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New Report Challenges the Case for a Militarization of Drug Policy in Africa

Is West Africa Destined to Relive the Failures of the Latin American Drug War?

The Global Drug Policy Observatory at Swansea University released a briefing paper today that dissects the call to a new front in the drug war, this time in West Africa. It suggests that, even as the region struggles with the many harms of significant drug trafficking routes, responses to those routes must take account the failures of earlier militarized drug control.

The briefing, titled *'Telling the story of drugs in West Africa: The newest front in a losing war?'* investigates a narrative riddled with poor data and politically-driven rhetoric that seem to push for greater securitization and even militarization of drugs, a strategy that cost the Latin American region hundreds of thousands of lives.

“Whether we like it or not, narratives do much to shape policy,” said Prof. Dave Bewley-Taylor, Observatory director. “With some Latin American countries charting a new course away from the ‘war on drugs’, it appears that drug warriors are shifting their focus to West Africa. This runs a terrible risk of replicating the failing, and often counterproductive, policies long applied in Latin America.”

Report lead author, Joanne Csete, added, “It is true that West Africa is suffering terribly in the current situation. However, no matter how much security-related counter-narcotics assistance is provided, there is no more reason for West Africans to expect success than during the crises in Mexico, Central America or Colombia. New approaches are needed.”

These failures are particularly evident in that many of the countries that have previously been cast as the ‘frontlines of the war on drugs,’ such as Colombia and Guatemala, are now encouraging a review of the drug control system.

The United States has presented new counter-narcotic programs in West Africa as counter-terrorism measures, making a politically charged connection between drugs and terrorism that does not appear to be supported by the limited facts on the ground.

The report also investigates the data supporting this call to arms by the US and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, which continue to be used despite the unreliability of information on drug trafficking and consumption in West Africa.

The report concludes that rather than a simple replication of often harmful and ineffective policy interventions applied in Latin America, the response to illicit drugs in West Africa should benefit from a careful reflection about what has and has not worked in other parts of

the world, particularly in places where repressive drug control measures have raised HIV risk and exacerbated poverty.

The drug war is now widely acknowledged to be a costly failure. Throughout most of the 1990s and 2000s, even as seizures and arrests increased, drugs have become cheaper and more potent. Moreover, drug-related violence has continued or even become more diffuse in many regions.