

Combating Drug Trafficking in South Africa: A Multifaceted Approach to Addressing Socioeconomic, Political and Law Enforcement Factors

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Abstract: This paper explores the intricate propellants of drug trafficking in South Africa, framed within national and international drug trade networks. Key contributory factors include poverty, unemployment, insufficient law enforcement capacity, porous borders, corruption, and inadequate adherence to technology-driven advancements. Socio-economic hardships such as high poverty rates and job scarcity lead individuals towards drug-related activities, while inadequate resources and vulnerable borders facilitate the influx of illicit substances into the country. Corruption within law enforcement and judicial systems further complicates the required control efforts, with compromised officials often protecting traffickers. Technological innovations such as online drug markets and encrypted communications present formidable challenges to traditional policing methods.

This study underscores the need for a multifaceted response to drug trafficking by employing qualitative interviews with law enforcement officials and drug enforcement specialists. Overall, the findings suggest that reducing drug trafficking in South Africa requires a comprehensive approach that integrates economic reform, as well as significant improvements in law enforcement and international cooperation. By addressing both supply and demand aspects, the study advocates for strategies that can create a safer environment, promote the well-being of South African communities and mitigate the adverse effects of drug trafficking.

Recommendations focus on implementing targeted economic development programmes to address fundamental socio-economic issues, enhancing law enforcement capabilities through increased funding and specialised training, as well as strengthening border security with advanced surveillance technologies. Anti-corruption efforts are essential for maintaining the integrity of law enforcement and judicial systems, while international collaboration and intelligence sharing are crucial for dismantling global drug trafficking networks.

Keywords: drug trafficking, law enforcement challenges, organised crime, policing strategies, political challenges, socio-economic challenges

Introduction

Drug trafficking poses a significant threat to South Africa and is deeply embedded within broader international crime networks (Goga, 2014:2). Drug trafficking has intensified in South Africa, driven by socio-economic inequalities, limited law enforcement capacity, and transnational crime networks. Most notably, drug trafficking has also created far-reaching consequences for local communities (Cusack & M'Crystal, 2020:10). The consequences of this illegal trade manifest through heightened crime rates, public safety threats, and the weakening of institutional integrity (DosD, 2019:14; Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:13). To address this complex issue, interventions must extend beyond merely targeting the drug supply chain to include addressing underlying social and economic factors that push individuals into the drug trade (Peltzer, Ramlagan, Johnson & Phaswana-Mafuya, 2010:30).

This paper explores the root causes and consequences of drug trafficking in South Africa, with a focus on its socio-economic, political, and public safety dimensions. South Africa's strategic location and economic vulnerabilities render the country a key transit point within national and international drug routes (UNODC, 2021a:1). Consequently, the rise in drug-related activities impacts governance and public safety, with escalating risks for health and community

security (Mahlangu, 2020:1). This study further examines factors fuelling South Africa's drug trade, such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption, together with law enforcement challenges, insufficient border controls, and technological innovations that traffickers exploit (Tropina, 2016:8; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2020:np). In particular, marginalised communities facing economic instability are highly susceptible to drug traffickers, while advancements in online platforms and encrypted communication aid smugglers in circumventing traditional controls (Mahlangu, 2020:1).

By analysing existing literature and conducting in-depth interviews with law enforcement and anti-drug experts, this paper identifies areas requiring urgent intervention. The paper proposes recommendations tailored to South Africa's unique challenges, emphasising the need for targeted economic development programmes, robust law enforcement reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and strengthened international partnerships. Improving border security and investing in surveillance technologies are also essential for controlling drug trafficking flows (Tropina, 2016:8). Effectively addressing drug trafficking demands a balanced approach that combines prevention, enforcement, and socio-economic reforms to ensure long-term stability (Mahlangu, 2020:1). Through a diagnostic exploration of the drug trade's contributing factors and the provision of actionable recommendations, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of South Africa's drug trafficking landscape and strategies to mitigate its impact on local communities (UNODC, 2020:np).

Literature Review

The nature and extent of drug trafficking in South Africa

Drug trafficking in South Africa has evolved into a highly organised and sophisticated operation involving both international and local networks. The country's strategic position as a major port of entry and exit significantly enhances its role as a critical transit hub for illicit substances such as cocaine, which is frequently smuggled from South America. The interception of large shipments of cocaine from countries such as Brazil at Durban Harbour highlights the country's prominence in international drug trafficking routes (Dolley, 2022:np). In 2021, South African law enforcement authorities seized over a ton of cocaine, some of which was concealed within sugar consignments. This demonstrates the ingenuity of traffickers who exploit the port's extensive commercial activities to import drugs undetected (Dolley, 2022:np). Figure 1 below illustrates South Africa's geographical position relative to international producer and consumer countries.

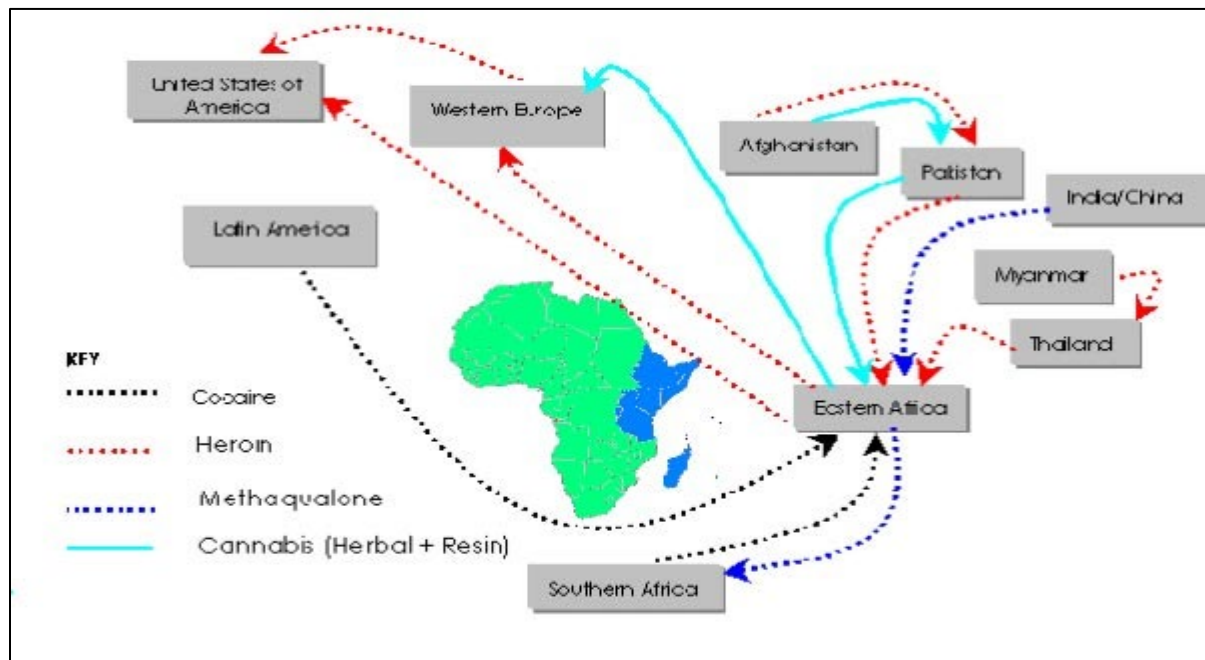


Figure 1: Global drug trafficking routes in respect of the more commonly used drugs in South Africa

(Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2021a:1)

In addition to cocaine, South Africa's illicit drug market encompasses cannabis, heroin, methamphetamine (locally known as "tik"), and mandrax, each of which is supported by distinct user bases and distribution networks (UNODC, 2021b:47). While cannabis remains the most widely trafficked drug, there has been a notable surge in heroin use, particularly in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods where cheaper derivatives such as "sugars" and "whoonga" are prevalent (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:34). In response to increased demand, local drug networks have shifted their focus toward the distribution of heroin and methamphetamine, often bypassing cannabis and mandrax (DosD, 2019:28). These synthetic drugs are frequently produced in clandestine suburban laboratories, with traffickers using secluded, upscale properties to evade law enforcement scrutiny (Rondganger, 2015:1).

The discovery of several drug laboratories in affluent areas such as La Lucia, Ballito, and Hillcrest in 2015 underscores this operational shift toward concealed production within residential neighbourhoods (Rondganger, 2015:1). Furthermore, the use of "whoonga," which was initially targeted at Durban's Indian communities in neighbourhoods such as Chatsworth, has since expanded its reach into townships and informal settlements, indicating a growing penetration into diverse socio-economic contexts (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:34).

The preponderant availability of drugs in South Africa is indicative of the country's entrenched role in illicit drug trafficking and the challenges posed by poverty, unemployment, and social instability (Fellingham, Dhali, Guidozi & Gardner, 2012:78). These factors contribute to the establishment of an entrenched drug economy and creation of significant obstacles for local law enforcement. Consequently, South Africa's dual role as both a trafficking hub and a distribution centre underscores the extensive reach of the illicit drug trade and highlights the complexities involved in addressing this pressing issue (Dunlop, 2018:i).

Causes of drug trafficking

Drug trafficking is primarily driven by sustained global demand for illicit narcotics, posing a significant challenge for governments attempting to counter this pervasive issue (Wolf and Chi-Pam, 2012:np). The principle of supply and demand in economics explains the growth of illegal drug markets. This implies that as demand for narcotics increases, the production, smuggling and distribution activities associated with these narcotic substances intensifies reciprocally (Edubirdie, 2021:np). In South Africa, the rising demand for recreational drugs attracts traffickers, subsequently fuelling the growth of the illicit drug market (Jenner, 2011:904; Machethe & Mofokeng, 2022:340). The heightened demand for heroin in particular, has resulted in the establishment of advanced drug laboratories in affluent suburbs, highlighting the dynamic and adaptive strategies of drug trafficking (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:34; Rondganger, 2020:1).

Porous borders and inadequate border control measures further facilitate smuggling routes into South Africa, which is exacerbated by factors such as gaps in crime intelligence and limited law enforcement resources (Peltzer et al., 2010:4). Corruption within these agencies compounds the problem, because compromised officials often enable traffickers to operate with minimal interference (Aslett, 2018:330; ENACT, 2020:9; USAID, 2013:10). Additionally, advancements in technology have provided the illicit drug traffickers with sophisticated methods in order to evade traditional policing strategies, which complicates the efforts to interdict them (Broséus, Rhumorbarbe, Mireault, Ouellette, Crispino & Décary-Héty, 2016:2; Tropina, 2016:8).

Economic hardships are instrumental in perpetuating drug trafficking, because individuals facing poverty frequently turn to the drug trade for financial survival (Montilla, 2019:np). In such situations, engaging in drug sales is perceived as a more lucrative alternative to traditional employment and offers the potential for traffickers to generate significantly higher income than through conventional means (Barkemeyer Law Firm, 2021:np). In South Africa, socio-economic factors such as high rates of poverty and unemployment compel individuals to be involved in the drug trade as a means of economic survival (Cheteni, Mah & Yohane, 2018:5-7; Montilla, 2019:np).

Transnational organised crime (TOC) groups capitalise on this demand and establish extensive smuggling and distribution networks, which positions South Africa as a strategic hub for international drug trafficking, particularly for cocaine shipments (Dolley, 2022:np). The criminalisation of substances such as cannabis, heroin and cocaine has inadvertently strengthened black-market monopolies controlled by TOC networks. Advocates for drug policy reform argue that decriminalising certain substances could disrupt the control exerted by these networks, potentially weakening their dominance in the illicit drug market and facilitating the gradual dismantling of their operations (UKEssays, 2018:np).

The effects of drug trafficking on society

Drug trafficking and its surge has profoundly affected various communities and societal aspects, including individual well-being, public health and damage to public infrastructure, and also destabilises essential social systems such as healthcare and the justice system (Grunwald, 2020:1; Kofastudy, 2022:np). Furthermore, Talcherkar (2022:np) emphasises that drug abuse can lead to increased crime rates, particularly violent crimes involving firearms, as addicted individuals were likely to resort to criminal activities to fund their drug use (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:13). In South Africa, the escalation of drug trafficking has resulted in heightened public health and safety risks, including a notable increase in violence and drug-related illnesses. The misuse of drugs contributes to severe health issues, as the unregulated production of illicit substances often involves toxic chemicals and inconsistent dosages and exposes users to significant health risks. Long-term drug use can lead to mental health disorders, infections, overdoses, and even death (Talcherkar, 2022:np). Within correctional facilities, drugs have become a form of currency and further perpetuates criminal behaviour and complicates prison management (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:13).

The judiciary is also under significant strain, with rising incarceration rates for drug-related offences imposing a heavier financial burden on legal and justice systems (United States Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center, 2010:np). Moreover, drug trafficking disproportionately impacts marginalised communities, exacerbates financial hardship, and promotes social fragmentation (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:13). Furthermore, illicit drug use undermines the social development of young people by disrupting their education and contributing to higher rates of adolescent pregnancies (Grunwald, 2020:1). The multifaceted impact of drug trafficking underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address the public health crises and social destabilisation it causes, particularly within vulnerable communities (Organisation of American States (OAS), 2013:5).

The effects of drug trafficking on the economy

Drug trafficking severely impedes societal progress by significantly undermining both the economy and public health (Kofastudy, 2022:np). According to the United States Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center (2010:np), drug addiction decreases worker productivity and imposes substantial financial burdens on society, which manifests through increased accident rates, premature deaths, and chronic health issues. Healthcare and law enforcement resource constraints manifest with public funds increasingly diverted from critical services to address the repercussions of illegal drug use (Lievens, Vander Laenena, Verhaeghed, Putmanc, Pauwelsa, Hardynsa & Annemans, 2017:50).

The economic costs associated with drug trafficking are extensive and encompass heightened healthcare expenses, rehabilitation efforts, incarceration costs, and lost productivity (Felbab-Brown, 2013:14). Drug-related unemployment and absenteeism further burden the economy, exacerbates the declining productivity rates and limit economic growth in communities affected by drug use (United States Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center, 2010:np). South Africa is particularly vulnerable to these challenges, as the increased production, trafficking, and consumption of drugs pose significant threats to both economic security and sustainable growth (Jordan, 2013:np).

The average age of drug users in South Africa ranges from 15 to 30 years, a trend that contributes to rising youth involvement in gangs and violent crime (Jordan, 2013:np). This escalation creates a cycle of social deterioration, and adversely affects families and destabilises whole communities (Jordan, 2013:np). The inter-related issues of drug trafficking, youth violence, and economic decline highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address both the immediate impacts of drug abuse and the broader societal consequences that impede sustainable development (Cheteni, et al., 2018:5-7).

Challenges associated with the policing of drug trafficking in South Africa

The drug trafficking challenges faced by law enforcement agencies in South Africa are complex and substantial (Haysom, 2021:np). To that effect, Scheibe, Shelly, Versfeld, Howell and Marks (2017:199) argue that the country's integration into the global community after the end of apartheid inadvertently led to the dismantling of specialised drug investigation units. The dismantling created a void that facilitated the rise of drug trafficking and the proliferation of substances such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine. As a result, South Africa's role in the international drug trade has remained largely unaddressed, with policing efforts often characterised as ineffective and disorganised (Howell, 2021:np).

Over the past two decades, the availability and affordability of illicit drugs have surged, reflecting the growing influence of organised crime and gangs in South Africa (Howell, 2021:np). This situation underscores law enforcement's inability to effectively curb street-level trafficking (Cooper, 2015:1). The reliance on outdated policing

tactics, rooted in apartheid-era practices, continues to drive mass incarceration and social exclusion, and also places an enormous burden on courts, correctional facilities, and law enforcement (Shelly, 2016:np).

Corruption within police forces also presents a substantial barrier to addressing drug trafficking (Peltzer et al., 2010:3). Some officers collude with drug syndicates, providing critical intelligence and even engaging in drug sales themselves (Goga, 2014:14-15; Machethe & Obioha, 2018:73). The Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime (GITOC, 2021:8) emphasises that such levels of corruption undermine anti-trafficking efforts. Haysom (2021:np) notes that the cash-based nature of the drug trade exacerbates low-level corruption, while understaffing and inadequate training further diminish law enforcement's capacity to address organised drug networks. To that effect, Haysom (2019:np) advocates for intelligence-led approaches that specifically target high-level facilitators within trafficking operations.

Coordinated efforts at both local and national levels are essential for effectively confronting these multifaceted challenges. Developing effective anti-trafficking strategies requires a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic drivers, public health impacts and institutional obstacles involved (May, 2017:1). Law enforcement authorities and policymakers can devise targeted interventions by identifying the root causes of drug trafficking such as poverty, unemployment, the expansion of illicit markets, porous borders, as well as corruption and operational inefficiencies (IDPC, 2012:35). These strategies could encompass both demand and supply reduction measures, intelligence-driven policing and protective policies for vulnerable groups (Geldenhuys, [sa]:3). Ultimately, the focus should be on dismantling the drug trafficking networks and mitigate their societal impact (Home Office, 2021:np).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design in its approach to analysing the intricate dynamics of drug trafficking in South Africa, and consequently proposing targeted interventions for addressing the issue. As outlined by Leedy and Omrod (2015:269) and Mehrad and Tahriri (2019:2), the qualitative approach focuses on exploring, describing, analysing, and interpreting phenomena within their real-world contexts through the perspectives of individuals who have directly encountered such phenomena. In addition, the qualitative approach values the subjective insights and interpretations of participants with first-hand knowledge of drug trafficking and law enforcement challenges from a constructivist worldview.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with a group of 51 participants who comprised provincial commanders from the Provincial Organised Crime, the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation, as well as Border Policing units stationed at King Shaka International Airport, Kosi Bay, and Durban Harbour. These were categorised as Sample A. Another group of participants included 10 (ten) members of the South African Narcotics Enforcement Bureau (SANEB) from KwaZulu-Natal's Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation categorised as Sample B; as well as 5 (five) members from the Provincial Organised Crime Unit categorised as Sample C. The study also involved 10 (ten) members each from the Border Policing units responsible for crime prevention and investigation at King Shaka International Airport who were categorised as Sample D; Durban Harbour categorised as Sample E; as well as the Kosi Bay Border Post participants categorised as Sample F. Two international participants from the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) were also included and categorised as Sample G.

An interpretive approach was adopted to capture the participants' insights and experiences accurately. Data analysis followed a structured process to ensure meaningful organisation and interpretation of large amounts of qualitative data. Consistent with Schurink, Fouché and De Vos (2011:397), this approach removed non-essential data to identify significant patterns and construct a contextual framework for the findings. Thematic analysis, an established method within qualitative research, served as the primary analytical technique. This involved the identification and grouping of recurring themes to achieve a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and viewpoints (Grove, Burns & Gray, 2013:46).

Data interpretation relied on the researcher's immersion in the collected data and subsequently decoding meanings, recognising key patterns, and drawing appropriate conclusions (Creswell, 2014:249). The collected data was systematically organised into codes, categories, and themes, with coding applied to assign meaning and reduce redundant information (Creswell, 2014:249). Following the data analysis, themes emerged that provided a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives on drug trafficking, paving the way for targeted and contextually relevant interventions based on the findings and applicable recommendations.

Results and Discussion

The investigation of the factors that contribute to drug trafficking in South Africa was guided by responses to the question: *What are the factors that contribute to drug trafficking?* Participants provided a range of perspectives in this regard, and from which the following key themes emerged: South Africa's strategic geographical positioning; porous borders; poverty and unemployment; social and political transformation; deficient intelligence and law enforcement capacity; corruption in drug trafficking; as well as the role of technology in drug trafficking. In this regard, the discussion in this paper focuses on the interconnectedness of these themes and their collective influence on the drug trafficking landscape in South Africa. By integrating relevant literature and participants' insights, the analysis aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted drivers behind drug trafficking in the region.

Theme 1: South Africa's Strategic Geographical Positioning

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of South Africa's geographical positioning in facilitating drug trafficking activities (South African Government, 2021:np). Existing literature indicates that while South Africa is not situated directly on the primary routes between supplier and consumer countries, it functions as a significant trans-shipment hub for narcotics (Hübschle & de Greef, 2016:8). Furthermore, Peltzer et al. (2010:4) assert that the country's extensive transportation infrastructure, coupled with a well-connected network of international flights, enhances the operational capabilities of drug traffickers. Moreover, South Africa's geographical features, such as its porous borders and burgeoning trade relationships with North America, Western Europe and Asia, further solidify its appeal as a transit point for drug trafficking (Peltzer et al., 2010:4).

Participants in this study echoed these insights, emphasising the strategic importance of South Africa's geographic location. In support of this view, Participant A-1 stated: *"South Africa's trade relations with global markets make it a target for drug trafficking"*, which was a reflection on the interconnectedness of global trade and the illicit drug trade locally. Participant A-2 further observed that: *"With its strategic geographical location, South Africa is seen as a transit hub for narcotics between major producers and consumers"*, which highlights the geopolitical significance of South Africa within the global drug trafficking landscape.

The correlation between South Africa's geographical positioning and the influx of drugs was articulated by several participants. In this regard, Participant A-3 noted that: *"The influx of drugs into South Africa reflects its increasing connection to international drug routes,"* indicating an expanding network of global drug trafficking that increasingly implicates South Africa. Additionally, Participant A-4 highlighted systemic issues within law enforcement as follows: *"Weak law enforcement at ports allows South Africa to become a gateway for drugs,"* underscoring the vulnerabilities in South Africa's border control that drug traffickers exploit.

Participant C-18 contextualised these observations by linking drug trafficking patterns to various factors, including unemployment and globalisation as follows: *"The factors contributing to drug trafficking are unemployment, increased demand, porous borders, globalisation, and the position of South Africa on the global drug trafficking routes."* This underscores the multifaceted nature of drug trafficking dynamics and suggests that addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that considers both geographical and socio-economic factors.

The perspectives shared by participants align closely with existing literature regarding South Africa's geographical positioning and its implications for drug trafficking (South African Government, 2021:np; Ford, 2021:np; Dolley, 2022:np). The characterisation of South Africa as a transit hub between producer and consumer countries by Peltzer et al. (2010:4), is also reflected in the participants' insights. Furthermore, the notion that South Africa's geographical location renders it vulnerable to international drug routes is consistent with findings by Hübschle and de Greef (2016:8), who emphasise the country's significance in global drug trafficking networks. The collective insights of the participants indicate that South Africa's geographical positioning serves as a critical conduit for drug trafficking within the country. Addressing the challenges posed by this positioning requires enhanced law enforcement measures and a nuanced understanding of the global and socio-economic contexts that fuel illicit drug trade activities.

Theme 2: Porous Borders

The findings of this study illuminate on the significant role that porous borders play in facilitating drug trafficking in South Africa. Existing literature shows that the degree and levels of border permeability varies widely across contexts (Hansen & Papademetriou, 2014:1). This inherent vulnerability often enables illegal activities, particularly in drug trafficking (Collingwood, 2014:11). As such, drug traffickers use this knowledge of porous borders to their advantage when choosing trans-shipment hubs, transportation routes and modes of transportation (Basu, 2014:19). Porous borders complicate the task of effective monitoring, while also increasing the unrestricted flow of money and drugs

between, and among countries (Collingwood, 2014:11). INTERPOL (2022:np) further notes that the growing permeability of international boundaries correlates with escalating global drug addiction and accessibility. Aaron Motsoaledi, former Minister of Home Affairs has acknowledged that South Africa's excessively porous borders facilitate the illegal movement of various goods and people, including stolen vehicles and human trafficking (Mamokhere & Chauke, 2020:4). The literature further indicates that inadequate border security and understaffed ports, combined with South Africa's extensive porous borders, render the country as a prime target for drug traffickers (Peltzer et al., 2010:4). In addition, Meetsi (2014:15) describes the ineffective state of the borders between South Africa and its neighbours as a major factor in facilitating the smuggling of illegal goods.

Participants in this study provided valuable insights concerning the influence and effect of porous borders on drug trafficking. In that regard, Participant B-8 remarked: *"Porous borders, the backlog of all the containers due to COVID and the influx of goods... customs are being relaxed and Border Police is being relaxed"*. This statement highlights how operational backlogs and lax enforcement have created opportunities for traffickers. Participant B-10 identified the broader socio-economic context as follows: *"Porous borders, unemployment, poverty, and high demand for drugs"*. This participant response emphasises the interplay between porous borders and socio-economic conditions driving individuals toward drug-related activities.

Participant B-14 further noted: *"Increased demand for drugs, unemployment which results in more people selling drugs to survive, poor policing at ports of entry and the cities that allow the drugs to end up on the street..."*. This observation underscores the link between systemic issues such as inadequate policing and economic hardship, and the facilitation of drug trafficking. Participant C-16 mentioned further that: *"Porous borders, corruption, and the lack of policing capabilities at ports of entry, coupled with the lack of intelligence on high-tech trafficking methods by drug dealers"*. This underscores the complex challenges facing border control authorities in the effective management of illicit activities.

Collectively, participants emphasised that porous borders and insufficient border control significantly contribute to drug trafficking, enabling traffickers to smuggle drugs into the country with relative ease. Common themes that emerged from responses included the pervasive nature of porous borders, systemic corruption, and a lack of resources and intelligence for effective border policing. The repeated emphasis on these issues reveals a shared recognition of drug traffickers' exploitation of vulnerabilities in border security. These perspectives resonate with existing literature, which highlights the challenges posed by porous borders and the strategies employed by traffickers to exploit these weaknesses (Peltzer et al., 2010:4; Basu, 2014:19; Collingwood, 2014:11; Hansen & Papademetriou, 2014:1; Meetsi, 2014:11; INTERPOL, 2022:np).

Theme 3: Poverty and Unemployment

The investigation into the interplay between poverty, unemployment and drug trafficking reveals a disconcerting reality for many communities, particularly in South Africa (Montilla (2019:np). In that regard, Cheteni et al. (2018:5-7) and Musai and Mehrara (2014:126) highlight the precarious living conditions in low-income areas, where residents often lack access to basic necessities such as safe water, adequate housing and healthcare. This scarcity creates vulnerability, forcing some individuals to resort to illegal activities such as drug trafficking, as a means of survival (Musai & Mehrara, 2014:126). Participant A-3 reflected on vulnerability as follows: *"Unemployment is a big issue for our youth; it is frustrating to go through training and studying only to find no jobs, leading them to sell drugs on a small scale to make quick money"*. Furthermore, Participant B-5 articulated the urgency of financial desperation as follows: *"It's not just about wanting money; it's about needing to feed your family"*.

The findings further underscore the role of economic deprivation as a force that drives individuals into the drug trade and perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability. To this effect, Participant B-7 noted: *"You see many young people hanging around because there are no jobs. They end up getting involved in drugs just to survive"*. The consensus derived from the participants' responses indicate that poverty and unemployment are primary factors compelling families to engage in drug trafficking. Participant B-12 succinctly stated: *"Poverty and unemployment are driving vulnerable families to sell drugs to make ends meet"*. Participant B-14 added: Demand for drugs exacerbates this issue; as one participant remarked, *"There is always a demand for drugs, and when there is demand, there will always be supply"*.

The participants' responses suggest that many view the drug trade as an accessible, albeit illegal, means of generating income amid dire economic circumstances. To that effect, Participant C-19 explained: *"One of the driving factors for people engaging in drug trafficking is the need for money"*, which highlights that desperation often overrides moral considerations. This sentiment is echoed by Participant D-26, who mentioned that: *"A large number of unemployed individuals would be willing to traffic drugs simply to earn money for survival"*.

Participants' insights align with existing literature perspectives proffered by authors such as Cheteni et al. (2018:5-7), Kofastudy (2022:np), Montilla (2019:np), and Musai and Mehrara (2014:126), who emphasise that targeted interventions addressing poverty and unemployment are crucial in combating drug trafficking. By focusing on improving job opportunities and living conditions, there is potential to disrupt the cycle of desperation that leads individuals to engage in the illicit drug trade, thus contributing to broader efforts to enhance community safety and well-being (Nangolo, 2020:18).

Theme 4: Social and Political Transformation

The findings of this study highlight the intricate relationship between socio-political transformation and the rise of drug trafficking in South Africa. Literature also documents the historical provenance and evolution of drug use as a form of creativity and community reform, to its use as a coping mechanism or depressant amidst societal pressures (Buddenberg, 2011:12). Buddenberg (2011:12) posits also that the shift towards mood-altering prescription medications has redefined the priorities of drug users, reflecting broader changes in social norms and economic conditions. As noted by the USAID (2013:15), the increased availability of cheaper drugs exacerbates the situation, which renders illicit substances more accessible to vulnerable populations.

Participants in this study echoed these concerns, highlighting how changes in societal dynamics contribute to drug trafficking. In this regard, Participant B-9 stated: *"Social issues like poverty and unemployment have led many to turn to drug trafficking as a survival strategy"*. This reflects a growing recognition of how socio-economic challenges intersect with drug-related crime. In support of this view, Participant B-12 stated: *"The political landscape influences access to resources, and that trickles down to how communities deal with drugs"*, which underscores the intersection of politics and social welfare.

The implications of drug trafficking are particularly pronounced among marginalised communities, where social and economic marginalisation are often intertwined (Montilla, 2019:np). Participant B-14 reflected further that: *"Those in impoverished communities are often left to fend for themselves, and this creates opportunities for drug traffickers to exploit their vulnerabilities"*. This perspective aligns with literature on the link between systemic inequalities and drug-related crime (Buddenberg, 2011:12; USAID, 2013:15).

Furthermore, the participant responses illuminated on the role of governance and policy in shaping the drug trafficking landscape. In agreement, Participant C-18 remarked: *"The lack of effective policy measures allows drug traffickers to operate with impunity"*. This highlights the critical importance of political will in addressing the challenges posed by drug trafficking. This sentiment was echoed by Participant D-22, who stated: *"Inadequate responses from law enforcement and policymakers perpetuate the cycle of drug abuse and trafficking"*. Such perspectives suggest that efforts to combat drug trafficking must also address underlying social and political issues to be effective. The insights garnered from the participants show that the dynamics of drug trafficking are deeply embedded in the broader context of social and political transformation. Recognising the interplay between socio-economic factors, governance, and drug-related crime is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat drug trafficking in South Africa.

Theme 5: Deficient Intelligence and Law Enforcement Capacity

The literature review reveals a critical link between inadequate crime intelligence and insufficient enforcement capacity in the fight against drug trafficking in South Africa. Crime intelligence – which is defined as information utilised for crime prevention, investigations, and the preparation of evidence - plays a crucial role in combating organised crime networks associated with drug trafficking (Aslett, 2018:330). Investigations into organised crime often lack traditional complainants and necessitate a proactive, intelligence-led approach (Aslett, 2018:328). However, a significant challenge remains in the limited understanding of drug syndicate structures, with law enforcement frequently targeting lower-level street dealers rather than dismantling larger networks (Hübschle, 2010:95). This misdirection has profound implications, particularly in exacerbating the heroin epidemic in South Africa (Haysom, 2019). As such, timely and accurate intelligence is essential for comprehending the covert dynamics of drug trafficking (INTERPOL, 2022:np).

The participants' responses cohered with the literature-based perspectives regarding the lack of crime intelligence as an adverse factor in efforts to combat drug trafficking. Their responses highlight operational inefficiencies stemming from inadequate intelligence capabilities, which hinder timely responses to emerging threats. In this regard Participant A-3 remarked: *"A low level of crime intelligence information to assist members with profiling and searches. Members often resort to offender profiling to conduct their searches, acting on their perceptions rather than intelligence"*. This

sentiment was reinforced by Participant E-34, who noted that: “...the lack of information from INTERPOL and Crime Intelligence compromises the effectiveness of policing efforts at the street level due to inadequate information-sharing mechanisms between law enforcement agencies”.

Participant E-35 emphasised the need for a dedicated profiling team, stating: “Lack of sufficient intelligence and poor execution of drug operations”. This statement emphasises the absence of informers and a proactive monitoring approach for incoming containers. These insights reflect a broader consensus among participants regarding the urgent need for a robust crime intelligence framework. The absence of dedicated teams and insufficient inter-agency collaboration leads to fragmented efforts, rendering law enforcement vulnerable to exploitation by drug traffickers (Western Cape Government report (2018:20).

The literature points to systemic issues within law enforcement that exacerbate drug trafficking challenges. For instance, the UNODC (2022a:np) highlights that effective drug law enforcement mechanisms are often lacking in developing regions, which contributes to ineffective crime prevention programmes. Machethe and Mofokeng (2022:355) observed that 80% of illicit drugs in South Africa are of international origin. However, law enforcement at ports of entry is largely ineffective in curtailing cross-border drug trafficking. Participant A-1 succinctly captured the essence of the problem as follows: “The lack of resources, manpower, trained personnel ... represents a significant barrier to effective enforcement”.

Furthermore, participants articulated the issue of member commitment and motivation, revealing a culture that undermines operational effectiveness. In that regard, Participant A-4 noted: “The challenge is that members are not driven and motivated to work at the border. If there was much more stringent application of the rules of law, we would not be in the situation that we find ourselves in with a huge drug problem”. In addition, Participant B-14 highlighted the ageing workforce within specialised units, leading to diminished physical endurance and energy crucial for effective drug investigations. This lack of commitment contributes to operational inadequacies and fosters a culture of complacency within the police force and other law enforcement agencies.

Further analysis suggests that the interplay between insufficient crime intelligence and weak enforcement capacity creates a multifaceted challenge in combating drug trafficking. In that regard, Participant P-51 highlighted a critical “lack of intelligence on the drug trafficking organisation and their methods of operating”, which emphasises a persistent gap in understanding both the structure and evolving tactics of the drug trafficking groups. Participant P-51 furthermore stated that “drug traffickers are embracing new technology,” making it increasingly “difficult to keep abreast with these changes.” This gap in adaptive intelligence reflects a significant obstacle in enforcement efforts, as participants noted that limited capacity to keep abreast of traffickers’ advancements undermines effective response strategies, particularly in tracking new trends and developments in drug trafficking.

The participant insights reveal a profound understanding of how intelligence deficiencies hinder law enforcement’s ability to detect and disrupt trafficking networks. The latter view is in alignment with existing literature in which there is emphasis on organised crime’s propensity to thrive in environments characterised by corruption and poor law enforcement capacity (UNODC, 2020:np). The participants’ perspectives emphasise the urgent need for a comprehensive approach that integrates improved crime intelligence with strengthened law enforcement capacity in order to combat drug trafficking effectively.

Theme 6: Corruption in Drug Trafficking

The reviewed literature highlights the pervasive influence of corruption in facilitating drug trafficking across Africa, particularly at airports, harbours and land borders. Corruption acts as a critical enabler of organised crime syndicates, which frequently exploit corrupt officials to smuggle illegal commodities (ENACT, 2020:9). Research indicates that poor law enforcement and corruption significantly contribute to the sustained profitability of the illicit drug market (UNODC, 2021b:np). This corruption permeates various sectors, undermining eradication teams, law enforcement agencies, the criminal justice system and the health sector, thereby affecting the entire drug supply chain, from manufacturing to distribution (UNODC, 2022b:np).

Participants articulated a profound awareness of the corruption challenges confronting law enforcement in their efforts to combat drug trafficking. Many participants highlighted how corrupt practices undermine the integrity and effectiveness of policing efforts. In this regard, Participant A-2 stated: “Corruption. Our members are getting bribed by the drug traffickers. The members are working for the drug traffickers”. This perspective aligns with literature suggesting that drug money compromises the professional integrity of law enforcement personnel, thereby hindering effective policing efforts (USAID, 2013:10).

Concerns with the integrity of law enforcement personnel were echoed by Participant B-13, who mentioned that: *“The challenge lies with the integrity of the members as to whether the information will be leaked”*. The absence of vetting and integrity testing for officers, particularly those involved in drug trafficking investigations, was highlighted by Participant C-17, who stated that: *“There is a lack of integrity because there is no vetting and integrity testing for members who are recruited to investigate drug trafficking”*. These observations reflect systemic vulnerabilities identified in the literature, where corruption among law enforcement compromises national stability and the effectiveness of drug-related enforcement measures (McVay, 2020:np).

Several participants noted that corruption extends beyond the South African Police Service (SAPS) and is prevalent among various governmental and law enforcement agencies as well. Participant D-21 affirmed this view as follows: *“Corruption is one of the serious issues and it is not only limited to the SAPS but also to other role-players, governments, or agencies”*. This insight aligns with findings from the UNODC (2022b:np), which indicates that corruption creates barriers to effective policing and provides criminal networks with protection from law enforcement. The dynamics of corruption also manifest through complacency within law enforcement ranks. As such, Participant F-45 noted: *“There is no rotation of members, which makes them complacent and open to corruption”*. This lack of oversight and rotation may exacerbate corrupt practices, leaving officers susceptible to bribery and other forms of illicit influence.

The perspectives shared by the participants resonate with existing literature concerning drug trafficking organisations' greater financial power than local governments have, which enables them to secure protection from law enforcement and erode the rule of law (McVay, 2020:np). Corruption cultivates a culture of impunity that allows drug traffickers to operate with minimal risk and ultimately undermine the integrity and effectiveness of policing efforts. Participants' responses substantiate the literature perspectives regarding the pervasive influence of corruption in drug trafficking. Both sources emphasise the need for systemic reforms aimed at enhancing integrity, accountability, and vetting processes within law enforcement agencies.

Theme 7: The Role of Technology in Drug Trafficking

The reviewed literature highlights the transformative impact of technological advancements on illicit financial flows and criminal enterprises, significantly facilitating money laundering while complicating detection and prevention efforts for law enforcement. The integration of global financial networks has eliminated barriers to international trade, allowing vast sums of money to traverse borders without adequate regulatory oversight (UKEssays, 2018:np). Tropina (2016:8) posits that digital networks are central to new methods of generating and transmitting illegal funds, providing a conduit for traditional illicit financial flows. The evolution of criminal activities has paralleled advancements in technology, through avenues such as online banking, mobile payments, cryptocurrencies, e-commerce and online gambling offering new opportunities for illegal money transfers and concealment.

Participants provided valuable insights into how technology is reshaping drug trafficking dynamics. In that regard, Participant C-17 noted that: *“The advances in technology allow users to concoct narcotic substances from internet recipes”*. This observation highlights how the internet has dismantled barriers to drug manufacturing, enabling individuals to produce narcotics in domestic settings. Participant C-18 elaborated further, and stated that: *“The internet and technology have made it easier for anyone on the street to manufacture drugs in a domestic household,”* while also noting that “platforms such as the ‘Dark Web’ create new marketplaces for drug users and dealers, posing significant challenges for law enforcement”.

Concerns regarding the lack of intelligence on high-tech trafficking methods were voiced by Participant D-20, who remarked that: *“There is a lack of intelligence regarding the high-tech methods used by drug dealers for trafficking”*. This sentiment reflects the literature's assertion that the dynamic nature of the internet presents unprecedented challenges for governments and law enforcement in combatting illicit financial flows (Tropina, 2016:8). The evolution of criminal activities necessitates that law enforcement agencies should adapt to rapidly changing information and communication technologies.

Participants also underscored the influence of social media on youth engagement in drug trafficking. Participant D-23 commented: *“Technology influences young people through social media and other platforms, encouraging them to get involved in drug trafficking”*. Additionally, Participant F-43 mentioned that: *“Social media, profiling individuals in particular positions, accessibility, and financial rewards all play a role”*. These insights suggest that social media has normalised drug use and trafficking, while also acting as a recruitment tool for vulnerable individuals.

The responses from participants illustrate the complex relationship between technology and drug trafficking. This emphasises both the opportunities that technology presents for illicit activities and the challenges it poses for law enforcement. The mentioning of the 'Dark Web' aligns with Broséus et al.'s (2016:1-2) findings regarding underground environments that facilitate criminal operations and complicate detection efforts. Moreover, concerns about intelligence gaps in understanding high-tech methods highlight the literature's emphasis on the evolving nature of organised crime (Tropina, 2016:8). As such, the participant perspectives validate the critical concerns raised in the literature regarding the role of technology in drug trafficking. Advances that have enabled the home production of narcotics and the rise of the 'Dark Web' as a marketplace for illicit transactions are emblematic of the urgent need for law enforcement to adapt strategies in response to these evolving challenges.

Recommendations

In order to combat drug trafficking in South Africa effectively, it is essential to implement targeted economic development programmes aimed at creating sustainable job opportunities in low-income areas, while simultaneously strengthening social safety nets to support individuals facing financial hardships and deter their involvement in the illicit drug trade. In addition, the efforts of law enforcement agencies should be bolstered by means of increased funding, training and resources in order to enhance their capacity to combat drug trafficking effectively. This should be accompanied by improved international cooperation to disrupt transnational drug trafficking networks and address the broader issue of global inequality.

Given South Africa's strategic position as a transit hub for drugs, reinforcing border control measures is crucial to curb the flow of illicit substances across borders. Strengthening border security and investing in advanced technologies and surveillance systems will allow for more effective monitoring of border areas. Moreover, restructuring border management policies and procedures is necessary to enhance controls and prevent smuggling. Such prevention measures should be enhanced with strict enforcement of anti-corruption measures aimed at addressing the collusion between border officials and drug traffickers. Furthermore, law enforcement efforts should be intensified for the dismantlement of drug trafficking networks and disrupt online drug markets, including those operating on the 'Dark Web'.

Improving rehabilitation and treatment services is also vital to reducing the demand for illicit drugs and addressing addiction issues. Establishing dedicated drug enforcement units focused on intelligence-led investigations will help target organised crime networks and higher-level traffickers. In addition, investments in modern technologies and analytical tools are essential for enhancing proactive crime prevention efforts. Moreover, increasing funding and resources for law enforcement agencies will enhance policing initiatives and foster stronger community engagement, while also ensuring that personnel receive specialised training in drug detection and investigative techniques.

Strengthening anti-corruption measures through the strict enforcement of laws and prosecution of corrupt officials is imperative. Accordingly, improved transparency and accountability within law enforcement and judicial processes will further prevent corrupt practices. Furthermore, developing law enforcement capabilities to monitor and investigate online drug trafficking activities in collaboration with international partners and technology experts is crucial. Enhancing cybercrime legislation and enforcement mechanisms will address the growing threats posed by crypto-markets and encrypted communication channels.

Addressing drug trafficking in South Africa requires a nuanced and integrated strategy tailored to the country's unique socio-economic circumstances. By implementing targeted economic development initiatives, strengthening law enforcement capabilities, and enforcing rigorous anti-corruption measures, South African law enforcement authorities could effectively address the underlying causes of drug trafficking. Furthermore, enhancing border surveillance and investing in advanced technological solutions will improve the interception of illicit drug shipments. Fostering international collaboration and enhancing intelligence-sharing mechanisms will further augment South Africa's capacity to disrupt transnational drug trafficking syndicates. Ultimately, a cohesive approach involving local government, law enforcement, community groups and international partners is indispensable for ensuring the safety and well-being of the population while effectively combating drug trafficking in the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study on drug trafficking in South Africa as a whole highlights the complex and multifaceted challenges posed by this illicit trade. Through a thorough analysis of the contributing factors, the findings have identified critical areas for intervention and offered targeted recommendations tailored to the unique context of the

country. In South Africa, the pressing socio-economic landscape, marked by poverty and unemployment, underscores the need for targeted economic development programmes and robust social safety nets to deter individuals from turning to drug-related activities as a means of survival. Moreover, enhancing law enforcement capabilities, strengthening border security measures, and addressing corruption within law enforcement institutions are essential steps for disrupting the drug trafficking networks operating within the country.

South Africa faces challenges that necessitate comprehensive strategies designed to fit the country's diverse geographical and socio-political landscapes. It is crucial to bolster law enforcement agencies, cultivate the political will to combat drug trafficking, enhance international cooperation, and invest in advanced technology in order to address this issue at the national level effectively. Addressing drug trafficking requires a coordinated approach that integrates socio-economic development, law enforcement initiatives, governance reforms and international partnerships. By implementing the proposed strategies and fostering collaborations among various stakeholders, South Africa could work towards the reduction of the prevalence, magnitude and impact of drug trafficking, ultimately safeguarding the well-being and security of communities.

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