

Heroin markets and other drug markets in Eastern and Southern Africa:

Our research into the heroin economy looks at how this **international** trade enters and leaves a **regional** economy and generates very specific **local** impacts.

In recent years, the volume of heroin shipped from Afghanistan along a network of routes in East and southern Africa appears to have increased considerably. Most of this heroin is destined for Western markets, but there is a large spin-off trade for local consumption.

Africa is now experiencing the sharpest increase in heroin use worldwide and a spectrum of criminal networks and political elites in East and southern Africa are substantially enmeshed in the trade. The transit of heroin had shaped and been shaped by high-level governance dynamics, and the criminal governance of illicit markets mirrors the dynamics of political competition and rule.

In addition to this high-level corruption, the heroin transit route has developed large local markets. These local markets have grown consistently for two decades, but with key “surge” periods, and they are having acute effects on prospects for development. The reason this market has become so important is because the heroin trade has found ways to align with three key socio-political trends that are occurring at the same time:

Trends:

1. Urbanisation

Huge urban concentrations provide the markets for drugs, and the spaces where criminal governance can prosper. Africa’s urban population is the fastest growing in the world.¹Urbanisation in Southern and Eastern African countries is expected to increase by 74.3 and 43.6 percent by 2050 respectively. Five of the top 20 fast-growing cities are in East Africa. This includes Kampala, Uganda (expected to grow by 99.5%); followed by Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (85.2%); Kigali, Rwanda (79.9%); Mombasa, Kenya (79%); and Nairobi, Kenya (77.3%).²

The expansion of the heroin market throws into the relief the failures of formal urbanisation - it has flourished in the informal economy, particularly in informal waste and recycling economies, and in abandoned spaces, and amongst the unemployed, irregular migrants, and the homeless.

Heroin, in particular, appears to greatly accelerate the growth of the informal, at the expense of the formal: petty theft and other taboo behaviours that often accompany dependent use affect community trust and often scare people from the spaces where users reside (who are

¹ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africas-future-is-urban>

² <https://www.polity.org.za/article/a-new-african-dream-the-benefits-of-satellite-cities-for-east-africa-2013-05-29>

themselves hiding from the police), and generate subcultures that are marginalised and criminalised

2. Challenges of local governance

The region is currently undergoing profound challenges to governance at a level, which is the coalface between the state and its citizens. These challenges have many dimensions but the corruption nature of illegal drug markets and gang formation but seen as key phenomenon. The cash-based nature of illegal drug markets makes them highly corruption of police at a local level, and because drug dealers need protection at a level that corresponds to their own, as drug syndicates grow so corruption creeps up the state hierarchy. Our research has come across several local jurisdictions where local political actors are linked to local criminal actors and dirty money through their need fund campaigns or patronage and secure their position.

3. Violence and fragility

Larger urban nodes with most longstanding markets have all generated street-based retail markets, which over time, and with an influx of weapons, have generated battles for territory (or 'turf') and high levels of violence. Cape Town currently has a murder rate that puts it into the top ten most violent cities in the world, with gang dynamics that rival those of Latin America: this is intimately related to the drug market. Mombasa, too, is undergoing a concerted and aggressive police crack down in response to spirally violence linked to gangs, which are linked both to drug syndicates and extremist groups.

At the level of street retail, dealers often sell a suite of drugs that link several different transit and supply routes, bringing numerous drug transit routes to bear on local explosions of violent competition. For example, in South Africa, Cape gangs tend to sell crystal meth, qualuudes, crack cocaine, and heroin, as well as other drugs. Yet heroin is largely supplied by Tanzanian networks, Cocaine by Nigerian ones, and Crystal Meth is produced in the country, with precursors sources through Asian networks along with qualuudes.

The degree to which street retail generates violence is tied to whether gangs based on turf control are able and allowed to form. In that sense, the degree to which violence is linked to the heroin trade depends a lot on Trend 1 and 2.

Urbanisation, governance and violence are often analysed separately, but the heroin economy is a crucial component in shaping each trend and cuts across and connects them. Understanding the drug trade in this region is understanding key development phenomenon, and yet the trade and its employees and users, are too often invisible. Heroin in particular is a poor man's drug and is hidden not just by the criminality of the trade, but by the marginalisation of and discrimination against the communities where it flourishes.