month |
| Price | 5-8€ per gram No quantity discounts | 6.5-9€ per gram » Discount for medical members No quantity discounts |
| Information about cannabis | Some CSCs provide information | Most CSCs provide information |

In terms of the continuity, in practice, of the key features associated with the model and reported in earlier research into Belgian CSCs, a mixed picture emerged. Based on the findings presented so far, a number of distinctive features among the Belgian CSCs seem to emerge. These are captured in the (tentative) typology presented in Figure 7. The typology is discussed in light of the broader literature on the topic in the next section.

Figure 7: A CSC typology.



Sources: Interview and fieldwork data; literature review (including: Barriuso, 2012; Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2016).

Note: In practice, CSCs may shift between the two ends of each dimension, and may also align with different ‘CSC types’ as several dimensions may apply to the functioning of particular Clubs (e.g. one CSC might become more or less activist-oriented, while at the same time being a mixed and overt CSC).

4. Discussion

Belgium is one of the key settings associated with the development of the CSC model (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte & Pardal, 2017). While the first CSC was established in the country over a decade ago (Pardal, 2018a), no legislation allowing or regulating this supply model has been introduced to date (Pardal, 2016a). The emergence and expansion of CSCs in Belgium has thus been driven primarily by the users themselves (Pardal, 2016b). By gathering first-hand views of individuals in key positions within these associations, as well as considering their self-regulatory efforts, this analysis offers valuable insights into the practices adopted by Belgian CSCs. In fact, in the absence of a formal legal framework and although there has been no significant policy change with regards to cannabis or CSCs in the country, we identified differences and shifts in CSC practices.

As the co-existence of and shifts between different types of CSCs raises further questions and may be informative for the future design of policies in this area (as discussed in the next paragraphs), we make a first attempt at identifying and discussing the key differences associated with Belgian CSCs’ practices. Our review of the still thin body of literature on CSCs and their practices has also confirmed, and offered additional examples of some of the ‘CSC types’ presented in our typology (Figure 7). It suggests that several variants of a CSC model (rather than a stable and homogeneous CSC model) have emerged. This typology is, of course, not definitive, as CSC practices (in Belgium and elsewhere) will likely continue to evolve and much CSC activity in other settings where the model is present remains scarcely documented.

But we hope it can be a starting point to reflect on the complexity of the model. Future studies of CSCs in other settings could help fine-tune the different dimensions of this typology, or identify additional discrepancies in terms of CSCs' supply practices, and are recommended.

Before discussing the typology, it is important to note that there is an underlying difference concerning CSCs' legal status, which could have implications to the degree and context in which CSC practices may be further shaped and adapted. In Uruguay, CSCs are able to operate, if meeting the legal requirements established in Law 19.172 (and subsequent regulations), within a formally legalized and regulated framework which establishes a number of conditions for the (legal) functioning of CSCs (Queirolo et al., 2016). Differently, in Belgium (as in other jurisdictions, notably in Spain), all active CSCs continue functioning in an unregulated/self-regulated context, and although exploiting the perceived room for manoeuvre within domestic policies, they remain vulnerable to law enforcement interventions, as illustrated by the closure of many Belgian CSCs or by some of the adaptations to their practices (Pardal, 2016a, 2018a).

As presented in Figure 7, we found that two Belgian CSCs are currently neither producing nor distributing cannabis. This represents a significant distinction in terms of CSCs' function. In fact, while some CSCs actively play a supply function (and may also have engaged in activist action), others seem to focus exclusively on advocacy/activism efforts, arguing for the introduction of legislation that would recognize and regulate the CSC model. This echoes previous analysis of CSC practices in Spain, where Marín (2008, 2009) identified the central role played by Spanish CSCs within the Spanish cannabis movement. Further research investigating the broader repertoire of action of both types of CSCs could further shed light into their engagement within the cannabis movement, and to the participation of CSC members in it. The Belgian CSCs seem to be primarily volunteer-run, and specialized staff – such as health professionals or others, remain rare (Pardal & Bawin, 2018).

We found no evidence of significant deviations in terms of CSCs' functioning as non-profit oriented cannabis suppliers in Belgium. While in Spain the emergence of so-called Cannabis Commercial Clubs (especially in Catalonia) has been recurrently reported in the recent years (Barriuso, 2012; Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte et al., 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015), in Belgium the CSCs continue to register as non-profits, and to date there has only been one known case of abuse of that statute (Decorte, 2015; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). The motivational accounts of those involved in the CSCs, the relative small to medium membership base of the Belgian CSCs, the continued preference for small-scale production, and the limited remuneration offered to CSC staff seem to suggest that these are primarily non-commercially driven initiatives. Nevertheless, a more in-depth analysis of the financial aspects of Belgian CSCs would be of interest, especially since their accounting practices may not have been under external scrutiny so far. The presence of Cannabis Commercial Clubs implies a different business model, and would blur the distinction between CSCs and some of the other supply models we discussed earlier.

We make also a distinction between ‘overt’ and ‘underground’ CSCs to illustrate the varying degrees to which CSCs are willing to face public scrutiny. For instance, in a previous analysis of media reporting on CSCs in Belgium, we noted differences in terms of the public profile of Belgian CSCs (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). What is more, while formal registration in the national registry of associations remains a common practice among Belgian CSCs, we are aware that other more recent CSC initiatives might have started operating without being formalized as registered associations. One other CSC in our sample had also not (yet) completed registration. Such practices run counter the principles defended in the European CSCs’ Code of Conduct proposed by ENCOD (2011), which endorses public and formal registration as a guarantee of CSCs’ transparent working. The emergence of unregistered CSCs could thus represent a decrease in CSCs’ transparency and openness to dialog with the public authorities. Recent police interventions affecting registered CSCs might help explain the reluctance to formalize and publicly register the associations (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 May 2017; Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, 2 June 2017).

There are differences concerning the size of Belgian CSCs, with small CSCs formed by groups of friends or acquaintances co-existing with larger CSCs. In comparison to earlier findings concerning Belgian CSCs, the largest CSC currently active has seen a substantial increase in terms of its membership base in the last few years (Decorte, 2015). The Belgian CSCs are in most cases larger than would be permitted by law for Uruguayan CSCs, but seemingly smaller than some Spanish CSCs (Decorte et al., 2017; Queirolo et al., 2016). CSC size, considering the membership base of CSCs, thus forms another dimension in our typology. What is noteworthy as well is the emergence of CSC branches or sub-divisions, a novelty that has not been reported in other contexts where the CSC model is present (Decorte et al., 2017). The establishment of relatively independent sub-divisions within a CSC can be seen as a way for CSCs to expand their presence and reach in the country, and to lay the ground for the development of new CSCs (Pardal, 2018a).

Access to cannabis via a Belgian CSC remains limited to members only, who must meet a number of requirements (i.e. concerning age, residency/nationality, prior cannabis use, and other specific requirements). In relation to access, an important development of the CSC model in Belgium concerns the establishment of a CSC, as well as a ‘specialized’ CSC sub-division, exclusively admitting members using cannabis for medical reasons (Pardal & Bawin, 2018). Although it should be noted that most (if not all) Belgian CSCs are open to both recreational and medical users, this new variant of the model exclusively allows for the supply of cannabis to users who, among other general requirements, present a medical record/formal recommendation from a physician. While we noted some of the differences concerning the functioning of these ‘specialized’ outlets, it is worth investigating whether and how they have further adapted their practices to accommodate the specific needs of medical users, as well as those users’ perspective on these services – especially in comparison with the experience of medical users integrated in other (‘mixed’) CSCs (for an analysis of some of these issues, please see: Pardal & Bawin, 2018).

Cannabis cultivation is carried out, more than in earlier phases of the model in Belgium (Decorte, 2015), by in-house growers, who are also members of the CSCs, on the basis of one plant per member. However, as we noted earlier, there have been indications that some Spanish CSCs might not always rely on in-house cannabis production. Again, a potential reliance on cannabis produced in the illicit market, instead of cooperatively produced within a CSC, might have implications in terms of the quality, potency and purity of the product that is being offered through these outlets. In the Belgian context, cultivation tends to be decentralized across multiple small-scale grow sites and in adherence to organic agricultural standards (Pardal, 2018b). Nevertheless, and although some CSCs have enacted practical guidelines for cultivation, the growing procedures may still vary among growers/CSCs and thus standardization of practices has not been achieved. Despite some progress with regards to cannabis testing, the implementation of regular quality control practices remains problematic for Belgian CSCs.

The distribution of cannabis through the Belgian CSCs has also undergone some changes in relation to earlier accounts (Decorte, 2015). While the typical method of distribution previously consisted of so-called 'exchange fairs', social gatherings where the members were able to collect the pre-ordered cannabis (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017), some of the CSCs now prefer to individually distribute the cannabis among their members (either at the member's home, at a pre-determined location, or at the premises of the CSC). The shift to this type of distribution aims in part at reducing the risk of interception during the transport of cannabis for the group-distribution moments, where larger amounts of cannabis would be moved, but also ensures that distribution takes place in a convenient way for the members. Nevertheless, individual distribution allows for arguably less social contact among CSC members, an aspect which had been highlighted as a positive feature of the model from a harm reduction perspective (Belackova et al., 2016). Also the cultivation of cannabis is currently decentralized, with growers typically cultivating the plants allocated to them in their own property (Pardal, 2018b). It should also be noted that the majority of the Belgian CSCs currently lacks a separate and dedicated space where members may gather and interact on their own initiative. To note these differences in terms of the degree of socialization among members promoted by the CSCs, we distinguish between a truly 'social' club and a 'lonesome' club. Additional insights concerning the range of (non-supply) social activities organized by the CSCs could further inform this distinction.

The price per gram imposed by the CSCs (6.5-9EUR) remains comparable to the estimated price per gram (based on Belgian Federal Police data from 2013) at street level (8-9.5EUR) (Plettinckx et al., 2014), and well within the street market price per gram range (3-20EUR), according to 2015 data (EMCDDA, 2017a). The maximum threshold quantity members can obtain from the CSC has increased (Decorte, 2015), but there are significant differences among CSCs (15-60gram/per month). Additional data on self-reported consumption patterns by CSC members could shed light into the frequency of use, quantity consumed, and methods of consumption, allowing for a more accurate understanding of the types of users served by (and thus the

market segment associated with) the CSC model in Belgium (Caulkins et al., 2012a; Caulkins et al., 2012b; Kilmer et al., 2013a; van Laar et al., 2013).

5. Conclusion

The CSC model remains, in Belgium, operating as a closed-circuit, cooperative-based and small-scale non-commercially oriented supplier. This is in line with earlier descriptions of the model, and echoes the key strengths attributed to this supply option, in the sense that it does not introduce significant incentives to increasing either production or consumption (Caulkins et al., 2015a). Formal and regular quality control of the cannabis produced and distributed by the CSCs are, however, still lacking. At the same time, we noted a number of important changes in Belgian CSCs' practices that deviate from what had been understood as the core characteristics of the model. The introduction of individual distribution, as well as the recently emerging cases of unregistered CSCs could represent a reduction of transparency and social interaction typically associated with the model. The establishment of a 'medical cannabis club' is another novel development in Belgium, which warrants further attention.

Furthermore, this analysis highlights the richness and complexity of the CSC model in practice. The data collected with regards to the Belgian CSCs, as well as earlier analyses of CSCs in Belgium and elsewhere, point towards the co-existence of and shifts between several variants of a CSC model. Although the literature often refers to a CSC model this analysis reveals a diversity of practices, not only across jurisdictions (Decorte et al., 2017), but even within the same setting. We sought to capture this diversity of practices in a first CSC typology, noting important differences across nine dimensions: the degree of professionalization of CSCs' staff (volunteer vs. professional staff), the function played by CSCs (activist vs. supplier), CSCs' business model (non-profit vs. Cannabis Commercial Club) and public profile (overt CSC vs. underground CSC), their size (small vs. medium vs. large), organizational differentiation (single unit vs. multi-unit), accessibility (mixed CSC vs. medical CSC), in terms of CSCs' position in the supply chain (vertically integrated vs. buyers club), and the degree of interaction among members generated by CSCs (social club vs. lonesome club).

These changes are, particularly within the Belgian context, reflective of the self-regulatory efforts of those involved in the running of these associations, and in some cases are adjustments implemented as a way to tackle a perceived vulnerability to law enforcement interventions. The results presented here speak to CSCs' capacity to self-regulate (Belackova & Wilkins, 2018). Jurisdictions considering the introduction of legislation allowing the supply of cannabis through CSCs would benefit from considering the different variants of this model and from engaging with the grassroots actors who have contributed to their development (Decorte et al., 2017). A 'multiple regulatory strategy' (Ritter, 2010), which moves beyond sole reliance on CSCs' self-regulatory efforts and integrates additional standards and formal (top-down) regulations may be an opportunity to strengthen 'consumer agency' and mobilize the cumulated knowledge (Belackova & Wilkins, 2018), which could facilitate the implementation

of the operational aspects of the model, while at the same time enhancing the protection of public health goals (Decorte et al., 2017; Pacula et al., 2014).

Chapter 9: The supply of cannabis for medical use through Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium

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Abstract

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are non-profit associations of adult cannabis users which collectively organize the supply of cannabis among their members. As CSCs currently also serve members using cannabis for medical purposes, this paper aims to detail the particular features of Belgian CSCs as suppliers of cannabis for medical use, and how those are perceived by CSC members. In this paper we draw on data gathered through interviews with the managing staff (n=21) of seven currently active Belgian CSCs. In addition we conducted interviews (n=21) and an online survey (n=80) with members of Belgian CSCs using cannabis for medical reasons. We present Belgian CSCs' practices building on an adapted version of the health services analytical framework proposed by Belle-Isle et al. (2014). This paper thus provides a first overview of the features of Belgian CSCs as suppliers of cannabis for medical use, as well as members' perceptions. Structural differences emerged as to how the Belgian CSCs have accommodated medical members' needs (in mixed CSCs where no formal distinction is made between recreational and medical members, in a separate CSC sub-unit, or in a CSC admitting medical members only). Candidate medical members must fulfil specific criteria, particularly when applying for the medical units. The CSCs have adopted two different types of distribution methods, and the cannabis supplied is produced organically – systematic quality control is, however, lacking. We noted some flexibility in relation to frequency and quantity distributed to medical members. Affordability was positively appreciated by CSC members. Collaboration between CSCs and the health sector remains challenging. Some degree of diversity in practices among CSCs remains, as well as common issues which continue to affect the model in Belgium and are important in understanding the role and potential of CSCs as providers of cannabis for medical use.

Keywords: Cannabis Social Club; supply; medical use; cannabis; mixed methods; Belgium.

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) emerged as a result of grassroots initiatives of groups of adult cannabis users who sought to create a model of (collective) self-supply, by ensuring the cultivation and distribution of cannabis among themselves, on a closed and non-profit basis (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Blickman, 2014; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016b). The first such initiatives emerged in Spain during the 1990s (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Marín, 2008, 2009; Montañés, 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015). Today, CSCs can be found in several other countries, notably in Belgium and Uruguay (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017). In most cases, the CSCs remain an initiative driven mainly by the users-activists themselves, and have not been formally acknowledged nor regulated by the respective domestic legislators. The exception is Uruguay, which passed legislation in 2013 introducing a legal framework for the supply of cannabis including the CSC model (Pardo, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016; Room, 2014).

The role CSCs specifically play for medical cannabis users remains an under-researched issue. It has been generally reported that (at least some) CSCs also allow medical users to join those associations – in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017). The existence of a small number of CSCs exclusively serving medical users has also been reported in a number of countries (Spain, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland) (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017). Further to these indications that CSCs are serving medical users, there is a dearth of information concerning specific CSC practices and the views of medical users regarding this supply model. In this regard, the limited literature on this topic notes only that medical users looking to join a CSC might be asked to provide a medical prescription or a more general file in support of their membership application (Decorte et al., 2017), a requirement that does not apply to recreational users. It has also been suggested that some CSCs give their medical members a discount in the price of the cannabis products, as well as allowing them to receive larger quantities of cannabis at each supply moment (Decorte et al., 2017).

While the CSC model has been present in Belgium for over a decade now, and previous research has reported that medical users might have sought to secure cannabis through these associations (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017), it remains unclear whether and how CSCs have sought to adapt their practices to meet the needs of medical cannabis users. This article makes a first contribution to filling this gap in knowledge. Drawing on the analytical framework developed by Belle-Isle et al. (2014), we aim to provide an overview of the features of Belgian CSCs as suppliers of cannabis for medical use and to explore how current practices accommodate medical users' needs.

The use and supply of cannabis for medical reasons

Cannabis remains a controlled substance, scheduled as particularly conducive to 'abuse' and to the production of ill effects (Schedule I, United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs,

1961), and as of limited medical or therapeutic value (Schedule IV, United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961) (Mead, 2014).¹⁰⁷ ¹⁰⁸ Yet for centuries cannabis has been used worldwide for its medical properties (Zuardi, 2006) and there is increasing recognition of the therapeutic value of cannabis (Grotenhermen & Müller-Vahl, 2016). Scientists and companies have begun exploring the properties of the plant in order to develop remedies based on cannabis (e.g. Sativex®, Marinol®, Epidiolex®). Surveys, conducted internationally, report that individuals use cannabis for various medical indications, including pain, anxiety, feelings of depression, and insomnia (Hazekamp, Ware, Muller-Vahl, Abrams, & Grotenhermen, 2013; Reinerman, Nunberg, Lanthier, & Heddleston, 2011; Swift et al., 2005; Walsh et al., 2013). Other survey-based research has also noted that a significant proportion of cannabis growers seems to be cultivating cannabis for medical use (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Potter et al., 2015; Werse, 2015).

Large-scale clinical trials testing cannabinoids for medical use remain scarce. Nevertheless, there is scientific evidence concerning the therapeutic efficacy of cannabis for certain conditions. For instance, studies have shown that cannabinoid drugs might be beneficial for the treatment of chronic pain and spasticity. In addition, there is low-quality evidence that these medicines improve chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, weight gain in HIV infection, sleep disorders, and Tourette syndrome (Kowal, Hazekamp, & Grotenhermen, 2016; Whiting et al., 2015).¹⁰⁹ Currently, the therapeutic efficacy of cannabis receives the most support in research on the treatment of symptoms of multiple sclerosis (Chohan, Greenfield, Yadav, & Graves, 2016; Patti et al., 2016).

Following the increasing recognition of the medical value of cannabis, countries have developed regulations to allow the supply of cannabis for medical use. Certain countries, including Canada, the Netherlands, Israel and 28 US states, have for instance developed and integrated official medical cannabis programs. Worldwide, the supply of cannabis for medical use is organized in a range of different ways. Firstly, the cannabis products made available might differ. Most nations allow solely pharmaceutical preparations (e.g. United Kingdom and France, among at least 23 countries according to a review by Belackova et al. (2017)), while only a few countries have regulated and introduced the supply of medical-grade herbal cannabis or other cannabis-products, such as cannabis oil (e.g. Canada and the Netherlands).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ In 1991, following a recommendation by the World Health Organization (WHO), dronabinol was reclassified from Schedule I to Schedule II (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014). In 2006, the WHO recommended dronabinol be rescheduled from Schedule II to Schedule III, in recognition of its medical value. This recommendation was rejected (Hallam et al., 2014).

¹⁰⁸ The use of cannabis for medical and scientific purposes is, however, not restricted by the United Nations Conventions.

¹⁰⁹ The systematic review of Whiting et al. (2015) found no difference between herbal cannabis and other cannabinoid drugs. However, only two out of the 79 studies evaluated herbal cannabis. The researchers argued that more research is needed to understand the benefits and side-effects associated with herbal cannabis.

¹¹⁰ This is evolving rapidly so the number of countries with such provisions might be changing.

In addition, there is diversity in access to cannabis. In several countries, patients need a prescription in order to obtain cannabis products, while in other countries a physician's recommendation is required. In several cases, countries also have a list of qualified conditions for which the use of cannabis is allowed. Also, supply sources also differ across jurisdictions. In most countries the cannabis products are available through pharmacies, especially in the case of pharmaceutical preparations. In other countries, the cannabis is delivered by the distributors, for instance through home delivery. In addition to these official sources of supply, other organisations also supply cannabis such as dispensaries, coffee shops, compassion clubs and cannabis social clubs. Home cultivation, whether legal or not, has also been an option pursued by medical users to access cannabis (Belackova et al., 2017).

The Belgian context

In Belgium, cannabis cultivation and distribution remain prohibited (Pardal, 2016a), and only a specific group of patients has legal access to a cannabis-based product, Sativex®, following the passage of a 2015 Royal Decree by the Health Minister. In that context, the purchase of this cannabis-based mouth spray is only reimbursed when used to alleviate the spasms associated with multiple sclerosis. Beyond that, cannabis for medical reasons is only accessible through illegal channels, including social supply, street circuits, personal cultivation, online sales, or through legal models available when crossing the Dutch border, such as Dutch pharmacies and coffee shops. Obtaining cannabis from a Dutch pharmacy is possible when prescribed by a Belgian physician. In Belgium, physicians are allowed to prescribe unlicensed medicines, such as cannabis, due to what is called 'therapy freedom' (FAGG, 2017). Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are another supply channel in Belgium.

Nevertheless, they continue to operate in a vulnerable legal context (Pardal, 2016a). Despite the Belgian prohibition on cannabis supply, CSCs have based their actions on their interpretation of a policy guideline issued in 2005 by the Minister of Justice and the College of Public Prosecutors (Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016a, 2018a). This Ministerial Guideline assigned the lowest priority to the prosecution of cases involving the possession of a maximum of three grams of cannabis or one cannabis plant (in the absence of aggravating circumstances or disturbance to the public order). The Belgian CSCs have since argued that, by cultivating one plant per member only, they would respect the threshold defined in the 2005 Ministerial Guideline for lowest enforcement priority (Pardal, 2016a). However, this interpretation has not been supported by the relevant authorities, and the College of Public Prosecutors has recently contested it publicly (College van Procureurs-Generaal, 2017). Despite this unfavourable legal context, and the many court cases involving Belgian CSCs, the model has remained a constant presence in the country since 2006 (Pardal, 2018a). Those leading these organizations continue to argue for legal reform in the country (for instance by engaging with the domestic media to communicate their activities and claims) (Pardal, 2016b; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017).

Analytical framework

In outlining the practices of Belgian CSCs, we use an adapted version of the health services analytical framework proposed by Belle-Isle et al. (2014). We discuss the five categories used in this study, which examined access to cannabis for therapeutic purposes in Canada: *accommodation*, *accessibility*, *availability*, *affordability* and *acceptability*. We adapted these categories slightly to the Belgian context and used a mixed approach to examine this new area of research. For the purposes of the present analysis, *accommodation* refers to CSCs' general appropriateness to meet medical users' needs (similar to Belle-Isle et al.'s interpretation). In turn, *accessibility* corresponds to the perceived distance between the location of a CSC and a member's place of residence, as well as the ease with which cannabis can be obtained from these associations (i.e. the different methods of distribution of cannabis). In addition, we examine accessibility by considering the process through which prospective medical members are able to join these associations. *Availability* was broadly defined by Belle-Isle et al. (2014) as "the adequacy of available services according to the nature of patient needs" (p. 2). In our analysis, we focus in particular on the quality control practices adopted by the CSCs, the types of products offered by the organizations, and the frequency of distribution and quantity supplied. *Affordability* refers to the costs of the services and products provided by the CSCs as well as members' perceived ability to afford those costs. We address this issue by examining the price of cannabis products supplied by the CSCs as well as other costs associated with membership of these associations. Finally, the fifth dimension, *acceptability* touches upon members' perceptions of CSCs as a supply option, and reflects on the social interaction among members as well as between them and CSC representatives.

2. Methods

The analysis presented here draws on data from two separate and ongoing studies: a study of CSCs in Belgium, and a study of self-reported medical cannabis use in Flanders (Belgium). From the first study, we draw two data sources. This research project was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Law at Ghent University. First, we draw on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 21 directors of the seven CSCs that were active at the time. At least one member of the Board of Directors of each CSC took part in an interview.¹¹¹ The Belgian CSCs were identified by drawing on a previous exploratory analysis by Decorte (2015), and subsequent fieldwork and snowballing from the initial group of known CSCs. The schedule used in these interviews drew on the schedules used in previous studies of CSCs in Belgium (Decorte, 2015) and Uruguay (Queirolo et al., 2016), and addressed a range of aspects of the functioning of the CSCs. As noted elsewhere, the CSC landscape in Belgium is somewhat volatile, in part due to the domestic legal framework in which the associations are operating (Pardal, 2016a,

¹¹¹ Each CSC received a random identifier (CSC1-CSC7), which we use to refer to different sources of data concerning each CSC. When citing data from the interviews with the CSCs' directors we add a -D suffix per respondent.

2018a). As such, we are aware that the number of active CSCs and/or some of their practices might have changed since these data were collected.

Our second data sources from the first study is an online survey of 190 Belgian CSC members – Table 9. Participation in the survey was open to current CSC members who were at least 18 years old at the time. Of the sample of 190 respondents, 80 reported using cannabis for medical reasons. For this analysis we focus on this sub-set of respondents and their responses to the survey questions concerning levels of satisfaction with CSCs' supply function.

Table 9: Key demographic characteristics of online survey respondents (n=80).

| | Frequency | Percent of cases (%) |
|--|-----------|----------------------|
| Age Mean age: 45 (range 22-73) | - | - |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 23 | 29.5 |
| Male | 55 | 70.5 |
| Conditions* | | |
| Pain relief | 56 | 70.0 |
| Sleep deprivation | 32 | 40.0 |
| Depression | 29 | 36.3 |
| Anxiety | 28 | 35.0 |
| Spinal cord injury | 17 | 21.3 |
| Migraine | 11 | 13.8 |
| Neurological disorder | 10 | 12.5 |
| Chronic fatigue syndrome | 9 | 11.3 |
| Spasms (spascity) | 9 | 11.3 |

Source: Online survey conducted among Belgian CSC members.

* Percent of respondents who have selected the condition as a reason for their cannabis use. Multiple choice was possible.

Note: Other conditions (N<9): fibromyalgia, arthritis, nausea (persistent), neuralgia/neuropathy, weight loss, cancer, glaucoma, HIV/AIDS, multiple sclerosis, spondyloses, degenerative discopathy, herniated disc, necrosis, hip injury, ADHD, ulcerative colitis, concentration, relaxation, energy, genetic connective tissue disorder, degenerative eye disease, muscle disease, stress, restless legs syndrome, hypertension, tinnitus.

From the second study, we rely on interview data from a subsample of self-reported medical cannabis users (n=21) living in Flanders. From the total sample (n=57) in this study we included respondents' interview data where CSCs were discussed during the interviews.¹¹² Recruitment took place via calls for participation through social media, patient organisations, medical institutions, via the distribution of flyers, and through snowball sampling. Participants dealt with a range of different conditions, including chronic pain, cancer, rheumatism, neuromuscular disorders, insomnia, digestive disorders and ADHD. Most respondents were members or former members of the CSCs participating in the first study (n=14). A small number

¹¹² In this larger study we examine self-reported medical cannabis use in Flanders using a mixed methods approach. Alongside qualitative interviews, we conducted an online survey with a cross sectional design.

of non-CSC members who reported using cannabis for medical reasons were also included in our sample as they provided valuable knowledge about CSCs from an outsiders' perspective. This study was approved by the Commission for Medical Ethics from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Ghent University.

Our analysis thus draws on datasets from two separate studies. Both studies rely primarily on qualitative interviews, undertaken during a similar time-frame (2016-2017). All face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analysed using NVivo11. That data were analysed thematically in light of the theoretical framework used here, with these categories being fine-tuned through individual coding and recoding by the two authors. Through data triangulation, the qualitative results were complemented with the larger number of response from the CSC members who participated in the online survey. Descriptive analysis of the survey data was performed using SPSS.

The two studies mobilized here offer first-hand insights into the CSC model, conveying the views of those taking the initiative to establish and run the associations, as well those of their users'. However, there are also noteworthy differences in terms of study design. For instance, the study of self-reported medical cannabis use focused exclusively on a population from one Belgian region (Flanders), while the other study considered any CSC activity across the whole country. This explains the lack of interviews with members from some of the CSCs (n=3), as some of those organizations are not based in Flanders. By mobilizing a number of different sources (i.e., online survey, fieldwork observations, interview data), and including the views of different groups (i.e., CSC directors, members, former members, and non-members), we sought to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth picture of the issues under analysis (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Flick, 2014).

3. Results

In the following sections we present and discuss the research findings, grouped under each of the categories of the framework developed by Belle-Isle et al. (2014) and adapted to the Belgian CSC context.

How do CSCs accommodate medical users' needs?

Medical users' membership of CSCs in Belgium is organized in three different ways: in one case, the CSC reported exclusively accepting medical users, another CSC had a separate unit for medical users, and the five other CSCs, although also admitting medical users, had no formal structural arrangements particular to them. The 'medical' CSC had, at the time of data collection, about 60 members, and the CSC with a separate unit had an estimated 30 medical members. The number of medical cannabis users who are members of the other five clubs is likely under-estimated here, as the staff of these clubs might be unaware of the purposes for

which their members are using cannabis. The tentative estimate offered by CSC directors is presented in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Overview of CSC membership base, including medical members.

| | CSC1 | CSC2 | CSC3 | CSC4 | CSC5 | CSC6 | CSC7 |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------|
| Number of medical members | 60 | 6 | 30* | 0 | 2-3 | 0 | Not known |
| Total number of members | 60 | 45 | 400 | 10 | 81 | 10 | 70 |

Source: Interviews with CSC representatives, fieldwork notes.

* This figure corresponds to the number of members of this CSC's medical sub-division.

Note: The figures included in the table correspond to the estimates made by the CSC representatives during the data collection phase. We are aware that these might have changed since then.

In terms of specialized staff, at the time of the interview, only one CSC (with a medical sub-division) had a (volunteer) nurse within the CSC structure. The directors of this CSC indicated that in the past they had also hosted a physician from Doctors without Borders who gave consultations at the club for a period of time. Besides this collaboration, no other CSC reported having specialized medical staff within the association. The CSC directors nevertheless told us of having approached health professionals, but being met with some resistance by some of them, which they attributed in part to lack of knowledge about cannabis, as the following quote illustrates:

“Most of the doctors, and I speak [of] about 70-80% of the doctors, still don't know about medical cannabis or how to prescribe it. They don't know” (CSC1-D1).

The Belgian CSCs also provide somewhat regular support to their members, in person but also over the phone, via email or through other online social platforms. In particular, the directors of two CSCs discussed having more frequent contact with those members who used cannabis for medical reasons. Overall, the members we interviewed reported having learned much about cannabis and cannabis use from CSC representatives and other members.

“With the CSC, I learn how many different strains there are and that there are strains that are more hallucinogenic and other strains that are more pain-relieving or less sleep inducing. [...] On their website they explain everything clearly, actually with reviews of the members” (Interview 6).

The head of the CSC medical division further explained what those contact moments entailed, starting from the intake moment:

“So the intake consists of filling in a form together and most of the times I give this small presentation about cannabis to the patient. And then I start actually gathering data on pain, quality of life and mood, also with the depression scale. [...] With patients who don't have previous experience with cannabis I ask for a prescription from a doctor, and then the questionnaires are filled in weekly. With the ones that already used cannabis before for their medical condition, they fill this in every month” (CSC3-D20).

The directors of the medical CSC also discussed preparing a file for each member based on information collected during the contact moments including the quantities of cannabis used, the methods of use, and its reported effects. This was confirmed by a member of the club. The frequency of these conversations varies as explained by one of this CSC's directors:

“First, when they start up, it’s three times a month [that the CSC contacts the member] [...] but we always say: “if you have questions yourself, you call us”. And then afterwards, after the first month, if we feel that everything goes well, then I call them once a month. Or I send an email, because some people are very busy. And then I just ask, check up: ‘How are you? Still going well? Is everything okay?’”(CSC1-D2).

These CSC directors thought this approach was beneficial for members in a number of ways. Firstly, it serves to create a rapport with the members: *“you build a certain relationship”* (CSC1-D2). Secondly, it helps to identify situations where the use of cannabis might not be producing the expected/desired effects: *“Sometimes a patient does not react well with this kind of plant. Then we discuss: what can we do? What can we propose? That’s the way we do it.”* (CSC1-D2). Thirdly, and at the same time, by regularly asking questions about cannabis usage and its effects, the CSCs hope to educate members and increase their self-awareness:

“I inform and follow up. I think it’s an important statement because actually I train them to be their own guider. Also by monthly filling in these questionnaires, it helps them reflect upon how they feel, about their use... I explain cannabis consumption methods so they can chose which method will be better for them” (CSC3-D20).

The accessibility of CSCs

Admission criteria

Candidate members to a Belgian CSC must meet a number of general criteria concerning age (at least 18 or 21 years old), Belgian nationality and/or residency, and being extant cannabis users – although this last requirement might be waived for medical candidate members in some instances. In addition, candidate members wishing to enrol at a CSC to obtain cannabis for medical reasons usually have to meet additional requirements, which vary among the different CSCs. The medical CSC admits candidates who present a prescription for the use of cannabis from their physician. This CSC also considers enrolling candidates without a prescription on a case-by-case (exceptional) basis - when candidates have presented their medical record to the CSC representatives at a first meeting and, having returned to their physician (with additional information concerning cannabis prepared by the CSC), were refused a recommendation or prescription. In some of those instances, the CSC representatives thought the refusal to issue a recommendation related to a lack of understanding of cannabis’ medical properties, fear of prescribing it, and an *“old-fashioned”* mentality among the health-care professionals. Two medical users indeed reported experiencing difficulties in finding a physician willing to

prescribe cannabis and not being able to join that CSC as a result, as noted by one of our interviewees:

“My pain doctor said: ‘Look, I’m not familiar with use by non-cancer patients, I’m willing to monitor you, but I don’t want to prescribe it’.[...]”

I: So you can’t join the CSC without a prescription?

R: No, they don’t allow it. As long as you don’t have a doctor’s recommendation, they don’t want to help you.” (Interview 23).

The CSC with a sub-unit for medical users requires candidates to present a letter from their physician acknowledging that the patient is going to use/already using cannabis, and for which condition or symptoms. This was confirmed by two members of this unit. This CSC exceptionally allows the admission of candidates who have not used cannabis prior to their enrolment in the association, in cases where the use of cannabis is formally prescribed by a physician. At the other ‘mixed’ CSCs, candidate medical members may present a medical prescription or recommendation, but this is not always required, as they may also proceed to enrol as recreational members (if meeting the general admission conditions mentioned above).

The candidate members are also asked to take part in an intake interview with a view to learn about the functioning of the CSC and the use of cannabis, as well as for the CSC representatives to get to know more about the candidates joining the associations. Some of the medical users we interviewed mentioned participating in these conversations with the staff of their clubs upon enrolling. One CSC has temporarily stopped accepting new members, placing individuals who wish to join on a waiting list. In part because of this issue two medical cannabis users we interviewed had doubts about the CSC as an adequate solution to obtain cannabis:

“In my opinion, a cannabis club isn’t the solution for everyone, if you look at the waiting lists and also at the costs, the efforts you have to do, and the time you have to wait eventually.” (Interview 15).

One other medical user told us of also being interested in joining that CSC, but not being able to due to the CSC’s temporary restrictions upon admitting new members.

CSC location

The currently few active CSCs are based in different locations in Belgium, with the majority operating in the Flemish region of the country. In Wallonia there is only one CSC operating in an area of 16,844 km². Multiple medical cannabis users told us they have to travel a great distance to obtain cannabis from a CSC, as the following quote illustrates:

“The only thing is that I have to go to [location of CSC] and I’m not always capable of driving. So then I have to ask someone else to go for me. [...]Yet, if I have to go two times in a month to [location CSC] then it is already quite stressful for me” (Interview 2).¹¹³

¹¹³ The distance from this particular respondent’s house to the CSC is about 55 km.

Distance to a CSC might become particularly burdensome when, for instance due to a criminal investigation the closest CSC ceases its activities, and members have to enrol at other CSCs further away. Still, one member noted being glad about no longer having to drive to the Netherlands to obtain cannabis.

Methods of distribution

The Belgian CSCs have adopted two different methods of distribution: at so-called ‘exchange fairs’, where all the members who have ordered cannabis gather to collect it, or distributed by a CSC representative to each member individually (at members’ home address, at a pre-arranged location, or for pick up at the CSC). Currently, the medical CSC has opted for the individual ‘door-to-door’ type of delivery. The CSC with a separate medical unit organizes ‘exchange fairs’, but the medical members are also able to collect the cannabis from the CSC at a time that suits them best. The remaining CSCs have adopted a mix of both distribution methods.

Cannabis availability

Quality control and production standards

All the Belgian CSCs currently producing and distributing cannabis to their members declared their adherence to organic farming practices, which is also a requirement asked of the clubs’ growers (Pardal, 2018b). As noted by one of the CSC directors:

“First of all, we grow biologically or organically. We instruct our growers not to use any chemical substances. And we really insist on that because we also have medical users who have a bad health already. They don’t need to have more chemicals in their body, so we really want to keep it that way. And we believe this is in the end is making cannabis use less harmful” (CSC3-D6).

As noted elsewhere (Pardal, 2018b), some of the CSCs developed minimum requirements with regards to the grow site and the equipment used for the cultivation of cannabis. The CSCs’ medical members we interviewed thought that the cannabis products offered by the CSCs were of good quality, and mentioned that the cannabis is cultivated organically. They contrasted it with the cannabis bought from street circuits or coffee shops:

“I know that I have good stuff now, because before I used to get bags with little blue balls laying on the bottom. I thought ‘for God’s sake, what am I smoking here?’” (Interview 6).

The perceived cannabis quality was an important reason given by medical users to join a CSC, as illustrated by the following remark:

“For me, it was also mainly about having some assurance in terms of quality; what do you receive? Did nothing strange happen with it? What else did the dealer put in it,...? At this place it was actually a little bit more transparent” (Interview 48).

A similar picture emerged from our online survey data, as most self-identified medical CSC members appreciated the quality of the cannabis they acquired through the CSCs (Table 11).

Table 11: CSC members’ satisfaction with six supply aspects.

| | Very dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Satisfied | Very satisfied | Total |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| Quality of the cannabis received | 0 (0) | 5.2 (3) | 41.4 (24) | 53.4 (31) | 100 (58) |
| Quantity of cannabis received | 0 (0) | 10.2 (6) | 37.3 (22) | 52.5 (31) | 100 (59) |
| Frequency of distribution | 3.4 (2) | 15.3 (9) | 44.1 (26) | 37.3 (22) | 100 (59) |
| Variety of cannabis available | 3.6 (2) | 7.1 (4) | 46.4 (26) | 42.9 (24) | 100 (56) |
| Forms of cannabis available | 2 (1) | 21.6 (11) | 60.8 (31) | 15.7 (8) | 100 (51) |
| Price of the cannabis | 4.9 (3) | 8.2 (5) | 47.5 (29) | 39.3 (24) | 100 (61) |

Note: Valid % (n).

Source: Online survey conducted among Belgian CSC members.

However, further standardization processes are not in place at the CSCs, and there is likely to be variation in terms of the type, potency, and overall quality of the cannabis produced by the different growers and CSCs. Although quality control was a concern for most producing CSCs, systematic cannabis testing remained limited. One of the CSC directors reflected on the need to improve the quality control practices particularly in view of serving medical members:

“It’s not sufficient [i.e., the quality control practices employed by the CSC] because there is some percentage of variance. [...] But it’s a medicine, so the Jack [i.e. Jack Herer, a cannabis strain] should not one time have 18% [THC] and the next time 20% [THC]. That should not be possible. It must stay between 18.1% and 18.8%, you see? Then it would be okay for medical reasons” (CSC1-D1).

In addition, some of the CSCs occasionally send samples to be analysed externally – usually based on thin-layer chromatography (TLC) testing.

Quantity supplied and frequency of distribution

The CSCs set limits on the maximum quantity of cannabis members are able to obtain at each supply moment, ranging from a low maximum of 15 grams per month to a high maximum of about 60 grams per month. This was confirmed by some of the CSC members we interviewed. Nevertheless, medical CSC members seemed satisfied by the quantity of cannabis they acquired from the CSCs (Table 11).

The frequency of distribution among Belgian CSCs ranges from weekly supply, to distribution every four months. The members of the medical CSC can receive cannabis approximately every two weeks, and the members of the medical sub-division usually receive cannabis on at least a monthly basis (while the recreational members of this CSC are only supplied every 2-3 months). The members of this unit appreciate this arrangement, as the following quotation illustrates:

“The advantage is that when you are a medical member you can order it and pick it up at any time. If you are not a medical member then you have to order it and you have to wait for an exchange fair.” (Interview 20).

In the five ‘mixed’ CSCs, the frequency of distribution is the same for medical and recreational members. Generally, however, as illustrated in Table 11, the medical CSC members surveyed provided more positive assessments of the frequency of distribution.

Product types

The CSCs are mainly supplying herbal cannabis, usually having several different strains of cannabis available, as the following quotation illustrates:

“We try to have 5-6 different [strains], between Indica, Sativa and hybrid, because there are members who prefer Indica and others who prefer Sativa, so we try to have both” (CSC7-D16).

A director of another CSC further explained that: at “every exchange fair we have ten different strains. The grower can choose, we don’t say: ‘you have to grow this or that’, but there is a lot of choice” (CSC3-D8). Strain selection thus usually follows growers’ preferences, but also takes into account specific demands of the members – including also cannabidiol-rich plants (Pardal, 2018b), an issue brought up by the members we interviewed as well. This variety of strains was one of the aspects the medical members we interviewed most highlighted as positive about the functioning of the CSCs.

“You get an email from them with the available strains and you choose which strain is the best for you. At the moment it is really good that they really have medical strains¹¹⁴ in their assortment” (Interview 20).

At the same time, as the diversity of cannabis strains depended on growers’ decisions, some of the members noted that the supply of particular strains was not always available:

“The club doesn’t always know which strains will come in. It’s fantastic when you discover a new strain, but if you really need another strain... For my stomach I need a really specific type. Then sometimes you might be [...] without what you need.” (Interview 2).

¹¹⁴ Different interpretations of the term *medical* cannabis exist. When using this term, people might refer to quality-controlled cannabis and/or cannabis that is prescribed or recommended by a physician and/or cannabis used for medical purposes and/or cannabis that has high levels of cannabidiol.

Nevertheless, drawing on our survey data, most medical CSC members had expressed a positive view of the variety and forms of cannabis available at the CSCs (Table 11).

Although going beyond the official CSC policy, some of the CSC representatives admitted at times also supplying other cannabis-based products to their members, including cannabis oil, butter, suppository, cannabidiol products and cookies – as confirmed by three members we interviewed.

A director of the medical CSC talked about the club's efforts towards reviewing the available data on the types of cannabis used with positive effects on certain conditions or illnesses: *“Every time a patient comes and she says ‘I have fibromyalgia’, I try to search all the scientific research on it”* (CSC1-D1). Additionally, a member of the medical sub-division noted also that the club gathers members' own feedback on the different cannabis strains available, which is published on the CSC's website. This was seen as a useful resource for the members who sought more information about which strains might be helpful for particular conditions.

Affordability

Price per gram

The price per gram of (herbal) cannabis ranges between 4.5-9EUR. Members of the medical sub-division are able to receive cannabis at a price per gram of 4.5EUR (instead of 7EUR for the recreational members of that club), a 'discount' also noted by the members we interviewed. The medical CSC supplied cannabis at 6.5EUR per gram. We have no information concerning the price of other cannabis-based products supplied by some of the CSCs. In general, several medical members noted that the cannabis acquired via the CSC was cheaper than that acquired through other sources of supply (e.g. Dutch pharmacies and coffee shops). One of them told us:

“The plant that I need to sleep we buy at a cannabis social club. And that is still 7 to 8EUR per gram. That is cheaper than a [Dutch] pharmacy, but yeah still a lot” (Interview 42).

Another commented that:

“In the club the weed costs me 4.5EUR. Cheaper isn't possible, no? I mean, if I have to go to Holland I have to pay 7-8EUR. Then it becomes expensive” (Interview 3).

This finding was further confirmed by the responses to our online survey, which showed that medical CSC members are satisfied with the price of cannabis at the CSC (Table 11).

Membership costs

All members of Belgian CSCs are expected to pay an annual membership. At the moment, no discounts for medical members are made by the clubs, and in most cases the annual

membership amounts to 25EUR, with the exception of one CSC where members are asked to contribute 40EUR per year. Two (ex-)members of the medical CSC pointed out that the club recently raised the membership from 25EUR to over 100EUR.

“The club has increased its membership significantly this year, to become a member you have to pay 125EUR either way and only then you can order” (Interview 17).

No other membership costs were reported by the CSC representatives or the medical users we interviewed.

Acceptability of cannabis for medical use and/or of CSCs as suppliers

Some of our interviewees consider the clubs as official or legal organizations, or at least the ‘most legal’ way to obtain cannabis in Belgium. Respondents reported being glad to be members of a CSC, as they thought that would give them some level of protection from law enforcement, as the following quotation illustrates:

“I think it is a good way to get cannabis, because it is the most legal way in the sense that if you ever get in trouble with the police or justice, a lawyer of the club will be there to defend you. So that’s the most legal way” (Interview 1).

Nevertheless, multiple medical cannabis users were aware of police raids and criminal investigations involving CSCs, which have at times resulted in their closure (permanent or temporary) or interfered with the supply cycle of several of these organizations (Pardal, 2016a). For instance, some CSC members told us that obtaining cannabis from their CSC was no longer an option, as production had been discontinued. Furthermore, two other members reported having been called as witnesses about the CSC at a police station during the investigations. Two medical cannabis users, who had not joined a Belgian CSC, discussed preferring to cultivate cannabis at their homes, as they feared being identified during a police investigation involving CSCs.

Most medical users who are members of a CSC reported being satisfied with the way the organizations function and their representatives, despite initial doubts, as noted by one of our interviewees:

“I think it’s really nice... first I was a little bit scared about what kind of people I would be in contact with. [...] The chairman of the CSC is a calm man. He takes time to clearly explain everything and to see if he can help me in any way. So that was a relief, immediately I felt comfortable. The people I have met were normal. I thought it was a really nice system” (Interview 48).

Acceptance of the model by health professionals and the health sector more broadly remains challenging, as noted by a director of a CSC: *“They [health professionals] are not open to communication or cooperation with us... they don’t want to have anything to do with us” (CSC2-D3)*. This reluctance felt by the CSC representatives was also associated with a broader resistance towards the model and to the use of cannabis in a medical context, as noted by

another director: *“Because it’s cannabis, because we are a Cannabis Social Club. It’s still not so commonly accepted”* (CSC3-D8). Even in relation to some of the members, the CSC representatives talked about their efforts to change perceptions concerning cannabis. The following quotation is illustrative:

“A lot of people [...] come here and say: ‘yeah, it’s a drug’. No, no. The way we cultivate it, it’s no drug. The way you are going to use it, it’s no drug. If you misuse it, we throw you out. That’s what we say. We follow up. And then we say: it’s a medicine. Don’t talk about weed, don’t talk about hemp or joints. We say: it’s a medicine. And then they go and say ‘cannabis, so medical cannabis’” (CSC1-D2).

The social aspects of the CSC were also appreciated by some medical members, who valued being able to sit together and talk with other CSC members. This was described as an opportunity to share their own experiences with cannabis and learn from each other, as in the following quotation:

“We go there in the afternoon and you talk to everyone. And everyone says: ‘I use it for this, I use it for that... for me that ‘paste’ helps, for me this helps’. And you stay there the entire afternoon and people talk about other things than cannabis, also about herbs and salves. That’s just fun” (Interview 42).

Nevertheless, only one of the CSCs participating in our study had, at the time of the interview, dedicated premises open to members, so the possibility of informal socialising at the CSCs remains limited.

4. Discussion

In our analysis, we have sought to provide detailed information on how Belgian CSCs are currently supplying cannabis to medical users. We have focused on five key dimensions (i.e. accommodation, accessibility, availability, affordability, and acceptability) identified as relevant in considering the provision of cannabis for medical purposes (Belle-Isle et al., 2014). While this framework has been used in other research to evaluate the access to health care, we used it to identify the practices of CSCs with regards to the supply of cannabis for medical use, an area which has not been studied before. Although previous studies mobilizing this framework mainly used quantitative methods as evaluation tools, we relied here primarily on qualitative data, which was complemented with the results of an online survey among members. These data sources allowed us to offer rich new insights, considering both CSCs’ practices and members’ perceptions. At the same time, in using a pre-structured framework, we should note that there might be dimensions we did not thoroughly study and which may also be important in the context of CSCs. For instance, the social aspect of CSCs, typically associated with the model and considered important in health care more generally, was underexposed as we did not explore in-depth the extent and nature of social activities developed by these associations (nor the level of members’ participation in those).

A number of important commonalities and differences concerning the way supply is organized and perceived by members, former members, and a small group of other medical users (not affiliated with a CSC) emerged from our data. Firstly, we should note that medical users have been formally integrated in Belgian CSCs under three different schemes, ranging from a mixed CSC where no formal distinction is made between recreational and medical members, to a CSC featuring a separate and somewhat independent sub-unit to serve the medical members enrolled in that association, to a CSC admitting medical members only. Although we refer to a CSC model (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017), this diversity is illustrative of the continuing self-regulatory innovation and experimentation of those active in the field, and suggests that multiple variants of a CSC model may be in place (and evolving).

In terms of how the CSCs have accommodated medical users' needs, members voiced concerns about potential or ongoing police investigations, and their repercussions for the normal functioning of the associations and their ability to obtain cannabis through the clubs, as well as to being identified and drawn into these investigations. As noted at the outset of the article and elsewhere (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2016a), the Belgian CSCs are in a particularly vulnerable position from a legal point of view. The development of the model in the country has indeed been volatile, with some of the CSCs ceasing their activities as a result of or fear of legal consequences. What is more, none of the CSCs (regardless of the formal structure adopted) employs a physician, and cooperation between CSCs and health professionals is generally limited. Only the CSC featuring a medical subdivision collaborated with a volunteer nurse. Although this lack of medical expertise within the CSCs is a point for improvement, especially seeing that the use of cannabis by the members might also lack supervision by their own physicians, it should be noted that the CSC representatives reported making efforts to develop a closer relationship with health professionals – but were met with resistance. Other studies have also shown that the use of cannabis for medical reasons has not (yet) been fully accepted by health professionals – which might (at least partially) explain this reluctance to engage with the CSCs (Charuvastra, Friedmann, & Stein, 2005; Fitzcharles et al., 2014; Kondrad & Reid, 2013). In any case, members reported learning about cannabis and its effects from CSCs' staff and other members. This peer-to-peer educative function played by the CSCs had also been noted in a previous study assessing the potential for harm reduction of CSCs in Spain (Belackova et al., 2016). The medical CSC and sub-division seemed to offer more regular and focused follow up to medical members.

With regards to CSCs' accessibility, entry into an exclusively medical CSC or into a CSC's dedicated medical unit follows more stringent requirements than those applied by mixed CSCs, in that candidate members are typically asked to present a medical prescription or doctor's note, in addition to being Belgian nationals or residents, extant users, and at least eighteen years old. In exceptional cases, candidates not meeting those requirements (i.e. those without a prescription or 'novice' cannabis users) have also been admitted to the CSCs. Given the knowledge gap about medical cannabis and the apparent lack of collaboration with health

professionals, it appears that CSC staff have sought to develop their own expertise. This finding is consistent with practices of dispensaries (operating in a grey zone) in Canada, which also conduct their own research and accept anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies of the therapeutic benefits of cannabis as credible evidence for its efficacy (Penn, 2014). In practice, and despite the fact that the CSCs might exceptionally admit candidates not fully meeting these requirements, admission into a CSC might prove burdensome for some candidate members. Since the use of cannabis for medical purposes is not formally recognized in Belgium and there is no comprehensive legal framework for its supply (beyond the limited cases where Sativex® might be a legal option), it is likely that physicians will oppose patients' requests for prescriptions for cannabis use. At the same time, requiring a medical authorization ensures that a physician is informed about the use of cannabis by his or her patient and this might be an incentive for further monitoring.

The CSCs are spread throughout Belgium, but because they are limited in number, CSC members might have to travel considerable distances to obtain cannabis. Two different methods of distribution have been adopted by the Belgian CSCs: exchange fairs and individual distribution. Direct individual distribution, a practice adopted also by some mixed CSCs, might be more convenient for patients. Indeed, for ill people, traveling to the distribution point for an exchange fair might pose a barrier to obtaining cannabis from a CSC. At the same time, the exchange fairs are social gatherings which can also be beneficial for the wellbeing of members. Isolation and loneliness are often associated with chronic diseases and social interaction might promote health (Grinspoon, 1999; Lubkin & Larsen, 2006).

All the CSCs take measures to ensure the quality of the cannabis they produce and reported adhering to organic cultivation practices – an aspect confirmed also by Belgian CSC growers (Pardal, 2018b) and in previous research into Belgian CSC practices (Decorte, 2015). However, due to the challenging domestic legal framework, the lack of official standards and guidelines on the production of cannabis, and the associated costs, regular laboratory testing and standardization processes are lacking in all CSCs, resulting in likely variation in terms of quality, potency, and the types of products delivered to the medical members. This issue has also been noted as a general current weakness of the CSC model, based on practices identified in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay (Decorte et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the members were satisfied with the cannabis received, and believed it was not contaminated with harmful substances, in contrast with the cannabis obtained through other suppliers. There was significant variation in terms of the quantities distributed and the frequency of distribution among the Belgian CSCs, but we found also some indications of greater flexibility in accommodating medical members' needs (e.g. more frequent supply in comparison to non-medical members) – in line with what had been suggested in previous research (Decorte et al., 2017). All CSCs in Belgium provide herbal cannabis, and the members are able to choose between different cannabis strains, which vary over time. Overall, the variety in strains was valued positively by the members. Some of the clubs might also offer other cannabis-based products including oil, cookies, and butter.

Affordability of cannabis products obtained through Belgian CSCs was positively appreciated by the medical members. The price per gram at the CSCs is generally lower than from other illegal sources of supply in Belgium (Druglijn, 2017; EMCDDA, 2017a; Plettinckx et al., 2014). Prices of cannabis strains vary from 4.5 to 9 EUR, with the medical CSC and the CSC with a medical subdivision providing cannabis at the lowest price. The cannabis products sold by CSCs are nevertheless not reimbursed by health insurers. In addition, membership costs are around 25EUR per year. Two exceptions are the medical CSC which recently raised the fee (to 125EUR per year) and one other mixed CSC (40EUR per year). While we found no evidence of CSCs adopting a blatantly commercial orientation, reports of CSC activity in other settings, namely Spain, have noted that some CSCs have moved away from the initial non-profit ethos guiding the associations (Decorte et al., 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015). Such changes, especially if associated with increases in price and/or decreases in the quality of the cannabis supplied, could pose additional burdens to those using cannabis for medical reasons in particular.

Despite the reported concerns about police interventions affecting the CSCs, some medical members we interviewed seem to perceive the CSC as the ‘most legal’ cannabis supplier available. The social contact among members was also highlighted as a positive aspect of the associations. As noted by Belackova et al. (2016), “criminal risks and stigma are reduced as cannabis users enter the environment of the social club” (p. 55). Nevertheless, the Belgian CSCs still face a considerable degree of legal uncertainty and resistance from important stakeholders, such as professionals from the health sector, and have also suggested that even among CSC members a perception of cannabis as a stigmatized substance might in some cases still prevail (in line with findings from Bottorff et al. (2013)). This is a view that CSC representatives attempt to change by reframing cannabis as a medicine (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013).

5. Conclusion

This paper provides a first analysis of how the supply of cannabis for medical purposes is organized by CSCs in Belgium. As the legal supply of cannabis in Belgium is limited to Sativex® for a restricted group of patients, the CSCs might represent an alternative option to ensure access to cannabis, and thus it is of interest to learn more about how CSCs accommodate medical users’ needs. While we noted some diversity in terms of how medical users are served by the CSCs (in a medical-only CSC or unit or in mixed CSCs), there are clear barriers affecting the model in general. The lack of collaboration with the health and medical sector, the instability of the model, and the limited quality control practices applied are examples of such limitations. At the same time, the CSCs – particularly those with specialized medical units – seemed to have made efforts to accommodate medical members’ needs, in terms of accessibility, availability, and affordability. Beyond the structural differences among CSCs (medical CSC versus mixed CSCs/CSC units), a diverse range of practices concerning the supply of cannabis for medical use emerge. This suggests that multiple variants of a CSC model have emerged and co-exist, rather than one version of the model only. It is important to keep in mind

that those differences usually entail significant implications for the way members, and particularly the medical users among them, are supplied by the CSCs.

Our analysis revealed a number of common issues affecting the CSC model, which are relevant to the supply of cannabis for medical use. In addition, multiple CSCs have no formal structural arrangements specific to medical users. Such shortcomings raise questions regarding whether CSCs are suitable suppliers of cannabis for medical use – although some have developed arrangements to better accommodate their medical members. At the same time, due to the limited supply options in Belgium, currently restricted to the prescribed supply of Sativex® to a small group of patients, the CSC model might be perceived as an alternative and perhaps less harmful solution for medical users of cannabis compared to other illegal sources of supply. Certainly, medical members' views highlighted several advantages of belonging to CSCs and a general appreciation of CSCs' supply practices.

Furthermore, there are other aspects of the CSCs not included in this study which are important to better understand the CSCs' role as suppliers of cannabis for medical use. For instance, the assessment of the quality of the cannabis products CSC members receive is based on their self-perception only. However, access to a quality product is especially crucial for people with poor health. Further studies analysing the types of products offered by CSCs would be of added value and are recommended. In addition, this study focusses on the needs of medical cannabis users with reference to one model of supply of cannabis for medical use: CSCs. Additional research examining the needs of medical cannabis users regarding access to cannabis more generally could provide complementary insights into users' preferences and experiences of different supply models.

Chapter 10: The leadership of Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium

This chapter has been submitted for publication at *Tijdschrift over Cultuur en Criminaliteit*.

It is currently under review.

Abstract

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are here conceptualized as social movement organizations advocating for the legalization of a closed, cooperative and non-profit model for cannabis supply among adult users. Drawing on qualitative data collected in Belgium, this paper analyses how one becomes a leader of a CSC as well as the functional role assumed by those individuals. It further unveils how Belgian CSC leaders' engagement in those organizations and in the wider cannabis movement is perceived. We identify and discuss the techniques employed by those key activists to manage cannabis-related stigma drawing on a framework developed by Lindblom and Jacobsson's (2014). We found that although the Belgian CSCs are led by a small team of activists, they are primarily driven by the key (insider) activists in the formal top leadership position of the organizations who assume several different functions within the CSCs and the broader cannabis movement. While CSCs might contribute to normalizing cannabis use and supply, our analysis suggests that CSC leaders face some degree of stigmatization, shifting between conformist and confrontational techniques to manage the perceived cannabis-related stigma. Building on the case of Belgian CSC leaders, this paper makes a contribution to the understanding of an under-researched movement, and the role of the leaders within it, expanding also the application of Lindblom and Jacobsson's (2014) framework to a novel area of activism.

Keywords: Cannabis; Cannabis Social Club; leadership; cannabis movement; stigma; qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs or Clubs) constitute a user-driven, cooperative and non-profit model of cannabis supply, which first emerged as a result of grassroots initiatives in Spain (Barriuso, 2011; Martínez, 2015; Pardal, 2016b), and which now can be found in many other countries. CSCs have been present in Belgium since 2006, typically operating as formally registered non-profit associations of adult cannabis users, which collectively ensure the production and distribution of cannabis among their members (for personal use) (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2016b). While the supply of cannabis is at the core of CSCs' goals and activities, these organizations aim also to be "*a response to the legal insecurity and other problems faced by cannabis consumers*", and advocate for the legalization and regulation of the supply model they have developed (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). Nevertheless, to date, only Uruguay has introduced legislation recognizing and regulating the functioning of CSCs (Pardo, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016). Most CSCs elsewhere, including in Belgium,¹¹⁵ thus remain operating at the margins (and often challenging) the applicable domestic legislation (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; EMCDDA, 2017b; Kilmer et al., 2013b), and actively promote legal reform (Hunt et al., 2010; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Montañés & Oomen, 2009).

To our knowledge, the particular role of activists formally leading CSCs has not been studied to date. This paper is a contribution to filling that research gap, at the same time strengthening the scarce body of literature on CSCs and the wider cannabis movement which they integrate. The goals of this paper are two-fold: firstly, we aim to examine the leadership structure of Belgian CSCs and the functions performed by their leaders; secondly, we seek to explore how the Belgian CSC leaders perceive their role and manage external perceptions associated with their participation in these organizations (and in the wider movement). In the next paragraphs we review some of the relevant literature on which we build to frame and analyse these issues.

CSCs and the cannabis movement

Social movements can be observed with the emergence of a conflictual collective action, in which individual and organized actors pursue or oppose social change through different actions or initiatives, developing a sense of common purpose, connectedness and collective identity (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Diani, 2004; Marín et al., 2015; Staggenborg & Klandermans, 2002). Earlier studies of CSCs in Spain maintain that these initiatives can be understood as part of a broader "*cannabis movement*" which opposes current prohibitionist cannabis laws, and ultimately seeks to lead to a legislative change concerning the supply of that substance, while contributing to the normalization of cannabis use (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Martínez, 2015; Montañés, 2017; Val, 2017). Marín and colleagues

¹¹⁵ In Belgium, the cultivation and distribution of cannabis remain prohibited, although a 2005 Ministerial Guideline has attributed the lowest priority for prosecution to cases involving the possession of 3 grams of cannabis or of one plant, in the absence of aggravating circumstances or public disturbance (Pardal, 2016b).

(2008, 2009; 2017) have extensively documented the different phases and actors of this movement within the Spanish context. The authors situated the emergence of the cannabis movement in that country during the 1990s, and emphasized the role played by CSCs as “*central actors of the movement*” (p. 454, own translation). The CSCs have thus been conceptualized as social movement organizations (SMOs), i.e. as organized groups whose mission and goals are aligned (at least to some extent) with the broader cause at stake (in line with McCarthy and Zald (1977)). In particular, it was noted that these associations have ensured the continuity of the movement claims through time and have implemented a diverse repertoire of action (engaging in both conventional as well as novel means of protest, such as the collective cultivation of cannabis – see for instance: Alvarez et al. (2016)), and fostered the movement’s collective identity. Also in Uruguay, previous research has explored the development of a “*marijuana legalization social movement*” which preceded and contributed to the passage of new cannabis legislation (recognizing also CSCs) in the country (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Arocena & Aguiar, 2017; Garat, 2016; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012).

Social movement leadership

While leaders play a role in the emergence, development and outcomes of a social movement, empirical research in the field of social movement leadership remains somewhat limited, despite increased interest in recent decades (Klandermans, 1997; Valls, Aubert, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2017). What is more, some of that literature has primarily focused on the personal traits of movement leaders, drawing on Weber’s notion of charisma or building typologies classifying leaders in accordance to individual characteristics (Bligh & Robinson, 2010; Klandermans, 1997; Roche & Sachs, 1955; Weber, 1947). In a review of the literature on and approaches to the study of social movement leadership, Morris and Staggenborg (2004) proposed the following definition of movement leaders, which informs also our analysis: leaders are “strategic decision-makers who inspire and organize others to participate in social movements” (p. 171). While we are aware that such leadership can be exerted even when leaders do not hold a titled position (Robnett, 1996; Sacks, 1988), we focus particularly on formal leadership, although acknowledging different leadership roles or tiers. In fact, as Ganz (2004, p. 187) noted, leadership can be shared among teams “*who formally or informally participate in making authoritative strategic choices for an organization or units of an organization*”. Different leadership tiers can thus be observed within SMOs: 1) leaders who take the formal leadership positions of SMOs; 2) leaders who are part of the immediate leadership team, in secondary formal positions within SMOs; 3) ‘bridge leaders’, i.e. mediators between the top leadership and the larger group of movement participants (Robnett, 1996); and 4) other organizers, who regularly participate and assist in leadership activities (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Previous research has also suggested that leadership teams (rather than individual leaders), and diverse leadership teams in particular, including ‘insiders’ as well as ‘outsiders’ to the movement, might be able to devise more effective strategies and reach more successful outcomes for the movement, as these individuals have ties to and knowledge of both the immediate constituency

of the movement as well as of other stakeholders and can put forward a more diverse repertoire of action (Ganz, 2004, 2010; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004).

Movement leaders typically take on a variety of roles and tasks. Leaders are often the initiative-takers in setting up movement organizations, defining their goal and structure (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). They serve also a crucial function in devising the strategy of the organization and developing its public narrative and collective identity (Couto, 1993; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Moreover, leaders are usually responsible for building relationships among both individuals and other organizations relevant to the claims of the movement, but also are key forces in mobilizing participation and action within the movement constituency (Ganz, 2010). Gusfield (1966) pointed out that these different functions can be at odds, as leaders must ensure mobilization to the movement by inspiring the commitment of its participants, while at the same time articulating, framing, and negotiating its messages and demands externally.

On normalization and stigma

Social movements often contribute to what Shakespeare (1993) termed the ‘subversion of stigma’ (i.e., *“taking a negative appellation and converting it into a badge of pride”*, p. 253). As noted above, CSCs (like other drug user organizations) hope also to contribute to a positive change in the perception of drug use and drug users (Anker et al., 2008; Kerr et al., 2006; Martínez, 2015; Pardal, 2016b). Although not a new concept (Blackman, 2010; Sznitman, 2007), during the 1990s Parker and colleagues (Measham, Parker, & Aldridge, 1998; Parker et al., 2002) developed the drug normalization thesis, arguing that drug use has become a mainstream, ‘normalized’ aspect of leisure time (based on qualitative and quantitative UK data) as a result of six factors, namely drug access and availability, youth drug-trying rates, drug usage rates, attitudes towards (‘sensible’ recreational) drug use, and cultural accommodation of illegal drug use, as well as more favourable drug enforcement or policy. While the normalization thesis has been extensively applied in the study of drug use - Sznitman and Taubman (2016) offer, for instance, a comprehensive and critical overview of such research, normalization as formulated by Parker et al. (2002) is primarily a macro-social process, not focused on the potential micro-politics adopted by drug users to challenge stigmatization (Pennay & Moore, 2010; Sznitman, 2007). Other scholars have also noted that despite indications of a normalizing process concerning, for instance, cannabis, there is at the same time evidence of internalization of stigma by users (Hathaway, Comeau, & Erickson, 2011; Sandberg, 2012).

What is more, beyond possible stigmatized views in relation to use, in pursuing social change, activists might also be perceived by others as transgressors, ‘outsiders’, or deviants (Becker, 1963; Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014). Lindblom and Jacobsson (2014) argued that the consideration of activists’ role and behaviour is often ambiguous, and described activists as ‘entrepreneurial deviants’ – drawing on Becker’s (1963) concepts of moral entrepreneur and of deviance. Accordingly, as the moral entrepreneur, the activist is *“strongly committed to the*

activity of creating and establishing new norms in society” (Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014, p. 136). At the same time, the activist often lacks social or institutional support and *“like other deviants, continually breaches social norms and may be seen by mainstream society as a public nuisance and a menace to society”* (p. 136). Activists’ efforts may thus carry some degree of stigmatization. Lindblom and Jacobsson (2014) put forward a framework incorporating the different strategies deployed by animal rights activists to manage the stereotypes and deviant image attached to them. The authors argued that the process of management of deviance should be understood as being dialectical, with activists moving between: 1) concealing some of the behaviours or thoughts considered deviant vs. confronting by arguing for their cause (Goffman, 1963); 2) employing techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957)¹¹⁶ vs. employing techniques of idealization, i.e. building a positive counter-stereotype of commitment to a moral ideal; 3) engaging and developing a ‘sub-culture’ within the activist group (Becker, 1963).¹¹⁷ In our analysis, we draw on this framework to understand whether and how Belgian CSC leaders have managed stigmatized perceptions of their role. In this regard, it should be noted that while previous qualitative research in the field of cannabis has revealed instances of internalization of stigma and responses thereto by cannabis users (Hathaway et al., 2011; Sandberg, 2012), we are not aware of prior research exploring potential stigmatization associated with the role of cannabis activists (or of CSC leaders in particular) – which encompasses but goes beyond a consideration of perceptions of cannabis use only.

2. Methods

For the analysis presented here we rely on qualitative data collected in the context of an ongoing study into Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium. More specifically, we draw on face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted with 21¹¹⁸ members of the board of directors of the seven active Belgian CSCs participating in the study.¹¹⁹ The CSCs were identified on the basis of an earlier mapping exercise by Decorte (2015), which we extended through additional fieldwork and snowballing. The questionnaire used in the interviews built on the lists of questions used in previous research into CSCs in Belgium and Uruguay, in which the authors interviewed also the individuals running or managing CSCs in those contexts (Decorte, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2016). It included questions concerning the foundation and general set-up of the organizations; admission; house-rules; decision-making and internal structure; financial aspects; cultivation and distribution practices; quality control; relationships with other

¹¹⁶ Sykes and Matza (1957) explicated five techniques of neutralization: the denial of responsibility, the denial of injury, the denial of the victim, the condemnation of the condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties.

¹¹⁷ Although we recognize the importance of exploring the interaction between leaders and other activists participating in the movement (Barker 2001, Morris and Staggenborg 2004), in this paper we focus only on the activists exercising a leadership position and thus group-level dynamics and strategies (including the third level of management strategies introduced by Lindblom and Jacobsson (2014) are not considered here.

¹¹⁸ Including heads of CSC subdivisions (n=4), and one former director of the currently active CSCs.

¹¹⁹ We are aware that the number of active CSCs and/or the activities performed by some might have changed since the time of the interviews, given the volatility of the landscape in Belgium (Pardal, in press).

stakeholders; and views on the CSC model and cannabis policy more broadly. The interviews took place between February 2016 and January 2017,¹²⁰ were conducted in English or French, recorded, and transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. This data was analysed using the NVivo 11 software package.

Another data-source mobilized for this analysis concerns the key internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs, particularly the organizations' bylaws, which contain information regarding the decision-making structure and competences of the different organs of the organization. We have also collected 164 domestic news articles (from 12 key Belgian print media outlets) reporting on CSCs between January 2006 and June 2016, which were the basis of an analysis of the media framing of and by CSCs in Belgium (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). For this paper, we considered particularly the public interventions made by the key activists leading the CSCs included in that dataset. As noted in previous research "leaders, in this function as representatives (or articulators) appear before the public as the champions of their movements on radio, press, and television" (p. 141), and thus including their public remarks in the print media offered additional relevant insights into the issues studied here.

3. Results

Becoming (and remaining) CSC leaders

The Belgian CSCs are, in most cases, formally registered non-profit associations (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017). In order to complete that registration, at least three directors must be named (FOD Justitie, 2016). As such, the founding members of the associations usually become their formal leaders. One of these directors typically assumes the presidency of the association (Decorte et al., 2017), corresponding to the top leadership tier according to the classification proposed by Morris and Staggenborg (2004). The secondary leadership positions are often occupied by close friends, partners or family of the lead founding member and president of the organization – this was the case among five of the Belgian CSCs.¹²¹ For instance, a CSC president told us: *"we started with the minimum, so it's me and my girlfriend and another friend"* (CSC7-D16). Similarly, one other CSC top leader pointed out that *"the Club was actually only me, but they signed the papers, she [the interviewee's wife] and my brother"* (CSC1-D1). A reason brought forward by our interviewees to explain the involvement of family members or friends relates to some resistance to trust others outside of that more closed circle in such an endeavour, as they might, in their view, pursue activities which would go against the working principles they defend for the CSC (such as for instance, the non-profit ethos of the

¹²⁰ Each CSC received a random identifier (CSC1-CSC7), which we use to refer to different sources of data concerning each CSC (for instance, CSC's bylaws, and other internal documents). When citing data from the interviews with the CSCs' Board of Directors we add a -D suffix per respondent.

¹²¹ One other CSC had been founded also by two friends of the lead founder, but these have since then stopped their engagement with the club. The remaining CSC constitutes an exception as the board of directors has not been formed based on family or friendship ties.

associations), and which might increase the risk of police interception. One of the CSC presidents explained it as follows:

“I was looking for people to found the club, my board of directors. I had meetings with a lot of people but I had my doubts about most of those people, because I don’t really know their intentions or their background, their history, their criminal record. And at that point I decided that the best situation for me personally would be if my mother and my girlfriend [were a part of it]” (CSC2-D3).

The interviewee further noted that by inviting his family into the management of the CSC: *“I am sure we are not in it for the money, no strange things happened in the past, nobody is dealing or doing things on the side” (CSC2-D3).* Having additional backing for decisions concerning the goals and activities of the Club was also another factor discussed, as the following quote illustrates: *“that’s why I invited my wife into the board of directors, because she supports me” (CSC5-D14).*

The duration of the leadership mandate is in most cases defined in the organizations’ bylaws, and varies from a 1-year term to a mandate for *“indefinite duration”*. While the oldest CSC (established in 2006) has reported holding elections in the past, in the case of two other CSCs the (original) mandate term has not yet expired. The other four CSCs have not held elections so far. As such, in practice, most of the original founders of the Belgian CSCs still play a leadership role within the organizations.¹²² In addition, one of the CSCs has also developed a more complex organizational structure, setting up (four) somewhat independent regional chapters and a specialized subdivision (for the supply of cannabis to medical users only), which are managed by CSC members (who spurred the creation of the unit). Those responsible for these sub-divisions can thus be seen as more informal ‘bridge leaders’ in the sense that they mediate between the (formal) leadership of the primary associations and the members of the regional/specialist branches (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004; Robnett, 1996).¹²³ The different leadership functions fulfilled by these activists are usually carried out on a volunteer basis, and are not remunerated. Only one CSC reported allocating a remuneration to two of its directors, although that was not the case at the outset of the initiative.

The Belgian CSCs’ top leaders had different experiences within the broader cannabis movement prior to establishing a CSC. The president of the first CSC had for instance integrated other local and international drug user organizations in the past, through which he gained knowledge of the CSC model (which had emerged in Spain):

“When the guideline [i.e., the 2005 Ministerial Guideline] came out and through ENCOD [i.e., the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies] I had a lot of contacts in Spain and saw how this model was gaining ground” (CSC3-D6).

¹²² Among these, the longest-running CSC leader has, at the time of writing, been in place for about 4 years.

¹²³ These subunits remain formally part of the primary CSC (and follow that Club’s bylaws, house-rules, etc.), but its day-to-day running is ensured by its own division director.

Three other top leaders of Belgian CSCs were first members of the first Belgian CSC and later on moved on to set up separate CSCs, as one of them told us:

“So I contacted [Director CSC3] and became a member of CSC3. I immediately, I was really... the model really inspired me and I really had in mind ‘oh I want to do something similar’” (CSC2-D3).

The other current CSC top leaders had no direct experience within a CSC before, but were aware and somewhat inspired by the earlier initiatives, and had also been involved in the movement as individual cannabis users and/or growers.

The role played by CSC leaders

The CSC top leaders have been, as discussed above, the main initiative-takers in setting up the CSCs. Together with the remaining members of the board of directors (secondary leaders) and the managers of CSC subdivisions (bridge leaders), they are formally accountable for the associations, and responsible for their daily running. As such, those in a leadership position (top, secondary or as bridge leaders) are involved in several aspects of the functioning of the CSCs, in most cases, on a volunteer basis (only two directors of one CSC were receiving a financial compensation for their leadership role at the time of the interview). No clear task division among the individuals in a leadership position emerged from the interviews nor from the CSCs’ bylaws (except for a brief reference in some of those internal documents to the functions of treasurer and secretary), although in some cases the interviewees made remarks about the predominant role played by the top leadership of the CSC: *“The [name of the CSC president] does all the work” (CSC2-D4).*

The competences and tasks assigned to the board of directors of the CSCs are only listed in two CSCs’ bylaws. In those cases, the board of directors is expected to prepare and implement the policy of the association (as approved by the members’ general assembly), to present an annual report on the progress of the CSC activities to the members, as well as to keep the association’s financial accounting. Finally, the board of directors is also assigned the task of facilitating the cooperation among members working in the different activities of the associations. Beyond those, keeping in touch with the members of the association was also discussed during the interviews as another duty of the leaders. In practice, most Belgian CSCs do not have their own premises, and thus the associations are often based at the personal address of one of the leaders. What is more, the CSC leaders are also directly involved in the CSCs’ supply activities, for instance by growing cannabis for the respective club or unit. In the case of three CSCs, the production of cannabis was in fact exclusively ensured by the respective presidents of those associations (Pardal, 2018b). The CSC leaders are generally also the key spokesperson for their CSC. As concluded in a previous analysis, the Belgian CSCs have sought to engage with the domestic (print) media, and the CSC directors (as well as their legal representatives) have been key sources for the media reporting on the topic (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). In addition, they

have also (re)presented the CSCs in other public events. Given the extent of the involvement CSC leaders have in a range of aspects of the functioning of the club and the domestic cannabis legal framework – which prohibits the cultivation and distribution of cannabis - they have also often faced criminal charges for activities related to the CSCs (Pardal 2016a).

Criminals, activists, model citizens?

The CSC leaders discussed their role and how it was perceived by others in different moments during the interviews, as well as in several media interventions. As noted elsewhere (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), the (print) media portrayal of CSCs in Belgium has predominantly featured law enforcement or criminal justice matters affecting those associations. Even if such coverage is to some extent reflective of the vulnerable legal position of CSCs in the country, it translated into somewhat ‘involuntary’ coverage for the organizations, and arguably also for the key activists involved in those processes or cases (usually the CSC leaders, or other cannabis growers affiliated with a CSC). More generally, CSC leaders noted that cannabis (activism, and use more generally) was often negatively perceived, as the following illustrates: *“So many people feel like a criminal. [...] So many people are labelled”* (CSC2-D3). The deviant status this interviewee alluded to was at times discussed almost in a technical way, in relation to the legal context or the outcome of legal cases involving CSC representatives. For instance, one of the CSC leaders weighed whether or not his/her efforts should be understood as criminal behaviour as follows: *“For the moment it’s an illegal activity, so actually I am a criminal right now”* (CSC1-D1). At the same time, a court decision seen as favourable to the CSC at stake was interpreted by one of the CSC leaders concerned as a dismissal of the ‘criminal status’ pending upon the CSC activists: *“In any case, we are now stronger than before the court ruling: we are not criminals”* (Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, 4 May 2007). In another court case, a CSC director alluded to the issue as follows: *“The public prosecutor is trying to make criminals of us. We are not criminals, we worked hard to stand where we are now”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 20 November 2015). While the issue of ‘being a criminal’ was, at least in part, discussed as being circumstantial and associated with interpretations of the domestic legal framework, that perception did encompass considerations of another nature as well. As the following quote illustrates, being perceived as criminal was also associated with moral or other value assessments: *“they look at me like I am a bastard child if I speak about cannabis somewhere sometimes at the wrong place with the wrong people... they look at you like ‘eh, this is a criminal’”* (CSC5-D14).

Managing stigmatization

As some of the above remarks suggest, the deviant or ‘criminal’ portrayal was often raised but generally rejected by the CSC leaders, as one director (mockingly) explained: *“I know in my heart that I am not a criminal. You can see my profile and think ‘oh he is a criminal’, but in my heart I am a Smurf”* (CSC5-D14). The CSC leaders reacted to and managed these negative

(external) perceptions in different ways. For instance, a manager of a CSC branch talked about hiding his/her involvement in a CSC for fear of losing his/her job:

“I work for [an organization affiliated with the Belgian centre-right political party CD&V], so you have to follow, you have this contract, their values, and I am sure that smoking cannabis or all this CSC activity is not among their values. If they would know, I think maybe I could lose my job” (CSC3-D19).

However, this seemed to be an exception as most CSC leaders have in fact been quite vocal in acknowledging their support of and engagement with the model, by for instance being interviewed by reporters, and publicly advocating for the model at other events (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017).

CSC leaders have also argued that the CSC claims and working should not be seen as negative or harmful endeavours and thus sought to downplay the deviance image, for instance by noting: *“we do nothing wrong”* (Flemish newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg*, 20 December 2013). Contrasting the CSC working with that of dealers operating in the illegal market was also a strategy employed at times by CSC leaders to curtail stigmatization:

“We are really convinced that this is a good initiative. Now the cultivation and distribution of cannabis is in the hands of criminals. We want to remove cannabis from the criminal sector” (Flemish newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws, 14 April 2006).

This argument was mobilized with reference to different aspects that, in CSC leaders' view, distinguished the CSC supply model advocated by these activists from other illegal market operators, placing the negative label onto the latter suppliers. For instance, CSC leaders often emphasized the non-profit ethos they adhered to: *“we want to be social and we don't want to make a lot of money like dealers”* (CSC3-D21); or highlighted their concern with cannabis quality and purity:

“We offer an alternative to the criminal sector. The commercial stuff is often cut with glass particles, hairspray, and other unhealthy products. For us, public health must be a priority” (Flemish magazine Knack, 4 April 2012).

Another technique identified in the literature to manage deviant perceptions consists of discussing and minimizing the risks associated with cannabis itself, often by comparison to other substances (Becker, 1963; Goode, 1970; Peretti-Watel, 2003; Sandberg, 2012). We found a few examples of such risk minimization discourse, as the following remark illustrates: *“You can never die of cannabis, never ever. If somebody dies because of the use of cannabis it's like if you eat too many tomatoes – I think you can explode”* (CSC5-D14). Also the gateway hypothesis (see for instance: Kandel, 2002) was challenged: *“people also think that when you smoke your first cannabis joint, afterwards you are going to go to cocaine or I don't know what. [...] But that's not true”* (CSC2-D4). At the same time, CSC leaders did also recognize some harm associated with the use of cannabis: *“we don't want to fall into a situation like alcohol or*

tobacco, you know. It's better not to smoke cannabis just as it's better not to drink beer or smoke tobacco, you know" (CSC2-D3).

In terms of self-perception, the CSC leaders often described themselves as *"self-made man"* (CSC1-D1), *"pioneering something [...] nobody has done before"* (CSC2-D3). They talked about doing *"visionary"* work, supporting a user-driven model for the supply of cannabis (among adult users). Some of the CSC leaders actually attempted to reinterpret the external negative perception as a more positive image, for instance by describing themselves as *"model citizens"* as the following quote illustrates:

"I am really, really passionate about the plant and the point I have to make, and I am truly convinced that I am not a criminal, and in a way I am a model citizen, only I am not labelled in that way, but I try to behave, to lead by example, and I try to behave responsibly in society, in every possible way" (CSC2-D3).

The Belgian CSC leaders generally accentuated their activist role, in refutation of other negative perceptions: *"me, I'm an activist"* (CSC3-D18), and discussed their engagement in the movement in terms of directly contributing to a cause they believe in: *"I wanted to do something, where I could be the person responsible, for something that I stand for... that's something I wanted to do in my life"* (CSC5-D14). One other interviewee told us that:

"In my view, they should legalize [cannabis] so I needed to do something. Everybody says they want to change it [cannabis legislation], but it is the action that really changes it. So that was a first step for me." (CSC3-D19).

A number of CSC leaders admitted also being ready to make personal sacrifices in the pursuit of the CSCs' goals, as illustrated by the following remark: *"to risk a bit of freedom is okay for me. If they put me in jail, it won't be a nice time, but it's part of life, it's also an experience, and if it's for the good cause then I am willing to go there"* (CSC3-D20). Reflecting on this issue, another CSC leader similarly told us: *"I am nuts, because I am so emotionally involved. I don't have children, I am very well willing to sacrifice my life for the point I want to make"* (CSC2-D3). As these quotes illustrate, the CSC leaders sought also to counter external negative perceptions with the idea of leading a change they thought desirable and in agreement with their moral values/beliefs, even if it means bearing personal costs.

4. Discussion

Belgian CSC leadership is formally defined in the by-laws of the associations, and is the result of the self-regulatory efforts of the activists involved in the movement (Decorte et al. 2017). Each CSC is headed by a board of directors, and thus a leadership team with at least two leadership tiers is at play (similarly to what has been found in relation to other social movements, see for instance a study of the environment movement by Tranter (2009)). Nevertheless, and although task division was often blurred, the top leadership typically took a

more predominant role within the associations. This top leader is an ‘insider leader’ as he/she is part of the challenging group – all top CSC leaders have, as we have seen, been involved in the cannabis movement in different capacities before forming a CSC (e.g. as cannabis cultivators, users, or by participating in other CSCs or other drug user organizations). Morris and Staggenborg (2004) noted that although the ‘insider leader’ enjoys legitimacy among the broader membership and is usually insightful of the challenges and issues affecting the movement, a mixed leadership “*comprised of both insiders and outsiders have the greatest chances of success*” (p. 189). Only one CSC presented a more complex leadership and organizational structure, including also sub-divisions or regional chapters which were driven by ‘bridge leaders’ (Robnett, 1996). CSC leaders’ (mostly voluntary) workload encompassed a multitude of tasks, and crossed different areas: both in terms of contributing to the internal ‘services’ of the Club, by cultivating cannabis, basing the CSC at its own personal address, generally managing the daily-functioning of the organizations, and designing the CSC strategy; but also linking the internal workings of the CSC with the general audience and the relevant stakeholders, by informing and advocating via the media, the associations’ social media platforms, as well as by participating in other public events (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017; Tieberghien & Pardal, in preparation). As such, CSC leaders seem to be juggling both the ‘articulator’ and ‘mobilizer’ functional roles (Gusfield, 1966), as well as directly contributing to the day-to-day functioning of the associations.

CSCs’ leadership nonetheless resembled a family/friends affair, seeing as the principal initiative-taker often invited people close to him/her to share the leadership of the association (Decorte 2015). Although this was associated with a perceived need to keep leadership within a trusted small circle of peers, it is also a vulnerability of the movement as, in practice, a significant responsibility and role of the initiative is concentrated in one individual (and a few others close to him/her). Nevertheless, Ganz (2004) suggested that ‘self-elected leaders’ (i.e. those taking the initiative in setting up the undertaking) are more likely to possess the knowledge and motivation to implement effective strategies for those organizations. In addition, the Belgian CSCs are, in most cases, currently still being led by the first generation of activists who started them off – it remains unclear whether and how that role will be shaped in the future (but Marullo (1988) suggested that second generation leadership might be less radical ideologically). Earlier research into Spanish CSCs has also noted that some of the associations struggled with replacing the individuals in the leading positions, suggesting that this could be related to the small size of the associations (Marín, 2008). Montañés (2017) further noted that the over-focus on the leaders of the movement (which the author classified as a “*cult of personality*”) may have weakened the movement. Our research suggests also that the inclusion of close family members or friends, albeit a way to meet the minimum legal requirement to form an association, is another example of the limited diversification and renewal of leading positions within the CSCs. It also raises the question of whether the broader membership base of these associations is willing and/or able to take a more active role within CSCs and the broader

cannabis movement – we did not analyse here the relationship between CSC leadership and rank-and-file membership, but recommend it as an area for future research.

Given the central role played by the CSC leader(s) in the movement in Belgium, we sought also to explore how they perceived their engagement, and how they reacted to and managed the negative, ‘deviant’ connotations they felt were attributed to their efforts in defending and advocating for the CSC model or about the substance itself. The Belgian CSCs’ repertoire of action includes, among other activities, illegal (non-violent) actions as part of the cannabis supply function of the associations, in which the leaders also partake (and advocate for) (Decorte et al. 2017, Decorte 2015). The domestic media has often focused on the criminal justice aspects associated with those, which might have contributed to a more general perception of transgression (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). Although previous studies have noted the potential of CSCs as a “*normalizing alternative*” (Barriuso, 2011; Martínez, 2015; Martínez & Arana, 2015), contributing to reduce the stigmatization of cannabis users (Belackova, Tomkova and Zabransky 2016), our analysis shows that some degree of cannabis-related stigma continues to affect (at least) those involved in leadership roles within Belgian CSCs. Our data resonates with some of the findings from Lindblom and Jacobsson (2014) with regards to a number of the strategies of deviance-management deployed by activists. We found only one instance of ‘passing’ (Goffman, 1963), in which a CSC (bridge) leader admitted concealing the engagement in the movement from his/her employer. In most instances though, CSC leaders have filled a very public and visible role – what could be understood as ‘confronting’ according to Lindblom and Jacobsson’s (2014) framework in that “*activists deal with their deviance by arguing their cause, setting good examples, staging attacks, setting up blockades or carrying out acts of civil disobedience in order to transform social order*” (p. 142). At the same time, there were also instances in which activists seem to have mobilized neutralization techniques (Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Drawing on the risk denial techniques brought forward by Peretti-Watel (2003) as an update to Sykes and Matza (1957), we note that the CSC leaders seem to have engaged in some scapegoating, in particular by imputing the negative label to the ‘real’ criminal dealers. Also Potter (2009) suggested, in an analysis of retail-level drug distribution, that avoiding association with the ‘real’ dealers could be seen as a way to mitigate against the negativity of that label. To some extent, CSC leaders’ discourse sought also to minimize the harmfulness associated with cannabis, although recognizing that the substance is not completely harmless. In other instances, we noted also the attempts of CSC leaders to turn the negative stigma into something positive (Goffman, 1963), by for instance phrasing their engagement in the movement as a sacrifice for a higher cause – adopting an idealization technique to counter the negative label as the “*activist strives to be regarded as a pursuer of moral ideals, and not a social disappointment, in the eyes of others*” (Lindblom & Jacobsson, 2014). By actively challenging the label of deviancy, CSC leaders engage in what can be described as transformational normalization, a form of micro-politics which again “*emphasizes the unfinished processes of drug use normalization*” (Pennay & Moore,

2010; Sznitman & Taubman, 2016), by expressing criticism of current drug laws and focusing on the positive aspects of the model they defend.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper offers new insights into a key group of actors involved in the CSC model in Belgium. CSC leadership in that country rests in the hands of a small group of motivated activists, who take on multiple functions, both internally as externally, with a view to pushing for the introduction of a legal framework (more) supportive of CSCs as a model for the supply of cannabis. The concentration of tasks in often one (to three) key activists in leadership positions and the limited renewal of those positions, suggest limited involvement of other CSC members (an issue that should be further analysed) and may hinder the further development of the activities of the organizations. It also constitutes an important vulnerability to the continuity of the associations, in particular in the current climate of ‘criminalization’ of the model, in which a police intervention or criminal charges against the top leading figure(s) of a CSC could potentially result in a leadership void leading to the closure of some of the associations, and to a weakening of the movement.

Although the presence of the CSC model and its repertoire of action might arguably contribute to some normalization of cannabis use and/or supply (Barriuso, 2011; Belackova et al., 2016; Martínez, 2015), our findings suggest that CSC leaders still face some degree of stigmatization – both in relation to their more visible role as front-runners of the model and the movement, but also in terms of the way cannabis itself is perceived. The paper highlights also the value of taking into account activists’ somewhat ambiguous status in future research, as doing so might help shed light into their experiences of stigmatization and responses thereto – which could otherwise go unnoticed. By employing the deviance management framework developed by Lindblom and Jacobsson (2014) in a relatively under-researched field of activism, we were able to identify the different techniques mobilized by Belgian CSC leaders, which is illustrative of activists’ adaptability in moving between conformist strategies and actively countering or confronting the negative perceptions attributed to them.

Chapter 11: “The difference is in the tomato at the end”: understanding the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs

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Abstract

Background: In Belgium, Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) collectively organize the cultivation and distribution of cannabis for the personal use of their members. With this paper, we sought to improve the understanding of the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within CSCs, shedding light into CSCs’ cultivation process, a crucial aspect of their functioning as cannabis suppliers.

Methods: We draw on data gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the directors of seven currently active Belgian CSCs (n=21) and CSC growers (n=23). This data is complemented by additional fieldwork, as well as a review of CSCs’ internal documents (e.g., bylaws and growing protocols).

Results: The Belgian CSCs rely on single and multiple in-house grower arrangements. Most CSC growers had been cultivating cannabis prior to joining their current CSC, albeit doing so in different contexts (non-commercial and commercial). The CSC growers discussed both ideological and pragmatic motives to operate within a CSC. Cultivation took place indoors and followed organic practices. Despite small-scale (20 plants on average), the grow sites featured specialized equipment. The growers reported receiving a financial compensation to cover production costs.

Conclusion: This paper offers news insights into a particular segment of domestic cannabis cultivation. The Belgian CSCs have tended to decentralize production among small-scale grow sites, at a size comparable to that found in other small-scale cultivation studies. In terms of both motivations and practices, CSC growers shared some of the features ascribed to other small-scale cannabis cultivators. At the same time, CSC growers seemed particularly engaged with the CSC model and willing to adhere to the (self-)regulated practices developed by the organizations, which had implications for the way cultivation was organized and for the role of the grower within the CSC.

Keywords: cannabis; Cannabis Social Club; small-scale cultivation; supply; grower; qualitative research.

1. Background

Over the past three decades, the production of cannabis has increasingly shifted from traditional producer countries to a larger number of developed Western countries, which are able to supply their internal market, albeit to different degrees (Alvarez et al., 2016; Athey, Bouchard, Decorte, Frank, & Hakkarainen, 2013; Barratt et al., 2012; Belackova & Zabransky, 2014; Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hough et al., 2003b; Potter et al., 2015; Potter, Bouchard, & Decorte, 2011; Willis, 2008). The upsurge in domestic production has also been noted with regards to the Belgian cannabis market, especially since the early 1980s, as reliance in external production reportedly began to diminish (Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b). This phenomenon, which has been termed as ‘import substitution’ (Jansen, 2002; Potter, 2008, 2010b; Reuter, Crawford, & Cave, 1988), can be explained in light of continued demand, the relatively simple cultivation process of cannabis, technological advances (including lighting, irrigation, and temperature control technologies), the presence of ‘grow-shops’, and the availability of information about cultivation techniques, among others (Alvarez et al., 2016; Barratt et al., 2012; Belackova & Zabransky, 2014; Hammersvik, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2012; Hough et al., 2003b; Jansen, 2002; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Potter, 2008, 2010b).

While economic considerations are important drivers for cannabis cultivation, it has been noted that other non-financial motives may also play an important role and could help explain the emergence and development of cannabis cultivation across Western countries, especially among small-scale growers (Potter, 2010b; Potter et al., 2015; Potter et al., 2011; Weisheit, 1991a, 1991b). Previous qualitative research, drawing primarily on interview and ethnographic data, has analysed the motivations of cannabis growers, as well as the size and scope of their cultivating activities. Weisheit (1991b) interviewed cannabis growers and police officers in the US (Illinois) and developed a typology of commercial cannabis growers. The author identified three broad types of growers: ‘communal growers’, who cultivate in a relatively small-scale for their own consumption, but who may also give away or sell part of their production (and in some cases drift towards larger scale cultivation); ‘pragmatists’, whose involvement in cultivation is driven by economic necessity; and ‘hustlers’, who are profit-oriented and generally large-scale growers, with an entrepreneurial attitude.¹²⁴ Bovenkerk and Hogewind (2002) conducted interviews with police officers in the Netherlands, and constructed a four-tiered typology of growers. Accordingly, the authors identified two groups of home growers: the ‘small home growers’, who tend to grow for their own personal consumption (generally up to five plants), but who may also direct any possible surplus towards friends or coffee shops; and the ‘large independent home growers’ – these growers supply cannabis to coffee shops, dealers or other regular customers. Bovenkerk and Hogewind (2002) referred also to two other groups of large(r) scale growers: the ‘large industrial producers’ and the ‘organizers of industrial cultivation’. The main difference between these last two groups is that the ‘organizers of industrial cultivation’ build on contacts with other illegal entrepreneurs to arrange for growing

¹²⁴ Hafley & Tewksbury (1998) later extended Weisheit’s typology, adding two other types of growers: the ‘young punk’, and the ‘entrepreneur’.

locations, and may also be involved in other types of criminal activity. In the UK, Hough et al. (2003b) identified five types of growers, on the basis of 37 interviews with cannabis growers. The authors discussed the role of the ‘sole grower’, who cultivates as a hobby to cover his own personal consumption; the ‘medical grower’, whose motivation relates particularly to the perceived therapeutic value of cannabis; the ‘social grower’, who grows for his/her own personal use as well as for friends; the ‘social/commercial grower’, who relies on the cultivation of cannabis to supply him/her-self and friends as a way to secure additional income; and finally, the ‘commercial grower’ who is generally motivated by profit and supplies cannabis outside the friends’ group. Potter (2010a) distinguished also between non-profit and for-profit oriented growers, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among cannabis growers in the UK. The author identified, for instance, personal use growers, medical cultivators (for their own use or that of others), and activist growers as non-financially motivated growers. As for-profit growers, Potter (2010a) pointed to ‘one-off opportunists’, who start by growing for personal consumption but who are drawn by the perceived potential for profit; the ‘self-employed grower’, who essentially grows for personal consumption and sells the surplus to friends; and the ‘corporate grower’, who runs larger operations and relies on a range of individuals taking different roles within the ‘enterprise’, and who may also engage in other criminal activities. In addition, Potter (2010a) discusses also the role of ‘cooperatives’ (i.e., growing circles, equally sharing profits) and ‘franchises’ (i.e., where one grower provides expertise and equipment to a starting grower, who in turn returns part of the profit to the supervising grower, until eventually becoming independent), which are the result of joint efforts of a group of growers.¹²⁵

While these typologies are generally built upon an explicit or underlying distinction between commercial and non-commercial oriented growers, that boundary is often difficult to establish. Hough et al. (2003b) have for instance suggested that one could be considered a commercial grower when the most part of the cannabis produced is sold. Potter (2010a) placed also the different motivations of growers in a spectrum, “with ‘altruism’ at one end and ‘greed’ at the other” (p. 164). Primarily among non-profit oriented growers, some of the common drivers for cultivating cannabis identified in the literature include being able to source one’s own supply (or that of friends and family) and ensuring control over the quality of the cannabis (Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hakkarainen, Frank, Perala, & Dahl, 2011; Hough et al., 2003b). At the same time, by growing their own cannabis, ideological or non-commercial growers seek also to avoid contact with the illegal distribution market (Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hakkarainen et al., 2011; Hough et al., 2003b). The high price of cannabis has also been considered a driver for some cannabis users to begin cultivating (Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hough et al., 2003b). Finally, enjoying gardening has been reported as another important factor for the initiation of cannabis cultivation by non-commercial growers

¹²⁵ Nguyen & Bouchard (2010) have also employed quantitative analysis methods to understand youth involvement in the cultivation of cannabis in Canada (Quebec). The authors identified four different groups of growers, namely: “participants for which cultivation is mainly a money generating activity (*Entrepreneurs, and Generalists*), those who grow for personal use or intangible rewards (*Hobbyists*), and those who rarely grow for themselves but who are involved on cultivation sites as hired labour (*Helpers*)” (p. 280).

(Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; EMCDDA, 2012; Hakkarainen et al., 2011; Hough et al., 2003b). An online survey among mainly small-scale cannabis cultivators in eleven countries (including Belgium)¹²⁶ seems to have confirmed these earlier findings, noting that *“cost, provision for personal use, and pleasure were among the top reasons for growing across all countries”* (p. 232) (Potter et al., 2015).

The size or scale of the grow sites of cannabis cultivators has been another aspect often explored in the literature on this topic. As to the size of the plantations, previous research has often referred to a cut-off point of 20 plants to distinguish between small-scale and large-scale cultivation sites (Bouchard, 2007; Hough et al., 2003b; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Weisheit, 1991b). However, as noted in an EMCDDA (2012) report, there are differences in the way European countries officially classify cannabis plantations (for law enforcement purposes), and in some cases no clear divide or criteria are applied (Wouters, 2013). For instance: *“a ‘small’ plantation may have 50-249 plants in Belgium, 20-99 in Germany, 1-10 in Hungary or 1-50 in Poland”* (EMCDDA, 2012, p. 80).

Prior research into cannabis cultivation in Belgium suggests that *“small-scale growers may constitute a significant segment of the cannabis market”* (Decorte, 2010a, p. 273). It is in this context that, although not formally allowed by domestic law (Pardal, 2016a), a number of collectives of cannabis users, usually registered as non-profits in the national registry of associations, have emerged in Belgium (since 2006) (Decorte, 2015; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016b).¹²⁷ The associations, Cannabis Social Clubs (hereinafter CSCs or Clubs), have the particularity of gathering under the same entity adult cannabis users and cannabis growers, and seek to collectively organize the production and distribution of cannabis among their members (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017; EMCDDA, 2012). For that purpose, CSCs typically rely on in-house cannabis growers, who are also members of the associations, to produce the cannabis that is supplied to the members. The Belgian CSCs report cultivating one plant per member (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017), and have adopted a system where each plant is identified and associated with his/her respective member. Adherence to this notion of ‘one plant per member’ is justified by CSCs’ own interpretation of a 2005 Ministerial Guideline which attributed the lowest priority for prosecution to the possession of a maximum of three grams or one cannabis plant, in the absence of aggravating circumstances or public nuisance (Pardal, 2016a). The Belgian CSCs have since argued that they should not be prosecuted if operating on a one plant per member basis, although this interpretation has not been supported by the domestic public authorities (College van Procureurs-Generaal, 2017; Pardal, 2016a), and the

¹²⁶ The eleven countries covered in that analysis were: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, German-speaking Switzerland, the UK, and the US (Potter et al., 2015).

¹²⁷ This model of supply has emerged in other countries too, notably in Spain – which is often considered the birthplace of the CSCs; as well as Uruguay, where CSCs are one of the legal and regulated models for the supply of cannabis (Barriuso, 2011; Belackova et al., 2016; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Decorte et al., 2017; Queirolo et al., 2016).

cultivation and distribution of cannabis remain prohibited in the country. As a result, many CSCs (and their representatives) have faced legal issues.

While growers cultivating cannabis within the context of a CSC have not been explored in research to date, they are crucial actors within the CSC model. With this paper, we seek to better understand how cannabis cultivation is organized in the context of Belgian CSCs, and to explore the motivations and practices of cannabis growers operating within those CSCs.

2. Methods

This analysis is part of a wider study examining the development of the Cannabis Social Club model in Belgium. Initial identification of the CSCs was done based on a previous exploratory study by Decorte (2015), in which the author reported on the activities of the five CSCs active circa February 2014. We followed up on that initial list of CSCs during fieldwork, reaching out to additional CSCs established since then. For this analysis we draw on qualitative data gathered through face to face semi-structured interviews with two important groups of actors within the Belgian CSCs: the directors of the organizations and the CSC cannabis growers. With regards to the first group, we contacted and organized an interview session in which at least one member of the Board of Directors of each of the seven active Belgian CSCs participating in the study was interviewed (n=21).¹²⁸ While the CSC landscape in Belgium has changed since the emergence of the model in the country in 2006, with some CSCs closing, and other new ones being established, at the time of the data collection, all the known active Belgian CSCs were identified and agreed to participate in the study.¹²⁹ We draw here in particular on the sections of the interview concerning cannabis production. In addition, we interviewed cannabis growers from the six Belgian CSCs that were, at the time of the interview, actively involved in the production and distribution of cannabis among their members. This data is the primary source for this analysis. While we discuss the wider functioning of the Belgian CSCs elsewhere (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, forthcoming), it is worth noting that presently three of the Belgian CSCs rely on multiple growers. In the past, one other CSC counted with several growers as well (n=5), but due to issues with some of the growers, as well as a decrease in the number of members following a criminal proceeding against this CSC's representatives, only one grower remains cultivating for the club. We interviewed 23¹³⁰ growers (from a total of about 31 growers,

¹²⁸ Each CSC received a random identifier (CSC1-CSC7). When citing data from the interviews with the CSCs' Board of Directors we add a -D1 to -D21 suffix per respondent.

¹²⁹ At the outset of the study one other CSC was operating but decided, at the time, not to take part in the study as, among other reasons, its representatives were considering stopping its activities – which has indeed taken place since then.

¹³⁰ One of the interviewees, although referred to us by a CSC representative as a CSC grower, did not consider himself a grower of that CSC, but explained only informally collaborating with the Club, namely with a view to produce oil for some medical users who are members of that CSC (G21). As such, and while the interview with this grower offered interesting insights for our wider study, in this analysis we made limited use of this interview data.

according to CSCs' estimates).¹³¹ We conducted interviews with at least one grower per CSC, and in the cases where CSCs relied on multiple growers, we spoke also with several growers per CSC (with exception of one of such CSCs, where we interviewed only one of the two growers). During the interviews we covered a number of issues pertaining to both the general background of the grower, as well as to the cultivation process, and the relationship between the grower and the CSC. Both groups of interviews were conducted in Dutch, English or French, in accordance with the indicated preference of each interviewee. The interviews took place between February 2016 and February 2017. All interviews were recorded, transcribed as close to verbatim as possible, and coded through NVIVO.

Two other data sources were also mobilized here. Firstly, we collected also important internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs, such as their bylaws, codes of conduct and protocols for plant-caretakers, etc. These were reviewed and offered additional information as to how the CSCs formally made arrangements with regards to the functioning of the organizations, including concerning cultivation and the relationship with the CSC growers. Finally, we were also able to attend several moments of CSC activity. The observations made during such moments offer further insights on the issues addressed in our analysis.

3. Results

Before the CSC: prior experience as cannabis cultivators

Most growers (n=17) indicated having grown cannabis before joining a CSC. These growers had (circa February 2017) cumulated an average of about 11 years of experience as growers. There was some variation among this group of growers: the least experienced grower (from those with pre-CSC experience) reported cultivating cannabis for the past three years; the most experienced grower indicated having 25 years of activity as grower. In addition, five of the current CSC growers had no experience cultivating cannabis prior to joining their respective CSC, and thus their first plantation took place within the context of a CSC¹³² – and as noted by some of these growers, with support and guidance from the CSC. All the 'new growers' in our sample came from the same CSC, which thus had a mix of experienced and novice growers. What is more, the majority of these new growers told us growing and using cannabis for medical reasons.

Generally, CSC growers with prior growing experience had been cultivating cannabis for their own consumption before entering a CSC. Many growers seem to have supplied others with the yield of their cultivation too. Almost one third of the sample have mentioned sharing the

¹³¹ When citing data from the interviews with the CSC growers we use a random identifier (G1-G23) per respondent.

¹³² One of the growers reported cultivating cannabis for the first time after joining the CSC, but that first attempt was done on a personal level, as the yield did not revert to the CSC. Following that first experiment, this member began cultivating also for the CSC (G17).

cannabis they cultivated in a social context with friends. Two other growers told us that following initial harvests exclusively intended for their own consumption, they had begun supplying a number of Dutch coffee shops. In addition, two other growers reported having gained international experience as cannabis growers for US dispensaries prior to enrolling with Belgian CSCs. One of them referred to that period as follows:

“I went to California, to the Cannabis University in Oakland [Oaksterdam University], [...] studied and worked there for a couple of different dispensaries and collectives [...] We [referring to another grower] had experience with small cultivations, but there we did the most. In three years we gained a lot of experience... outdoors, really big cultivations” (G18).

One other grower who had recently joined a CSC at the time of the interview, reported having many years of experience cultivating and supplying the “black market” (G9). A director of one of the CSCs commented also that the Club had other growers which had previously been cultivating in the ‘black market’, noting that: *“Many of our growers come from the black market, because if not, how can you have experience?”* (CSC3-D6). Finally, two other growers had previously been growing cannabis for a different CSC than their respective current ones.

Understanding the motivations to become (CSC) growers

The growers we interviewed discussed their motivation(s) to transition or start as growers in the context of a Belgian CSC (and to grow cannabis more broadly). Each grower usually brought forward several different reasons, and there were no clear differences among growers of different CSCs. We grouped all the motives raised by the interviewees under five broad themes, which we introduce next.

Alignment with the CSC model¹³³

Some growers highlighted their general appreciation and identification with the “CSC concept” (G2, but also G10, G17) or “vision” (G11) to explain their decision to enrol in their respective CSC. For example, one of the growers explained it as follows: *“Because I actually support 100% their vision and their way of working. I wanted to become a part of it”* (G11). Other growers saw their engagement with a CSC as a way to contribute towards the legalization of cannabis and a “regulated system” for cannabis supply in the country (G14, G17, G23).

¹³³ One grower had actually considered joining and growing cannabis for a Spanish CSC, but opted for a Belgian club mainly for three perceived characteristics of the model in Belgium: more clarity in terms of the (self-regulated) working practices; more quality control over the cannabis produced and distributed; and a lower number of active CSCs. While it is interesting to note the apparent awareness of other contexts/CSCs and the potential mobility of those involved in the CSC model across Europe (and beyond), this issue falls outside the scope of the present analysis (see also: Decorte et al., 2017).

A number of more specific aspects of the functioning of the CSCs were especially highlighted by the growers to explain their decision to join. For instance, CSC growers praised the transparency and the internal organization of the CSCs, and valued the fact that the Clubs adhere to organic cultivation practices – a point we discuss in more detail below. In their view, the CSC allows for more control over production, which in turn ensures a better quality product. The (technical) support offered to growers by the CSC was seen as an important feature, in particular for some of the growers with no prior growing experience. The proximity between growers and the cannabis users who are members of the Clubs was also considered an appealing feature of the model by one of the growers:

“The Club is kind of like a bistro [...] you have like your own members, so you grow plants for your own members... it’s less anonymous. So at the end you have more satisfaction from your work” (G8).

Similarly, growers discussed being able to “help others” (G1) by growing cannabis within a CSC. This was often mentioned by growers who told us growing (and using) cannabis for medical reasons, or in relation to supplying (or ‘helping’) members of the CSC who use it for that purpose.

General practical reasons

Growers in our sample joined these organizations also on the basis of more pragmatic considerations. Some growers saw the CSC as an alternative to ensure that the part of the yield of their production which they did not use could be directed towards others through the CSC, avoiding the traditional illegal circuit, while at the same time reducing the costs incurred with cultivation. What is more, and despite operating (at best) at the margins of domestic legislation, the CSCs do guarantee the legal representation of their growers (and pay the associated costs), in case of interception by the police – another pragmatic reason often brought forward by the CSC growers we interviewed:

“Because it does give you an extra, maybe even a false, safety feeling. [...] If there are problems, then I can fall back on the club, especially on judicial aspects” (G22).

In terms of labour, growing a few additional plants was not seen as a burden, as this grower noted: “if I grow a plant for myself, with the same effort I can grow some more” (G13). Other growers discussed growing for the CSC as a way to use the grow site/installation in a more efficient way, as the following grower commented on:

“It would be idiotic to grow just for yourself one plant underneath one lamp, that would be a waste of electricity, because there is room for more than one [plant] underneath the lamp” (G5, also G7).

Avoiding (other) illegal supply channels

As mentioned above, some of the growers joining the Belgian CSCs found it important to be able to direct the surplus of their production towards the CSC. This was particularly valued in

comparison and as an alternative to the ‘black market’ and its *“shady figures”* (G3). The CSC was perceived as a somewhat more ‘legal’ or safer alternative vis-à-vis growers’ previous experiences. In fact, growers in our sample discussed their participation within a CSC in terms of *“not being in a criminal milieu”* (G3). For one of the growers, who had been supplying the ‘black market’ prior to joining a CSC, this was in fact the key factor explaining the transition:

“That is the reason why I work with [the CSC]. Because I had enough of this stress after 15 years of street business. [...] I might as well earn a little less money. So, it’s easy. [The Director of the CSC] comes, there is no stress with knowing whether everything will go as planned when I give him the plants or to receive the money. So, zero stress. We drink a coffee, we talk. This is really not the case on the black market” (G9).

Although the transition to cultivating cannabis for a CSC implied a reduction in the income generated with the supply of cannabis, this grower emphasized that operating within a CSC was less *“stressful”*, and less risky. In particular with regards to the distribution of the cannabis produced, the CSC was described as a safer intermediary or facilitator.

Reducing costs and generating extra income

While it should be noted that the CSC growers typically receive a financial compensation for their work and expenses during the care-taking of the cannabis plants allocated to them (see further below), that financial return did not emerge, for most growers, as a key reason for entering a CSC. Only one grower described the cultivation activities for the CSC as his/her main occupation.

For some growers though, in particular those also using cannabis for medical reasons, and due to economic difficulties, receiving a stipend from the CSC for the cannabis produced was nevertheless important in order to cover the growers’ own cannabis consumption costs and generate supplemental income, as described by the following grower:

“Because I am ill I only receive unemployment benefits, so I have about 950EUR per month, and if you need to buy 10 to 20 grams of cannabis per month, then it costs quite a lot... and yes, eventually I had a settlement for gas and electricity costs and received a lot of money. And then I thought ‘I might as well invest and construct a growing room, that way the cannabis doesn’t cost me anything anymore” (G1).

Enjoying gardening

Cannabis growers in our sample told us they grow cannabis because they enjoy the gardening activity and the cannabis plant in particular. One of them explained that:

“It’s passion, it’s just passion for the plant. The way you see it growing it’s like seeing your own baby growing” (G6).

Some of the growers described cannabis cultivation as an hobby, and were keen to learn about different cultivation methods, techniques and equipment.

The relationship between the CSC and the grower

Entry into the CSC

Most of the current CSC growers reported taking the initiative themselves in finding and approaching a Belgian CSC (n=15). Of those, some learned about the CSC through online searches, via friends or acquaintances, or through the media. Six other growers had played a direct role in the establishment and subsequent management of a CSC – tasks they cumulated with cultivating cannabis for those Clubs. Only one other grower seems to have been initially approached by a representative of a CSC, who was acquainted with a common friend of both, to join that CSC as a grower. One of the CSCs also commented on distributing a ‘call for growers’ among their contacts, highlighting that the CSC is a non-profit organization and is *“thus not looking for people with commercial motives”*.

The Belgian CSCs generally require growers to register as members upon entering the CSC. As such, candidate growers must meet the membership requirements (e.g., being adult users, Belgian residents or nationals) and take part in an intake interview (Decorte et al., 2017). In addition, some of the growers (n=6) had to wait between *“a few weeks”* (G7) to a *“few months”* (G11) before beginning to operate in that capacity within the CSC. When discussing this time period, growers described it as being an opportunity to gain the trust of the CSC directors, as well as to understand the functioning of the organization. Another group of growers was allowed to immediately join as (members and) growers (n=7). While several factors might have been on the basis of these two different trajectories, the candidates’ prior experience as growers might have been an important one. With a few exceptions (n=3),¹³⁴ the growers who were able to start off cultivating since the beginning of their membership with a CSC had relatively more experience than the growers who had to wait some time. The particular staffing/production needs of the CSCs may have also played a role here. Finally, three of the current growers (who had no prior growing experience) first joined the CSC solely as members, and did only later decide to start growing cannabis for the CSC.

Formal arrangements

The relationship between growers and CSCs is often based on a formal agreement or contract between the two parties (‘Code of Conduct and Protocol for Plant-caretakers’). This is a particularly common practice among CSCs relying on multiple growers.¹³⁵ This document usually defines how the grow site should be set up and run (e.g., space, number of plants, type of equipment, cultivation methods, etc.), includes information about the expected contact between the CSC and the grower, and the payment growers receive for their services. The

¹³⁴ Two of these growers are particularly exceptional in the sense that they were able to join the CSCs immediately as growers without having any prior experience cultivating cannabis. However, this is because the two growers had agreed with the CSC they would cultivate one plant each only (which they use for medical ends), and return any eventual surplus to the CSC to distribute among other members.

¹³⁵ Only one of such CSCs had not adopted this practice at the time of the interview, but planned to do so in the future.

protocol outlines also the steps growers ought to take in case of theft or of police intervention. In addition, the CSCs usually collect a form in which each member declares retaining ownership of the plant that will be cultivated by the CSC for him/her – a so-called ‘Statement of Ownership’ which is handed out to the grower tending to that plant, together with a copy of the member’s national ID. According to the CSCs’ guidelines, these documents are to be attached to the respective plants as identification. One of our interviewees explained this as follows:

“Members for whom I cultivate a plant, so to speak, they actually give me a request, a declaration, and a copy of their ID-card. And there it is stated that the plant is theirs... a declaration that the plant is their property and that I only take care of it” (G13).

This explains also CSCs’ preference to use the term ‘plant-caretaker’ to refer to their growers. The formal arrangements were positively appreciated by some of the growers, who felt that these ensured transparency and could potentially be used to explain their involvement before the public authorities, as the following quote illustrates:

“We do have some formal documents, I also need that, because I need to be able to show what I do if I get questions from the government, for example” (G13).

What is more, in case of interception by the police or if facing criminal charges, CSC growers would be supported by the CSC – as mentioned earlier.

Financial compensation and growers’ views on CSCs as non-profits

Growers operating within Belgian CSCs generally receive a financial compensation for their activities as growers.¹³⁶ In the words of the growers, this is described as a *“compensation for the expenses incurred”* (G7), and not as a remuneration or sales income. While this reimbursement is expected to cover the expenses made by the growers during the cultivation process, it is not directly calculated against the expenses made. Instead, the growers typically receive a pre-defined amount per gram of cannabis delivered to the CSC amounting to 4-4.50EUR (per gram).

The growers considered the amount received to be *“fair”* and *“enough”* to cover their costs (n=10). They argued that ‘one does not get rich’ from growing for a CSC, even if admitting that the reimbursement somewhat exceeded the expenses made. This was, however, considered a positive aspect of the model, and was often associated with attracting passionate and non-profit driven growers, as one of our interviewees explained:

“You have a varied range of people that grow. You have people who grow for passion because they just like to do that; there’s people who grow for themselves and they have just a little bit more to give away [...]; and there’s people who grow because they think there is big money behind it and they are not ready to do anything else. The problem with cannabis is that cannabis, because it’s a plant, it’s like tomato. Tomato can grow

¹³⁶ Three growers from three different CSCs were at the time of the interview not receiving a financial compensation, but two of them expected that would happen in the near-future.

either you do a bunch of work or either you don't. The difference is in the tomato at the end. [...] The Club pays the growers a little bit, gives them a reimbursement for the cannabis. This is a good point, why? [...] Because the growers who really want to grow, who have passion, rather get way less money, but clean from people that really, you know..." (G8).

One of the growers perceived also this reimbursement as a way to compensate for the risks growers take, by acknowledging that: *"we assume that it is legal, but we also know that we are a little bit in an in-between, in a grey zone"* (G13). For the majority of the growers, this reward did not constitute their only or principal source of income. As noted earlier, only one grower admitted that the compensation received from the CSC corresponded to the grower's main income.

The growers in our sample generally agreed that CSCs should function in a non-profit way (n=15), although some thought that those working for the CSCs, including also other staff, should be rewarded for their work. The growers contrasted what they perceived as a fair compensation with *"getting rich from it"* (G10) or *"over-commercialization"* (G7). In their opinion, the CSCs should not have the making of profit as goal, and should seek to attract growers that share that ethos, as in their view that would contribute to producing and delivering cannabis of higher quality. Some of the growers were also very critical of the legal and illegal commercial cannabis trade, arguing that such commercialization makes the product unaffordable and/or inaccessible, and has a negative impact on its quality.

Cannabis cultivation within Belgian CSCs: key features

Characteristics of the grow sites

Cultivation within Belgian CSCs mainly takes place indoors, usually in growing tents or closed rooms. Some growers moved also part of the cultivation outside during the summer period, or tried a few crops outdoors (n=10).

The growing rooms/tents were usually equipped with artificial lighting, ventilators, an exhaust system with filters, and in some cases temperature and humidity regulators, as well as fire alarms. The general agreement commonly established between the CSCs and their growers specifies also minimum standards for the electric installation used at the grow sites, as noted by one of the growers:

"I didn't meet the requirements of [the CSC], so they asked me to bring it in order, that's what I'm doing right now. [...] Because [the CSC] needs to be able to say before the court that the plants are cultivated without creating fire hazards or things like that" (G9).

Generally, growers are expected to purchase the necessary equipment themselves – only two growers did not, and described the equipment as property of the CSCs.¹³⁷ In a few other cases, the growers benefited also from discounts at certain grow shops (due to the grower’s affiliation with a CSC), or were able to use and test specific equipment sponsored by those shops free of charge. Finally, one other CSC offered so-called “*green loans*” (i.e., interest-free loans) to growers who wished to invest and upgrade their grow site installation after delivering some crops to the CSC.

As discussed earlier, CSC growers cultivate one plant for each of the members at their care. The number of plants growers cultivated for their respective CSCs varied, with the smallest grow site including 2 plants,¹³⁸ up to the 49 plants one other grower reported cultivating. In keeping a maximum of 49 plants per grow site, the CSCs (and their growers) reveal awareness of the classification system used by law enforcement in Belgium, which considers plantations of up to 49 plants as ‘micro-’ or ‘mini-’ (EMCDDA, 2012). In average, a CSC grow site has about 20 cannabis plants.¹³⁹

Cultivation practices

In terms of their growing practices, with one exception, all growers were growing cannabis exclusively in soil. The Belgian CSCs support organic cultivation in order to achieve what was described as a “*clean product*” (CSC2-D4). All growers interviewed told us adhering to such practices, and most considered organic growing important. In their view, organically grown cannabis was of better quality and safer for the user, in contrast with the cannabis produced by “*bigger growers*” working within the illicit market, as illustrated by the following remark:

“There is a lot of fiddling around... large growers, commercial growers, they only think about the weight, and sometimes they also add things that are not healthy at all, only to get the weight up. [...] Pesticides that are illegal in agriculture are sprayed because it is out of sight, not controlled. So right before the harvest something very toxic is sprayed on it. Who controls it? Who sees it? Nobody. And maybe it ends up with people that are ill, you don’t know. And even if they are not ill, it’s just not good” (G13).

Also when discussing the measures growers took to prevent and tackle plant diseases or pests, all growers commented on using natural, non-chemical means.

In general, CSC growers simultaneously cultivate more than one strain and/or change it at each cultivation cycle. Decisions on which type of strain is cultivated are generally made by the grower, sometimes in consultation with the CSCs, as the following interviewee explained:

¹³⁷ However, they were the only growers of their respective CSCs.

¹³⁸ The smallest grow site, as well as two other grow sites, were tended to by two growers (each), who were a couple.

¹³⁹ This is based on growers’ accounts on the total number of plants per grow site (and not per grower), as some of the grow sites were shared by two growers.

“They do state which types they prefer, also for medical reasons... yes, for some patients for example that need that [specific cannabis type or strain] [...] but it is not obligatory” (G2).

Growers typically cultivate hybrid strains, and close to half of the growers we interviewed specifically mentioned cultivating CBD-rich plants (n=11).

Inspection of the grow site by the CSC

In the cases of CSCs relying on more than one grower, the cultivation site is usually visited by a representative of the CSC throughout the cultivation cycle (usually once or twice per month). Most growers appreciated this close contact with the CSC, and thought it was a way for the Club to offer some guidance to the growers who needed it, ensure that the technical installation met the CSCs’ standards, and that any emerging issues affecting the plantations were tackled as soon as possible. Some growers discussed receiving an additional visit from a CSC representative closer to the end of the cultivation cycle, with the purpose of making a rough estimate of the expected quantity of cannabis that would be delivered by the grower.

Harvest

As growers cultivate different strains of cannabis, the length of the growing cycle varies significantly. The quantity of cannabis produced ranged between about 13g and 120-150g per plant – and may be related to the type of cannabis plants grown (e.g., one grower mentioned, for instance, usually producing *“between twenty and fifty grams for auto-flowers, and for ordinary strains up to 100grams [per plant]”* – G19), to whether cultivation takes place indoors or outdoors, as well as to growers’ skills and experience.

Most growers had a separate space to dry the cannabis (n=20), and told us they would harvest, cut and trim the cannabis plants on their own without additional help from the CSC or others (n=16).¹⁴⁰ However, some of those growers told us it would be possible to receive help from the Club, if needed. Two final steps take place at the growers’ premises: the cannabis is generally cured in glass or plastic jars, and packaged in plastic bags. The cannabis is usually then collected by a representative of the CSC, as distribution to the members is not organized by the grower directly, but by the CSC.

A common practice among several growers is to return also part of the leaves and stems to the CSC so that these can be distributed to the members. This is a symbolic way of returning the plant back to the member who had allocated it to the care of the grower, and relates to the notion of cultivating one plant per member. In some cases, and although this is not the official

¹⁴⁰ Only four growers, from two different CSCs, told us they had some assistance during the harvest phase. All these growers received help from their respective CSCs: two growers were aided by a CSC representative during their first harvest, one other grower received help from volunteer members of the Club, and the other gave a financial compensation to the members who helped him/her with the task.

policy of the Belgian CSCs, some of the growers told us also using the waste plant materials to produce oil, butter, or other cannabis by-products.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This paper offers new insights into a particular segment of the domestic cannabis cultivation phenomenon, namely growers operating within CSCs in Belgium. Although the cultivation and distribution of cannabis remain prohibited in the country, these associations have sought to exploit the perceived room for manoeuvre brought about with the 2005 Ministerial Guideline. In practice, the clubs' (contested) interpretation of that policy document has been translated into a system based on the cultivation of one plant per member. Core to the functioning of CSCs in Belgium is thus the establishment of a closed supply system, in which the cannabis produced by in-house growers (who are also registered members) is distributed only among CSC members for their own personal use (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, forthcoming).

In terms of how production is organized within Belgian CSCs, we found that while some CSCs count only with one grower, others rely on multiple growers and have tended in fact to decentralize cultivation – by spreading production across different indoor grow sites, usually at the private property of the growers. Maintaining several small grow sites might in turn pose obstacles to the professionalization or technical sophistication of the grow sites. Nevertheless, we found that CSC growers had cumulated some experience cultivating cannabis and used somewhat specialized equipment (e.g., artificial lighting, ventilators, etc.) – in accordance with CSC requirements. Earlier research into small-scale cannabis cultivation in Belgium had also noted that, despite the size of the operations and the absence of clear commercial goals, growers did increasingly use professional equipment (Decorte, 2008).

The CSC grow sites are relatively small, ranging between 2-49 plants, and an average of 20 plants per site – which is comparable to the cut-off used in previous research concerning small-scale cultivation (Weisheit, 1991b). On average, the number of plants cultivated at CSC grow sites was larger than that of general small-scale domestic cannabis growers in Belgium though, based on a 2006 online survey among 659 growers (Decorte, 2010b). Nevertheless, the CSCs impose important restrictions to the size of the grow sites. The first limitation relates to the Clubs' interpretation of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline, according to which cultivation is limited in absolute terms by the total number of members of the CSC (as clubs cultivate one plant per member only). In addition, the CSCs do not allow grow sites to have more than 49 plants each, keeping in line with the domestic law enforcement classification of micro/mini plantations. These practices, which point to some influence of legal and criminal justice aspects in the way in which cultivation takes place within CSCs (and reported in relation to other small-scale cultivators too – e.g., by Potter et al., 2015), seem to suggest that restrictive deterrence may play a role. This framework has been mobilized in the context of other cannabis cultivation studies (Nguyen, Malm, & Bouchard, 2015; Werse, 2015), especially exploring the link between

sanction severity and the size of grow sites. At the same time, as Alvarez et al. (2016) suggested, cannabis cultivation in the context of CSCs represents also *“a form of resistance, affirmation and protest for legal change”* (p. 78) (similarly, also: Madera, 2017; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017). Adherence to the above mentioned law enforcement classification or to a threshold of one plant per member thus seems to (at least in part) be related to CSC efforts towards raising public acceptance of the model and developing distinguishable features from other cannabis market operators (e.g., dealers, Dutch coffee shops).

Growers operating within Belgian CSCs are expected to adhere to the organizations' self-regulatory guidelines and requirements concerning cultivation. For instance, CSC growers are asked to follow organic cultivation practices. Cultivating a 'clean product' was also seen as important by the CSC growers themselves, which they opposed to the (adulterated) practices of 'bigger' and 'commercial' growers – a contrast echoing the findings from Decorte (2011) on growers' perceptions of cultivation practices and cannabis quality. Previous research into small-scale cultivation of cannabis in Belgium has nevertheless found that chemical substances and fertilizers are *“used relatively often (30.6%)”* (Decorte, 2010b, p. 352). Additional analysis (for instance, laboratorial testing of cannabis samples produced by the CSCs) would be of added value in further examining the potency, quality, and purity of the cannabis produced by CSC growers.

The CSC growers had cumulated diverse cultivation experiences prior to joining the Belgian CSCs, but some among them had actually no cultivation experience before their affiliation with a CSC. In those exceptional cases the decision to start growing seems related to personal circumstances (i.e., financial difficulties, illness, etc.) and was often associated with the use of cannabis for medical reasons. The presence of such growers within Belgian CSCs can be seen as reflective of a wider trend, as cannabis cultivation for medical purposes has been considered a relatively common practice among small-scale growers in a number of European countries (including Belgium) (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Werse, 2015). This raises also a number of questions: whether these growers/users are resorting to self-supply due to the limited or lack of alternative legal options for the supply of cannabis for medical ends (as suggested by Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Werse, 2015); whether and how their use of cannabis is supported and/or supervised by medical professionals, and for what type of symptoms/conditions cannabis is being (self-)prescribed.

Most CSC growers had nevertheless cultivated cannabis before enrolling with a Belgian CSC, mainly for their own personal use, although some reported also sharing or distributing the surplus of their production with friends and other acquaintances before entering the CSC. In comparison to the findings of an online survey among (mainly) small-scale cultivators, CSC growers seem to be relatively more experienced growers (Potter et al., 2015). Some of the current CSC growers have in fact transitioned from commercially-oriented production, including supplying Dutch coffee shops, US dispensaries, and the local illegal street market. For them, the move into CSCs implied scaling down the grow operation, adhering to CSCs' self-regulatory framework, and reducing the revenues generated with growing cannabis. Indeed,

while the growers operating within Belgian CSCs do generally receive a financial compensation close to/at cost price (comparable to findings from Vanhove, Surmont, Van Damme, and de Ruyver (2012, 2014), who estimated a price per gram between 3-4.25EUR at grower level for Belgian indoor cultivation circa 2010-2011), the monetary return is arguably small(er).¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, it might still be possible to generate some income from such grow operations (Camp, 2008). While only some of the growers in our sample acknowledged that the financial compensation played a role in their decision to grow cannabis within a CSC, it is difficult to assert on the overall importance of the financial reward CSC growers received.¹⁴² The small-scale of the grow sites, the fact that this compensation was not the only nor principal source of income for these growers, as well as their stated motivations to join the CSC (and opinions on the non-profit character of the organizations) seem to suggest that the financial aspect is secondary (Decorte, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Potter et al., 2015).

A mix of motives, ideological (such as ‘passion for the plant’, alignment with and support of the CSC model), but also pragmatic (such as maximizing the utilization of the grow site, covering the costs of production) seem to explain growers’ participation within CSCs. Potter et al. (2015) concluded that growing cannabis is often both a rational choice (in terms of reducing the harms associated with purchasing from or supplying the illicit market), and “*an aesthetic and/or ‘ideological’ choice*” (p. 235). Also in this regard, CSC growers thus bear some resemblance with other small-scale cultivators (Belackova et al., 2015; Potter, 2010b). Other commonalities with a number of features included in previous typologies of small-scale growers emerged from our data as well (Bovenkerk & Hogewind, 2002; Hafley & Tewksbury, 1998; Hough et al., 2003b; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Potter, 2010a; Weisheit, 1991a, 1991b). For instance, many of the growers in our sample could be considered ‘communal growers’ (and perhaps ‘pragmatists’), using Weisheit (1991b) typology. Similarly, most CSC growers could fall under the ‘small home grower’ category, or some under the ‘large independent home grower’ group. Variants of the ‘social grower’ or the ‘social/commercial’ grower could also be identified in our sample (Hough et al., 2003b), as well as ‘medical growers’ (Hough et al., 2003b; Potter, 2010a). Differently, CSC growers’ motivations and practices seem distant from those of commercial growers, as these last tend to place more emphasis on the quantity produced (and less so on the quality of the ‘*tomato*’), have large-scale plantations (often in separate commercial properties), and prefer to sub-contract part of the (more labour-intensive) tasks to others (e.g., cutting and trimming the cannabis buds, packaging, etc.) (EMCDDA, 2012).

At the same time, the motivation and practices of CSC growers in Belgium seem to have been shaped by aspects specific to this supply model too. For instance, CSC growers were particularly driven to grow cannabis in the context of a CSC, and in most cases took the initiative in

¹⁴¹ For instance, the price of cannabis at retail level was estimated at 8-9.5EUR per gram, according to 2013 data from the Belgian Federal police (Plettinckx et al., 2014).

¹⁴² As Hammersvik (2016) noted, growers may also ‘flex’ (i.e., “*adjusting accounts to contextual criteria of ‘account adequacy’ in a way that protects the speaker’s sense of being self-coherent*”, p. 5) their motivational accounts, for instance switching between ideological and commercial vocabularies depending on the situation, audience, etc.

approaching the CSC. It is worth noting that while operating within a CSC, growers have to register as members of the organization (and in some cases go through a probationary period before initiating production), need to adhere to the guidelines and self-defined rules of the CSC with regards to the cultivation process, and generally have their grow sites somewhat regularly inspected by a CSC representative. While aware of the current vulnerable legal standing of the associations and putting much emphasis on the fact that in case of a police intervention they were part of a larger organization - which would also aid them through the process and would cover any eventual costs with legal fees, CSC growers often described the CSCs as a 'safer' and 'more legal' (or legitimate) option. The structure and *modus operandi* of the CSCs was positively appreciated, and growers welcomed the opportunity to actively support and contribute to the further development and legalization of the model.

However, it remains unclear whether the CSC model would remain the preferred option for CSC growers (and other types of growers) in a scenario where other supply models would be legally available (for an overview of different 'supply architectures' please see: Caulkins et al. 2015). In the current (unregulated) Belgian context, our research suggests that CSCs have most predominantly attracted somewhat experienced, small-scale and (primarily) non-profit driven growers. But as we noted, to some extent the CSCs gather also growers with different prior experiences (including growers who had formerly engaged in more commercially-oriented production), as well as novice growers (among these, the emergence of the 'medical grower' should be highlighted). Further research exploring growers' attitudes and preferences towards different regulated models of cannabis supply (see, for instance: Lenton, Frank, Barratt, Dahl, & Potter, 2015) would be of interest in understanding how appealing this supply model might be to growers currently operating in different areas of the illicit market spectrum, and would allow for a more nuanced consideration of the potential of the CSC model as a 'middle-ground' option for cannabis supply (Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte et al., 2017).

Chapter 12: Cannabis use and supply patterns among Belgian Cannabis Social Club members

1. Introduction

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit substance in Europe and worldwide (EMCDDA, 2017c; UNODC, 2017). In Europe, prevalence of cannabis use is higher among males, particularly among regular users, and the substance is typically smoked, mixed with tobacco (EMCDDA, 2017c). Also in Belgium, cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug, most predominantly among young adults (15-34 years old) and males (EMCDDA, 2017a). National data concerning the use of illicit substances in Belgium is collected through the National Health Survey (since 2001) (de Donder, 2009; Decorte, 2007).¹⁴³ A new wave of that survey is currently under way (WIV, 2018),¹⁴⁴ but the latest available data was collected in 2013 (EMCDDA, 2017a; WIV, 2018). Accordingly, 2.6% of the population between 15-64 years are current cannabis users (based on past month reported use). Among those, 21% used cannabis during 20 or more days in the past 30 days, corresponding to more frequent or regular users (WIV, 2018).

A number of other studies have attempted to gather further insights into the patterns of use among particular segments of the population in Belgium. For instance, Decorte, Muys, and Slock (2003) interviewed 369 experienced users (i.e., respondents who had used cannabis at least 25 times and were at least 18 years old). The authors reported that first use of cannabis occurred on average at 16.3 years old, and found that cannabis smoked with tobacco corresponded to the most popular consumption method. On average, participants reported using 11.9gram of cannabis in the month before the interview. Close to half of the sample were students (average age of participants was about 25 years). As part of an international exercise conducted by the Global Cannabis Cultivation Research Consortium (GCCRC), 1065 small-scale cultivators in Belgium were also surveyed, including also questions about cannabis consumption patterns (Potter et al., 2015). Most had first used cannabis before the age of 18, and were regular users (i.e. reported use today or in the last week). Participants were more likely to report being employed (full-time, part-time or self-employed), and the median age of participants was 26 years old. Male respondents outnumbered female respondents (Potter et al., 2015). More recently, Vlaemyneck (2016a, 2016b) explored the social networks of young cannabis users (18-31 years old) through in-depth computer-assisted interviews, and de Kock et al. (2016) interviewed over 200 users drawing on a community-based participatory research design to improve the understanding of substance use among people with a migration

¹⁴³ In addition, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), which is launched every four years among 15-16 year old students, has been carried in Belgium (in Flanders, primarily) since 2003 (ESPAD, 2016). In Belgium, the Flemish Centre of Expertise on Alcohol and Other Drugs (VAD) conducts also a yearly survey among high-school students (Rosiers, 2017), and coordinates another 4-yearly survey among University students in Flanders since 2005 (Rosiers et al., 2014).

¹⁴⁴ Data collection for this wave of the survey is expected to be carried until December 2018 (WIV, 2018).

background. There have also been earlier efforts at the local level to collect qualitative data on drug use, for instance in the city of Antwerp (Decorte & Janssen, 2011; Tieberghien & Decorte, 2009) and Turnhout (Vlaemyneck & Decorte, 2016).

Cannabis Social Clubs (hereinafter CSCs or Clubs) represent a non-profit model for the supply of cannabis (Caulkins et al., 2015a, 2015b; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, in preparation-b). Typically, cannabis cultivation is undertaken by a number of volunteer members (who receive a financial compensation from the CSCs) (Pardal, 2018b), with the yield being distributed close to/at cost price among their registered, adult members. CSCs have been established in several countries (e.g., Spain, France Italy, the Netherlands, etc., but also beyond Europe, for instance in New Zealand, Chile, and Argentina) (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Decorte et al., 2017), and have been present in Belgium since 2006 (Pardal, 2018a). In most jurisdictions,¹⁴⁵ including in Belgium, CSCs have been initiated and developed by groups of users, exploiting legal loopholes or grey zones or blatantly breaching domestic legislation (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2016a). The goal of the analysis presented here is to describe the socio-demographic characteristics, patterns of use and supply of current Belgian CSC members, expanding the small body of literature on these issues, as to date only a few studies have surveyed CSC members in Spain (Arnosó & Elgorriaga, 2016; Marín, 2008, 2009).

2. Methods

In what follows, we draw particularly on data from an online survey among Belgian CSC members, conducted between February and September of 2017. The survey questionnaire was developed building on questions included in previous relevant surveys on substance use and political engagement¹⁴⁶ (Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, 2014; Decorte et al., 2012; Kilmer et al., 2013a; Swift et al., 2005; Tilburg University & Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2008), and new questions tailored to the CSC context. The questionnaire was translated into Dutch and French, and participants could select their language of choice (EN, FR, NL). During a short pilot phase (2-month period), the survey was tested in the three languages by eight respondents: a group of former CSC members and cannabis users familiar with the CSC model (who were not eligible for further participation in the survey). Based on the feedback received during this phase some final adjustments (in wording, types of questions, etc.) were made to the survey instrument. The core survey questionnaire includes 66 items, including sections on: membership within a CSC, cannabis supply through a CSC, patterns of consumption, socio-demographic characteristics, views on drugs policy and political engagement. The survey included also two items to test eligibility: only 18 years old or older

¹⁴⁵ Uruguay remains to date the only jurisdiction to have introduced nationwide legislation concerning the CSC model, with the passage of Law 19.172, which also allows and regulates home cultivation and cannabis sales through pharmacies (Decorte et al., 2017; Queirolo, Boidi, & Cruz, 2016).

¹⁴⁶ The findings concerning political engagement and participation in the CSCs' activities (beyond cannabis production and distribution) are discussed elsewhere (Chapter 13).

respondents, who were also currently members of a Belgian CSC¹⁴⁷ were allowed to complete the survey. An additional, (4-item) optional module¹⁴⁸ was also included at the end of the survey.

The participants were recruited with the assistance of the directors of the active Belgian CSCs previously identified and who took part in the wider research project (n=7). The directors of these CSCs were briefed about the purpose and content of the survey and received a copy of the draft questionnaire for feedback. During that meeting, promotional materials about the study and the upcoming survey, including flyers, posters (and later on also QR-cards) were handed out to the CSC directors in attendance, so they could in turn distribute them to their members. In order to protect the privacy of the members of these CSCs, we did not collect their personal contact details, but relied on the CSC representatives to establish that contact. We also used a project Facebook page and website¹⁴⁹ to disseminate information about the launch of the survey and the research project. During the time the survey was running, we asked the CSC representatives to send regular reminders to their members, in order to boost the response numbers. By combining the two recruitment strategies (indirectly, through the CSCs, and directly, via social media) we sought to reach out to a larger number of potential participants, while at the same time limiting the opportunity for fraudulent completion of the survey by non-members. To that effect, in the survey, when enquiring about which CSC the participants were affiliated with, we purposely included a fictitious CSC name to rule out participation by non-members (only one returned questionnaire had selected that option, and it was removed from our dataset).

As presented in Table 12, our sample includes CSC members from all the seven active CSCs participating in the study. Generally, the surveyed had no particular function (i.e. they were not growers, did not play a leadership role, nor were they responsible for other administrative tasks) within the clubs they belonged to (89.8%). The Belgian CSCs have very different sizes in terms of membership base, which also fluctuate quite often (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, in preparation-b). This to some extent helps explain the differences in the number of participants across CSCs. In addition, one of the CSCs closed down around the time the survey was launched, and one other had had its crop confiscated by the police a few months before the start of the survey. During the time the survey was running, the latter CSC as well as one other were also subject to a large scale police intervention, resulting in the detention of several CSC directors and other individuals involved with those CSCs. These law enforcement interventions are likely to have had a negative impact on the response rate, and although we estimate that around

¹⁴⁷ Beyond asking participants whether they were currently affiliated with a Belgian CSC, the recruitment strategy also primarily targeted the known CSCs, relying on their representatives to disseminate the call for participation on the survey among the CSC members.

¹⁴⁸ This brief module included questions about whether respondents' friends and acquaintances were also CSC members, about who was aware of their CSC membership and what was their general view on that, as well as an open question about whether there are any specific aspects of their CSC that could be changed or improved.

¹⁴⁹ The website page can be found at: <https://cscbelgium.wixsite.com/cscbelgium> (last accessed 13 February 2018), and the Facebook page at: <https://www.facebook.com/study.csc> (last accessed 13 February 2018).

27% of the total known CSC members in Belgium did complete the survey, it is possible that those who volunteered to participate in this context are different than those who did not, thus affecting the representativeness of the sample.

Table 12: Overview of the sample per CSC.

| | Distribution of survey respondents by CSC (%) | Distribution of survey respondents by CSC (frequency) | Estimated number of members by CSC |
|------------------|---|---|------------------------------------|
| CSC1 | 8.4% | 16 | 60* |
| CSC2 | 8.4% | 16 | 45* |
| CSC3 | 72.1% | 137 | 400* |
| CSC4 | 1.1% | 2 | 10 |
| CSC5 | 4.7% | 9 | 81 |
| CSC6 | 0.5% | 1 | 10* |
| CSC7 | 1.1% | 2 | 70* |
| CSC(s) not known | 3.7% | 7 | n.a. |
| Total N | | 190 | 676 |

Note: The figures included in the table concerning the number of members per CSC correspond to the estimate made by the CSC representatives during the data collection phase. We are aware that these might have changed since then. In particular, the cases of CSCs marked with * are likely to have seen a substantial decrease in terms of the size of their membership base as those CSCs closed down or faced legal issues around the time of the launch of the survey.

Given the small number of participants from some of the CSCs (Table 12), and due to ethical considerations (i.e. to avoid potential identification of participants, and to limit direct comparisons between CSCs – which, in a landscape characterized by some divisiveness and tensions among some of the actors (Pardal, 2018a), could be problematic), we present the survey data in aggregate form throughout the paper. This follows the recommendations and practices of previous research with regards to the handling of sensitive information (Adler & Adler, 2002; Milan, 2014; Wiles et al., 2008).

The goal of this analysis is primarily of a descriptive nature, seeing also as this constitutes the first examination of Belgian CSC members. Nevertheless, a more complex analysis of the relationships between different variables will be integrated in subsequent papers. We hope that this first effort creates opportunities for comparative analysis with the results of surveys in other settings with a CSC presence (in particular, Uruguay – as the only nationwide jurisdiction to have legalized and regulated the model).

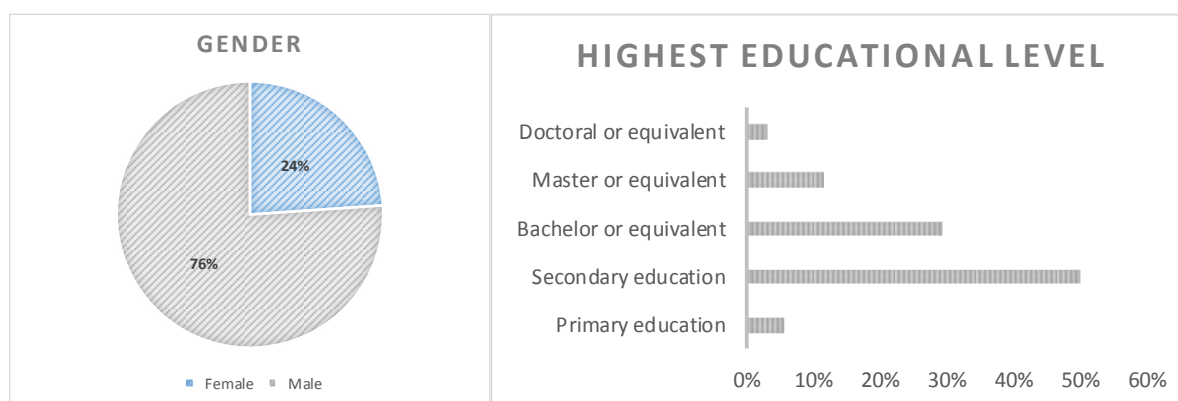
3. Results

Introducing the CSC members in the sample

The CSC members who took part in the survey are aged between 21 and 74 years old (median age of 40 years), are most predominantly male (over three-quarters of the sample) and Belgian – as illustrated in Figure 8 below. More generally, although most CSCs allow members to enrol

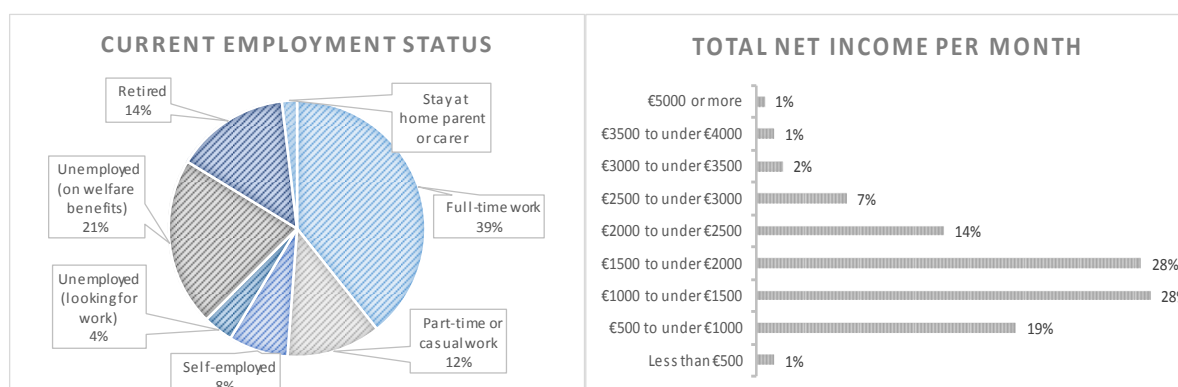
starting from 18 years old (Pardal, in preparation-b),¹⁵⁰ our sample does not include members younger than 21 years old. According to the latest data available from the National Health survey (WIV-ISP, 2015) – data from 2013, prevalence of current use of cannabis was higher among the age group of 15-34 year olds. The percentage was also three times higher for men than women (3.9% vs. 1.3%) (WIV-ISP, 2015). Other studies have noted a higher male participation in the cannabis market as well (Caulkins & Pacula, 2005; Rotermann & Langlois, 2015; van Laar et al., 2013), including studies drawing on survey data among Spanish CSC members (Arnosó & Elgorriaga, 2016; Marín, 2008).¹⁵¹ In terms of nationality, the predominance of Belgian participants (90.2%) was to some extent expected seeing as nationality (or in some cases, residency, which explains the presence of foreign users in the sample)¹⁵² is another requirement imposed by the Belgian CSCs for the enrolment of new members (Pardal, in preparation-b).

Figure 8: Overview of key demographic characteristics of the Belgian CSC members' sample.



Note: n=163.

Note: n=156.



Note: n=160.

Note: n=155.

¹⁵⁰ Being 18 years old was also the minimum age threshold for participation in the survey.

¹⁵¹ The study by Arnoso & Elgorriaga (2016) recruited participants from 11 CSCs which were affiliated with a particular CSC Federation in the Basque Country, counting with 458 participants. In addition, the study also included a control group of 135 users who were not members of CSCs. We will refer to the CSC members' results throughout the paper (unless otherwise noted).

¹⁵² CSC members from other countries represented in our sample include: Canada (0.6%), Colombia (0.6%), Croatia (0.6%), France (1.9%), Germany (1.2%), Italy (1.2%), the Netherlands (2.5%), Spain (1.2%).

In terms of participants' educational background and employment situation (Figure 8), about 44% have completed university studies (from bachelor to doctoral level degrees), making this a relatively high-educated sample. The results are comparable with the findings from the two surveys among Spanish CSC members (Arnosó & Elgorriaga, 2016; Marín, 2008). In the general population in Belgium, the percentage of those with a university diploma was lower (about 30%), based on 2016 figures (DG Statistique, 2017). In the National Health Survey (WIV-ISP, 2015), only about 11% of the 15-64 years old who reported daily or near daily use of cannabis in the past 30 days (i.e. on 20 days or more) had received a university degree. Instead, the biggest percentage of university degree holders was found among those reporting using cannabis 1-3 days in the past 30 days (48.1%) (WIV-ISP, 2015).

Most study participants are currently employed as well (close to 59%), in line with Arnosó & Elgorriaga's (2016) and Marín's (2008) survey results (in the latter, 54% of the Spanish CSC members participating in the study reported being employed). According to the Eurostat figures for 2016, in Belgium about 68% of those aged between 20-64¹⁵³ were employed (DG Statistique, 2017). About one-fifth of our sample indicated being out of work and receiving welfare benefits. This was often a result of illness, and associated also with (self-declared) use of cannabis for medical reasons (32 out of 34 cases were medical cannabis users). The largest proportion of respondents receive a total net income between 500EUR-1999EUR per month (Figure 8). In Belgium, the median net monthly income was estimated at 1873EUR for 2017, and the minimum living wage (or '*leefloon*') corresponded to 892.70EUR¹⁵⁴ (Brys & Vanoost, 2017; POD MI, 2017).

CSC membership

The survey included an open-ended question prompting the participants to discuss the reasons they considered it important to enrol at a CSC.¹⁵⁵ Being able to obtain cannabis through these associations was, unsurprisingly, the most commonly mentioned factor – mentioned by 155 respondents. Many made general remarks describing the CSC as a source of cannabis: "*to be able to provide for my use of cannabis*" (M92). In addition, in a considerable number of responses (n=47), CSC members explained that the CSC was a way to avoid other illicit channels of supply, as illustrated in the following quotation: "*to avoid coming into contact with dealers and their milieu*" (M79). In contrast, the CSC was described as a "quasi-legal", "as legal as possible", or even as the "only legal way" to obtain cannabis in Belgium (n=30). While cannabis cultivation and distribution remain prohibited in the country (Pardal, 2016a), CSC members seem to share their representatives' claims that the CSC activities can be understood in light of

¹⁵³ Please note that our sample includes respondents aged between 21-74 years old.

¹⁵⁴ This amount corresponds to the benefit granted to a single person living alone as per 1 September 2017.

¹⁵⁵ A total of 171 (out of 190) respondents answered this question. Respondents typically referred to multiple factors, which we grouped under three broad categories: supply-related reasons, activist reasons, other. As most offered also additional detail in relation, particularly, to the supply function CSCs played, a number of sub-themes emerged as well (such as avoiding the illicit market, price of cannabis, etc.) as discussed above.

the 2005 Ministerial Guideline (Pardal, 2018a), as this participant pointed out: *“to act within the spirit of the Ministerial Guideline of 25 January of 2005”* (M101). Some confusion with regards to the applicable cannabis legislation thus remains (Gelders & Vander Laenen, 2007). Many respondents (n= 38) alluded also to their (self-defined) medical use of cannabis and saw the CSCs as adequate suppliers for that end (Pardal & Bawin, 2018), for instance:

“Because I needed cannabis as a medicine and I was tired of having to buy my medicine in shadowy back rooms in the Netherlands” (M81).

The CSC members often explained joining a CSC as they were unable to obtain cannabis from Dutch coffee shops or because the CSCs were closer to their place of residence (n=23).

Two aspects associated with the cannabis supplied by the CSCs were also mentioned by respondents to explain their motivation to join a CSC. Firstly, many (n=63) thought that the cannabis produced and delivered by the CSCs was of high quality, produced biologically, as one of the members explained:

“to have access to a decent and responsible product, in which no harmful substances have been used and which has been grown in an organic way under the supervision of people who know what they are doing and who can deliver a quality product” (M101).

Secondly, the price was another positive element associated with the supply of cannabis through a CSC according to the survey respondents (n=15). Some described it as being a *“reasonable price”* and others considered it cheap(er).

In addition to supply-related motivations, a smaller number of CSC members discussed joining a CSC from an activist standpoint. Becoming a CSC member was described as making a statement, extending support for the initiative and the CSC (*“I have joined to support the CSC”*, M76), and the broader ‘cannabis movement’: *“Through my membership at a CSC I also support the cannabis activism in Belgium”* (M87). Contributing to a change in the domestic drug laws was also articulated as a driver to join a CSC (*“to join the fight for legalization”*, M119). Being able, as a CSC member, to counter stigmatized views of cannabis users was also seen as important, as one of our respondents highlighted:

“But the main reason for becoming a member is broader... what I want to say with this is... the fact that you can contribute to policy, the fact that you can break the taboo and show that you, as a normal person, can also be a user” (M89).

The Belgian CSCs only accept candidates who are not members of other Belgian CSCs. However, the CSC representatives we spoke to noted the difficulties in applying that rule, as no CSC membership database has been created in Belgium (Pardal, in preparation-b). Nevertheless, our survey data suggests that multiple CSC membership remains uncommon, as less than 5% of participants reported being members of more than one CSC.¹⁵⁶ Mobility of members

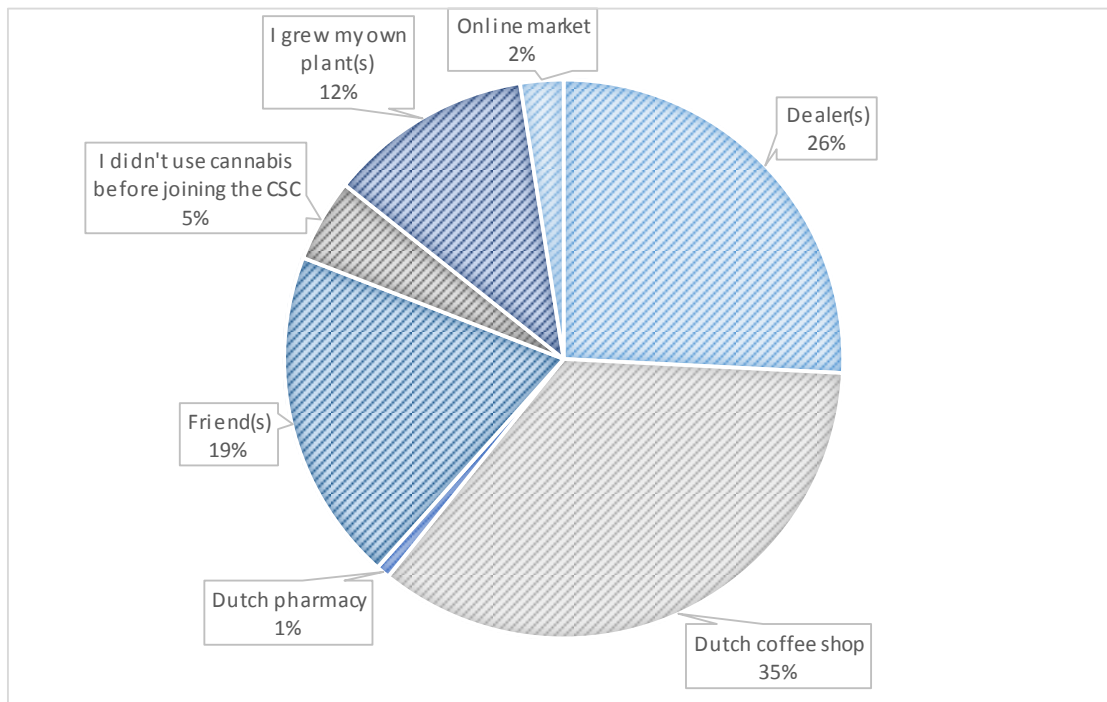
¹⁵⁶ Out of those 8 cases, 2 indicated CSC2 as the secondary CSC (the remaining did not provide an answer to that question). This CSC had in the context of an ongoing court case, suspended the production and distribution of

between Belgian CSCs was also exceptional, as only 11 participants (6.4%) had been members of a different CSC in the past. The decision to leave the first CSC was in some cases related to its closure (e.g.: “*this CSC was dissolved due to a judicial intervention*”, M71), due to personal conflicts with the directors of that CSC, dissatisfaction with its functioning, or the emergence of a new CSC closer to the place of residence of the respondent.

Supply patterns among CSC members

Before obtaining cannabis through a CSC, our survey participants resorted to a variety of other suppliers: dealers, Dutch coffee shops and pharmacies, friends, and the online market (Figure 9). Others also grew their own plants. Supply via a coffee shop seems to have been the most commonly used channel (35%) prior to enrolment at a CSC, as well as through dealers (25.8%) and friends (19.3%).

Figure 9: CSC members' former supplier(s).



Note: Response rate for this question was about 92% (174 out of 190 respondents).

This finding confirms the perceived increase in the volume of CSC members following the changes to the Dutch coffee shop policy circa 2012 (Pardal, 2018a),¹⁵⁷ which imposed

cannabis among its members. Due to a strong collaboration with another CSC, members of CSC2 were invited to register with the other Club in order to continue having access to cannabis (while at the same time having the possibility to remain enrolled at CSC2).

¹⁵⁷ Of relevance here are two new criteria added to the coffee shop policy since 2012: accordingly, only registered members were able to obtain cannabis through those outlets; and only residents were granted access to the coffee shops. The new criteria were first implemented in the southern provinces of Limburg, Noord-Brabant and

additional restrictions upon Belgian citizens who previously acquired cannabis through those outlets (Grund & Breeksema, 2017; Ooyen-Houben et al., 2014). Some of the survey participants also discussed this as a reason to enter a CSC, as for instance:

“Because of the legislative change in the Netherlands where it is no longer possible to buy cannabis in coffee shops if you are not a resident in the Netherlands” (M116).

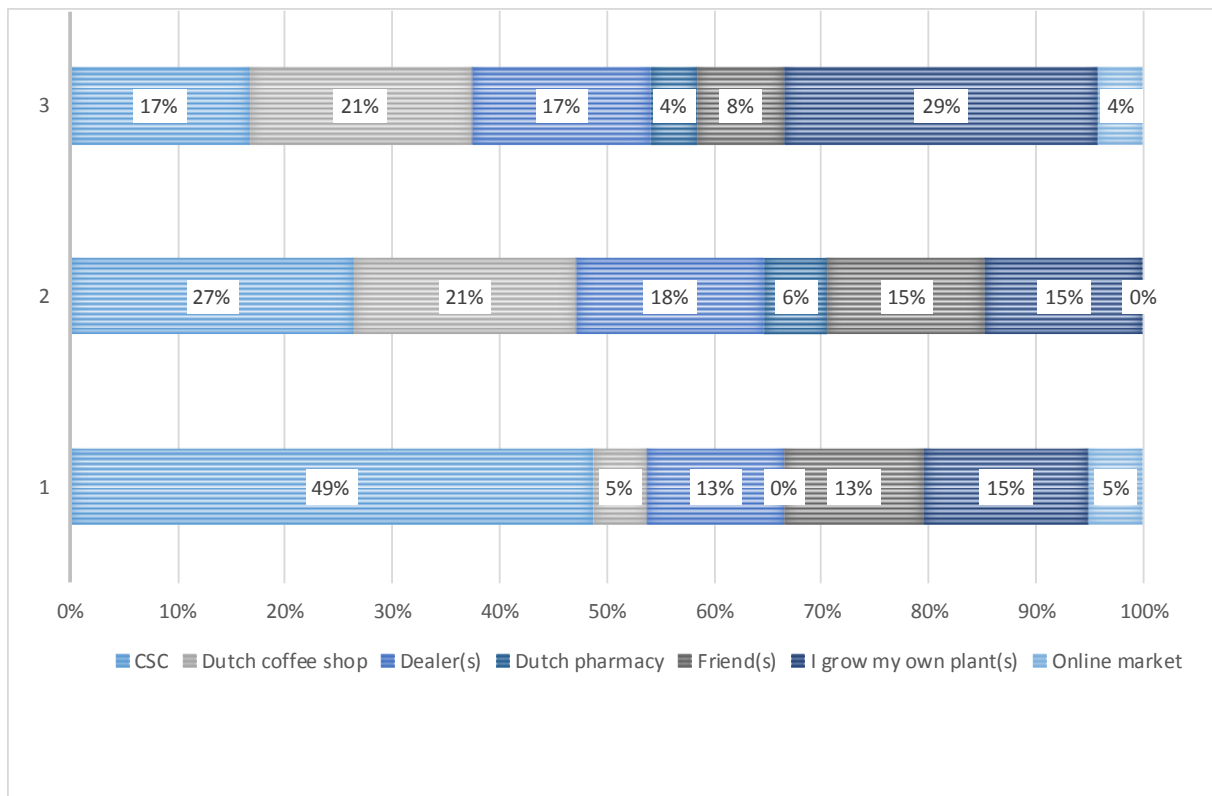
At the same time, slightly over one-quarter of the sample had previously been sourcing the cannabis from the illegal market – a source they were looking to distance themselves from, as noted above when discussing participants’ motivations to join a CSC. Interesting to note as well is that about 5% of the surveyed (17 respondents) had not used cannabis prior to joining a CSC. Most of these ‘new users’ declared currently using cannabis for medical reasons.

We should note that among the seven CSCs participating in the study, two were not supplying cannabis to their members when the survey was launched (Pardal, in preparation-b). In addition, (the three) members of two other active CSCs who participated in the survey did not complete this section of the questionnaire, so the data gathered in relation to supply issues is based on the responses of members of three CSCs only as well as from ‘CSCs unknown’.¹⁵⁸ Among those who were receiving cannabis from their CSC, most relied exclusively on the CSC to secure the cannabis they were using (71.9%). About 28% reported acquiring cannabis through other sources, in addition to their CSC. For the latter group, the CSC generally remained the principal cannabis supplier. When asked to rank up to three key suppliers in order of importance, home cultivation, dealers, and Dutch coffee shops seemed to be the main channels members resorted to in addition to their CSC (Figure 10).

Zeeland, which share the border with Belgium. The registration criteria (also called ‘weed pass’) was later abolished, but the residency one is still in place (circa 2015, 80 from the 103 Dutch municipalities with coffee shops were implementing it) (Ooyen-Houben et al., 2014; Rijksoverheid, 2015).

¹⁵⁸ 160 out of 190 respondents answered the question “currently, is your CSC distributing cannabis among the members?” (84.2% response rate); 131 answered positively (82%), and 29 members indicated their CSC was not actively supplying cannabis to the members (18%).

Figure 10: CSC members' principal suppliers in order of importance.



Note: 39 members had indicated relying on multiple sources for cannabis in response to the previous question. Of those, when asked to indicate their principal cannabis supplier, 39 respondents indicated one supplier only, 34 selected two key suppliers in order of importance, and 24 added a third supplier.

Beyond indicating which other suppliers they relied on, 38 survey participants have further offered some detail on the reasons to combine multiple suppliers. Members told us they resorted to other supply channels because they were not always able to acquire sufficient cannabis through their CSC to meet their personal consumption needs, and there was often a long time between distribution moments or in some instances these did not take place or were suspended for some time, for instance due to law enforcement interventions. One of these respondents explained that:

“The Club can provide me a maximum of 60grams every 2 to 3 months and if I do not have enough I go to a Dutch coffee shop or to Belgian, Dutch, German or French dealer groups (very dangerous)” (M66).

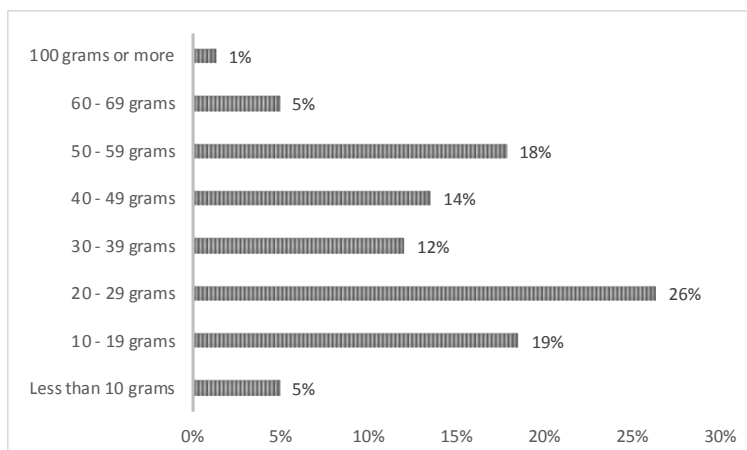
In addition, some might at times look to acquire cannabis products or varieties (e.g. hashish or specific strains) not available through their CSC or grow their own plant(s) (*“to also be busy in the garden”*, M152), as the following CSC member explained:

“For strains that my CSC does not offer (e.g., hashish) I go to a Dutch coffee shop. Growing your own plant is also fun, allows you to discover what you can create yourself, it’s cheap, and natural” (M132).

The fact that the distribution system at the Belgian CSCs does not foresee constant availability, and requires immediate payment upon delivery, for some participants the costs could at times be too burdensome: *“the CSC asks for a lot of money at once”* (M55). Similarly, one other member mentioned: *“I don’t always have enough money to pay a large sum of money at once”* (M165).

In terms of the supply of cannabis at the Belgian CSCs, we found that typically the members surveyed had received cannabis from their CSC on up to 6 occasions during the past 12 months. The smaller group of members indicating having received cannabis on 7 or more occasions (7.1%) tended to be primarily CSC members (self-reportedly) using cannabis for medical reasons (in 9 out of 10 cases). This echoes the reports from CSC representatives, who have acknowledged organizing more frequent distribution moments for members using cannabis for medical reasons (Pardal & Bawin, 2018). The quantity of cannabis typically received at each distribution moment organized by the CSC can be situated mainly between 10 and 59 grams, with the most common amount reported being 20-29grams (Figure 11). While these values might be, to some extent, indicative of members’ consumption patterns given that most members had indicated the CSC as their only supplier, the amount of cannabis available for distribution at each moment is also dependent of the production capacity of each CSC (which, as we have noted elsewhere, might fluctuate and be affected by police controls (Pardal, 2018a, in preparation-b)). At the same time, given the price per gram asked by the CSCs which ranges between 6.5-9EUR (vs. 8-9.5EUR estimated street market price circa 2013, as per: Plettinckx et al. (2014)), the cost of the one-time payment could be a barrier to obtaining larger amounts (if those were to be available), as noted above. For instance, obtaining 24.5gram at the cheaper value charged by a Belgian CSC (6.5EUR) would amount to a 159.25EUR transaction, and considering a price per gram of 9EUR this would correspond to 220.5EUR. We have no evidence of quantity discounts (as discussed for instance in relation to the US cannabis market by Caulkins & Pacula, 2005) being applied by the Belgian CSCs. In some cases, there might be a price differentiation for CSC members using cannabis for medical reasons though (Pardal & Bawin, 2018).

Figure 11: Quantity of cannabis typically received per distribution moment.



Note: 140 (out of 190) participants completed this question

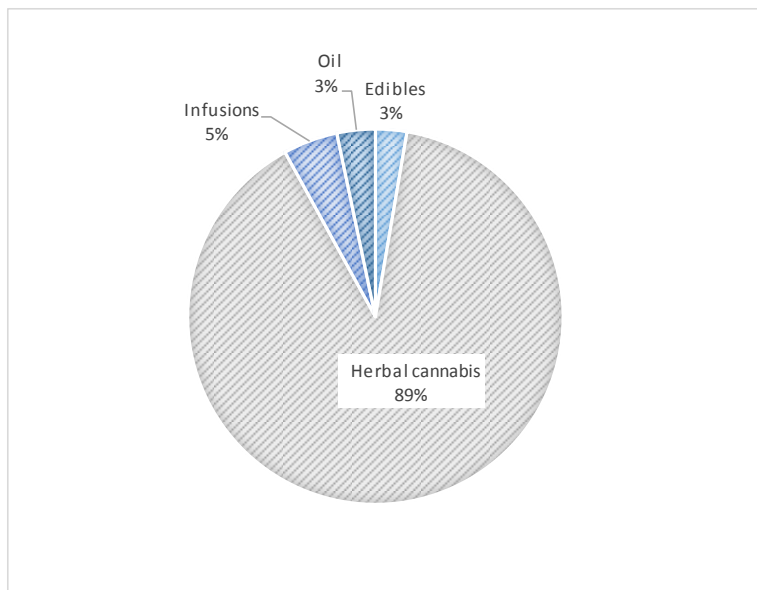
In accordance to what is the known CSCs' policy (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, in preparation-b), most study participants typically receive herbal cannabis from their CSC (94.4%), in a variety of strains, and only in a few cases reported acquiring infusions, oils or edibles via the CSC (Figure 12). Herbal cannabis is the only form of cannabis distributed by all active CSCs according to the members' accounts. The Belgian CSCs seem to have at least two different types of cannabis strains available for distribution. The CSC members who took part in the survey seem to be lacking further knowledge of the type of cannabis received though. When asked about their best estimate of the THC and CBD contents¹⁵⁹ of the cannabis they most typically obtained through their CSC, most were only somewhat confident about the value or indicated not being able to estimate it; this was particularly the case in relation to CBD – as 63.2% noted not knowing the percent of CBD present in the cannabis they obtained through a CSC. Based on the estimates brought forward by the members who reported being confident about the typical THC and/or CBD contents of the cannabis they obtain from their CSC, the median THC percentage was 15% (and the range: 3-21%), and the median CBD content was estimated at 5% (ranging between less than 1% and 25%).

There is some indication from the available literature that users' (and growers') perceptions of cannabis potency may be an over- or under- estimate of the actual THC content. For instance, an analysis by Lakhdar (2009), which drew on 2005 data from a survey among daily users of cannabis in France – who were also asked to provide a cannabis sample for toxicological analysis, found gaps between participants' perceptions and the results of the laboratorial analysis: *“the higher their expectations are, the greater the mean and the median of the THC gap is, or the greater the mistake done by users about the potency of their cannabis”* (p. 8). At the same time, the study participants with significantly more use experience were more likely to err by under-estimating the THC content (Lakhdar, 2009). According to a review of the international literature, McLaren, Swift, Dillon, and Allsop (2008) noted increases in cannabis potency in the UK, the Netherlands (although it dropped again since 2004), and in the US, but as *“there is enormous variation in potency, within a given year, from sample to sample”* (p. 1106), and other methodological issues (e.g., different testing, sample selection, etc.), so the results should be interpreted with caution. The latest data available (2016-2017) from the annual monitoring of THC content from cannabis sold among (50) Dutch coffee shops reported an average THC percentage of 16.9%.¹⁶⁰ (Rigter & Niesink, 2017). Decorte (2011) referred also to Belgian seizure data from 2003-2004, which pointed to an average THC of 13.6% in 2003 and 13.2% in 2004 (in a study by Van Tichelt et al., 2005).

¹⁵⁹ Cannabis contains a range of cannabinoids. The most known and primary psychoactive substance is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Cannabidiol (CBD) has received more attention in recent years as it may reduce anxiety and has antipsychotic properties. The ratio THC:CBD may thus have important implications in terms of the health effects of cannabis use (Burgdorf et al., 2011).

¹⁶⁰ The authors noted a difference in THC concentration between Dutch-grown cannabis ('nederwiet'), which on average amounted to 16.9% and imported cannabis, which had a lower THC content, estimated at 6.9%.

Figure 12: Form of cannabis typically received from Belgian CSCs.



Note: Based on 142 responses from survey respondents (74.7% response rate).

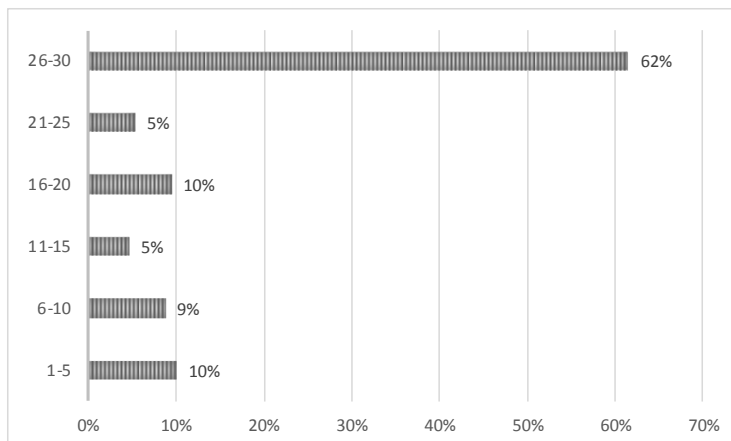
CSC members' cannabis use

The age of first use of cannabis among the current CSC members who participated in our survey ranged between 12 and 67 years old (median: 17 years old). This is similar to the age of first use reported in the last National Health Survey which found a median age of 17 years old among 15-64 years old reporting ever having used cannabis (WIV-ISP, 2015), and echoes also the results from a study into Spanish CSC members, in which participants' median age of first use was 16 years old (Marín, 2008). It is noteworthy that of those responding to the question: “Do you currently use cannabis for medical reasons?”, half reported using cannabis for medical reasons.¹⁶¹ Among those respondents, about 51% did not currently have a written recommendation, such as a prescription or a letter, from a health care professional (i.e., a general physician, a specialist or a nurse) advising the use of cannabis.¹⁶² Given the relevance of this issue to understanding the CSC model, we discuss several aspects related to the supply and use of cannabis for medical reasons in a separate paper (Pardal & Bawin, 2018). CSC members were most predominantly current cannabis users, as most reported using cannabis in the past 30 days (92.9%). What is more, most of them were near daily or daily users (61.5% indicated using cannabis in 26-30 days during the past 30 days) – Figure 13.

¹⁶¹ From the 190 respondents, 80 indicated currently using cannabis for medical reasons, 80 indicated not using cannabis for medical reasons, and 30 did not respond to this question.

¹⁶² About 49% reported having such a recommendation (27.8% from a general physician; 19% from a specialist; and 2.5% from a nurse). Among those who currently did not have a recommendation, 45,6% reported never having had one, and 5.1% had received a recommendation in the past but currently did not have one.

Figure 13: Number of use days in the past 30 days.



NOTE: n=148.

This is a higher percentage than that recorded in the 2013 National Health Survey, according to which “one in five (21%) of current users are heavy cannabis users (>20 days/month)” (WIV-ISP, 2015, p. 279, own translation). However, in a 2006 survey among Spanish CSC members, almost 70% reported daily or near daily use of cannabis (Marín, 2008). In the more recent survey among Basque Country CSC members, about 77% reported using cannabis daily (Arnosó & Elgorriaga, 2016). In terms of the quantities used (Table 13), on a typical and light day of use the median value was 0.5gram. On a heavy day of use, that value raised to 1gram.

Table 13: CSC members’ cannabis consumption on heavy, typical and light day of use.

| | Heavy day of use | Typical day of use | Light day of use |
|--------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Range | <0.1 – 6gr | <0.1 – 4.5gr | <0.1 – 4gr |
| Median | 1gr | 0.5gr | 0.5gr |
| Mean | 1.53gr | 0.87gr | 0.61gr |

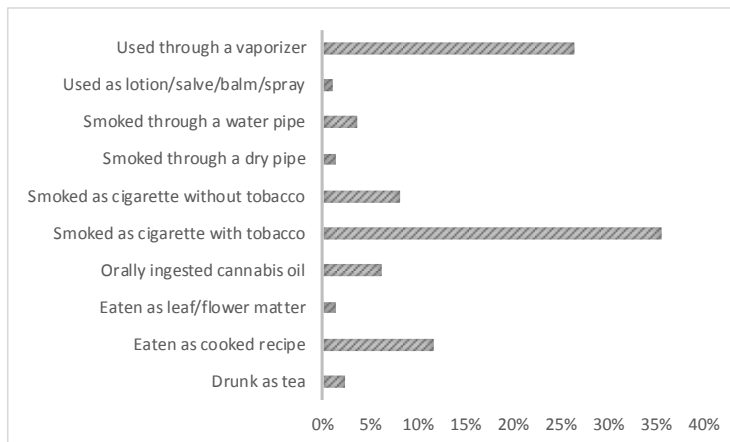
Note: 133 respondents indicated a valid value for heavy and typical day of use, and 111 for a light day of use. While participants were asked to estimate the quantity used in grams, a number of respondents (13, 11 and 8 participants with regards to heavy, typical, and light day of use, respectively) did refer to number of joints, oil drops, or cookies consumed, or otherwise described use in other terms (e.g.: “very little”). These responses were excluded from our analysis (similarly, Caulkins and Pacula (2005) noted the lack of consensus on how to convert quantities in joints to grams, and did not include the reported purchases of joints in their analysis).

When asked to reflect about whether there had been any overall changes to the amount of cannabis used since joining their current CSC, about 53% indicated no changes in the levels of use, and close to 20% were unable to identify a clear trend noting that their cannabis use fluctuated.¹⁶³ The same value was registered by Arnoso and Elgorriaga (2016), as 53% of respondents indicated maintaining a stable pattern of use since joining the CSC. In terms of consumption methods, smoking cannabis as a cigarette mixed with tobacco appeared to be the

¹⁶³ About 5% indicated using much more than before joining the CSC, and 4% reported using a little more now too.

most common one (35.9%), as per Figure 14 (consistent also with Arnoso and Elgorriaga's (2016) findings).¹⁶⁴

Figure 14: Typical form of consumption.



NOTE: n=167.

Cannabis consumption through a vaporizer (26.6%) was also a commonly used method – and one that the CSCs have reported encouraging (by for instance, organizing group buying of vaporizers or securing discounts for those purchases). While most participants reported stable use of smoked cannabis with tobacco since joining the CSC (67%), the use of cannabis through a vaporizer seems to have increased, as 64.2% of respondents noted using it much or a little more. Most respondents had not (ever) received any treatment in relation to their use of cannabis (94.4%). There seem to be opportunities to discuss cannabis use with other CSC members or representatives, during the intake interview (58.6%) and other gatherings of the CSC (29.3%), or upon request of the members (4.5%). Nevertheless, close to 7% had not talked about cannabis use at any point during their trajectory in their own CSC.

4. Discussion and conclusions

While the CSC model has recently been featured in the scholarly debate about the range of alternative models for the supply of cannabis (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte et al., 2016; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014), the body of literature on the functioning of the model remains rather thin (Belackova et al., 2016; Decorte, 2015; Marín, 2008; Queirolo et al., 2016). An aspect of the model that has been particularly neglected in research to date is an in-depth consideration of members' experiences – even if learning more about CSC members' socio-demographic features, levels of use (and changes thereof), and supply patterns, among other issues, could provide important insights to our understanding of the role played by CSCs. This paper makes a modest contribution to that body of knowledge, by offering a first

¹⁶⁴ Tobacco use in the past 30 days was reported by 74,2% of respondents.

descriptive sketch of Belgian CSC members, drawing on survey data from 190 current members. In our sample, the typical CSC member is a Belgian, middle-class, middle-aged, high-educated male user. This is consistent with the findings from a 2006 survey among Spanish CSC members, conducted by Marín (2008). It seems to suggest that the CSCs have indeed primarily gathered adult and national (extant) users, in line with their self-defined membership criteria and the overall ethos of the model (Pardal, in preparation-b). The way the CSCs organize the distribution of cannabis to their members, with bi-monthly (or less frequent) supply moments where the members can acquire large(r) amounts to cover their consumption needs for the subsequent weeks/months (Pardal, in preparation-b), may not be well suited for users with a more limited financial capability (as members need to make one off payments), and could in practice translate into a limit to the real access to the model. No quantity discounts or other types of promotions seem to be applied by the CSCs (Pardal, in preparation-b), although members using cannabis for medical reasons are generally able to obtain cannabis at a cheaper price at the CSC (Pardal & Bawin, 2018).

The survey participants have primarily joined the CSCs as a way to secure cannabis, and thought of the CSCs as more legitimate and quality-driven suppliers, although enrolment with a CSC was also described as a way to support the cannabis movement. The Belgian CSCs have appealed mainly to former (and, in some cases, current) Dutch coffee shop goers. The change of policy in the Netherlands seems indeed to have contributed to a shift from that market to the Belgian CSCs, confirming earlier findings from this study (Pardal, 2018a). Current CSC members (26%) reported also having resorted to illegal market dealers to purchase cannabis prior to enrolling with a Belgian CSC. This suggests that the model may have indeed the potential to curtail, to some extent, the illicit market – especially with regards to regular users (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a). In fact, the CSC members in our sample are by and large current cannabis users, and the majority (61%) used cannabis on a daily or near daily basis (26-30 days in the past 30 days). A similar picture emerged from a survey among Spanish CSC members, which revealed a yet larger proportion of frequent users (close to 70% daily or near daily users) (Marín, 2008). Marín's study (2008) did not enquire about the quantity used by CSC members on a typical day of use, and generally there is a need to undertake further efforts to collect data on consumption (both numbers of use day, as well as grams used per use day) (Kilmer et al., 2013a; Kilmer & Pacula, 2016). The available literature does suggest that *“those who use on more days per month also tend to use more grams per day of use”* (Kilmer et al., 2013a, p. 8; van Laar et al., 2013). Furthermore, according to Caulkins et al. (2012a), those using cannabis on a daily or near daily basis account for about 80% of the total quantity of cannabis consumed. A previous study based on survey data from seven European countries observed that among users reporting using cannabis in 25 days in the past month the average quantity of herbal cannabis used per day of use was about 0.9gram, and 1.5 gram for those who reported 30 days of use in the past month (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2013). In our survey, although we did not enquire about how many days of typical/light/heavy use participants registered in the past 30 days, the

average quantity consumed on a typical day of use corresponded to 0.87gram, on a light day of use it was 0.61 gram, and 1.53 gram on a heavy day of use.

Previous studies have also explored the potential harm reduction role played by CSCs (Belackova et al., 2016; Decorte et al., 2017). Our survey has found that, although CSC members consider that the cannabis they receive from their CSCs is of good quality, they have little knowledge of the THC-CBD ratio of the cannabis they acquire through their CSCs. This can also be explained by the limited or lack of testing done by the CSCs (which thus may also not have this information) (Pardal, in preparation-b). In any case, those responding estimated that the cannabis typically obtained through the CSC amounted to 15% THC (median value; range: 3-21%), with CBD at 5% (median value; range: 1-25%). Most CSC members did discuss their use of cannabis with CSC representatives in different moments, which suggests that the CSCs may create opportunities to aid and follow up the members' consumption levels and identify cases of problematic use. As discussed elsewhere (Chapter 8), CSC representatives reported having a conversation about cannabis use (among other issues) with candidate members upon admission, and maintain somewhat regular contact afterwards (Chapter 9).

Our data on supply patterns (in relation to participants' current CSC) is limited, in part because some of the CSCs were, at the time of the survey, not actively producing and distributing cannabis among their members (Pardal, 2018a, in preparation-b). This is illustrative of the context of legal vulnerability in which the Belgian CSCs are operating (Pardal, 2016a), and suggests that law enforcement interventions or fear of being 'criminalized' have (directly or indirectly) affected CSCs' capacity to play a supply function (Pardal, in preparation-b). At the same time, for most members who did respond, the CSC was the sole cannabis supplier. Even among the minority of participants (28%) who indicated maintaining several suppliers, the CSC was still considered as the primary source for cannabis. In addition, those members relied on Dutch coffee shops, as well as other illegal dealers. Some instability in terms of CSCs' supply patterns, which has at times resulted in changes to the planned distribution moments or suspension of supply for a period of time (or indefinitely) seems to have played a role. But keeping several suppliers was also described as a way to obtain different strains or cannabis types which might not be available through the CSC (such as for instance hashish).

The limited assortment of cannabis products delivered through the CSCs could thus be both a strength from a public health perspective (as CSCs have not sought to transform or promote innovative, high-THC cannabis products, as it has been reported in other for-profit models – see for instance Carlini et al. (2017), Smart et al. (2017)) and weakness of the model (as it might not meet the preferences of some users, especially the more frequent users: Boidi, Queirolo, and Cruz (2016)). As discussed elsewhere, some of the CSCs reported producing cannabis oil, butter and cookies but only in exceptional cases (Pardal, 2018b, in preparation-b). Some of the CSC members also reported enjoying cultivating cannabis, and thus grew also a plant(s) at home in addition to the cannabis received from the CSC.

In our sample the proportion of users relying on multiple suppliers was small. This finding suggests, however, that for some users resorting to one supply model only may not be sufficient or suitable. While a system such as the one introduced in Uruguay (Cerdá & Kilmer, 2017; Queirolo et al., 2016), which allows users to select a preferred model of supply (i.e., home cultivation, CSC, or sales through pharmacy) may attenuate that issue, it is plausible that some users (especially those using more frequently) might prefer to simultaneously rely on more than one supply model (as suggested also by Boidi et al. (2016), and thus to some degree a 'grey' or 'black' market may persist even in a scenario where at least one supply model is authorized .

Chapter 13: Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: understanding members' participation. A cause (too) high?

1. Introduction

Cannabis Social Clubs (hereinafter CSCs or Clubs) are formal organizations of cannabis users which seek to contribute to a change in the current prohibitionist framework with regards to the supply of cannabis, and who have developed a particular model for the supply of that substance (Hunt et al., 2010; Pardal, 2016b). CSCs are typically non-profit, registered organizations, which constitute a middle-ground option for the supply of cannabis: the substance is produced by a group of members and distributed close to/at production cost among the adult, registered members of the associations (closed supply) (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2018b). At the same time, previous research has contended that CSCs can be conceptualized as social movement organizations, integrating a broader cannabis movement which indeed seeks the reform of cannabis laws (even if within that movement, different actors might be pleading for different legislative scenarios – for instance, different legal models for the supply of cannabis, with the CSC model being one of such scenarios) (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Marín, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017). In Belgium, CSCs have emerged and been active since 2006 (Pardal, 2018a), but no legislative change with regards to those organizations' claims has taken place. As a result, the CSCs have been operating in a context of legal uncertainty, given that the cultivation and distribution of cannabis remain prohibited in the country, but there is a policy of tolerance towards the possession of three grams or of one cannabis plant in accordance with a 2005 Ministerial Guideline (Gelders & Vander Laenen, 2007; Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2016a).

This paper focuses on CSC members' participation and engagement within CSCs. In particular, our analysis seeks to answer the following questions: 1) what are the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals registered as members of CSCs?; 2) to what extent do CSC members participate in the internal decision-making of the organizations as well as in their broader set of activities (repertoire of action)? In so doing, we contribute to a better understanding of the cannabis movement (through the perspective of CSCs), of the individuals active in it, as well as of CSCs' capability – as key actors within that movement (as further discussed below), to mobilize members' engagement. To the best of our knowledge, these issues have not yet been studied to date with regards to the cannabis movement.

Social movements and 'mobilizing structures'

Although social movements have been defined in different terms, we follow Snow et al.'s (2004) view, conceptualizing them with consideration to the following aspects: 1) collective or joint action, 2) change-oriented goals or claims, 3) extra- or non-institutional collective action, 4)

some degree of organization and 5) temporal continuity (p. 6). Organizations play an important role within a social movement, as they mobilize resources such as people and their time and efforts, and financial resources, among others (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Rucht, 1996), they help develop a movement's sense of identity, and ensure continuity of the movement claims through time (della Porta & Diani, 2014). As such, movement organizations often play a leadership role on behalf of the wider social movement. McCarthy and Zald (1977) advanced an often cited definition of social movement organization as a key concept to their resource mobilization theory. Accordingly, a social movement organization (SMO) *"is a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals"* (p. 1218). Social movement organizations (SMOs) are thus important building blocks within a social movement (Kriesi, 1996), and have been described as 'formal movement-mobilizing structures' (McCarthy, 1996, p. 145).¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, a social movement should not be equated with its social movement organizations (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Lofland, 1996).

Social movement organizations can adopt different forms. Kriesi (1996) highlighted four particular organizational features that may result in differences among SMOs: 1) formalization, i.e., whether and how SMOs develop written rules and procedures, fixed criteria for membership, formal leadership, etc.; 2) the degree to which there is professionalization with the SMO, for instance by employing paid staff or introducing opportunities for career development; 3) internal differentiation, by establishing a clear division of labor and/or setting up different territorial subunits (decentralization); and 4) the development of hierarchical vs. horizontal decision-making structures. More grassroots, participatory or professional SMOs may emerge as a result of how these 'organizational dilemmas' are resolved (and which may change throughout the course of the movement) (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Diani & Donati, 1999; Kriesi, 1996; Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000). SMOs intervene also in different ways, and develop a range of various initiatives, i.e., build their own 'repertoire of action' (Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1986). Such a repertoire of action has included legal activities such as organizing petitions, lobbying, or lawful protests and demonstrations or marches, as well as boycotts of certain products or services (Tarrow, 1994; Taylor & Dyke, 2004; Tilly, 1986). Less conventional interventions, such as illegal activities, both non-violent such as the peaceful occupation of buildings or other civil disobedience actions, as well as violent activities resulting in physical harm or injury of others, have also been employed by SMOs in different instances (Dalton, 1988; Taylor & Dyke, 2004). New elements have also emerged within SMOs repertoire of action, such as the use of internet and online advocacy, as well as transnational mobilization, for instance (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Earl et al., 2015; Garrett, 2006). Adopting one or other method of action is a strategic decision by the SMO, and might be driven by different logics: for instance by organizing a march or demonstration the SMO might intend to show in numbers the support the movement receives; differently, the SMO might seek to create disruption by

¹⁶⁵ McCarthy & Zald (1977) also put forward the notion of social movement industry, corresponding to *"all SMOs that have as their goal the attainment of the broadest preferences of a social movement"* (p. 1218).

promoting a strike or boycott; or to convey or reinforce a moral message (even if with personal costs for participants) by breaking what are considered as unjust laws (della Porta & Diani, 2014). Taylor and Dyke (2004) argued that while SMOs are more likely to draw on actions or tactics with which they are familiar, the use of innovative actions may be more successful in achieving policy change. An effective repertoire seems to relate also to the variety of forms of protest implemented by the groups, militancy (i.e., the use of disruptive tactics), size (e.g., large-scale protests), and cultural resonance (Taylor & Dyke, 2004). All types of actions come with costs and benefits for the SMOs promoting them, as well as to the broader movement, and the repertoire of action may also evolve to better adapt to the specific circumstances and context of the movement.

The cannabis movement and CSCs as social movement organizations within it: the cases of Spain and Uruguay

While CSCs are present in many other countries (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Blickman, 2014; Decorte & Pardal, 2017), their role as central actors in the cannabis movement has primarily been considered with regards to the Spanish and Uruguayan contexts. The role of CSCs (*'asociaciones cannábicas'*) has been highlighted, and they have been described as key actors within the movement: they contribute to the collective identity of the movement, implement their repertoire of action, and guarantee a lasting presence through time (Alvarez et al., 2016; Calafat et al., 2000; Marín, 2008, 454).¹⁶⁶ Marín (2008) built on the typology of social movement organizations developed by Diani and Donati (1999), and considered CSCs as being participatory movement organizations: given the participative focus of these associations, the somewhat decentralized governance structure, and primarily due to their confrontational and resistance action.

The first of such organizations were established in the 1990s, initially as registered associations *"for the study of cannabis"*, and since 2001 have explicitly included in their bylaws the goal of cultivating and distributing cannabis (Barriuso, 2011, 2012b; Martínez, 2015). In recent years, the number of CSCs has increased and their practices have diverged as well.¹⁶⁷ Drawing on the notion of repertoire of collective action, Marín (2008) identified and classified a range of actions developed primarily by the CSCs: 1) the collective cultivation of cannabis, which sought to provoke a judicial reaction, as noted also by Alvarez et al. (2016): *"these forms of cannabis production were perceived by activists as a form of resistance, affirmation and protest for legal*

¹⁶⁶ The participation of other actors in the cannabis movement, although not being the focus of the present analysis, should not be understated. For instance, Arana & Montañés (2011) have, for instance, noted the engagement of specialist magazines dedicated to the cannabis culture, of grow shops, as well as other networks and groups, and individual users. And as noted by Calafat et al. (2000), alongside these actors, other groups defending the broader goal of legalization of all drugs emerged too.

¹⁶⁷ Montañés (2017) noted that while there were some signs of consolidation and professionalization of the movement, such as for instance the creation of the first Spanish think-tank specialized on cannabis policy in 2012 (Fundación Renovatio), as well as the platform Regulación Responsable in 2014 (echoing an Uruguayan initiative) which gathered over 100 cannabis activist organizations, the movement seems to have entered a period of crisis.

change. Hence cannabis cultivation took on an unexpected meaning. It became an innovation in the repertoire of non-violent collective actions by militants in a new social movement” (p. 78). But other actions were also pursued, such as 2) competitions among cannabis growers such as ‘Cannabis Cups’, which established quality standards for the field, promoted home cultivation and challenged the current legislation (Calafat et al., 2000); 3) study meetings, including roundtables, seminars or symposia focusing on cannabis-related issues (Calafat et al., 2000); 4) legal representation of growers facing legal challenges; 5) protests; 6) informative campaigns (Calafat et al., 2000); and 7) proposals for alternative legislation (Barriuso, 2005).¹⁶⁸ While some of these actions are common to other social movements (e.g., protests), others are rather novel forms of contention (e.g. collective cultivation, Cannabis Cups). CSCs’ repertoire of action has been flexible and adapted to the changing political opportunities. The CSCs have also used the internet to disseminate the movement’s ideas and activities, in particular through their own social network platforms (Facebook, Twitter) and specialized websites (Marín & Hinojosa, 2017).

Uruguay has recently passed legislation (Law 19.172) which legalizes and regulates three models for the supply of cannabis, including CSCs. The presence of CSCs in the country is a novelty that emerged only after the new law was approved, but some of the clubs have roots in other organizations which had been previously involved in the cannabis movement (Queirolo et al., 2016). While the first activist efforts in the field of cannabis can be traced back to the late 1980s (following the end of the civic-military dictatorship in 1985), especially driven by youth groups (Aguar & Musto, 2015; Arocena & Aguar, 2017), it is only during the 2000s that references to an actual social movement can be found in the literature. Also in Uruguay, formal organizations were set up, gathering groups of growers, users and other activists (Castro, 2014; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012). The repertoire of action of the organizations engaging in the cannabis movement in Uruguay has been described as innovative, and included the use of social network platforms to launch campaigns, public interventions through the media, protests and marches, concerts, but also workshops about cannabis cultivation or other cannabis-related themes, Cannabis Cups, and political debates, among others (Arocena & Aguar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012). The cannabis activists also lobbied and tried to deepen connections with key political actors. Some of the organizations were actually able to play an advisory role in the development of the new legislation (Arocena & Aguar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016). For instance, it has been noted that the initial draft of the bill did not foresee the possibility of legal home cultivation nor of CSCs, but through the negotiations cannabis activists (especially those associated with ENCOD) pushed for its inclusion (Castro, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016).

¹⁶⁸ While initially the CSC model was included in some of these proposals as a transitional option, in later claims the model was considered as a stand-alone and definitive alternative for the cannabis market, defended by the movement (Barriuso, 2005, 2011).

2. Methods

The analysis presented here draws on mixed data collected in the context of an ongoing study of CSCs in Belgium. In particular, three sets of data are mobilized: 1) documentary sources; 2) qualitative interviews and field notes; and 3) survey data. Firstly, we collected and analysed the key internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs, including their bylaws, membership forms, house-rules, and other codes of conduct. These are important sources of complementary information about the self-defined goals and procedures of these organizations (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2012). In the context of an analysis of the media framing of and by the Belgian CSCs, we conducted also a qualitative content analysis of domestic print media accounts of CSCs' activities, on which we also built here, where relevant (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017).

Secondly, we conducted face to face semi-structured interviews with 21 members of the Board of Directors¹⁶⁹ of the seven active (at the time of the start of the analysis) Belgian CSCs participating in the study.¹⁷⁰ The CSC directors of each CSC who agreed to take part in the interview were invited to join the interview session organized for their respective CSC, which took place between February 2016 and January 2017.¹⁷¹ Identification of the Belgian CSCs had as a starting point a previous exploratory research project by Decorte (2015), in which five active CSCs (circa February 2014) had been identified. Through additional fieldwork and snowballing we were able to map the Belgian CSC landscape more extensively. The design of this semi-structured questionnaire was informed by the questionnaires used for CSC studies in Belgium and Uruguay (Decorte, 2015; Queirolo et al., 2016).¹⁷² The interviews were conducted in the preferred language of each interviewee (Dutch, English or French). The interviews were recorded, and transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. We used the NVivo11 software package for coding and analysis of this data. In a first coding phase, we used a brief qualitative codebook, including pre-determined general codes which were identified through the review of relevant literature on the topic (e.g. categories such as 'becoming CSC member' and 'cultivation', among others). This preliminary stage of the coding was complemented and expanded by adding new codes which emerged inductively from the data. In doing so, the codebook was reviewed and fine-tuned, until reaching saturation of the data (Bryman, 2012; Decorte, 2016).

¹⁶⁹ Including heads of CSC subdivisions (n= 4), and one former director of one of the currently active CSCs.

¹⁷⁰ As discussed elsewhere (Pardal, 2018), the Belgian CSC landscape is characterized by some volatility and thus it is likely that the number of active CSCs might have changed since the data was collected.

¹⁷¹ Each CSC received a random identifier (CSC1-CSC7), which we use to refer to different sources of data concerning each CSC (for instance, CSC's bylaws, and other internal documents). When citing data from the interviews with the CSCs' Board of Directors we add a -D suffix per respondent.

¹⁷² The interviews included questions about the foundation and general set-up of the organizations; admission; house-rules; decision-making and internal structure; financial aspects; cultivation and distribution processes; quality control practices; relationships with other stakeholders; and reflections on the model and cannabis policy more broadly.

With a view to gain a deep(er) knowledge of the Belgian CSCs and the individuals associated with them (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014), we sought to keep close contact with those organizations, and where possible interact further with them. For instance, we were able to attend court sessions involving CSC representatives, demonstrations and marches organized by the CSCs, internal CSC meetings (General Assembly meetings, growers' meetings, and a Cannabis Cup event). We also held informal conversations with various representatives of the CSCs following the interview sessions, and regularly followed also their online interventions through their websites or social media pages. For the present analysis we thus rely also on the field notes made during various moments of CSC activity.

Finally, we draw particularly on data from an online survey among Belgian CSC members, conducted between February and September of 2017. The survey questionnaire was developed building on questions included in previous relevant surveys on substance use and political engagement¹⁷³ (Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, 2014; Decorte et al., 2012; Kilmer et al., 2013a; Swift et al., 2005; Tilburg University & Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2008), and new questions tailored to the CSC context.¹⁷⁴ The core survey questionnaire used in this study includes 66 items, including sections on: membership within a CSC, cannabis supply through a CSC, patterns of consumption, socio-demographic characteristics, views on drugs policy and political engagement. The survey includes also two items to test eligibility: only 18 years old or older respondents, who were also currently members of a Belgian CSC, were allowed to complete the survey. Participants were able to select their language of choice (Dutch, English or French) to complete the questionnaire.

The participants were recruited with the assistance of the directors of the active Belgian CSCs participating in the study. The lack of a public or reliable list of participants is an issue common to other social movement studies (Klandermans & Smith, 2002), which we sought to overcome (as much as possible) by relying on CSC directors to in turn engage with the CSC members about participating in the survey. Promotional materials about the study and the survey, including flyers, posters (and later on also QR-cards) were handed out to the CSC directors to be distributed among their members. In order to protect the privacy of the members of these CSCs, we did not collect their personal contact details (including e-mail address) but relied on the CSC representatives to establish that contact. We also used a project Facebook page and website¹⁷⁵ to disseminate information about the launch of the survey and the research project. During the time the survey was running, we asked the CSCs to send regular reminders to their members, in order to boost the response numbers. By combining the two recruitment

¹⁷³ The findings concerning patterns of use and supply among CSC members are discussed elsewhere (Chapter 12).

¹⁷⁴ During a short pilot phase (2-month period), the survey was also tested in the three languages by eight respondents (former CSC members and cannabis users familiar with the CSC model who were not eligible to participate in the actual survey). Based on the feedback received during this phase some final adjustments (in wording, types of questions, etc.) were made to the survey instrument.

¹⁷⁵ The website page can be found at: <https://cscbelgium.wixsite.com/cscbelgium> (last accessed 13 February 2018), and the Facebook page at: <https://www.facebook.com/study.csc> (last accessed 13 February 2018).

strategies (indirectly, through the CSCs, and directly, via social media) we sought to reach out to a larger number of potential participants, while at the same time limiting the opportunity for fraudulent completion of the survey by non-members. To that effect, in the survey, when enquiring about which CSC the participants were affiliated with, we purposely included a fictitious CSC name to rule out participation by non-members (only one returned questionnaire had selected that option, and it was removed from our dataset).

As indicated in Table 14, our sample includes CSC members from all the seven active CSCs participating in the study. Generally, the surveyed had no particular function (i.e. they were not growers, did not play a leadership role, nor were they responsible for other administrative tasks) within the clubs they belonged to (89.8%). The Belgian CSCs have very different sizes in terms of membership base, which also fluctuate quite often (Decorte, 2015; Pardal, in preparation-b). In addition, one of the CSCs closed down around the time the survey was launched, and one other had had its crop confiscated by the police a few months before the start of the survey. During the time the survey was running, the latter CSC as well as one other were also subject to a large scale police intervention, resulting in the detention of several CSC directors and other individuals involved with those CSCs. These law enforcement interventions are likely to have had a negative impact on the response rate, and although about 27% of the total known CSC members in Belgium did complete the survey, it is possible that those who volunteered to participate in this context are different than those who did not, thus affecting the representativeness of the sample.

Table 14: Overview of the survey sample (per CSC).

| | Distribution of survey respondents by CSC (%) | Distribution of survey respondents by CSC (frequency) | Estimated number of members by CSC |
|------------------|---|---|------------------------------------|
| CSC1 | 8.4% | 16 | 60* |
| CSC2 | 8.4% | 16 | 45* |
| CSC3 | 72.1% | 137 | 400* |
| CSC4 | 1.1% | 2 | 10 |
| CSC5 | 4.7% | 9 | 81 |
| CSC6 | 0.5% | 1 | 10* |
| CSC7 | 1.1% | 2 | 70* |
| CSC(s) not known | 3.7% | 7 | n.a. |
| Total N | | 190 | 676 |

Note: The figures included in the table concerning the number of members per CSC correspond to the estimate made by the CSC representatives during the data collection phase. We are aware that these might have changed since then. In particular, the cases of CSCs marked with * are likely to have seen a substantial decrease in terms of the size of their membership base as those CSCs closed down or faced legal issues around the time of the launch of the survey.

Taking into account the small number of participants from some of the CSCs (Table 14), which could potentially be identified (and to limit also direct comparisons between CSCs – attending to the divisiveness characteristics of this milieu, as discussed in Pardal (2018a)) the survey results are presented in aggregate form throughout the paper. This is in line with the

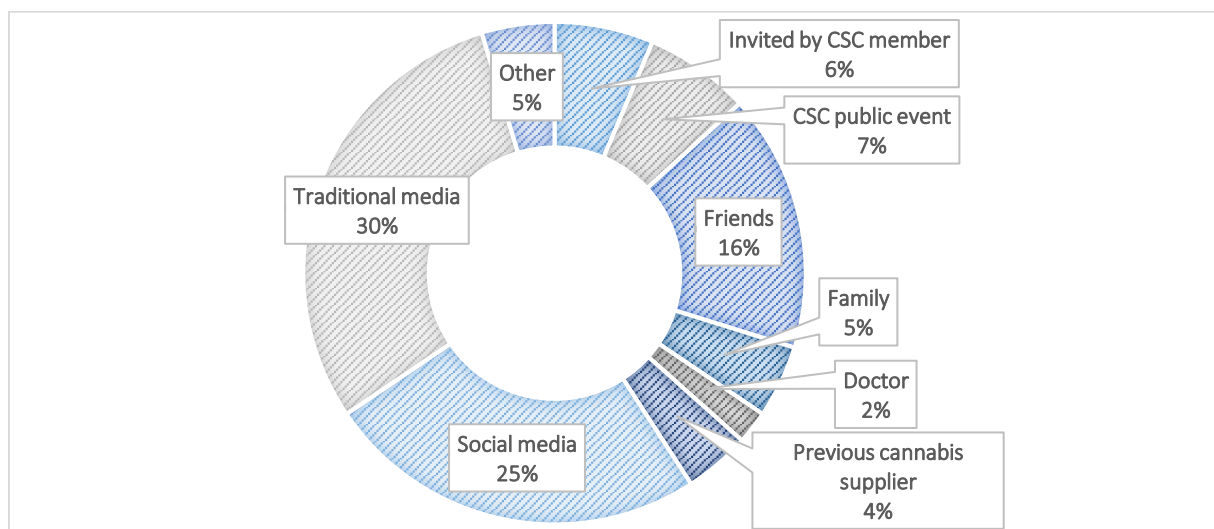
recommendations and practices of other researchers, with regards to the handling of sensitive information (Adler & Adler, 2002; Milan, 2014; Wiles et al., 2008).

3. Results

A sketch of the Belgian CSC members taking part in our survey

In order to join a Belgian CSC, candidates have to fulfil certain requirements, which are outlined in the regulations developed by the CSCs (Pardal, in preparation-b). These relate to the age of the candidate (18 years old or 21 years old at a minimum), nationality (Belgian) or place of residence (in Belgium), and to the use of cannabis (only extant cannabis users are admitted). Other specific criteria apply, in some cases, for candidate members using cannabis for medical reasons (Pardal & Bawin, 2018). In total, the Belgian CSCs gather about 676 members,¹⁷⁶ although the size and number of active CSCs has fluctuated over time (Pardal, 2018a). We did not find any direct calls by the Belgian CSCs for the enrolment of new members, nor any kind of entry promotion/discount.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, it can be argued that CSCs' media exposure, both via traditional channels as well as new social media platforms has been rather important in mobilizing new members (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017; Tieberghien & Pardal, in preparation) – as illustrated in Figure 15.

Figure 15: How did CSC members find out about their current CSC.



Note: This question included an additional response option which was not selected by any respondent to explain how they learnt about the CSC: 'I was contacted by the CSC'. The following examples were included in the survey questionnaire, with regards to the option 'previous cannabis supplier': e.g. dealer, coffee shop, other CSC, etc.; with regards to the option 'social media': CSC's webpage, Facebook or other social media; and with regards to 'traditional media': e.g., newspaper, radio, television, etc. Responses listed under 'Other' included references to

¹⁷⁶ This figure corresponds to the estimate made by the CSC representatives during the data collection phase. We are aware that the number of members might have changed since then.

¹⁷⁷ This is an important difference for legal reasons as well, as explicitly inviting new members could be seen as inciting the use of cannabis, something CSC directors were rather cautious about, given that it could constitute grounds for further criminal charges.

other events (not organized by the CSC), or to being the founder of the CSC. Response rate for this question was about 98% (186 out of 190 participants).

As presented in Table 15 below, the CSC members who completed our survey were aged between 21 and 74 years old (median age: 40 years old). Over three-quarters of the sample is composed of male CSC members. The large majority of participants were born in Belgium. About 44% of participants have received university degrees (from bachelor to doctoral levels), and most respondents were also employed (close to 59%). Total net income was primarily reported between 500-1999EUR per month (Table 15). In Belgium, the median net monthly income was estimated at 1873EUR for 2017, and the minimum living wage (or *'leefloon'*) corresponded to 892.70EUR¹⁷⁸ (Brys & Vanoost, 2017; POD MI, 2017).

Table 15: An overview of the key socio-demographic features of the surveyed CSC members.

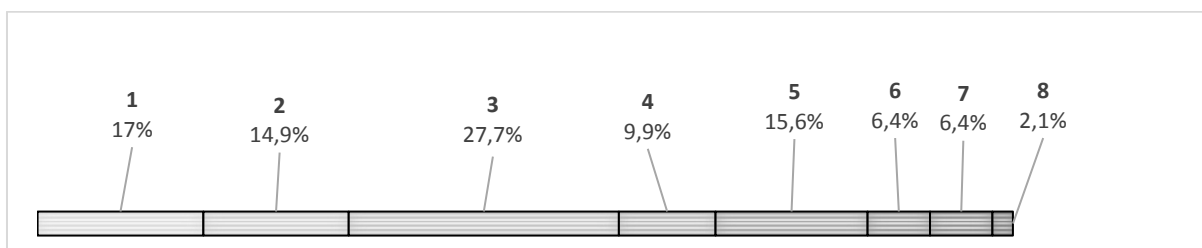
| | Total | | Total |
|----------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Age | | Gender | |
| Mean | 42.28 | Female | 23.9% |
| Median | 40 | Male | 76.1% |
| Range | 21-74 | <i>Total n</i> | 163 |
| <i>Total N</i> | 190 | | |
| Country of origin | | Highest educational level | |
| Belgium | 90.2% | Primary education | 5.8% |
| Other countries* | 9.8% | Secondary education | 50.1% |
| <i>Total n</i> | 162 | Bachelor or equivalent | 29.5% |
| | | Master or equivalent | 11.5% |
| | | Doctoral or equivalent | 3.2% |
| | | <i>Total n</i> | 156 |
| Current employment status | | Total net income per month | |
| Full-time work | 39.4% | Less than €500 | 1.3% |
| Part-time or casual work | 11.9% | €500 to under €1000 | 18.7% |
| Self-employed | 7.5% | €1000 to under €1500 | 28.4% |
| Unemployed (looking for work) | 3.8% | €1500 to under €2000 | 27.7% |
| Unemployed (on welfare benefits) | 21.3% | €2000 to under €2500 | 13.5% |
| Retired | 14.4% | €2500 to under €3000 | 6.5% |
| Stay at home parent or carer | 1.9% | €3000 to under €3500 | 1.9% |
| <i>Total n</i> | 160 | €3500 to under €4000 | 1.3% |
| | | €5000 or more | 0.6% |
| | | <i>Total n</i> | 155 |
| Interest in politics | | | |
| Not at all interested | 9.3% | | |
| Hardly interested | 17.4% | | |
| Quite interested | 41.6% | | |
| Very interested | 31.7% | | |
| <i>Total n</i> | 161 | | |

Note: *Other countries include: Canada (0.6%), Colombia (0.6%), Croatia (0.6%), France (1.9%), Germany (1.2%), Italy (1.2%), the Netherlands (2.5%), Spain (1.2%).

¹⁷⁸ This amount corresponds to the benefit granted to a single person living alone as per 1 September 2017.

The CSC members in our sample showed a keen interest in politics, as illustrated in Table 15: about 73% reported being quite or very interested. In comparison to responses to the same question included in the European Social Survey (ESS), CSC members reported more interest in politics than the general Belgian population: about 46.9% of respondents to that survey indicated being quite or very interested in politics (European Social Survey, 2016). Furthermore, in terms of political positions, survey participants positioned themselves primarily on the left end of the spectrum: around 85% of respondents selected values 1-5 (where 1 meant the left, and 10 the right). Among the general population, drawing again on data from the ESS for Belgium, only 32.1% identified with a left stance (European Social Survey, 2016).¹⁷⁹ Close to 15% of participants placed their political stance on the right end of the spectrum (Figure 16).

Figure 16: CSC members' political stance on a left-right scale.



Note: No respondents selected options '9' nor '10' (corresponding to the most right-wing stances). Response rate to this question was about 74% (141 out of 190 respondents).

In line with that, CSC members reported feeling closer to left-oriented political parties, primarily with the Green Party (Ecolo-Groen): 38%, followed by the Communist Party (PVDA-PTB): 31.7%, and the Socialist Party (SP.A): 13.9%.¹⁸⁰ Data from the ESS (2016) for Belgium revealed lower interest in the Green Party (15.3%) and in the Communist Party (4.2%), although more respondents identified with the Socialist Party (21%) (European Social Survey, 2016).

CSC members' engagement in CSCs' internal decision-making

As we noted elsewhere (Pardal, 2018a, in preparation-a, in preparation-b) the Belgian CSCs are in most cases formal associations, registered as non-profits in the national registry. This formal registration does not follow any legal requirement,¹⁸¹ although the first initiative-takers

¹⁷⁹ The scale used in the European Social Survey ranged from zero to 10. Placement on the left (0-4) corresponded to 32.1%; 32.8% selected a centre placement (5); and 35.1% associated with right-wing political views (6-10).

¹⁸⁰ 79 respondents completed this question, which was only shown to the 94 participants who had indicated feeling closer to a particular political party in the previous question.

¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, by registering as non-profits, the CSCs need to comply with a number of requirements, such as for instance submitting an annual financial report (which is also to be approved by the General Assembly of the association) (Lembre et al., 2004). The bylaws of the Belgian CSCs have a similar structure, as required by domestic legislation for this type of registration (FOD Justitie, 2016), including information about: 1) name, legal seat, goal and duration of the association; 2) membership of the association (admission and exclusion); 3) Board

thought it could contribute to increasing public and/or political acceptance for their actions (Pardal, 2018a). In terms of the internal decision-making structure, the CSCs rely essentially on two organs: the Board of Directors and the General Assembly (GA) of members of the CSC. In addition, the CSCs have also other (paid and unpaid) staff to fulfil specific functions (e.g. cannabis cultivation, administrative tasks, assistance with specific activities, etc.). As set out in their bylaws, the GA ought to meet at least once or even twice a year. While some of the CSC directors explicitly discussed hosting such meetings during the interviews, in practice not all CSCs were organizing GA meetings, but asked for members' input on a more informal basis. The GA competences include the approval (by simple majority) of the annual report of the CSC as well as its budgetary plan, and the appointment and dismissal of the board of directors. One of the CSC directors explained that it is possible for members to be involved: *"if you want as member you can be close to the decision-making of the association"* (CSC3-D20). One other explained that the GA was nevertheless presented with a suggested plan or options to ensure the meetings run in a more efficient way:

"I think that we are very democratic. We are open to every suggestion and every idea but we are not going to sit around with 20 people like smoking joints [...] and after a few joints ask 'now what are we going to do?', you know? That wouldn't work. [...] I'm the visionary. We talk about the strategies, if everybody agrees with it then we follow that strategy and along the road or before we start a strategy we communicate it to the members: 'this is what we want to do, what do you think of it? Do you agree with it or do you oppose it?'" (CSC2-D3).

Based on our observations at three GAs (of three different CSCs), the members attending (from 6 members in the GA of a small CSC to 45 in that of a larger CSC) did have the opportunity to discuss their position with regards to the proposals or issues raised by the CSC leadership. The sessions were a platform for leaders to inform members about the latest activities (in one case, an annual report and financial overview was distributed), developments, or concerns, and we observed much interaction between those attending. The discussion of legal issues (either in relation to a judicial case involving the CSC, or in terms of adapting CSCs' strategy to avoid prosecution) took a central place in all the three GA meetings. At one of the meetings, some of the members commented that the CSC should not overlook its social and activist stance due to the burden of judicial case(s), and the launch of new actions was discussed (including a press release and intensification of the CSC's public activities). While CSC members' involvement in CSCs' decision-making is not restricted to contributions during GA meetings, attendance of those gatherings can be seen as an indication of members' participation in the internal life of the organizations. As noted in Figure 17 below though, the majority of respondents indicated 'never' attending a GA meeting(s) in the past 12 months (52 respondents or 52.5%, while 111

of Directors (competencies, length of term, etc.); 4) General Assembly (competencies, decision-making process, etc.); 5) financial resources of the association; and 6) dissolution of the association.

respondents had indicated that this activity had taken place during that time-frame in response to a previous question).

Belgian CSCs' repertoire of action and members' participation

The Belgian CSCs engage in a range of actions, although the core activity developed by these organizations is the cultivation and distribution of cannabis among their members. While the specific aspects of CSCs' supply function are explored in detail elsewhere (Pardal, in preparation-b), it is important to note that this type of action can be interpreted as a form of protest and resistance (Alvarez et al., 2016; Bone, 2017), and it is arguably not in line with the domestic legislation on cannabis (Pardal, 2016a). At the time of data collection, most CSCs were engaging in cannabis cultivation and distribution among their members (Kilmer et al., 2013b; Pardal, 2018b), as shown in Table 16. The Belgian CSCs also develop other actions beyond supplying cannabis to their members. In fact, the importance of those activities was highlighted by some of our interviewees, as pointed out by the following CSC director: *"we always have to remember that we are political action more than a cannabis shop"* (CSC3-D6).

Some CSC directors explained that their repertoire of action has been somewhat limited because these were relatively new organizations, or because they had to prioritize preparing their legal defence in cases involving some of their representatives or growers, which had repercussions for the strategy of action they would otherwise seek to develop, as well as for the size of the budget and other means available for other activities. In Table 16, we provide an overview of the different types of CSC actions. It is worth noting that CSCs' repertoire of action might have changed over time. For instance, one of the CSCs had been an active supplier in the past, but during the course of a legal proceeding (in which the dissolution of the association was at stake, for pursuing an illicit goal), the CSC discontinued production and changed its bylaws accordingly – removing any references to the cultivation and distribution of cannabis (Pardal, 2018a).

Table 16: An overview of Belgian CSCs' repertoire of action.

| | Number of Belgian CSCs developing action |
|---|--|
| Cannabis cultivation and distribution | 5 |
| Sharing information materials physically or through online social platforms and websites | 7 |
| Informative events (e.g., debates, lectures, and workshops) | 2 |
| Entertainment events (e.g., Cannabis Cup, CSC Café, and Comedy Night) | 2 |
| Cannabis Liberation Day/March for cannabis regulation | 3 |
| Notifying, lobbying and informing key stakeholders (policy-makers, health professionals, law enforcement agents, and media) | 6 |
| Public interventions at other events (i.e., upon invitation) | 2 |

Sources: Interview data, fieldwork notes, and other documentary sources.

The Belgian CSCs have thus developed annual or more sporadic events, some open to members only (e.g. Cannabis Cup among the growers of the CSC), and others reaching out to the general public (e.g. Cannabis Liberation Day). The actions were also organized pursuing different goals: informing the members about specific issues (e.g., some of the CSCs hosted workshops about how to make cannabis oil), to stimulate social interaction among members and like-minded individuals (e.g. Comedy Night), or more explicitly aiming to gather support and call for a legislative change (for instance, through the organization of marches and protests). These marches or protests were usually organized in a central square of a city, and the programme included speeches from activists, as well as a number of music concerts, and booths with information about cannabis-related devices (e.g. vaporizers), books and other products. They were typically organized in May, integrating other activists efforts in many other countries as part of the annual ‘Global Marijuana March’. Both police and media were often present at the protests organized by the Belgian CSCs, and we noted that at one of the events we attended the CSC representatives asked the crowd not to smoke cannabis in the square as to avoid confrontation with the police (which had intervened in previous editions of that event, as we note here: Pardal and Tieberghien (2017)). These events captured media attention and were also disseminated via social media (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017; Tieberghien & Pardal, in preparation). But as a CSC director noted, the clubs are active on a more regular basis as well: *“it’s not done only at Cannabis Liberation Day, the fight against criminalization is not once a year, it has to be every day”* (CSC5-D13). These other efforts relate for instance to the more regular sharing of the organizations’ activities and standpoints through their own websites or social media platforms, or by publicly engaging with the domestic media (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017; Tieberghien & Pardal, in preparation).

Some CSC representatives participated also in events organized by other organizations or stakeholders. For instance, several CSCs have attended and/or spoke about the CSC model at conferences and discussion sessions organized at the European Parliament on the topic of medical cannabis and cannabis regulation,¹⁸² or at the annual meeting of the UK CSCs umbrella organization (Sullivan, 2016). At those events, they were often introduced as *“political activists”*. At the same time, the CSC representatives have generally also sought to contact other stakeholders such as the local police forces and policy-makers, and tried to publicise their views regarding the CSC model and activities. Two directors of one of the CSCs described their first visit to the local police, which they arranged to inform the law enforcement agents about their CSC initiative, as follows:

“CSC1-D2: They [the police] laughed at us: ‘What are you doing here?’. They laughed at us [...] CSC1-D1: And afterwards, after almost two hours of talking, they saw something in the project, but they said ‘the law is the law’”.

¹⁸² Including, for instance, the conferences organized by GUE/NGL MEPs on ‘Hemp and medical cannabis as a driving factor of growth and employment’ (23 February 2016), the ‘International Conference on Medical Cannabis’ (30 October 2016), as well as on the ‘The future of cannabis, towards integral regulation’ (2 May 2017).

Two of the CSCs have also drafted a blueprint for cannabis legislation in Belgium, in which the authors defend the introduction of a legal framework allowing for: 1) home cultivation (of up to 5 plants outdoors or 2m² indoors); 2) CSCs; and 3) a third supply option exclusive for medical use of cannabis (relying on local growers but distributed and under oversight of specialized federal agencies) (Oomen, Vermeesch, & Degens, 2016). Several CSCs have also tried to establish partnerships or more informal collaborations with health professionals and institutes, even if the sector is often reluctant to enter into such collaborations, as discussed in Pardal and Bawin (2018). Some of the CSCs have developed relationships with a number of other actors active in the cannabis field too (including larger lobbying organizations, grow shops and seed banks, among others), an issue we explored elsewhere (Pardal, 2018a).

Despite the range of activities developed, the CSC directors acknowledged difficulties in mobilizing their own direct constituency (i.e., the CSC members) to participate in those. On the one hand, CSC directors felt that there was some degree of “*opportunism*” at play by some of the members who accordingly only use the CSCs to secure access to cannabis, and who are not necessarily interested nor do they participate in the wider actions of the organizations. On the other hand, it was also noted that some members might struggle and be afraid to “*come out*” as cannabis users who are members of a CSC, and as a result refrain from publicly engaging in the more visible CSC activities – an issue CSC representatives have also voiced in some of their media interventions (Flemish Newspaper *De Standaard*, 25 May 2006; *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 30 March 2007; *De Standaard*, 4 May 2007; *Het Belang van Limburg*, 13 June 2016). Indeed, this was/is a struggle of the LGBT movement as well as part of its constituency has remained ‘closeted’, which according to Garner (1996) “*works against unity and political action*” (p. 335). A director of one of the CSCs explained it as follows:

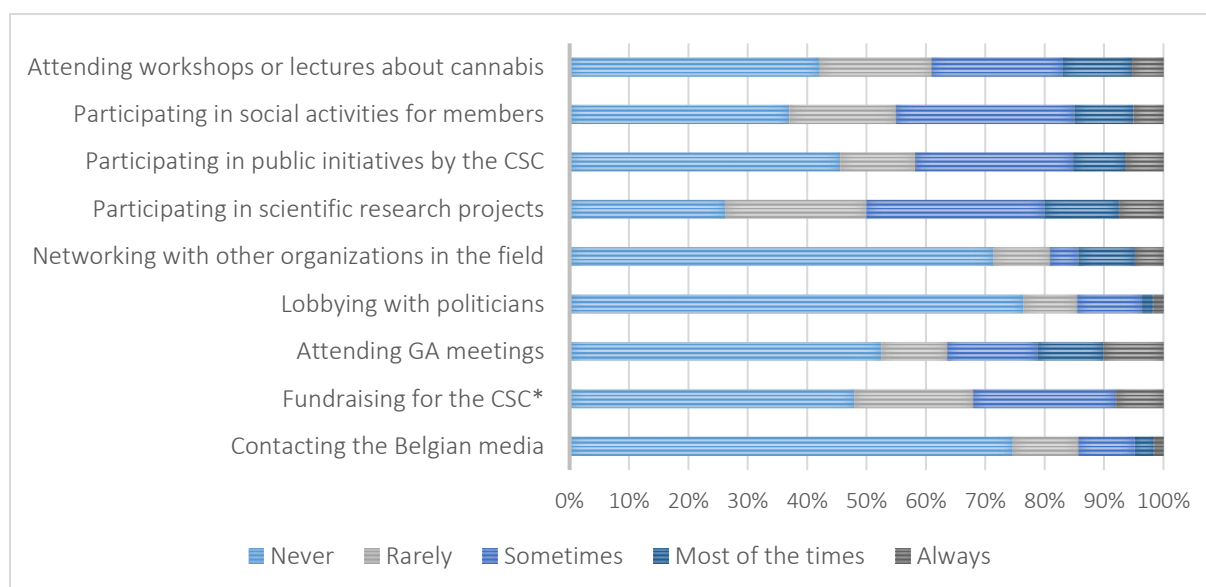
“because we are in Belgium, not everybody wants to come out as a cannabis smoker. I think that to be part of the social side of it [i.e., of the CSC activities], then you would have to come out and present yourself as a cannabis user...” (CSC2-D5)

Similarly, a director from another CSC admitted that: “*people are still hiding a lot*” (CSC4-D10); and yet one other thought that: “*it is more difficult to say you smoke cannabis these days than to say you are gay*” (CSC5-D1).

Our survey data confirms, to some extent, CSC directors’ perception of members’ limited engagement in the broader CSC activities. Generally, participation levels are low, but three types of activity seem particularly beyond the realm of action of CSC members: contacting the domestic media, lobbying with politicians and networking with other organizations active in the field of cannabis (respectively: 75%, 76%, and 71% had not engaged in such actions in the past 12 months). These seem to be tasks typically taken up by the CSC leaders, in line with other findings from this study (Pardal, in preparation-a; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017; Tieberghien & Pardal, in preparation), and highlights the importance of CSC leaders’ role in terms of being public spokespersons for the organizations and the movement, and in trying to reach the political structures. At the same time, Figure 17 shows some involvement of CSC members in

other CSC actions, such as social activities for members, lectures and workshops about cannabis and also public initiatives (e.g. protests and public campaigns). Most members had at least minimally participated in those actions in the past 12 months. The activity in which most members reported having some degree of involvement in the time-frame considered related to participation in a scientific research project. Arguably, this figure is likely to have been driven by participation in our survey and the broader study (which has been running since 2015).

Figure 17: Members' participation in CSCs' non-supply-related activities in the past 12 months.



Note: Response rate for each item included in Figure 3 varied between 13.2% (for 'Fundraising for the CSC') and 52.6% (for 'Participating in social activities for members'). The survey questionnaire offered the following examples of 'public initiatives by the CSC': protests, public campaigns. *Only 27 respondents (14.2%) indicated, in a previous question, that this activity had taken place in the past 12 months. All other activities registered a higher positive response among CSC members, and we were able to confirm its occurrence through other sources (e.g. interviews and documentary data) as noted above.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Mobilization or recruitment into the CSCs has mainly taken place indirectly, through CSCs' exposure both via traditional as well as new social media (i.e. public and mediated recruitment according to Lofland's (1996) classification), rather than following direct invitations or calls for enrolment. In that sense, CSCs' media strategy has proven somewhat successful (see also: Pardal and Tieberghien (2017); Tieberghien and Pardal (in preparation)). This finding highlights the importance and role played by the media, both as a platform for CSCs' framing processes and communication of the movement's messages to its constituency and institutionalized actors, as well as for introducing the organizations to a broader audience – and mobilizing new participants. It echoes the results from previous analyses which have identified the media as one of the central tools for drug advocacy organizations (EMCDDA, 2013a; O'Gorman et al., 2014). Also the literature on SMOs has emphasised that access to media and media

representation are relevant processes for activists' efforts towards shaping new opportunities for the movement (McAdam, 1996b; Tarrow, 1996).

The CSC members in our sample are primarily Belgian (90%), male (76%), and (close to) middle-aged. It is a relatively high-educated group, with most members active in the labour market. These findings are consistent with the results from a 2006 survey by Marín (2008), which observed also a stronger male presence within Spanish CSCs, with average age recorded at 31 years old, and a majority of employed participants. As the author put it: *"The cannabis movement is a movement of middle and well-educated classes"* (Marín, 2008, p. 305, own translation). At the same time, according to analysis of the Spanish cannabis movement the gender imbalance (although reflective of cannabis consumption patterns – as discussed in Chapter 12) could also limit the movement (Gálvez et al., 2017; Marín, 2008; Montañés, 2017). Alignment with left politics was common among our respondents, specifically with the Green Communist and Socialist parties. Also in this regard, there were similarities with Marín's (2008) findings: 61% of the respondents identified with left politics.

While in part these features reflect CSCs' self-imposed access limitations, seeing as only Belgian nationals and/or residents who are 18 or older can enrol with the organizations (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, in preparation-b), they also reveal parallelisms with the profile of the actors typically associated with 'new social movements', especially in relation to their economic and educational background, as well as their political orientation (Habermas, 1981; Kriesi, 1996; Marín et al., 2015; Offe, 1985). At the same time, while in 'new social movements' the groups active within them tend to be more informal and ad hoc (Offe, 1985), the CSCs constitute formal organizations, with bylaws, internal rules and procedures, and in which different roles emerge (Kriesi, 1996). To that effect, Soule (2013) noted that *"despite the claim by some social movement scholars that formal SMOs are a thing of the past, data seem to indicate that formal SMOs are far from moribund"*. The cannabis movement seems to also be issue-based, accentuating autonomy and identity (Offe, 1985; Touraine, 1985), and thus previous research has described it as a 'new social movement' (Marín, 2008, 2009).

In general, the Belgian CSCs adopted a diverse repertoire of action in trying to shape and open the structure of political opportunities (see also: Heddleston (2013)). As noted elsewhere (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), the formal bylaws of the CSCs put forward the supply of cannabis as a key goal, but in some of those documents the CSCs are described also as a response to the *"legal insecurity"* and/or refer to the legalization of cannabis as a goal of the organization. The latter goal is also alluded to by a former leader of one of the Belgian CSCs, who emphasized that the CSC *"is more than an interest group of cannabis users. It is first of all about the abolition of the absolute prohibition of cultivating a plant"* (Oomen, 2008, p. 162, own translation). The Belgian CSCs' repertoire of action included a range of conventional as well as novel and more confrontational actions, echoing previous efforts from CSCs in Spain (Barriuso, 2005; Calafat et al., 2000; Marín, 2008) and Uruguay (Arocena & Aguiar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012).

Not all the CSCs have implemented all the identified actions though. In fact, the only action all CSCs seem to have put in practice concerns sharing information about cannabis (in different formats and through different channels), and almost all CSCs (six out of seven) have tried to build contacts with public stakeholders (policy-makers, health professionals, law enforcement agents, media) in a clear effort to reach out not only to supporters and potential supporters but also to try to exert influence over public authorities (Klandermans, 1997). Most Clubs were also actively producing and distributing cannabis among their members, arguably the least conventional form of protest, as noted also by Alvarez et al. (2016): *“these forms of cannabis production were perceived by activists as a form of resistance, affirmation and protest for legal change. Hence cannabis cultivation took on an unexpected meaning. It became an innovation in the repertoire of non-violent collective actions by militants in a new social movement”* (p. 78). While that was the case in Belgium as well, the leading activists often framed the supply activities as being in line with domestic cannabis policy, in particular with reference to the 2005 Ministerial Guideline, and emphasised the difference between the model and other (i)llegal for-profit suppliers (Pardal, 2018a, in preparation-b; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). It is interesting to note as well that only 2-3 CSCs have organized informative events about cannabis and/or the CSC model, events promoting social contact among CSC members, or protests. Nevertheless, these were among the (non-supply related) activities with higher reported participation among the CSC members participating in our online survey.

Our data suggests that there is modest participation of CSCs’ direct constituency, i.e. CSC members, in the internal decision-making of the organizations as well as in the various actions they develop. It confirms earlier findings from our study which pointed to the rather central and (almost) all-encompassing role played by CSC leaders (Pardal, in preparation-a). Most members have in fact never attended a General Assembly meeting in the past year, though such gatherings provide an opportunity for members to help shape the goals and strategies of the organizations. Given the scope of this study, we only captured the participation of formal CSC members in the activities of these SMOs. However, we do not assume that those are the only potential or actual participants in the movement or that the CSC-sponsored actions encompass all the actions of the broader movement (Lofland, 1996; McAdam, 1986). Among CSC members, we should note that, as discussed in Chapter 12, the decision to join a CSC seems to have been driven primarily by the idea of securing cannabis, and activist reasons – although also playing a role, were not mentioned as often. To some extent, this is consistent with the findings of Arnoso and Elgorriaga (2016), who found that only about 8% of the respondents, members of CSCs from the Basque Country, had joined a CSC for activist reasons. Also the 2006 survey by Marín (2008) offered somewhat mixed results as although 18% of the respondents (Spanish CSC members) had never participated in any action from the cannabis movement, 16% did take part in a protest or march, and 23% attended informative events such as debates or talks about cannabis.

Further, social movement scholars discuss different degrees of participation in social movements. Even among those who have already taken a formal step to join a SMO, there can

be differential participation, as Lofland (1996) noted: *“SMO members almost always display considerable variation in the intensity – the extent- of their participation and in, moreover, the forms of participation – the kinds of things they do in the SMO”* (p. 207; see also: Klandermans (1997)). The author referred to a previous classification of members’ participation in the actions of a SMO involved in the antinuclear movement to illustrate that idea (Marullo, 1990). In that case, the largest percentage of members had only minimal participation in the activities of that SMO. In the case of CSCs, it should be noted that even at a minimum, CSC members have already taken the initiative to formally enrol as members, and that they make a financial contribution to the movement in the form of an annual membership fee (as well as the payment for the cannabis they acquire via the CSC) (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, in preparation-b), which are important resources for the organizations.

That finding suggests that members have some degree of ideological affinity with the movement and are willing to support it. McAdam’s (1986) seminal distinction between low-risk/cost and high-risk/costs forms of activism is of importance here. The author defined cost as *“the expenditures of time, money, energy that are required of a person engaged in any particular form of activism”* (p. 67); and risk as *“the anticipated dangers – whether legal, social, physical, financial and so forth – of engaging in a particular type of activity”* (p. 67). As the author noted, the seemingly simple act of signing a petition, although always of low cost, can imply varying risks depending on contextual factors. In the case of CSCs and the cannabis movement in Belgium, the unfavourable legal context, and especially the more recent police interventions (Pardal, 2018a; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), may have contributed to increase the ‘risk’ associated with participation in CSC actions. Also McCarthy and Zald (1977) argued that SMOs’ mobilization capacity is conditioned by public authorities and the police: *“their action affects the readiness of bystanders, adherents, and constituents to alter their own status and commitment”* (p. 1222).

According to the model proposed by McAdam (1986), individuals’ engagement in high-risk/cost activism is explained by attitudinal affinity and biographical availability (i.e., time and personal responsibilities which may constrain participation) – although findings on the role played by biographical availability have remained inconsistent. As we noted above, CSC members seem to have some level of identification with the ideas and claims of the movement, but based on the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, they may have commitments detracting them from more intense participation (e.g., most are employed). While these are necessary, they are not sufficient causes for participation in high-risk/cost actions, and *“microstructural factors”*, such as individuals’ integration within activist networks, should also be considered (McAdam, 1986; Tindall, 2015). As McAdam (1986) explained:

“An intense ideological identification with the values of the campaign acts as the ‘push’ from the individual in the direction of participation while a prior history of activism and integration into supportive networks acts as the structural “pull” that encourages the individual to make good on his strongly held belief” (p. 87-88).

As we noted elsewhere (Pardal, in preparation-a), CSC leaders seem to have been involved in other drug user organizations, other CSCs or individually participated in the cannabis movement as growers/users prior to joining (and in many cases setting up these SMOs). Although we have less information regarding CSC growers' integration in activist networks, most did report having cultivated cannabis prior to enrolling with Belgian CSCs (Pardal, 2018b). But rank-and-file CSC members' integration in activist networks certainly warrants further attention.

Finally, a limitation of this paper is that it did not capture changes in CSCs' repertoire of action or to the frequency of those actions through time. Although we noted that some actions take place on a regular basis (for instance, that is the case of the annual CSC-driven protest/march), it would be of added value to consider whether (and why) CSCs' repertoire has evolved, given that these SMOs have now been present in the country for over a decade (Pardal, 2018a). Such research should capture also any changes to CSC members' participation in those activities. That would further shed light into CSCs' organizational changes, and the extent to which their interventions become more moderate/institutionalized or radical over time.

PART V: General Conclusions

1. Introduction

Following the detailed overview and discussion of this study's findings (PART IV: Results), we now summarize and expand on the conclusions drawn from that analysis. The key conclusions emerging from the study are brought forward in §2, under nine broad themes. Next, in §3 we consider the ways in which this study contributes to the scholarly and policy debate. The section concludes with suggestions for future research into this and related topics.

2. Key conclusions emerging from the study

CSCs' emergence and continued presence in Belgium: an early aperture, contained

The first Belgian CSC was established in 2006, shortly after the publication of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline. Regardless of whether CSCs' interpretation of that policy document is valid and/or recognized by public authorities, the 2005 Ministerial Guideline represented, from the perspective of political opportunity structures, an opening in the institutionalized system (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam, 1996a). Its publication was seen by the activists as granting more openness to cannabis use and production. And as we have found through the mapping exercise presented in Chapter 6, the introduction of the CSC model in Belgium was explicitly linked to that event by the activists involved. Some of these activists had also participated in other drug user organizations (Chapter 6), and previous activist efforts and associations active in Belgium have also been documented (for instance, by the 'Belgian Cannabis Consumer Association', established in 1995; or the 'Anti-Prohibition League', among others) (Oomen, 2008; Tieberghien, 2017). But the emergence of Belgian CSC initiatives seems to have been precipitated by the passage of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline. As such, this finding suggests that shifting political or institutionalized structures, or even the perception of a shift, have indeed the potential to affect the timing and further development of movements (Lofland, 1996; Tarrow, 1994).

Nevertheless, beyond that early key moment, we found no other signs of an opening in the Belgian political system since 2006, and in fact some of the recent developments could be seen as an attempt to contain it. For instance, a 2015 circular (COL 15/2015 of 21 December 2015) with regards to the establishment, registration and prosecution policy on the possession and retail trade in illicit drugs established that, although the possession of cannabis by adults for personal use will still receive the lowest prosecution priority, the cannabis must be confiscated by the police (Van Espen & Vanthienen, 2016).¹⁸³ In addition, a 2017 statement by the Belgian College of Public Prosecutors (12 years after the introduction of the 2005 Ministerial Guideline),

¹⁸³ Even in the case of a simplified official report ('*vereenvoudigd proces-verbaal*').

explicitly rejected the application of the policy of ‘lowest priority for prosecution’ foreseen in the 2005 policy document to the activities of CSCs, and emphasised that there were multiple ongoing police investigations into those organizations. This public positioning confirms also previous analyses which had suggested that in the current Belgian framework the responsibility to press charges has been delegated to the Public Prosecutors (Guillain, 2017), which can generate some ambiguity in interpreting the current legislation (for an earlier discussion of this issue, see for instance: Gelders and Vander Laenen (2007)) (Chapter 3).

Despite CSCs’ attempts to influence the institutionalized system, for instance through lobbying with policy makers and other key stakeholders (further discussed below), we found that Belgian policy-makers have only on a few occasions offered any public statements with regards to the CSC model, and those have often been unfavourable to CSCs’ claims (for instance, noting that the 2005 Ministerial Guideline should not be extended to CSCs’ system of collective cultivation and distribution) (Chapter 3, 7). Since 2014, a centre-right coalition government has been in power,¹⁸⁴ following the general election win by N-VA (the New Flemish Alliance) (IBZ, 2014). The election programme of that political party indicated that a tolerance policy with regards to drugs was “*a wrong message*”, and considered that legalization was “*out of question*” (N-VA, 2014, p. 65, own translation). The governmental policy agreement of the current coalition government did not reveal any intent to introduce a legislative change in this regard either (it noted that: “*the possession of drugs is prohibited. Drug consumption in the public space cannot be tolerated*”, (Federale Regering, 2014, p. 133, own translation)). In addition, based on our analysis of domestic print media items (2006-2016), policy-makers’ interventions have mainly been reactive: often reduced to a response to an event (e.g. court cases involving CSCs or their representatives, CSCs’ public actions, etc.), rather than part of a larger discussion of the model as a potential alternative to the current cannabis policy (Chapter 7). An actual public debate about the CSC model has thus not yet fully emerged in Belgium (Chapter 7),¹⁸⁵ despite several calls from academics encouraging the consideration of alternative policies in this area (Decorte et al., 2014a; Decorte et al., 2016; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Paoli et al., 2018).

No significant legislative reform in this area has taken place in the country.¹⁸⁶ Although CSCs have had an uninterrupted presence in the country since 2006 (with at least three phases of renewed activity – Chapter 6), nearly all have faced legal issues. This has had at least four

¹⁸⁴ The political parties that form this coalition government are: CD&V (the Flemish Democratic Christian Party), MR (the Reformist Movement), N-VA (the New Flemish Alliance), and Open Vld (the Flemish Liberals and Democrats).

¹⁸⁵ Although it is noteworthy that the Walloon Socialist Party (currently in an opposition role) has presented a bill to Parliament to regulate the cannabis market which also foresaw the introduction of a legislative framework concerning the CSC model, alongside home cultivation (Voorstel van kaderwet van 13 september 2017 tot instelling van een gereguleerde cannabismarkt. De Kamer van volkstegenwoordigers, 54, 2660/001).

¹⁸⁶ As noted in Chapters 6, 7 and 9, a Royal Decree came into force in 2015 which regulated the introduction of cannabinoid-based pharmaceutical medicines to be made available under specific conditions (based on prescription, currently for the treatment of spasticity caused by multiple sclerosis when other treatments proved to be ineffective). At present, Sativex® is the only such cannabinoid-based medicine to have obtained a license for commercialization in Belgium, and has been brought to the market in 2017 (Koninklijk besluit van 2015 tot het reglementeren van producten die één of meer tetrahydrocannabinolen bevatten, B.S., 25/06/2015, 36784).

implications for Belgian CSCs: 1) it has led (directly or indirectly) to the closure of several CSCs (Chapter 6); 2) it helps explain the limited growth of the number of CSCs in the country (especially in comparison to other settings where CSCs are present – Chapter 2) (Chapter 6); 3) it affected CSCs’ functioning (e.g., some CSCs have suspended or refrained from initiating the collective cultivation of cannabis for fear of criminal sanctions) (Chapter 8); and 4) it may have limited the resources available for CSCs’ actions (both financially as well as in terms of members’ willingness to engage in CSCs’ actions - issues we return to below) (Chapter 13). McAdam (1996a) considered the state’s repression as a dimension of the structure of political opportunities. In the case of Belgian CSCs, that dimension is clearly unfavourable. Taking into account the documented impacts of this ‘criminalization’ of the model, we can conclude that the presence of the CSC model and the contribution of CSC activists to the broader movement remains rather vulnerable to domestic control forces.

The social movement literature indicates that the international context can also add pressures or opportunities that affect movements at the domestic level (McAdam, 1996a) (Chapter 5). At the European level, the trend in the past two decades has been to reduce the penalties for minor cannabis possession (i.e. possession of small quantities for personal use) (EMCDDA, 2017b; Hughes, 2017), and there is “*growing interest in exploring the feasibility of regulation as an instrument to control the drug market*” - especially in relation to cannabis (Trautmann, 2017, p. 243). Nevertheless, a plurality of approaches have been implemented across the EU,¹⁸⁷ given that competencies for drug policies remain primarily at the Member State level (Bergeron & Colson, 2017; Elvis, 2017). Based on a review of legal analyses of the international drug framework (Chapter 3), we note that the current prohibitionist international regime (under the United Nations Conventions on drugs) imposes strong restrictions to policy changes in this area, including to the introduction of a legally regulated model for the supply of cannabis for non-medical and non-scientific purposes (Bewley-Taylor et al., 2014; Bewley-Taylor & Jelsma, 2012; Fijnaut & de Ruyver, 2014; Kempen & Fedorova, 2014; Room et al., 2010). According to previous legal analyses, at best the flexibility permitted within the UN Conventions framework would allow for a waiving of prosecution to CSC members, but the formal legal recognition of the model and of further legislation regulating its functioning could represent a breach of those treaties (Kempen & Fedorova, 2014). Beyond these scholar analyses, the UN bodies (namely by the INCB – as detailed in Chapter 3) have not offered any additional commentary on the compatibility of the model with the UN treaty system. While this seems to suggest a closed and stable structure at the international level, not favourable to CSCs’ aspirations, it should be noted that several jurisdictions have followed a different path, (arguably) disregarding the provisions of UN drug treaties to introduce a number of alternative cannabis policies and supply models (Chapter 4). The case of Uruguay is particularly noteworthy (but perhaps also the result

¹⁸⁷ For instance: some countries’ legislative framework distinguishes between cannabis and other substances, others do not; the unauthorized possession of cannabis is subject to different sanctions (with or without incarceration); there are also different thresholds limiting what is to be understood as an amount corresponding to personal use; and there are different approaches with regards to the cultivation of cannabis for personal use across EU Member States (EMCDDA, 2017b; Hughes, 2017).

of very exceptional circumstances, as argued by Castro (2014)), given that the new cannabis law (Law 19.172) introduced the CSC model as one (of the three) legal models for the supply of cannabis in the country (Chapter 5). Although there seems to be no consensus with regards to the role played by cannabis activists (vs. the government) in that process (Hoffmann, 2016), it has been noted that the inclusion of the CSC model in the final legislation was achieved through negotiations with cannabis activists, and had not been foreseen in earlier versions of the bill (Arocena & Aguiar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Queirolo et al., 2016).

The Belgian CSC landscape: not a united front

The CSC landscape has been populated by a relatively small number of associations (especially in light of the expansion in the number of CSCs that has taken place in Spain (Parés & Bouso, 2015) (Chapter 2, 6). Nevertheless, and despite the challenging political system in which they have been operating, we only found a few instances of collaborative efforts among the Belgian CSCs. While previous analyses of social movement inter-organizational relations suggest that when faced with external opposition or repression SMOs tend to unite (della Porta & Diani, 2014; Gerlach, 2001; McCammon & Moon, 2015; Zald & McCarthy, 1980), the Belgian CSCs have not formed a united front (Chapter 6). Our analysis revealed that a number of CSCs have actually been operating in isolation from one another, and that there is some degree of tension and disputes among several CSC leaders (Chapter 6), confirming earlier findings from Belgium and Spain (Chapter 2). As we noted in Chapter 1, competition and conflict among different groups have also been important barriers for other drug users' organizations in the past, hindering the potential for collaboration among them (Anker et al., 2008; Kerr et al., 2006; Montañés & Oomen, 2009). In the case of Belgian CSCs, the reluctance to collaborate was associated with personal conflicts between the different CSC leaders, as well as distrust of one another. Some of the CSC leaders had doubts about each other's motivations to set up the organizations, and their 'true' intentions and plans with regards to the CSC model/movement (Chapter 6). Beyond potentially hindering the movement's efforts, this divisiveness posed also additional challenges for the implementation of the research project (as discussed in PART III). The emergence of splits and conflicts among activists is, however, also a common feature of other social movements (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Garner, 1996).

Further, a 'supra-organization' (Zald & McCarthy, 1980) such as a CSC Federation, that would represent Belgian CSCs' efforts in pursuing their goals has also not yet been created (although this has been debated among the activists – see also: Decorte (2015)). In Uruguay, the emergence of such 'supra-organizations', some of which integrate also organizations from the LGBT and environmental movements, as well as student unions and multiple Uruguayan public figures, has reinforced the movement and professionalized their action (Hoffmann, 2016).

More recently, the UK CSCs have also formed a supra-level organization.¹⁸⁸ There are examples of such structures being created in Spain, although in that context, the opposite trend seems to have taken place: multiple Federations have emerged which has led to a dispersion of efforts (Montañés, 2017) (Chapter 2). While it can be argued that the segmented character of the CSC landscape in Belgium may have weakened the movement, as its actions are not coordinated, and there is limited cooperation between the different CSCs, at the same time this may have acted as a protective factor for the movement as well. As discussed in Chapter 6, the fact that the CSCs are (in most instance) operating separately and autonomously from one another, could help explain why some have ‘survived’ the disappearance of others (instead of resulting in a broader collapse of the movement) (Gerlach, 2001), as well as the successive cycles of newly emerging CSCs.

A movement/model not only made in Belgium: the importance of the transnational link

While the first CSC was established in Belgium in 2006, this development should not be considered in isolation, as similar earlier initiatives can be identified within a broader international context. In fact, the model of supply proposed by the Belgian CSCs and to some extent the repertoire of action brought forward by these groups is not unique to the Belgian context (although some particularities, as discussed further below, are). We found that the activists driving the first CSC initiative in Belgium were well aware of the experiments around the model which had started taking place in Spain in the previous decade (Decorte & Pardal, 2017) (Chapter 2, 6), and sought to adapt it to the Belgian context. For instance, although we found important differences in terms of how supply is organized in Spanish vs. Belgian CSCs, there are striking similarities in terms of the organizational and structural shape of the organizations (e.g., formal registration of the collectives in the national registry of associations, adoption of a non-profit statute, etc.). Although not all movements develop a transnational dimension, within the social movement scholarship, there has been growing attention to understanding the emergence, processes, and outcomes of transnational movements - for instance, in relation to human rights, environmental, peace or global justice movements (Gould & Lewis, 2018; Smith, 2004). Our findings suggest that also within the cannabis movement ideas and practices may have spread from one country to another, in a process described as transnational ‘diffusion’, highlighting the connectedness among CSC activists (and others) across countries (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Tarrow & McAdam, 2005).

Furthermore, beyond informing the design of the model and movement actions, this transnational link was also reflected in the broader ‘social movement organizational structure’ (della Porta & Diani, 2014). We should reiterate here that our focus was on the Belgian CSCs, and thus the identification of other actors contributing to the movement goals was undertaken

¹⁸⁸ While the CSC movement in the UK remains a relatively new (the first known initiatives occurred in 2011) and scarcely documented phenomenon, many of the active CSCs in that country have also been drawn together by a platform called UK CSC (UKCSC, 2017).

through the CSCs (as we were interested in learning more about the type of organizations/actors the CSCs engaged with). As such, the picture emerging might not capture to the full extent the myriad of organizations part of the cannabis movement, but rather provides a view of the actors that have supported the CSCs. We found that the Belgian CSC landscape is interconnected with different types of organizations both in Belgium and abroad, echoing previous research into the Spanish cannabis movement which highlighted the co-existence of a range of secondary actors, including grow shops, specialized media, political parties with a focus on cannabis, among others (Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Montañés, 2017) (Chapter 5). The Belgian CSCs have benefited from regular contacts with the cannabis industry in Belgium and abroad (e.g., grow shops, cannabis testing facilities, etc.), and secured legal counselling and representation. Drawing on Kriesi's (1996) typology of movement-related organizations (which we introduced in Chapter 5), these other actors can be described as service organizations, as they do not directly engage in the mobilization of participants for the movement, but sympathize with it or at least provide services that are of relevance for SMOs and the movement constituency. In addition, the Belgian CSCs built ties with organizations directly active in the cannabis movement, such as other CSCs abroad – in a two-directional exchange of experiences. Finally, the Belgian landscape seems to also be populated by interest groups, as the CSCs engaged with international advocacy groups with a broader agenda (e.g., ENCOD, VOC) – which in itself constitutes another manifestation of the transnationalization of the movement (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), or with a focus on a specific aspect related to the CSC model (e.g., the case of associations representing medical cannabis users). In this regard, it should be noted that while ENCOD's goal goes beyond the claims of CSCs (as the organization advocates the “*end of the war on drugs*”), it has supported and promoted the CSC model in Spain, Belgium as well as in other European countries (producing for instance a CSC Code of Conduct, and a first inventory of European CSCs affiliated with the organization) (Chapter 2). As an international organization supporting domestic activists in their own national efforts, it thus constitutes a case of ‘externalization’ of the movement (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). Such transnational dynamics are also encouraged by that organization as according to its CSC Code of Conduct CSCs should stimulate and support the development of (inter)national platforms for cannabis activism (ENCOD, 2015b). Although not a central point in our analysis, this study suggests that transnational processes may be at play within the cannabis movement (which warrant further attention, as proposed in §4).

The media as a channel for framing processes and a strong mobilization tool for Belgian CSCs

As noted in Chapter 5, following the emergence of a movement, a central challenge for activists is how to confront the institutionalized political system. Access to media and media representation are important means through which SMOs or individuals might attempt to ‘make opportunities’ (McAdam, 1996b; Tarrow, 1996). In the field of drugs, earlier studies have noted also that communicating through the media corresponds to one of the main tools drug advocacy organizations have resorted to in trying to influence policy-makers and the public

discourse (EMCDDA, 2013a; O'Gorman et al., 2014) (Chapter 7). In line with that body of literature, our analysis revealed that most Belgian CSCs had some form of contact with the domestic print media, on their own initiative and/or following a request from journalists. The CSC presence in the country since 2006 (and as per our analysis, until June 2016) has captured media attention. Nevertheless, we found that the Belgian print media were more likely to report on law enforcement interventions or other criminal justice issues affecting the CSCs and their representatives (e.g., arrests and court cases). We argue that this constitutes 'involuntary' coverage for the CSCs, and that this portrayal might have intentionally or unintentionally contributed to support prohibitionist views, unfavourable to the movement's claims (Chapter 7). While to some extent the CSCs managed to secure media access, the output generated was thus affected by some of the issues identified and discussed by other scholars in relation to the news production process (e.g. selectivity and a tendency to focus on negative, short-lived, spectacular or sensational events) (Coomber et al., 2000; Gamson, 2004; Klandermans & Goslinga, 1996; Tieberghien, 2014). We noted, however, subtle but important shifts in the way CSCs were represented in the media during the period considered, moving away from somewhat negative connotations towards more pro-social characterization (for instance, the term CSC was only introduced in news items as of 2010, and from then onwards the organizations were also increasingly described as 'users' organizations', and associated with medical supply/use of cannabis).¹⁸⁹

At the same time, CSCs' media representation did capture and disseminate important aspects of the functioning of the CSCs, providing information in line with what are the known features of the model. The reader has thus access to accurate information about how a CSC works (e.g. about the enrolment process, how cultivation and distribution takes place, etc.). What is more, that information has often been provided by a CSC representative, mainly by one of their directors or leaders, which indicates that the CSCs have to some extent succeeded in directly contributing to the media (and thus public) discourse on the topic. It highlights also the role played by CSC leaders as spokespersons, publicly representing the CSCs (a theme we expand on further below) (Chapter 10). Even if the participation of policy-makers in the news production about CSCs has remained rather limited, the relevance of CSCs' media exposure should not be understated. In fact, we found that the most common way CSC members learned about their CSC was through the media (both traditional, and new social media) – corresponding to what Lofland (1996) classified as public and mediated recruitment (Chapter 13). We can conclude that CSCs' media representation has been important to introduce the CSCs' claims and working to the public audience, and has aided the mobilization of participants to the organizations, in line with Gamson (2004).

Beyond the traditional media, the increasingly popular social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, etc., allow also for the exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010), and thus to circumvent some of the challenges posed by traditional media. The new social

¹⁸⁹ It is not clear whether this shift is specific to the Belgian context or a manifestation of a wider trend, as we could not identify other media analysis specific to CSCs in other contexts, as noted in Chapter 7.

media enables users to communicate in their own voice, and are a low-cost tool which has the potential to reach new audiences and contribute to transnational interaction among activists (Bruns, 2008; Earl et al., 2015; Garrett, 2006). Drawing on an additional (exploratory) analysis of a sample of YouTube videos published by or about Belgian CSCs (included in Annex), we found that four of the Belgian CSCs had at least one official YouTube channel through which they posted video content (and most videos about CSCs had indeed been posted through those channels). As the CSCs had arguably more editorial autonomy in producing this type of contents, the YouTube items we analysed focused primarily on the social aspects of CSCs, including footage of events organized by them, such as marches, protests, reunions or debates, and of the participation of CSC representatives in other social events - in stark contrast with the criminal justice focus which characterized CSC representation through the traditional media (Chapter 7).

Although in our analysis (and in line with the research questions posed at the outset of the study), we focused on the framing processes through the (Belgian) media, that is certainly not the only arena through which CSCs sought to communicate their messages. We agree with Clemens (1996) in noting that even the organizational form adopted by social movement groups constitutes a way of framing, as it articulates a message to both the movement's constituency as well as to the institutions and actors that form part of the political opportunity structure (Chapter 5). CSC activists' choice to formally register the associations and to adopt a non-profit statute is illustrative of that dynamic. This aspect was often also mobilized (including in their media interventions – Chapter 7) by CSC leaders to distinguish the organizations from other for-profit driven suppliers such as coffee shops or illegal dealers, and was thought to increase the resonance and acceptance of the supply model among the broader public and policy-makers (Chapter 8).

Formal organizations with an (all-)encompassing leadership

Most Belgian CSCs have pursued registration in the national registry of associations, thus constituting formal organizations (Chapter 8). As we noted in different chapters throughout this dissertation, the CSCs have also developed their own set of internal rules and procedures, produced practical guidelines with regards to the role of cannabis growers, defined specific criteria for membership of the organizations, and developed formal leadership positions. In the absence of state-sponsored legislation, the organizations have thus undertaken several steps to self-regulate their functioning. In light of the set of organizational features of SMOs as proposed by Kriesi (1996) (Chapter 5), the CSCs thus can be described as formalized organizations. The application of the three other aspects considered by that author (i.e., professionalization, internal differentiation, and integration) to the Belgian CSCs revealed some differences among the Clubs. Although the (producing) CSCs typically attribute a “reimbursement” to the members who grow cannabis for the club (Chapter 11), beyond that, only one CSC had (two) paid staff in other functions (e.g., leadership and administrative

positions) (Chapter 8, 10). So although it can be argued that there is generally some degree of professionalization, opportunities for career development remain rather limited within CSCs, differently from the professional SMOs described by McCarthy and Zald (1973). Instead, similarly to the findings of Marín (2008, 2009) in relation to Spanish CSCs, we can describe the Belgian Clubs as being participatory movement organizations (even if, as we will discuss further below, members' level of engagement proved to be somewhat modest). In terms of internal differentiation, only one CSC had developed a more complex structure of territorial and 'specialist' sub-units, headed by 'bridge leaders' (Chapter 6, 8, 10). Finally, with regards to integration, it should be noted that the CSCs have developed, according to the organizations' bylaws, a horizontal structure of decision-making, but in practice decision-making has been driven by the small group of activists in leadership positions (Chapter 13).

Indeed, although task division within the leadership positions was often blurred, CSCs' top leaders often took a very encompassing role within the associations (Chapter 10). CSC leadership has tended to rest in the hands of a small group of motivated activists, who have taken on multiple functions, both internally as externally, with a view to push for the introduction of a legal framework supportive of CSCs as a model for the supply of cannabis in the country. The top leaders can be described as 'insider leaders' in the sense that they have a prior engagement within the cannabis movement (e.g., as cannabis growers, users, or by participating in other CSCs or other organizations representing cannabis or other drug users), and thus integrate the challenging group (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Currently, most CSCs are being led by the 'self-elected leaders' who took the initiative in establishing the associations (often in collaboration with other family members or friends), and thus correspond to the first generation of CSC activists. While 'self-elected leaders' tend to possess the knowledge and motivation to implement effective strategies for SMOs (Ganz, 2004) and may be more radical ideologically (Marullo, 1988), earlier research in Spain has also noted that some of the CSCs have struggled with leadership renewal (Marín, 2008). According to Montañés (2017), the Spanish CSCs have become over-dependent and over-focused on the key figures leading the movement, stimulating a 'cult of personality' which has (along with other factors) hindered the movement (Chapter 5). In addition, given the Belgian legal context where the model remains 'criminalized', the concentration of tasks in one (to three) key activists in leadership positions and the limited renewal of that function could add vulnerability to the continuity of the associations: a police intervention or criminal charges against the top leading figure(s) of a CSC could potentially translate into a leadership void and risk the closure of some of the Clubs, weakening the movement (Chapter 10).

A mixed repertoire of action but modest member engagement

In trying to shape and open the structure of political opportunities, the Belgian CSCs adopted a diverse repertoire of action, including a range of conventional (e.g. protests, marches, and informative events), as well as novel and more confrontational actions (e.g. collective cannabis

cultivation and competition among cannabis growers), in line with what has been the documented set of interventions by CSCs in Spain (Barriuso, 2005; Calafat et al., 2000; Marín, 2008; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017) and Uruguay (Arocena & Aguiar, 2017; Castro, 2014; Pettitt-Schieber, 2012) (Chapter 13). There were differences among each Belgian CSC's repertoire of action: not all the CSCs have implemented all the identified actions. In fact, the only action included in the repertoire of action of all Belgian CSCs concerns the dissemination of information about cannabis. In addition, nearly all CSCs have tried to deepen their relationship with key stakeholders such as policy-makers, health professionals, law enforcement agents, or the media. As such, CSCs have sought to reach out not only to their direct and potential constituency but also reached out to institutional actors (Klandermans, 1997). Most Clubs were also actively producing and distributing cannabis among their members, arguably the least conventional form of protest (Alvarez et al., 2016), and which simultaneously constitutes the model of supply these activists wish to see legalized and regulated.

Our data suggest that there is modest participation of CSCs' direct constituency, i.e., CSC members, in the internal decision-making of the organizations as well as in the various actions they develop (Chapter 13). It further confirms the rather central and (almost) all-encompassing role played by CSC leaders, as discussed earlier. Research into CSCs in Spain highlighted also the over-focus on movement leaders and limited participation which have weakened the movement (Montañés, 2017). We should offer the caveat that in light of the research goals of the present study, we only captured the participation of formal CSC members in the activities of these SMOs. We do, however, not assume that that group corresponds to the total of actual or potential participants in the movement, nor that the cannabis movement's repertoire of action is fully represented in the actions put forward by the CSCs (Lofland, 1996; McAdam, 1986). Among CSC members, we should note that the decision to join a CSC seems to have been driven primarily by the idea of securing cannabis, and activist reasons – although also playing a role, were not mentioned as often (Chapter 13). This is consistent with findings from survey-based research of Spanish CSC members' participation in the activities of those organizations (Arnosó & Elgorriaga, 2016; Marín, 2008). It is not unique to the cannabis movement though, as the degree of participation in social movements' activities is rather variable (Klandermans, 1997; Lofland, 1996).

At the same time, it should be noted that CSC members voluntarily complete a formal registration as members, and make a financial contribution to the movement in the form of an annual membership fee (as well as the payment for the cannabis they acquire via the CSC) (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, in preparation-b) - which may also be an important resource for these organizations (Klandermans, 1997). It is plausible that the unfavourable legal context, and especially the more recent police interventions (Chapter 6, 7) may have contributed to increasing the perceived risk and/or cost associated with activist action, and thus negatively affected members' willingness to participate in the movement's action (McAdam, 1986; McCarthy & Zald, 1977) (Chapter 13). High-risk/cost activism, according to McAdam's (1986) model, is explained not only by attitudinal affinity with the movement or biographical

availability to participate in its actions, but also with integration within activist networks. While we have some evidence of CSC leaders' (and to a lesser extent, of growers') prior engagement in other cannabis movement initiatives, rank-and-file CSC members' integration in such activist networks should be further analysed (§4).

We did, however, learn more about the members of Belgian CSCs (Chapter 12, 13). In our sample, CSC members are primarily Belgian, male, and (close to) middle-aged. It is a relatively high-educated group, with most members active in the labor market. These findings are consistent with the results from a 2006 survey by Marín (2008). Alignment with left politics was common among our respondents, specifically with the Green, Communist, and Socialist parties. Also in this regard, there were similarities with Marín's (2008) findings. While in part these features reflect CSCs' self-imposed access limitations, seeing as only Belgian nationals and/or residents who are 18 or older can enroll with the organizations (Chapter 2, 8), they also reveal parallels with the profile of the actors typically associated with 'new social movements', especially in relation to their economic and educational background, as well as their political orientation (Habermas, 1981; Kriesi, 1996; Marín et al., 2015; Offe, 1985). At the same time, 'new social movements' groups tend to be more informal and ad hoc (Offe, 1985) while, as discussed above, the CSCs constitute formal organizations, with bylaws, internal rules and procedures, and in which different roles emerge (Kriesi, 1996). Nevertheless, the cannabis movement tends to highlight autonomy and self-organization – features typically ascribed to 'new social movements' (Offe, 1985; Touraine, 1985), and previous research in Spain has classified it as such (Marín, 2008, 2009).

A 'middle-ground' supply model with potential

Our analysis confirmed that some of the core characteristics generally associated with the CSC as a model for the supply of cannabis have been implemented in practice by the Belgian CSCs (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte, 2015; EMCDDA, 2013b). Indeed, the data gathered suggests that the CSCs in Belgium are operating as small-scale, closed circuit suppliers, relying on in-house growers to produce the cannabis that is distributed among the larger number of registered members by the CSC (Chapter 8, 9, 11). The findings support earlier considerations of the model within the broader 'supply architectures' range. It shares similarities with a 'self-supply' or 'grow your own' model (MacCoun, 2013; Room et al., 2010), expanding the idea of 'one cultivating for one's own consumption' to a collective level, in the sense that cultivation within CSCs is typically carried by (some of the) users/CSC members (an issue we address further below). That is also an important distinctive feature in relation to other of the supply models described earlier (Chapter 4), such as a government monopoly or license models, as well as the competitive regulated market option that typically allocates production to a state agency or private operators (non- or for- profit). In those scenarios though, in theory, the introduction of quality control procedures is (albeit to different degrees) less challenging than within the CSC model (Caulkins et al., 2015a). To that effect, our analysis demonstrated

that, although some of the Belgian CSCs have put forward practical guidelines for cannabis cultivation, professional and regular quality control testing is still lacking (Chapter 8, 9).

A number of scholars argue that the CSC model may have the potential to curtail an important segment of the illegal market, by ensuring the supply of cannabis to regular users (Caulkins & Kilmer, 2016; Caulkins et al., 2015a; Decorte, 2015; MacCoun, 2013; Transform, 2013). Our research suggests that the Belgian CSCs may indeed appeal to regular users: among our sample of 190 CSC members from the seven active CSCs, most members were by and large current cannabis users, and the majority used cannabis on a daily or near daily basis (26-30 days in the past 30 days) (Chapter 12), consistent with findings from earlier research into Spanish CSCs (Marín, 2008). The way the CSCs organize the distribution of cannabis to their members, with bi-monthly (or less frequent) supply moments where the members can acquire large(r) amounts to cover their consumption needs for the subsequent weeks/months (Chapter 8), may not be well suited for users with a more limited financial capability though (as members need to make one-off payments), and could in practice translate into a limit to the real access to the model (Belackova & Wilkins, 2018). No quantity discounts or other types of promotions seem to be applied by the CSCs (Chapter 8), although members using cannabis for medical reasons are generally able to obtain cannabis at a cheaper price at the CSC (Chapter 9).

Although CSCs' potential role in supplying individuals using cannabis for medical reasons has not been explored in the reviewed literature, our sample of CSC members revealed that that group of users forms an important segment within Belgian CSCs (Chapter 9). In Belgium, legal supply of cannabis products is limited to Sativex[®], for a restricted group of patients, and thus CSCs seem to have been perceived by users as an alternative (or preferred) option. The Belgian CSCs, particularly those with separate medical units or serving exclusively medical users, seem to have made efforts to accommodate medical members' needs, making differentiated arrangements with regards to access and availability of the substance, as well as to its pricing (Chapter 9). Nevertheless, cannabis production within Belgian CSCs, in the current context, does not meet the standards established for the production of medicines (such as standardization and quality control procedures), nor the criteria established for instance under other medical models (Belackova et al., 2017).

The Belgian CSCs were also the sole cannabis supplier for most of the members participating in the survey. Even among the smaller group of participants who indicated maintaining several suppliers, the CSC was still considered the primary source for cannabis. In addition to the CSC, those members relied on Dutch coffee shops, as well as other illegal dealers. (Un)expected changes to CSCs' supply patterns such as changes to the frequency of distribution moments or suspension of supply for a period of time (or indefinitely) was one of the reasons members discussed to explain resorting to alternative sources of supply. But keeping several suppliers was also described as a way to obtain different strains or cannabis types which might not be available through the CSC (such as for instance hashish). The limited assortment of cannabis products delivered through the CSCs could thus be both a strength from a public health perspective (as CSCs have not sought to transform or promote innovative, high-THC cannabis

products, as it has been reported in other for-profit models – see for instance Carlini et al. (2017), Smart et al. (2017)) and weakness of the model (as it might not meet the preferences of some users, especially the more frequent users: Boidi et al. (2016)). Some of the CSC members also reported enjoying cultivating cannabis, and thus grew also a plant(s) at home in addition to the cannabis received from the CSC. While in our sample the proportion of users relying on multiple suppliers was small, it does indicate that for some users resorting to one supply model only may not be sufficient or suitable. While a system such as the one introduced in Uruguay (Cerdá & Kilmer, 2017; Queirolo et al., 2016), which allows users to select a preferred model of supply (i.e., home cultivation, CSC, or sales through pharmacy) may attenuate that issue, it is plausible that some users (especially those using more frequently) might prefer to simultaneously rely on more than one supply model (as suggested also by Boidi et al. (2016), and thus to some degree a ‘grey’ or ‘black’ market may persist even in a scenario where at least one supply model is authorized .

CSCs have also the potential to play a harm reduction role (Belackova et al., 2016; Decorte et al., 2017). Most CSC members did discuss their use of cannabis with CSC representatives in different moments, which suggests that the CSCs may create opportunities to aid and follow up the members’ consumption levels and identify cases of problematic use (Chapter 8, 9, 12). We found that, although CSC members consider that the cannabis they receive from their CSCs is of good quality, they have little knowledge of the THC-CBD ratio of the cannabis they acquire through their CSCs. This can also be explained by the limited or lack of testing done by the CSCs (which thus may also not have this information) (Chapter 8). As discussed in PART III, we were unable to conduct the initially planned laboratorial analysis of cannabis samples produced by the CSCs and thus the data on this issue remains limited (see also §4).

A first CSC typology: more than one CSC model?

We identified multiple areas where CSC practices have evolved, as well as diverging features among the active Clubs. Drawing on the findings from the Belgian study, as well as on the review of the existing literature on CSC practices elsewhere - primarily in Spain and Uruguay (PART II), we contend that several variants of the CSC model have been developed in practice, and that thus also in Belgium various interpretations of the model co-exist (instead of a stable and homogeneous CSC model) (Chapter 8). While these changes are, particularly within the Belgian context, reflective of the self-regulatory efforts of those involved in the running of these associations, and in some cases are adjustments implemented as a way to tackle a perceived vulnerability to law enforcement interventions, they nevertheless have important implications for our understanding of the model(s) and may be informative for the design of policies in this area (Chapter 8). In an effort to capture the complexity of practices identified, we developed a first CSC typology which highlights nine key dimensions: the degree of professionalization of CSCs’ staff (volunteer vs. professional), the function played by CSCs (activist vs. supplier), CSCs’ business model (non-profit vs. Cannabis Commercial Club) and public profile (overt CSC vs. underground CSC), their size (small vs. medium vs. large), organizational structure (single unit

vs. multi-unit), accessibility (mixed CSC vs. medical CSC), in terms of CSCs' position in the supply chain (vertically integrated vs. buyers club), and the degree of interaction among members generated by CSCs (social club vs. lonesome club) (Chapter 8).

The richness in terms of practices warrants a reflection on its potential implications. The emergence of a for-profit variant of the CSC model, the so-called Cannabis Commercial Club, documented primarily in Spain (but there has also been at least one case of a so-called 'shadow CSC' in Belgium, see: Chapters 6-8) constitutes an important deviation from what are the core characteristics of the model, and would move it closer to other commercially-oriented models of supply, such as a for-profit license model or the competitive regulated market option (Chapter 4). Changes along the public profile dimension may also carry important changes to the dynamics between CSCs and other institutionalized actors. The Belgian CSCs have tended to keep a rather overt profile, as we noted above, for instance by engaging with the media, and seeking an open dialogue with public authorities (Chapter 7, 13). However, there are some indications of the appearance of more 'underground' CSCs both in Belgium as well as in Spain: unregistered CSCs or otherwise Clubs seeking to operate away from the public eye (Chapter 8). Such practices run counter ENCOD's set of principles for European CSCs, which indicate that CSCs should function in a transparent and open way (ENCOD, 2011). While this could be a strategy to avoid law enforcement detection, it could also decrease the likelihood of engagement with public authorities, and reduce the visibility of the model. Our typology indicates also a difference in terms of CSCs' size. Within the Belgian CSC landscape, there are differences in terms of CSCs' size, but they have not become large enterprises. Decorte (2015) argued that such an increase in CSC size was a potential weakness of the model, as it could blur the distinction with other models, and might involve a change in terms of how cultivation is organized (i.e., shifting from current decentralized, small-scale production towards larger production or bulk purchases from other producers). Access-wise, a novelty in Belgium is the establishment of a 'medical' CSC or CSC sub-unit, which restricts entry to individuals using cannabis for medical reasons, as discussed above (Chapter 9). We have noted also the development of a structure of CSC branches or sub-divisions, which may be a means for CSCs to expand their presence in the country and lay the ground for the creation of new CSCs in those regions (Chapter 8). Cannabis production in Belgium remains a task of in-house growers, but in Spain there are reports of CSCs purchasing cannabis in bulk from the illicit market (Chapter 8). Such a shift could have implications in terms of the quality, potency and purity of the product supplied through these outlets. Finally, we noted also differences in terms of whether and how CSCs promote contact among their members. Although there seems to be opportunities for members to individually discuss cannabis consumption with CSC representatives, different distribution methods have been implemented (some of which do not allow for much interaction among members/users), and most CSCs currently do not have a place where members can interact on their own initiative – these issues could be relevant from a harm reduction perspective (Belackova et al., 2016).

Discovering another small-scale cannabis grower

This study investigated also the role, profile and motivations of the cannabis growers operating within the Belgian CSCs, gathering new insights into a particular segment of the domestic cannabis cultivation phenomenon (Chapter 11). Most CSC growers had cultivated cannabis prior to joining the organizations, revealing a diverse background. While most had primarily been cultivating cannabis for their own personal use or shared/distributed part of the yield of their production with friends or acquaintances, some of the growers had also been supplying commercially-oriented outlets (such as Dutch coffee shops, US dispensaries, and the local illegal street market). At the same time, the Belgian CSCs had also integrated a group of ‘novice’ growers, with no prior cultivation experience. In those exceptional cases the decision to start growing seems related to personal circumstances (i.e., financial difficulties, illness, etc.), often associated with the use of cannabis for medical reasons. As discussed in Chapter 11, the latter finding can be contextualized along with other studies which have noted an increasing trend in small-scale cultivation for medical reasons (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Werse, 2015).

A mix of motives, ideological (such as ‘passion for the plant’ and alignment with and support of the CSC model), but also pragmatic (such as maximizing the utilization of the grow site and covering the costs of production) seem to explain growers’ participation within Belgian CSCs (Chapter 11). This finding is in line with Potter et al. (2015) who concluded that growing cannabis is often both a rational choice (in terms of reducing the harms associated with purchasing from or supplying the illicit market), and “*an aesthetic and/or ‘ideological’ choice*” (p. 235). The Belgian CSC growers thus bear some resemblance with other small-scale cultivators in terms of their stated motivations (Belackova et al., 2015; Potter, 2010b). Other commonalities with other types of small-scale growers identified in the literature in relation to actual cultivation practices, particularly attending to the relatively small size of the cultivation sites, emerged from our data as well (Bovenkerk & Hogewind, 2002; Hafley & Tewksbury, 1998; Hough et al., 2003b; Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Potter, 2010a; Weisheit, 1991a, 1991b).

At the same time, the motivations and practices of CSC growers in Belgium seem also to have been shaped by aspects specific to this supply model. For instance, CSC growers were particularly driven to grow cannabis in the context of a CSC, and in most cases took the initiative in approaching the CSC. It is worth noting that while operating within a CSC, growers have to register as members of the organization (and in some cases go through a probationary period before initiating production), need to adhere to the guidelines and self-defined rules of the CSC with regards to the cultivation process, and generally have their grow sites somewhat regularly inspected by a CSC representative (Chapter 11). While aware of the current vulnerable legal standing of the associations and putting much emphasis on the fact that in case of a police intervention they were part of a larger organization (which would also aid them through the process and would cover any eventual costs with legal fees); CSC growers often described the CSCs as a ‘safer’ and ‘more legal’ (or legitimate) option. The structure and modus operandi of the CSCs was thus positively appreciated, and growers welcomed the opportunity to actively

support and contribute to the further development and legalization of the model, suggesting also an activist stance.

3. Where do we stand now?

While the contributions (and shortcomings) of this research to the field(s) of study and to policy have been articulated throughout this dissertation, some points warrant further reflection. In the following paragraphs we highlight a few.

Expanding the body of knowledge on CSCs: a scholarly contribution

As noted at the outset of the study, the available scientific literature on the topic of CSCs is rather scarce. In particular, we were only able to identify a few studies that have empirically examined particular aspects related to CSCs – some of which appeared during the course of the study (2015-2018), particularly in Spain (Belackova et al., 2016; Marín, 2008, 2009), and Uruguay (Queirolo et al., 2016). In Belgium, Decorte (2014a, 2015) conducted a first exploratory study into the CSCs in the country, which opened up the field for the research presented here. Our analysis enhances the view on the segment of the market that the Belgian CSCs have currently attracted, the ‘type’ of cannabis users who have resorted to the Clubs to acquire cannabis, as well as a the profile and motivations of cannabis growers who are operating within the CSCs. With regards to the latter, this analysis draws on and contributes to the growing body of criminological literature on small-scale cannabis cultivators (e.g.: Alvarez et al., 2016; Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Potter et al., 2015; Potter et al., 2011), introducing the figure of the CSC grower to the various classifications developed by other scholars.

The activist facet of these groups has also received little scholarly attention (Aguiar & Musto, 2015; Castro, 2014; Marín, 2008, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Musto, forthcoming), and has not been the central focus of studies to date (with the exception of Marín (2008, 2009)). In addition, while there had been some accounts, from within the criminological and sociological literature, with regards to ‘cannabis activism’, highlighting for instance the role of medical cannabis activists (Heddleston, 2013; Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013), or the activist stance taken by cannabis growers (Klein & Potter, 2018; Potter, 2010a), a social movement perspective had not been explicitly incorporated in such analyses.

The first contribution of the study is thus a general one: we hope to have provided a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of CSCs (in Belgium), and to increase the scholarly debate about the topic. With that in mind, we adopted a mixed methods approach, and considered different dimensions of the phenomenon: situating CSCs, as both supply model and social movement organization, within the larger institutionalized context, while at the same time paying attention to key individuals (or groups) with a clear function within the

organizations: their leaders, cannabis cultivators, and members, and the dynamics between them and the broader cannabis movement landscape in Belgium.

Policy implications emerging from a nuanced understanding of the CSC model

As discussed in Chapter 4, as a result of both scholarly design, actual policy implementation or grassroots initiatives, a range of cannabis supply models have been identified and (to different extents) documented. A better understanding of each of these models is not only relevant to the development of a scientific (criminological, public policy) body of knowledge, but can also be informative and bears implications for the design of actual policies in this area. A second contribution of this study thus relates to a more nuanced understanding of the CSC model. Our analysis unveiled a richness and complexity of CSC practices and features, which although had been hinted at in a few previous publications (Decorte et al., 2017; Parés & Bouso, 2015), had not yet been revealed to the extent presented here (Chapter 8, 9). We noted shifts in the model and the co-existence of different CSC variants. This was captured in a first CSC typology, which we hope will be further explored (and expanded) in subsequent studies of CSCs in Belgium and elsewhere.

The way the CSC activists have shaped (in an unregulated context) CSCs' functioning not only feeds into the scholarly understanding of 'what is a CSC', but provides important pointers which could inform future regulation of the model. Although this study did not aim (nor was it designed) to provide an evaluation of the CSC model or its impacts, the evidence gathered allows us to reflect on some of its potential implications. As discussed in §2, the Belgian CSCs have introduced minimum age requirements (18 or 21 years old) and other restrictions in terms of access to cannabis. Quantity discounts, advertisement, or other marketing incentives to stimulate consumption were not practices identified among the sample of CSCs under analysis. These aspects are positive mitigators to ensure safeguards to public health (Haden & Emerson, 2014; Pacula et al., 2014; Spithoff et al., 2015). Further, most CSC members who participated in our survey were regular, daily or near daily users, who indicated a stable pattern of consumption (after joining a CSC) – this is an important segment of the cannabis market, considering that regular users account for the largest share of the quantity of cannabis consumed. At the same time, quality control and labelling remain challenging, and it is not clear how the model performs in other aspects relevant for public health oriented policies (such as, for instance, reducing drugged driving, or concurrent use of cannabis and alcohol) (Pacula et al., 2014). The CSCs seem to impose a somewhat high threshold as well (e.g. with regards to registration, payment, frequency of distribution), which may not be well suited to all users – an issue raised also by Belackova and Wilkins (2018). As the typology suggests, the CSCs have, in a number of areas, adopted different and changing practices, which may have different impacts.

Our analysis suggests that future legislative efforts would benefit from considering and to some extent integrating the self-regulatory framework(s) already developed by the CSC activists in practice (Chapter 2, 8). Most CSCs have shown willingness to share and discuss their current

working methods and views with the public authorities, which could be rather insightful in designing new policies or legislation in this area, and potentially facilitate its implementation (Belackova & Wilkins, 2018) (Chapter 1). As such, a ‘multiple regulatory strategy’ (Ritter, 2010) could be a possible way forward: strengthening ‘consumer agency’ (Belackova & Wilkins, 2018), while at the same time safeguarding public health goals (Decorte et al., 2017; Pacula et al., 2014).

Beyond the supply of cannabis: the added value of adopting an inter-disciplinary approach

The review of the empirical research conducted into CSCs in Spain revealed that, although the supply of cannabis was central to those organizations’ goals and action, their scope of intervention was broader. Also in Belgium, the CSCs articulated the pursuit of a legal or policy change as a goal, and developed a range of strategies (traditional and new) to mobilize participants and wield influence over key institutionalized actors, with some degree of organization and temporal continuity (Snow et al., 2004) (Chapter 5, 13). They are thus cannabis suppliers, but also social movement organizations. Marín (2008) classified the cannabis movement in Spain as a ‘new social movement’. Key to ‘new social movements’ are the focus on values, accentuating autonomy, identity and self-organization, the implementation of unconventional types of action, supported primarily by middle-class, educated, and left-leaning activists (Chapter 5, 13). Although we looked at the movement through the lens of the CSCs only, our evidence seems to support Marín’s (2008) claim.

Over a decade later, and as discussed in §2, no significant legal reform has, however, taken place in this area, in Belgium. Should this be understood as a failure of the movement? Social movement scholarship has tended to focus primarily on the emergence and development of movements; the study of movements’ impacts has remained somewhat neglected (Amenta & Caren, 2004; Kane, 2003). Attributing causal influence remains a complex exercise (Amenta & Caren, 2004; Earl, 2004), and one that would demand separate analysis. In any case, considering only legal or policy changes would offer an overly narrow view of social movements’ contribution to change. Mobilization constitutes in itself an organizational success of the movement (Bernstein, 2003). In this regard, the Belgian CSCs have maintained continuous presence and developed action since 2006 (Chapter 6). Cultural outcomes, such as a change in the public understanding of cannabis or cannabis supply, would also be another dimension of ‘success’ (Bernstein, 2003; Earl, 2004; Giugni, 2004).

The consideration of social movement perspectives in the current study improved the breadth and depth of the analysis presented here. It allowed for a situated understanding of the motivations and practices of the actors involved, and to further explore the presence of and dynamics between CSCs and other players active within the broader cannabis movement landscape as well as the institutionalized structures being challenged. By drawing on theoretical insights from the field of social movement studies, as well as on an understanding of cannabis markets and the design of supply models developed within public policy and criminological

inquiries, this study highlights the potential for cross-fertilization between both areas of knowledge. Furthermore, we believe that the analysis presented here also invites reflexive consideration by the activists who have proposed and implemented the CSC model in Belgium (as well as in other unregulated contexts), or who have been involved in the various broader actions of the cannabis movement.

4. Suggestions for future research

This doctoral dissertation raises also new questions that ought to be explored in future research. Some of these build directly on data that we have already collected, while others imply the collection of new data. We discuss some of those avenues in the next paragraphs.

What about the cannabis?

An important aspect of the consideration of CSCs as a supply model relates to the type of cannabis produced and distributed by those outlets. Additional laboratorial analysis could provide complementary information on the quality, potency, and purity of the cannabis supplied through CSCs, and would also allow for further comparative analysis (for instance, in relation to similar data on cannabis seized by domestic law enforcement; or to the annual monitoring already implemented with regards to cannabis supplied through Dutch coffee shops). As we discussed in Chapter 12, users'/growers' perceptions of potency offer an indication but are often under-/over-estimations. We also found that the Belgian CSCs often issue guidelines for the growers cultivating for the Clubs, and all reported adhering to organic cultivation practices (Chapter 8, 11). Due to the lack of authorization from the competent authority (FAGG) we were unable to conduct the planned toxicological analysis of cannabis samples produced by Belgian CSCs. Given the argumentation put forward by FAGG, it is unlikely that this permit will be granted in the current legal framework, although we would stress the relevance of collecting and analysing such data. If possible, further efforts should be made in other settings with a CSC presence to implement laboratorial analysis of the cannabis produced by these organizations.

What about CSC members' views and preferences?

The survey dataset allows for further analysis. One interesting aspect which we did not delve into here is the consideration of CSC members' own views and preferences with regards to a range of supply models and to CSCs' features, which could provide additional insights into the potential of the CSC model to keep appealing to members vis-à-vis other options. For instance, our survey included a set of questions about participants' view on drugs policy: they were asked 1) about their position (favour/oppose) with regards to the introduction of legislation formally allowing and regulating the CSC model in Belgium; 2) about the extent they agree/disagree with

current features of Uruguayan CSCs (as a result of regulatory requirements, such as formal registration of members in a national database, monthly limits to quantities purchased through a CSC, etc.); as well as 3) about their views on whether other models of supply should be legally introduced in Belgium (e.g. grow your own, government monopoly, for-profit suppliers, etc.). During our interviews with CSC directors we also discussed their opinion on how the CSC model would/should evolve in the future, so this qualitative data could complement the analysis of the survey data. Additional interviews with CSC members could also offer a more in-depth understanding of these issues (considering also that most members did not complete our survey).

What about non-CSC members?

According to CSCs' own estimates (during data collection), 676 cannabis users are members of Belgian CSCs. Given the scope of this study, we focused exclusively on CSC members in our analysis. Research by Wouters and Korf (2011) in the Netherlands found that among 354 Utrecht coffee shop visitors, two thirds "*have never heard of the social club model*" (p. 23). After receiving some basic information about the model and the plans of the city to introduce it as an experiment, 58% indicated not being interested in joining a CSC, primarily because of the need to register as member (Wouters & Korf, 2011). In Belgium, a recent (unpublished) study among 432 Flemish, adult cannabis users (who reported using cannabis in the past 30 days) found that about 63% were not familiar with the CSC model (Loots, 2017). Future research could, for instance, try to learn more about why other users have not joined these organizations. Our analysis indicates that the current legal framework may constitute an additional barrier for users to join (also seeing as they would have to formally register as members). However, we do not know the extent to which this and other factors may have played a role for other users.

A second line of investigation in relation to non-members relates to cannabis users' engagement within the cannabis movement. As we noted in this dissertation, cannabis users (and others who identify with the movement) may participate in its action while not-affiliated with a particular CSC or organization – such engagement has been noted by authors studying other movements (Walgrave, 2013). It would be of added value to better understand the extent and intensity to which such participation occurs, and perhaps compare it with the findings from users affiliated with particular organizations, including CSCs. Several scholars, including van Stekelenburg and Roggeband (2013), as well as Klandermans (2013), have argued that the demand-side of protest (i.e. "*the interest in a society for what a movement stands for*") warrants further attention. In this dissertation, the focus was on the supply-side: the characteristics of the movement, its organizational forms and activities. Further examination of demand processes could offer complementary insights into the dynamics of mobilization (van Stekelenburg & Roggeband, 2013).

What about the broader cannabis movement in Belgium? And abroad?

We would encourage further analysis into the broader cannabis movement in Belgium. In our analysis, we identified a number of other actors (e.g., growers, lobby groups, consultants, etc.) who beyond the CSCs, participate in that movement. However, we did not capture the full landscape of that movement (as we focused on the actors with whom the CSCs reported collaborating). As such, further analysis could expand that mapping exercise, and examine their roles, claims and the actions developed by these other actors.

In our review of the literature, we found reports of CSCs active elsewhere (beyond the three key settings more salient in current analyses: Spain, Belgium and Uruguay), both in Europe (e.g. France, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the UK) and beyond (e.g., Argentina, Chile, New-Zealand, etc.) (Chapter 2). As noted in §2, we also identified transnational processes among cannabis activists. However, there is very limited data on CSCs' practices in other countries. In our own analysis, we often could only point to the Spanish context as a reference, given the dearth of knowledge about how CSCs are operating in other countries and the extent to which they adhere to the typical features ascribed to the model. In addition, although there has been growing research interest in understanding transnational dynamics within social movements, as Tarrow and McAdam (2005) note: *"the spread of contention has not received the same level of theoretical or empirical attention as two other processes, movement recruitment and emergent mobilization"* (p. 126). In our view, additional inquiry into the cannabis movement, analysing such 'scale shifts' would be an important contribution to the scholarly debate on transnational movements.

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Annex

1. Approval (Faculty of Law)



FACULTY OF LAW

ETHICAL COMMITTEE

Advice of the committee January, 5th 2015

Concerning the application of Prof. Dr. Tom De Corte (supervisor) under the title 'Cannabis social clubs in Belgium: a study of the organization of collective cannabis cultivation for personal use and characteristics of club members.', submitted on November, 28th 2014.

After deliberation the committee unanimously approves the submitted application.

The committee wishes the researchers and supervisors every success.

Prof. Dr. Jan Verplaetse

President of the Ethical Committee, Faculty of Law (Ghent University)

2. Rejection letter for toxicological analysis

Team Narcotics
Tel.: 02/528.40.00
e-mail: narcotics@fagg.be

Instituut voor Sociaal Drugsonderzoek
T.a.v. Dhr. Tom De Corte
Universiteitsstraat 4
9000 Gent

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|--|----------|-------------------|
| uw bericht van 27/09/2017 | uw kenmerk | ons kenmerk FAGG/DGI/SGS/ ind. 1029251-1 | bijlagen | datum 21/10/17 |
|------------------------------|------------|--|----------|-------------------|

Weigering van de activiteitenvergunning verdovende middelen en/of psychotrope stoffen

Geachte,

Ik verwijs naar uw aanvraag tot een activiteitenvergunning verdovende middelen en/of psychotrope stoffen zoals voorzien in art. 11 van het koninklijk besluit van 06.09.2017 houdende regeling van verdovende middelen en psychotrope stoffen.

Uw aanvraag werd onontvankelijk verklaard door het team Narcotics van het FAGG op 25/10/2017 met de melding dat u volgens art. 12§1 een termijn had van maximaal 1 maand om de aanvraag te regulariseren.

Echter, de aanvraag werd niet geregulariseerd, met als gevolg dat de aanvraag tot een activiteitenvergunning verdovende middelen/psychotrope stoffen wordt geweigerd op grond van onontvankelijkheid (art. 12§1, 2^{de} alinea).

Bovendien kan de motivatie nooit aanvaard worden, gezien de social cannabis clubs een inbreuk begaan op de drugswet en bijvolg cannabis uit deze illegale bron enkel kan geanalyseerd worden in het kader van een gerechtelijk onderzoek.

Overeenkomstig artikel 19 van de gecoördineerde wetten op de Raad van State, kunt u in geval van een benadeling of van een belang tegen de beslissing beroep instellen bij de Raad van State. Dit beroep moet op straffe van onontvankelijkheid ingediend worden binnen 60 dagen na de dag dat u kennis heeft genomen van deze beslissing. Het beroep wordt ingeleid door een gedagtekend verzoekschrift dat door u of door een advocaat ondertekend moet zijn. Het verzoekschrift moet bij aangetekende brief gestuurd worden aan de Eerste Voorzitter van de Raad van State, Wetenschapsstraat 33, 1040 Brussel.

Met beleefde groeten
Voor de Minister,



X. De Cuyper
Administrateur-generaal

3. Interview guide (EN): interviews with the Board of Directors of Belgian CSCs

Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: a study of the organization of collective cannabis cultivation for personal use and characteristics of club members

Interviews with the Board of Directors of Belgian CSCs

I) Basic Information about the CSC [only ask about information not yet collected]

| | |
|---|--|
| 1 | What is the name of the CSC? |
| 2 | Where is the CSC situated? |
| 3 | When was the CSC established? |
| 4 | Does the CSC have a website? Is the Club active in the social media? (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) |
| | - If yes, why? [note website/social media addresses] |
| | - If not, why not? |

II) Foundation and general background of the CSC

| | |
|----|--|
| 5 | How was the CSC born? |
| 6 | Can you tell us something about the initial vision/mission of the CSC? - How has this evolved during the existence of the CSC? (stayed the same/purpose changed) If evolved, why? |
| 7 | How many people were involved in the creation of the Club? - Are they still members of the Club? If not, why did they decide to leave the Club? |
| 8 | Is the CSC registered as an association? [check by-laws of the CSC before interview] - If yes, with which status? (non-profit, etc.) - If not, why not? |
| 9 | Did the CSC emerge from a previous organization/CSC? - If yes, which? What is the current tie with that organization/CSC? |
| 10 | Could you tell us a bit more about the relation of the CSC with other Belgian CSCs? (knowledge of other Clubs, working together with other Clubs, problems with other Clubs, etc.) Does the Club have contacts with foreign CSCs? If yes, can you tell us more about those? |
| 11 | Is the CSC member of a federation of CSCs or another umbrella organization? - If yes, which one? Why? - If not, why not? |

| | |
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| 12 | Is the CSC involved in other activities (beyond the supply of cannabis to its members)? - If yes, could you tell us more about those? (which ones, and goals) |
|----|--|

III) Becoming a member of a CSC [check membership form of the CSC before interview]

| | |
|----|--|
| 13 | We understand that the CSC has/does not have defined criteria/conditions that candidate members must fulfil to become members... - If yes, could you tell us more about those? Why do you apply such criteria? How do you check whether members adhere to those? - If not, why not? (Is this something that you consider introducing in the future?) |
| 14 | Are members of the CSC recreational cannabis users only, medical cannabis users only, or both? Why? - If medical only or medical and recreational, are there any specific requirements? - How is 'medical use' defined? - Could you describe the typical recruitment process of your CSC? |
| 15 | |
| 16 | In your view, what are the main reasons for new members to join your CSC? - Are there any differences with other CSCs? - Do you have a sense of how candidate members found out about the Club? |
| 17 | How many members does the CSC have now? - What is the proportion of medical/recreational/medical and recreational users? - Could you tell us something about the evolution of the number of members from the foundation of the CSC until today? (stable/increase/decrease; any particular moments of change) - In your view, what would be the ideal number of members for your Club? [if available, can we receive an overview of the number of members since the foundation of the CSC] |
| 18 | Does the CSC have a waiting list at the moment? - If yes, how many candidate members are waiting to be accepted? - How did this evolve over time? (stable/increase/decrease; any particular moments of change) [if available, can we receive an overview of the waiting list since the foundation of the CSC] |

IV) House-rules [check house-rules of the CSC before interview]

| | |
|----|---|
| 19 | We have received/not received your CSCs' house rules... - If yes, could you tell us more about those? How are these applied? Have there been any cases where members did not adhere to those? (if yes, how have those incidents been dealt with by the CSC?) |
|----|---|

| | |
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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If not, is it the case that your CSC does not have such a guiding document? Are there any informal guidelines? |
| 20 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has the CSC ever excluded members? - If yes, how many? - If yes, what were the reasons and the process? |

V) Structure and governance [check by-laws of the CSC before interview]

| | |
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| 21 | Could you describe the management structure of the Club? (Is there a specific division of tasks, etc.) |
| 22 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If there are board members... - How have the board members been appointed? - Have they been members/staff/board members of other CSCs? - What are their responsibilities? - How long have they been in function? (Is there a maximum length) - Is this a remunerated/volunteer function? |
| 23 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If there is other hired staff ... [the role of growers is discussed in detail in section VII] - How have they been selected? - Are they current members of the CSC? - What is their role? - Is this a remunerated/volunteer function? |
| 24 | Could you describe the involvement/participation of the members in the decision-making process of the CSC? (Are decisions voted?, is there a particular moment where members can participate in the decisions?, in what kinds of decisions are they able to participate?) |
| 25 | How does the CSC stay in touch with its members? (website, email, meetings, etc.) |
| 26 | Does the CSC record any data from its members? If yes, what kind of data is being recorded? For which purpose is it being recorded? |

VI) Financial aspects

| | |
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| 27 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the CSC functioning on a non-profit basis? - If yes, could you tell us more about the reasons to run the Club as a non-profit organization? - If not, could you tell us more about how you run the CSC? |
| 28 | Could you tell us something about the main costs incurred by the CSC? What about the main sources of income? |
| 29 | Does the CSC apply a membership fee? If yes, how much do members pay per month/per year? What does this membership fee cover? |
| 30 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If not, does the CSC request another type of contribution from its members? - Are there any possible reductions in the membership fee? - If yes, in which cases? How much? |

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| 31 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do the members (also) pay for the cannabis supplied by the Club? If yes, what is the price per gram? How is the price determined? (Does it vary depending on strain/THC, etc.) What does it cover? (if available, can we receive an overview of the price per gram/per strain/per product) |
| 32 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there any possible reductions in the price of the cannabis supplied by the Club? - If yes, in which cases? How much (typically)? |
| 33 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there any other costs for members? - If yes, which ones? How much (typically)? |
| 34 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has the CSC experienced any financial shortcomings? - If yes, what were/are the key challenges? (price too low, members leaving, legal costs, etc.) |
| 35 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has the CSC been able to achieve a surplus in the past? - If yes, could you tell us roughly how much (typically)? How is that capital used? |

VII) Cannabis production [check growing protocol(s) of the CSC before interview]

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 36 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could you describe how growers are selected by the CSC? - Are they current members of the CSC? (If yes, is this a requirement?) |
| 37 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How many growers are cultivating cannabis for the Club at the moment? - Is this similar/more/less than in the past? |
| 38 | Could you tell us more about the relation between the Club and the growers? (i.e., any protocol, working rules, growing techniques, growing spaces/plants registered by the Club, any security measures) |
| 39 | Does the CSC finance and/or directly supply the growing materials and necessary equipment? (seeds, etc.) |
| 40 | Does the CSC collaborate with grow shops or seed companies? If yes, can you tell us a bit more about this collaboration? |
| 41 | Is the grower compensated for his/her work for the Club? If yes, in which way? (part of the cannabis, reduced membership, money, etc.) |
| 42 | Is cultivation taking place indoors and/or outdoors? What are the reasons for that? |
| 43 | How many plants does each of the growers cultivate for the Club (typically)? |
| 44 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the strains of cannabis produced by the Club? - Could you tell us more about how this choice is made? - Is this similar/more/less variety than in the past? |
| 45 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the average yield of cannabis plants per supply cycle? [note number of plants and typical duration of supply cycle] - Have there been any instances of over- and/or under- production? How were these dealt with? |
| 46 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is the grower allowed to cultivate cannabis for his/her own personal consumption? And for other clubs or other suppliers? - If yes, are there any limits imposed by the Club? How is this controlled by the Club? - If not, what are the reasons? How is this controlled by the Club? |

| | |
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| 47 | Do the different growers of the CSC have any contact/share practices, etc. with each other? - If yes, could you tell us a bit more about this? |
| 48 | Did the Club ever experience any problems with the Club's growers? - If yes, what was the nature of the conflict or incident? How was this dealt with by the Club? (was the police contacted?, did it result in exclusion of growers/members?, etc.) |
| 49 | Did the growers report any incident themselves? (e.g., theft of cannabis, etc.) - If yes, what was the nature of the conflict or incident? How was this dealt with by the Club? (was the police contacted?, did it result in exclusion of growers/members?, etc.) |
| 50 | Does the Club produce any other cannabis-based products for its members? (oils, etc.) - If yes, which ones? Could you tell us more about the production cycle? |

VIII) Quality control

| | |
|----|--|
| 51 | Can you describe the controls applied by the Club to test the quality/potency of the cannabis produced by the Club? - If any such controls are being employed, have these evolved over time? |
| 52 | [For CSCs supplying cannabis for medicinal purposes only] Are there any specific control measures with regards to the cannabis being produced for medicinal users? - If yes, could you tell us more about those measures? |
| 53 | In your opinion, are the current quality control measures adequate and sufficient? |
| 54 | What is the average THC/CBD level of the plants produced by the CSC? |
| 55 | In your view, are the members satisfied with the current variety/potency/quality of the cannabis supplied by the Club? - Do you ask for feedback from the members? [if feedback is being recorded, can we have access to that information?] |

IX) Cannabis distribution by the CSC

| | |
|----|---|
| 56 | Where and how is the cannabis produced by the Club stored before it is distributed to the Club's members? [just general description, no need for full addresses] |
| 57 | Could you describe how the cannabis is transported from the growing location(s) to the distribution point(s)? |
| 58 | Can you tell us more about how the cannabis produced by the CSC is distributed to its members? (specific moments, walk-in, etc.) - Where is the cannabis usually distributed to the members? - When and how often is cannabis distributed to the members? |
| 59 | How much cannabis can members obtain at each supply moment? |

| | |
|----|--|
| 60 | Does the Club provide information about the potency/purity of the cannabis supplied? Is any other information provided? |
| 61 | How is the cannabis supplied by the Club typically used? (smoked, vaped, etc.) - If smoked, does the Club offer/promote other possibilities? How so? |
| 62 | In your opinion, is the cannabis supplied sufficient to cover the personal consumption needs of the members? - Do you ask for feedback from the members? [if feedback is being recorded, can we have access to that information?] |
| 63 | Are the members allowed to use cannabis in the premises of the Club? |
| 64 | Does the Club monitor the patterns of use of the members? - If yes, has the CSC noted any instances of potential problematic use by its members? How did the Club address this? [if consumption/supply patterns are being recorded, can we have access to that information?] |

X) The CSC and other stakeholders

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| 65 | <u>Police and judiciary:</u> [check legal processes before interview] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you describe the relation of the CSC with the local law enforcement and judicial authorities? • Has the Club actively sought to inform these authorities about the activities of the Club? • Have there been any problems or incidents involving the police or the judiciary? - If yes, what was the nature of those problems or incidents? - How often have these happened? - How have these affected the staff/members of the Club? (have any staff/members been arrested/convicted in relation to the activities of the Club) - How have these affected the activities of the Club? (has the club been temporarily closed, did the club receive support from other clubs to maintain supply, etc.) |
| 66 | <u>Policy-makers:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you describe the relation of the CSC with policy-makers... - At the local level? - At the regional level? - At the national level? • Has the Club ever actively sought contact with any of them? [note if local/regional/national] • How would you characterize their position towards the activities of the Club? |
| 67 | <u>Media:</u> [check media analysis before interview] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you describe the relation of the CSC with the print media? (are they informed about the activities of the Club?, did they/the CSC seek contact?, etc.) • Would you describe the media representation of the activities of the Club as rather positive, negative or neutral? |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the Club ever actively sought contact with the print media? Does the Club have a specific media strategy? If yes, could you tell us more about this? |
| 68 | <p><u>Health professionals:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could you describe the relation of the CSC with professionals or professional services in drug prevention or drug treatment? Has the Club ever actively sought contact with any of these health/drug treatment professionals? If yes, is there any formal/informal collaboration in place? How does it work in practice? If not, what are the reasons for that? Would the Club be willing to develop a formal/informal collaboration with drug prevention or drug treatment professionals in the future? <p><u>Criminal entrepreneurs:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the Club have any contacts with third parties, such as criminal entrepreneurs - for instance illegal dealers or growers (who are not members of the Club)? If yes, what is the nature of that contact/relationship? Has the Club ever actively sought contact with any of them? Has the Club experienced any problems involving illegal dealers or growers or other criminal entrepreneurs? If yes, how often have these happened? How did the Club address those problems? <p><u>Other stakeholders:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the Club have noteworthy relations with other stakeholders? If yes, could you tell us more about the nature of that contact/relationship? Has the Club ever actively sought contact with them? |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o (...) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there aspects of the functioning of the Clubs which you think the legislator/Government should not regulate/intervene? Is the Club actively seeking opportunities to advocate for the introduction of such legislation? How? |
|--|--|

Would you like to add anything else or make a final comment?

Thanks for your time!

XI) Reflections about the model and cannabis policy

| | |
|----|--|
| 71 | How do you see the model evolving in the next 5-10 years in Belgium? (specialization for medicinal use?, no longer exists?, increased size?, increased quality controls?, regulation? etc.) |
| 72 | <p>In your opinion, is the CSC model a viable alternative for the supply of cannabis (in relation to other models of supply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you think are the key advantages of the model (in relation to other models of supply)? Could you explain? What do you think are the key challenges of the model (in relation to other models of supply)? Could you explain? |
| 73 | <p>Would you be in favor of the introduction of legislation regulating the activities of the Club?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If yes, what in your view would be the ideal regulatory framework? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Max. number of members o Max. number of plants/grams per year o External quality control o Rules about types of strains, labeling, advertisement, location of the Club |

4. Interview guide (EN): interviews with CSC growers

Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: a study of the organization of collective cannabis cultivation for personal use and characteristics of club members

Interviews with CSC growers

General background

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Could you start by introducing yourself – how did you come in contact with the CSC? - Were you first a member? If yes, for how long were you a member, before starting as grower? |
| 2 | Were you a grower before joining this CSC? - If yes, for how long? - If yes, was that only for your own consumption? Or did you supply others? |
| 3 | Why did you decide to become a grower for a CSC? - Do you agree with the non-profit nature of these organizations? |
| 4 | Do you have a contract or some form of agreement with the CSC? |
| 5 | Do you get any form of payment from the CSC? - If yes, does that cover your costs (energy, equipment, etc.) and labour? - If yes, is that your only source of income? |
| 6 | We understand that the CSC prepares a file for each plant with the identification of the member, etc. – can you tell us a bit more about this? - Are these documents stored in the cultivation site? |

The cultivation process

| | |
|----|---|
| 7 | Could you tell us more about the space where you grow cannabis for the CSC? (NOT interested in address) - Indoors vs outdoors? - In own house vs rented location? - Closed vs accessible to others? - Size of the site? |
| 8 | How many plants do you normally cultivate per cycle? - Does it vary significantly from cycle to cycle? - Do you use your own seeds? - Do you cultivate in water (hydroponic) or in soil? Why? |
| 9 | Could you tell us more about the strains you cultivate? - Which do you normally cultivate? - Who decides which strains to be cultivated? |
| 10 | Do you use any specialized equipment (like lamps, or ventilators, or humidity regulators or water filters)? - If yes, could you describe these? - Did you purchase those yourself? |
| 11 | How much time do you typically spend taking care of the plants? (hours per day) |
| 12 | Do you take any specific precautions against fungus, insects and diseases of the plant? - If yes, could you tell us more about it? What kinds of issues have you experienced so far? - Did it happen frequently? - What kinds of products do you use to tackle those issues? |

| | |
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| 13 | We understand the Club supports organic/bio cultivation. - Do you find this important? - How is this reflected in your growing practices? |
| 14 | Do you usually harvest all the plants from one cycle at the same time or do you do this at different moments? - Do you have any extra help from the Club or others during this phase? |
| 15 | Could you describe the drying process? - Typically, for how many days are the plants drying? - Does this take place in the cultivation site? |
| 16 | In average, which quantity do you obtain per plant (after drying)? - Does this vary significantly? - Have there been occasions where you produced less than expected? |
| 17 | After cutting, how do you store the cannabis? - Does a representative of the Club collect it from the cultivation site? - What happens to the rests of the plant? |
| 18 | Is the cultivation site inspected by a representative of the CSC throughout the process? - How often? - Do you find this important? |

Growers' relations with the Club and other relevant actors

| | |
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| 19 | Could you describe your relationship with the CSC? - Do you think they support your work in an adequate way? - Do you frequently have contacts with a representative from the Club? - Did you have any problems/disagreements with the Club so far? |
| 20 | Do you have contact with other growers from the Club? - If yes, how often? - If yes, in which context? - If yes, is this stimulated by the Club? - If not, why? |
| 21 | Do you have contacts with other relevant organizations/people in the field? (e.g., seed banks, grow shops, etc.) |
| 22 | Beyond the nature-related problems discussed earlier (i.e., fungus, insects, diseases of the plants), did you experience any other issues so far? (theft, fire, law enforcement interventions, etc.) - What kind of issues did you experience? - Did the Club help you in those occasions? |

Would you like to add anything else or make a final comment?

Thanks for your time!

5. Interview guide (EN): interviews with organizations collaborating with CSCs

Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium: a study of the organization of collective cannabis cultivation for personal use and characteristics of club members

Interviews with key stakeholders: organizations that collaborate with Belgian CSCs

I) Basic Information about the organization

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| 1 | What is the name of the organization? |
| 2 | Where is the organization situated? |
| 3 | When was the organization established? |
| 4 | What is the goal(s) of the organization? |
| 5 | What are your main activities? - Does the organization function on a non-profit basis? |
| 6 | How do you plan to/collaborate with CSCs in Belgium? - With which Clubs? - Could you tell us more about how that collaboration came about? (who took the initiative, specific activities, timing, payment, etc.) - Do you plan to extend that collaboration to other Clubs? - Do you also collaborate with CSCs outside of Belgium? |
| 7 | - And with other types of cannabis suppliers? |

II) Reflections about the model and cannabis policy

| | |
|----------|--|
| 8 | How do you see the model evolving in the next 5-10 years in Belgium? (specialization for medicinal use?, no longer exists?, increased size?, increased quality controls?, regulation? etc.) |
| 9 | In your opinion, is the CSC model a viable alternative for the supply of cannabis (in relation to other models of supply)? - What do you think are the key advantages of the model (in relation to other models of supply)? Could you explain? - What do you think are the key challenges of the model (in relation to other models of supply)? Could you explain? |

Would you like to add anything else or make a final comment?

Thanks for your time!

6. Survey questionnaire (EN)



IMPORTANT - please select your preferred language above!

BELANGRIJK - Kies uw taal hierboven!

IMPORTANT - veuillez sélectionner votre langue préférée ci-dessus!

We thank you for your interest in participating in our study about Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium, which has been funded by the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO, grant no. G.0A85.15N). This study is conducted by Mafalda Pardal, a researcher working at the Institute for Social Drug Research (ISD) at Ghent University, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Tom Decorte.

Goals of the study: With this study we want to learn more about the Belgian Cannabis Social Clubs: how they are structured and organized, about the profile of their members, and about the cannabis that is supplied by these organizations.

About this survey: In this survey we will ask questions about your experience as a member of a Cannabis Social Club, about your reasons to join a Cannabis Social Club, about your personal use of cannabis and other drugs, as well as your opinions about this and other possible options for the supply of cannabis.

To participate in this survey you must:

Be a member of a Belgian Cannabis Social Club, and Be at least 18 years old.

It will take approximately 25 minutes to complete this questionnaire.

Why participating: There is no financial reward for participating in this study. Nevertheless, your participation will contribute to a larger body of knowledge that will help improve our collective understanding of the Cannabis Social Club model. It will also help correct any misconstrued stereotypes about the Cannabis Social Clubs and cannabis users.

A note on privacy: The information gathered through this survey is strictly confidential, and will be solely used for academic research purposes. No identifying information that could be used to match you to your questionnaire results will be collected. This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law at Ghent University.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and consent will be assumed upon the submission of data from the questionnaire. You can decide not to answer some of the questions, or leave the survey website at any point – however, for the purposes of this study it would be of great value if you could



Section A: Can you participate?

A1. How old are you?

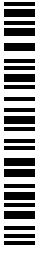
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Section B: Membership within a Cannabis Social Club

B1. Which Cannabis Social Club are you currently a member of?

- Bon Pied Bonne Herbe
- CSC Green Leave
- Le Planet Vert
- Mambo Social Club
- Medicinale Cannabis Club
- Oost West Thuis Best
- Peace
- Trekt Uw Plant
- Other

Other

B2. Which Trekt Uw Plant branch are you currently a member of?

- Trekt Uw Plant Brussels
- Trekt Uw Plant Medical Division
- Not a member of a specific branch (i.e., general Trekt Uw Plant)
- I don't know
- Other

Other

B3. Are you currently member of more than one Belgian Cannabis Social Club?

- Yes
- No



- 86
- 87
- 88
- 89
- 90
- 91
- 92
- 93
- 94
- 95
- 96
- 97
- 98
- 99
- 100

A2. Are you currently a member of a Belgian Cannabis Social Club?

Cannabis Social Clubs are here understood as: organizations of adult cannabis users which represent them and organize the supply of cannabis for their members, be it for recreational and/or medical purposes.

- Yes
- No

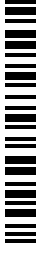


B4. Please indicate which Cannabis Social Club you consider as your main current Cannabis Social Club. The following questions are about that Cannabis Social Club.

- Bon Pied Bonne Herbe
- CSC Green Leave
- Le Planet Vert
- Mambo Social Club
- Medicinale Cannabis Club
- Oost West Thuis Best
- Peace
- Trekt Uw Plant

B5. How long have you been a member of your current Cannabis Social Club?

- Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact timing.*
- Less than 6 months
 - 6 months to less than 1 year
 - 1 year to less than 2 years
 - 2 years to less than 3 years
 - 3 years to less than 4 years
 - 4 years to less than 5 years
 - 5 years to less than 6 years
 - 6 years to less than 7 years
 - 7 years to less than 8 years
 - 8 years to less than 9 years
 - 9 years to less than 10 years
 - 10 years or more



B6. How did you find out about your current Cannabis Social Club?

Check all that apply.

- I was contacted by the Cannabis Social Club
- I was invited by a member of the Cannabis Social Club
- Through a public event organized by the Cannabis Social Club
- Through friends
- Through family
- Through my doctor
- Through my previous cannabis supplier (e.g., dealer, coffeeshop, other Cannabis Social Club, etc.)
- Through the Cannabis Social Club's webpage, Facebook page or other social media
- Through the media (e.g., newspaper, radio, television, etc.)
- Other

Other

B7. Why did you join a Cannabis Social Club?

B8. Do you have a specific function within your Cannabis Social Club?

Check all that apply.

- Yes, administrative clerk
- Yes, grower
- Yes, head of a Cannabis Social Club branch
- Yes, member of the Board of Directors
- No, just member
- Other

Other

B9. How many members of your Cannabis Social Club do you know?

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact numbers.



B15. In the past, which of the following Cannabis Social Club(s) were you a member of?

Check all that apply.

- Bon Pied Bonne Herbe
- CSC Green Leave
- CSC Sativa
- Eureca
- Le Planet Vert
- Ma Weed Perso
- Mambo Social Club
- Medicinale Cannabis Club
- Oost West Thuis Best
- Peace
- The Herb Club
- Trekt Uw Plant
- Weed Out
- Other

Other

.....

B16. Why did you leave that Cannabis Social Club(s)?

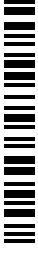
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Section C: Cannabis supply through the Cannabis Social Club

C1. Before you joined a Cannabis Social Club, how did you obtain cannabis?

Check all that apply.

- Dealer(s)
- Dutch coffeeshop
- Dutch pharmacy



- Friend(s)
- I didn't use cannabis before joining the Cannabis Social Club
- I grew my own plant(s)
- Online market
- Other

Other

.....

C2. Currently, is your Cannabis Social Club distributing cannabis among the members?

- Yes
- No

C3. Currently, is the Cannabis Social Club your only source for cannabis?

- Yes
- No

C4. Currently, which of the following are your principal cannabis suppliers?

Please rank up to three suppliers in order of importance.

- Cannabis Social Club
- Dutch coffeeshop
- Dealer(s)
- Dutch pharmacy
- Friend(s)
- I grow my own plant(s)
- Online market

C5. Why do you maintain other cannabis suppliers, in addition to your Cannabis Social Club?

.....



C6. In the past 12 months, how many times did you receive cannabis from your Cannabis Social Club?

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact numbers.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- In more than 12 occasions

C7. How much cannabis do you typically receive at a distribution moment organized by your Cannabis Social Club?

We use the term 'distribution moment' to refer to the different arrangements Cannabis Social Clubs make to supply cannabis to their members (e.g., group 'exchange fairs', individual distribution, etc.).

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact quantity.

- Less than 10 grams
- 10 - 19 grams
- 20 - 29 grams
- 30 - 39 grams
- 40 - 49 grams
- 50 - 59 grams
- 60 - 69 grams
- 70 - 79 grams
- 80 - 89 grams
- 90 - 99 grams
- 100 grams or more



C8. Which form(s) of cannabis do you typically receive from your Cannabis Social Club?

Check all that apply.

- Edibles (e.g., cookies, cake, etc.)
- Hashish
- Herbal cannabis (i.e., marijuana)
- Infusions (e.g. butter, skin moisturizers, etc.)
- Oil
- Tincture
- Other

Other

C9. Which strain(s) do you typically obtain from your Cannabis Social Club?

Check all that apply.

- Sativa
- Indica
- Hybrid, sativa-dominant
- Hybrid, indica-dominant
- Even hybrid (50/50)
- I don't know
- Other

Other

C10. THC is the abbreviated name for tetrahydrocannabinol, the main psychoactive ingredient in cannabis plants. Now we want to talk about the type of cannabis you most typically obtain from your Cannabis Social Club. Do you know the amount of THC of that type of cannabis?

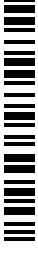
- Yes, I'm confident I know the THC %
- Maybe, I'm somewhat confident I know the THC %
- No, I don't know



C11. What is your best estimate of the THC % of the type of cannabis you most typically obtain from your Cannabis Social Club?

If you receive cannabis with different THC from your CSC, please indicate the THC % of the type of cannabis you most frequently obtain. Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact %.

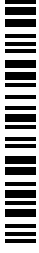
- Less than 1%
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- 90%
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- 93%
- 94%
- 95%
- 96%
- 97%
- 98%
- 99%
- 100%

I don't want to answer

C12. CBD is the abbreviated name for cannabidiol, a compound in cannabis plants that counters the psychoactive effects of THC. Now we want to talk about the type of cannabis you most typically obtain from your Cannabis Social Club. Do you know the amount of CBD of that type of cannabis?

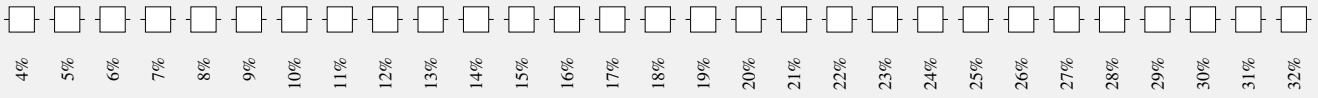
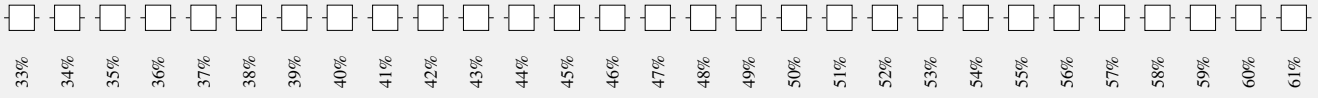
- Yes, I'm confident I know the CBD %
- Maybe, I'm somewhat confident I know the CBD %
- No, I don't know

C13. What is your best estimate of the CBD % of the type of cannabis you most typically obtain from your Cannabis Social Club?

If you receive cannabis with different CBD from your CSC, please indicate the CBD % of the type of cannabis you most frequently obtain.

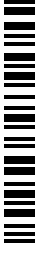
Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact %.

- Less than 1%
- 1%
- 2%
- 3%





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- 98%
- 99%
- 100%

I don't want to answer

C14. How would you best describe your level of satisfaction with the supply of cannabis through your Cannabis Social Club?

| | Very dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Satisfied | Very satisfied |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Frequency of distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Information accompanying the cannabis | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Price of the cannabis | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Quality of the cannabis received | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Quantity of cannabis received | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Forms of cannabis available (e.g., herbal, hashish, oil, tinctures, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Variety of cannabis available (i.e., different strains) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

C15. In the past 12 months, how often have you engaged in any of the following activities with other members using the cannabis you received from your Cannabis Social Club?

| | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Very often | Always |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Gave some/all the cannabis (for free) to other members | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Helped making a cannabis preparation (e.g., cookies, oil, tincture, etc.) for other members | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sold some/all the cannabis to other members | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Swapped some/all the cannabis with other members | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Never Rarely Sometimes Very often Always

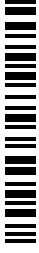
Used cannabis together with other members

Section D: Patterns of consumption

D1. How old were you when you first used cannabis?

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact age.

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- 100

I don't want to answer

D2. Did you use cannabis in the past 30 days?

- Yes
- No

D3. In the past 30 days, on how many days did you use cannabis?

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact numbers.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6



- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30

I don't want to answer

D4. Think for a moment about how much cannabis you consume on a typical, less than typical (light), and more than typical (heavy) day of use. How many grams do you think you use on a:

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact quantity (e.g., 0.5gram, or 1gram).

Heavy day

Typical day



Light day

D5. Has the amount of cannabis you use changed since you have joined your current Cannabis Social Club?

- I use much more now than before I joined a Cannabis Social Club
- I use a little more now than before I joined a Cannabis Social Club
- I use about the same as before I joined a Cannabis Social Club
- I use a little less now than before I joined a Cannabis Social Club
- I use much less now than before I joined a Cannabis Social Club
- My use fluctuates

D6. In what form do you typically take cannabis?

Please check up to three main methods of consumption.

- Drunk as tea
- Eaten as a cooked recipe (e.g., biscuits, cookies, etc.)
- Eaten as leaf/flower matter
- Orally ingested cannabis oil
- Smoked as cigarette (i.e., joint) with tobacco
- Smoked as cigarette (i.e., joint) without tobacco
- Smoked through a dry pipe
- Smoked through a water pipe
- Used as lotion/salve/balm/spray
- Used through a vaporizer

D7. Has your method of consumption changed since you joined your current Cannabis Social Club?

- | | Much more now | A little more now | About the same | A little less now | Much less now |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Drunk as tea | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Eaten as a cooked recipe (e.g., biscuits, cookies, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Eaten as leaf/flower matter | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Orally ingested cannabis oil | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Smoked as a cigarette (i.e., joint) with tobacco | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Smoked as a cigarette (i.e., joint) without tobacco | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



No

I don't want to answer

Other

Other

D13. Some people sometimes seek help, counseling and/or other forms of treatment to reduce or abstain from using cannabis. Have you ever received treatment in relation to your use of cannabis?

Yes

No

D14. In the past 30 days, have you used any of the following substances? Please check all that apply and indicate also the number of days in which you have used them (in the past 30 days).

Please exclude any pharmaceutical drugs that you are taking as directed by your doctor or other specialist.

Please give your best estimate if you are unsure about the exact numbers.

Alcohol

Amphetamine (e.g., speed)

Benzodiazepines and sedatives (e.g., valium, stihnox) for non-medical reasons

Cocaine or crack cocaine

Ecstasy (e.g., MDMA)

Heroin

LSD

Metamphetamine (e.g., meth, crystal, ice)

Other opioids (e.g., OxyContin, codeine, buprenorphine) for non-medical reasons

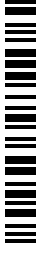
Synthetic cannabinoids (e.g., spice, kronik, k2)

Tobacco

None

Other

Other



D15. Have you ever received treatment for the use of any of those substances?

Yes

No

Section E: Socio-demographic characteristics

We would like to ask you some demographic questions. As we mentioned earlier, all data will be treated confidentially.

E1. I identify my gender as:

Female

Male

Other

Other

E2. What province/region do you live in?

West-Flanders

East-Flanders

Antwerp

Limburg

Flemish Brabant

Brussel capital

Walloon Brabant

Henegouwen

Liège

Namur

Luxembourg

I don't live in Belgium

E3. In which country were you born?

Afghanistan

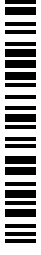
Albania

Algeria

Andorra



- Angola
- Antigua and Barbuda
- Argentina
- Armenia
- Australia
- Austria
- Azerbaijan
- Bahamas
- Bahrain
- Bangladesh
- Barbados
- Belarus
- Belgium
- Belize
- Benin
- Bhutan
- Bolivia
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Botswana
- Brazil
- Brunei
- Bulgaria
- Burkina Faso
- Burundi
- Cabo Verde
- Cambodia
- Cameroon
- Canada
- Central African Republic



- Chad
- Chile
- China
- Colombia
- Comoros
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Republic of the Congo
- Costa Rica
- Cote d'Ivoire
- Croatia
- Cuba
- Cyprus
- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- Djibouti
- Dominica
- Dominican Republic
- Ecuador
- Egypt
- El Salvador
- Equatorial Guinea
- Eritrea
- Estonia
- Ethiopia
- Fiji
- Finland
- France
- Gabon
- Gambia



- Laos
- Latvia
- Lebanon
- Lesotho
- Liberia
- Libya
- Liechtenstein
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg
- Macedonia
- Madagascar
- Malawi
- Malaysia
- Maldives
- Mali
- Malta
- Marshall Islands
- Mauritania
- Mauritius
- Mexico
- Micronesia
- Moldova
- Monaco
- Mongolia
- Montenegro
- Morocco
- Mozambique
- Myanmar (Burma)
- Namibia



- Georgia
- Germany
- Ghana
- Greece
- Grenada
- Guatemala
- Guinea
- Guinea-Bissau
- Guyana
- Haiti
- Honduras
- Hungary
- Iceland
- India
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Iraq
- Ireland
- Israel
- Italy
- Jamaica
- Japan
- Jordan
- Kazakhstan
- Kenya
- Kiribati
- Kosovo
- Kuwait
- Kyrgyzstan



- Nauru
- Nepal
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Nicaragua
- Niger
- Nigeria
- North Korea
- Norway
- Oman
- Pakistan
- Palau
- Palestine
- Panama
- Papua New Guinea
- Paraguay
- Peru
- Philippines
- Poland
- Portugal
- Qatar
- Romania
- Russia
- Rwanda
- Saint Kitts and Nevis
- Saint Lucia
- Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
- Samoa
- San Marino



- Sao Tome and Principe
- Saudi Arabia
- Senegal
- Serbia
- Seychelles
- Sierra Leone
- Singapore
- Slovakia
- Slovenia
- Solomon Islands
- Somalia
- South Africa
- South Korea
- South Sudan
- Spain
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Suriname
- Swaziland
- Sweden
- Switzerland
- Syria
- Taiwan
- Tajikistan
- Tanzania
- Thailand
- Timor-Leste
- Togo
- Tonga

E6. In the past 12 months, what was your main source of income?

Check one main source of income only.

- Wage or salary
- Pension
- Allowance or welfare benefits
- Sale of cannabis
- Other illegal activity
- Child support
- Supported by partner/family
- Other

Other _____

E7. If you add up the net income from all your sources, how much would you say your income per month amounts to approximately?

- Less than €500
- €500 to under €1000
- €1000 to under €1500
- €1500 to under €2000
- €2000 to under €2500
- €2500 to under €3000
- €3000 to under €3500
- €3500 to under €4000
- €4000 to under €4500
- €4500 to under €5000
- €5000 or more

E8. Who else lives with you in the same household?

Check all that apply.

- My spouse/partner/boyfriend/girlfriend
- My child(ren)
- My parents
- My grandparents
- My siblings or other family members



- My friends
- No one, I live alone
- Other housemates
- Other

Other _____

Section F: Your view on drugs policy and political engagement

You are almost finished!

F1. Do you favor or oppose the introduction of legislation formally allowing and regulating the Cannabis Social Club model in Belgium?

- Favor, for medical purposes only
- Favor, for recreational purposes only
- Favor, for medical and recreational purposes
- Oppose
- I don't know

F2. As you may know, Uruguay is currently the only national jurisdiction which has introduced legislation explicitly allowing and regulating Cannabis Social Clubs. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following rules included in that legislation?

- | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Legal access to cannabis is possible for adults only | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Legal access to cannabis is possible for nationals only | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cannabis users must select one supply model (i.e., home cultivation or Cannabis Social Club or supply via a pharmacy) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cannabis users must register in a national database | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cannabis users can obtain a maximum of 40grams of cannabis per month | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



G5. Think about the current features of your own Cannabis Social Club. Are there any specific aspects where you think the Cannabis Social Club could improve or do things differently?

Section H: Final comments?

H1. Is there anything else you would like to say about the Cannabis Social Club model and/or your experience within your Cannabis Social Club?

Thank you very much for your time and efforts!

Your contribution is much appreciated and will help us improve the knowledge about Cannabis Social Clubs and their members. We will inform you about the results of our research through your Cannabis Social Club, and you can also follow our progress here.

7. Excerpt from NVivo codebook: node structure

Node Structure CSC_v0.1 5/03/2018 10:03

| Hierarchical Name | Nickname | Aggregate | User Assigned Color |
|--|----------|-----------|---------------------|
| Node | | | |
| Nodes | | | |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Establishment date | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\House-rules | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\How CSC keeps in touch with members | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\Change stereotype around cannabis user | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\Following Min Guidelines & conformity with law | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\Following past CSC experience | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\Passion for the plant | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\Past conviction | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\Quality and price | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\The Spanish model | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Motivation or vision to set up CSC\\To help others | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\General | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Internal | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Internal\\Comedy Night | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Internal\\CSC Cafe | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Internal\\Lecture | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Internal\\Political debate | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Internal\\Workshops | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Public | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Public\\Participation in other events (not organized by CSC) | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Public\\Policy recommendations & own research | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Non-supply activities\\Public\\Protests and marches | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Number of members | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Number of members\\Current number | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Number of members\\Evolution in membership base | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Number of members\\Proportion recreational and medical | | No | None |
| Nodes\\Basic features CSC\\Number of members\\Waiting list | | No | None |

8. Cannabis Social Clubs on YouTube: A Qualitative Content Analysis

This chapter has been submitted for publication as follows:

Tieberghien, J., Pardal, M. (forthcoming). Cannabis Social Clubs on YouTube: A Qualitative Content Analysis. In: Potter, G., Korf, D., Fountain, J. (eds.), *Place and space in drug use, markets and policy*. Lengerich: Pabst Science Publishers.

Abstract

Background: Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) - registered non-profit associations of cannabis users, advocate for a legal change which would recognize and regulate CSCs as a supply model for cannabis. As social media might facilitate CSCs' communication about their mission, this chapter analyses Belgian CSCs' representation on YouTube as well as the interaction generated in response to those videos.

Methods: We conducted a qualitative content analysis to identify the framing of and by Belgian CSCs on YouTube. Using a systematic search strategy, 59 relevant videos were collected on May 11th, 2017.

Results: Most videos are posted by the official YouTube channels of the CSCs and consist of self-made footage of social activities. The videos frame CSCs' general functioning and critically discuss the legal framework in force. Information is shared using neutral vocabulary. In terms of interactivity, the videos did not generate a strong reaction or engagement.

Conclusion: Offering an overview of the representation of the CSCs on YouTube and how that hardly has captured viewers or generated interaction concerning the model, these findings contribute to advancing the knowledge about CSCs' media efforts. Methodologically, this chapter provides insights into challenges related to online qualitative research methods.

Keywords: Cannabis Social Club; framing; YouTube; cannabis; cannabis movement.

Cannabis Social Clubs on YouTube: A Qualitative Content Analysis

Introduction

CSCs are legally constituted non-profit associations of adult cannabis users, which arrange the cultivation and distribution of that substance among themselves (Arana & Montañés, 2011; Decorte et al., 2017; Kilmer, Kruithof, Pardal, Caulkins, & Rubin, 2013). A particularity of this model of supply is that it emerged essentially as a result of grassroots initiatives, driven by cannabis users themselves - originally in Spain but later expanding into other countries and regions (Bewley-Taylor, Blickman, & Jelsma, 2014; Blickman, 2014; Pardal, 2016b). With exception of Uruguay, where CSCs are regulated by law (Pardo, 2014; Queirolo, Boidi, & Cruz, 2016), in most other jurisdictions, including in Belgium, the CSCs remain operating in a vulnerable legal position (Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Pardal, 2016a). In this context, the CSCs have also actively advocated for a legal change which would recognize and regulate the supply model they have developed. Previous research suggested that these organizations' efforts could be understood as part of a broader 'cannabis movement' seeking to move away from the current prohibitionist framework (Belackova, Tomkova, & Zabransky, 2016; Calafat et al., 2000; Marín, 2008, 2009; V Montañés & Oomen, 2009; Marín & Hinojosa, 2017; Virginia Montañés, 2017).

In this light, the media are certainly a major target for such efforts (McCarthy et al., 1996). Indeed, one of the means of action CSCs have used, with a view to communicate their message and mission to a broader audience, has been to engage with the media (Marín, 2008; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017; Coitiño, Queirolo, & Triñanes, 2017). Seen from the perspective of framing theory, media coverage can make an important difference in the way people think about public issues (Entman, 1989). However, it is well-known that traditional news media are firstly, highly selective in their choice of news topics, and secondly, 'frame' selected stories in very particular ways (McCombs, 2014). New social media¹ facilitate the sharing of one's ideas, feedback, opinions and interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Yar, 2012). What is more, in the social media, communication takes place through a larger variety of forms: online posts, comments, links, photo and video (Bruno, 2008). The use of these new technological tools might also be advantageous for social movement actors, including CSCs, to mobilize participation and publicly articulate their message, as these online platforms are widely available and are a low-cost tool – with the potential to also aid building

¹ Commonly defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010).

transnational activity among activists and new audiences (Earl, Hunt, Garrett, & Dal, 2015; Garrett, 2006).

In particular, YouTube has the potential to challenge the dominance of traditional broadcasting services (Burgess & Green, 2009). As the slogan denotes — “broadcast yourself” — YouTube allows users to tell stories to an audience through self-made videos or even re-edited TV programs. The relevance of YouTube lies also in the open invitation for others to comment or interact. Its potential importance for mainstream politics, activism, and campaigning have been widely discussed, but there is now a growing interest in the role that YouTube plays more specifically in the circulation of ideas about health, health education, body image, identity and stigmatization (Backinger et al., 2011; Carroll, Shensa, & Primack, 2012; Hussin, Frazier, & Thompson, 2011; Kim, Paek, & Lynn, 2010; Koff, Pumper, & Moreno, 2012; Yoo & Kim, 2012). However, apart from work by Hess (2009), Lange, Daniel, Homer, Reed, & Clapp (2010) and Manning (2014), the part that YouTube might play in frames about drugs or drug policy has yet to be properly considered.

This chapter aims to explore the CSCs’ representation on YouTube (*framing*) – including 1) how Belgian CSCs have attempted to deliberately frame their activities through YouTube and the ways in which the Belgian CSCs have been framed by YouTube videos that are posted by others than the CSCs; 2) and how this framing invites audiences to actively comment about the content and to discuss the model (*interactivity*). As there is little scholarly research on YouTube concerning drug issues, this study’s objective is exploratory.

Methods

Visual materials are increasingly present in our daily lives and as noted by Rose (2016): “knowledge as well as many forms of entertainment are visually constructed” (p.1). The context of those visual representations may contribute towards the effect they have: how do we see? How are we able, allowed, or made to see? YouTube is probably the best known online platform where visual materials are displayed (Burgess & Green, 2009). That social media outlet, created in 2005, allows users to view and upload video clips covering a diverse spectrum of topics. With more than 10,000 new videos posted online every day, YouTube has become a kind of community of participants with an appreciation and affinity for exchanging videos and communicating with other people through text comments or by posting video responses (Burgess & Green, 2009). It is thus a key site where the emergence of the creative, empowered consumer can be observed (Jenkins, 2006). Our sample of videos was collected on May 11th 2017, using the search terms “Cannabis Social Club” AND “België”, the names of the known CSCs and of their Directors. In addition, we consulted the YouTube channels of the known Belgian CSCs, based on ongoing work of one of the co-authors. Irrelevant (i.e., videos not addressing CSCs nor CSCs’ activities or not posted by CSCs) and duplicate

videos were excluded. This search strategy returned 59 relevant videos. Our sample included videos narrated in Dutch, English, and French.

In order to get an overall view of the videos and a general sense of their features, we first made an inventory of a limited number of variables: length of the video, number of views and (dis)likes, date of upload, source of video, number of comments, YouTube category, online summary of the video and the 'genre' of the video (news clip, documentary, self-produced video consisting of self-made footage, etc.). Second, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify the frames used to visualize or to communicate about CSCs on YouTube. Content analysis is a valuable and adaptable methodology because of its application to all kinds of communications - texts, images, interviews, and observational records (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009). Thus, the term "content" is used in a broad sense to refer to language that is written or printed as well as visual images and sound effects (Fairclough, 2003). As discussed elsewhere, a qualitative content analysis is helpful for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns and significant themes emerging within visual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also allows researchers to look beyond the obvious and find unique themes and patterns that might exist in these videos (Rose, 2001). The topics of each video — as well as locations, music playing in the background, who addressed the audiences and the ways in which people regarded their audiences — were considered. In addition, this study focused on the textual comments posted in response to the videos as these comments could offer deeper insights into what controversial aspects or triggers of discussion. As such, both video and comment content were manually coded and analyzed, following an inductive (grounded-theory) approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

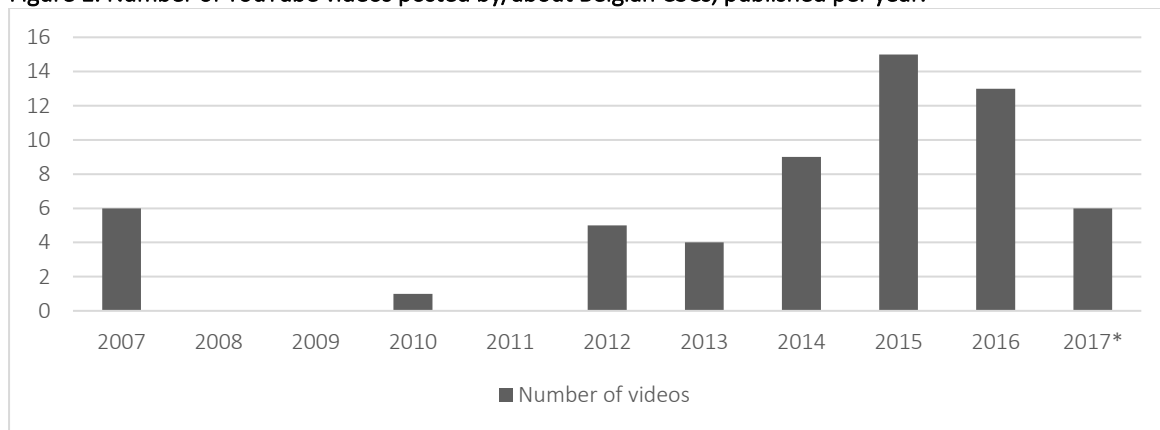
Two independent coders were trained to conduct the observations. Training consisted of watching five videos and learning the main topics and the definitions of the terms used in the coding. The two sets of results from this test coding were comparatively assessed by the two coders in order to ensure consistency in terms of the coding approach. The sample of 59 videos was then divided, with each author reviewing one group of videos (30 and 29 respectively). We thus acted as separate coders, writing descriptions based on the observations of video content with a focus on the visual/textual representations of the clubs, its functioning or members' use, tone of comments, and appreciation of the model. The process of codebook development, revision and recoding was carried out by the two coders, verifying the accuracy of the codes with constant comparison, in order to improve the breadth and depth of the analysis and subsequent findings (Silverman, 2010). All coding and analyzing was completed during the months of June-July 2017.

Results

General video characteristics

Our searches yielded video results for a time period of 10 years. The first video was uploaded in April 2007, approximately one year after the establishment of the first Belgian CSC. The coverage of the Belgian CSCs on YouTube has then gone through a period of no or nearly no presence on that platform, with only one video published between 2008-2011. From 2012 onwards, the coverage of CSCs on YouTube generally increased. The volume reached its maximum in 2015 with a total of 15 videos published.

Figure 1. Number of YouTube videos posted by/about Belgian CSCs, published per year.



Note: For 2017 only videos published by May 11th were included.

Nearly all videos in our sample (n=55) were posted by the official YouTube channels of the CSCs. Four CSCs have an official YouTube channel and publish videos on a regular basis. What is more, most videos were published by the channels of two CSCs in particular – which are the longest standing CSCs in Belgium, both based in Flanders. As such, it is no surprise that the videos are predominantly in Dutch (32 videos), despite nearly half of the Belgian CSCs being located in the French-speaking region of the country.² Furthermore, the average length of the videos is rather short (about 3,58 minutes) in light of other studies in this area (e.g. Lange et al., 2010; Krauss et al., 2015).³ Only in a few instances (n=3), the length of the video transcended 1 hour.

² In particular, we found 32 videos in Dutch, 12 in English and 15 in French.

³ The average duration of the videos in these studies was 5,6 minutes (Krauss et al., 2015) and 5,8 minutes (Lange et al., 2010).

Table 1. General video characteristics.

| Video characteristic | Range |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Number of views | 11 – 20.518 |
| Number of likes | 0 – 42 |
| Number of dislikes | 0 – 3 |
| Number of comments | 0 – 17 |
| Video length | 16 sec – 1 hour 27 min 54 sec |

YouTube’s interactive audience response mechanism (i.e., number of views, viewer ratings and number of comments) captures message reach, viewer preference and viewer engagement. Our findings show limited interaction and little usage of the comment or (dis)‘like’ functions (Table 1). Most videos were watched by a relatively small number of people: only 12 videos had over 1000 views.⁴ Furthermore, there were far fewer comments than expected. The videos posted by the official YouTube channels of the CSCs, consisting of footage from news items or documentaries, generated more interaction. In those examples, the number of “likes” was the highest, ranging between 28-42. In comparison, other videos only received up to 20 likes with an average between 0-5 “likes”. The near absence of “dislikes” suggests that mostly like-minded people watch this type of videos.

Amateur videos with a principal focus on social activities

The largest proportion of the videos (n=34) were amateur videos without editing or chopping cuts, originally produced by representatives or members of the CSCs. Some of these videos are monologues of rather shaky quality (e.g., mobile phone recording) and lacking any script, others resemble animated or computerized videos consisting of self-made, or existing footage, pictures, images, words and sound, combined into a new ‘text’. To a lesser extent, CSCs extracted professionally-made clips from television or news sources and ‘re-mediated’ this content re-uploading it via YouTube (n=19). Although the original representation through traditional media can be seen as somewhat ‘involuntary’ media coverage for the Belgian CSCs, its re-mediation is now the result of proactive framing from their side.

On many videos – whether or not uploaded by the YouTube channel of the CSCs, the principal focus lays on CSCs’ social activities, the majority of which involved the two Belgian CSCs with the

⁴ In our sample we identified three outlier videos with respectively 10262, 11538 and 20518 views.

strongest YouTube presence. Several videos reported on the Cannabis Liberation Day, a yearly event organized by one of the CSCs. Other videos showed the presence and/or participation of CSC representatives at (inter)national events such as cannabis fairs. Those fairs, whether small-scale events or large ‘expos’ (such as ‘Cannafest’ in the Czech Republic or ‘Spannabis’ in Spain), are represented as the place-to-be to receive advice on cultivation, devices for preparing and consuming cannabis products and hemp products. We retrieved also many videos covering other events, such as a political debate organized by one of the Belgian CSCs, or a speech of another CSC’s director at the national annual general meeting of the UK CSCs.

While the print media coverage of the CSC model tended to focus on law enforcement or criminal justice issues (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), those are not central topics in YouTube videos. We observed only four videos which focused on the outcome of court cases concerning two Belgian CSCs (in 2007 and 2015). In these videos, CSC representatives reacted to court case proceedings or discussed the uncertain legal context in which the CSCs were operating. One other video featuring a social event organized by a Belgian CSC in a public location actually included images of the police intervening at the event, including the arrest of at least two of the CSC’s representatives, after they had been seen planting cannabis seeds as a symbolic action. In what follows, the video shows also what seems to be a somewhat spontaneous protest after that police intervention, in which a group of participants is filmed marching to the police office and questioning the officers present there.

Information sharing platform

So far, we have introduced the major focus of (or event featured in) the videos we analyzed. We now turn to the thematic coverage in each video. Given that most videos are posted by the official YouTube channels of the CSCs, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of the videos informed viewers about CSC’s mission and general functioning. In most cases, these were videos re-uploaded by the CSCs, which had originally been produced as part of professional news segments or documentaries. Specifically, several of those videos explained the admission process, for instance with reference to an intake interview of candidate members. Also the main membership criteria, i.e., being an adult, residing in Belgium, and being a cannabis user prior to membership, were discussed. The principle of one plant per member which guides the way CSCs organize their collective cultivations (Decorte, 2015; Decorte et al., 2017), where the ownership of each individual plant is to remain with the respective member, can be clearly visualized in practice in the clips. For instance, in many videos the CSC grow sites were actually filmed and in some instances the plant identification, and the ownership form (i.e., a declaration members are asked to sign acknowledging ownership of their one plant, which is cultivated for them by the CSC) can be seen as well. However, we noted a difference between the narratives of the Belgian CSCs. While two of

the CSCs have developed ways to describe the model more carefully in line with their stated goals and functions, one other CSC often described its activities in a different way. For instance, representatives of this last CSC referred to ‘selling cannabis’ – while generally the CSCs refrain from using language directly associated with sales, instead describing the price as a contribution to the cultivation costs.⁵

Another theme present in the videos is the consideration of the (perceived) ‘grey legal zone’ wherein CSCs are operating. Often references are made to the international context, pointing to what are seen as good policy examples (e.g., the Portuguese decriminalization policy or the recent legislative change in Uruguay). The current international legal framework and prohibition more generally are often criticized, as well as other policy changes– for instance the so-called ‘weed pass’ policy introduced in the Netherlands. In other instances (n=10), we found also comparisons between the use of cannabis and other substances (e.g., alcohol, tobacco), which are presented as being more harmful but legally available. At the same time, in a few videos CSC representatives alluded to other social movements (e.g., LGBT movement) and/or used language typically associated with those, for instance by urging cannabis users to ‘come out’ and take a more active and visible role in the movement.

Overall, the YouTube videos we analyzed featured an informative tone, in recognition of the ‘seriousness’ of the issues concerning cannabis policy and the claims of the movement and employed a common, neutral vocabulary. Videos that ‘celebrate’ intoxication or the excitement of the experience of cannabis use were an exception in our sample. Only in a few examples, self-made videos used graphical and audio effects to construct a message of fun and pleasure. For instance, a video showing a crowded cannabis fair in Spain (Spannabis) celebrated cannabis experiences by creating a sphere of hedonistic and bodily pleasure, as the video was guided by uplifting music and showed people who were preparing their joint, smoking cannabis or who were testing or buying bongs or vaporizers. In a similar vein, an invitation video to one of the annual Cannabis Liberation Day events used parodic acts such as smoking a fake (paper) joint and pretending to be ‘stoned’, mixed with some police sirens sound effects.

⁵ The reference to cannabis sales diverges also from what are the recommendations included in the (non-binding) Code of Conduct for European CSCs prepared by the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies, which states that “a CSC does not buy and sell cannabis, it provides a service to its members” (ENCOD, 2011).

Self-representation of CSCs and their members

Given that most videos are uploaded by the official YouTube channels of the CSCs and thus reflect a proactive framing, it is interesting to examine the ways CSCs represent themselves. Firstly, for each video, we captured the YouTube category assigned by the individuals who posted it.⁶ Interestingly, most of the videos in our sample were labelled as 'People and blogs' (n=25), followed by 'Non-profit and activism' (n=17) and 'News and politics' (n=15). Secondly, if we turn to the way the CSCs and their members represent themselves in the amateur, self-made videos, the general (self-) characterization relates to being a group/association of cannabis consumers, a group of friends ("a group of consumers, even friends, that have decided to organize supply"), or to being "cannactivists" or activists, non-profit oriented and passionate about cannabis. Again, the preference for the term 'consumers' ("I'm a cannabis consumer for almost 20 years", "Let's show the world that you are a cannabis consumer") instead of 'users' may have been intended to de-emphasize the negative associations attached to drug users. 'Consuming' is less drug-specific than 'using' and subsequently may be a more acceptable alternative which separates the 'good' actions of supporting regulation and consuming, from the negative reactions towards 'drug usage'. Furthermore, in some videos, the CSC model has been described as a social project or experiment which offers opportunities for society in the domains of public health or public order (e.g. has having the potential to create jobs, to open up social debates, to promote health and aid treatment in the case of medical use of cannabis, and to invest in research).

Additionally, several videos made brief references to cannabis use for medical purposes. However, this was almost never the main focus of the video until 2015. From then onwards, support for the medical use of cannabis was also found in videos exclusively addressing that issue. For instance, one CSC posted a video focusing on the benefits of cannabis in cancer treatment. Similarly, several testimonies of medical cannabis users and of CSC members mobilized in other videos provided also clear support for the CSC model.

In general, the videos used insiders' words and stories to build the CSCs' narratives rather than relying on external stakeholders such as scientists, professionals, journalists. Typically, a CSC director is featured in almost all videos as the central spokesperson. Only occasionally some members are shown or interviewed (e.g. harvesting the mother plant, providing a testimony, or participating in social events). We noted very limited political or expert involvement in the framing of CSCs via YouTube. For instance, a few health professionals were filmed (n=7, but almost all in the same video). Only two police officers were included (which is unsurprising given the principal

⁶ When uploading a video, users are requested by the YouTube interface to select a category that fits the content or purpose of the video clip (Snickars & Vonderau, 2009).

source of the videos), and nearly no politician was featured. Similarly, in these videos only two Belgian scientific experts critically discussed the advantages and shortcomings of the CSC model.

Of note are subtle changes to the visual self-portrayal by the CSCs since 2014. In the early videos, the directors, the members as well as the cannabis plants and indoor/outdoor grow sites were (although the location was kept secret) filmed. More recent videos however seem to be more covered in a sphere of 'secrecy'. For instance, one video still includes images of the grow sites, but the reporter acknowledges not being able to show the location of those; in one other, the video includes old footage of a CSC director showing a grow site (images that had been use in an earlier TV segment) and notes that the CSC no longer allows that kind of coverage. This seems to be a conscious move in the relationship with journalists when participating in TV pieces, as well as to what CSCs decide to show and post themselves on YouTube. In a similar vein, there are some examples of 'computerized' or 'animated' videos which are worth noting. Two videos use the signature mask of hacking collective Anonymous to discuss the basic principles of the CSC model. In these instances, nobody is literally showing his/her face, which is a very different approach than what other previous videos had taken. Arguably, this could be interpreted in light of a periods of intensification of law enforcement interventions tackling the Belgian CSCs or subsequent court proceedings. Four instance, several CSCs ceased activities following police actions circa 2014-2015. Also, during 2017, several Directors and members of Belgian CSCs were arrested and imprisoned (Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 May 2017; Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, 2 June 2017). This provoked several reactions, offline as well as online. As far as the online reaction on YouTube is concerned, several individuals - self-reported medical cannabis users in particular – were filmed giving a personal testimony of the positive impact of the CSC in their life, defending the model – but at the same time keeping their identity hidden.

Let's talk action instead of interaction: reaching out to the audience

As Van Zoonen et al. (2010) note, new communication channels could extend and universalize civil rights, political movements or participation. In a similar vein, CSCs seem to have placed some faith in the Internet as a technological tool that can help give a voice to the CSC model and the claims they put forward. Despite the rather low number of views or likes, the videos clearly aim to mobilize or circulate a message among the – imagined – audience. In the videos, CSCs' logo or contact details, such as links to their websites or Facebook pages were often shared for that purpose. In most examples, reaching out to the YouTube audience was pursued through the announcement of a social event organized by the CSC. In contrast, we found no direct, explicit calls to advertise cannabis sales or recruit new CSC members.

At the same time, CSCs construct online affiliations through the content of their videos. In some instances, these videos appear to be loaded as a means of reaching out to an online community of

cannabis users (e.g., by using hashtags such as “#jesuisTUP” in support of a CSC during a legal case involving some of its representatives). However, as we have discussed above, very little interaction between hosts of the videos and viewers, as well as among viewers, occurred. Only in the cases of ‘re-mediated’ news clips or documentaries did we observe that commenters clearly enacted affiliation with the CSCs and a liberal model of cannabis policy in general. Comments along the lines of “legalize it”, “Do your best. Fight for cannabis legalization” revealed viewers as a community sharing positive views about cannabis.

Discussion

Taking into account the changing media landscape and the increasing importance of social media, this chapter provides a first exploratory analysis of how Belgian CSCs have been framed via YouTube, how CSCs communicate with the public about their activities via this social media platform, and how this framing invites audiences to actively comment about its content and discuss the model. Generally, we found a small volume of videos and associated visualizations during the period considered, which seems to suggest that YouTube might not be the preferred channel used by CSCs to communicate with their members and the broader public. Even so, four Belgian CSCs have official YouTube accounts through which they posted videos, and the longest-standing CSC had in fact set up multiple accounts. Interestingly, in a previous study the same CSCs had also emerged as the most featured CSCs in domestic news items covering the model (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), which points to differences in the repertoire of action of the Belgian CSCs and/or to their different preferences concerning media/communication strategies, which warrant further analysis.

The CSCs remain the key communicator about the model on YouTube, as most videos were uploaded by the CSCs themselves. Although this echoes the idea that social movement organizations might seek to circumvent classic mass media outlets by using their own media (Klandermans & Goslinga, 1996), it also lays bare the reduced engagement of other actors or stakeholders in disseminating, advocating or discussing the model. In fact, similar to the ways the CSCs’ narratives are built in newspaper articles (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), the videos hardly reflected the voices of scientific experts, law enforcement, health professionals or politicians. The same picture emerged in terms of the key sources constructing the frame in the videos as, with a few exceptions, the CSC directors were typically the key individuals present in the videos to convey the ‘public story’ of the organizations, in line with previous research which had identified this as a central task of movement leaders (Ganz, 2010; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). What is more, although YouTube offers a number of tools for interaction between the hosts of the videos and the audience (Burgess & Green, 2009), the videos we analyzed revealed very little such interaction. In

fact, our findings suggest that YouTube may have done little to strengthen the advocacy efforts of CSCs.

The YouTube videos we analyzed focused primarily on social activities of the CSCs, including footage of events organized by the CSCs, such as marches, protests, reunions or debates, and of the participation of CSC representatives in other social events. Unsurprisingly, given the editorial autonomy enjoyed by CSCs when posting on YouTube, criminal justice issues – which constituted the main focus of traditional media coverage of the model (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017), were not central here. The preference to focus on social activities can also be seen as a tool to stimulate the sense of belonging to a community, strengthening the movement’s collective identity (Porta & Diani, 2014). As Porta and Diani (2014) noted “the story of movements is therefore also the story of their members’ ability to impose certain images of themselves, and to counter attempts by dominant groups to denigrate their aspirations to be recognized as different” (p. 106). It was also reflected in the way CSCs presented themselves, illustrated by their choice of YouTube category (‘People and Blogs, ‘Non-profit and activism’, and ‘News and politics’), as well as the self-characterization as ‘cannactivists’ in the videos. We noted also an effort to introduce more neutral terminology (i.e., cannabis consumers instead of users), which denotes the perceived need by the CSC representatives to counter stigmatized notions associated with cannabis use. Similarly, previous research argued that online platforms such as discussion fora may operate as an alternative public space of resistance to the dominant constructions of cannabis (e.g. Månsson (2014)).

Furthermore, the videos we analyzed revealed that YouTube mostly contains self-produced amateur videos without editing or chopping cuts that show the social activities or the general functioning of the CSCs in detail, extending findings from past research on CSCs (Pardal, 2016a; Decorte & Pardal, 2017; Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017). Interestingly, as a result of proactive framing from their side, CSCs ‘re-mediated’ also existing footage from news, documentary, and other professionally produced audiovisual material via YouTube. What is more, the videos also show subtle changes to the visual self-portrayal of CSCs since 2014. While some members, as well as cannabis plants and indoor/outdoor grow sites were represented in early videos, more recent ones seem to be more covered in a sphere of ‘secrecy’. In addition, from 2015 onwards, videos increasingly made references to cannabis use for medical purposes, mostly mentioned in the video itself. Clearly, some patterns of framing loom large across mainstream media are found here too (Pardal & Tieberghien, 2017).

Methodologically, this exploratory chapter enters novel pathways related to qualitative research methods in the drug field. YouTube videos are easily accessible and potentially far-reaching and therefore important to the understanding of visual types of messages shared (Krauss et al., 2015), particularly with regards to social movement actors who may attempt to influence public policy via this channel.

There are several methodological challenges in researching YouTube or video-sharing sites in general. Firstly, YouTube lacks the stability that characterizes traditional media. In practice though, all the video content observed and coded remained available through the data collection and coding period, May 2017 to July 2017. Secondly, while YouTube provides important data, there are methodological issues in relation to viewer counts and number of (dis)likes that should be taken into account. The use of automatic page refreshers may artificially increase view counts, boosting the perception of a video's popularity (Burgess & Green, 2009). This did not seem to occur in relation to our sample. Thirdly, the selection of keywords and information extraction techniques might have created additional biases. For instance, it must be noted that, although the keywords were tested for relevance, it is possible that we have overlooked videos around topics that include activities or debates about Belgian CSCs but that do not exactly mention the selected keywords in their title or description. In this context, it is also important to notice that search engines such as YouTube are likely to produce slightly different result totals each time a search is replicated (Vis, Zoonen, & Mihelj, 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the framing of CSCs on YouTube, analysing how CSCs represented themselves as well as how others have communicated about this supply model. This study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first analysis of YouTube discourses about CSCs. Although the videos did not generate a strong *interactivity* among YouTube viewers, in terms of *framing* processes, our findings seem to represent a challenge to the 'involuntary' traditional media coverage which is most likely to report on the law enforcement or criminal justice issues associated with CSCs. The YouTube videos are highly significant for the circulation of meaning and may affect how consumers as well as producers of the videos come to understand particular topics. It will be key to further improve our empirical and theoretical understanding of the framing role of (traditional versus social) media in the field of drugs.

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