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*“Achieving SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) in line
with the 2030 United Nations agenda.”*



Committee: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes

Agenda Item: Evaluating the diversification of drug markets in Africa

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Positions: President Chair, Deputy Chairs

Introduction

Drug markets in Africa have spiraled into a significant issue throughout the years. While the continent was only a transit zone for illicit drugs, it quickly turned into a place where drugs are also produced, sold, and consumed. A variety of drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, heroin, synthetic substances are increasingly present in African markets. Evaluating the diversification of drug markets in Africa is important since it helps explain how and why these changes happen, and how to prevent them.

One major reason for the diversification of drug markets in Africa is globalization. The increase of international trade, improved transportation networks, and weaker border controls in specific regions have made it easier for drug trafficking organizations to move and distribute a wider variety of substances. In addition, governments corrupting in specific regions have allowed criminal groups to operate more safely. Because of those reasons, Africa has become more connected to global drug markets which resulted in the distribution of drugs.

The diversification of drug markets have had serious consequences for the African societies and governments. Due to the increasing availability for drugs, citizens of African states have developed health problems, including addiction and the spread of diseases. Additionally, the crime rates got higher, and some regions became unsafe. Governments started to struggle with addicts since they lack powerful law enforcement, enough resources, and effective drug treatment programs. Evaluating these impacts are key to creating better policies that include prevention, education, and rehabilitation for drug usages.

Definition of Significant Terms

Drug Market

The system through which illegal drugs are produced, distributed, and sold, including the networks and actors involved.

Diversification

The process by which drug markets expand to include a wider range of drugs, activities (production, trafficking, consumption), and geographic areas.

Transit Route

A country or region used mainly to transport drugs from producers to consumer markets, rather than for local sale or use.

Drug Production

The cultivation or manufacturing of drugs, such as growing cannabis or producing synthetic substances in laboratories.

Drug Trafficking

The illegal movement of drugs across borders or within countries through organized criminal networks.

Synthetic Drugs

Man-made drugs created in laboratories, such as methamphetamine or synthetic opioids, which are often cheaper and easier to produce than plant-based drugs.

Organized Crime Networks

Structured groups that engage in illegal activities, including drug trafficking, often operating across national borders.

Public Health Impact

The effects of drug use on population health, including addiction, overdose, and the spread of diseases.

Law Enforcement Capacity

The ability of governments and institutions to prevent, detect, and respond to drug-related crimes through policing and legal systems.

Policy Response

The strategies and actions taken by governments and international organizations to address drug issues, including prevention, enforcement, and treatment programs.

Detailed Background of the Issue

For a long time, Africa served primarily as a transit route for illegal substances headed for Europe, including heroin from Asia and cocaine from Latin America. A number of African regions were at risk of being used by transnational trafficking networks due to lax border controls, a lack of surveillance capabilities, and inadequate law enforcement.

This role has changed dramatically since the early 2000s. Africa became an active player in the world's drug markets as criminal groups started to store, distribute, and sell drugs domestically. Due to the continent's involvement in the manufacture, trafficking, and consumption phases of the drug trade, this shift signaled the start of diversification.

The rise in local medication manufacture has been a significant factor in diversification. The good climate and economic difficulties in rural areas led to the expansion of cannabis growing. Cross-border trafficking within Africa was made possible by enhanced regional transportation networks.

Synthetic drugs like tramadol and methamphetamine were more common at the same time. These materials don't require any agricultural land and are easier and less expensive to generate. Their manufacture sped up the diversification of drug markets by enabling criminal organizations to quickly adjust to enforcement actions.

Local drug usage has increased as a result of the increased availability of narcotics, especially in urban regions. Addiction, mental health issues, and the spread of infectious diseases are among the public health issues that have grown as a result. Many African states lack sufficient treatment and rehabilitation facilities, turning drug use into a major public health concern.

In addition to strengthening organized crime networks, diversified drug markets have increased regional insecurity, money laundering, and corruption. Drug earnings have further weakened state authority and stability in places with poor governance.

Africa is becoming a producer, transit center, and consumer market for a variety of illegal substances. Diversification is still fueled by unemployment, economic inequality, and inadequate institutional capacity. Comprehensive approaches that include public health, law enforcement, and regional collaboration are needed to address this problem.

Timeline of Key Events

1990s	During the 1990s, several African countries became important transit routes for cocaine and heroin moving from Latin America and Asia to Europe. Weak border controls and limited law-enforcement capacity made trafficking through West and East Africa easier.
Early 2000s	In the early 2000s, international criminal networks began to establish a stronger presence in West Africa. These groups did not only transport drugs but also started to store and redistribute them locally, marking a shift from transit to market involvement.
Mid 2000s	By the mid-2000s, drug consumption began to rise in major African cities. Cocaine and heroin use increased among urban populations, showing that drugs were no longer just passing through the continent but being sold and consumed locally.
2010	Around 2010, synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine began to appear more frequently in Africa. These substances were easier and cheaper to produce locally, reducing reliance on international supply chains and accelerating market diversification.
2014-2016	Cannabis cultivation expanded in several African countries, both for domestic use and regional trafficking. Improved transport networks allowed cannabis markets to grow across borders within Africa.
2018	Reports by organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime highlighted that Africa was becoming a production, transit, and consumption region. This marked global acknowledgment of the diversification trend.
2020s	During the COVID-19 pandemic, drug trafficking routes and distribution methods adapted, including greater use of local markets and informal networks. This further strengthened domestic drug markets and long-term diversification across the continent.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Nigeria

Nigeria is a major hub for drug trafficking and distribution in Africa due to its strategic location and strong international connections. It faces challenges related to synthetic drug trafficking and organized criminal networks, despite efforts by national agencies such as the NDLEA.

Ghana

Ghana has served as a transit country for cocaine trafficking and has experienced increased domestic drug use. It actively supports regional cooperation and works with UNODC programs to strengthen border and airport security.

Kenya

Kenya plays a key role in East African heroin trafficking routes. Rising drug use in coastal areas has created serious public health concerns, while enforcement and treatment capacities remain limited.

South Africa

South Africa has one of the most diversified drug markets in Africa, acting as both a consumer and transit country. It also faces challenges related to synthetic drug production and organized crime.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

UNODC supports African states through research, technical assistance, and capacity-building programs such as AIRCOP. It promotes balanced drug policies that combine enforcement with prevention and treatment.

African Union (AU)

The African Union provides a continental framework for drug control, highlighting the links between drug trafficking, development, and governance.

World Health Organization (WHO)

WHO focuses on the public health impacts of drug use, supporting prevention, treatment, and harm-reduction strategies across the African region.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

In 2008, the heads of state and government of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) adopted a political declaration on drug trafficking that formally recognized West Africa's impactful role in international drug trafficking, particularly as a transit region for cocaine transported from Latin America to Europe. The Declaration recognized the connections between drug trafficking and transnational crime, corruption, and threats to regional stability. It urged a higher level of cooperation between Member States, sharing of information, improved control of borders, and harmonization of national legislation with international drug control conventions. The declaration also underlined the responsibility of ECOWAS Member States to view drug trafficking as a regional issue rather than a series of national problems.

Following the 2008 declaration, ECOWAS adopted the Regional Action Plan on Drug Trafficking in 2009 as an operational framework, in order to address the issue. The plan included an extensive agenda of goals, all of which tended to develop cooperation between the various law enforcement agencies, as well as enhancing the fight against the related financial crimes of drug trafficking. It was hoped that the strategy would improve the coordination between the various national drug control agencies, advancing more efficient intelligence-sharing and joint actions, and, at the same time, improve the capacity of the various enforcement agencies such as the police, customs, and the judiciary. The strategy also includes the aspect of demand reduction, advocating the promotion of prevention, treatment, and awareness. The action plan also incorporated measures related to drug prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation within the ECOWAS region.

In 2010, UNODC, in cooperation with ECOWAS and other international partners, launched the Airport Communication Project (AIRCOP) in West Africa. The project established Joint Airport Interdiction Task Forces (JAITFs) at some international airports that were selected, including major hubs such as Dakar, Accra, and Lagos. AIRCOP focused on improving real-time communication between law enforcement agencies while allowing the facilitation of exchange for intelligence related drug trafficking and other forms of transnational organized crime. The objective of the initiative was to strengthen the capacity of participating states to detect and

intercept illicit drug shipments moving through air transport routes, and it did so by providing specialized training and operational support to airport-based units.

Alternative Solutions

A possible path to follow to address the outgrowing problem of the increasing drug market in Africa is through strengthening coordination capacity of multilateral and regional bodies, specifically in scenarios where multi-substance drug trafficking or linear transit routes are present. Already existing structures, while being effective in targeting isolated trafficking routes, lack the ability to address the multi-layered structure of transit, consumption and money laundering which takes place in Africa. In this scenario, where addressing these routes are significant, the enhancement of institutional capacity would lead authorities to test these interconnected dynamics.

Furthermore, another effective approach towards the problem could be improvement of coordinated regional enforcement and multi-focusing mechanisms, specifically between parties where the effect of drug trafficking is mirrored. Strengthening legal definitions, surveillance and security standards would help the reduction of displacement strategies which are mostly used by trafficking groups. Stronger coordination also will lead to increased consistency of monitoring of emerging drug types, which have entered the African market through numerous corridors.

Lastly, another path to follow for the issue could be through the integration of drug-control strategies, supported by financial oversight and development focusing government measures. The rapidly increasing diversity in drug markets in Africa is in direct contact with the weakness in the areas' economies, informal economies and limited presence of state presence in border regions. Strengthment of regulations, improvement of customs capacity and enhancement of cooperation between law enforcement and financial institutions will have the potential to dispute the economic foundations which sustain the diversified drug markets, instead of targeting individual activities.

Useful Links

1. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – World Drug Report

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report.html>

The UNODC *World Drug Report* provides comprehensive global and regional data on drug production, trafficking, and consumption. It outlines how Africa has shifted from being primarily a transit region to becoming increasingly involved in production and local consumption. The report is particularly valuable for identifying long-term trends and patterns in the diversification of drug markets across the continent.

2. UNODC – Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in West Africa

https://www.unodc.org/documents/westafrica/publications/Drug_Trafficking_and_Organized_Crime_in_West_Africa.pdf

This report offers a detailed analysis of drug trafficking routes and organized crime networks in West Africa. It explains how international trafficking groups have expanded their operations beyond transit activities into storage, redistribution, and local sales. The source is useful for understanding how weak governance and limited law enforcement capacity have contributed to market diversification.

3. World Health Organization (WHO) – Substance Use in the African Region

<https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/substance-abuse>

The World Health Organization provides insight into the public health consequences of increased drug availability in Africa. It highlights issues such as addiction, mental health challenges, and

pressure on healthcare systems. This source connects drug market diversification to broader social and health impacts rather than focusing solely on criminal activity.

4. World Bank – Crime, Violence, and Development in Africa

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialdevelopment/publication/crime-and-violence-in-africa>

The World Bank examines the relationship between crime, including drug trafficking, and economic development. It shows how illicit drug markets can weaken institutions, increase inequality, and slow economic growth. This perspective helps explain why drug market diversification poses long-term risks to governance and development.

5. Institute for Security Studies (ISS) – Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in Africa

<https://issafrica.org/research/books/drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-in-africa>

The Institute for Security Studies provides region-specific analysis of how drug trafficking affects security and stability in Africa. The publication discusses the adaptation of drug markets in response to political instability and weak border controls. It is particularly relevant for evaluating law enforcement challenges and regional security implications.

6. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime – Africa Analysis

<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/africa/>

The Global Initiative offers research on illicit economies and transnational organized crime in Africa. Its reports explain how globalization, trade routes, and infrastructure development facilitate the expansion and diversification of drug markets. This source is valuable for understanding the structural drivers behind these changes.

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