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The Business Aspect of Drug Trade

Analyzing the economic effects of drug trafficking: Mexico and Guinea-Bissau

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Abstract

This capstone provides an overview of the economic and social effects of drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau and Mexico. Both countries are transit countries, which are affected by the rapid flow of drugs. Cocaine is currently being transported from Colombia or Venezuela to West Africa in order to satisfy the European market. Current research provides an interesting guideline of how to analyze drug trafficking but in economic terms. Short and long term benefits and effects are tangible not only in the society but also in the balance of trade and foreign direct investment.

Many times governments don't have the economic power to fulfill its role. Drug cartels assume this position and with their profits they provide social services, especially in rural areas. Many times these cartels provide jobs and economic stability where they have their operations.

Can drug trafficking create a positive spillover? This will be analyzed in the next sections.

Globalization of Drug Trade

Openness of markets ensures that “producers will find a way to deliver all things insatiably desired, whether good or bad.”¹ For example, drugs from Colombia can be found in either Slovakia or Thailand, distance is no longer a problem.

Over the years, the process of globalization ensures that “West African drug traders can penetrate markets in almost every continent, and have created an important position in a business distinguished by soaring competition and high profits”.² Distance is no longer a problem and the profitability margin in this industry attracts suppliers from all over the world. Substitutes are readily available, where price discrimination can easily be applied.

Trade and open markets have promoted the integration of financial markets and thus, provided belligerent groups with more opportunities to launder money and invest in legal

¹ Traub, James. "Africa's Drug Problem" *New York Times Magazine*, 2010: 42.

² Ellis, Stephen. "West Africa's International Drug Trade" *African Affairs*, 2009: 171-196.

businesses.³ As trade and human mobility in the form of migration and multipurpose traveling keeps growing, so will the volume of illegal trade.

Detection becomes more difficult; as countries sign agreements between each other, cooperation and alliances among criminal organization also becomes a popular strategy. Criminal networks are created and they support each other when it's convenient. A terrorist group might offer protection to drug traffickers in exchange for drugs and money.

The United Nations estimates that more than 100 countries are involved in some way in illicit drug trafficking and around \$1.5 trillion in illicit money is being raised in the world.⁴ The explosion of an illicit economy, intertwined with the social and political consequences adds challenges to our safety and efforts of helping developing countries. Besides poverty, hunger and illiteracy, now drug trafficking and drug dependence erodes the effectiveness of aid programs.

According to Forbes Magazine, in 2003 Canada exported between \$4 billion an \$7 billion of cannabis to the U.S. making it one of the leading exports to its neighbor country, even more valuable than wheat or timber. Clearly the southern border is not the only entry door; developed countries are also involved in producing and distributing. Diaspora, globalization, travel and migration create a world of borderless countries where the market is more powerful than any other forces.

Drug cartels have obtained the power to undermine the governments and the popular trust in public officials. As security measures change, transnational crime operations adapt to the new

³ Bartilow, Horace, and Kihong Eom. *Free traders and drug smugglers: the effects of trade openness on states ability to combat drug trafficking*. Miami: University of Miami, 2009.

⁴ Killebrew. *Crime and Terrorism*. Washington D.C. : Center for a New American Security.

dynamic. Today's drug platforms "quickly shift locales, jumping across borders with the greatest of ease".⁵ Civil servants are the common links between drug cartels and other drug trafficking networks, their insufficient wages and low social standing and prestige of being a bureaucrat in many countries, facilitates the collaboration between them and illegal groups.

State failure, the lack of government accountability and affective involvement has turned West Africa into a safe heaven for drug traffickers. Failing and failed states pose enormous risks not only to international security but also to inhabitants of these countries. Former President George W. Bush declared that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones". Interesting enough, fragile states "only play a minor role when it comes to money laundering, human trafficking or environmental crime".⁶

Weak states in West Africa serve as hubs where organized criminals can easily distribute cocaine or other drugs to Europe. Cartels look for states where they can bribe government officials, border security is nonexistent and their geographical location allows them to access multiple markets.

⁵ Gootenberg, Paul. *Talking about the flow: drugs, borders, and the discourse of drug control*. University of Minnesota, 2009

⁶ Patick, Stewart. "The Brutal Truth: failed states are mainly a threat to their own inhabitants. We should help them anyway." *Foreign Policy*, 2011: 55-57.

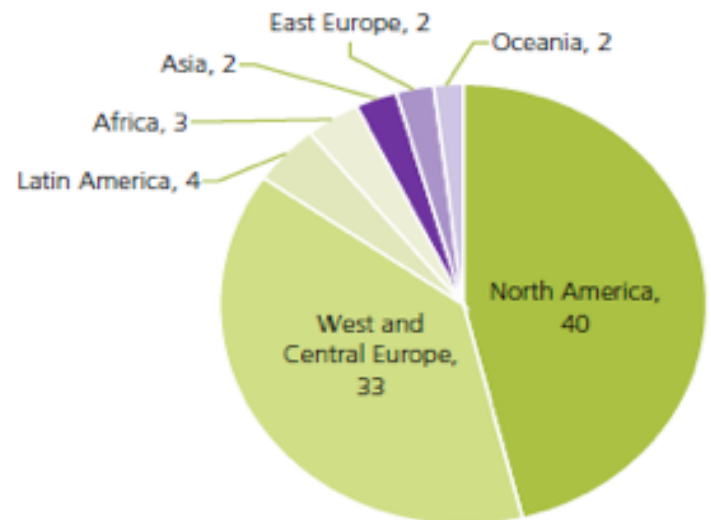
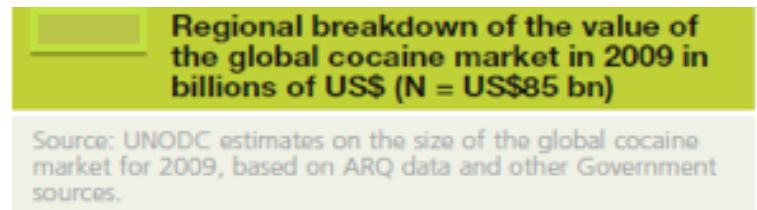
Economic benefits of Drug Trafficking

In the drug business, trafficking or trade is the most lucrative stage, far more than production or processing. INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimate that the drugs trade is a \$400 billion per year illicit industry. Just the cocaine market is more than \$80 billion worth.

Drug cartels or other criminal networks organize their activities within a business-oriented framework. Some refer to the trafficking of marijuana, cocaine and heroin as “among the most dynamic of Africa’s non traditional exports and re-exports”.⁷ It has become one of the main sources for capital formation in West Africa and other poor countries in other areas of the world.

African criminal networks (ACNs) have certain characteristics:⁸

- They are made of small, compartmentalized cells of between two and ten members.
- They make deals and then disperse, regrouping only at a later date; highly mobile.
- Are always willing and able to bribe government officials.
- Try to refrain from the use of violence to avoid attracting attention from law enforcement agencies.



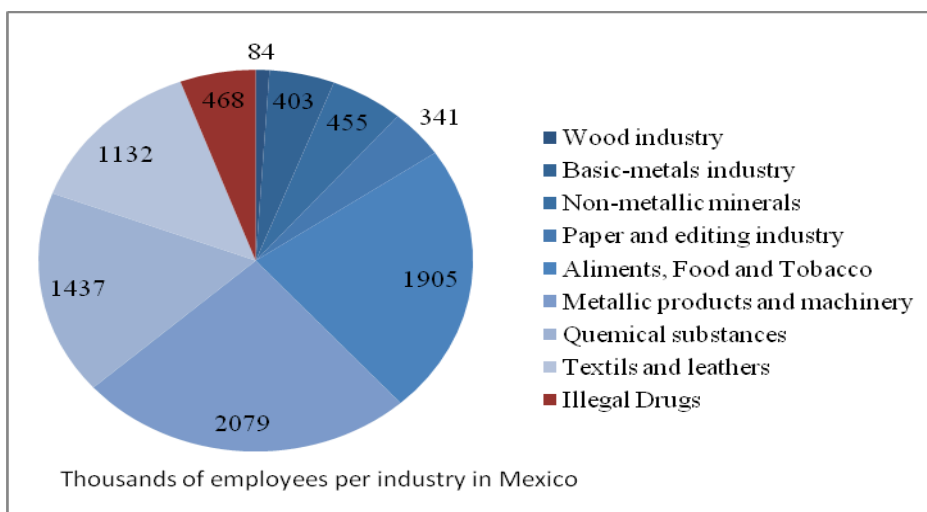
⁷ Barnstein, Henry Ghanas drug economy: some preliminary data *Review of African Political Economy* 199913-32

⁸ Muazu, Umar 2006 *African Criminal Network* The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency Lagos

According to a study by Levitt and Venkatesh, it is estimated that earnings for drug gang leaders are between \$50,000 and \$130,000 per year.⁹ Members on the second level of the hierarchy earned approximately \$12,000 and street dealers \$2500 also annually. Being a member requires minimal job skills, but they must be motivated to move up in the hierarchy of the gang, which in turn represents a strong incentive to stay even if the wages are low.

Africa is geographically strategic because it is located between the sources of supply in South America and the markets in Europe. In the mid-1990s Colombian traffickers purchased a kilo of Bolivian or Peruvian cocaine for \$650 to \$1,000. After processing and transporting it to the wholesale market, its price had already climbed to between \$13,000 and \$40,000 per kilo.¹⁰

In 2007, 635 kilograms were seized along the coasts of Guinea-Bissau. According to UNODC, the seizure was worth around \$11 million at wholesale prices in West Africa, and \$26 million in Spain, which was equivalent to “20 percent of all international aid



Source: Legal manufacture workers were reported by Aregional 2007 as part of the national economic census. Number of employees dedicated to drug production corresponds to the official agricultural data reported by the Mexican Office of the General

⁹ Levitt S.D.; Venkatesh S.A. An economic analysis of a drug selling gang's finances *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 207:55-789

¹⁰ Affinnih, Yahya Revisiting Sub-Saharan African Countries Drug Problems: Health, Social, Economic Costs and Drug control Policy *Substance & Misuse* CUNY 2002:265-290

given to Guinea-Bissau in 2005, 14 percent of the country's exports and 280 percent of all net incomes from foreign investments in the country".¹¹

In the last couple of years West Africa has become the middleman between Latin America and Europe. However, Mexico has been in this position for a longer time. Americans spend around \$6.6 billion each year on drugs.¹² In 2006, \$206 million were seized just in cash from the drug dealer Zhenli Yen Gon, equivalent "to the whole budget of Mexican General Attorney Office for three months".¹³ Drug trafficking is the 5th largest employer in the country, hiring around 468,000 people each year.¹⁴

Besides being a transit country, production in Mexico has also increased. In the mid 1970's there were around "50,000 narco-entrepreneur farmers. By 1998 estimates indicate that around 300,000 peasants were employed in drug production".¹⁵ Marijuana is six times more profitable than vanilla and sixteen times more profitable than almonds.¹⁶ Salaries are better, and smugglers offer to pay a fee if rain or other natural conditions damage the merchandise. In some rural areas of the country, drug production might be the only source of employment.

In Sinaloa, for example, a less diversified economy prevents farmers from this region to compete in international markets. Arencillas found that in some communities "drug traffic

¹¹ UNDP Human Development index 2006

¹² Drug Enforcement Administration "The price and purity of illicit drugs:1981 through the second quarter of 2003",2003

¹³ CDHCU "Presupuesto de Egresos de la Federacion para el Ejercicio Fiscal 2007" *Diario oficial de la Federacion*,2006

¹⁴ Rios Viridiana; Kevin Sabet. Evaluating the economic impact of drug traffic in Mexico. Mimeo
<http://www.gov.harvard.edu/people/viridiana-rios-contreras> Versión 2008.

¹⁵ Andreas, Peter "The political economy of narco-corruption in Mexico" *Curent History* April1998

¹⁶ Resa Nestares, Carlos "El valor de las exportaciones mexicanas de drogas ilegales" Universidad Autonoma de Madrid 2003

activities have improved the precarious economic conditions by opening the possibility of production, that is why drug organizations are considered heroes”.¹⁷

According to an interview “even Mexican local authorities have acknowledged that almost 30 percent of the population makes a living out of the drug business”¹⁸ Small and isolated rural areas many times lack vital services such as running water, electricity and drainage. The drug industry has allowed peasants to have the resources to build this infrastructure since the local government is unable to provide these services.

Drug trafficking generates capital flows that generate economic activity. Mario Arango interviewed smugglers and concluded that the investment portfolio consisted of real estate (around 45 percent), cattle (about 20 percent) and other forms of legal commerce (15 percent).¹⁹ Mexican traffickers invest in almost everything, from churches to mansions. Even peasants invest their profit in cattle, animals or save to cross the border in the future.

¹⁷ Marin, Alvaro "Cambios en el financiamiento de las labores del campo Mexicano" *Revista Antropología Experimental* 2002

¹⁸ Astorga, Luis "Arqueología del Narcotráfico" *Nexos* July 1995

¹⁹ Lee, Rensselaer "The white labyrinth. Cocaine and political Power" 1989

Estimates of gross profits made by cocaine traffickers (billion US\$), by region, 2009		
Sources: UNODC estimates based on ARQ data and other Government or scientific sources.		
	In billion US\$	In % of GDP
South America, Central America, Caribbean		
local market	3	0.1%
export to North America*	6	0.2%
export to Europe**	9	0.3%
Subtotal South America, Central America, Caribbean	18	0.6%
North America (USA, Mexico, Canada)	34	0.2%
West and Central Europe (EU-25 and EFTA)	23	0.1%
West and Central Africa (local demand and export to Europe)	0.8	0.2%
Other	8	0.04%
Total trafficking profits	84***	0.1%

* Trafficking from producing areas in the Andean region to Mexico.

** All trafficking to transit countries (US\$4.9 bn) and from transit countries to Europe (US\$6.1 bn) of which 70% (US\$4.3bn) is assumed to be generated by trafficking groups from South America and the Caribbean; gross profits for trafficking to Europe are higher as prices in Spain (the main entry point into Europe) are much higher than prices in Mexico (the main entry point into North America).

*** The difference between the total size of the global cocaine market (US\$85 bn) and gross trafficking profits (US\$84 bn) is income of farmers; farmers are estimated to earn less than US\$1 bn.

Narco-power and Narco-corruption: West Africa

For more than a decade, West Africa has been a transit zone for drugs. Latin American drug traders have been benefiting from West Africa's competitive advantage and have profited from the "well established networks that provide them with safe houses, banking, storage space and other facilities in return for a suitable financial arrangement for more than a decade."²⁰¹

In 1934, Nigerian colonial authorities experimented with coca cultivation in various regions of the country.²² By the 1950's local farmers were arrested for growing cannabis and

²⁰ Mazzitelli, Antonio. "Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: the additional challenge." *International Affairs*, 2007: 1075-6.

²¹ Ellis, Stephen. "West Africa's International Drug Trade ." *African Affairs*, 2009: 171-196.

²² National Archives . correspondance concerning coca cultivation, Ibadan.

marijuana.²³ Even Lebanese smugglers used West Africa as early as 1952 to send heroine to the United States.²⁴ However, by 1960's once the Beatle-mania had been launched, rock-n-roll and the hippy culture took root inducing a radical change in the behavior of the youth, and consequently the markets for illicit drugs boomed in America as well as in Europe. As a result, West Africa emerged as a major transit zone. Since then, according to a Nigerian federal official, "Nigerian travelers are often subjected to rigorous search each time they travel abroad".²⁵

The social, political and economic structure of West African countries has been based on the exploitation of natural resources. Cocaine exports created a type of "Dutch Disease" in the region because other forms of commercial activity became less attractive than drug trafficking due to the fact that it generates more money and employment than any other legal business or activity in the economy. Due to the degradation of civil rights and liberties in countries within West Africa, states have become "rentier states" because the availability of easy rents, in this case derived from drug trafficking, "erodes governance due to the absence of accountability or any incentives to combat corruption."²⁶ Cocaine serves as a proxy natural resource that "creates dependence at the expense of licit industries."²⁷

²³ National Archives. "Indian hemp: circular from Acting Permanent Secretary ." Ministry of local government, Western Region, Ibadan, 1954.

²⁴ US National Archives and Records Administration. "Smuggling Narcotics." general records of foreign service posts: records of the consulate general, Maryland.

²⁵ "The cost of war against smuggling." *New Nigerian*, 1979.

²⁶ Bybee, Adhley-Louise. "The Narco-Curse in West Africa." *New Voices in Public Policy*, 2009.

²⁷ Ibid.

Tentative estimates of the profits reaped by West African groups out of cocaine trafficking, 2009

Source: UNODC estimates based on ARQ and IDS data.

	Gross profits	Proportion of (assumed) West- African involvement	West African cocaine related trafficking income
Profits made by importing cocaine from South America to West Africa for domestic use	US\$ 0.2 bn	10%	US\$ 0.02 bn
Profits made by selling cocaine to West African customers	US\$ 0.4 bn	100%	US\$ 0.4 bn
Profits made in shipping cocaine to countries in West and Central Europe and selling it to mid-level drug dealers	US\$ 9.2 bn	13.4%*33%	US\$ 0.4 bn
Subtotal			≈ US\$ 0.8 bn
Retail profits made in West and Central Europe	US\$ 20 bn	5% - 10%	US\$ 1 bn – US\$ 2 bn
Total			US\$ 1.8 – US\$ 2.8 bn

Due to its history and lack of development, West Africa provides the perfect political and social environment for drug traffickers to operate. The permissive environment in these countries has induced some Latin American cocaine traders to relocate to West Africa, the same way multinational companies' move from region to region according to changing comparative advantages.

Why West Africa?

According to African development indicators, in Guinea-Bissau it takes 211 days to register a property, 167 days to get construction permits and as a result makes the country number 176 on ease of doing business.

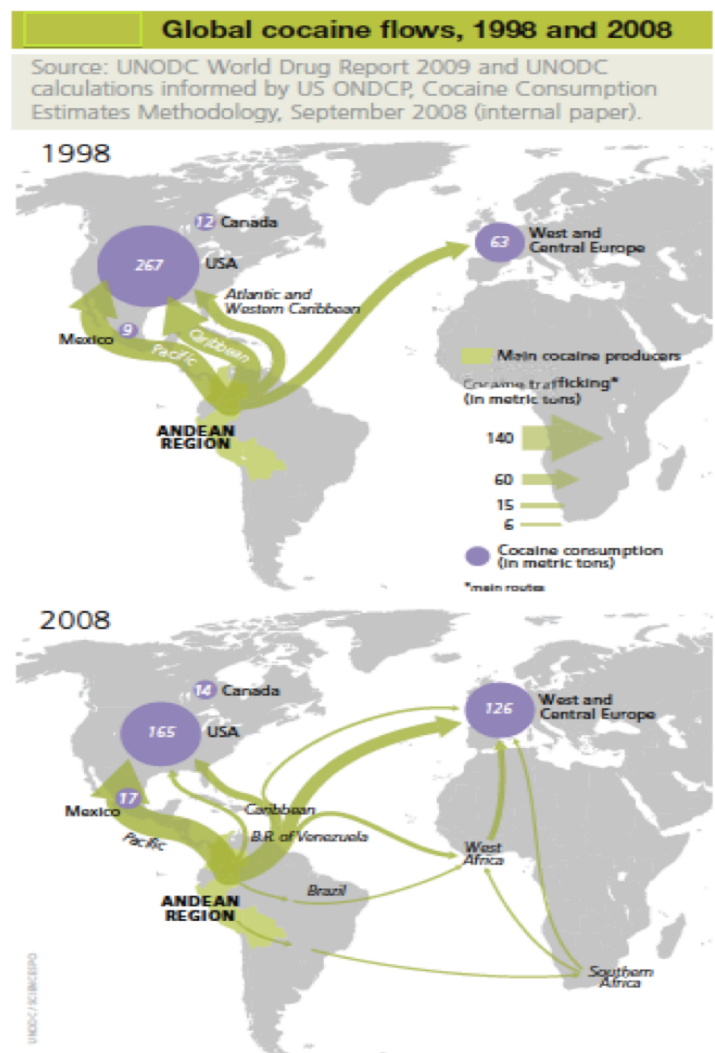
The value of exports in 2010 was \$197.6 million while that of imports, \$405.1.

There's no surprise why the presence of drug cartels has increased overwhelming. It's easier for them to establish a business infrastructure than for a private firm

Latin American drug cartels have targeted failed states along Africa's coconut or gold coast. By 1986 cocaine from South America was being seized in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria. West Africa is a region already plagued by conflict, poverty, corruption, lack of health and social services. Drug trafficking has

weakened the role of the state, perverted into a drug dependent economy and changed the dynamics of society

There are several reasons why West Africa is one of the principal zones connecting Latin America and Europe. There are few economic transactions that can generate the same amount of



money that cocaine trafficking does. Luxury cars and hacienda style houses in some countries in West Africa are a testimony to many locals that crime has its benefits. Narco-corruption “aims to change the nature of the government by creating covert ties, dependencies and even bonds of loyalty through subterranean social support network”.²⁸ Even for the more educated population, money laundering “may appear to be high profit and low risk alternative to the toil and uncertainty of promoting local development”.²⁹ Illicit revenues were estimated at \$2 billion in West Africa, which shows the financial power that this activity produces and the consequent crowding out of licit economic activities.³⁰

The shortage of funds and skilled professionals in the security and legal areas leaves the police, the military and other members of the government vulnerable to corruption. This vulnerability allows “drug traffickers to integrate themselves with the community and blend into it through well placed bribes and graft”.³¹ According to UNODC in Nigeria and Senegal over 40% of the population paid bribes in 2007, in order to obtain services from the government. Five of the countries in West Africa: Mali, Niger, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone have the lowest levels of human development in the world.

As was to be expected in the contest of very low income and difficult working conditions these countries have very weak criminal justice systems. In many them, police are in charge of

²⁸ Knowles, Gordon. "Threat Analysis: Organized crime and narco-terrorism in northern mexico." *Military Review*, 2008: 73-84.

²⁹ United Nations office on Drugs and Crime. *Drug Trafficking as a Security threat in West Africa*. Annual Report, United Nations, 2008.

³⁰ De Andres, Amado Philip. *West Africa under Attack*. Discussion paper 16, UNISCI, 2008.

³¹ Knowles, Gordon. "Threat Analysis: Organized crime and narco-terrorism in northern mexico." *Military Review*, 2008: 73-84.

border patrol, but not investigating narcotic cases. Ironically, Guinea-Bissau has one of the best police per capita ratios: 284 law enforcement officials per 100,000 citizens.³² Yet, there are only 60 agents for drug control and the department has only one car that usually has no fuel. Luncinda Barbosa Ahukharie, Director of the Judicial Police stated in an interview:

“We have nothing here. We are working with one car and most of our agents had no salary for four months. Of course they are corrupt- they need to feed their families! How can we possibly compete with drug traffickers?”

The UNODC, estimates that the annual European cocaine demand is between 135 and 145 tons. An increasing demand from Europe and the euro’s strength against the dollar adds to an even greater appeal to the region. Economic policies that were implemented in West Africa in the 1980’s promoted the creation of a ‘shadow state’ in which “rulers draw authority from their abilities to control markets and their material rewards”.³³ In this case, drug cartels have not only corrupted the entire system, but they have undermined the role of the State, they have captured it and could possibly fuel future civil wars.³⁴

The environment has changed; children grow up surrounded by drug traffickers, drug addicts and are witnesses of how illicit trade the life of many- in a positive or negative way.

³² United Nations office on Drugs and Crime. *Drug Trafficking as a Security threat in West Africa*. Annual Report, United Nations, 2008.

³³ Reno, William. *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

³⁴ United Nations office on Drugs and Crime. *Drug Trafficking as a Security threat in West Africa*. Annual Report, United Nations, 2008.

Besides corruption, the dynamic of society has changed, where the state can no longer define what's good or bad for their society.

With the example of Guinea-Bissau, we see how drugs have transformed a failed state into a narco-state. The cost of bribing local authorities is relatively low; there is no attempt at sea interdiction or detection by naval or airport authorities. Virtually no infrastructure has been built since Guinea-Bissau's independence from Portugal in 1974. Coups and attempted coups are very common and the military works closely with drug cartels.

This country has a geography, which lays out like a smuggler's dream; 350 km of unpatrolled coastline and an archipelago of 90 islands.³⁵ Weak institutions are a common denominator in this region, turning "police officers, soldiers and politicians into business partners for the drug dealers".³⁶ Drug trafficking is not only the largest export business in Guinea-Bissau, but it is virtually the only one. Foreign Direct Investment suddenly increased by more than eight times, from less than two million in 2004 to fourteen million in 2009.³⁷

Some experts believe that the next plan of action for Latin American cartels is to start large-scale cocaine production in West Africa.³⁸ Penetration of dirty money has affected politics, in both West Africa and Latin America. Importers of both regions are affected when drug money

³⁵ CIA World Factbook. *Entry for Guinea-Bissau*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pu.html#Geo>. (accessed October 2011)

³⁶ United Nations office on Drugs and Crime. *Drug Trafficking as a Security threat in West Africa*. Annual Report, United Nations, 2008.

³⁷ World Bank. *Indicators: Guinea-Bissau*. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD> (accessed October 2011).

³⁸ Ellis, Stephen. "West Africa's International Drug Trade ." *African Affairs*, 2009: 171-196.

is laundered through the imports of goods, and sold at a lower price compared to local competition. For many, Latin American traffickers have transformed West Africa into their own paradise where everything can easily be bought off and the rule of law is inexistent. Activity between Latin American drug cartels and terrorist groups in the Middle East and West Africa has been increasing, and Latin America can easily become a financial hub where terrorist groups can finance their activities through drugs and money laundering.

Policy Recommendations

Economists of such different ideological bent as Milton Friedman and Lester Thurow considered that the artificial divide of good and bad drugs generated a radical critique of the perverse price theory behind drug policy prohibition.³⁹ They were not wrong. Drug trafficking “breeds criminality, exacerbates criminal and political violence and fuels armed groups.”⁴⁰ Any type of transnational crime affects the security, growth and development of a country. Without regulation and control, drug trafficking not only promotes violence and corruption, but also creates other health problems besides addiction within consumers.

One policy suggestion to end transnational issue, is the end of drug prohibition altogether. Drug legalization would “deprive terrorist organizations of an important source of

³⁹ Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998.

⁴⁰ Youngers, Coletta. "The Collateral Damage of the U.S. War on Drug: Conclusions and Recommendations." In *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America*, by Eileen Rosin and Coletta Youngers. 39-375.

revenue and would free up thousands of personnel and billions of dollars for waging the war against terrorism”.⁴¹ Without this, drug trafficking will continue to be an extremely profitable activity, able to pay farmers far more than any other crop and violence, corruption and trafficking of weapons will keep increasing. Drugs such as marijuana and cocaine need to be regulated, because before these drugs are distributed they are altered with other harmful products that make them even more dangerous

More than a military focused war, governments in Latin America should target the ‘war on drugs’ as a health issue. Military involvement always creates human rights conflicts, and what is needed is a type of pole that can be trusted by citizens in their countries.

Supply side policies promoted and financed by the United States have not decreased the violence in Mexico or decreased cocaine production in Colombia but quite the opposite. The International Narcotics Control Board in 2007 released a report indicating that West Africa accounts for almost 90% of all Africans arrested for drug trafficking. The U.S. should stop their military aid to these regions and address economic factors. There’s nothing as real and tangible as how much money there is in their bank account. Deteriorating economic standards, unemployment and low wages for public officials makes it easier for drug traffickers and terrorists to infiltrate every hierarchical level of the government.

⁴¹ Galen, Ted. *Bad Neighbor Policy*. New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

The war on drugs has created a space for terrorist groups and drug cartels to share and merge their networks. Now, it is common to see Colombians on the streets of Guinea-Bissau, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda members in South America and African drug gangs in South East Asia. Narco-terrorism reflects the latest stage in the evolution of 21st century global organized crime. According to Colonel Robert Killebrew, the indisputable convergence of terrorism and international drug trafficking is playing out before our very eyes in Afghanistan and in other places around the world. Criminals have the same or better firepower than the states. Violent drug related crimes plague too many communities and terrorize growing numbers of innocent citizens because “we have been reluctant to treat drug organizations as terrorists and terrorist organizations as drug traffickers”⁴² sacrificing effectiveness in combating narco-terrorism.

It should be an embarrassment for all of us to see how illicit trade has benefited the poor which many times are forgotten by their governments. Drug cartels many times provide basic services and provide social benefits to people that reside in rural areas. How can we tell poor farmers that drug trade is illegal when most of the time this is their only source of income? Investment in Guinea-Bissau has increased due to drug trade and provides salaries to public servants. Drug trade creates a fictional economy, one day many enjoy the profits but the other cartels can disappear and move to another country and region. A very short term oriented business. The short-term benefits overshadow the long-term effects such as violence.

Africa’s production and export of drugs will keep expanding to the rest of Africa and Asia. China is an attractive market due to its economic boom and growing demand for narcotics.

⁴² Marshall, Donnie. "Terrorism: the legal implications of the response to september 11." *Narco-Terrorism: The new discovery of an old connection*. Cornell International Law Journal, 2001.

Should we just continue to rely on the military and continue to be observe how drug trade destroys the natural construct of an economy?

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