

Title: A decade of CSCs in Belgium: hitting the headlines?

Authors:

Mafalda Pardal, PhD researcher, Institute for Social Drug Research (ISD), Ghent University (Belgium), Mafalda.Pardal@Ugent.be

Dr. Julie Tieberghien, Postdoctoral Fellow FWO, Institute for Social Drug Research (ISD), Ghent University (Belgium), Julie.Tieberghien@Ugent.be

Keywords: Cannabis Social Clubs; drug policy; media; content analysis.

Aims, methods and findings of the paper proposed

Background and aims

Cannabis Social Clubs (CSCs) are non-profit organizations that collectively organize the cultivation and distribution of cannabis for the personal use of their adult members. This model for the supply of cannabis first emerged in Spain during the 1990s, but can now be found in many European and Latin American countries. In Belgium, the first CSC was established in 2006. Since then the landscape of CSCs has evolved significantly, with some new Clubs emerging and others ceasing their activities. While becoming a recurrent subject in the international debate about drug policy reform, especially as a meaningful middle ground between cannabis prohibition and commercial legalization, the activities of the CSCs have never been far from the media gaze too. This is of particular importance since the way in which the media frame, supporting or opposing 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 representation specific to the CSC model. In this article we seek to understand whether and how the Belgian CSCs have been portrayed by the domestic media – as denoted by patterns and trends in news media reporting on the CSC model in the country.

Methods

A content analysis of Belgian print media was carried out over the period 2006–2016 from a sample comprised of 12 newspapers. Articles that contained one or more mention of the CSC model were identified. A sample of 164 articles was selected for media content analysis. Key elements of analysis, following the analytical framework of Hughes et al. (2011), included the explicit or implicit messages about the CSC model and its characteristics, the principal sources of information referring to or discussing the CSC model; and value dimensions such as the overall tone adopted and the positive/negative connotation of the model. This dataset was complemented by a review of the relevant literature in this topic, as well as of the internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs (e.g., by-laws, membership forms, house-rules, etc.). In addition, between February and June of 2016, one of the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with the Board of Directors of the then six active CSCs participating in the study (n= 15 interviewees). 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 questionnaire included also 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.

Findings

The CSC model was not heavily featured in the domestic printed media in Belgium between 2006 and 2016. The media portrayals tended to focus on legal issues affecting the CSCs or those running the Clubs, and while this may partially reflect the uncertain legal context in which the CSCs are operating in the country, this emphasis may also generate a negative public perception of the CSCs – a concern shared by some of the CSCs. Nevertheless, in spite of the focus on law enforcement or criminal justice issues associated with the CSC model, the reporting has been balanced and moving from an initial somewhat negative connotation attributed to the Clubs, to a more neutral characterization. The Belgian printed media offered also some level of detail on the functioning of the CSCs, providing the general public with information about the internal structure and activities of the CSCs. The main sources for the news articles tended to be the CSCs themselves, who have also commented on their readiness to engage with the media, either on their own initiative or when approached by journalists. During the time period considered, the limited contribution of policy-makers to the news concerning the CSC model in Belgium is striking.

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis shows that the introduction and development of the CSC model in Belgium was accompanied with some attention by the domestic printed media, even if focusing primarily on legal issues and thus potentially contributing to a negative public image of the model. Such media attention has been noted in other instances, where new or alternative policy options or proposals are introduced in the public arena. While the CSCs interviewed shared some disbelief about the willingness or

ability of the media to report on non-sensationalist items, and to understand the complexities of their functioning, we found that the media depictions about the internal workings of the CSCs are broadly in line with what has been described in previous research, and the internal documents produced by the Belgian CSCs. This suggests that patterns of news media reporting on the CSC model may be somewhat more neutral and less biased or narrowly framed than previously anticipated. Although the international policy and scholarly policy reform discussion seems to be increasing, a public or political debate on the CSC model does not seem to have yet been initiated in Belgium, as attested by the lack of involvement from policy-makers in the CSC news items during this decade. However, learning from the Uruguayan case - which is the first example of a national jurisdiction recognizing and regulating the CSC model, media scrutiny may prompt the opening of a policy window of opportunity for issues to be placed on the government's agenda. As the CSC model matures in Belgium and elsewhere, it is thus important to understand how this and other 'middle ground' options for cannabis policy are being featured in both the domestic and international media.