



# Drugs and Development: Exploring Nuances Based on the Accounts of Nigerian Retail Dealers

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

The production, distribution, and consumption of drugs has long been seen as a threat to social and economic development. On the other hand, conditions of unemployment and poverty foster expansion of illegal drug markets. In this study, I offer a nuanced view of the drugs/development connection where poverty and unemployment incentivise participation in the illegal drug market as a response to the failure of state-led development. The study is based on 31 in-depth interviews with male retail drug dealers in Nigeria. Findings revealed various ways the participants framed retail drug trade in connection to development. This includes, drug dealing as a pathway to social and economic mobility, drug dealing as way of mitigating youth crime, drug dealing as a response to failed development promises, and drug dealing as a means of capital formation for legitimate investment. The complex relationship between drugs and development revealed in these accounts troubles the narrow emphasis on counter-narcotics that dominate Nigerian drug policies. They indicate a need to view illegal drug trade, especially low-level distribution, as grassroots dissent from exclusionary development. Social policies designed to provide skills and opportunities for legitimate, gainful employment for at-risk youths offer scope for curbing involvement in retail drug trade.

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## KEYWORDS:

drugs; development; drug  
policy; Nigeria; retail drug  
market

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Nelson, E-UE. 2024. Drugs  
and Development: Exploring  
Nuances Based on the  
Accounts of Nigerian Retail  
Dealers. *Journal of Illicit  
Economies and Development*,  
5(3): pp. 47–59. DOI: [https://  
doi.org/10.31389/jied.180](https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.180)

The relationship between drugs and development has emerged as a major focus of drug policy debates in recent years. However, perspectives on the nature of the relationship varies. On one hand exists an orthodoxy wherein drugs are seen as ‘symbols of economic decline, crisis, and even state collapse’ (Carrier & Klantschnig 2016, p. 400). In his seminal work, Singer (2008) described how drugs impose serious constraints on the ability of developing countries to achieve improvements across the full range of accepted development goals. He explained the relationship between drugs and development in terms of the ways drug trade creates barriers to development through poor productivity, threat to youths, health problems, corruption, and violence (see also UNODC 1994).

To Singer’s list, Carrier and Klantschnig (2016) have added environmental degradation associated with drug production and cultivation activities, which has adverse effects on population health, and portend long-term risks for natural resource conservation. Similarly, a report by United Nations Development Programme has described how the activities of criminal groups in drug producing and transit countries foster corruption, negatively impacts legitimate economic activities, fuel conflict and insecurity, and undermine democratic governance (UNDP 2015; see also Cockayne & Williams 2009). In 2003, the International Narcotics Control Board reported that the expansion of cannabis cultivation in East Africa is threatening food security in parts of the continent (INCB 2003). In Sudan, for example, the report stated that ‘there has been a shift from cultivation of food crops to the cultivation of cannabis, resulting in a concomitant widespread shortage of food’ (INCB 2003, p. 41).

On the other hand, the link between drugs and development has been shown to be more complex than is commonly portrayed. The production and supply of drugs, though harmful to individuals and societies, are known to provide livelihoods and economic growth in many developing countries, in some cases protecting local communities from economic difficulties (Buxton 2015; Carrier & Klantschnig 2016). In East Africa, for example, khat provides better income than legal crops such as coffee, contributing to improved food security and off-farm investments (Carrier 2014; Gebissa 2004). In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria, cannabis production provides income for cocoa farmers adversely impacted by declining terms of trade (Klantschnig 2014; Laudati 2014). Further, enforcement-based approaches to drug control, rationalised by the negative effects of drugs, disproportionately affects marginalised groups and disadvantaged communities including local farmers, low-level drug offenders (e.g., those selling small quantities of drugs), racial and ethnic minorities, and indigenous people (UNDP 2015). In this context, Singer (2008) noted that drug production and trade as a source of income for the poor in the absence of alternative employment creates a paradox for policy. It has been argued that resolving this paradox requires more than conventional, alternative development approaches that are encased within prevailing counter-narcotic policies (Buxton 2015).

A key highlight of current debate on drugs and development is the call to situate drug policies within development priorities, especially the sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Bewley-Taylor 2017). In Africa, two inter-locking processes create a need to heed the call to put development at the centre of drug policy. On one hand, conditions of poverty and unemployment have long been seen as major contributors to increase in drug production, distribution and use on the continent (Carrier & Klantschnig 2012). On the other hand, the emergence of the continent as the focus of international counter-narcotics efforts has made blaming drugs for the problems plaguing the continent from poverty to insecurity, a reflex (Cockayne & Williams 2009), in the process diverting attention away from wider drivers of social problems, such as political corruption and mismanagement of the economy.

Scholars have questioned this view, highlighting the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the link between drugs and development, including how drug production and distribution contributes to improvement in the living conditions of local communities in different parts of the continent (Bloomer 2009; Carrier & Klantschnig 2016). Disputing the view that illicit drug markets develop in deprived spaces that have been bypassed by modern development, recent historical studies have shown how the failure of state-led development has created conditions that launch contemporary global illicit drug circuits (Bradford 2019; Britto 2020;

Gootenberg & Davalos 2018). These studies link the rise of global illicit economies to the cold war modernisation era, suggesting an intimate and integral connection between illegal and legal economies (Gootenberg 2020).

Although it is well known that conditions of poverty and unemployment contribute to the growth of illegal drug markets, especially in the developing world, there is still a lot to be learned about how illegal drug trade serves as a mean of social and economic advancement for the poor in the context of the failure of development promises, and processes driven by the state. In other words, there exists a need for studies that explore illegal drug markets as a product of dissent from exclusionary development, 'a creative response to modernisation on its own terms' (Britto 2020, p. 218). Apart from nuancing the debate on the drugs and development equation, the findings could also have utility for domestic drug policy making. This study aims to contribute to this debate based on qualitative research on retail drug market in Nigeria.

## THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

The rise of organised crime in Nigeria has been explained in terms of 'a mix of incentives and pressures for criminal activity, the availability of opportunities, and the resources or capacity to exploit these opportunities' (Williams 2014, p. 255). This explanation also applies to retail trade in illegal drugs specifically with conditions of poverty and unemployment creating both incentives and opportunities for the trade, while a large population of youths provide the resources for their exploitation. Nigeria's developmental failure is remarkable in the light of its assets and potentials (Lewis 2006). The abundant human and natural resource endowment of the country has not translated to meaningful improvement in the living conditions of citizens. A history of resource mismanagement has resulted in a 'strange paradox', where Nigeria is 'the only nation on earth among the top ten oil producing countries classified as poor' (Ochela 2008).

Poverty in Nigeria has been attributed to widespread corruption, including embezzlement of public funds by state officials (Agbiboa 2012; Igiebor 2019), resulting in limited resources for funding infrastructural development and provision of basic amenities such as education and healthcare. Successive governments have professed aspirations for development (Lewis 2006), but have failed to make right on such promises. As the infamous 'change agenda' of the Muhammadu Buhari-led All Progressive Congress (APC) government has demonstrated promising development, often vaguely defined, is a strategy by which Nigerian politicians secure votes and does not, necessarily, reflect a political commitment (Albin-Lackey 2007; Okolo & Karimo 2017).

Nigeria, an ethnic mosaic, is the prize of politics, and the spoils are distributed by patrons to their political and tribal clients. In this context, the public good has routinely been subjected to parochial and narrow interests, whether personal, familial, or tribal (Ebbe 1999; Reno 2000). Williams (2014) has written that the Nigerian state, under successive regimes, is little more than a series of glorified criminal enterprises where state officials are highly corrupt and engage in various criminal activities for personal enrichment. Over a decade of civilian government has not succeeded in creating a state that is legitimate and responsive to the needs of its citizens. The involvement of state officials in criminal activities makes it difficult for ordinary citizens to observe the law. This creates a climate of impunity that undermines the rule of law and encourages corrupt practices. This culture also fosters illegal activities in the parallel economy, including: hoarding, exchange of goods above official price, smuggling, illegal currency deals, bribery, and illicit drug trade. Ordinary citizens view state institutions and representatives (e.g., law enforcement agents) as 'enemies to be evaded, cheated and defeated if possible but never as partners in development' (Abittey 1999, p. 217).

As poverty intensifies and a youth bulge contributes to high levels of unemployment, the migration to illegal activities becomes self-perpetuating (Williams 2014). A 2008 US report emphasised that 'abysmal economic conditions for the vast majority of Nigerians contribute significantly to the continuation and expansion of drug trafficking, widespread corruption, and other criminal acts in Nigeria' (see also Ellis 2009). Under these conditions, many young people have turned to retail drug trade, which serves an expanding domestic consumer market estimated at 14.4% of the population aged 15–64 years (amounting to 14.3 million people) (UNODC 2019).

The Nigerian state has long relied on punitive measures to curb production, distribution, and consumption of illegal drugs (Obot 2004). These measures have not reduced the supply of drugs partly because they do not address the fundamental, social, and economic conditions underpinning drug market expansion. Conversely, an environment marked by widespread corruption is conducive for illegal activities. Law enforcement systems in Nigeria are weak, corrupt, inefficient, and officials often participate in criminal activities (Nelson 2023a). In a situation where endemic corruption and impunity intersects with widespread poverty and limited opportunities for a young and rapidly increasing population, illegal activities (such as illegal drug trade) become attractive as an alternative means of livelihood.

## STUDY AIMS

This study explores a recursive relationship between illegal drug trade and development, where conditions of under-development (characterised by poverty and unemployment) encourage participation in drug trade as a means of income generation and livelihood. It draws from 31 in-depth interviews conducted with male retail drug dealers in a Nigerian city, to explore how illegal drug trade is framed in relation to the failure of state-led development. This shows how opportunities for social and economic improvement provided by the drug trade, including through capital formation for investment in the legal economy, problematises the legal/illegal dichotomy and foreground more nuanced approaches to illegal drug control.

## METHODS AND DATA

This study was originally designed as a qualitative exploration of retail drug distribution, including entry and exit from retail drug markets, encounters with law enforcement officers, drug market violence, and navigational strategies. These findings have been reported in previous publications (Nelson & Tasha 2022; Nelson 2023a; Nelson 2023b). I did not set out to explore the relationship between development and illegal drug trade, but as is often the case in qualitative research, these issues began to emerge during interviews and probes were used to elicit more information. In this article, I draw on this segment of the data to explore how the failure of state-led development creates a context where drug trade as dissent from exclusionary development thrives. A major limitation of the study is that it is based on a small dataset because the research was not originally designed to explore these issues, and data was obtained through questions added subsequently. Future studies that focus on the links between development and illegal drug trade could elicit more data to enable a better understanding of the phenomenon.

## THE STUDY SETTING

The study reported here was carried out in Uyo, the largest urban centre in Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. The city occupies a land area of 362 square kilometres and has an estimated population of 1,143,689 million people (World Bank 2020). Urban expansion and population growth have outstripped infrastructural development and provision of social amenities such as healthcare, education, housing, electricity, and water supply. Available estimate indicates that 51% of the population live in extreme poverty (NBS 2010), which means living on less than one US dollar per day. This translates into significant social and material deprivation, including inability to meet basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, housing) for a vast majority of the population. A large segment of the population earns income from the informal economy, where state regulation is weak and the boundary between what is legal and illegal is permeable. Illegal drug dealing, which serves as a means of livelihood for many young people, thrives in this context (Nelson & Tasha 2022).

## PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

The participants ( $n = 31$ ) were recruited through snowball sampling from different drug networks in the city, to make the sample more diverse. The inclusion criterion was being an active commercially oriented retail dealer (which means currently retailing illegal drugs to consumers for commercial profit at the time of interview). They were aged 21 to 45 years, with a mean age of 35 years. Of the 31 participants, 14 were unemployed, 6 were students, and 11 were engaged in other economic activities (e.g., carpentry, vehicle repairs). They sold

different types of drugs including cocaine, heroin, and cannabis. On average, they had been selling drugs for 16.5 years (range 3–27). Based on self-reports, the participants earned up to 50,000 naira (N50,000/US\$97.09) monthly from retailing drugs. This is a high monthly income level, especially when compared to the minimum monthly wage for formal sector employees in Nigeria (N30,000/US\$65.11). It is also higher than earnings from other sources of income available for unskilled workers, including in the informal economy. This explains why retail drug trade is attractive for socially disadvantaged youths, and why better alternatives in the legal economy are hard to find (Nelson 2023b).

## INTERVIEWS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection was through in-depth, individual interviews using a topic guide. Some of the topics covered included: drug market violence, policing, and factors that influenced entry into the trade, which is the focus of the present analysis. Interviews were recorded with a digital device, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Data coding and analysis was based on the framework approach (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor 2010). This approach was adopted because it allows different aspects of a phenomenon (in this case, the development-related factors that influence retail drug trade) to be captured. After reading the transcripts repeatedly to gain an overview of the data, a 'coding index' was developed from initial themes and sub-themes identified in the data (e.g., development issues, crime, livelihoods). This was applied to code the data through line by line reading of each transcript. Coding was followed by the development of thematic charts to capture interpretations of the themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes were further developed by working backwards and forwards across each transcript to make sense of the data, clarify information, and select relevant quotes.

## ETHICS

Ethical principles were followed. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants. This step was taken to reduce potential risks (e.g., police arrest), and to make the participants feel comfortable and safe. All participants were given adequate information about the study. They were also informed that they could decline to answer any question that made them uncomfortable or unsafe. All participants gave verbal consent before interviews were conducted, including the audio-recording of their responses. They were gifted N500 (US\$1.20) for participation, and assured of data anonymity and researcher's confidentiality. The protocol was approved by the ethics research committee of the Ministry of Health, Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria (MH/PRS/101/Vol. IV/269).

## RESULTS

Participants accounts revealed different framings of illegal drug trade in relation to the failure of state-led development in Nigeria. These include socioeconomic conditions, involvement in criminal activities, failed promises of the state to provide development dividends (e.g., employment opportunities for youth), and capital formation for legitimate investments. These issues highlight a recursive relationship between illegal drug trade and development, where development failures incentivise drug trade while the latter serves as a means for realisation of development dividends for socially disadvantaged youths. I analyse these themes in detail throughout the following sections.

### DRUG SELLING AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

The major reason most of the participants presented for their decision to start selling illegal drugs was the improvement of their socioeconomic conditions. In Nigeria, decades of economic mismanagement have given rise to poverty and unemployment. These conditions have been shown to drive many Nigerian youths into criminal activities, including illegal drugs trade, in search for means of livelihood (Nelson 2023b). The participants in this study described how conditions of poverty and privation, which affects large segments of the Nigerian populace, incentivised drug selling as a means of income generation for survival. Daniel (age 36, associated with heroin, cocaine, and cannabis), who had been selling drugs for over 17 years, stated,

The reason I started selling is because of how condition is. Things are very difficult in this country. You cannot tell someone give me this or that all the time. You have to feign for yourself. So, I decided to do this business to make money so I can take care of myself.

In this example, Daniel decided to sell drugs to avoid being dependent on others due to the prevailing economic situation in Nigeria. Like other participants, Daniel did not want to overburden his relatives, who were equally struggling to survive ('My people are not doing so well. Why should I wait for them?'). Daniel's, and other similar, account echo findings from a previous study, which revealed that the decision to enter illegal drug trade was part of a youthful search for social and economic autonomy (Nelson 2023b). Drug selling was not seen as a pathway to affluence, but as a means of earning income to meet basic needs. This included being able to provide for oneself and close relations (e.g., immediate family). Ubon (age 38, associated with cannabis and cocaine), who had been selling illegal drugs for 10 years, stated that he became the bread-winner for his family after his father's death. In the absence of better alternatives, he took up drug selling to be able to fulfil this onerous responsibility. In his words:

It was when my father passed on so early that I had to do something since I was the oldest child of my mother. I was now the one to take care of the family, and I had nothing I was doing. That is why I started selling drugs.

As the quote indicates, Ubon 'had to do something' since the responsibility of providing for the family had fallen on him. But having no legal means of fulfilling this responsibility ('I had nothing doing'), he turned to available alternative in the illegal economy. This shows how conditions of severe social and material disadvantage constrain young people's choices, and establishes a context of vulnerability to engaging in illegal activities as a means of livelihood. In addition to lack of legitimate alternative means of income generation, the lucrateness of the trade in illegal drugs was seen as another factor that made it attractive for young people who are socially and economically disadvantaged. As a lucrative venture, drug selling was seen as offering potential for social and economic improvements. This is captured in the following quote by Bombo (age 29, associated with cocaine and heroin), who had been selling drugs for about 10 years:

There is interest in the business. If you buy something worth one thousand, you make one thousand, especially if you don't use it. Then I noticed that with the interest involved that if you do it well, I know I will succeed. So, I went into the business.

As indicated in the above quote, it is the prospect of 'success' that attracted this participant to drug selling. This shows that while retail drug trade was not seen as a means to affluence, it did offer opportunities for social mobility for young people located on the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. This further highlights the need to situate young people's decision to sell illegal drugs, within the context of limited legitimate opportunities for the realisation of their dreams and aspirations. Accounts further revealed how drug selling was part of a youthful search for social and economic independence. Idowu (age 29, associated with heroin and prescription opioids), who had been selling drugs for seven years, explained why he started selling illegal drugs:

I just felt I should start selling it so I can get money. So that I will not be disturbing my parents about money because they have their own problems to solve. Anything I need, I can just buy from my own money, my pocket money.

In this example, the decision to sell drugs was driven by a desire to avoid imposing further burden on parents. Financial independence, in turn, served as a means of acquiring the social recognition and status that these youths desired. As another participant, Andy (age 31, who had been selling cannabis for five years) explained, 'If you can make your own money and pay your bills, people will respect you.' These cases show how retail drug distribution provides the resources for socially disadvantaged young people to meet basic needs in the context of pervasive poverty and unemployment, fulfil emerging social responsibilities, as well as enjoying relative social and economic autonomy.

Apart from describing the socioeconomic factors that influenced their decision to sell illegal drugs, participants also offered general explanations for the involvement of young people, especially socially disadvantaged youths, in illegal drug dealing. In this connection, accounts indicated how conditions of poverty and marginalisation establishes a context where young people are highly vulnerable to engaging in criminal activities as a means of survival. This view is corroborated by research linking criminal activities among Nigerian youths to pervasive poverty and unemployment (e.g., [Arisukwu et al. 2020](#); [Ebobo & Alero 2022](#)). In the following quote, Mighty (age 35, associated with cannabis, heroin, and cocaine), who had been selling illegal drugs for 11 years, offered a telling explanation for youth involvement in illegal activities:

The reason why you see many youths being involved in crime these days is because they don't have anything doing. There are no jobs and most of them didn't go to school to even get the jobs. So, what will they do? How will they survive? You see, that is why they go into crime.

Like Mighty, other participants referenced lack of opportunities for income generation as a major reason for youth criminality, with some maintaining that blame should be placed on these structural drivers and not on youths ('The problem is our society and all the poverty and lack of work; it is not youths that cause it,' stated Ubon). Although such views may be seen as extreme since they de-emphasise the agency of youth criminal offenders, it is important to recognise that agency is always exercised within structural confines. This means that state responses that focus solely on criminal behaviours (e.g., illegal drug trade), while ignoring the structural factors that influence criminal activities among socially disadvantaged youths, are misguided and will be unproductive.

Drug selling was seen as serving the purpose of curbing involvement in crime and anti-social activities among these young people. Although the trade was known to be illegal due to the legal prohibition on trade and consumption of these drugs, it was considered a lesser crime not only because it involves willing buyers, but more so because of the benefits it offered to socially disadvantaged youths. Thus, drug selling, though prohibited in Nigerian drug laws, enjoyed social legitimacy among youths experiencing social and material disadvantages. This reality corroborates the concept of 'quasi-legality', which refers to a situation where illegal drugs (or in this case, drug selling) are embedded in moral and legal ambiguity ([Carrier & Klantschnig 2018](#)). According to some of the participants, illegal drug trade was a form of employment and a means of income generation for young people living in poverty. By offering opportunities for work and income generation, drug selling was seen as reducing young people's vulnerability to other forms of criminality. Ikpa (age 36, associated with cannabis, cocaine, and heroin), who had been selling drugs for 13 years, explained,

Like these drugs that we are selling, it is like doing something so you can have money to take care of yourself. It is like you are doing something, and you are not just hanging around looking for what to do. People who do not have what to do are the ones who steal and do all sort of bad things.

The phrase 'it is like you are doing something' in the above quote suggests that drug selling provided a feeling of productive employment for these young people. Also, Ikpa considers stealing as a 'bad thing' that people engage in when they lack gainful employment. In this context, drug selling is positioned as relatively good because it provides employment that keeps people from engaging in bad things such as stealing. The illegality of the trade was, however, not lost on the participants. Instead, they called on those in position of power to consider the crime reducing potentials of drug selling in the context of poverty, and limited employment opportunities. For example, Jude (age 27, associated with cannabis and heroin), who had been selling drugs for six years, stated,

Our government people only see this selling of drugs as something that is illegal. They should also see how it is helping young people to stay away from doing very bad things. They should know that people are doing this because there is no job, and those who are into it do not want to steal.

In the quote above, Jude offers a critique of current drug policies that criminalises retail drug trade without considering its livelihood and crime reducing benefits. He highlights how such policies emphasise the illegality of drug retailing without considering how it is helping to reduce youth's involvement in crime. He also contrasts drug selling with the 'very bad things' that unemployed youths are at risk of doing, thereby corroborating the view that retail drug distribution is a lesser crime when compared to others, such as robbery. Others, like Mighty, described how they would have been involved in more serious criminal activities had they not found a means of livelihood in drug selling ('I don't know where I would have been if not for this drugs business. I think I would have been a real criminal'). Such views urge further reflection on the criminalisation of young people who retail small quantities of drugs.

## **DRUG SELLING AND FAILED DEVELOPMENT PROMISES**

During interviews, I observed that the participants had a lot to say about current drug laws, including how they impinge on the lives of those who sell and/or consume drugs. As those who are directly affected by the enforcement of these laws, I felt they had a right to speak. To enable them to do so, I probed for their perspectives on drug criminalisation and how it affected them as sellers. The participants variously commented on drug criminalisation and laws enforcement, emphasising the inherent injustice of criminalising individuals who sell drugs due to unemployment and poverty by the same government that has failed in its duty to improve the living conditions of its citizens. They were convinced that this approach will not produce desired results because, in the words of Mighty, 'how will they (drug sellers) survive?'

The government people are all into arresting people for selling drugs because they say it is illegal. Yes, it is illegal. But it (i.e., arresting sellers) will not work because there is no work for them to do. They have to get money to be able to survive. How will they survive?

Mighty's take on the preoccupation of the Nigerian state with criminalisation of retail drug trade is that 'it will not work' (which is to say that it will not produce the expected outcome of curbing retail drug distribution) because there are no legitimate alternative opportunities for those engaged in it. His question ('how will they survive?') highlights what is at stake in the criminalisation of drug selling, viz. survival of the most marginalised segments of society. Yet, these are not considerations to enter discussions about drug control in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the control of illegal drugs has long been about the exercise of state power against unwanted sections of society, with 'little clarity of the rationale for the particular set of measures taken' (Klein 2009, p. 385).

In some of the accounts, participants described what they referred to as a 'promise and fail' syndrome, where successive administrations in Nigeria make promises of job creation and poverty reduction to the citizens but repeatedly fail to deliver on them (a point made earlier in the introduction). This syndrome was seen as breeding lack of trust in government and as encouraging citizens to look out for themselves, including engaging in illegal activities. This was an insightful observation, which relates to a dynamic that scholars of Nigerian politics have long observed where development is less an outcome to be achieved than a rhetoric that could be invoked according to the political needs of those in power (see for example, Ake 2001). In the words of Idowu,

When you have government that keeps saying they will do this and that, but will not do it. They say ok we will create jobs. But where are the jobs? So, how will you believe them. You won't. So, people are now doing their own thing to be able to survive.

As a means of survival, illegal activities are here depicted as a situated response of Nigerians to the failure of state-led development. It is a form of grassroots dissent from exclusionary development, 'a creative response to modernisation on its own terms' (Britto 2020, p. 218). Drug selling, as a means of income generation for socially disadvantaged youths, was seen as excusable within this wider context of failed promises of development and betterment, with some participants viewing it as an attempt to secure benefits of development that the state has failed to provide (indicated in the phrase 'people are now doing their own thing to be able



to survive', in Idowu's account above). This was an interesting twist, revealing how socially disadvantaged young people rationalise illegal trade in relation to what Apter (1999) described as the 'politics of illusion' in postcolonial Nigeria. Andy stated,

For me, the way I see it, this selling of drugs is to get the things that they (government) have not given to us. Things like jobs, like the dividends of democracy you know. It is the way people have to get these things. Why I am saying so is because if they had provided jobs, people will not be selling.

It is easy to disregard comments such as the above as an attempt to excuse wrong-doing. But the gravity of this comment comes to the fore when the antecedent wrong-doing is kept in view, viz. the failure of the state to fulfil its promises to the citizenry. Viewed in this way, retail drug distribution as an attempt to compensate for the developmental failure, though inexcusable, becomes understandable. Further, it should be noted that this view of drug selling is based on the situated perspectives of socially disadvantaged individuals. As such, the import will be lost on those in a different social location (e.g., state officials who make drug policies).

## **DRUG SELLING AS A PATHWAY TO LEGITIMATE LIVELIHOODS**

Accounts indicated that most participants did not desire to continue selling drugs due to the risks associated with the trade. These risks include police arrest, prosecution, and stigma associated with being found out as a drug seller (e.g., 'It is risky because people will call you a bad name, if they know what you do for a living'). Mali (age 31, associated with cocaine and heroin). For these reasons, most participants did not see a career in the trade. They viewed it as a temporary source of income to meet survival needs in the absence of viable legitimate alternatives, with some making plans to transit onto legitimate economic activities. For example, Eneh (age 31, associated with cannabis, heroin, and meth), who dropped out of school due to lack of sponsorship, planned in the long term to return to school. In the interim, he intended to stop selling drugs and instead use his newly acquired tech skills to earn income:

Perfectly, I don't want to continue selling because I know the stresses, the risks that I do take in selling. The risk is so much. So, my plan is to finish school from where I stopped. I have been learning some skills presently. I have some skills now. So, I won't think of going back to selling anymore. I have some skills to use to make some small money.

Eneh refers to the 'risks that I do take', which suggests that selling drugs is a demonstration of bravery on the part of these young men. This is not to divert attention from the illegality of the trade, but to acknowledge the agency that they exercise amidst severe constraints. Yet, one cannot continue to bear such risks, hence the plan to move onto a legitimate trade. Eneh was not the only one who planned to transit to legitimate alternatives. Others viewed drug selling as means of generating the financial capital needed to start a legitimate venture. For example, Igoh (age 29, associated with cannabis), who had been selling drugs for about seven years, stated that he sold drugs in order to save up money to invest in a legitimate business and thereby make his way out of the drug trade. In his words,

I have a plan that will make me leave the business of selling drugs. I decided that at the end of the month I will not sell drugs again. Once I get enough money to start the oil business I will stop. I want to sell engine-oil by the road-side. That one will give me money to take care of myself.

Accounts like Igoh's above suggests that some drug sellers are willing to exit the trade, but they need alternatives to move onto. Drug selling as a means of generating capital to invest in legitimate economic activities is situated within the context of limited access to loans from financial institutions due to lack of collaterals. Jude pointed this out when he stated, 'It is very hard to get loans from bank.' In this context, drug selling serves as a strategic response to the challenges facing small enterprises in Nigeria, including poor access to low-interest loans. It allows these socially disadvantaged Nigerians to navigate institutional constraints on small-scale enterprises through the repatriation of funds to the legal economy.

The emergence of Africa as the focus of international counter-narcotics efforts has been accompanied by the reflex of blaming the social, economic, and health problems blighting the continent on the production, distribution and consumption of drugs (Cockayne & Williams 2009). This narrow view, which reinforces support for enforcement-based policies, neglects the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the drugs/development relationship, including how the failure of state-led development has fostered expansion of the drug market on the continent. Increasingly, researchers have shown how involvement in drug production and trade in developing countries is shaped by conditions of poverty and material deprivations, and some have called for a greater focus on these issues in policy (Bloomer 2009; Carrier & Klantschnig 2016; Singer 2008). Building on this literature, the present study explored how Nigerian retail drug dealers explained and rationalised their involvement in drug selling in terms of the failure of state-driven development and as an attempt to realise development benefits from below.

Accounts framed retail drug trade within prevailing social and economic conditions in Nigeria. Corroborating earlier studies (Bloomer 2009; Carrier & Klantschnig 2012), the study participants' decision to sell illegal drugs was described as a strategic response to conditions of economic decline, poverty, lack of opportunities for gainful employment, and socioeconomic dependence. In this context, drug selling served as a means of generating income to meet basic needs for the self and dependents, as a facilitator of social mobility, and as part of a youthful search for social autonomy. I argue that the failure of the state to improve the living conditions of the citizenry, through social policies and programmes to create employment and reduce poverty, creates a context where retail trade in illegal drugs by young people living in poverty is seen as understandable. This corroborates the view that illegal drug markets are driven by underlying societal 'development' problems, often linked to deprivation (Carrier & Klantschnig 2016). It also resonates with view that illegal drug markets are part of grassroots dissent from exclusionary development, a response to modernisation on its own terms (Britto 2020; Gootenberg 2020).

The link between the failure of state-led development and retail drug trade comes into better view in how the participants rationalised drug selling in relation to the government's failure to deliver on its promises to improve the living conditions of the citizenry. Analysts have shown how reneging on, or outrightly denying, promises of development is a central dynamic in the political economy of corruption and under-development in postcolonial Nigeria (Albin-Lackey 2007; Okolo & Karimo 2017). This amounts to a failure on the part of those in power to discharge the fundamental responsibilities of government to its citizens, contributing to erosion of the legitimacy of the postcolonial state, and in turn creating an environment for illegal economic activities to thrive. This study has shown that illegal economic activities, including retail drug trade, are rationalised within this context of legitimacy crisis facing the postcolonial state. In this context, drug trade serves as a means by which disenfranchised citizens seek to realise livelihood improvements on their own. A parallel to this situation is found in Gootenberg and Davalos's (2018) study of the origin of cocaine in the Amazon Andes, where the populace, orphaned by the failure of neo-liberal development, turned en masse to coca farming for survival.

Further, and closely related to the foregoing, drug selling was excused by the participants because it reduces the risk of involvement in criminal activities arising from the failure of the state to secure the livelihoods of the populace. This is an important finding, one that deserves the attention of policy makers. It can be seen here that conditions of poverty and unemployment, created by the failure of the state, to improve the fortunes of the populace, places the disenfranchised in a position where they have to choose between different types of illegal economic activities as a means of survival. In this context, retail drug trade, which involves exchange of prohibited commodities between sellers and buyers, is seen as a lesser crime that potentially offsets the risk of involvement in more serious crimes. Similarly, drug selling was viewed as a temporary diversion into the illegal economy in order to accumulate the capital needed to invest in legitimate economic ventures. This indicates that both the legal and illegal economies are intimately related, and socially disadvantaged youths switch between the two in search of livelihood opportunities. It also shows that they make choices based on comparative advantage. The responsibility lies with the Nigerian state to widen the

options available to them by providing opportunities for legitimate employment. The findings further show the futility of current approaches to retail drug markets, indicating that providing legitimate employment opportunities could be more effective in reducing involvement in illegal trade.

## CONCLUSIONS

Current debates take for granted the negative effects of drugs on development in Africa, ignoring the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the drugs/development relationship. This study problematises this orthodoxy, showing how involvement in retail drug trade, by socially disadvantaged Nigerians, is rationalised under conditions of poverty and the failure of state-driven development. The study indicates the importance of addressing inequitable social and economic conditions that influence participation in illegal drug trade. This entail offering drug market actors alternative means of livelihoods by providing them skills and opportunities to engage in legitimate income generating activities, opportunities that can elevate their standard of living beyond the levels available in the local context. Such approaches are likely to succeed because they build on their aspirations to exit illegal trade. On the other hand, approaches that emphasise law enforcement risk encouraging drug trade by perpetuating the very inequitable social and economic conditions that drove these young people into the trade. In short, what is being recommended is a development-based approach that breaks with the repressive orientation of existing policies and focuses, instead, on the social and economic contexts that shape retail drug distribution.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Nelson, E-UE. 2024. Drugs and Development: Exploring Nuances Based on the Accounts of Nigerian Retail Dealers. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 5(3): pp. 47–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.180>

**Submitted:** 29 August 2022

**Accepted:** 05 August 2023

**Published:** 26 February 2024

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