



POLICY BRIEF

Cultivating Alternatives: Towards a Regional Cannabis Model

Kevin Edmonds

University of Toronto

Abstract: *The decriminalization and regulation of cannabis has been occurring in many jurisdictions in the United States – but also closer to home and more significantly in Jamaica. While unable to directly compete with these long-established producers, the Windward Islands are home to their own significant, albeit illegal, cannabis economy. A pressing task facing the cash strapped governments of the Windward Islands, particularly St Vincent and St Lucia is to capitalize on the current climate of drug reform and adopt creative decriminalization policies which will ensure that they are able to transition the employment, income generation and value added opportunities from the ganja economy to the legal economy.*

Keywords: Cannabis; Ganja; Marijuana; St Vincent and the Grenadines; CARICOM; Bananas

The failure of trade liberalization to provide sufficient employment across the Caribbean has led to the troubling growth of the informal drug-based economy as a coping strategy for many impoverished rural and urban communities. In many ways it can be argued that this is an unintended, albeit devastating, example of the free market at work—particularly in the Windward Islands of St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

The key purpose of this brief is to provide context on the current socio-economic situation of the St Lucian and Vincentian case studies, documenting how ganja farming has become an important part of the respective economies. The secondary goal of

is to introduce policy measures aimed at decriminalization that can be implemented by the respective governments in order to ensure that the Windward Islands do not miss out on the opportunity to become active and innovative players in the rapidly emerging licit ganja industry.

THE FAILURE OF THE 'WAR ON DRUGS'

It is becoming increasingly common that influential international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization are declaring that after over 50 years of losing the War on Drugs it is now time to change course.¹ The reforms undertaken by the governments of Uruguay, Portugal, Jamaica and many U.S. states towards a policy of legalization/decriminalization is evidence that there is an increasing desire to a more humane approach to dealing with drugs – one rooted in scientific evidence, justice and ultimately harm reduction. The Caribbean's experience of the failed War on Drugs is regrettably typical, resulting in a suboptimal allocation of scarce resources towards surveillance, eradication and incarceration instead of much needed social and human development.² Another one of the problematic consequences of the War on Drugs is that it has lumped together two relatively separate drug trades in the Caribbean into one. Outside of Jamaica, Belize and Guyana, the Eastern Caribbean is home to a sizable regional cannabis trade, which is largely produced and consumed regionally – but it is also a trafficking corridor for cocaine moving onto North America and Europe. It is crucial to make the distinction between the two trades: while there is some inevitable overlap, the actors, resources and levels of violence are very different.

The year 2015 has marked the start of what one can only hope will be a regional transformation in regards to cannabis. After decades of discussion and deliberation, Jamaica has taken the first step in the region and implemented important reforms on cannabis. However, there has been a troubling lack of movement from the rest of the Caribbean Community on the matter, as evidenced by the very quiet CARICOM 'ganja commission'. Given a lack of developmental options across the region, sitting on the sidelines during a historic period of drug reform cannot be an option; the Eastern Caribbean islands must not only be one of the first off the starting line, but also creative in order to capture as many of the potential gains from cannabis reform as possible. The

challenge the sub-region is currently facing is how to help transition the currently illegal positives which have emerged from the drug trade—such as employment, income generation, entrepreneurship and regional trade networks—into legal ones. These should form key cornerstones of any regional discussion of comprehensively reforming cannabis prohibition laws so that they do not cause further harm to the most vulnerable, meaning those who often find employment in this trade.

In contrast to some of the more vocal cannabis advocates in the region, the reform of existing prohibitive laws should not be seen as a panacea to the many structural socio-economic problems which challenge the Caribbean. While decriminalization is an important and necessary first step, it must be part of a wider effort to not only diversify and intensify agricultural production and employment, but also to support and transform it into an industry that the youth and displaced farmers will want to participate in.

THE RISE OF 'GANJA' AMID THE COLLAPSE OF BANANAS

Starting in the mid-1990s the Caribbean underwent a process of trade liberalization which dismantled the former protections vital to the region's banana industry, as mandated by the World Trade Organization. This gradual elimination of protected trade with Europe led to numerous negative and widespread impacts on rural communities, such as an increase in unemployment, poverty, crime and a dramatic cutback in government programs and services.³ As Thomas Klak has stated, the Eastern Caribbean banana trade went from 'riches to rags'.⁴

As evidence of this, in 1990 St Vincent and St Lucia produced 82,725 and 160,000 tonnes of bananas respectively. By 2010 St Vincent produced 56,000 tonnes of bananas, with St Lucia managing 21,702 tonnes—or a drop of nearly 34 and 85 per cent in 20 years.⁵ As a result of the economic transformation, in St Lucia, the unemployment rate in 2012 stood at over 20 per cent with the youth unemployment rate reaching a staggering 32 per cent.⁶ International Financial Institutions have openly stated that St Vincent's unemployment rate is difficult to discern, but agree that annually fluctuates between 25 and 30 percent.⁷

Within the Eastern Caribbean, governments, the private sector (i.e. 'Fair Trade' initiatives) and international financial institutions have all failed to effectively find a way to integrate former banana farmers and rural communities into alternative, competitive

industries in order to provide opportunity, income and employment. Due to this bleak economic situation, many farmers and former agricultural workers in the Eastern Caribbean have begun to turn to the cultivation of cannabis as a necessary activity in order to survive.

While this reality cannot be openly stated on the record by the Eastern Caribbean Heads of Government due to fears of being accused of abandoning their commitments to international narcotics prohibition regimes, the cannabis economy provides a significant source of income to many impoverished communities.⁸ As Andre De Caries—the former leader of the St Lucia Cannabis Movement—has written:

This is a hidden economy, meaning that it exists under the radar of Government, but contributes significantly to the alleviation of poverty among many of the poor people of this nation. This is not a “trickle down” economic model like tourism, but a “filter up” economic model like any agricultural based model. Money generated from the ganja industry, is money that stays in the country as opposed to tourism dollars where a large percentage of it ends up overseas. Reality is that there are just not enough legitimate jobs out there to employ everyone, and if there is indeed an industry that contributes so significantly, then why try to destroy it?⁹

During my six months of fieldwork in the Windward Islands it was repeated by those who engaged in the cultivation of cannabis, a significant amount of the older farmers state that they would still be banana farmers if the industry had not been destroyed by the WTO in the mid-1990s.

Indeed, the cultivation of marijuana has become so commonplace in St Vincent that in the mid-1990s a Marijuana Growers Association was established on the island where more than an estimated 12,000 acres of land were under marijuana cultivation, employing more than 8,000 people directly.¹⁰ Twenty years after the initial economic shock, based on its size, St Vincent and the Grenadines is one of the largest, if not the largest per capita cultivator and exporter of ganja in the world.¹¹ The issues facing cultivators have not disappeared either, and many of the leading figures involved in the Marijuana Growers Association have recently reorganized to form the St Vincent and the Grenadines Cannabis Revival Committee. Despite the importance of the ganja economy, with the legalization of cannabis in many American

states and Jamaica legalizing marijuana for medicinal use there is the possibility that the Windward islands may become net importers of ganja if they do not play their cards right.

APPROACHES AND RESULTS

After conducting primary research on the ganja trade in St Lucia and St Vincent for six months, I have been fortunate to learn from farmers, civil society activists, smugglers and dealers, providing incredible insight into how cannabis plays a major role in the underground economy of both islands. While there has been a steady increase in police seizures in St Lucia, particularly in the mountainous Fond St Jacques and Mabouya Valley communities, it is not comparable to St Vincent, where it is an extremely important, albeit illicit, economic engine. Using data from the Royal St Lucian Police Force and the International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, it has become clear that the ganja economy contributes as much to the domestic economy as bananas did at their peak in St Lucia – and completely overshadows it in the case of St Vincent.¹²

Within the Windward Islands, St Vincent occupies the economic periphery, as it has not benefitted from agriculture or tourism in the same way that St Lucia has.¹³ This literal lack of alternatives is the primary reason why so many Vincentian individuals have taken to the ganja trade in order to survive. While St Lucia does grow an estimated tens of millions of dollars' worth of cannabis at the conservative end of the spectrum,¹⁴ due to its geographic location and large tourism industry with numerous yachts, boats, ferries and airplanes coming and going, it primarily acts as a trafficker to the islands north of St Vincent. The southern tip of St Lucia and the cannabis-growing regions of northern St Vincent are roughly 50 km apart.

Many farmers consider that the decriminalization of cannabis would be a better route to changing its status than full legalization at the present time. This would have important benefits with regards to reducing incarceration and judiciary costs, in addition to removing the criminal penalties of marijuana possession which have given so many people an unnecessary criminal record. Getting rid of these penalties will allow for greater life opportunities for people who would otherwise remain marginalized and often unemployable due to this record, along with offering a medical 'harm reduction' approach for those with addiction problems.

WHY DECRIMINALIZE?

The call for decriminalization has to do with the fact that global economic flows and trends have been unkind to the Caribbean. Given the realities of the Caribbean's marginalized position within the global economy, a push towards the full legalization of marijuana would leave the Caribbean at the mercy of much larger producers who enjoy economies of scale such as the United States and potentially Canada. A shift towards decriminalization and the legalization of, in particular, medicinal marijuana would provide the needed breathing space for regional cannabis industries to emerge and seek regional and international sources of investment. Under decriminalization recreational and medicinal consumption becomes regulated/legalized—however trafficking and cultivation outside of the strict regulations would remain criminal offenses, creating a supply problem. When it comes to reform, the rest of the Caribbean does not have to reinvent the wheel, but it has to take action, as Jamaica and the region's ganja advocates have already done much of the heavy lifting on the matter.

Jamaica has set forth important guidelines concerning limits on amounts of marijuana for personal possession, and these have not triggered significant domestic or international backlash. Some of the key aspects of Jamaica's 2015 revision to the Dangerous Drugs (Amendment) Act are as follows:

- Possession of 2 ounces or less of ganja for individuals 18 years and older is no longer a criminal offence for which one can be arrested, charged and imprisoned, but rather a ticketable offence. In addition, each household will be permitted to grow no more than 5 plants for personal consumption.
- The possession of ganja for religious purposes by the Rastafari community, medical patients consuming for therapeutic reasons, and scientific researchers, are exempt from the fines applicable to the general public.

While Jamaica will undoubtedly enjoy numerous benefits of being the first mover in the region to adopt significant cannabis reforms, the opportunity to maximize the potential must be attempted by more regional members. Following this, the rest of the Caribbean should take advantage of the opportunity that has emerged with ganja reform as a way to break into niche markets, attract

investment in research and development, and strengthen the linkages between the waning agricultural sector and value-added industries.

Central to this is the establishment of regulated companies and licenced cooperatives that are legally permitted to grow and study marijuana for medicinal purposes. The size of the legal marijuana market in the United States in 2014 was an estimated at \$2.7 billion, and there exists space for Caribbean producers to compete.¹⁵ The experience of Jamaica recently landing a \$100 million deal with the Canada-based Timeless Herbal Care Limited is instructive of the potential market that exists for marijuana-based products.¹⁶

By having licenced cooperatives as an important part of the industry, it will allow cultivators with low levels of economic resources, who had previously engaged in previously illicit activities, to bring their skills and expertise into the formal economy. Cooperatives would also allow the gains from the marijuana sector to be distributed in a more horizontal, democratic manner (in addition to becoming taxable). The cooperative element would also tie in with the niche marketing idea of exporting an ethically produced medicinal product (to come in the more traditional form or as an oil or edible products), which has the potential to be certified organic, grown on the slopes of volcanic Caribbean mountains.

If the decriminalization or legalization of ganja takes place without sufficient regional and domestic regulation, the Caribbean may end up losing out on one of its most lucrative, albeit illicit, exports. This lesson has not been lost on the small cultivators either, as the people who are displaced from selling five bags on the block will not find employment after legalization, and without the ability to compete with larger producers, may fall prey to cocaine trafficking, which is a more lucrative, but also considerably more violently administered alternative than grassroots, community-based ganja cultivation and trade.

Due to the fact that times are quickly changing concerning the legal status of ganja as a prohibited narcotic, the Windward Islands should look to implement the following policy measures to help bring about the decriminalization and regulation of cannabis in a creative manner:

- CARICOM must commit to implementing reforms concerning the decriminalization of ganja as soon as possible. Following the

model put forward by Jamaica – standardized limits on personal possession and cultivation must be implemented in addition to the legalization of ganja for medicinal and spiritual use.

- A clear framework concerning the production of medicinal marijuana for domestic and international use must be implemented in a democratic partnership with civil society and farming associations. Foreign investment in these industries must be done in partnership with locals in order to avoid the dominance of foreign capital – placing local workers as little else but cheap labour.
- An open, affordable licencing system for domestic producers and production cap will also ensure that wealthier individuals in the Windward Islands do not dominate the new industry at the expense of those who have traditionally cultivated ganja and bore the accompanying physical hardship and legal risks.
- The legalization of hemp for industrial purposes must also be put forward. Hemp has proven to be an incredibly versatile and renewable raw material that can be used in everything from clothing to building supplies.
- In regards to recreational supply, the Netherlands has been a pioneer in regards to creatively navigating international narcotics laws without penalty. In 1976, the country made a sharp distinction between hard and soft drugs, implementing a policy of de-facto legalization in regards to the recreational use of cannabis.¹⁷ While remaining a signatory to all major drug control conventions, the country has continually faced pressure from the international community to shut down the ‘coffeeshop’ scene in Amsterdam, where ganja is openly sold and consumed—but the government has relented. Coffeeshops can have a maximum of 500 grams on site at any given time. Despite the cultivation of ganja being illegal in the Netherlands, these shops have never had the problem of running out. While the power dynamics are undoubtedly different in the Caribbean, one must be hopeful that a similar ‘grey area’ of de facto legalization can work—as there are many spliff bars in St Vincent which operate in the open without sanction.

CONCLUSION

While it would be sensible to think that the majority of individuals engaged in the cultivation of cannabis would have been in favour of its outright legalization, my fieldwork highlighted that this was not the case. The decriminalization of cannabis will have important benefits with regards to reducing incarceration and judiciary costs, in addition to removing the criminal penalties of cannabis possession which have given so many people a serious criminal record for a very minor offence.

While the legalization of cannabis is often hailed as a panacea by those in civil society, the Caribbean will still face important structural limitations in regards to achieving long term, equitable growth. Given their small size, inability to achieve economies of scale and a limited resource base, it is very likely that even with the eventual legalization of cannabis cultivation the problems inherent to small island developing states will still hinder the economic and social development of St Lucia and St Vincent. As a Senator from St Vincent, Jomo Thomas remarked concerning the lingering issue regarding economies of scale: 'There are marijuana fields in Kentucky larger than the entire island of St Vincent'.¹⁸

This is why the region must act in concert to bring about reforms which not only change the laws, but act to capture the economic benefits associated with the creation of a regulated marijuana market. Thus, if Caribbean governments are not careful, they will soon be importing the very same ganja that they were demonized and punished for producing for so many years.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Kevin Edmonds is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Toronto and is a St Lucian national. His research examines the connection between trade liberalization, the decline of the banana trade and the rise of marijuana cultivation/trafficking in the Eastern Caribbean islands of St Lucia and St Vincent. He can be reached at kevinedmonds1@gmail.com or on Twitter @kevin_edmonds

NOTES

¹ Major reports recently calling for significant drug reform include the leaked United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's briefing paper on decriminalization (2015), London School of Economics Expert Group's *Ending the Drug Wars* (2014), the Global Commission on Drug Policy's *Taking Control: Pathways to Drug Policies that Work* (2014) and the World Health Organization's *Consolidated*

Guidelines on HIV Prevention, Diagnosis, Treatment and Care for Key Populations (2014).

- ² For an overview of the impact the War on Drugs has had on the Caribbean in particular, three excellent sources are Ivelaw L. Griffith's *The Political Economy of Drugs in the Caribbean*. (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2000) and *Drugs and Security in the Caribbean: Sovereignty Under Siege* (University Park, Penn State University Press, 1997), in addition to Axel Klein, Marcus Day & Anthony Harriot's *Caribbean Drugs: From Criminalization to Harm Reduction*. (London, Zed Books, 2004).
- ³ See Myers, Gordon. *Banana Wars: The Price of Free Trade*. (New York, Zed, 2004); Girvan, Norman. 'Caribbean Dependency Thought Revisited.' *Canadian Journal of International Studies*. Volume 27, Number 3, (2006): 327-350; Fridell, Gavin. *Alternative Trade: Legacies for the Future*. (Halifax, Fernwood Press, 2013).
- ⁴ Klak, Thomas, et al. 'Inclusive Neoliberalism? Perspectives from Eastern Caribbean Farmers'. *Progress in Development Studies*. Volume 11, Number 1, (2009): 34.
- ⁵ FAO, 2013. FAOSTAT. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- ⁶ St Lucia Voice. 'Unemployed Youth Can Take Hope'. July 28, 2012. Available at: http://www.thevoiceslu.com/features/2012/july/28_07_12/Unemployed.htm
- ⁷ International Monetary Fund. 'St Vincent and the Grenadines: IMF Country Report'. No. 11, 343. 2011. Washington DC: IMF.
- ⁸ Currently cannabis is classified as an illegal narcotic under St Lucia and St Vincent's respective Drugs (Prevention of Misuse) Acts.
- ⁹ De Caires, Andre. *The Ganja Document: Exploring Decriminalization in St Lucia*. Unpublished. 2013.
- ¹⁰ Gibbings, Wesley. 'Marijuana Report Wins Applause'. *IPS News*. March 24, 1999. Available at: <http://www.ipsnews.net/1999/03/narcotics-caribbean-marijuana-report-wins-applause/>
- ¹¹ Fineman, Ben. 'Seeds of Distress in St Vincent'. *The Los Angeles Times*. January 28, 2000. Available at: http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2000-01-28/news/0001280218_1_marijuana-vincent-island-economy
- ¹² It has been stated by the Drug Enforcement Agency and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime that police forces on average intercept or eradicate only 10-15 percent of marijuana worldwide.
- ¹³ Bishop, Matthew Louis. *The Political Economy of Caribbean Development*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 134
- ¹⁴ From my own analysis of data from the Royal St Lucian Police Force and the International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports, using a very conservative calculating methodology based on eradication and seizures, I estimate that the value of the cannabis economy in St Lucia falls within the range of \$65 - \$140 million USD in 2013. While similar statistics are not available from St Vincent, it is much undoubtedly much higher.
- ¹⁵ Grillo, Ioan. 'U.S. Legalization of Marijuana Has Hit Mexican Cartels' Cross Border Trade'. *Time*. April 8, 2015. Available at: <http://time.com/3801889/us-legalization-marijuana-trade/>
- ¹⁶ Asher, Kesi. 'US 100m Ganja Deal'. *The Jamaica Observer*. September 15, 2015. Available at: <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/US-100-m-ganja-deal>
- ¹⁷ MacCoun, Robert & Peter Reuter. 'Interpreting Dutch Cannabis Policy: Reasoning by Analogy in the Legalization Debate'. *Science*. Volume 278, Issue 553. (1997): 47.
- ¹⁸ This interview was conducted with Senator Jomo Thomas at his office in Kingstown, St Vincent in November 2014.