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Illicit livelihoods: Drug Crops and Development in Africa

Carrier, N., Klantschnig, G.

Illicit drugs are increasingly seen as a developmental issue. While portrayed as a threat to all parts of the world, their impact on ‘developing countries’ is seen as especially dangerous, imperilling hopes of progress towards more prosperous futures. Until recently most concern about a drugs-development nexus had focused on Latin America as well as Asia, where the global trade in cocaine and heroin has long been seen as destabilising societies, spreading consumption and addiction in its wake (UNODC 1994). However, much recent focus has shifted to Africa, regarded as the latest target in the global ‘war on drugs’ (Carrier and Klantschnig 2012).

Much of this focus on Africa emerges from a trend in recent years for international cocaine smugglers to use routes through Africa to get shipments to Europe. Guinea-Bissau has been a major concern in this regard, described as Africa’s first ‘narco-state’, but the whole western coastline of the continent, as well as the Sahel region, have been seen as threatened by an ‘invisible tide’ of drug smuggling, weakening already weak states, and bringing addiction along with consumption (*Observer* 2008; *Sunday Times* 2009; *El Pais* 2009; Cockayne and Williams 2009). Africa, of course, is also a continent long targeted by initiatives designed to improve the lives of those deemed underdeveloped, being a key terrain for the development industry. Given the common framing of the continent as somewhere hindered by underdevelopment and poor governance and given the apparently new threat it faces from drugs, there is deep concern that these substances will harm Africa’s developmental prospects (Costa 2008a; UNODC 2010a; Morris 2010).

While there are many dangers for the continent linked to drugs and the drug trade, this article will suggest that a received wisdom that glibly ascribes a negative effect to all such substances and their trade should be critiqued. There are many shades of grey: the category of ‘illicit drugs’ contains substances of very different harm potential, often only linked through their classification as ‘illegal’ in international and national legislation, while some of the potentially most harmful substances are legal: tobacco and alcoholic drinks (Nutt, King and Philips 2010). Furthermore, some substances – khat (the stems and leaves of the shrub *Catha edulis* chewed as a stimulant) and cannabis – in certain contexts – especially in rural Africa – are highly ambiguous in their relation to development, playing an important role in livelihoods and poverty alleviation, a key contemporary focus of development projects. In fact, such substances impact on far more lives in Africa than cocaine and heroin: the latter commodities show worrying signs of increasing demand within Africa (their use has spilled over from the use of African countries as transshipment hubs (Vigh 2012; McCurdy 2014)), but still they are out-competed considerably by the likes of cannabis as seizure charts in the *World Drug Report* invariably reveal (WDR 2015). Yet concern about cocaine and heroin comes to stand for all substances described by the loaded term ‘drug’.

This article assesses the impact of drugs on agricultural production and trade and how drugs have affected African development more broadly through case studies of cannabis and khat. It actively engages with recent research that has started to explore the links between drugs and development in Africa, and challenges some of

its key assumptions. It argues that based on the available empirical evidence, the causalities between drugs and underdevelopment are not always apparent. The article proposes a more nuanced understanding of the economic impact of cannabis and khat, in particular as agricultural crops and trading commodities, and how they have provided farmers and entrepreneurs with opportunities not readily available in difficult economic environments. Drawing on empirical material from Lesotho, Nigeria and Kenya,¹ the article shows the role that cannabis and khat have come to play in local livelihoods, particularly as a means of agricultural diversification – a role already hinted at in Bernstein’s seminal study on cannabis in Ghana (1999: 29-30). However, they are not a panacea for development in rural Africa: the article also shows the limits of these often-illicit livelihoods, as they expose farmers and traders to many of the risks common to other agricultural cash crops, as well as those more particular to the illicit.

Drugs as Anti-Development

During the last 10 years growing attention has been paid to drugs as a developmental issue in Africa, a continent that over many decades has seen a wealth of projects designed to increase social and economic well-being – or, at the least, alleviate hardship – through ‘development’.² Drugs, corruption and crime go together, it is argued, destabilizing societies, reducing productivity, thus impeding development. Such is the received wisdom commonly seen in reports and conferences under the aegis of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 1994, 2010a; Morris 2010). Indeed, the former head of the UNODC – Antonio Maria Costa – lamented in 2008 how ‘the cocaine used in Europe passes through impoverished countries in West Africa, where the drugs trade is causing untold misery, corruption, violence and instability’ (Costa 2008a). In all this, Africa is constructed as a passive victim at the mercy of the global drug trade.

However, the drugs and development nexus is not just linked to concern for African countries, but also connects with anxieties in the West. The growing ‘securitisation’ of development in the wake of the attacks of 11 September has meant that overseas aid spending has often been justified to the public as essential for security at home (Bachmann and Hoenke 2010; Gebresenbet 2015). Reported links between terrorist groups and drug smugglers, for instance in Mali, have accentuated this concern, as suggested by a UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office report on

¹ This article draws on long-term research into Africa’s drugs trade by Carrier and Klantschnig. Carrier has researched khat and other drugs historically and ethnographically (principally in Kenya and among the Somali diaspora) since 1998, and conducted further surveys and interviews on the production, trade and use of khat during a recent (2011-13) project on Nairobi’s Eastleigh estate, a major hub for the substance. Klantschnig has conducted in-depth research into Nigeria’s licit and illicit drug trades and related policy since 2003. During fieldwork in 2005, 2007 and 2010 he gathered archival, government and market data (primarily drug prices) on Nigeria’s evolving cannabis trade and interviewed a number of cannabis entrepreneurs and control officials in Lagos and Kaduna. In addition to these sources collected during fieldwork in Kenya and Nigeria, this article is also based on a thorough reading of secondary and grey literature.

² ‘Development’, of course, is notoriously difficult to define as it means so many things to many different people (Cowen and Shenton 1996). For the purposes of this article we focus on the role of cannabis and khat in livelihoods, and use the term in a broad sense that encompasses both poverty alleviation and the improvement of living conditions.

‘Traffickers and Terrorists’ of 2013 (FCO 2013). Also, improving economic conditions in countries now seen as entrepôts for the drugs trade is seen as a way to cut off illegal trade networks that thrive on underdevelopment, and so reduce supply to western countries (Cockayne and Williams 2009). Thus, the increasingly strong link between drugs and development is not merely rooted in concern for the economic and social welfare of African countries, but also connects to more parochial western concerns.

Whatever the reason for the increasing attention given to drugs and development, the link between them emerges in several different aspects of their trade and use. Singer has outlined the major arguments about the negative impact of drugs upon developing countries (Singer 2008a). He divides up their impacts into five categories to which we have added a sixth, drugs’ negative impact on the state, as this has received extensive attention in the literature on drugs in Africa. Most examples used in discussions of the topic are drawn from places with such a troubled relationship with drugs as Colombia and Afghanistan and certainly, the drugs trade has played a significant role in the destabilization of these regions. In the following, we relate these broader arguments of drugs’ detrimental impact on development to African countries.

First, Singer draws attention to how drugs can impact negatively a country’s productivity on both the supply side – through injuries and health problems acquired in processing drugs, and through arrests of employees in the drugs trade – and also on the use side, where health problems can reduce productivity of workers. In African countries, alcohol has been implicated in such debates since colonial times, as is khat (Crush and Ambler, 1992; Willis, 2002). Indeed, in the case of khat, long chewing-sessions in the Horn of Africa and Kenya are seen by some as examples of indolence (Anderson and Carrier 2011: 19). However, the impact of drugs on food security is seen as an even greater threat. On a continent where hunger is an important concern, the use of land to grow drug crops is seen by many as immoral and irresponsible (for example, see Gebissa 2010, in relation to khat, and INCB 2003 [page 39] in relation to cannabis).

Second, most concern about drugs revolves around the young. In Africa - where there is great fear of an ‘epidemic’ of drug use among youth – this is especially worrying given the demographic ‘youth bulge’ combined with high levels of formal unemployment.³ For children and youth to consume drugs is considered both dangerous, and a waste of their potential and productivity. In Nigeria, the earliest debates about cannabis in the 1960s were almost exclusively focussed on the impact they could have on urban youth, reproducing arguments related to alcohol in the late colonial period (Klantschnig 2014). The high rates of unemployment throughout the continent, from Lagos to the Cape Flats and Nairobi, also creates fertile environments for the spread of drug use among marginalized youth (Scholes 2007; McCurdy 2014).

Third, Singer highlights the harm that drugs can cause to health, especially through the spread of blood-borne viruses such as HIV. In Africa, the relatively high rates of HIV/AIDS means that injecting drug use is especially dangerous, as research from East Africa has shown (Ratcliff, McCurdy et al 2013). But also the lack of any

³ On the ‘youth bulge’, see Sommers 2011.

sufficient medical treatment options for problem drug users has been a recurring concern and has been highlighted in the most recent major drug policy deliberation on the continent (WACD 2014).

Fourth, in writings about Africa, drugs are also depicted as endangering the foundations of society through instigating and perpetuating violence (for a critique, see Laudati and Suckling in this issue). The use of cannabis amongst combatants in West and Central Africa is well attested, and many claim that such usage increases their courage and stamina levels.⁴ More importantly, drugs are often mentioned as ‘conflict goods’, helping ‘warlords’ fund militias and their weaponry (Cooper 2001; INCB 2003). The use of khat was similarly linked to conflict in Somalia at the time of the country’s collapse in the late 1980s / early 1990s (Anderson and Carrier 2006).

Fifth, Singer describes the developmental harm wrought by the corruption often linked to drugs trade, and examples of these linkages are easy to find in Africa as elsewhere. There are many cases of suspected drug-related corruption and even police officers are quite open about the bribes received from drug traders.⁵ International drug agencies, in particular, have blamed this negative impact of drugs on state weakness in Africa, which is usually illustrated through Africa’s porous borders and underpaid law enforcement (for an overview, see Carrier and Klantschnig 2012, chapter four). Cockayne and Williams argue that along with widespread poverty, urbanisation and youth unemployment, ‘the lack of adequate forces dedicated to counternarcotics’ contributes to the expansion of the drug trade and corruption (2009: 13).

Finally, and related to the above is an argument that has gained extensive attention in Africa: the criminalisation of the state, as described by Bayart, Ellis and Hibou (1999). Drug-related corruption in Africa is not restricted to low level law enforcers but involves figures in the high levels of government. This is especially associated with Guinea-Bissau where such a criminalisation of the state has generated the fear that the country is becoming a ‘narco-state’ (*Observer* 2008; *Sunday Times* 2009; *El Pais* 2009), though other countries, including Kenya and Nigeria, have been implicated (*Newswatch* 1986; *Wikileaks* 2006). The state is described as being bought by powerful drug cartels, which gain official protection for their business or who co-opt state actors into active positions within the trade (Costa 2008b).

The major dynamic behind this criminalisation trend are politicians and top officials seeking involvement in illegal commercial activities as a means to hold on to power (see also Reno 1998: 1-28). Bayart *et al* take the growth of the drug trade through Africa and reports of state involvement in it as their prime example of this trend. In fact, the effects of criminalisation are not necessarily seen as negative, as they argue that the drug trade is a way to re-integrate Africa into the world economy, rather than leaving it at the margins (Bayart et al 1999: 114-116). This creates the prospect of a revived, yet criminalised, development process on the continent.

⁴ For example, see the following report on drug use by ex-combatants in Liberia: <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=81910>

⁵ During Klantschnig’s fieldwork, Nigerian drug law enforcers openly admitted the temptations that bribes from drug smugglers mean for junior and also senior officers.

In general, all these debates reflect real and potential dangers; however, it must be emphasised that a detrimental (or positive) effect of drugs on development in Africa has rarely been demonstrated through sound research. In fact, there has been little exploration of causality in all the hand-wringing about drugs and development (Costa 2008, UNODC 2010, USAID 2013). There are no data presented to support arguments of drug-related economic decline, nor any solid evidence that development would progress apace were it not for drugs. The most well-publicised case for a large-scale negative impact of drugs is surely that connected with their smuggling and the connected state corruption in Guinea Bissau. But even here it is unclear whether the cocaine trade has triggered instability, corruption and violence, when the instability and corruption of the state pre-existed the country's recent absorption into the international drugs trade (Forrest, 2003). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the cocaine trade as well as state involvement in it further exacerbated the serious problems facing the country (Vigh, 2012; Shaw, 2015).

While all the above do suggest potential developmental harms linked to drug production, trade and consumption on the continent, we argue that they also reflect received wisdom about the impact of drugs on African societies. In what follows we suggest that there are different dimensions to the drug-development nexus, some of which are more positive in relation to poverty alleviation and livelihoods. This is especially so, we would argue, in relation to Africa's two major drug crops – cannabis and khat – both of which are seen as major threats in much of the official discourse.

Africa's Drug Crops

Globally drug crops have become a key economic resource for many farmers, and persuading – or forcing – those on the margins of the world economy to give up such sources of livelihoods has proved extremely difficult, whether in regard to coca farmers in South America, or opium farmers in Afghanistan (Buxton, 2015). This has been described as the 'paradox for development initiatives' posed by drugs, that despite their potentially negative impact on societies listed above, they provide poor households with opportunities in several parts of the world (Singer 2008b: 472). Similarly, in Africa drug crops are also entwined with livelihoods. Not all these crops are illegal. In fact, many African drug crops are 'respectable' and traded legally throughout the world: tea, coffee, kola and tobacco being good examples, while the production of alcoholic drinks – whether legally or illegally – is a major source of income at both a local and national level (Willis, 2002; Van den Bersselaar, 2007). However, in this article we focus on two in particular, one illegal – cannabis – and one legal in its main producer countries, but illegal in many other countries around the world, including the UK which banned the substance in 2014: khat. Both offer good examples of how illegal and 'quasi-legal' crops can become highly attractive especially in comparison with more 'respectable' cash crops (sometimes compensating for their decline), and both elicit praise in this respect from farmers and traders.⁶

Cannabis

⁶ Note that we use the term trader as an umbrella category for people involved in the transport, wholesale, retail and smuggling of cannabis and khat. The term 'trafficker' is used interchangeably with 'trader', however, the former has clear negative connotations and is often used in official and law enforcement discourse (Zaitch, 2002).

Including North Africa as well as Sub-Saharan Africa, the UNODC estimate that cannabis is grown in at least 43 of the continent's countries, and that Africa accounted for 25 per cent of global cannabis production in 2005 (UNODC 2007: 2). Cannabis has a long history in Africa, especially in eastern and southern Africa: its use is no recent phenomenon, and nor is its cultivation (Carrier and Klantschnig 2012: 32-7). While thorough research into its early production is still in its early stages, there are clues in the chronicles of early explorers, such as cannabis used as part of the Bene Diamba 'cult' of Central Africa and *dagga* commonly used across southern Africa (Fabian 2000). An expanding cash economy generated some commoditization of cannabis even before its illegality, although the current boom in production owes much to the rise in value accruing to cannabis thanks to illegality.

Cannabis production was commonplace throughout most the continent by the mid-twentieth century; however, production intensified in the 1980s (Du Toit, 1980; Akyeampong, 2005). The 1970s and 1980s were times of economic crisis and structural adjustment in much of Africa. Rising oil prices and declining terms of trade for export crops such as cocoa or coffee, combined with economic mismanagement led to an array of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in different African countries, which were marked by painful liberal economic reforms and a further deepening of the economic crisis (Williams 1994). These programmes would be implemented differently across the continent and at different times, but in most cases they negatively impinged on large sections of African society.⁷ The removal of trade barriers imposed under structural adjustment led to further crisis, as home-produced maize, rice and other crops faced competition from cheaper imports. This agricultural crisis was compounded by ecological degradation in several regions and the effects of drought. It is in this context that cannabis cultivation was seized upon by ever more farmers as a means to diversify agricultural output, cannabis forming what has been termed a 'compensation crop' (Perez and Laniel 2004: 125).

Chouvy and Laniel describe a boom in the cannabis economy following the introduction of SAPs as living conditions became more of a struggle and conflicts have proliferated - both factors they link to increased demand for cannabis. This hypothesised rise in demand and falling commodity prices spurred more farmers to produce a crop with many advantages, notably its tolerance of even poor quality soil (Chouvy and Laniel 2007: 140). Cannabis plants are also easy to grow among other crops, so allowing the plants to be easily hidden. In western Kenya much cannabis is grown among plantations of sugar cane and it is also often grown on very marginal land. Its cultivation is therefore not necessarily incompatible with the production of subsistence crops. Furthermore, the crop requires little input either of fertilizer and pesticide, or of labour. Of course, these advantages of cannabis as a cash crop would have little worth for farmers were it not in demand and marketable. Indeed, the relatively little research there is on cannabis in Africa shows how developed local, regional and global markets are for the commodity (Bernstein 1999; Klantschnig 2013, Laudati 2014). Consumers interviewed in Nairobi also reported how cannabis sold there not only comes from local production zones, but also as far as Malawi and

⁷ SAPs were not always bad news for farmers, as, according to Gavin Williams, such policies sometimes raised prices for crops on local markets. But such gains were usually outweighed by the fall in export prices (Williams 1994).

Ethiopia, suggesting both the scale of regional trade networks, and the demand that exists for non-local varieties.

What evidence there is concerning the cultivation of cannabis in Africa supports the notion that cannabis is acting in some respects as a ‘compensation crop’, although it is far more integrated into some African economies than the term ‘compensation crop’ suggests (Laudati 2014). In the case of the small mountainous kingdom of Lesotho – one of the few African countries where significant research on cannabis production has been conducted – an increase in cannabis production is linked to a decline in wage-labour, high demand for cannabis in surrounding South Africa, and a landscape degraded by soil erosion caused in part by overgrazing. Lesotho has been a key labour reserve for South Africa, and 200,000 men – a large proportion of the population – found employment in South Africa in the 1970s, mainly in the mining sector (Bloomer 2009: 51). The migration patterns of Basotho men meant that remittances were a key part of the Lesotho economy, helping many in the rural areas. With increasing retrenchment in the 1990s following a fall in gold prices among other factors, remittances have decreased, and cannabis has filled the resultant gap in income for many Basotho, especially those in the rural areas, where it is now a major cash-crop. In fact, for the country as a whole, cannabis is a major source of foreign revenue, and ‘while there is no official data, other than police seizure statistics, all observers with knowledge of rural livelihoods in Lesotho agree that cannabis is the nation’s most significant cash crop’ (Bloomer 2009: 75ff).

Cannabis has thus become an ever more critical part of rural economies since the 1980s, although the extent of its importance only became more widely appreciated since the 1990s. Cannabis is grown in all regions of this mountainous country, including on small plots in the capital Maseru, however the major areas of cultivation are in the mountain zones in central and eastern parts of the country (Laniel 1998). The crop is mainly grown by smallholders, often intercropped with maize, and there are reports of larger scale mono-cropping of cannabis on farms of around 3-5 hectares in area. Cannabis is planted between mid-August to mid-October, providing a first harvest of inferior product in January, and the main harvest from February to April. Most work on the crop is done by members of the household, although harvest can be a communal occasion with work parties enlisted to help. Farmers simply dry the crop and pack it into sacks, while some add extra value to their crop by preparing it into rolled cigarettes (Ibid.).

Profits from cannabis are much higher further along the commodity chain – as traders boost its value to account for their risk – however, it still offers farmers much higher returns than other crops. In the late 1990s, profits from a hectare of cannabis were estimated at twenty times that for maize (Ibid.). In Bloomer’s more recent research in a Lesotho village called Botsoapa, cannabis was still the most reliable crop in the current economic climate, although prices fluctuate, and so profits are not guaranteed. Prices drop rapidly at harvest time due to the glut of the crop entering the market; thus, poorer farmers with little option but to sell the harvest straightaway fare badly compared with those who can store their harvest until prices rise once more (Bloomer 2009:51). In Botsoapa, approximately 28 percent of annual income derived from cannabis, though few farmers get rich from growing it, and, indeed, it was the poorer farmers who relied more on the crop; wealthier ones gained a higher proportion of income from non-farm income. Still, cannabis cultivation ‘has offered

the opportunity of generating an income from the resources available to almost every household in Botsoapa, namely land' (Ibid.: 56).

Cannabis is firmly integrated into the economies of several other African countries (Kepe 2003). This is the case also in Nigeria, although its recorded history is significantly shorter than in parts of southern and northern Africa (Klantschnig 2014). Cannabis cultivation has been historically concentrated in South-Western Nigeria, while some cultivation has also been detected in other parts more recently (AEGD 2001: 7; UNODC 1999: 22). The majority of Nigeria's cannabis grows in its highly fertile 'cocoa belt', which has been hit hard since the 1960s by declining prices for export crops (UNODC 1999: 49-51). It has also been relatively cheap and easy to produce cannabis in Nigeria's cocoa belt, as experts in the 1960s already observed (Asuni 1964: 20-21). In line with the trend in Lesotho, cannabis has come to serve as a means of agricultural diversification for farmers facing declining terms of trade and state policies making the production and sale of legal crops difficult – a pattern observed in other West African countries too (UNODC 1999: 53).

Moreover, cannabis has not only been a rewarding crop for farmers – who receive a relatively small share of the overall profits at the farm gate – but also for others involved in the trade (Reuter 2004: 130-1). Interviewed wholesalers who had worked in Northern Nigeria in the late 1990s and early 2000s confirmed cannabis's lucrative nature. Not only has cannabis been one of the country's flourishing trades despite recurring economic crises and adjustment, it has also provided employment for school leavers and graduates aspiring to be 'successful' in Northern Nigeria's depressed and highly competitive labour market. Much of the wholesalers' work involved regularly purchasing supplies in Nigeria's producer regions and selling it on to buyers in the North, gaining hefty profits, which largely reflected the higher risks of detection along the supply chain (Cannabis entrepreneurs, interviews 1-4, 25.09.2005).

Wholesalers recounted how they owed to cannabis their successful entrepreneurial rise, even though there were high risks involved in this type of business. One of them started out as a motorcycle taxi driver in Kaduna in the late 1990s and initially sold cannabis to some of his friends. As his consumer base grew, he began to buy from a supplier who transported the cannabis directly from Southern Nigeria to Kaduna. At the peak of his business, cannabis would earn him more than eight times the monthly salary of an early-career police officer. With 25 years of age and five years in the trade, he owned three motorcycles, a house, had financed his expensive wedding and supported several of his family members. While other wholesalers were not all as successful, most could not imagine a future outside the business (Cannabis entrepreneurs, interviews 1-4, 25.09.2005). Hence, this story and others of traders and farmers confirm Bernstein's assertion that cannabis is one of Africa's most dynamic and valuable non-traditional trades, on which many livelihoods in rural and urban Africa depend (Bernstein 1999: 30).

Given the international disapproval of cannabis, one might wonder how farmers and traders feel about the crop, especially as economic pressure plays such a role in encouraging its production and sale. Based on the available case studies, there is great ambivalence among them: while many would readily grow and sell other products, for others it is hard to understand why cannabis is illegal given that it has been used in

some parts of Africa for so long, and given that the trade has been passed from generation to generation (Bloomer 2009; Cannabis entrepreneur, interview 2, 25.09.2005). Also, given that anti-cannabis laws come from national governments often considered predatory by the poor – and from international bodies of little moral standing amongst them – it is easy to see how farmers and the urban poor are unlikely to worry about the morality of growing or selling cannabis.

Khat

Khat has for centuries been cultivated in parts of Ethiopia (Gebissa 2010), while cultivation in Kenya's Nyambene Hills also dates back at least 150 years and most likely more. Alongside much of Northern Yemen, these three growing zones are those most associated with the crop, and those where it is grown most intensively. Worries about the supposed negative effects of khat upon society have long been present in its growing regions, and its history in Kenya is illustrative of the debates that come to revolve around such crops (Anderson and Carrier 2009). Increasing consumption in the lowlands of northern Kenya caused panic among colonial officers worried about its corrupting influence on local pastoralists. The khat they were consuming was coming from the Nyambene Hills northeast of Mount Kenya, a district inhabited by Meru agriculturalists. Unlike other cash crops introduced by settlers, khat was an indigenous crop commercialized by Africans (Goldsmith 1994), and the colonial authorities were taken aback when they finally researched the trade and realized how far Nyambene khat was travelling. By the late 1940s, it was already being exported as far as Dodoma in Tanganyika. Improved transport infrastructure and growing urbanization were both key factors in the spread of demand for a perishable commodity whose sociable stimulating properties (known as *handas* in Kenya) are valued in both recreation and work contexts.

At first, concern about the health dangers of khat consumption won out, especially after the publication of a sensationalized special issue of the *East African Medical Journal* on the substance was published in 1945. This issue – though based on a tenuous evidence base – gave those campaigning against it the weapon they needed to push for control.⁸ Attempts to control the substance's consumption in the colony through a permit system and an outright prohibition in the north were trialled. Amongst other absurdities, the permit system only allowed consumers certified as 'addicts' the right to consume khat, as the administration thought they might 'die' without their fix of this relatively mild stimulant. This led to thousands of consumers throughout Kenya self-declaring themselves as addicts in order to be allowed their chew.

Meanwhile Meru producers and traders were lobbying hard on behalf of the trade, stating how important the commodity had become for them both economically and culturally. With such lobbying and the obvious unworkability of the legislation, colonial officers in the most intensive production area of Meru district while initially suspicious of the crop soon came to see its worth for the economic development of the region. Having abandoned attempts at control except in the north, by the late 1950s, the colonial administration instead attempted to regulate and rationalize its production

⁸ Letter J.D. Rankine (Chief Secretary) to Provincial Commissioner of Central Province, 22/1/1948, Kenya National Archives VQ/11/4.

and trade through standardization and an aborted-attempt to create a co-operative system for the commodity. There was even talk among district officers about promoting the export of Kenyan khat to other consuming hotspots such as Aden in competition with Ethiopian and Yemeni khat. While exuberance on behalf of the late colonial administration to promote the export of Meru khat abroad faded in the face of increasing international anxiety, production continued to grow along with demand (Carrier 2014).

For much of the colonial era, Meru was the only district in Kenya where khat was produced in great quantities, and the Meru had honed their expertise with the crop over centuries, creating a sophisticated inter-cropping system that prevented soil erosion and protected other crops (Goldsmith 1994; Carrier 2007). Furthermore, alongside Arabs and Somalis – who have been involved in the trade in Kenyan khat for many decades – the Meru innovated much in regard to marketing. The varying qualities and types of khat – distinguished by growing region, variety of tree, age of tree, part of the tree harvested, length of the stems and so forth – allowed it to be marketed for both wealthy and poor consumers, thus expanding its consumer base.

Some colonial interference aside, Kenyan khat has received little in the way of government assistance, farmers and traders being left to their own devices. While not daring to antagonize farmers and traders, since Independence the Kenyan authorities have applied a policy of not encouraging, but not discouraging production of a crop that was bringing in substantial revenue through tax, and foreign exchange earnings with growing trade to Somalia. Goldsmith describes the further spurs to production in the Nyambenes provided by the spread of the Somali diaspora in the wake of its civil war of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Goldsmith 1999: 15-9). By the mid-1990s, increasing quantities of Kenyan khat were being sent as far afield as the UK and North America, and new areas of cultivation in the Nyambenes were opened up to satisfy this demand. Lack of official involvement in the trade means that accurate quantitative data are lacking, but by the early 2000s the most quoted figure was that the khat trade was bringing in \$250 million a year to the Nyambenes (Carrier 2007: 250). Indeed, rather than negatively affecting food security, such relatively high income levels have helped make the region more food secure in recent times than nearby districts where the dominant cash crops are tea, coffee and cotton (Goldsmith 1994).

Certainly the 2002 tonnes of Nyambene khat that until recently was being imported into the UK each year is indicative of the scale of production and importance of this crop for Kenya (Anderson and Carrier 2011). The economic value of this export was estimated at £12,740,000 (Carrier 2014: 117), and this is only a small proportion of the total production, most being consumed nationally or exported to Somalia. In the Nyambenes, farmers have constantly emphasized to researchers how much more valuable this crop is for them than more ‘respectable’ crops such as coffee (Carrier 2007: 57ff), and a recent estimate of potential income from khat in the main production region within the Nyambenes suggests a figure far higher than the Kenyan average (Baariu and Mulaku 2015: 60). Income comes not only from its farming, but also from its trade, as Meru are highly involved in its national retail trade and transport, while also entering into the international export business (Goldsmith 1999). Khat’s cultural resonance for the Meru of the Nyambenes, has been enhanced and reinforced greatly by its economic worth to the district: it is so integrated into

culture and economy, that schools and churches in the region often have a few khat trees to help support themselves financially. In the Nyambenes, few see khat as a dangerous drug menacing society, but as the bedrock of the local economy. Earnings from the trade are not restricted to the Meru, but also spread to the thousands of Somali wholesalers and retailers scattered throughout northern Kenya and Somalia (Carrier 2007: chapter four). Somali involvement in the trade has also had a direct effect on the urban landscape of Nairobi, as capital from its international export was channelled into the Somali district of Eastleigh, capitalising a number of commercial ventures in what is now a global hub for clothing and textiles (Carrier 2016). In this regard, Eastleigh offers a clear example of how trade in such a ‘dubious’ substance can underpin economic growth.

The situation for khat farmers in the Nyambenes and in Ethiopia is not dissimilar to the one faced by cannabis cultivators in Lesotho and Nigeria: in Ethiopia Gebissa reports how khat has allowed producers to ride out economic shocks, and remain relatively food secure while improving their standard of living (Gebissa 2010: 114). Khat growers earn around five times more cash-crop income than non-khat growers, while owning more livestock, farm implements, and other such indicators of relative prosperity (Tefera, Kirsten and Perret 2003). In fact, contrary to anxiety that khat is ‘taking the place of food’ (see below), the ability to feed children appears to increase proportionally with the amount of land dedicated to khat, and decrease with that dedicated to growing cereal crops. Indeed, a far more positive gloss can be placed on khat’s role in East Africa than given by development experts. Khat farmers have been increasingly able to divert income from khat into off-farm occupation, including transport, trade and retail sectors, allowing for migration to businesses in urban centres (Gebissa 2010: 124).

As with cannabis, the story of khat’s role in development does not end in the main producer regions of Kenya and Ethiopia, however: it also now extends to growing production regions in Uganda and northern Madagascar, as well as generating livelihoods for its wholesalers, retailers and exporters (Carrier 2005). Indeed, in describing the expanding importance of khat production in several regions of Uganda, Beckerleg makes similar points concerning the positive role khat can play in improving rural livelihoods. So important is this indigenously developed crop, that she even goes as far as to state that khat is subversive to international development practices, many predicated on the role of the outside developmental agency: ‘Khat is subversive because in East Africa it has improved the lives of millions of poor people who are not part of development programs. Khat, I contend, renders “development” irrelevant to the lives and livelihoods of independent-minded producers and entrepreneurs’ (Beckerleg 2010: 182).

Illicit and Quasi-Licit Livelihoods

Thus, the support cannabis and khat provide to rural and urban livelihoods suggests that they can be assessed in a much more positive way than conventional wisdom would allow. However, how sustainable are these livelihoods linked to internationally reviled crops? Clearly, there are risks associated with cannabis and khat: vulnerability to law enforcement; little recourse to legal protection, certainly in the case of cannabis, although khat’s legality in producer countries affords some protection; the trade networks that farmers rely on to sell their crops at decent prices are vulnerable

to closure by law enforcement agencies; there is also vulnerability to change in demand and legal status, as well as competition from other growing regions. The dangers of reliance on khat has been demonstrated recently by the decision of the UK government to ban the commodity following international pressure from European countries that had already banned it, as well as domestic pressure from an anti-khat campaign waged in the main by members of the Somali diaspora (Carrier 2014). As tonnes of khat were leaving Kenya for the UK most days of the week, this had had a great impact on the growing regions, especially those which emerged to feed the European market. Given such risks and changing situations, would farmers be better placed eschewing khat and cannabis and sticking with either subsistence crops or licit cash crops?

The decision to grow such crops must be placed in the context of a lack of alternatives. As we have seen, land pressure and degradation means that hardy, tolerant crops like khat and cannabis are sometimes the only ones that might thrive and provide an income that allows food security and some economic advancement (UNDP 2015; Buxton 2015). Also, there are many risks in all cash crops, even internationally approved ones that are very much at the mercy of global markets and a world of trade imbalances heavily skewed in favour of the West (Tandon 2015), as well as drought, pests and lack of agricultural subsidies to help provide fertilizer and other such inputs. That cannabis and khat are delinked in various ways from the mainstream global economy can also be an advantage, insulating them from the uncertainties of the far-off markets that fix prices for the likes of coffee and tea, although, of course, both crops are enmeshed within their own regimes of value in which farmers often only accrue a small proportion of overall profits.⁹

Furthermore, the argument that cannabis and khat take away land that could be better used for food crops, is an argument that would apply to other non-food cash crops such as tea, coffee and the vast quantities of flowers grown and exported globally from countries such as Kenya. In fact, cannabis and khat might allow more subsistence agriculture than 'legitimate' cash crops: cannabis does not require cultivation on the most fertile land – unlike other cash-crops – so can leave such land for food, while many farmers in East Africa intercrop other crops with khat, allowing a diversified approach to sustainable livelihoods (Carrier 2007: 35).

Even the risk of arrest and incarceration or having ones crop of cannabis destroyed is low in many parts of rural Africa, where the power of the state is often too weak to reach farmers, and too constrained by a lack of will power in tackling a crop so fundamental to many livelihoods. Figures of authority are also at times implicated in the trade networks emanating out of production zones, and so have a vested interest in protecting farmers (Bloomer 2009; Klein, 2001). In a rational assessment of which crop to produce or trade, therefore, illegality – and the risk of future illegality – is for many farmers not the most critical factor. Certainly, as experience elsewhere in the world shows, until viable alternatives are found upon which livelihoods can be based, internationally-suspect crops such as cannabis and khat will continue to be farmed (Buxton 2015). As many African leaders have realized, international political will to combat the production of such crops in Africa

⁹ See Carrier 2007, chapter five, for a description of conflict between Meru farmers and Somali exporters at the turn of the millennium.

is lacking, in contrast to the will to combat smuggling routes bringing harder drugs into Europe and North America (UNODC 2010b). The current political and economic state of affairs – as well as the fact that khat and cannabis are often culturally validated in Africa – means that such crops are likely to remain significant factors in rural livelihoods for the foreseeable future.

This is not to deny the very real difficulties faced by African consumers of drugs – especially those using ‘harder’ drugs (McCurdy 2014), and the many children dependent on solvents – or the way that drug consumption (khat and cannabis included) can break people apart as well as bring them together, so negatively affecting livelihoods and development. But it must be stressed that the impact of drugs upon development in the African context – especially in rural regions – is far more complicated than the official views discussed above suggest. Certain ‘drugs’ can, in fact, be seen to play more positive roles in rural livelihoods.¹⁰

However, this should not be seen as an argument that such drug crops and commodities could actually be a basis for more profound social and economic development: cannabis and khat are not panaceas for Africa’s developmental ills. This is especially so as they are often a way of diversifying and compensating for other declining incomes, and because, just like other commodities and cash crops, such drug crops expose farmers to new risks and uncertainties. Indeed, as Clapham observes in relation to khat, it would be foolish to ‘extol the crop as a potential basis for any broader process of sustainable development’ given the lessons of other crops whose boom years came to a very quick end (Clapham 2010: 206).

Conclusion

Thus, the received wisdom of drugs and development must be nuanced in relation to Africa’s drug crops. However, this begs the question of what policy can be enacted in relation to drugs to mitigate risks, including those that might prove impediments to development. This is all the more important to ask as there is increasing acknowledgement that current drug policy itself has capacity to ruin livelihoods and impede development, sometimes more so than the drugs themselves. Indeed, even the UN has recently acknowledged the ‘unintended consequences of drug control’, ‘the most formidable of which is the creation of a lucrative black market for controlled substances, and the violence and corruption it generates’ (UNODC 2009: 165).

Indeed, in most African states, drug-supply control has clearly been prioritised and it is mainly petty cannabis traders, farmers and users who ‘meet justice’, as they are easy targets for law enforcement officers. In Nigeria, for instance, the great majority of drug related arrests and convictions are for the possession of small amounts of cannabis and for cannabis cultivation (Klantschnig, 2009). So-called ‘alternative development’ programmes – substituting other crops for the likes of cannabis – have rarely been attempted by African governments. However, there is little reason to believe that such policies could be successful, as research in Latin America and Central Asia has shown that the value of drug crops is kept inflated by

¹⁰ Such questioning comes from all political directions, even from the World Bank (Keefer, Loayza and Soares 2008).

the risk factor created through prohibition (Buxton 2015). Our two case studies of khat and cannabis would also confirm this, as for alternative development to work, higher value crops than cannabis and khat have to be found, and the infrastructure established to make them a viable alternative: this requires much to go right, including demand for the replacement crops to be established.

Finally, there is a sense that little drug-related change will be achieved until lives and livelihoods in general are improved. As the case of cannabis and khat production and trade have shown, the causality between drugs and underdevelopment can be questioned. While causality is difficult to prove – and drug trade and consumption continue among the wealthy in society too – poverty exacerbates problems associated with drugs (including legal ones such as alcohol), encouraging people to get involved in their profitable trade, and sometimes become problematic consumers. As Alexander shows, where problematic drug consumption is common, so are underlying societal ‘development’ problems, often linked to deprivation (Alexander 2010). McCurdy’s work on heroin use in Dar-es-Salaam also vividly shows the connection between marginalisation and addiction (McCurdy 2014). Many of these social and structural problems such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, violence or even war, require a more far-reaching approach than the one promoted by international drug policy makers and development planners (UNDP 2015). Thus, truly tackling the problems associated with the drugs trade in Africa requires tackling these structural ‘development’ problems. Our case studies of cannabis and khat may offer livelihoods in hard times, but their popularity as commodities and cash crops speaks volumes about the asymmetries of global trade, where farmers in developing countries find more developmental benefits in such substances than in a mainstream global economy that is structured against them.

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