

GDPO Situation Analysis

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The ‘War on Data’ in Africa, or how to provide an alternative discourse to the ‘War on Drugs’ within the international drug control system

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Subject

Over the last decade, the United Nations (UN) has shown concerns regarding the proliferation of illegal drug trafficking in Africa, defining it as a threat for both the international security and the development of African countries. However, when examining more closely the data used by the UN to assess the drug situation in Africa and justify its alarmist discourse, it is unclear whether the UN uses this data to fully assess the real issues at stake in Africa or simply to replicate a semblance of the ‘War on Drugs’ on the continent. Therefore, this Situation Analysis invites the readers to take part in a ‘War on Data’ in Africa.

Significance

As this analysis hopes to demonstrate, the UN evaluation of the drug situation in Africa raises concerns as it mainly relies on quantitative data that is instrumentalised, manipulated and of limited availability. Therefore, the tendency of the UN to rely mostly on quantitative data appears to be more of a powerful strategy to perpetuate the dominant drug policy approach in Africa rather than a way to assess the real issues at stake on the continent. Thus, one way to provide an alternative discourse to the ‘War on Drugs’ within the international drug control system might be to call for a new methodological approach to evaluate drug-related issues - one that makes a more balanced use of quantitative and qualitative data on drugs and that aims to guarantee more effective, adequate and evidence-based policies in Africa.

Analysis

1. Africa and the international drug control system

Until the 1990s, there was little real concern about drugs in Africa, international interest being then more focused on Central Asia and Latin America and the continent was considered ‘relatively free of major drug abuse problem’¹. However, with important seizures of drugs having been reported in West Africa at that time², the UN adopted what might be viewed as an alarmist discourse on the proliferation of drugs in Africa, defining it as a threat for both international security and the development of African countries - a situation requiring urgent action³.

The UN's concerns for the proliferation of drugs in Africa resulted in a heightened securitisation of the continent by Western actors and UN agencies with the opening of drug control offices, the establishment of specialised agencies and the creation of monitoring programmes aiming at ensuring that African countries gained the institutional capacity to combat drugs⁴. Therefore, traditionally most of the international drug control efforts have been oriented towards the control of drug supply in Africa.

2. The UN's evaluation of the drug situation in Africa - Questioning the power of numbers

When the UN started to raise concerns about the proliferation of illegal drug activities in Africa, it also attached more importance in assessing the evolution of its drug situation, notably within the annual *World Drug Report* (WDR) published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). This report relies mainly on quantitative data such as drug seizures, drug arrests and drug consumption surveys⁵. Though the utility of this data is undeniable, several limitations have emerged when it comes to evaluating its capacity to assess - in a fair, adequate and reliable way - the drug situation in Africa.

a) Quantitative data underestimates the long history of drug in Africa

By relying mostly on drug-related quantitative data, the UNODC tends to present Africa as 'defenceless in the face of international narcotic trafficking'⁶ and to consider the presence of drugs on the continent as a new phenomenon. However, it is a major drawback as it leaves aside the long history of drugs on the continent and the various meanings - be they cultural, social, or economic - given to these activities over time⁷. Therefore, quantitative data tends to give a simplistic understanding of the proliferation of drugs in Africa and ignores the diversity and specificity of geographical areas in which a global phenomenon can develop.

b) Quantitative data as a political arm for the UN

Another limit has to do with the power of influence of the UN and part of its drug control apparatus - the UNODC. Indeed, it is considered as an authoritative and reliable body and the data it gathers and publishes is rarely challenged and generally disseminated with trust by journalists, researchers and policy-makers⁸. However, evidence shows that the reliability and adequacy of this data raise questions. Indeed, although the situation is improving, in many WDRs assertions on drug trends in Africa are made without referring to data or there is a lack of evidence regarding the way data has been collected to validate the given statement. For instance, in 2009, the former UNODC Executive Director revealed that 30 to 35 tons of Afghan heroin were being trafficked into East Africa each year but he did not give indication on what this figure was based⁹. In 2013, the UNODC regional representative for West and Central Africa asserted: 'while data are limited, officials "believe" that annual cocaine trafficking had rebounded to the level of 30-35 tons'¹⁰. Therefore, this data might be seen to be more of a political instrument to raise concerns among the general public and justify international intervention in Africa rather than a useful tool to evaluate the real drug issues at stake on the continent.

c) Drug-related quantitative data, national government's goodwill and capacity

The adequacy and reliability of drug quantitative data are also dependent on the goodwill and/or the capacity of national governments to provide trustworthy data¹¹. In the case of Africa, both dimensions apply and remain a great problem to evaluate the real extent of drug-related activities. First, quantitative data can be provided by state officials who are directly involved in drug trafficking and have little interest in displaying real numbers¹². As a result, there is a risk to rely on quantitative data that may be biased or manipulated. Second, the lack of technical and financial capacity to produce quantitative data on drugs can impede African national governments from providing it¹³. For instance, in many African countries, there is no population-based data, which constitutes an obstacle to evaluate drug use levels as they are usually based on sample surveys¹⁴. Finally, every WDR published since 2000 reveals that drug quantitative data provided by African governments is usually limited, sporadic or lacking¹⁵.

d) Drug-related quantitative data cannot explain all issues

Drug-related quantitative data presented in the WDR has the advantage of providing a broad picture of the international drug trade. However, while this data may be useful to measure the activities of drug law enforcement, it does not offer adequate information for more complex issues such as the direct effects of drug activities on the social and political life of communities or about the drawbacks of drug control policies themselves¹⁶. Additionally, factors such as the historical, social and political context of

African countries, the impacts of globalisation, and the influence of the social environment are useful indicators to better understand the intensification of drug trafficking in Africa¹⁷. However, they can hardly be assessed by current drug control metrics. Finally, by focusing only on metrics associated with drug markets, this data dehumanises the ‘drug problem’ and ignores the viewpoints of people who are directly involved in these activities¹⁸.

Therefore, the UNODC’s evaluation of the drug situation in Africa raises questions as it relies mostly on quantitative data that is instrumentalised, manipulated and of limited availability, resulting in a partial assessment of the real issues at stake on the continent.

Finding an agreement between quantitative and qualitative data on drugs

Over the last years, there has been a growing recognition – among academic communities and some countries such as the United Kingdom - of the necessity to adopt a more sophisticated approach to looking at numbers¹⁹. They are calling for, among other things, the establishment of metrics that better evaluate the negative impacts of drug policies in terms of health outcome and socio-economic development of communities. However, given that collecting conventional metrics is already problematic in Africa²⁰, it is hard to predict if it would be easier with new ones.

Therefore, one way to reverse the dominant approach on drug prohibition and to evaluate the real issues in Africa might be to call for a better balanced use of quantitative and qualitative data on drugs and to re-affirm the importance of qualitative empirical research on drug trafficking. Although it can be argued that the illegal and criminal character of illicit drug trafficking renders more difficult and dangerous the collection of qualitative data²¹, I rather contend that it exists but often lacks in public reports and tends to be much more used in the academic sphere.

1. Lessons from incarcerated drug traffickers

Although in-prisons research - that aim to provide an in-depth understanding of world drug trafficking by interviewing people who have been incarcerated for drug-related offenses - has been mostly conducted in Western countries²², some independent bodies have recently taken the initiative to conduct such research in Africa. The West Africa Drug Commission (WADC), created to mobilise West African civil society and politicians against the challenges posed by drug trafficking and to develop evidence-based drug policy recommendations, is a good example. Indeed, its research team has undertaken preliminary surveys on people serving sentences for drug offences in Nigerian, Guinean, Malian and Ghanaian prisons²³. The research shows that most of the offenders interviewed mention the lack of social and economic opportunities as the main reasons for their involvement²⁴. Therefore, further research on African people incarcerated for drug offenses can improve the understanding of the current drug situation in Africa and how to more adequately tackle it.

2. Confronting the illegal drug problem

Another qualitative methodology consists in conducting ethnographic research in drug dealing and smuggling communities. In Africa, some researchers have conducted ethnographic research on people directly involved in the cultivation and trade of drugs so they can better understand the main reasons of people’s involvement. For instance, in Guinea-Bissau, Vigh notes that the cocaine trade constitutes an alternative to traditional livelihoods for the local fishermen or Mandingo traders²⁵. Other researchers have given a voice to drug users to evaluate the extent and types of drug consumption and broaden the debate around African drug control. For example, Klein argues that in Nigeria, the ‘law has proved neither equitable nor effective in curtailing the spread of drug use and drug trafficking’²⁶. Finally, some academics have interacted with drug dealers and traffickers to assess the structure and organisation of foreign and African drug trafficking²⁷. An interesting study on West African criminal networks in Southern Africa reveals that while they are highly engaged in cocaine trafficking, they do not correspond with the conventional conceptions of organised crime, as they are not organised around structured and hierarchical entities but are more a network of individuals and small groups²⁸.

Conclusion

It is a fact that the debate brought in this analysis is not without controversy as it implies re-evaluating a discourse and a methodological approach on the 'drug problem' that have been internationalised and institutionalised for almost half a century. Therefore, it is hard to predict whether there will be a winner and a loser in this 'War on data' or whether an agreement will be found. However, if quantitative data on drugs remains the main soldiers to combat the 'drug problem', there will be little chance to see emerging a world free from the harm of drugs.

Endnotes

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