



West Africa Drugs trade threatens progress

Obasanjo and Annan call on West African states to reform to drug laws and policies

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Dakar, Senegal – In a joint declaration, the West Africa Commission on Drugs concludes that drug trafficking, consumption and production in West Africa undermines institutions, threatens public health and damages development efforts. This is the key finding of the Commission’s report *Not Just in Transit: Drugs, the State and Society in West Africa*.

The scale of the cocaine trade alone through West Africa (estimated at \$1.25 billion) dwarfs the combined state budgets of several countries in the region.

“We call on West African governments to reform drug laws and policies and decriminalize low-level and non-violent drug offences”, Olusegun Obasanjo, Chair of the Commission will say.

“West Africa is no longer just a transit zone for drugs arriving from South America and ending up in Europe but has become a significant zone of consumption and production” Mr Obasanjo will say. “The glaring absence of treatment facilities for drug users fuels the spread of disease and exposes an entire generation, users and non-users alike, to growing public health risks.”

Kofi Annan, who initiated the West Africa Commission on Drugs, will say: “Most governments’ reaction to simply criminalise drug use without thinking about prevention or access to treatment has not just led to overcrowded jails, but also worsened health and social problems”.

“We need to gather the required political will to go after the organized traffickers while reforming outdated laws and policies that no longer fit reality”, Pedro Pires, of the West Africa Commission on Drugs will say. “We call on West African States to collaborate and make common cause against a trade that knows no borders.”

“We need the active support and involvement of civil society and of the international community”, Edem Kodjo, a member of the West Africa Commission on Drugs will say. “South America, where most of the drugs smuggled to West Africa come from, and Europe, which is the main consumer market, must take the lead to deal with both production and consumption at home. We cannot solve this problem alone; governments and civil society have to come together in West Africa to help prevent the drug problem from getting completely out of hand”.

For further information, please go to: www.wacommissionondrugs.org/report or follow the Commission on Twitter at: @WACommission

The launch event will be live streamed from 10.30 Dakar time / 11.30 UK time - watch the event here: <http://www.simtech.sn/live/wacd>

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About the West African Commission on Drugs

Kofi Annan, in consultation with international and regional partners, national governments and civil society organizations, convened the West Africa Commission on Drugs (WACD) in January 2013 to make face to the ever-growing threats posed by drugs in West Africa.

The report is the culmination of one and a half years of engagement by the Commission with national, regional and international parties including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). It is informed by a series of background papers, drafted by leading experts from Africa and beyond.

The Declaration of the West Africa Commission on Drugs – Full text:

West Africa can look forward with optimism. Civil wars have receded, democracy has gained ground and our economies are growing. But a destructive new threat is jeopardizing this progress: with local collusion, international drug cartels are undermining our countries and communities, and devastating lives.

After looking at the evidence, consulting experts from the region and around the world, and visiting some of the most affected countries and communities in West Africa, we the Commissioners have reached a number of conclusions – detailed in this report – about how we should tackle the problems of drug trafficking and consumption.

We have concluded that drug use must be regarded primarily as a public health problem. Drug users need help, not punishment. We believe that the consumption and possession for personal use of drugs should not be criminalised. Experience shows that criminalisation of drug use worsens health and social problems, puts huge pressures on the criminal justice system and incites corruption.

We abhor the traffickers and their accomplices, who must face the full force of the law. But the law should not be applied disproportionately to the poor, the uneducated and the vulnerable, while the powerful and well-connected slip through the enforcement net.

We caution that West Africa must not become a new front line in the failed “war on drugs,” which has neither reduced drug consumption nor put traffickers out of business.

We urge the international community to share the burdens created by the rise in trafficking through West Africa, which neither produces nor consumes most of the drugs that transit the region. Nations whose citizens consume large amounts of illicit drugs must play their part and seek humane ways to reduce demand for those drugs.

We call on political leaders in West Africa to act together to change laws and policies that have not worked. Civil society must be fully engaged as a partner in this effort. Only in this way can we protect our people, as well as our political and judicial institutions, from the harm that illicit drugs can inflict.

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