



WEST AFRICA'S NEW DRUG OF CHOICE: THE RISE OF METHAMPHETAMINE

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West Africa is rapidly evolving from a cocaine transit corridor from Latin America to Europe into an independent methamphetamine production and distribution center. This policy brief by ISDP's Transnational Threats Initiative examines the drug's emergence in the region and its implications, before arguing how civil society has so far been a largely overlooked actor that should be leveraged in drug prevention efforts.

International organizations such as the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the UNODC have monitored with growing concern the increasing seizures of methamphetamine in West Africa in the last few years. The first methamphetamine facilities were uncovered in Nigeria in 2011, with five labs subsequently discovered in the Lagos area alone between mid-2012 to mid-2013. Currently, large-scale methamphetamine production is suspected in Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, and Mali. Already a cocaine transit corridor from Latin America to Europe, there is clear evidence that West Africa is shifting to also become an independent production hub of methamphetamine. This is not only prompting increased health risks, crime, corruption, and destabilization of fragile regimes at the local level, but also harbors regional and international implications in the form of growing transnational criminal (including terrorist) enterprises. Furthermore, the scale of the market is on the increase, both in terms of domestic consumption and distribution to other markets.

About one-third of the drugs that pass through West Africa—mostly marijuana and cocaine—are consumed locally, with an estimated 1.5 million current users, especially youths. Methamphetamine has the potential to become the new drug of choice: it provides a much cheaper and stronger alternative to marijuana and cocaine. In Lagos, for instance, one shot of methamphetamine costs as low as US\$1.20, compared to US\$15 for a gram of cocaine in Guinea-Bissau. Unlike plant-based crops, methamphetamine can be produced without specialized equipment and using simple formulas. It requires no rare or expensive precursors—its components can be found in products as common as nasal decongestants.

Furthermore, the profits that can be made from exporting methamphetamine, particularly to Asia, are significant—up to five times those of cocaine trafficking. Whole-

sale prices range from about US\$40,000/kg in Malaysia to \$200,000/kg in Japan and South Korea, according to a U.S. Senate report. The INCB estimates that 1.5 tons of methamphetamine were trafficked from West Africa to Asia in 2012, according to the most recent data available. Further illustrating the scale and lucrateness of methamphetamine production is that a single methamphetamine laboratory discovered in Nigeria in July 2011 had an estimated capacity of producing 25 to 50-kilogram batches.

Implications in a High-Risk Region

Methamphetamine has found a suitable “breeding ground” in the countries of West Africa, which have youthful populations afflicted by poverty and a lack of legitimate employment opportunities. Furthermore, many are characterized by a post-conflict culture in which a lack of education, trauma, and development shortcomings make daily existence a challenge. In Sierra Leone alone, over 70,000 ex-combatants have swollen the ranks of young job seekers. Youth unemployment remains chronic, however, with the region also having one of the world's highest rates of “working poverty” (employment that garners less than US\$2 a day). Such social exclusion has served to perpetuate poverty and increase incentives to turn to crime and violence. In the absence of viable income generating activities turning to methamphetamine production has become increasingly attractive. Further, the drug has garnered the street name of “paya” and is well-known for its capacity to dull pain and enhance sexual performance. A small amount causes erratic, violent behavior among its users, and long-term it can cause brain damage, strokes, and comas. The immediate health risks also include increased potential for HIV transmission: in Senegal and Nigeria, around 9 percent of new HIV cases are linked to drug abuse with contaminated needles.



The presence of cheap, readily-available methamphetamine thus has the potential to further undermine already fragile institutions and a weak rule of law, increasing local crime as well as corruption and instability. State monopolies on violence are chronically fragmented in West Africa, and the high profit turnover by moving methamphetamine to markets in Europe and Asia spawns innovation in other criminal enterprises, from arms to human trafficking. A web of associations between corrupt government officials and international drug trafficking networks is already in place from years of cocaine-smuggling through West Africa. Moreover, the political risks extend beyond the local level. Sophisticated criminal groups—dominated by Nigerian criminal organizations—operate in partnership with local syndicates across state borders, providing ancillary services, such as money-laundering in Senegal. These criminal networks are also financing terrorism: drug trafficking is singled out as the main source of funding for Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the high profits from methamphetamine production will no doubt be a boon to this and other groups which have benefited from cocaine trafficking in the past, such as Boko Haram.

Mobilizing Civil Society

International and regional organizations such as the UNODC, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), African Union, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, and INTERPOL, currently offer aid to undermine drug networks in the region, aiming to strengthen regional cooperation and support law enforcement. The current response has thus far been limited to the governmental level, strengthening the rule of law by increasing punitive measures and primarily targeting the criminal networks via seizures of drugs (mainly at airports) and raids of labs. What is lacking is development of prevention measures. Initiatives such as the African Union Plan of Action on Drug Control (2013-2017) have thus far failed to take advantage of the strong asset of West African civil society, which has long served as a type of “social cement” filling the void left by the region’s weak institutions.

Initiatives by both local law enforcement and international organizations can utilize a variety of civil society organizations, including religious groups, women’s groups, media, and traditional ethnic leadership. Accountability and monitoring programs should be prioritized, such as the ECOWAS Regional Action Plan to combat drug trafficking and abuse in West Africa by 2015, which has proposed mobilizing civil society to raise awareness, collect data, and develop communications networks for future monitoring. Data collection and

monitoring are particular priorities—many of these countries have little to no top-down transparency and rampant corruption, with the result that reliable statistics on the prevalence of drugs are virtually nonexistent. Such data is necessary if effective counter-measures are to be developed by state and international actors.

Civilian monitoring organizations could serve a secondary purpose of raising awareness of drug abuse and trafficking. Women’s organizations are particularly useful here, as African traditional society relies on women to secure their basic needs (food, care, work) in view of a lack of functioning institutions. Initiatives aimed at persons under 35 (who make up 70 percent of West Africa’s population) might include information campaigns and school-based programs, exposing the links between methamphetamine use, high-risk behaviors, HIV transmission, and other health risks.

Prevention through mobilizing civil society, in particular women’s organizations, is thus a key priority in: (1) combating local methamphetamine consumption; and (2) informing and building the capacity of state and regional actors engaged in dismantling the methamphetamine networks already entrenched in this region. In sum, the above should form part of a more holistic approach that integrates government-level reform, law enforcement, and the direct mobilization of civil society, thus developing a comprehensive response to the growing menace of methamphetamine production and consumption in West Africa.

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