

# Between Prohibition and Regulation: Narrative Analysis of Cannabis Policy Debate in Africa

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## KEY POINTS

- In recent years there has been intensified activism around cannabis policy, inspired by scientific evidence on the medicinal uses of cannabis as well as the obvious failure of legal prohibition to reduce its production, supply, and use.
- In Africa, there exist hegemonic narratives that emphasize prohibition, progressive narratives that support legal markets, and celebratory narratives that laud the economic benefits of legal markets but overlook potential negative impacts on small-scale farmers.
- Enforcement-based responses to cannabis cultivation are underpinned by a narrative that blames cannabis for conflict and social instability in some parts of Africa but fails to recognize the contributions of cannabis production to local livelihoods.
- Prohibition of cannabis consumption is largely premised on inconclusive evidence of its harmfulness to health. While complex, cannabis use has benefits and the harms experienced by users should be considered within the contexts of use.
- Policing of street-level cannabis markets reflect an emphasis on seizures and arrests as indicators of policy effectiveness, while downplaying the social and health costs of drug control-related violence and human rights abuses.
- Cannabis policy should protect public health, promote social welfare, and guarantee security, which currently dominant enforcement-based policies have failed to do.
- Narratives that capture cannabis policy reforms could challenge the normalization of prohibition and help place legal regulation on top of the policy agenda.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the liberalization of cannabis policy become an increasingly significant aspect of ongoing debate around international drug control. While this concern is far from new and in many settings has deep historical roots, we are now witnessing a growing wave of activism inspired by accumulation of scientific evidence on the therapeutic potentials of the cannabis plant as well as the obvious failure of legal prohibition to reduce the production, supply, and consumption of the drug. The history and politics of the condemnation of cannabis in the making and implementation of the three UN treaties on drugs has been well documented.<sup>1</sup> This involved the use of sensationalist arguments and dubious evidence to criminalize cannabis cultivation and trade, overriding its religious, medicinal, industrial, and recreational uses. A strong case can be made that cannabis prohibition, institutionalized in the UN narcotics conventions, is a colonial and racist remnant that undermines traditional practices, threaten livelihoods, and widens the reach of the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup> This is highly evident in Africa, where legal prohibition has often interfered with religious, cultural, and therapeutic uses of the plant, threatened the livelihoods of local communities and increased prison populations through incarceration of young people, mostly for possession of small quantities of cannabis for personal use.

The decision of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the UN's central policy making body on this issue, on December 2, 2020, to remove cannabis from schedule IV of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, where it was listed among drugs that are thought to have little to no therapeutic uses (e.g., heroin), looks set to have profound significance for rural economies in Africa. As has proved to be the case since late 2020, the decision is providing additional impetus for the development of medicinal cannabis markets, which have occurred in some African countries

(e.g., Lesotho, Zimbabwe) after the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the world drug problem in 2016. The 2016 UNGASS, though failing to produce treaty reforms called for in some quarters, signalled an opening of the political space for regional and national reflections on the nature of illicit drugs and domestic responses.<sup>3</sup>

While this is the case, the drug policy landscape in Africa remains politically charged. This is in many ways due to opposing narratives that seek to define the terms of the debate. On the one hand, there is a hegemonic narrative centered on prohibition, which sees drugs (e.g., cannabis) as social and moral evil to be eliminated through enforcement-based approaches. On the other hand, there is a more progressive, but muffled, narrative that recognizes the social, economic and health benefits of drugs, and support alternative approaches that emphasize human rights and public health. The narrative tussle is graphically illustrated by the controversy that surrounded African state's input into the UNGASS 2016 outcome document. The Common African Position (CAP) developed by the African Union (AU), through a consultative process that involved many countries, was supplanted by a different document that affirms prohibition. This was championed by the African Group (made up of influential African countries with Vienna presence).<sup>4</sup>

Maria-Goretti Ane-Loglo of the international non-governmental organization, the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), has explained that since the UNGASS 2016, the 'Africa Group' (led by Nigeria and Egypt), pretending to speak for the African continent at CND meetings, has been pushing for tighter control of drugs in the continent, including greater restrictions on cannabis and some essential medicines such as Tramadol.<sup>5</sup> She further observed that statements made by representatives of different African countries continue to reaffirm support for a failed war on drugs in Africa, emphasizing seizures and arrests while downplaying reforms

and progressive policies that are taking place in the continent.

Cannabis, the most commonly traded and used drug considered illegal by many states in the continent, is a key site of narrative tussle. In this context, narratives of reforms that support decriminalization and medicinal use are pitted against deeply entrenched narratives that blame cannabis for the continent's ills,<sup>6</sup> and support what might be regarded as a colonial war on drugs in the continent, including crop eradication and militarized responses to supply and use.<sup>7</sup> Legal prohibition of drugs can be seen as a legacy of colonialism.<sup>8</sup> It has been deployed in the service of state power by authoritarian and paternalist governments in many independent African countries.

Moreover, to add a further layer of complexity, celebratory narratives that dominate commentaries on emerging legal markets, which emphasize tax benefits and pay little attention to the potential impacts on small-scale farmers, have the potential to further undermine reform narratives in the continent. Within this context, this policy brief offers a timely analysis of policy narratives on cannabis in Africa covering different policy areas, including cultivation, consumption, law enforcement and medicinal markets. Drawing on 'narrative network'<sup>9</sup> as a conceptual tool, it highlights the need to amplify untold stories of cannabis policy reforms in Africa as a way of challenging hegemonic narratives that currently dominate the policy debate.

## NARRATIVE POLICY ANALYSIS

To make sense of the different narratives on cannabis policy in Africa, I adopt a narrative approach to policy analysis as developed in the works of Raul Lejano and colleagues.<sup>10</sup> In this framework, policy proposals are seen as narratives containing plots that integrate different aspects of a policy situation into a story. This narrative unity exudes a force of

necessity since they describe problems and attribute them to the actions of specific others thereby invoking governmental powers to address them.<sup>11</sup> Policy narratives are an exercise in meaning-making; they offer particular interpretations of problems, with language, discourse and argumentation often overriding rational and scientific considerations.<sup>12</sup> This is seen in the rhetoric and sensational language with which stories of the social and moral ills of cannabis in Africa are often laced (e.g. narratives of rape and murder committed by armed actors drugged on cannabis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (or DRC), although there is little evidence showing that cannabis induces these actors to commit crimes.<sup>13</sup>)

Some policy narratives, like the prohibition narrative on cannabis mentioned above, become hegemonic, offering compelling storyline that galvanize public support,<sup>14</sup> thereby defining the terms of the debate. As meaning-making devices, narratives are incomplete accounts that simplify complex issues. What they leave out can be as important as what they include. For example, a recent commentary of the preface to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) *World Drug Report 2021* by the IDPC demonstrates how official narratives on the global drug problem can bolster support for failed drug policies by carefully omitting any mention of policy-related harms.<sup>15</sup> In the case of cannabis in Africa, the hegemonic prohibition narrative leaves out the social, economic and health benefits of cannabis cultivation and use as well as more progressive policy reforms (e.g. decriminalization). This can be seen as part of an attempt by the African Group to present a consensus position centered on prohibition in the face of increasing fractures and diversity. The largely untold story of reform and progress is a potent threat to the hegemonic narrative of prohibition. As Lejano et al. noted, 'what metanarratives leave out can also be the seed of its downfall.'<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the policy analysis literature show that a network or advocacy community often emerge around alternative narratives. They are the narrators who bring this narrative to life. ‘Narrative-networks’<sup>17</sup> can develop as a force of resistance to hegemonic discourse coalition and stories that dominate policy debate. The network of actors and organizations around progressive policies and medicinal cannabis in Africa exemplifies this narrative-network that is emerging in response to the hegemonic coalition represented by the African Group. By amplifying the stories of progressive reforms, this narrative-network could challenge hegemonic narratives on cannabis and promote approaches that support health and social welfare.

### CANNABIS POLICIES IN AFRICA

Cannabis has been produced, consumed, and traded in Africa for several hundred years. Indeed, the smoking of cannabis, as opposed to drinking and ingestion practiced in India where the cannabis plant originated, was developed in Africa.<sup>18</sup> African states have played a role in the development of the modern drug control system, including the inclusion of cannabis among drugs subject to international control. South Africa played a role in the inclusion of cannabis in the Opium Convention of 1925.<sup>19</sup> Egypt also has a history of championing prohibition narratives. It was an Egyptian delegate to the second opium conference in 1924, convened to discuss measures to implement the 1912 opium convention for the control of opium, morphine, and cocaine, that proposed the inclusion of cannabis in the discussion and moved to bring it under the scope of the convention. Egypt continued to support cannabis prohibition in international drug control, collaborating with the United States to facilitate condemnation of the drug in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs.<sup>20</sup>

The development of the global prohibition regime is rooted in the politics of colonial and postcolonial power dynamics.<sup>21</sup> The prohibition

regime was developed at a period when many African countries were ruled by colonial powers, some of who were instrumental to the development of the regime (e.g. France, Great Britain). Drug control norms were imposed on many African countries during the colonial period.<sup>22</sup> Even after independence, African states continue to be recipients of drug policy measures developed by western countries (be it prohibition, decriminalization or harm reduction), with some (e.g. Nigeria, Egypt) playing key roles in the expansion of the prohibition regime in the region.<sup>23</sup> Many African countries have ratified the three international drug control treaties, and domesticated them through the establishment of agencies to enforce drug control in line with the requirements of the conventions.

Legal frameworks and national strategies developed by African countries post-independence to counter drugs and organized crime were adapted to the expanding structures of the international drug control system institutionalized in the UN narcotics conventions. A review of post-independence drug legislations of some African countries,<sup>24</sup> showed that most of these laws were drafted around the time of the global adoption of the 1988 Convention Against Traffic in Illicit Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Their developments were influenced by UN institutions, including the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the UNODC (previously United Nations Drug Control Programme). In some places (e.g. Nigeria), these legislations are replicas of the 1988 Convention, covering every aspects of drug trafficking and kindred offences.<sup>25</sup>

The systematic exportation of highly securitized drug control measures (e.g. interdiction of drugs at entry points, crop eradication) from western countries (particularly the US) along with the susceptibility of African states to pressures from the US and other international partners have been identified as key factors

shaping continental and national drug control policies in Africa.<sup>26</sup> These approaches have, however, not been effective in curtailing the supply and consumption of illegal drugs. Increase in the number of arrests and drug seizures as well as crop eradication exercises notwithstanding, the cultivation and supply of cannabis have expanded across the continent. Although distinctions between traditional cannabis producers and consumer states have become increasingly blurred, exportation of cannabis to western markets has continued apace.<sup>27</sup> The militarized approaches adopted across the continent to counter drug supply have had notable negative effects, including expansion of the prison population due to arrest and incarceration of an increasing number of people for drug-related offences, undermining the livelihoods of rural farmers dependent on illicit crops, and fostering corruption in law enforcement institutions.<sup>28</sup>

Globally, there has been a wave of defection from the consensus position on prohibition, due in part to increasing evidence and changing narratives around cannabis. A growing list of countries have adopted different forms of decriminalization of drug for personal use. Where cannabis is concerned, a small number of jurisdictions have gone further and adopted legally regulated markets for adult non-medical use, often referred to as legalization. This is the case despite the policy choice exceeding the boundaries of the UN drug control. The African continent has not been left out of this ‘crisis of consensus’, with some countries transiting from what has been regarded as a traditional continental consensus on prohibition to positions aligned with the global drug policy reform movement.<sup>29</sup>

Some countries have begun to explore alternatives to prohibition through adoption of policy reform measures. For example, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Zambia have legislated to permit cannabis cultivation for medicinal purposes. Others

(e.g. Ghana and Morocco) are in the process of decriminalizing cannabis cultivation and/or use. Still others have adopted a more lenient position, treating cannabis as de facto legal through their lax or non-enforcement of laws.<sup>30</sup> The recent recognition of the medicinal value of cannabis is a watershed moment that could further spur reforms of cannabis policies in the African continent. But narratives on cannabis policy needs to capture these changes, instead of reinforcing failed policies that are based on prohibition.

### **ILLEGAL TRADE AND DUBIOUS NARRATIVES**

On the flip-side of the gradual shift towards alternative policies on cannabis in some jurisdictions is growing international pressure for greater enforcement of laws against the cultivation of cannabis in Africa, which has long been seen as the continent’s most problematic drug.<sup>31</sup> For many members of the international community, both states and international bodies favouring prohibition-oriented drug policies, an anti-narcotics stance on cannabis cultivation is underpinned by a narrative that links the crop to armed conflict and organized violence as well as economic under-development in the continent.<sup>32</sup> In conflict-affected states such as the DRC, cannabis is portrayed as a cause of violence, insecurity and destabilization due to its effects on conflict actors and its entanglement in the war economy.<sup>33</sup> This storyline fits the characterization of policy narratives discussed earlier in that it identifies a problem (violence, under-development), attributes it to the action of particular others (armed actors drugged with cannabis) and recommends a solution (prohibition of cannabis cultivation and use). These narratives have, however, been challenged by recent research, which show how the link between cannabis trade and conflict is embedded in the political economy of drug prohibition in the continent.

Laudati<sup>34</sup> has shown in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo that the role of cannabis in violence and social instability is due less to the drug itself than to anti-narcotics policies, which allows both international and state actors to profit from the trade while the violence and insecurity inflicted on civilians by security forces are normalized and condoned because the illegality of the drug prevents oversight by regulatory actors. In regard to the view that violence is integral to the social organization of illicit drug production in the continent, Suckling<sup>35</sup> has shown how the institutionalization of apprenticeship in the cannabis economy in Sierra Leone contributed to the establishment of social order in a context that is generally seen as uncertain and volatile. These vignettes refute the view of illicit drug economies as relying on organized violence and as being destructive and detrimental to economic development.

On the other hand, in rural South African communities, cannabis cultivation is a coping response to social vulnerability and livelihood insecurity linked to decline in traditional sources of cash income.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, a qualitative interview study of cannabis farmers in rural southwestern Nigeria<sup>37</sup> has shown how widespread unemployment, rising demand, higher return relative to other cash crops as well as the complicity of state actors combine to sustain illicit cultivation and trade in cannabis despite law enforcement measures. Taken together, these studies show how narratives that blame cannabis for socio-economic problems in African countries may occlude its contribution to livelihood and development. It also shows how the very enforcement-based policies that these narratives support may be contributing to conflict and destabilization in some states in the continent. The transition to legal markets could reduce conflicts and violence linked to cannabis prohibition, while offering social and economic benefits. But even in this regard, it is important to monitor the policy narratives that are emerging.

## LEGAL MARKETS AND CELEBRATORY NARRATIVES

The potential economic benefits of legal cannabis markets present an opportunity to leverage cannabis cultivation to accelerate development and poverty reduction in local cannabis producing communities. Some countries have indicated interest in using the emerging legal market as an opportunity to facilitate development for small-scale cannabis farmers, as an alternative to ‘crop substitution’ projects implemented in the past with minimal results.<sup>38</sup> Commentators have extolled the economic potentials of cannabis, with some describing it as the new ‘green gold’ of Africa.<sup>39</sup> These views, which may be described as celebratory narratives, however, exists alongside concerns that legal markets could undermine the livelihoods of local farmers, if they are unable to gain a space in the emerging market. Like gold, diamond and oil, cannabis in Africa could be a blessing or curse depending on the policy direction.<sup>40</sup>

Bewley-Taylor, Jelsma & Kay<sup>41</sup> have argued that it is only fair that local farmers who, for reasons of economic survival in the absence of viable alternatives, have supplied the illegal market, bore the brunt of criminalization, and played a role in making recent policy shifts possible, should be the first beneficiaries from the legal market. They argue that this can be achieved through proactive measures to regulate foreign investments and support small-scale farmers to secure a place in the legal market. The legal, financial and administrative obstacles that small-scale farmers face in entering the legal cannabis market and the influx of foreign investments could result in the ‘extraction of wealth at the expense of local development and livelihoods.’<sup>42</sup>

The legal cannabis market in Lesotho has been hailed by commentators as a means of creating employment and economic opportunity.<sup>43</sup> But licensing fees and administrative corruption have been reported to create barriers to market



entry for small-scale farmers.<sup>44</sup> Concerns have been expressed that this could lead to capture of the market by foreign capital, forcing small-scale farmers back onto the illegal market. As in the Lesotho case, extant narratives on cannabis and economic development in Africa do not capture the risks legal market could pose to livelihoods in the absence of appropriate policies. It is important to mainstream these concerns into policy narratives in order to urge considerations of the kinds of affirmative action measures needed to foster development.<sup>45</sup>

### CONSUMPTION, CONTEXTS, AND HARMS

Cannabis is used throughout Africa not only as an intoxicant, but also for medicinal and religious purposes. Its use has persisted (and even expanded) despite the imposition of legal prohibition on cannabis production and consumption in the continent over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>46</sup> According to a large-scale study conducted by the UNODC, there were 38.2 million cannabis users in Africa in 2005.<sup>47</sup> The highest prevalence and increase in use were reported in West and Central Africa.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the world, legal prohibition of cannabis is largely premised on inconclusive evidence of its harmfulness to health. In Africa, narratives of cannabis-related harms are attenuated, however, by recent research which demonstrate that, while complex, benefits of cannabis use exist and that harms experienced by users should be considered within the contexts of use.

For example, cannabis use has been shown to serve as a social lubricant enabling friendship formations for young people in South-eastern Nigeria.<sup>49</sup> Social use fostered normalization of cannabis consumption among male youth, even as acceptance of the drug within the wider society remains fraught with ambiguity.<sup>50</sup> In the South African city of Durban, street children engage in communal cannabis use as a way of strengthening social bonds, which is a key contributor to resilience and survival on

the streets.<sup>51</sup> Cannabis consumption also plays a role in how young people navigate structural inequalities in African urban centres. Nelson has described how cannabis use serves as a means of stress relief and empowerment for marginalized Nigerian youth labouring under unforgiving socio-economic conditions to meet survival needs in the absence of social services.<sup>52</sup> This included using cannabis to remove inhibition to violence, seen as a survival strategy on the streets.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, street-involved young women (e.g. sex workers, hawkers) consume cannabis to medicate the mental health effects of trauma and social discriminations.<sup>54</sup>

Benefits from cannabis use (such as those described above) trouble the one-sided and simplistic framing of the drug in currently dominant policy narratives, particularly those that associate cannabis use with psychotic disorders in the absence of conclusive evidence.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, cannabis use for functional reasons by marginalized youth encouraged heavy and frequent consumption that increased the risk of harm.<sup>56</sup> This indicates that harms associated with cannabis use owe more to the socio-legal context of use than to the pharmacology of the plant. Enforcement-based approaches to cannabis are buttressed by the narrative that its use imperils health. In Nigeria, as in many other African countries, law enforcement measures, though unsuccessful in curbing the cultivation, retail, and personal use of cannabis, are justified by references to the dangers posed by the plant to the mental health of young people,<sup>57</sup> when, in reality, it is fundamental social conditions in the country that has the most negative effect on health.

Cannabis use serves as a means of health management for marginalized youth, and potential harms to health occur in the context of its use for health purposes. A sensible approach would therefore be to consider the conditions under which cannabis use creates risk for harm (i.e., social marginalization, legal

prohibition). In addition to decriminalizing personal use and providing treatment services for dependent users, social policies that promote social inclusion and access to social services for young people offer scope for the reduction of drug harms. Shifting policy towards harm reduction and social welfare require a narrative that captures the complexity of cannabis use, including how it serves as alternative means of entertainment and relief for the young in Africa in the absence of social services and leisure facilities.

### **STREET-LEVEL MARKET POLICING**

The most spectacular demonstration of legal prohibition of cannabis in Africa is street market policing. The focus on street-level markets by law enforcement agencies is partly informed by operational and institutional considerations, including the need for legitimation and to demonstrate effectiveness. The opportunity for extortion created by drug legislation wherein offenders forfeit their assets also contribute to this pattern of law enforcement. As Klein observed long ago in Nigeria, ‘arrest to loot’ is partly due to the revenue imperative of the underpaid personnel, who needs to make up for unrealistic wages.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, narratives of prohibition exemplified by sensational media reports and popular commentaries linking cannabis consumption to criminality have supported law enforcement measures against dealer/users,<sup>59</sup> more so as ‘barons’ (large-scale traffickers), who are usually wealthy and well connected, are harder to reach. In a speech to inaugurate a new zero-tolerance campaign against drug use launched by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, the president of Nigeria recently reaffirmed government support for intensified policing of people who use drugs, the majority of whom are dependent cannabis users.<sup>60</sup>

Street-level policing involves surveillance and crackdowns on street markets to effect arrest of offenders (in this case, peddlers,

and users). Crackdowns are response measures used to address crime and disorder problems.<sup>61</sup> They reflect an emphasis on seizures and arrests as indicators of policy effectiveness, while ignoring outcomes such as the social and health costs of drug control-related violence and human rights violations.<sup>62</sup> While they offer the promise of firm and immediate action, which gives the impression that drug problems are being addressed, they encourage abuse of police authority.<sup>63</sup> This is borne out by research findings from Nigeria, where police crackdowns on street-based drug scenes involved the use of physical force and unlawful practices such as financial extortion and sexual harassment of users, which exacerbated the social and health harms of structural violence experienced by marginalized youth.<sup>64</sup>

In other places, limited police resources have prompted changes in law enforcement priorities, including a shift from interdiction of large-scale trafficking to targeting street-level markets. In Madagascar, for example, where on average there is only one police officer for every 3,000 inhabitants, countering cross-border trade in cannabis is not a high priority for law enforcement agents. Instead, the focus is on the arrest of consumers and retail-level dealers.<sup>65</sup> This biased supply-side approach, which might be regarded as demand reduction by force, not only increase suffering for an already marginalized population, but also does not produce significant reduction in the trade and consumption of the drug.

### **MEDICINAL CANNABIS**

Cannabis preparations are known to offer therapeutic potential for the treatment of pain and other medical conditions. Across the world, an increasing number of countries have developed frameworks for the legal use of medicinal cannabis. This trend is bound to pick up steam following the recognition of its medicinal value in the UN scheduling system. This development offers a unique opportunity



to decolonize drug control in Africa, including reclaiming long-standing cultural, religious, and medicinal uses of the cannabis plant on the continent.<sup>66</sup> But it is important to note that the development of a market for medicinal cannabis was already afoot in Africa, even before the rescheduling of cannabis by the CND in 2020. Lesotho blazed the trail with issuance of licences to produce medicinal cannabis in 2017.<sup>67</sup> The country's medicinal cannabis sector has attracted international investment (for example, in April 2021 a local producer was licensed to sell medicinal cannabis in the EU.<sup>68</sup>) Uganda, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, and recently, Rwanda have approved the production and exportation of cannabis for medicinal use.<sup>69</sup> South Africa has developed a master plan for the development of the commercial cannabis market for export and local consumption.<sup>70</sup> In Seychelles, the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes was approved in July 2020, but cultivation remains de facto illegal.<sup>71</sup>

The cannabis market across Africa offers potential for economic growth and revenue generation through taxation, industrial production as well as improved livelihoods for rural farmers who depend on cannabis cultivation for the illegal market. However, medicinal cannabis is no magic wand for development in cannabis producing communities, contrary to popular views. As noted earlier, absent the right policies, legal cannabis markets in Africa could become a victim of corporate capture or serve as a new front for what has been described as 'rentier politics' that, as the extractive economies across the continent have shown, throws the state, foreign investment and local stakeholder groups into conflict. Portents of the future may be identified in the experiences of countries that have adopted legal markets for medicinal cannabis, including Lesotho where, as pointed out earlier, there is an influx of foreign capital and small-scale farmers face barriers to market entry due to licensing difficulties and administrative corruption.

## **CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR NEW NARRATIVES**

The cultivation, trade, and consumption of cannabis in Africa occupies a fraught political position. While recent changes in the international drug control framework have spurred developments in cannabis markets, policy narratives that blame cannabis for armed conflicts, socio-economic under-development and health issues in the continent have sustained militarized responses based on legal prohibition. A suitable cannabis policy for Africa is one that protects public health, promotes social welfare, and guarantees security. This cannot be achieved by enforcement-based approaches that exacerbate the socio-economic and health vulnerability of dealers, users, and farmers. Neither will a legal regime that places profit above local livelihoods suffice. Therefore, recent developments in international policy are not in themselves solutions; but they provide leverage for the work needed to develop policy frameworks that are responsive to the needs and realities of African countries. This includes measures that enable small-scale farmers to participate and benefit from emerging legal markets. It also includes decriminalizing consumption and investing in health and social services to reduce harms to users, as alternatives to enforcement-based policies. Actualizing changes in continental cannabis policy require narratives that highlight the social and health harms of enforcement-based approaches as exemplified by the debate on cannabis decriminalization in Ghana.<sup>72</sup> There is also a need for narratives that capture the potential and course of regulated markets for cannabis product as seen in IDPC's recent analysis of the significance of cannabis rescheduling for Africa.<sup>73</sup> Narrating progressive reforms could challenge the normalization of prohibition, and help place legal regulation more firmly on the policy agenda at domestic and continental levels.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Bewley-Taylor, D., Blickman, T., & Jelsma, M. (2014). The rise and decline of cannabis prohibition. *The history of cannabis in the UN drug control system and options for reform*. Amsterdam/Swansea: Global Drug Policy Observatory/Transnational Institute. [https://www.tni.org/files/download/rise\\_and\\_decline\\_ch4.pdf](https://www.tni.org/files/download/rise_and_decline_ch4.pdf)
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## About the Global Drug Policy Observatory

The Global Drug Policy Observatory aims to promote evidence and human rights based drug policy through the comprehensive and rigorous reporting, monitoring and analysis of policy developments at national and international levels. Acting as a platform from which to reach out to and engage with broad and diverse audiences, the initiative aims to help improve the sophistication and horizons of the current policy debate among the media and elite opinion formers as well as within law enforcement and policy making communities. The Observatory engages in a range of research activities that explore not only the dynamics and implications of existing and emerging policy issues, but also the processes behind policy shifts at various levels of governance.

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