

Cannabis is illegal in Nigeria but provides a living for families: Study calls for rethink of drug laws

August 29 2023, by Gernot Klantschnig, Ediomu-Ubong Nelson and Janet Ogundairo



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Arriving at the tranquil village health facility in southwestern Nigeria,

we were met by a small gathering of men—young and old—with thinly veiled excitement.

These [rural farmers](#) were visibly intrigued by our research interest in their experiences as proud growers of ewé ọ̀là (leaf of wealth), as they colloquially describe [cannabis](#) in the Yorùbá language. They had consented to meeting at the health facility because of its obscure location.

Cannabis is a heavily criminalized plant in Nigeria. It can get its growers, traders and users long prison sentences. The National Drug Law Enforcement Act prescribes an imprisonment of not less than [15 years](#) for possession and use of cannabis. Yet its very illegality ensures high prices and makes it lucrative to grow.

We are researchers who have studied drugs and drug policy in Nigeria for nearly 20 years. We were aware of the risks to our interviewees and the need to protect them. Our [research project](#) is one of the few to explore the inside views of illicit cannabis farmers and traders in Africa.

These insider views challenge the dominant story that the illicit cultivation and trade of cannabis is unproductive or driven by organized criminals.

Our [main findings](#) show that livelihoods are not only made from legal crops. In fact, it is illicit cannabis, with its illegality premium, that made a difference to our interviewees' lives in Nigeria. Understanding what roles cannabis plays in people's lives can help to inform alternative and possibly better drug policies.

Cannabis livelihoods

Our research is fieldwork-based and has so far included more than 40

interviews and ethnographic observation of individuals involved in illicit cannabis in the region at the [center](#) of cannabis production and trade in Nigeria.

The aim of the research is not to estimate the scale of the cannabis trade or use, as UN and government studies have (often unsuccessfully) done before. Our aim is to try to understand what cannabis means to the ones growing, trading and using it.

We learned from our interviewees that cannabis farming and trade offered socioeconomic benefits. For many, cannabis had become the main source of income, fetching far more than traditional crops, such as cocoa. These benefits, which need to be seen in the context of [widespread poverty](#), unemployment and income precarity, were the main reason they engaged in these activities.

For most rural dwellers cannabis farming served as a means of income generation and diversification to meet [basic needs](#). Many of the farmers we interviewed told us that they used the proceeds of cannabis farming to feed their families, send their children to school, and provide shelter for their households.

For those who worked as transporters and retailers of cannabis in the city, cannabis provided the income to meet their own needs and those of their dependants. The ability to meet basic needs in turn made many of them feel better about themselves. They were also able to help others in need, a gesture that earned them respect and status in their community.

We witnessed this firsthand when we interviewed a farmer whose neighbors had arrived to collect gifts from him in cash or kind. The farmer told us people are expected to share their wealth, and that he had introduced many young men to cannabis farming.

Contrary to popular views, it was not just uneducated and socially deviant individuals who were engaged in cannabis farming or trade. Our interviewees included university graduates, traditional healers, village elders and other community members who otherwise lived largely law-abiding lives.

For example, one of our interviewees was a university graduate who returned to the village to farm cannabis because he saw it as a better livelihood than paid employment. And some farmers switched from farming other cash crops, including cocoa and cassava, to commercial cannabis because it was more lucrative.

While most continued to grow other crops for subsistence or income, cannabis served as their major cash crop. In some cases, the cultivation of cocoa, cassava and other crops was used as a cover to avoid the threat of detection by [police officers](#).

The socioeconomic benefits of cannabis farming and trading did not cancel out its stigma. The cannabis plant, which has long been [associated](#) with deviance and mental disorder among Nigerians, is widely demonized. Growing, trading and using it is subject to social opprobrium.

Our interviewees repeatedly told us about the lack of legitimacy that they experience and how this adversely affects their self-esteem. They also told us about the effects of drug criminalization and police raids on cannabis farms and retail sales outlets (known locally as "bunks").

Sometimes they set aside money to bribe law enforcers. These measures often amounted to significant financial expenditures that could undercut profits or threaten their cannabis livelihoods.

Cannabis legalization?

The group of growers we spoke to wanted the stigma to be lifted and to produce their crop legally.

They knew of cannabis legalization elsewhere and hoped that eventual legalization in Nigeria would make their livelihoods respectable. They also expressed concerns about a potential takeover of the future legal cannabis market by wealthy, urban-based politicians seeking new investment opportunities.

It does not look as if their wishes are likely to materialize soon in Nigeria. Aside from social conservatism, there are [institutional reasons](#) why legalization or any other drug policy change is resisted by Nigerian politicians, officials and law enforcers. For one thing, some law enforcers have made their own livelihoods from policing the illegal cannabis market.

Still, the farmers we spoke to made it clear they would not give up farming what they considered as their "leaf of wealth." For them, it is not a drug and they are not criminals.

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Provided by The Conversation

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