



By Kalundi Serumaga



*Kampala, Uganda* - CUE THE STATISTICS.

There is a rising concern in both government and welfare circles that the region could be on the brink of a 'drugs epidemic.'

This could be misleading, and partly a result of our official culture of imitative behaviour.

The seizure and impounding of larger and larger amounts of contraband at our ports, (averaging hundreds of kilos of heroin worth millions of US dollars for example), does not necessarily mean that Africans are either the producers or the end-user of these items, as would be the case at London's Heathrow airport or through the United States port of San Francisco.

Not all narcotics are equal, and neither are their users. The core market for narcotics globally is poor people in rich countries. This is because, even though poor, they get access to money in real terms (by whatever means) to make the market viable.

There is little evidence to suggest that cocaine, heroin and amphetamines (in short, something that has to come out of a lab) are being manufactured in the region. Simply put: We cannot afford to be either the producers, or primary intended consumers of modern narcotics

Ordinary Africans simply do not have enough numerical strength to make up the necessary aggregated monetary demand, and rich Africans are simply too few to consume the volumes

necessary to make fixed supply lines to them worthwhile.

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Simply put: We cannot afford to be either the producers, or primary intended consumers of modern narcotics.

The more probable explanation is that the generally lenient punishments (themselves evidence of the relative historical rarity of the crime), as well as the easily compromised law enforcement regime, has made East Africa an attractive route for drugs smugglers operating from both Asia and South America, heading onwards to the viable markets of Western Europe.

The region's average prison sentence for trafficking is life imprisonment, assuming one is not merely subjected to a very large fine. In practice, nobody really gets caught, even when contraband is seized, and there are certainly none of the Asia-style death sentences in place here.

The media of the region exercise sporadic focus on shipments (and sometimes this means whole shiploads) of hard drugs being seized at sea or at some airport. These are couched in ritualised displays of law enforcement, whereby some Big Man presses a button that scuttles the ship, or sets fire to a huge pile of someone's stash.

#### GETTING HIGH ON BANNING

If you think about it, a lot of the history of African, and indeed other indigenous peoples, has been about enduring bans for one thing or another, imposed on them by people who are 'not them.'

This habit was carried on into Africa's post-Independence period, where "ban" is a well-used component of the lexicon of government.

The trouble with this habit is that it sets up a situation where the baby is thrown *in* with the dirty bathwater.

Some of these bans were aimed at 'herbal' habits already practised by the to-be-colonised people. Other bans were aimed at keeping local people away from habits brought by the colonisers, but deemed too 'damaging' to allow natives to use. These were the (in)famous licences natives were required to have in order to legally buy whisky or other such spirits. This gave rise to a third kind of banning, aimed at native adaptations to the new habits, such as bans on the makeshift brewing of spirit liquor.

Much of this was self-serving. In the early 1900s, the native Ugandans began forming co-operative unions as a response to the rigours being brought on by the then new colonial economy. These were banned, as were to be trade union membership, political parties, and certain new economic activities (such as ginning cotton) for the Africans. Even certain religious practices were banned under the 1912 Witchcraft Act, which was not repealed until the late 1950s. Others like hunting wildlife -branded 'poaching' - have carried on well into post-Independence.

Despite this, the relationship between marijuana, waragi (illegal moonshine or "war gin" apparently), and the ability of many an underpaid East African colonial foot soldier to just keep on marching is a seriously under-researched African topic.

It is in perhaps this historical context that the indifference to European and American-driven

concerns about the alleged 'proliferation of drugs' in the region may be understood. Western laws are not really made out of love for Africans, and there is little to suggest it is really proliferating among the citizens themselves anyway

This allows the entire matter to remain in the purview and hands of those managing the state. And that is where the problem begins.

Of the three broad narcotics categories outlined above - 'native' drugs, imported drugs for local use, and 'transit' drugs, or drugs made for export - each have received a separate but nevertheless state-oriented approach.

For the first category, the aim is the continued policing of native behaviour, in the best 'traditions' of the colonial project. At root, it is the general assumption that Africans cannot work out what is best for them, and need to have this discernment imposed.

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The second, is the management of elite behaviour. Apart from legal narcotics such as alcohol, there is some level of consumption of manufactured ones such as amphetamines, heroin and cocaine. However, like most imported things in the region, these are essentially a 'luxury' item affordable mainly to the socio-economic elite. In East Africa, there is actually very little sustainable consumption of such narcotics outside the circles of the rich.

In countries like Afghanistan and Brazil, where narcotics are being manufactured on a much larger scale, there is a certain amount of leakage into their communities of ordinary citizens. But this has perhaps more to do with being near the source, than with actual viable purchasing power.

The real area of activity is in the manufacture of narcotics for export, as well as the exploitation of our weakly governed official spaces as a conduit for narcotics coming in from elsewhere. This is the real cause of Western interest in East Africa's alleged 'drugs problem,' and the real source of local elite interest. Only an elite would have the resources and access to participate in today's drug trade, basically as an enabler, especially since the real market is off the continent.

WHO REALLY NEEDS 'FIXING'?

In a display of hubris similar to its 'concerns' about drugs proliferation in Central America, the US muddies the waters about whether this is a concern about the impact of drug abuse on the global youth, or merely a concern about such narcotics finding their way into the United States and their cousins in Western Europe.

This is a problem of denial.

First, the real crisis is not narcotics as such, but the Western habit of wanting to refine everything already consumed by the human - and even just mammalian - body, to the maximum extent of that product's physical properties.

The American war in Vietnam had an interesting sideshow in the form of heroin being made in, and smuggled from jungle hideouts in the Golden Triangle of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand to raise finances for pro-American armed groups

Sugar, which is completely consumable in a pre-digested form (thanks to honeybees), or in a natural form in sugar cane and beets, is extracted from the latter two and refined into that ubiquitous granular substance that borders on a poison, is the most familiar example of this.

Together with starch and processed fat, this 'denatured' sugar now forms the base of the entire global processed food industry, with all its associated health risks.

Other examples exist. It is an extract from the leaves of the humble coca plant, native to South America, that is the source of cocaine, a mind-blowing intoxicant.

Heroin, most venerable of the 'modern' narcotics, is originally derived from morphine, which in itself come out of the poppy plant located mainly in remote Afghanistan.

Most native alcohol manufacture was a fruit fermentation process leading to various kinds of relatively mild wines and beers. By contrast, the emergence and focus on the science of much stronger grain-based spirit liquors: Scottish whisky; Spanish-Mexican tequila; Russian/Scandinavian vodka; French brandies and American bourbons, and even rum from the leftovers of the abovementioned sugar processes, though probably pioneered by the Arabs in Baghdad in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, seems to have its origins in the same European thinking.

In fact, it is the failure to extract something equally lethal from East Africa's coca-like, mildly stimulating khat (miraa in Kenya, mairungi in Uganda, etc.) that could confirm my theory that the drug dealers of the world concluded a long time ago that East Africa's impoverished, rurally scattered citizens were simply not a viable mass-market for refined narcotics, and not worth the implied investment in labs and chemicals.

Second, the 'proliferation' has been less of a natural occurrence, and more a consequence of active state participation,

The port city of Hong Kong was famously taken over by Britain in 1862 as a result of the second (1856-1860) of the Opium Wars in which the Chinese Qing dynasty failed in its attempt to stop forcible smuggling of the drug into China by the British in the name of 'free trade.'

The American war in Vietnam had an interesting sideshow in the form of heroin being made in, and smuggled from American-backed jungle hideouts in the Golden Triangle of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand to raise finances for pro-American armed groups in the conflict. Many of these drug consignments ended up being smuggled back to the US itself by returning US military personnel.

In the seminal 1996 *Dark Alliance* investigative series, the *San Jose Mercury News* newspaper tells of a similar, but more devastating operation in yet another, more covert US war. At the height of their campaign against 'communist rebels' in South America, US intelligence agencies developed a scheme to supply cheap narcotics to poor US citizens so as to create cash flow to finance the anti-communist militias.

This is not to say that the poor had a *disposable* income. Rather, it meant that addicts would be able to spend less to achieve an even higher level of addictive intoxication. This means in practice that after robbing, cheating, begging and prostituting themselves to each other, these badly damaged persons would have realised the small amounts of money needed to get their 'fix,' as constituents of a mass market.

This was to become known as 'crack cocaine,' which was more potent, more conveniently consumed (through inhalation), and more addictive per weight unit, than the more middle-class oriented original version.

One man in particular, the (later to be convicted drug-dealer) African-American 'Freeway Rick; Ross was named as perhaps the person who in partnership with shadowy Latin American and US intelligence figures, basically ignited the 'crack epidemic' that devastated African-American communities up and down the West Coast.

## THE NECESSARY DEATH OF LEGAL COMMON SENSE

Like all things, there is certainly a need for the authorities to be aware of social behaviour, and if necessary, make laws to regulate it. In the same vein, and for the same reason, too much of anything too refined will certainly kill you.

However, the policy makers of East Africa must work to see that that and the laws they produce are not aimed merely at continuing the colonial imperative of policing indigenous behaviour, and are aimed at actually aimed at protecting those vulnerable to either narcotics misuse, and also the social and security implications of having large networks of well-financed criminally minded persons within their jurisdictions.

So far, we see policy caught in a parallel universe. On the one hand, the generally unproductive nature of regional economies (that is, outside the minerals sector, ring-fenced, as it were, for foreign capital) means that the functioning local elite - law enforcement officers, the politically well-connected, capitalisers, etc - are more than likely to be drawn to the management of the narcotics trade as a way of meeting their material aspirations.

In order for the drugs trade to be profitable to the East African elite, it is necessary to keep it in the domain of illegality, so as exploit those in need of illegal assistance around Customs and policing barriers

On the other, there is the burden of an enormously moralising mindset, in which those state actors not directly involved in the business of financing, focus on the problem from a colonial perspective, regardless of the fact that some of the former colonising countries have even legalised, or at least made peace with, some of these narcotics in recent years.

Third, attitudes and laws change, and change again:

The world famous drink Coca-Cola gets its name from originally having actual cocaine as its active ingredient; between 1929 and 1933, alcohol consumption was strictly prohibited in all America's 50 states; marijuana use, sometimes recreational, has been 'decriminalised' in a few Western European countries and four North American states. In any event, even the punishments and their enforcement around personal consumption have become officially lax.

As for harder drugs, there has been a migration from a punitive regime to a curative one, as addiction has been recognised more as an illness as opposed to an act of deviance.

Let me put it like this: In order for the drugs trade to be profitable to the East African elite, it is necessary to keep it in the domain of illegality, so as exploit those in need of illegal assistance around Customs and policing barriers. This is why it is important to them that the matter of narcotics use must not be separated from the dubious morality behind the current laws of the region, and the need to appear keen to support US and UN initiatives on the matter in the region.

Illegal narcotics are profitable, but not in the way that you may think.

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