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UNODC's World Drug Report 2024: Alarming diversification of local drug markets in Africa poses a growing public health crisis

- Cannabis remains the most sourced, trafficked, and used drug in Africa, but the continent is also increasingly a transit area for cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. These drugs have infiltrated local markets, exacerbating health challenges;
- Non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids like tramadol remains high in North Africa, as well as in West and Central Africa, with over 90% of global tramadol seizures occurring in Africa in the past five years.
- Harmful drug mixtures such as Kush, Khadafi, and Monkey Tail are emerging public health threats and will require member states to enhance their capacities to promptly identify and analyze new harmful domestic drug combinations;
- To effectively combat drug threats in the region, Member States must invest in prevention and treatment, while implementing evidence-based strategies for combating drug trafficking and organized crime, recognizing the global nature of the drug problem and the need for coordinated action.

Accra, June 26, 2024 – The alarming diversification of local drug markets in Africa poses a growing public health crisis and serious challenges to law enforcement according to the World Drug Report 2024 launched by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) today. The regional launch of the World Drug Report 2024 is happening in Accra, Ghana, as part of the celebrations for the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

The local drug markets in Africa are rapidly diversifying, shifting from a predominance of domestically sourced cannabis to a multitude of transiting drugs such as cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and pharmaceutical opioids. This diversification is exacerbating existing health challenges, particularly as the availability of drug treatment services are limited in West Africa.

Use of cannabis is particularly high in West and Central Africa, with prevalence of use in 2022 of nearly 10 per cent (31 million people). In comparison, over the same period, the global prevalence of cannabis use was of around 4%. The region has experienced the fastest global growth in cannabis use.

Africa is increasingly a key transit hub for drugs, with substances such as cocaine from Latin America, and heroin and methamphetamine from South-West Asia passing through on their way to Europe and other destinations. Over the past thirty years, criminal networks have expanded their operations in the region.

Between January 2019 and June 2024, at least 126.4 tons of cocaine were seized in, en route or from West Africa, mainly in international waters in the Gulf of Guinea (30.8 tons), in Cabo Verde (18.2 tons), Senegal (15.7 tons) and Guinea (5.6 tons). This has led to a surge in drug consumption and dependency within local communities. Cocaine, which was previously believed to only transit the region, is increasingly used, with the number of people entering treatment for cocaine rising. In 2020, law enforcement in Niger reported the dismantlement of two clandestine laboratories producing crack cocaine for the local market. Senegal dismantled a cocaine laboratory in 2021, seizing 675kg of cocaine in the operation.

Additionally, non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids, such as Tramadol, is widespread in North Africa, as well as in West and Central Africa, with a prevalence of non-medical opioid use in Africa of 1.3 per cent in 2022, compared to a global prevalence of 1.2 per cent over the same period. In the last five years, the continent accounted for 90% of global tramadol seizures.

New mixtures and concoctions, such as Kush, Khadafi and Monkey Tail, pose severe health risks due to their unknown and varied compositions. According to the limited available data, these mixtures contain, among other ingredients, various controlled drugs, pharmaceuticals, alcohol, and solvents. To effectively address these threats, it is essential to increase the scientific testing capacity of regional laboratories, enabling the prompt detection and analysis of their components. This approach will bolster the ability of law enforcement and health agencies to respond to and mitigate the emerging drug threats effectively.

“The evidence is clear: investing in drug prevention saves lives by protecting communities from the harmful effects of drugs” said Dr. Amado Philip de Andrés, Regional Representative at UNODC Regional Office for West and Central Africa. “It also weakens criminal groups by reducing the profits they generate from people’ addictions.”

Globally, drug traffickers are more likely to be prosecuted and convicted than those arrested for drug use or possession. However, in Africa, based on the limited data available, the pattern is reversed: arrests for drug possession or use often result in more convictions than those for trafficking. To dismantle drug networks effectively, efforts must prioritize the interception and disruption of high-level trafficking operations. Key strategies include reallocating resources to target high-profit individuals and groups at the core of the drug trade, as well as enhancing international judicial cooperation.

Each year, UNODC celebrates the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking on 26 June. This year's theme, “The evidence is clear: Invest in prevention,” highlights the importance of addressing drug demand and enhancing harm reduction through evidence-based prevention and internationally standard treatment services. It is crucial to recognize drug use disorders as health issues rather than criminal behavior, ensuring that treatment is managed within the healthcare system, not the criminal justice system.

“UNODC is committed to promote high-quality, accessible treatment services that honor the dignity of every person affected by drug use,” stated Dr. Amado Philip de Andrés. “This strategy not only addresses the issue at its core but also fosters an environment where recovery is supported, and stigma is eradicated.”

The states of West and Central Africa have mobilized substantial resources, with support from UNODC and technical and financial partners, to enhance policies for preventing drug use and trafficking. They continue to collaborate with the international community to gather data on drug trends in compliance with international drug control conventions.

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The regional launch of the World Drug Report will take place on 26 June from 9:00 to 12:30 in Accra, Ghana. For more information or to request an interview with Dr. Amado Philip de Andrés, Regional Representative of the UNODC Regional Office for West and Central Africa, please contact: Mrs. Helene Moussou Takow, Executive Associate at helene.moussou@un.org