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Stirred and shaken

Rank, ritual and reputation

Social and economic changes have increased drug use in the Sahel, Africa, causing health and crime problems but there may be lessons for everyone involved in drug work.



It would seem that when the drought struck, the structurally adjusted countries¹ in the Sahel² area of Africa already had more than their share of health and social problems. The last thing the overstretched government services could do with is substance misuse problems.

Yet according to aid workers and health professionals this is precisely what is happening, confirming the argument of the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) that the problems associated with drug abuse are not confined to the wealthy western countries (UNDCP 1997).

The theory that drugs are a symptom of decadence has long been discarded. In fact the argument has been inverted, now it is the poorest countries, and the poorest parts of rich countries which suffer maximum damage from drug-related problems.

This is certainly a view confirmed by health care officials at the general

hospital in Niger's second city, Zinder. The dramatic increase in heart disease, diabetes, and nervous disorders, which the health care facilities are unable to cope with, is associated directly with the spread of drug use.

An army officer stationed in rebel country in the north of Niger attributed the violence of the so-called bandits to a life of indolence and drug misuse in the bush. He describes a typical cycle of acquisitive crime feeding an anti-social lifestyle, which in turn removes the inhibitions to committing new crimes.

There is also a social cost affecting poorer households. One development worker for Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), a German development organisation, explained how drug use has a direct impact on the most vulnerable sections – women and children. Their diet and health has often deteriorated because a rising proportion of household income is spent on drugs.

Economic transformation

This is another reflection of the ongoing economic transformation, and the redistribution of resources within communities and households. The marginalisation of those forms of labour traditionally performed by women has tilted the balance of economic power further towards men. Most income opportunities, be they paid employment in the formal sector or market trading are dominated by men.

Large sections of the economy, which was once governed by relations of reciprocity and barter have now become cash based. These developments, often abetted by direct interventions from abroad, have increased the economic dependence of women and children on male breadwinners.

Yet, it is the men who are most vulnerable to chronic substance abuse. Though women are also liable to use, cases of women with chronic or problematic use are rare. This does not suggest that there is a gender



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predisposition to abuse, but relates to the social environment and the rigid segregation of men and women.

Both men and women are drug users, but very rarely do they indulge together, and men simply have greater opportunity. It is when men come together after work, or during encounters when travelling that drugs are most typically used. Two features stand out:

1. The distribution of drugs is invested with meaning, marking social status and hierarchy, and used as an idiom of hospitality, generosity and trust.
2. The preparation and consumption of drugs is highly ritualised

Social use

Drugs, and especially heavy drug use, occurs in the bush rather than in town. This has nothing to do with legal status and the likelihood of detection, but with the preserve of the domestic sphere for family use.

Much has been written about the distinction between private and public spheres in Muslim architecture. In addition to cultural values, there is the fact of high population density and the overcrowding in urban homes. There often isn't any space for men to gather, prepare the drug and use it. More importantly still, drug use at home may anger the women who witness household resources diverted to the consumption of luxuries.

It is different in the bush, where men journeying or herding their animals stop for the night. Strangers will come together at nightfall to share a fire, talk and take drugs. In one instance two groups of travellers were observed keeping their livestock separate, before coming together to take drugs.

This also happens in farmsteads, where the family usually eats in shifts – first the mother with her children, then the man, before gathering at a fireplace at a distance from the dwelling, where the neighbourhood men, elder women, and the children of the house may gather.

Again drugs flow freely among the elders, and remnants are passed to the children with a thought only to the economic value. With no sense of wrongdoing, there are no moral sanctions on drug use. In Niger



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public health education on substance misuse is rudimentary, and the health consequences have yet to be identified in the lore of folk medicine.

In the meantime the use of substances is celebrated as an achievement of prosperity, identified with leisure time, and tokens of friendship. They may even be symbolic for post-modern concerns with globalisation and modernity.

Costs of abuse

Health officials and governments concerned with the conservation of foreign exchange are searching for ways to contain the costs of abuse. A magistrate in Agadez, Niger's northernmost town suggested strict licensing for traders, but admitted to the difficulties of controlling any system of licit outlets. Moreover, any such restrictions would only play into the hands of the rebel groups among sections of the Tuareg.

Customs officers in the capital Niamey had discussed ways of imposing an effective import ban, but abandoned any realistic hope of success in view of Niger's long and porous borders. Not only are supply side interventions beset by practical difficulties, they may well contravene

a raft of international agreements, and violate conventions on free trade. The drugs in question are prime commodities of the international trading network, namely sugar and tea.

Social ritual

Ahmed and his four assistants have been riding since the break of dawn, when they decide to make camp just south of Aderbissinat. They have the worst of the sand storms behind them, their takings hidden among the saddles and bags, and only one more day of travel ahead. Known as Boubu, they are the Arabised descendents of West African agricultural workers.

They work as the transporters, taking grain from the market towns in the south, to the string of towns on the edge of the desert. Agadez and Aderbissinat were once surrounded by forest, but are gradually becoming engulfed by sand. The area's growing food deficit, is covered by imports from the south that are paid for by the trans-Sahara trade and the uranium mine at Arlit.

The five men running the mule train are close to the end of their journey and in high spirits. Sitting around the fire, Ahmed unwraps his blue kettle, fills it with water from the goatskin, adds a handful of gunpowder tea, and three or four small glasses of sugar. The kettle is set on the embers of the fire, and left to bubble.

Five glasses are lined up, and after a while the kettle is taken off the fire, held high above a glass and tea is poured with expert precision. When

each glass is full, the kettle is returned to the fire, the lid flipped open and the contents of the glasses poured back to boil and bubble some more over the fire.

When Ahmed is satisfied of its quality the tea is served in strict order of welcome and hierarchy. Each recipient gives thanks and drinks the sticky brew as hot as his gullet can handle. It is surprisingly delicious and, drunk underneath the spectacular beauty of the desert sky at night, a pleasure that can easily turn into habit.

The impact of the brew must be seen within the particular setting where consumption occurs. First the pharmacological context – the diet available to most people of the Sahel is low in sugar content. Islam, the prevailing religion, prohibits alcohol, tobacco is frowned upon, and coffee expensive and rare. Measured against such levels of abstinence, the impact of ultra-sweet caffeine is extraordinary.

This experience of momentary delight is then placed next to a situation of extreme economic insecurity, a very narrow opportunity structure and chronic political instability, where hopes are set to founder and where ambitions are frustrated. Most of all, the ceremony around the kettle creates a fellowship

and a magic that provides a higher meaning and a comfort. They need it, not knowing where the next job is coming from.

Now that the road between Zinder and Agadez is complete, courtesy of development assistance by the European Commission, trucks are plying between the two towns, providing deadly competition for the mule trains.

Men who face problems of overwhelming complexity are liable to forego all forward planning and live for the magic of the moment.

Substance, not drugs

The use of tea in the Sahel throws an interesting light on a long-standing debate in the drugs field. Is the cause of problematic drug use in the substance, in the addictive personality, or in the position of the user within their social structure?

The attribution of drug problems to something in the genetic or psychological makeup of the individual – the alcoholic gene or addictive personality – is implicit in some treatments on offer. For the purpose of policy formulation it supplies few answers other than to expand treatment facilities and outreach. It will be interesting to note if we find health workers in Niger and other

countries record cases of addiction or compulsive behaviour.

A more substance-focused position is taken by the UKADCU, which is aimed at 'the drugs that do the greatest harm'. The fear of heroin and cocaine as substances of particular power is widely held among the populace at large, as shown by recent MORI polls. Since few have had any direct experience of these substances, it may well be that such public fears are merely playing back the alarmist messages governments have been sending out over decades.

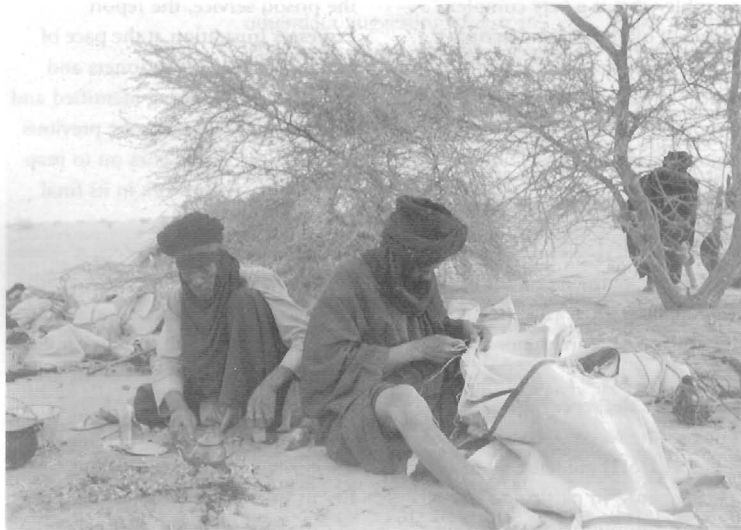
What the material from Niger suggests is that even substances as anodyne as tea and sugar can cause household ruin and become contributing factors in a spiral of acquisitive crime. This suggests that social pathologies, and the definition of misuse, cannot be attributed to the pharmacological properties of a substance.

This is a potentially controversial position as it suggests the possibility of non-problematic, recreational heroin and cocaine use. Hence the argument is extended to include factors of social structure.

It seems that the policy line of the Home Office has abandoned the search for root causes by distorting the correlation of drug use and crime into a causal relationship. Eliminating drugs as a prime cause of crime is presented as a policy of social regeneration – making neighbourhoods safer and better – as well as a measure in protection of property.

Social marginalisation, which manifests itself in drug use, is turned on its head and presented as a cause of the structural problems relating to inequality and opportunity structure.

Interestingly, the consumption of tea and sugar in the Sahel are seen as rooted in Islamic culture, associated with the Tuareg and Arabic tribes, but consumption now crosses ethnic lines. A symbol of modern prosperity, of leisure and relaxation, sugary tea is a drug around which strangers from many tribes gather in harmony. Like Islam, tea is a universal, a unifying constant in a sandy sea of cultural diversity. It is to be seen whether these constructive, culture building attributes are outweighed by the social, health and economic costs of tea use ■



1. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank prescribe Structural Adjustment Programmes to developing countries in need of financial assistance. Typically these programmes seek to balance budgets and encourage export led growth. In Africa they are associated with massive job losses and the erosion of public services, including health and education.

2. The fieldwork for this report was conducted in Niger and Algeria, but similar conditions obtain for the belt of countries from Senegal to Sudan, characterised by a resurgent Islam, structural adjustment and desertification.