



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

**COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE 14TH BIENNIAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON “DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND SOCIETY IN AFRICA” ORGANISED BY THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH
AND INFORMATION ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE (CRISA), HELD AT THE CONFERENCE HALL OF
DENIS HOTEL, ABUJA, NIGERIA, 26 – 27 OCTOBER 2022**

The Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse (CRISA) launched what has become a long-standing series of biennial international conferences on “Drugs, Alcohol and Society in Africa” in 1991. The 14th conference in the series was held in Abuja, Nigeria from 26–27 October 2022 on the theme: Towards the Reform of Drug Law and Policy in Africa: Research, Practice and Advocacy Considerations. The conference was organised in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and received support from Open Society Foundations/Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and African Union Commission.

More than 100 participants attended the conference in person from several countries in Africa and beyond, including Ghana, Cote D’Ivoire, Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Gambia, South Africa, USA, UK and Nigeria; and others participated virtually from different parts of the World. In his welcome address, the Executive Director of CRISA, Professor Isidore Obot observed that CRISA over the last 30 years has achieved most of its core objectives, including carrying out and supporting research on different aspects of licit and illicit drug use and other lifestyle and health issues. Professor Obot further noted that CRISA has collaborated with both governmental and non-governmental organisations over the years and the collaboration with the ECOWAS Commission for the 2022 international conference has made it possible for the West Africa Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (WENDU) focal points in ten countries in the region to be in attendance at the conference

Goodwill messages were delivered by representatives of the following organizations and agencies: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), The African Union Commission, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Federal Ministry of Health, National Agency for the Control of AIDS and the Chairman/Chief Executive of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). The conference was declared open by the Commissioner for Human Development and Social Affairs, Professor Fatou Sow Sarr, represented by Mr Daniel Amankwaah, who in his speech

emphasised the support of ECOWAS in the reform of drug policies in West African countries and the importance of the WENDU project.

Dr Ethan Nadelmann, founder and former Executive Director of Drug Policy Alliance, New York, USA, delivered the keynote address on “Drug Policy Lessons from around the world”. Dr Nadelmann emphasised the need to move away from the prohibitive and repressive approach to drugs related issues. He further emphasised the need to situate drug policy in an overall public health perspective while drawing lessons from the failure of alcohol prohibition in the United States.

The NDLEA Chairman, Brigadier Gen. Buba Marwa (Rtd), who was the special guest at the opening of the conference, congratulated CRISA for being a partner in progress and further wished the participants a successful outing during the conference while promising that very soon the National Assembly will pass into law the amended NDLEA Act.

There were seven panel discussion sessions and four scientific sessions during which more than thirty papers were presented. Very insightful and evidence-based presentations were focussed on the following areas of research and policy: Epidemiology of Substance Use, prevention and treatment of substance use disorders, gender and demographic issues in drugs, West African drug reports: Country situation, health and social effects of substance use, behavioural addiction/substance use and mental health, harm reduction and alcohol related issues, current issues in drug use research, the VIIV healthcare project on harm reduction, drug policy: what works, public health perspective to tobacco harm reduction, the AU response to drugs, the UNODC response to drugs and other related organised crime project , and the Cannabis Africana research project.

In the various sessions at the conference participants presented evidence on the growing prevalence of problematic use of various licit and illicit substances, including among special populations in Africa; the personal and social costs associated with drug use; and the need to adapt and implement comprehensive, integrated and evidence-based policies to address the drug problem in African countries guided by public health, human rights, social welfare and security concerns.

Below are some specific observations made in the discussions:

- There is need for policy reforms to ensure a shift away from the enforcement and prohibition approach to drug related challenges as this has been shown to lead to no significant impact on the availability and use of illicit drugs.
- Many countries are yet to roll out a full-scale implementation of harm reduction practices which is very important in keeping people who use drugs alive and functional.
- The lack of national alcohol policies in many countries is unhelpful in facing the challenges posed by the alcohol industry especially in exposing children and young people to alcohol use.
- While the legal regulation of cannabis will be beneficial, there is the need for a supportive legal framework and policy environment to minimise harms associated with cannabis use especially among young people.
- Stigmatisation and the burden of harms associated with the use of drugs keep people who use drugs away from accessing important services needed for their full functioning.
- The implementation of the Needle and Syringe Programme and scale up in some countries have mitigated the need for sharing of used needles among people who inject drugs, however, there is the need to roll out services to meet the needs of all PWUDs.
- Stable funding for research and drug demand reduction activities is lacking in all countries in the region. This is hampering the work of civil society and research organisations especially in working with local communities that need services.

The following recommendations were made by presenters and in the discussions that followed every session:

1. Drug policy reforms should be research driven and based on evidence, as prohibitive policies have not led to any significant reduction in the use of drugs.
2. African countries must demonstrate political commitment, including taking the necessary steps to reform their drug policies in order to benefit the health and welfare of their citizens. Governments should provide a standardised policy framework to guide the establishment and practices of drug treatment and rehabilitation facilities across countries, with a focus on the human rights of those who use these services. Drug laws, legal regulations, and practices (where they exist) should be amended to reflect current realities and international best practices that prioritise public health approaches.
3. Countries are encouraged to implement the comprehensive harm reduction package and also ensure that access to services is guaranteed by reducing barriers that make it difficult for people who use drugs to access services

4. There is the need for the implementation of wide ranging prevention programmes targeted at young people to delay the initiation of substance use while also helping them cope with other developmental challenges.
5. Stakeholders, especially healthcare professionals who frequently come in contact with people who use drugs should be sensitised on evidence-based practices with the aim of reducing stigma against people who use drugs.
6. Funding for research and drug demand reduction activities is very important in creating evidence for programme implementation and should therefore be encouraged and supported.
7. There is the need for a coherent approach to alcohol policy, alcohol marketing/advertisement and licensing to ensure that young people are protected against harms associated with alcohol use.

Participants expressed appreciation to CRISA, ECOWAS and other partners for creating the opportunity to discuss drug problems in Africa and make recommendations for the reform of drug policies in African countries.



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