

THE HEROINE COAST, WHY EAST AFRICA'S DRUG POLICIES NEED TO CHANGE

In recent years the volume of heroin shipped from Afghanistan along a network of maritime routes in East and southern Africa has reached record levels.

Most of this heroin is destined for Western markets, but there is a spin-off trade for local market and consumption.

East Africa is now experiencing the sharpest increase in heroin use and a spectrum of criminal networks, cross boarder traders and political elites in East and southern Africa are substantially enmeshed in the trade.

The political governments are somehow facilitating this trade knowingly and unknowingly.

Political systems across the region show signs of having been significantly captured for criminal ends. Heroin use is growing, while public-health systems are generally struggling to respond to it with the unavailable or limited resources. The side effects of this trade are damaging to democracy and the prospects for broad-based economic development.

Furthermore, in communities where there is widespread use there is growing numbers of HIV infections, sexually transmitted diseases, opioid babies and hepatitis C infection, and these communities are wracked by violence and criminalization, denying Africa its workforce.

According to current report pupils as young as 8 years old in standard four are already consuming hard drugs. And their trusted handlers are guilty of introducing them to the substances. In some cases, children easily access drugs from shops or bars near their schools. In the absence of these, Matatu touts, taxi drivers, kiosk vendors and chemists have become the conduits in the drug business.

Heroin overdose is now a local issue in east Africa are not reported nor recorded by the health authorities, because drug use is illegal.

Current drug policies in East Africa are based on the criminal justice approach and are a serious obstacle to other social and economic objectives and has resulted in millions of people imprisoned jailed or murdered.

The same policies have proved resistant to implementation of harm reduction principles as a method of treating opioid addiction because of the use of synthetic opioid for therapy.

Culture and religious principles highly held by leaders have only helped to make the situation worse. This has contributed further to high level of stigma and discrimination creating barriers to access to healthcare.

East Africa needs to move away from its euphoria of “drug free world” embrace alternative sentencing and harm reduction principles to support the youth and people already caught in the addiction web.

If we cannot control the demand of drugs, then there will be little hope of preventing foreign drug producers from fulfilling that demand. We will not get anywhere if we place a heavier burden of action on families and people and schools than on the executive and the legislature, who hold the key to directing these countries to the right path.

Decriminalizing drug possession appears to have impact on levels of drug use. However, its principal impacts are reducing arrests of drug users and de-congest the prisons, especially those who are young and/or members of minority groups or women; reducing opportunities for low level police corruption; allowing police to focus on more serious crimes; reducing criminal justice system costs; and better enabling individuals, families, communities and local governments to deal with addiction as a health related rather than criminal issue.

An example of Portugal who complemented its policy of decriminalization by allocating greater resources across the drugs field, expanding and improving prevention, treatment, harm reduction and social reintegration programs. This is the Way East Africa should go.

The abuse, illicit cultivation and production and manufacture of narcotic drugs as well as the illicit trafficking in those substances and its precursors, have reached record levels, and that the illicit demand for and domestic diversion of precursor chemicals are on the rise, it is time to end the drug war, it is time for east Africa to change its policies