



**Centre for Research
and Information on
Substance Abuse**

**COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE 5th BIENNIAL NATIONAL
SYMPOSIUM ON DRUGS AND DRUG POLICY IN NIGERIA ORGANISED BY
THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND INFORMATION ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE
(CRISA), HELD AT REIZ CONTINENTAL HOTEL, ABUJA, NIGERIA ON 27-28
OCTOBER 2021**

PREAMBLE

The Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse (CRISA) in collaboration with the EU/UNODC project -- “Response to Drugs and Related Organised Crime in Nigeria” -- held its 5th National Symposium on Drugs and Drug Policy in Nigeria on the theme ‘Substance Use, Addictive Behaviours and Covid-19’ at Reiz Continental Hotel, Abuja, Nigeria, on 27th and 28th October 2021.

The symposium drew attendance from researchers, government officials, policy experts, members of multilateral organisations, non-governmental organisations, substance use prevention and treatment experts, government parastatals as well as students.

Professor Ibrahim Abdu Wakawa, a consultant psychiatrist at the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital, Borno State, delivered the keynote address on harm reduction. Rt Hon. Onofiok Luke, Chairman House of Representatives Committee on Judiciary, chaired the opening session; the Chairman/Chief Executive of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, Brigadier-General Mohammed Buba Marwa was Special Guest of Honour. Also participating were representatives of the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

In his opening remarks, Rt Hon. Onofiok Luke noted that emerging figures of people using psychoactive drugs, estimated at over 14.3 million Nigerians, aged between 15 and 64 years was scary. He remarked that the development had deleterious implications for the economy, productivity, the gross domestic product (GDP), crime, law enforcement and governance. This situation he said should raise concerns among policy makers and parents whose children and citizens are equally vulnerable.

He called on government to be more involved in harm reduction interventions and the provision and expansion of the capacities of existing treatment facilities, which according to current research have

resulted in more positive outcomes compared to the deleterious effects of incarceration in correctional facilities.

CRISA's Executive Director, Professor Isidore Obot, in his welcome address expressed concern over the spike in the abuse of both licit and illicit use of drugs during the pandemic. Substances mostly abused during the period included heroin, stimulants, opioids, alcohol and the benzodiazepines. The lockdown period, he noted, had also witnessed drug related mortality, harmful use of alcohol (in terms of frequency, quantity and type) according to available data from other countries, with little known about its effects in Nigeria.

Speaking as Special Guest of Honour at the symposium, Gen. Marwa observed that substance use and abuse around the world including Nigeria is on the increase in terms of the proportion of the world's population. Findings from the National Drug Use Survey (2018) conducted by the UNODC revealed that 14.4% or 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15–64 years had used a psychoactive substance in the past year for non-medical purposes, meaning that one in seven persons had used some substances other than alcohol and tobacco. More worrisome is the finding that among every four drug users in Nigeria, one is a woman. The above findings of the survey by UNODC give a troubling portrait of drug abuse in Nigeria and we can no longer live in denial that Nigeria has a thriving illicit drug culture.

He noted that as part of efforts to stem the tide of illicit substance use, the Agency has proposed the construction of six standard rehabilitation centres across the six geo-political zones in the country beginning from next year. He said three of the centres would start next year as already proposed in the 2022 budget. According to him, "There is no doubt that Substance use impacts negatively on the individual, family and the society in general. Substance abuse affects the physical, social and psychological levels of the user and family members. Evidence has shown that COVID-19 infections are higher or more common with people diagnosed with Substance Use Disorders (SUD) hence addiction care must be reinforced in order to avoid complications of SUD and COVID-19. Reducing the demand for illicit drugs in the society depends to a large extent on the successful treatment of existing drug users. This fact accounts for the shift in global drug policy viz the treatment of drug problems as a public health issue. Consequently, Nigeria has operationalised the Standard Practice and Policy Guidelines, a treatment and rehabilitation document developed in conjunction with UNODC."

During the symposium, scientific and plenary sessions were held, and these focused on key areas, including the situation of drug use and policy in Nigeria, COVID-19 and substance use,

non-medical use of prescription and over-the-counter medications in Nigeria, gambling and other behavioural addictions, state of substance use research in Nigeria, epidemiology of substance use, prevention and treatment of substance use, qualitative research into substance use in Nigeria; and emerging issues in alcohol and other drug use among other drug related issues. One workshop was held on mixed methods research. Over 90 research papers many of them linking the COVID-19 lockdowns and increased drug use, misuse and abuse were presented.

OBSERVATIONS

The following were some of the key observations made by participants during the presentations:

- I. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on treatment and prevention services for drug use during the period was negative as the pandemic severely hampered services.
- II. There has been a growing shift in policies on cannabis towards decriminalisation of use and medical cannabis and Nigeria is being left behind in this trend.
- III. The lack of treatment centres and the shortage of bed-spaces in available treatment centres, makes it difficult for people who have problems with substance use to access treatment and in other cases, the high cost of treatment further makes treatment unaffordable, for those in dire need.
- IV. The cannabis policy landscape in Nigeria is politically charged due to opposing narratives that seek to define the terms of the debate.
- V. The social consequences of drug use in Nigeria are evident in the disruption of family lives, legal problems and criminality.
- VI. Despite the significance of harm reduction as a critical intervention pillar in drug response strategy, it is often neglected in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the 2015 to 2020 Nigerian National Drug Control Masterplan subsumed harm reduction under the Drug Demand Reduction shadows.
- VII. Some harm reduction strategies, for example; Needle and Syringe Programme and Opioid Substitution Therapy, are often misunderstood and regarded as means of encouraging drug users to continue their drug use behavior even by enlightened members of the society.

- VIII. Opioids are the second most commonly used psychoactive substances in Nigeria and the intravenous route remains one of the most common routes of administration; the risk of transmitting blood-borne viruses and other infections, as well as the risk of overdose are rife.
- IX. The use of methamphetamines and other forms of synthetic psychoactive drugs is an emerging problem.
- X. A large disparity exists in sentences imposed for similar drug-related offences by the same and different judges.

Recommendations

- I. While the effort to disrupt the illicit supply of substances has remained a strong focus of Nigerian drug control policy, providing support that encourages rehabilitation and psychosocial reintegration, reduced dependence on drug use and demand/harm reduction among problem drug users should be emphasized.
- II. The need for an amendment to the national drug law that reflects modern realities cannot be overstated as supply reduction alone is insufficient in tackling the problem of drug use.
- III. Evidence-based prevention services should be supported and encouraged to reduce the age of initiation into substance use.
- IV. Research focusing on methamphetamines and other synthetic substances should be carried out to ascertain the effects of these substances.
- V. The development of the protocol and guidelines for the implementation of medically assisted treatment should be expedited.
- VI. A national alcohol control policy should be implemented in line with WHO recommendations to curtail the negative effects of alcohol use, which have been widely publicised in the country.
- VII. There should be proper funding for healthcare interventions, to make access to treatment easy and affordable.
- VIII. A uniform methodology for imposing sentences on drugs related offences, using uniform and more humane sentencing guidelines should be encouraged among judges.
- IX. There is urgent need to combat stigma through interventions that seek to improve gender relations, living conditions and access to treatment services for marginalised women who use drugs.



Professor Isidore S. Obot

Symposium Chair/Executive Director, CRISA



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Symposium LOC Secretary