

Illicit Drug Trafficking in West Africa: The Contending Issues and Way forward

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Abstract

The advent of the 21st century which coincided with the return to democracy in West Africa has brought with it different security challenges that have continued to threaten the existence of states in West Africa. One of these challenges is the rising phenomenon of illicit drug trafficking across the West African Sub-region. These drugs, which include cannabis, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and non-medical use drugs like tramadol and cough mixtures with codeine (apart from Cannabis which is grown in the region) are smuggled into the region by drug cartels from South America. Thus, transforming the region into a commercial hub of illicit drugs. Using the linkage theory to explain the interaction between the internal and external dynamics facilitating illicit drug trade in the region and their effect on regional and national policies on illicit drugs in the sub-region. The paper revealed that illicit drug traffickers have penetrated government institutions, established their footholds in the region and exploited the already weak governance systems and loopholes to establish themselves. The paper concludes amongst other recommendations that ECOWAS should ensure member-states' commitment towards implementing the existing anti-drug instruments and other related instruments aimed at containing illicit drug trafficking in the Sub-region. National Governments should also actively confront the political and governance challenges that incite corruption within the government and security agencies that the drug traffickers exploit. The paper dwells mainly on secondary data and the use of content analysis as its Research technique.

Key Words: *Illicit Drugs, Trafficking, Cocaine, Heroin, Cannabis, Non-Pharmaceutical Use Drugs, West Africa, Geo-Strategic Significance, Cartel, Syndicate.*

Introduction

Since the advent of the 21st century which coincided with the return to democracy in West Africa, the Sub-region has featured repeatedly on global security discourses relating to issues of severe security threat to the continued existence of the states in the Sub-region. Among the core issues is the illicit trafficking of drugs which is gradually taking over the Sub-region. Unfortunately, apart from cannabis that is grown in the region and crystal methamphetamine that can be manufactured locally in laboratories, the majority of other drugs such as cocaine, heroin, non-pharmaceutical use

drugs and some other opioids that are constituting major threats in the West African region, are illegally smuggled into the region from outside Africa. These drugs originally are traced to Central and South American countries where the cartels and producers are well established. West African states, therefore, serve as logistics warehouses and major transit routes for drugs moving to Europe and other South African countries where they have big markets for the drugs. Reportedly, Guinea-Bissau in the north and Ghana in the south have been observed to constitute the two major drug centres where the first landfall is made with drugs coming from South America (SOCA, 2008; UNODC, 2008).

The UN Office on Drugs and Crimes (2008) reported that about half of the cocaine destined for the largest markets in Europe (The United Kingdom, Spain and France) is taken through commercial airlifts on transit through West Africa. The report further noted that at least 46 tons of cocaine had been seized en route to Europe via West Africa since 2005. Approximately 3.4 tons of cocaine was seized from 1357 couriers on commercial air flights from West Africa to Europe between 2004 and 2007. And of all these seizures, 62 per cent of the incidents and 55 per cent of the cocaine interdicted came from just four of the 15 West African countries: Senegal, Nigeria, Guinea (Conakry), and Mali. Thus, making the region one of the two parallel flows of hard drugs across the globe (SOCA, 2008). Incidentally, the increase in the influx of illicit drugs in the region has remained constant with each succeeding year being dangerously higher than the previous year.

The UNODC (2019) report noted a dramatic increase in the seizure of cocaine, opioids and methamphetamine, including non-medical use drugs like Tramadol and cough mixtures with Codeine in the region between 2014 and 2017. Precisely, Tramadol seizures as recorded by the report increased ten-fold from 17 tons in 2014 to 170 tons in 2017 (UNODC, 2019). This, however, does not include cannabis which is domestically cultivated, particularly in Nigeria and Ghana and distributed across the region. Reuters Africa (27 June 2022) reported UNODC observation that between 2019 and 2022 not less than 57 tons of cocaine were seized in and en route West Africa with more than one-third found in Cape Verde. Quite recently, the Nigeria Anti-drug agency, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) uncovered a cocaine warehouse in Lagos state where 1.8 tons (1,855 Kilograms) of cocaine worth two hundred and seventy-eight million, two hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$278,250,000) were stored (The Guardian, 20 September 2022). Barely three months before the discovery, four hundred and forty-three (cartons) of

Tramadol Hydrochloride worth over thirteen million four hundred and fifty one thousand, four hundred and sixty (13,451,466) pills of Tramadol 225mg was uncovered and seized in a residential mansion used as a drug warehouse in Lekki, Lagos state, Nigeria (Premium Times, 30 July 2022). This development in the trend of drug trafficking in the Sub-region indicates a significant change in the trade from a mere transit route for drugs (from Central and South America moving to the European markets) to a commercial and repackaging hub with a well-established network of smugglers and crime syndicates has been linked to the more robust U.S anti-narcotics response strategies that have clamped down on the Latin American drug syndicates on U.S routes as well as their desires for meet up with rapidly growing European market.

The consequences have far-reaching on the overall security and stability of the Sub-region: it has undermined the institutions of the states, particularly, the poorer and weak nations of Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Sierra-Leone, Mali, and other smaller countries like Gambia, Cape Verde and Sao-Tome and Principe as a result, the region has been destabilized, the maritime routes made insecure, thereby deepening the vulnerability of the states, and reinforcing and exacerbating the underlying security challenges in the Sub-region. In addition, the health and well-being of the population are at risk of being destroyed as the majority of the youth population has been hooked on drugs. Thus, affecting significantly the already very low human development index (HDI) in the Sub-region. The West African Epidemiology Network on Drugs (WENDU) (2019) observed that 31.6 per cent of people between 15 and 44 years in West Africa are hooked on drugs indicating that a significant number of its working population are on the verge of destruction. In addition, the vulnerability and fragility of the states in the Sub-region have been worsened as the cartels have exploited the weak institutions to establish their footholds in Sub-region. Many of these states have fallen into the hands of the drug cartels, thus making them unable to control their coasts and airspace (US DEA, 2016). These incidents are affecting the Human Development Index in the Sub-region with a knock-on-effect on the aspirations of the AU Agenda 2063 for a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development, particularly, on the initiative of “Silencing the Guns” in the Continent.

It is against this background that the paper investigates the phenomenon of illicit drug trafficking in West Africa with regard to the issues, challenges and effects on the security of the region. To achieve this feat the paper is divided into four rubrics. The first rubric is the understanding of illicit

drug trafficking and its theoretical underpinning. The second rubric covers the main issues of the paper espousing West African geostrategic significance to international drug trafficking and the contending issues. The fourth rubric is the implications of drug trafficking in West Africa and finally, the conclusion and the Way forward.

Understanding Illicit Drug Trafficking and Its Theoretical Underpinning

The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime defines illicit drug trafficking as a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws (UNODC, ND). These drugs include cocaine, heroin, morphine, cannabis, crystal methamphetamine, and non-pharmaceutical use drugs such as pain-killers and cough mixtures with codeine and sleeping pills (Degenhardt & Hall, 2012; Chris & Maxi, 2013; Australian Government Department of Health, 2017). They constitute the most commonly trafficked illicit drugs by traffickers across the world.

Illicit drugs are classified in the various forms in which they can be found and the effects they exude on the victims; they can occur naturally such as with marijuana (cannabis) or cocaine; they can be prepared from naturally occurring substances, such as the case with heroin; or they can be totally synthetic, as in the case with amphetamines and most other prescription drugs. Similarly, their effects are classified into four major types: stimulants, depressants, narcotics and hallucinogens (Houck & Siegel, 2010). The effects associated with these drugs made them a global health issue, as it represents the largest volume of criminal cases that are examined by forensic science laboratories across the globe (Houck & Siegel, 2010).

The Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin (2016) observed that illicit drug use can lead to health problems such as injury, chronic diseases like heart and liver problems, blood-borne viruses (infections like hepatitis and HIV), lower levels of social and emotional well-being (mental health problems) and increased risk of suicide. Between 2014 and 2017, it was estimated that 230 million people worldwide (approximately 5% of the world population) had abused an illicit drug at least once in their life. However, the number of illicit drug users worldwide is approximately 27 million (roughly 0.6% of the world population). Approximately 15.9 million people worldwide may inject illicit drugs and among them, an estimated 3 million people may be positive for HIV (Dasgupta, 2017).

The UNODC World Drug Report (2021) observed that illicit drug use killed almost half a million people in 2019, while drug use disorders resulted in 18 million years of healthy life loss, mostly due to opioids. It further noted that serious and lethal illnesses are more common among drug users, particularly those who inject drugs, many of whom are living with HIV and Hepatitis C (as a result of the same use of injection strings). The report noted that over the past years, around 275 million people have used drugs, up by 22 per cent from 2010. By 2030 demographic factors project the number of people using drugs to rise by 11 per cent around the world, and as much as 40 per cent in Africa alone (World Drug Report, 2021).

Despite the proven dangers associated with drug use, the trade and use of drugs persist and, in some contexts, it proliferates. It has continued to hold back economic and social development, while disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable and marginalized in society, and constitutes a fundamental threat to security and stability in some parts of the world (World Drug Report, 2021). The West African region is on the verge of being destroyed by the proliferation of trafficking of illicit drugs as a result of its effects on the overall human security of the Sub-region.

The Linkage Theory

In order to understand the increasing phenomenon of illicit trafficking of drugs in West Africa, the study adopts the linkage theory of analysis. Its essential doctrine is anchored on the continuous sensitivity between domestic and external dynamics that characterise international interactions between states and non-state actors. According to Rosenau (1969:5), linkage denotes “any recurrent sequence of behaviour that originates in one system and is reacted to in another”. This view is upheld by Frankel (1972) who opined that linkage theory evolves from the systems analysis which emphasises the interdependence of variables for the survival of the systems.

The initial and the terminal stages of linkages are described as ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’, differentiated according to their origin within the state or within its external environment and are linked together by three major types of linkages namely; the Penetrative, the Reactive and the Emulative (Adelusi, 2021). The Penetrative Linkage is one in which one polity serves as a participant in the political processes of another and shares the authority to allocate values within the penetrated units. According to Adelusi (2021, this category of linkage approach embraces not only political and military but also economic penetration and could be usefully employed in the analysis of the

denomination of industries and economies by massive foreign investment. On the other side, the Reactive linkage is said to be caused by boundary-crossing reactions without direct foreign participation in the decisions made within the unit while the Emulative linkage is where the response takes essentially the same as the action triggering it off.

Drawing from the holistic appreciation of the interconnectedness of policy actions of governments and reactions from the non-states actors as provided by the linkage theory, we conclude that the theory is best suited for the study. It explained the linkage between governmental policies on illicit drugs in the region and the rising phenomenon of the drugs in the region and also does not deny nor exaggerate the relevance of national boundaries as the main factors that condition reactions of non-state actors in the system.

West Africa and Illicit Drug Trafficking: The Contending Issues

Extant literature on illicit drug trafficking has identified West Africa as a region that offers an ideal geographical choice for the narcotic trade because of several factors and contemporary features that define the region. First, the geography of the region which straddles seventeen (16) countries at the westernmost part of the African continent comprising the countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2003) provides a vast geographical expanse that is difficult to secure as a result of many factors related to the affinity of the various ethnic nationalities that comprised the region. The vast geography maintains historical trade routes that traverse the Sahel belt and Atlantic Oceans through the North African countries to Europe. Similarly, the region boasts of an easy connection to the Southern African countries whose relationship with West Africa is founded on the struggle against the apartheid regime in the region. However, this great potential that makes the region significant as a business destination for global economic actors has been exploited by illicit drug cartels and other international criminal networks to perpetuate their illicit trades/crimes in the region. Consequently, the region has been transformed into a notorious transit route, and logistics hub centre for illicit drug trafficking and other illicit transactions including such as small arms and light weapons (SALWs) and trafficking in humans. Extant literature on illicit drug trafficking have revealed that 95 per cent of drugs that found their way to Europe and South Africa in recent times are smuggled through the borders of West Africa (UNODC, 2008; 2019; 2022; Aning and Pokoo, 2014).

Secondly, the nature and character of the states in West Africa present the ideal opportunities for the drug syndicate to exploit. The majority of the states in the Sub-region are characterized by state fragility syndrome which makes them too weak and unable to perform effectively the functions of government. This view is elaborated by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, Mohammed Ibn Chambers when he explains that the regions fragility syndrome is derived from the inability of the states to project and manage power for the protection of its people, its borders and a chunk of internal territory... the governed lacked the capacity to act as republican partners, watchdogs and a coordinated source of pressure in their relations with the rulers to deliver on both (Chamber, 2007:2). Similarly, Dakwa (2008) added that the states in the region share similar situations characterized by enormous political, economic, social and military vulnerabilities that weak states face. This indicates that the states lack the capacity for inclusive and transparent mobilization and management of resources for the socioeconomic development and security of the region. Unfortunately, the states in the region are not only way down by governance issues but also by huge external debt burden which has constantly placed them at the top of the list of Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs) and rank low on the Global Human Development Index (HDI). Based on these characteristics, it is not surprising that these states are among the most notorious states in the UNODC and Interpol list of high-risk countries for illicit Drug trafficking since 2004.

Thirdly, the territorial feature of countries in West Africa, characterised by a vast expanse of porous borders, presents easy access for the drug trade, thereby facilitating their trafficking in the region. Incidentally, this issue of porous borders is not limited to the West African region, they are linked to other volatile regions traversing the Sahel region to the deserts and borders of North Africa, which makes it difficult for effective border control. For instance, between Nigeria and Niger Republic's international borders, there is about 1,497 km of geographical space, poorly policed by the Nigerian Customs Service and Nigerian Immigration Service (Ojewale, 2021). The consequence of poor border control which undoubtedly has become a serious governance issue in the region has been exploited by international drug trafficking syndicates, most often in collusion with high-ranking staff of agencies of government and political officeholders to perpetuate their illicit trade in the region (Cantens, 2021). This has been supported by the report of the West African Commission on Drugs (WACD) (2014) which observed that drug traffickers have benefited from extensive networks of enablers and fixers in the formal and informal sectors (as a result of the

weak state syndrome), which provide them easy access to airports, ports, storage and transport facilities, communication systems and official documentation to perfect their trade. For instance, in Ghana, a member of parliament was implicated in one of the largest seizures of heroin in New York in 2006 of which the shipment originated from Ghana. However, the Parliamentarian was not subsequently suspended from his position in government as expected despite the investigation (Champion, 2012). In Nigeria, a Deputy Commissioner of Police was arrested for alleged involvement in an international cocaine smuggling cartel (VOA News, 2022).

Fourth is socio-economic issues such as poverty, hunger and unemployment that characterized the region's population. The UNODC (2005) and WADC (2014) reports have shown that the majority of the poor and vulnerable in the region embrace illicit drug trade as an alternative to the lack of jobs and a lucrative means of survival in states where getting a lucrative job is determined by your level of education and contact in high places. Statistics have shown that the proportion of people in West Africa living on less than US\$1.90 a day has been on the increase (UNECA and UN WFP, 2022). The UN WFP report further revealed that the debt burden of countries in the region has also increased in the context of slow economic recovery from COVID-19 thereby, shrinking fiscal space and weakening resource mobilization with more than 25 million people unable to meet their basic food needs (WFP, 20 January 2022).

In the area of unemployment, the Afro Aware Report (25 February 2021) has shown that unemployment in the Sub-region for the fourth quarter of 2020 is 725.1 thousand of the total working population. The report noted that the unemployment rate stood at 17.4 per cent compared to 16.2 per cent in the previous quarter with countries of the region on the top list of countries with high unemployment rates. Niger comes first with 0.3%, Benin and Liberia both occupy third place with 2%, and the Ivory Coast at 2.4% and took fourth place. With 4.1% Guinea-Bissau comes in the fifth position followed by Guinea and Sierra Leone at 4.3%. These are followed by Burkina Faso at 6.1%, Ghana at 6.8%, The Gambia at 8.9%, Mali at 9.8%, Mauritania at 10.32%, Cape Verde at 11.29% and at Senegal 17%. Nigeria shoots up the area by 27.1% (Afro-Aware, 25 February 2021). This is an indication of an unequivocal fall in the labour market in West Africa and the increasing phenomenon of the youth bulge syndrome which is creating opportunities for drug syndicates to recruit their foot soldiers. Thus, facilitating drug trade in the region. These

issues have created serious challenges to the control of illicit drug trafficking in West Africa thereby exacerbating their proliferation in the region.

Fifth, another major issue driving illicit drug trafficking in West Africa is the existing criminal networks and non-state armed groups (NSAGs) that have constituted themselves major facilitators of illicit drug trafficking in West Africa. These include armed bandits, criminals, militant groups, separatist groups, terrorist organizations, and local drug (cannabis) networks. These criminal groups in recent times not only constitute agents of insecurity across the region but also operate a transnational organized criminal network that competes for the state's monopoly control over instruments of coercion, which the international drug syndicates are exploiting to facilitate their illicit trade. They serve as illicit logistics purveyors in the drug trafficking cartel, thereby making it easier for them to smuggle the drugs across and outside the region using illegal routes and conflict zones. The Brookings Institution Report on the West African Drug Trade identified a nexus between the intensification of drugs in West Africa and transnational terrorism (Felbab-Brown, 2010). It further noted that the relationship is highly contingent on local conditions and the terrorist group's skills which are already present in West Africa and linked some of the cocaine smuggling operations in West Africa to Colombia's FARC. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has been included in the list of terrorist groups that have profited on some occasions from North Africa's drug smuggling and West Africa's assorted smuggling enterprises such as in Mali and West Sahara (International Crises Group, 2005; Saleh, 1 September 2008). This is also applicable to Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region and Islamic State in the West African Province (ISWAP), going by the constant use of drugs traced in their various camps.

Sixth, poor or non-implementation of extant regional laws and protocols by states in the region has remained a significant issue driving the intensification of illicit drug trafficking in West Africa. As part of the efforts towards combating and containing the threat of illicit drugs in the region, the ECOWAS adopted various regional instruments. First, countries of the Sub-region are all signatories to the ECOWAS Regional Framework and Action Plan on Combating Drugs and Organized Crime in West Africa adopted in December 2008; and The ECOWAS Operational Plan, elaborated in Abuja on 12-13 May 2009, endorsed at the 36th Ordinary Session of the Heads of States and Government in Abuja (22 June 2009) which provides for concrete budgeted activities aimed at building the ECOWAS Commission's coordination capacities and addressing specific

priorities linked to the drug and crime situation. In addition, these countries further subscribe to the AU Plan of Action on Drugs Control and Crime Prevention (2007-2012) as well as various instruments of the United Nations such as the UN Convention against Corruption, The UN Convention against Transnational Crime and its three supplementary protocols. Specifically, many ECOWAS members such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Gambia have established drug law enforcement legislations and laws as well as agencies for fighting illicit drugs in their various states. However, these efforts have not made the desired impacts. Drug syndicates have rather exploited the implementation deficits to their advantage to perpetuate their nefarious drug trade across the region. The constant rise in the trend of illicit drug trafficking in the Sub-region attests to the issue.

Some of the ECOWAS instruments towards the containment of illicit drugs as cited in the UNODC 2017 and 2018:

- ECOWAS Convention A/P1/7/92 on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters
- ECOWAS Convention A/P1/8/94 on Extradition;
- ECOWAS 1998 Declaration titled: Community Flame Ceremony in the Fight against Drugs;
- Resolution A/RES.2/8/97 relating to Prevention and Control of Drug Abuse in West Africa: Recommendation C/98 on the establishment of a Regional Fund for Financing of Drug Control activities in West Africa;
- Decision A/DEC.8/10/98 on the establishment of a Regional Fund for Financing of Drug Control Activities;
- Decision A/DEC.9/12/99 establishing the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA).
- Protocol on the Establishment of a Regional Criminal Intelligence and Investigation Bureau of 2005;
- ECOWAS 2008 approval of a Regional Framework and Action Plan on Combating Drugs and Organized Crime in West Africa in December 2008;
- Political Declaration 2008 – The Abuja Declaration – and a Regional Action Plan to address the security threats posed by drug trafficking in the sub-region resulting from ECOWAS Ministerial Conference in Praia, Cape Verde;

- The ECOWAS Operational Plan, elaborated in Abuja on 12-13 May 2009, endorsed at the 36th Ordinary Session of the Heads of State and Government in Abuja (22 June, 2009) which provides for concrete, budgeted activities aimed at building the ECOWAS Commission's coordination capacities and at addressing specific priorities linked to the drug and crime situation.
- Establishment of the Commission for Gender and Child Development, Youth/Sports, Civil Society, Employment and Drug Control which in 2012 focused on the development of policies and action plans, including the implementation of concrete programs on drug control.

Table 1. Key Illicit Drug Seizures in West African States 2019-2022

- **Nigeria**

Country	Dates of Seizure	Types of Drug	Weight of Drugs and Worth of Drugs in USD	Persons Arrested and the Arrested Agency	Source of Data
NIGERIA					
Methamphetamine Laboratory Uncovered in a residence of Chris Emeka Nzewi (a drug kingpin) at Lekki Estate, Lagos	Saturday 30 July 2022	Methamphetamine Laboratory and Crystal Methamphetamine	Methamphetamine Laboratory with 258.74 kg of Crystal Methamphetamine and various precursor chemicals used for the production toxic drugs	Chris Emeka Nzewi, a drug kingpin arrested and a Chemist, Sunday Ukah by National Drug Law Enforcement Agency-NDLEA	Premium Times 3 October 2020. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/557534-ndlea-arrests-drug-baron-recovers-n9-billion-worth-of-tramadol-official.html
Uncovered at a Warehouse in a secluded estate in Ikorodu, Lagos State	Sunday 18 September 2022	Cocaine	1,855 Kg (1.8 tons) worth over USD 278,250,000	4 drug barons, a Jamaican and the warehouse manager were arrested from different locations in Lagos by National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA)	The Guardian 20 September 2022. https://guardian.ng/news/ndlea-invades-cocaine-warehouse-seizure-n193-billion-worth-of-crack-in-lagos/

Uncovered in a residential area in Victoria Garden City, Lekki, Lagos State	October 2022	Tramadol	443 Cartons of Tramadol Chloride over 13,451,466 pills of Tramadol 225 mg worth over USD350 Million	The dealer and owner of the mansion, Ugochukwu Chukwukabia by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency-NDLEA	Premium Times 3 October 2002. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/557534-ndlea-arrests-drug-baron-recovers-n9-billion-worth-of-tramadol-official.html .
GUINEA-BISSAU					
Largest drug seizure in the history of Guinea Bissau. Discovered in a false bottom truck loaded with frozen fish known as CARAPAU	9 March 2019	Cocaine	789 Kg	Government of Guinea Bissau in Operation CARAPU led by the Transnational Crime Unit (TCU) and the Judicial Police of Guinea Bissau	UNODC, 15 March 2019. https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2019-03-15-seizure-guinea-bissau.html .
The second largest seizure in Guinea-Bissau in the Cities of Calo and Canchungo	02 September 2019	Cocaine	1,947 Kg	Operation NAVARA led by the Judicial Police of Guinea Bissau in collaboration with the Transnational Crime Unit (TCU) 6 Bissau-Guineans, 3 Colombians and 1 Malian	Reuters 03 September 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bissau-drugs-idUSKCN1V01VU/
Not Specified	November 2021	Cocaine	980 Kg	Guinea Bissau Police. In 2002, 975 kg was reported missing in court by the Police	African News 25 February 2022 https://www.africanews.com/2022/02/25/980kg-of-cocaine-seized-by-police-disappears-in-guinea-bissau/

THE GAMBIA					
Banjul capital of The Gambia. The largest arrest in the Gambia ever	January 2021	Cocaine	2, 900 Kg (2.9 tons) valued at USD88 million stuffed in 118 bags shipped from the Port of Guayaquil in Ecuador through Algeciras in Spain via Maersk Line Shipping	The Gambian Anti-narcotic Authorities. Gambian national Sherif Njie the contact person was arrested	Anadolu Agency, 09 January 2021. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/cocaine-worth-88m-seized-in-gambias-largest-bust/2104256/
CAPE VERDE					
Seizure made at sea on board a fishing boat from Brazil	April 2022	Cocaine	5,000 Kg (5 tons) of Cocaine	Arrest made by Cape Verde Police: 5 Brazilian and 2 Montenegrins	African News 4 April 2022. https://www.africanews.com/2022/04/07/cape-verdean-police-seizes-over-5-tonnes-of-cocaine/
Uncovered at the Port of Praia, the Capital City of Cape Verde on board a Panamanian-Flagged Vessel that left South America for Morocco with a Russian crew	February 2019	Cocaine	9,500 Kg (9.5 tons) of Cocaine	Operation by Cape Verde Police in collaboration with the US Drug Enforcement Agency (US DEA), the US Navy, the Brazilian Federal Police and the National Crime Agency of the United Kingdom	African News April 4 2022. https://www.africanews.com/2022/04/07/cape-verdean-police-seizes-over-5-tonnes-of-cocaine/

. Drugs seized on a vessel called PERPETUO SOCORRO DE ABAETE II	3 rd August 2019	Cocaine	2,256,27 Kg (over 2.2 tons) of Cocaine	A joint operation was carried out by Cape Verde's judicial police in collaboration with the National Coast Guard, Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre-Narcotics (MAOC-N), the Federal Police of Brazil and the National Police of Cape Verde. 5 Brazilians were arrested	UNODC/WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA 2019. https://www.unodc.org/westandcentralafrica/en/2019-08-03-seizure-cabo-verde.html
SENEGAL					
Dam of Goulumbu, National 632 Km South of Tambacounda	April 2019	Cocaine	72 Kg	None	
The second largest shipment since 2007 was hidden inside 15 cars in two Italian-Flagged Ships with a final destination of Europe on a ship from Brazil		Cocaine	1,300 Kg (1.3 tons) of Cocaine		
The seizure was made on board an intercepted fishing boat	6 November 2019	Cocaine	750 Kg of Cocaine	Joint Operation with Spanish Navy	Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 28 April 2022
Drugs hidden in a double-welded metal bottom inside	2019	Cocaine	300kg of Cocaine	Commercial Brigade of Kidira dependent on Regional Directorate of Customs of the South-East attached to	The Point (Banjul) 31 October 202. https://allafrica.com/stories/202210310551.html

a truck in the Dakar Port				Director of Customs Operations. The Driver of the vehicle and his apprentice arrested.	
Uncovered in Vessel La Rosa off the coast of Senegal about 363 Km from the capital, Dakar.	Oct 2021	Cocaine	2,026 Kg over 2 tons of cocaine	5 crew members arrested from the vessel. The operation was carried out by the Special Force Sea Unit of the Armed Forces of Senegal	APNews, 20 October 2021. https://apnews.com/article/africa-arrests-senegal-dakar-west-africa-17273dc36024b3f21b38efcb6bfada13
NIGER					
Confiscated from a warehouse in Niamey, Niger. The largest seizure. The drug was shipped from Lebanon to the Togolese Port of Lome and then transported over 1,000 Km by lorry, destined for Libya	May 2021	Cannabis Resin	17,000 Kg (17 tons) of Cannabis Resin valued at Euro 31 million	Operation Lionfish coordinated by Interpol aimed at disrupting drug trafficking in Africa and the Middle East (taking place in 41 countries)	
TOGO					
Largest seizure Intercepted in Montevideo Port meant for departure to Lome, Capital of Togo. The	December 2019	Cocaine	6,000 Kg (6 tons) of Cocaine valued at USD 1 billion	Intercepted By Uruguay Police	BBC News 28 December 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-50931204

drug was hidden in 4 Soy Flour Containers.					
BENIN					
Cotonou	October 2021	Cocaine	About 2.5 tons of Cocaine		
Hidden in containers used for transporting sugar in Benin	19 August 2021 (Issued date)	Cocaine	150 Kg	10 persons were arrested including employees from Bollorex MSC	African Intelligence 19 August 2021
LIBERIA					
The seizure took place on the outskirts of Monrovia, Liberia's Capital	2022	Cocaine	520 Kg of Cocaine valued at USD 100 million	2 men were arrested: I Guinea-Bissau national and I Lebanese national	

Compiled by the authors with sources from Newspapers, journals, periodicals and institutional reports from both national and international monitors.

From the table above, Mali did not feature because there have been no key seizures of illicit drugs between 2019 and 2022 despite being reported as a major transit route in West Africa. Some reports have stated that it is due to the country's instability and the involvement of extremist groups in the business have made it difficult for the anti-drug agencies to uncover huge drugs that are smuggled into the country. Meanwhile, earlier in 2018, the Mali anti-drug body (Office Central Des Stupefiants or OCS) seized nearly three tons of cannabis hidden in a truck of goods reportedly coming from Ghana via Cote d'Ivoire (Assanvo, 2018). In October 2017, it was reported someone attempting to bring nearly 1.4 Kg of cocaine into the country was arrested at Bamako International Airport. Thus, following a series of similar interceptions at the airport in 2016 and 2017.

The Implications of Drug Trafficking to West Africa

The intensification of illicit drug trade in West Africa attracts severe implications to the stability and security of the region. These implications are identifiable in the areas of health, security and democratic government, socio-economic and development of the region.

Health Implication

The transformation of the West African region into a commercial hub or logistics warehouse for cocaine, heroin, ATS, and other non-pharmaceutical use drugs has deepened the vulnerability of the region's population, particularly the youth to the use of hard drugs. The West African Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (WENDU) report (2019) observed that 31.6 per cent of people between 15 and 44 years use drugs in West Africa. Similarly, the UNODC-World Drug Report (2021) noted the rise in the number of drug users to 275 million users (among 15 to 64 years old) with 36.3 million people of the same age group suffering from drug disorders. The prognosis of the report gave a projection of a 40 per cent increase in the number of drug users and a 43 per cent increase in the population at risk of drug use by 2030 in the majority of the poorer countries where West African countries maintain top positions. More demeaning is that the region cannot boast of existing functional, well-equipped and standard treatment centres to handle the increasing rate of drug dependency cases across the region (WENDU Report, 2017).

The recent report of the Health and Drug Demand Reduction Unit at the UNODC's regional office for West and Central Africa released in 2022 confirmed the incidence when it noted that despite the increase in the number of drug users only 74 out of 1 million people are accessing treatment, and one in 15 women due to the dearth of standard treatment centres in West Africa (HDRU, 2022). It further revealed that the only standard treatment centre in West Africa exists in Dakar, Senegal: the Centre de Prise en Charge Intégrée des Addictions de Dakar (CEPIAD). Put together, these issues raise the question of the commitment of state governments and ECOWAS towards salvaging the health of the region's working population that is deteriorating on the basis of drug addiction/disorder with a severe threat to the stability, security and development of the entire region.

Security and Democratic Governance Implications

Extant studies on insecurity in West Africa have shown that drug trafficking has become a major impediment to peace, stability and development in West Africa. With a strong and rich cartel that

controls resources more than some of the states in the region, the drug cartels have established a foothold in West African countries by exploiting already weak governance systems and loopholes in the legislation. Several huge seizures of drugs and arrests of peddlers in West Africa have revealed a linkage with a range of actors, including politicians, members of the security forces, businessmen and women, the judiciary, clergymen, traditional leaders and the youth. In Ghana a member of the parliament had been implicated in drug smuggling; the largest seizure of heroin in New York in 2006 was made from a shipment originating from Ghana and belonging to a Ghanaian Member of Parliament who was not subsequently suspended from his position in government (Champion, 2012); In Nigeria, a Deputy Commissioner of Police was arrested for alleged involvement in an international cocaine smuggling cartel (VOA News, 2022), and he has been remanded in jail. In addition, it threatens democracy as several threats to the stability in some states in the region have been linked to drug-related problems. Reportedly, the last two coups d'état in Guinea-Bissau have been linked to a fight for the control of the drug trade (Champion, 2012). Similarly, Mali has experienced drug-related violence involving different groups operating in the region, and much of this violence appears to have stemmed from rivalries between different groups involved in the drug trade, allegedly contributing to the instability that led to the UN-backed French military intervention in January 2013 (News 24, March 2011).

Beyond Guinea-Bissau and Northern Mali conflicts in West Africa there is evidence that terrorist groups operating in the Lake Chad basin which comprised Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon are linked with drug trafficking cartels with connections to transnational crime in Europe, Asia and Latin America. While the traffickers supply the terrorists with arms, ammunition and narcotics, the terrorists assist in trafficking their drugs through the conflict zones to their various links in the region (Gaye, 2018). The upsurge in transnational terrorism, insurgency and violent extremism in the region can attest to this issue. Sadly, the states of the region are gradually tilting towards the fragility syndrome or what the UNODC described as 'Shell States': sovereign in name but hollowed out from the inside by the collusion of criminals and corrupt government officials and security services.

Socio-economic and Development Implications

Under the section on issues of illicit drug trafficking in West Africa, we argue that the West African region is characterized by socio-economic problems such as poverty, hunger, low HDI, and

unemployment, which have been partly the major drivers of illicit drug trafficking in the region. This interaction however between the region's growing drug consumption and drug trafficking problems on the one side, and the pre-existing social, economic, and political vulnerabilities, on the other hand, exacerbates the existing socio-economic challenges facing the region with severe consequences. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (1998) and corroborated by the United States Department of Justice (2007), West Africa's economic system is increasingly heading towards "junk economics" with economies addicted to drug-related revenues and skewed toward the unhealthy and unnatural economic imperatives dictated by the illicit economy. The outcome, of which is undermining the overall human security of West Africa's populations and cheapening the lives of the population, as evident in the increased number of school dropouts, increased unemployment, reduced work productivity, poor health, higher rates of human immunodeficiency-HIV and hepatitis B, social dysfunction, higher rate of violence, poverty, homelessness, a lower probability of recovery, poor treatment outcomes, and poor quality of life. The recommendations of various extant reports on drug trade in Africa have pointed out that addressing socio-economic development is key to rebuilding many of the poorer and most vulnerable West African countries that have found themselves in this illicit drug trafficking quagmire.

Conclusion and Way Forward

West Africa remains one of the regions across the globe with geo-strategic importance to illicit drug trafficking across the globe. Its geography, the fragility of the state, poor border security, the complicity of government agents in the drug business, poor implementation of national and regional extant laws against illicit drugs as well as the socio-economic situation of the people contribute to a great extent strengthening drug trafficking in the region and on the other hand, makes it difficult for the national government and even regional and international anti-drug agencies to successfully clamp down on the drug cartels. The implications have been worrisome as the health, security, democratic governance and socioeconomic development of the region are under severe threat. It is in this light that the paper proffers recommendations that if objectively followed could mitigate the rising increase in illicit drug trafficking in West Africa. The recommendations are as follows:

- a. National Governments in West Africa Should agree on a common position to contain the rising phenomenon of illicit drug inflows in the region by addressing the conditions conducive to their rise and spread across the region;
- b. National Governments in the region should actively confront the political and governance challenges that incite corruption within governments, the security services and the judiciary, which drug traffickers exploit;
- c. ECOWAS should ensure commitment of member-states towards the implementation of the existing anti-drug instruments and other related instruments that aimed at containing illicit drug trafficking in the Sub-region.
- d. National Governments of the region should ensure that effective governance capacity is inserted in the government: This will serve as the first step towards socioeconomic development of the region; improve the protection of the vulnerable population who bears the brunt of illicit drug trafficking in the region.
- e. ECOWAS in concert with the African Union should intensify engagements with strategic partners within and outside the region to mobilize resources and assets needed in the joint fight against illicit drug trafficking in the region.
- f. Member states of the region should intensify the research and intelligence required to understand and contain the threats of drug trafficking in West Africa.

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