

“DRUG ABUSE AMONG YOUTHS IN AFRICA: IMPLICATION FOR NIGERIAN ECONOMY AND 2023 ELECTION” — A PRESENTATION BY CHAIRMAN/CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE NATIONAL DRUG LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY, NDLEA, BRIG. GEN. MOHAMED BUBA MARWA (RETD), CON, OFR, AS GUEST SPEAKER AT THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY LECTURE & INVESTITURE OF REALNEWS MAGAZINE AND PUBLICATION LIMITED ON THURSDAY 17TH NOVEMBER 2022, AT SHERATON HOTEL, IKEJA, LAGOS.

PROTOCOL:

...It is important that I start my presentation with a big congratulations to the management of Real News Magazine and Publication Limited, for a decade of immeasurable contribution to the development of society, and also for surviving the odds in the Nigerian media landscape and for being a recognisable brand. My congratulations.

INTRODUCTION

My presentation, titled, “Drug Abuse Among Youths In Africa: Implication For Nigerian Economy And 2023 Election” is not an altogether esoteric discourse. What I will simply do is distil the available facts and further heighten our awareness of some cogent areas and in a specific direction.

Drug abuse among youths is an issue that cannot be ignored in today’s world because it is a growing concern for all countries and a problem area for

humanity. In the past two decades, we have seen a dramatic rise in drug abuse around the world and more than ever before, the situation is becoming complicated and dire.

In Africa, where countries are struggling with development issues, it is recognised that the prevalence of drug use among youths will impact the future of the continent, for better or for worse, depending on how we respond to the trend.

Therefore, countries must attend to the problem. Just as we devote energy, time and resources to climate change to save the planet, we must also deploy the same strength, sentiment and systems to curb drug abuse among youths to secure the future of coming generations.

Nigeria, in particular, cannot afford to trivialise the drug abuse menace in light of the country's illicit drug statistics. This is why every opportunity for public discourse on this subject matter is highly appreciated because keeping drug issues on the front burner in society is one way of catalysing solutions to the scourge.

On this note, I will like to thank the management of Realnews magazine for the foresight to have this presentation on a very important day as the 10th anniversary of this esteemed organisation.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT YOUTH DRUG ABUSE

To start with, Nigerians are not ignorant about drug trafficking and drug abuse issues. The activities of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, NDLEA, in the past 22 months have given our society a clear

picture, certainty and the severity of the drug problem in the country.

The arrest of 19, 341 drug offenders and subsequent conviction of 3, 111 in addition to the seizure of 5.5 million kilograms of assorted drugs in 22 months are incontrovertible facts of a deeply entrenched illicit drug subculture. Previously, many Nigerians found it hard to believe that illicit drugs such as cocaine and heroin are trafficked in and out of the country. But NDLEA has made huge seizures and there is no basis for scepticism anymore. If anything, NDLEA activities since January 2021 have further reinforced the facts of Nigeria being an important hub in the global illicit drug network, and secondly, that our country is not only a transit pipeline but also a market.

Similarly, Nigerians cannot pretend now not to know that our young people are abusing illicit drugs because youths have an overt drug lifestyle. Youths of today promote the drug subculture. It is common nowadays to hear them say they want to be high. It is there on the street. In songs. In chatroom. In clubs and parties. Many crave alcohol and weed as soon as they run into any emotional situation. To put it in their language, as glorified by one popular music, they tell you “I need *igbo* and *shayo*.”

It is disturbing that abusing marijuana and alcohol is the new normal for youths, especially the Gen Z and even the Millennials. For parents who are adept at using social media, Snapchat offers graphic details of what our young people are doing with alcohol and psychotropic drugs.

The empirical facts around us speak volumes about how young people are abusing dangerous substances. However, we may not have a grasp of the depth of this decadence until we begin to see statistics and other data. I will highlight a few facts from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC World Drug Reports 2021 and 2022:

1. “MORE young people are using drugs compared with previous generations.”
2. “Young people continue to use MORE DRUGS than adults, and have higher levels of use than in past generations.”
3. “Over the past year, around 275 million people have used drugs, up by 22 per cent from 2010.” Of the increase, over 50% are youths.
4. There is a 10 per cent prevalence of cannabis use among 15-16 years old young Africans.

These facts and figures sum up the situation. But we must also be honest to admit that society is also partly to blame for the rise in drug abuse among youths.

Let's take cannabis for an example, there is no gainsaying that the incident of more youths abusing the psychoactive plant is fuelled by society sending wrong messages to young people. Today, you have all sorts of pro-cannabis groups, movements and activists all over the place. They make it seem as if smoking cannabis is innocuous and not dangerous to health, and, therefore, should be an inalienable right of the smoker.

Even some politicians and institutions, focused on the economic gains of the cultivation of cannabis, are ready to liberalise the commercialisation of the plant. All of these send mixed messages to young people. Already, the damage is done because research shows that:

One: “The perceptions of cannabis harms have decreased in areas where the drug has been legalized.”

Two: “In some parts of the world, for example, cannabis products have almost quadrupled in potency, and yet the percentage of adolescents who perceive cannabis as harmful has dropped by as much as 40 per cent, despite the evidence linking regular use to health problems, particularly in young people, and despite the correlation between potency and harm.”

These are facts from year-long research conducted by UNODC and published in the annual World Drug Report.

So what do we have today? We have young people vaping, inhaling cannabis-infused shisha and experimenting with synthetic cannabis and other potent variants such as Loud and Colorado.

Still, on cannabis, the findings from the National Drug Use survey released in 2018 indicated that Nigeria is the world’s leading abuser of the psychoactive plant.

We have 10.6 million of our compatriots, mostly youths, abusing marijuana and other cannabis derivatives. Alarmingly, some of them started using

the substance between ages 13 and 17, with the largest pool of users in their early 30s.

Still, the activities of the past 22 months in NDLEA have given us further insights and we now know that aside from smoking, they use it for cookies and brownies and also infuse it in drinks.

Other dangerous substances, frequently abused by young people in this country include crystal methamphetamine, known locally as *Mkpuru Mmri*, and pharmaceutical opioids, mostly tramadol and codeine, which are used to produce dangerous mixtures, like skuchies, that they drink at parties.

Ladies and gentlemen, knowing that young people abuse drugs is alarming, but knowing the kind of consequences such action will bring on them and the country, will leave us all in a perpetual state of anxiety.

IMPLICATION FOR NIGERIA'S ECONOMY

The economic cost of drug abuse by youths is not easily calculable for this country. For want of comprehensive and organised statistics, the economic cost of drug abuse in Nigeria would be grossly underestimated, no matter the figure we arrive at.

But we can take a cue from America which has better statistics. In 2007, the economic cost of drug abuse in the United States was estimated at \$193 billion. Out of this, lost productivity accounted for \$120 billion; while healthcare gulped \$11 billion – for drug treatment and drug-related medical consequences and the sum of \$61 billion was spent on criminal

justice, primarily for criminal investigation, prosecution and incarceration, and victim costs. With Nigeria in perspective, let us take a look at specific ways that the youth drug abuse subculture affects the country.

1. Public health burden

Illicit drugs are banned for several reasons. One of the biggest reasons is that they constitute health dangers. Abuse of drugs leads to dependency which in the long run leads to the deterioration of users' health. Drugs such as cocaine, heroin and crystal methamphetamine, aside from directly affecting the health of users, also place them at risk of other deadly diseases such as HIV and hepatitis because of the associated risky habit of injecting with needles. More importantly, the abuse of psychoactive drugs has been attributed to the rise in mental health problems across the world. Let's take cannabis as an example.

According to UNODC: *“The proportion of people with psychiatric disorders and suicides associated with regular cannabis use has increased, together with the number of hospitalizations. Some 40 per cent of countries reported cannabis as the drug related to the greatest number of drug use disorders.”*

Just last year, a Danish report released by the *Journal of American Medical Association*, JAMA, indicated that cannabis is a contributing factor to schizophrenia.

In the same vein, the World Health Organisation, WHO, also has reservations about the dangers of cannabis.

Methamphetamine addiction also has chronic health implications. This time last year, the country was going through a meth epidemic in South East states. Aside from causing rapid deterioration of health, meth addiction is one of the most difficult to treat. With a lot of youths abusing these drugs, society has on its hand a ticking time bomb that could blow up to become a public health catastrophe a few years down the line.

That is a burden that African countries, including Nigeria, should avoid. Noting that in 2007, America spent \$11 billion on healthcare—for drug treatment and drug-related medical consequences—the question before us is: *Are we prepared for such eventuality?* The reality is we are not. We neither have the health facility nor the money to waste.

2. Loss of productivity

If you are privileged to hear stories of rehabilitated drug users, one common thing to them is their loss of productivity. Most of them lost their jobs because their performance declined. They also could not secure another well-paying job, and when they did, they could not concentrate enough to hold down the job.

Previously, these were people who are considered experts and very productive. Some of them had good education, world-class training and years of cognate experience that placed them on par with their peers

around the world. But in the final analysis, they were rendered redundant by drug use—and the country lost out in the race for progress.

Statistics from several reports and surveys have highlighted the detrimental effects of substance abuse on business productivity and competitiveness.

I will share a few of those known facts:

- About 30% of drug abusers are not part of the labour force
- Unemployed workers were twice as likely to be drug users.
- Drug users are more likely to have the highest record of absenteeism from work, and have difficulty holding down a job, with some of them reportedly working for three or more employers in a given year and more likely to report missing two or more workdays in a month due to illness or injury.
- Overall, their productivity is curtailed and this eventually affects national output or GDP.

It is globally recognised that one of Africa's comparative advantages is its huge youth population. This country, Nigeria, for instance, has no less than 151 million young people, accounting for 70% of our estimated 217 million population. Most of us don't know what that means. Youth means creativity, strength, resourcefulness and productivity. But how do we rake in these benefits when a significant number of this population is involved in the abuse of illicit substances?

The truth is instead of a boon they could become a burden because of abuse of illicit substances.

3. Derailment of education

Education is the bedrock of a country's greatness. Once in the 1960s and up till the 1970s, Nigerians were recognised for their intellectual capability. Our citizens studied abroad and were everywhere in the world contributing to progress in various fields. We should be aware, however, that intellectual capabilities can be eroded or derailed by drug use. Several studies have shown a pattern of school performance of drug users which I will also like to share with us:

- (1) Students who are not marijuana users are more than twice as likely to report an average grade of "A" than those who are using marijuana.
- (2) College students who use prescription stimulant medications for non-medical purposes typically have lower grade point averages and are more likely to be heavy drinkers and users of other illicit drugs.
- (3) They also are more likely to meet diagnostic criteria for dependence on alcohol and marijuana,
- (4) Students who use illicit drugs are more likely to skip class more frequently and spend less time studying.

At the end of the day, society bears the loss, losing bright minds to illicit substances.

4. Increasing cost of crime prevention

I have spoken on different forums about how illicit drugs act as enablers of crime and as catalysts for

insecurity. Between January 2021 and October 2022, NDLEA counselled and rehabilitated over 12, 326 drug users. Over 80 per cent of them are young people. The cost of treatment and rehabilitation is so huge we don't have to start doing the calculation here.

In the same vein, we have arrested 19, 341 offenders within this period, with 3, 111 convicted in court and as many as 3,500 cases pending. Over 50% are young people, still under the age of 40. All of these - treatment and the criminal justice system, namely criminal investigation, prosecution and incarceration, cost the government huge money.

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE 2023 ELECTION

Drugs and violence go hand in hand. We can recall the social upheaval caused in southeast states in the last quarter of 2021 when there was an outbreak of abuse of methamphetamine. That episode gave us a foresight of the kind of instability that could result from abuse of illicit drugs by young people.

With so many idle hands around, some of whom are hooked on drugs, the election will be a testy period. But, let me assure you that the security agencies are aware of this and are working to forestall it.

With such a huge youth population, you can begin to think that the election in the country will be won by a “youth referendum,” but with so many youths involved in drug abuse, they can hardly make the kind of strong impact that people envisage; just as they cannot hold down a job, they also cannot exhibit prudent electoral choices or execute the civic duty of

voting. What you end up having is the phenomenon of self-disenfranchisement among young people because those who are into drug abuse will readily make themselves available as tools for irrational activities such as electoral thuggery and violence.

Possible responses

Since the release of the 2018 National Drug Use and Health Survey, Nigeria has been seeking solutions to the drug scourge, especially as it pertains to youths. The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari gives NDLEA unflinching support.

The Agency in turn has been working on several measures which are largely youth-focused as well. We remain guided by global best practices. As recommended by the UNODC in the *World Drug Report 2022*: “Whole-of-society approaches are needed to ensure that people, young people most of all, have the information and develop the resilience to make good choices.”

Part of the recommendations include:

- The development of “national drug prevention systems that reach children as early as possible in their development and focus on building resilience.”
- Reaching out to and involving adolescents, disseminating prevention messages on social media and other online platforms.
- Promoting prevention and treatment options for young people who use drugs and young people with drug use disorders

In line with this recommendation, NDLEA has initiated some measures which I will mention briefly:

- One: War Against Drug Abuse (WADA) campaign: This is grassroots-oriented advocacy which we are using to diffuse anti-drug sentiment across the various strata of our society.
- Two: NDLEA Twitter Space where drug issues are discussed by experts from within the country and around the world to an audience of young people.
- Three: A 24/7 Drug Abuse call centre with a toll-free helpline: 0800 1020 3040. This allows drug users, their families and employers to seek treatment without compromising their identities or safety.
- Four: open-door treatment at 26 NDLEA treatment facilities across the country.

On a final note, let me leave us with a thought-provoking submission about the danger of complacency in tackling drug abuse among youth.

“By 2030, demographic factors project the number of people using drugs to rise by 11 per cent around the world, and as much as 40 per cent in Africa alone.”

This is an early warning that we should all take serious and ensure that we keep our young people away from dangerous substances that compromise the bright future ahead of them.

Thank you for listening.

