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Africa and the Drugs Trade Revisited

In the 1990s Africa, once again, became ‘a new frontier’ - this time for the global war on drugs. Recognising the significance of the continent’s immersion in the global drug trade, this journal dedicated a pioneering special issue to the matter in 1999 (Vol. 26, No. 79). The previous year, the UN had held its General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) and published its first major report on drugs in Africa (UNDCP 1999). RoAPE’s focus on the drugs trade grew out of these initiatives at the time. The next UNGASS is scheduled to take place this year, in April 2016, against the backdrop of accelerating global drug policy reforms and the expansion and transformation of drug markets throughout Africa. The role of developing countries in policing drugs, but also in informing and shaping broader policy, is bound to add both depth and dilemmas to the deliberations in New York.¹ Seizing this opportune moment to present and discuss new research from across the continent, this special issue revisits some of the themes explored in 1999 and introduces new findings and avenues for research. Intended to dispel myths about Africa’s ‘drug problem’, contributors aim to steer both the academic and policy-making debate towards issues emerging from empirical findings in a variety of country contexts.

The parameters of the continent’s involvement in the production, sale, and consumption of (illicit) drugs have been subject to a number of notable changes since RoAPE’s first special issue on the topic. National policing bodies such as Nigeria’s National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) have expanded their capacity, often with the assistance of external donors. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has opened offices in Lagos, Accra, Nairobi and Pretoria, and actively seeks to collaborate with local authorities. A multinational maritime task force is now policing the Indian Ocean and making record seizures, such as the over 1.5 tonnes of heroin intercepted off the coast of Kenya and Tanzania in 2015 alone (CMF 2015a; 2015b). As a result, trafficking routes have evolved to evade intensifying policing.

Consumption patterns on the continent have also changed. New drugs, such as methamphetamines, are sold and even produced in a number of African countries (Mark 2013). Substances previously confined to metropolitan areas are now trickling into rural areas (Syvertsen et al. 2016). In April 2015, Pierre Lapaque, the West and Central Africa representative for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), described the continent as ‘the market of the future for illegal drugs’ (Bouchaud 2015). Today drug consumption, trade, and production in Africa is the subject of a special commission headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and discussed by media and policy makers in almost every African country (WACD 2014). The fact that the African Union has developed two Plans of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention – for 2007-2012 and for 2013-2018 – is indicative of the continental scale of the phenomenon. However, statements like Lapaque’s convey an image of a sudden crisis that fits neatly into the broader rhetoric of the global drug prohibition regime. It also resonates with Africa-specific narratives of terrorism, corruption and state ‘failure’, which have captivated a range of audiences in the past decade and a half.

¹ Note that this special issue and its editorial went to press before the start of the UN meeting.

Of course, the ways in which drugs are smuggled, sold, consumed, perceived and talked about throughout the continent have changed. The trends outlined above are just some of the major developments that have taken place. Yet, very little has changed since 1999 in one fundamental aspect – our knowledge base and its use in formulating ‘evidence-based’ policy.

The data problem

The dearth of reliable data when it comes to illicit drug trade and consumption throughout Africa, as elsewhere, is staggering. While there has been a considerable increase in statistical information, this is still largely based on reports of seizures and arrests compiled by national authorities and international agencies mandated to control drugs. The most comprehensive drugs database remains that of UNODC. Each annual report of the organisation, however, is based primarily on the annual report questionnaires (ARQ) member states are mandated to submit. More than half of them did not do so for the 2015 World Drug Report. Of the 54 African countries only 10 submitted an ARQ. While grappling with bureaucratic impediments to systematic collection of information, the most widely used source of information on drugs in Africa offers a picture of escalating policing appetites rather than veritable trafficking and consumption patterns. Seizures and arrests are well-known to be poor measures of the drug trade. Further, UNODC itself does not have the resources to produce robust findings annually in its World Drug Report. A former author of the report has argued that the organisation ‘simply does not have enough personnel that can be dedicated to basic research’ (Thoumi 2005, 189).

This overreliance on fragmentary and unreliable seizure and arrest statistics has not only been instrumental in crafting the crisis narrative of drugs in Africa, but more importantly – has obscured important historical patterns and the possibility of developing alternative methodologies. UNODC has previously recognised the deficiencies in its methodological approach. In the 2013 World Drug Report, the organisation noted that the ‘irregularity and incompleteness in ARQ reporting’, as well as its susceptibility to ‘biases’ (2013, 1), ultimately affect the reliability of data. Yet, alternative approaches to data collection are not sought.

In an attempt to fill some of these data and analytical gaps, and in line with recent academic developments in the study of drugs in Africa (Klantschnig, Carrier and Ambler 2015), contributions to this special issue base their findings on extensive fieldwork in African drug markets. They also offer a much needed country-specific level of analysis, rather than sweeping pancontinental conclusions. Based on alternative sources of information, the authors question the prevalent national and international rhetoric on drugs in Africa: that drugs are a development impediment, undermining public health, reducing productivity, distorting economies and eroding governance. To address these perceived effects of the drug trade on the continent, donors assist and encourage African countries in building their policing infrastructure and formulating restrictive policies. Although these initiatives have often been justified as part of a development agenda, their impact on people’s livelihoods and socio-economic development has hardly been assessed.

Change and continuity

In addition to its focus on fieldwork-based research, the contributions to this special issue stress the historical roots of drug use, trade and control in Africa. In much of the official and media discourse, drugs are depicted as a new problem for the continent – until recently, Africa was seen as free from drugs, particularly harder substances such as cocaine and heroin (UNSC 2011; Time Magazine 2012; New York Times 2013). This emphasis on the novelty of the threat posed by drugs is useful for those who wish to convey a sense of urgency, such as the former head of the UNODC, who stated: ‘Let’s be frank: Africa in general, never faced a drug problem – whether we speak about production, trafficking or consumption. Now the threat is there, on all these fronts’ (Costa 2008). These ideas about Africa’s historical innocence when it comes to drug use and trade also reveal long-discredited ways of thinking of the continent as somehow thrust into modern global processes only with the coming of western colonialism or more recent forces of globalization.

Yet, Africa has a long history of drug production, use, trade and control. Only in the last few years, historians have started to explore this history and also the ambiguous relationship that different African societies have had with substances as diverse as khat, cannabis and heroin (Akyeampong 2005; Ellis 2009; Anderson and Carrier 2009). The local markets and concerns about some of these substances date back even before the current international regimes to control them were set up (Klantschnig, Carrier and Ambler 2014). Africa has also never been isolated from the global trade in drugs and has been an important actor in attempts to restrict and police it.

Nonetheless, the history of how drugs were used, traded and cultivated in Africa, remains still largely unexplored. This is especially true for the substances that are the most widely consumed, sold and produced on the continent, such as cannabis. While they might not pose the same ‘threat’ to western consumers and might even be considered legal in parts of the world, they have played an essential part in debates about drugs in Africa. This is also why Carrier and Klantschnig, Laudati and Suckling’s articles in this issue focus on cannabis and its production, sale and control.

Drugs and security

Aside from drugs transiting through Africa on their way to western consumers, the major concern about drugs on the continent has been their supposed threat to security and the state. Already in 1999, the editorial to RoAPE’s special issue on drugs highlighted the devastating effects that drugs could have on the already weakened state in the immediate post-Cold War era. A series of official reports on the topic of state instability and the impact of drugs have strengthened this view in recent years (UNODC 2007; Cockayne and Williams 2009; Gastrow 2011). Africa’s ‘porous borders’ and so-called ‘ungoverned spaces’ are seen as an easy target for international drug traffickers (Cockayne and Williams 2009). Guinea-Bissau stands out as an example of this purported weakness and state failure, although other countries, such as Kenya and Nigeria have shown similar tendencies (Bayart et al 1999; *Newswatch* 1986; *Wikileaks* 2006). As contributions by Dimova and Suckling show, these links between the state and drug trade are not as clear-cut as official narratives and some of the related theoretical

statements on the so-called ‘criminalisation of the state’ suggest, which are too generalised to account for the actual links between drug producers, traders and users, and state actors.

The same is true for the often prophesied but rarely documented links between drugs and other criminal activities, especially terrorism, now commonly termed the drugs-terror nexus. These links have been present in law enforcement imaginations for a while; for instance, in the 1990s, US officials were convinced of Nigerian drug syndicates transforming into ‘poly-crime organisations’ (Klantschnig 2013). However, after the terror attacks of 9/11, the major focus has been on links to terror cells, often conceptually subsumed under the transnational organised crime umbrella. As with the state-drugs nexus, the evidence of a systematic drug-terror nexus is rather thin (Ellis and Shaw 2015).

What is more important to acknowledge in this context is that drugs and terror, as well as crime more broadly, have to a significant degree been state projects in Africa as elsewhere. As the 1999 special issue alluded to, anti-drug policies are driven by states in Africa and often ‘promote a strengthening of authoritarian institutions and repressive state capacity, raising civil liberties issues’ (Allen 1999, 10). Many of the contributions in this special issue confirm that anti-drug policies are part of state expansion projects. They also show how, at the local level, the translation of anti-drug measures is often severely flawed with a high risk that drug control in practice simply adds another burden on citizens already at risk of being preyed upon by state agencies. At the same time, public health provisions for vulnerable populations receive only peripheral attention.

In this context, state-sponsored violence does in many ways dwarf the violence generated by illegal drug markets themselves. Official narratives have hypothesised the spread of violence based on the drug trade, often drawing parallels to major drug production and consumption centres in the Americas (UNODC 2007; Costa 2008). The organised crime literature has argued likewise: that the unregulated nature of illegal markets leads to violence as a means of contract enforcement (Shaw and Ellis, 2015). But is this really the case in African drug markets? In some of the continent’s illicit economies, for instance in South Africa, there is evidence for such claims. In Guinea Bissau, conflict over access to the spoils created by the drug trade has intensified violence between factions of the state (Shaw 2015). However, in most cases, widespread violence associated with the drug trade originates elsewhere: from the state. Two of the articles in this issue – by Laudati and Suckling – directly address these questions in the markets for drugs they analyse. Laudati comes to a telling conclusion examining the production and trade of cannabis in the Eastern Congo. She finds that rather than the usual reported causalities between drugs and violence, it is rather their illegality that stimulates everyday violence and insecurity.

Drugs and development

Where does this leave drugs and their actual role and impact in Africa today? As the articles in this special issue suggest, drugs should be seen within the context of agricultural change and development or as an economic activity on the margins of the urban economy. While the drug trade is not as economically significant to Africa and the world economy as stated in official

discourse (Reuter, 2004; Thoumi, 2005), this is not to say that it is unimportant for the livelihoods of farmers, traders, and smugglers engaged in these activities, as well as for its consumers. Seeing drugs through the lens of development helps to challenge many of the misconceptions of their actual impact throughout Africa.²[1]

The contributors to this special issue analyse the drugs-development nexus from different vantage points, including an exploration of the substantive role of drugs in African societies, both in past and present times. This provides an opportunity to challenge the dominant argument that the drug economy is simply a development impediment in Africa. In many African countries, the cultivation of cannabis and khat, for example, safeguards livelihoods by providing farmers with a rare source of cash income. Moreover, in contrast to other export crops, cannabis and khat are not only more hardy, but also somewhat insulated from global markets that are often skewed in favour of the West (UNDP 2015; Buxton 2015). Thus, cannabis has clearly acted as a ‘compensation crop’, although some argue that it is far more integrated into local economies than the term ‘compensation crop’ suggests (Laudati 2014). In urban areas the distribution of drugs is also a major component of the informal economy, offering – as McCurdy’s briefing demonstrates – disenfranchised segments of the population a productive livelihood strategy.

The contributions to this special issue challenge received wisdom about drugs in Africa and base their findings on views of actors involved in or affected by drugs – many of them labelled ‘criminals’. Turning to these sources of information distinguishes the contributions in this special issue from much of the existing work on drugs in Africa as elsewhere. However, we are not intending to diminish the real dangers that drugs can pose to people’s health, safety and livelihoods. As the contributions to the special issue show, some of these risks, however, are actively obfuscated by official narratives. For example, users’ transitions to injecting heroin in East Africa are often a result of deteriorating drugs quality, brought about by supply reduction strategies. Further, as illustrated in Dimova’s discussion of local policing initiatives in Mombasa, street-level dealers, who often come from marginalised backgrounds, suffer disproportionately once enforcement efforts are ramped up. These specific examples show that it is perceptions of security, rather than real concerns with development, that still drive drug policy elaboration and implementation in Africa.

Beyond drugs in Africa

There are three further articles in this issue, which stand outside of the special issue. Two of these papers reveal the continuing importance of ethnicity in the politics of class formation, as a means of concealing class privilege or of restructuring political community in opposition to it. First, Pinaud shows how the marriage market became part of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army’s circuit of predation during the war. More specifically, she highlights how the military

² Development itself is a highly contested concept – often defined by the state or dominant social classes. There was no common notion of development forced on the different contributors, except for a shared acknowledgement of RoAPE’s political economy approach (Bush and Harrison, 2014).

elite used marriages to defend its class interests and secure new inter-ethnic and inter-clanic military kinship ties. This served to consolidate forms of social, political and economic domination developed in the historical construction of ethnic identities in South Sudan.

Arowosegbe's contribution moves west to Nigeria and examines ethnic conflict as a consequence of the land question – the latter radically altered as populations are increasingly integrated into world capitalist systems. Autonomous development in the post-colonial state is subsequently diminished, contributing to its persistent failure to address land questions in Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe and elsewhere as well as in Nigeria. The article shows how an expansion of control and private ownership of land has intensified interethnic polarisation, social inequalities and landlessness, especially among the rural poor.

Land alienation is also a concern in Cioffo, Ansoms and Murisons' analysis of the Rwandan Crop Intensification Program, a process of agricultural modernisation developed over the past decade. They challenge the familiar claims of the 'new' Green Revolution that sub-Saharan Africa suffers from a 'yield gap' that can be overcome with modern agricultural inputs. Promoted by the World Bank and international donors, as well as the Rockefeller and Gates Foundations in the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Rwandan state, this top-down, bureaucratic approach towards soil management evidently undermines biodiversity and farmers' capacity to maintain the productivity of land and labour. At the same time, the programme actively differentiates medium and large farmers from small-holders, revealing a persistent class-bias as the poorer producers lack access to agricultural inputs. This article aptly reflects the themes raised in the contributions to this special issue by highlighting the gaps between the official claims and realities that African producers and traders of legal as well as illegal commodities confront in Africa today.

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