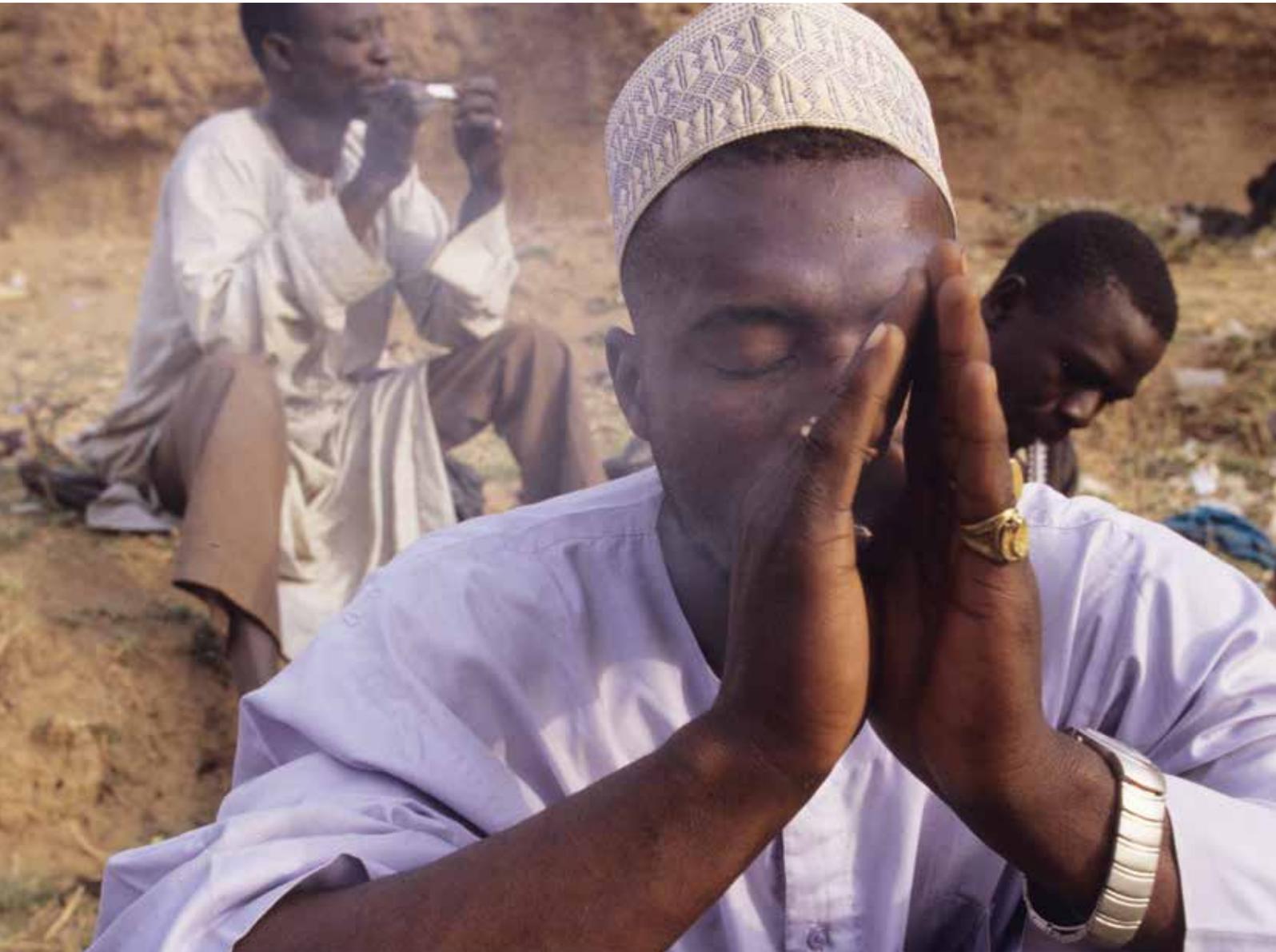


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POLICY BRIEF: MARCH 2017

How an improved understanding of drug use can contribute to peace and stability in Nigeria

SUMMARY

This policy brief presents the findings of a study conceptualised by the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) and carried out by International Alert on the prevalence of drug use in Nigeria. The study predominantly found that drug abuse is on the rise, particularly among women and youth, and that it is considered to be a contributing factor in various forms of conflict. Drug users face stigma from their communities and options for treatment are limited. Respondents highlighted that powerful individuals in Nigerian society are involved in the drug trade and use drugs to disrupt rival campaigns during elections. The study also reveals that regulations covering potentially harmful prescription drugs, such as tramadol, Exol and codeine, are potentially insufficient. The policy brief ends with a discussion on how adopting a peacebuilding approach to the problem of drug use in Nigeria will require an institutional understanding that its impact is not solely limited to the fields of health and law enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Nigeria has developed a reputation as a hub for international drug trafficking. Law enforcement officials say that Nigerian criminal organisations are involved in the transportation of narcotics such as cocaine, heroin and, increasingly, methamphetamine to consumers in wealthy countries. Research indicates that Nigerian drug traffickers are adaptable, politically well connected and sophisticated. They are able to independently move extremely large shipments through transit countries in West Africa and draw from a large Nigerian diaspora to facilitate distribution in Europe, North America and east Asia.

There has been limited research conducted on the prevalence of drug use in Nigeria and its effects on peace and conflict dynamics across the country. In response to this, Alert, in partnership with the NSRP, carried out a qualitative study on the linkages between drug use and conflict in five Nigerian states: Borno, Kaduna, Kano, Plateau and Rivers. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with community members, vigilante groups, women's groups and youth, while key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with law enforcement officials, local leaders, drug users, drug sellers, civil society organisations and others.¹ In addition, in Lagos and Abuja, representatives from the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) were interviewed, and researchers made a visit to a drug market in the city of Lagos.

KEY FINDINGS

Perception of linkages between conflict and drug use

An overwhelming majority of those who were canvassed for the study expressed their belief that drug use is linked to violent conflicts at various levels. In households, respondents spoke of the role that drugs can play in enabling spousal abuse, sexual violence or other internal family disputes. Interviewees shared stories of drug use providing the spark that pushed simple disputes between young people into deadly confrontations, which in some cases ultimately dragged the wider community into conflict, or which provoked deadly violence between street gangs. For example, in Plateau, respondents shared their perception that a conflict between Muslim and Christian communities in 2001 was worsened by youth who fought with one another while under the influence of drugs.

In Borno, a common perception related to the role that drugs allegedly played in violence carried out by *Jama'atul ahl al-sunnah li da'awati wal jihad* (JAS) – commonly known as Boko Haram. Community members, law enforcement officers, civil society groups and Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) members declared that JAS had targeted drug users for recruitment during its early days. Use of tramadol, an over-the-counter painkiller related to morphine and other opiates, was said to be rampant in JAS ranks, and was perceived by many interviewees to have played a role in enabling atrocities on both sides of the conflict. A number of respondents also

claimed that tramadol use is common within the ranks of the CJTF – including CJTF members themselves – and that the drug is trafficked inside of camps for internally displaced persons.

While this finding cuts across all the research states, it is nonetheless important to bear in mind that correlation does not equal causation. While drug use was seen as contextually harmful in specific situations – aggravating violence between ‘cult’ gangs in Rivers, for example – it is entirely likely that parties to these conflicts would have engaged in confrontation with one another even if drugs had not been present. Thus, it would be a mistake to imagine that the removal of drugs from the Nigerian street would eliminate violence and conflict. However, the role that drugs were said to play in exacerbating conflicts by impairing the judgement of involved parties highlights the need to address addiction and drug use in the context of strategies aimed at preventing conflict or addressing social fragility. Specific outreach to communities of drug users, for example, and the provision of medical and psycho-social services to those communities is likely to contribute to peace as well as public health.

Perceptions of linkages between electoral violence and drug use

In all of the five research states, a significant portion of those who participated in the FGDs and KIIs linked electoral violence to drug use, sharing a common perception that some candidates distribute drugs to street enforcers during elections for the purpose of enabling them to intimidate rival voting blocs. Drug users in Kano and Kaduna said that they had been given drugs and money by local candidates, with the Kaduna interviewee saying that he had been ordered to “snatch ballot boxes”.² While this perception may relate primarily to events that have taken place in the past, it was not solely shared by community members and drug users, but was also cited by law enforcement officials, community leaders, vigilante groups and others.

Another troubling perception related to the involvement of public officials and other Nigerian elites in the drug trade itself. This view was most widely shared by respondents in Rivers, but was also mentioned by a community leader in Borno. It follows a public pronouncement by the former president, Olusegun Obasanjo, who is now the chair of the West African Commission on Drugs, who said in 2014 that drug traffickers and their money has infiltrated Nigerian politics.³

The use of drugs to provoke electoral violence and the perception that drug traffickers are able to influence Nigerian

politics are disturbing, and carry important implications for peacebuilding in the country. On the one hand, connections between drug use and intimidation during political campaigns in the minds of the Nigerian public erodes faith in the electoral process, and can further stigmatise drug users by associating them with the consequences of contested elections. In addition, the cause of social cohesion and peace is ill-served by a perception that drug money influences the political process, particularly given the aforementioned association between drug use and conflict in and among Nigerian communities.

Mixed reviews on the effectiveness of law enforcement

Many of the law enforcement officers who were interviewed described a shortage of resources and logistical support, making it difficult for them to effectively curtail the supply of drugs on the street. Some said they were periodically forced to pay fuel costs out of their own pocket, for example. Still, there was a sense among informed observers that the NDLEA in particular has made some strides in recent years, and that the organisation is likely to benefit from increased training and the establishment of rigorous professional standards in fulfilling its new mandate to target high-level traffickers rather than street dealers. However, one NDLEA officer expressed frustration that, even when he is able to arrest and indict high-level dealers, it can be difficult to successfully prosecute them due to their political connections, wealth and influence.

On the community side, respondents expressed mixed views about the performance of law enforcement agencies, but the overall sentiment tended towards dissatisfaction. For example, of the eight youth in the Port Harcourt FGD who commented about the performance of the police, six said that police officers were either drug users themselves or were willing to take bribes to allow traffickers to escape sanction. Four out of five female drug users in Kano said that police sell drugs to traffickers, with one saying that law enforcement officers offered her drugs in exchange for sexual favours.

Some of the interviewees and focus group participants acknowledged the challenges law enforcement officers face in trying to tackle drug use and trafficking, pointing to reprisal attacks and funding shortages. Others, however, expressed frustration at the inability of police to remove drug sellers from the street and the tendency for them to be released quickly even when they are arrested. One law enforcement officer in Rivers said that there can be communication gaps between communities and police officers, adding that traffickers were sometimes harboured by community members and that informants had been subjected to assault.

Overall, the research indicates that, at best, there is a need for Nigerian law enforcement to more effectively communicate with communities that are affected by drug use and to open lines of dialogue that will enable Nigerians to better understand the challenges they face in tackling drug use and trafficking, as well as their successes. There is also likely a need for enforcement agencies to enact stronger monitoring structures that can ensure their officers do not behave improperly, and when they do that they are subjected to tangible consequences in order to reduce corruption and abuse.

Abuse of prescription drugs

While abuse of illicit narcotics was described as a significant challenge, particularly in Rivers and Lagos, aside from marijuana the most commonly used drugs were said to be over-the-counter prescription medications such as tramadol, codeine syrup, Exol and Rohypnol. These are all nominally controlled substances, only supposed to be taken in moderation under the guidance and advice of medical professionals. However, the research indicates that these drugs are being misused to harmful effect, and that some are contributing to conflict by impairing the judgement of users who engage in violent confrontations.

As mentioned previously, in Borno, tramadol was described as having played a role in the JAS conflict. JAS fighters were said to have widely abused tramadol along with some members of the CJTF. A significant number of the FGD and KII participants described tramadol as one of the most dangerous drugs currently used in Nigeria. As a close relation to the opiate family, tramadol is addictive and can cause severe withdrawal symptoms for regular users.⁴ The National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control is tasked with regulating the distribution of painkillers and other opiates, and its spokespeople say that they regularly confiscate tramadol tablets from illicit sellers.⁵ Still, respondents said that, despite illegal sellers occasionally being shut down by law enforcement officers, it remains relatively easy to obtain the drug.

Stigmatisation of drug users

The dominant sentiment among community members who were interviewed was that drug users are a strain on society and an embarrassment to their families. While others expressed compassion for drug users, and youth tended to see drug use as a normal social phenomenon, the research indicates that drug users face extremely high levels of social ostracisation and stigma. Drug users said that family and friends often rejected them, leading to a condition of isolation and restricting their social network primarily to other users. As one female user in Kaduna put it, “the

world hates us and we only get peace from these drugs, so why should we stop taking them?”⁶ A health professional who works in an addiction centre in the local government area of Jos North said that women are less likely to seek treatment due to the shame and stigma that they face and that families of female drug users prefer to hide the problem in order to avoid the judgement of others in the community.

Overall, while some of the participants of the community FGD recognised that drug use was not necessarily correlated with addiction, and that even heavy users required kindness and help, the prevailing sentiment was extremely negative towards drug users. This view was especially strong in Rivers, potentially due to the fact that many associate ‘cult’ gang violence with drug use, as well as the relatively higher reported presence of drugs such as cocaine. This stigma against drug users is a form of structural violence and in the case of female users it carries a component of gender-based violence as well. Many of the drug users who were interviewed described traumatic situations in their family, including sexual abuse, as a root cause of their decision to begin using drugs. Compounding that trauma by isolating them from society, subjecting them to punitive policing measures or assigning them stereotypes of criminality is likely to only push them further to the margins, giving them a lower stake in society and worsening their mental health.

If drug users do not feel that they have a personal stake in society, they are likely to be less driven to overcome addiction. They may also be more willing to participate in acts of violence, feeling less invested in the health and security of their communities than they would if they felt more connected to the wider society. This finding speaks to an urgent need to sensitise Nigerian communities to the realities of addiction and to design structures that can assist users in addressing their mental health issues and transitioning back into society.

Limited treatment options for users

Many drug users and health professionals described treatment as inadequate, expensive and difficult to access. Users spoke of unsuccessful efforts to overcome their addiction and health professionals highlighted the importance of taking a holistic approach to treatment, as well as the need for long-term support. While there are drug rehabilitation facilities in Nigeria, they tend to be expensive and generally inaccessible for many Nigerians who use drugs. This trend is not exclusive to Nigeria, with the 2015 World Drug Report published by the UNODC pointing to a global shortage of treatment centres and limited resources for drug rehabilitation.⁷

An official from the UNODC in Lagos pointed to the potential effectiveness of 'community-care' models, in which drug abusers are not admitted into facilities as a patient but are rather able to access a degree of counselling and treatment from local clinics with support from the larger community.⁸ The NDLEA maintains small treatment facilities at their regional offices, but officers who supervise these facilities say that funding is limited and they are not equipped to treat inpatients who require sustained medical observation or counselling. NDLEA centres tend to operate more as 'cooling-off' areas.

Providing effective treatment for drug users in Nigeria will contribute to peace and security in the country. By enabling users to overcome their dependency on drugs – and many of those who were interviewed said they would like to make such a change – Nigeria will be reducing the role that drug use might play in worsening or provoking conflicts. There is evidence that treatment-focused policies work. In the United States, for instance, treatment programmes for heavy users are said to reduce lifetime consumption of cocaine by 100 grams. This reflects results that are "three times as effective as preventive programs and punitive measures".⁹

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that Nigeria faces a growing problem of drug use across regions, and that drugs can worsen conflict dynamics and have a harmful impact on governance and peace. However, perhaps because of the perception that drugs and conflict are associated, users face severe stigma from their communities, a form of structural violence that is exacerbated by the absence of treatment options that might assist them in confronting and overcoming their addiction. Addressing the role that drug use can play in provoking violent conflicts requires adopting a peacebuilding approach that does not rely excessively on the criminalisation of users, but rather that will build dialogue mechanisms between law enforcement, users and community members, and that emphasises targeted prosecution of high-level dealers while ensuring that the influence of drug money in Nigerian politics is effectively eliminated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To these ends, the NSRP and Alert offer the following recommendations to the Nigerian government and its international supporters:

- Draw on the expertise of health professionals, cultural anthropologists and law enforcement officers to design public awareness-raising campaigns about drug abuse that inform the public about the risks that drugs pose on health and human interaction, which may become more violent with drug use.
- Devote additional resources to drug treatment facilities for drug abusers that include vocational training, counselling and follow-up outpatient care. Ensure that these facilities are affordable for the poor and reach out to the UNODC and other experts for guidelines on how to manage those facilities cost effectively.
- Consider evaluating whether 'community-care' models for drug treatment could work in Nigeria.
- Strengthen the regulation of dangerous prescription drugs such as tramadol, codeine and Exol, and levy stiff penalties on pharmacies and manufacturers who sell to minors and anyone without a prescription from a doctor.
- Increase transparency in election campaigning and investigate, prosecute and sanction politicians who distribute drugs as a means to foster election violence and other forms of political thuggery. Thoroughly investigate allegations of this practice and consider suspending offenders from political parties.
- Establish conflict-resolution mechanisms for street gangs, which include forums for dialogue that promote non-violent means to resolve conflicts and exert power.
- Ensure that drug use policies are tailored to both men and women, and that care facilities that cater for female drug abusers are established and are safe.
- Continue to prioritise investigations of high-level dealers rather than individual drug abusers and street dealers.
- Crack down severely on corruption in the ranks of law enforcement by establishing internal mechanisms through which officers can report malfeasance by their peers and which are able to investigate and levy penalties on offenders.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For full citations of focus group and interview respondents who made the assertions and statements that guided this policy brief, please see the report, A. Mukpo, *Out of the shadows: Adopting a peacebuilding approach to the social effects of drug use in Nigeria*, London: International Alert, 2017
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