

The Economics of Drug Trafficking on Security in West Africa: an Overview of the Gambia

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ABSTRACT: Illicit proceeds from drug trafficking distort the economy to the detriment of legal businesses and markets. The objective of the study provides an in-depth analysis of the economic nature of drug trafficking in The Gambia. The study adopted the exploratory qualitative research design. This approach was used to examine how drug trafficking is an emerging national security threat to The Gambia. The study interviewed various government officials, including the Drug Law Enforcement Agency, The Gambia's Ministry of Health, the Financial Intelligence Unit, and a former drug trafficker using non-probability and purposive sampling methods. Primary data was collected through in-depth oral interviews, while secondary data was gathered from journal articles, newspapers, reports, national legal documents, and reputable websites. The Gambia and West Africa face a growing national security threat from drug trafficking, exacerbated by factors like poverty, unemployment, instability, corruption, and porous borders, affecting social, economic, environmental, health, and education sectors. The study revealed that both women and children are involved in the illicit drug trade. The study reveals that, aside from the economic benefits, drug trafficking poses not only a rising national security threat but also a global security threat.

KEYWORDS: Drugs trafficking, The Gambia, Drug Law Enforcement Agency, Threat, security, national, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

Drug trafficking basically refers to the importation, sale, or transportation of illegal substances. Another name for it is drug distribution. The sale, importation, and transportation of illegal controlled substances are all punishable under drug trafficking statutes (Klingner & Espinosa, 2014). Methamphetamines, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and other illegal narcotics are examples of these substances. Drug trafficking is more serious than drug possession, which is also illegal. Drug distribution and trafficking are crimes, and they are more dangerous than drug possession (FindLaw, 2020).

The trafficking of drugs is a very lucrative business with an extremely complex network. The majority of hard drugs (heroin, cocaine, amphetamine, etc.) are recognised as illegal worldwide, despite the fact that there is a lack of international consistency regarding the legality and illegality of drugs (Finckenauer, Fuentes, & Ward, 2007). As a result, governments work together to prevent the trafficking of certain illicit substances. "Drug trafficking is a worldwide illegal trade that includes the production, distribution, and sale of substances that are prohibited by law." (Office of the United Nations on Drugs and Crime, 2010). Because drug trafficking is linked to organised and multinational crime, it affects every nation on the planet. Agencies from all over the world collaborate to combat drug trafficking because of its international nature.

Distribution of hard narcotics, such as cocaine, is only one aspect of drug trafficking. Additionally, it includes the unlawful distribution of prescription and medical medications, including pain relievers and sleeping medicines. Pharmaceutical opiates and hydrocodone compounds are the most common illegal substances used in the distribution of prescription medications (FindLaw, 2020). While some medicines are marketed as illegal worldwide, others are not. For instance, nations like Rwanda and Holland have legalised marijuana for commercial, recreational, and medical purposes. Nonetheless, it is still prohibited in the majority of nations worldwide.

Research on drug trafficking and its effects on national security is scarce in The Gambia. However, the nation's drug trafficking cases and court proceedings are sufficiently covered by the media. Three tonnes of cocaine were seized in the most recent and extensively publicised drug trafficking case. This was thought to be the largest drug bust in West Africa (Saine, 2021). Naturally, it was covered by all of the major worldwide media outlets. According to Ousman Saidybah, a spokesman for the Gambia's drug enforcement agency, "the 118 bags of cocaine were found on Thursday during a search of a container shipped from the port of

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Guayaquil in Ecuador and through Algeciras in Spain." (Saine, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The study used key informant interviews to assess drug trafficking's effects on Gambia's population of 2,698,23 with key actors like DLEAG personnel, Psychiatric Hospital, MoBSE, and Financial Intelligence Unit playing crucial roles. Non-probability and purposive sampling were used for in-depth studies within short timeframes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The operational costs of a drug trafficking business are quite low. A substantial cost is spent when the contraband is transferred across regulated borders rather than during manufacturing (Wilson & Stevens, 2007). Suppliers, customers, and a distribution channel are the three main components of the illicit drug market at any one time (Jenner, 2011). Drug trafficking organisations have enormous financial resources at their disposal due to their high revenue, which they can use to bribe authorities and live extravagant lifestyles (Demombynes, 2011).

Drug trafficking finds the Middle East and North Africa to be a very profitable destination and transit region. The region's instability and the existence of numerous terrorist organisations make it unsafe, which drug cartels take advantage of to grow their operations. "The illegal drug industry, which is currently valued between \$400 and \$600 billion, is expanding alongside hotspots for the illegal trade." (Page 1 of Barzoukas, 2017). Drug use, especially among drug abusers, can result in dependency. In addition to relying on society to meet their needs, individuals also lose their employability. Both the unemployment rate and poverty rate rise as a result. The correlation between drug dependence unemployment and poverty is revealing. Similarly, the stigma associated with drug use and its criminalisation limits a person's employment prospects by decreasing options for employment and productivity (UNDOC, 2025).

The economy is distorted by illegal drug trafficking profits, which hurt legitimate companies and markets. Because drug barons bribe authorities with their dirty money, a profitable illegal drug market causes corruption in the legal system and law enforcement (Barzoukas, 2017). Drug gangs in Mexico gave aid and loans to impoverished farmers, business owners, housewives, and churches. They publicised these ostensibly charitable actions in publications. Regrettably, the beneficiaries later experienced violence and financial extortion from the cartels (Robles, Calderon, & Magaloni, 2015).

Drug usage, trafficking, and cultivation are major issues in Senegal, just like in the Gambia. Drug trafficking is one of the several problems afflicting the two countries with Guinea Bissau, and because of their proximity and physical location (The Gambia is surrounded by Senegal), whatever happens in Senegal has an impact on The Gambia, either directly or indirectly. High consumption of cannabis, cocaine, and heroin in West Africa leads to significant drug-related problems, causing severe health and social issues.

Senegal faces drug trafficking-related crimes, such as money laundering and financing terrorism, just like other African nations. Drug trafficking, which brings in over US\$360 million (CFA 200 billion) per year, is the primary driver of money laundering and terrorism financing, which places it ninth in the world (Abderrahmane, 2022). "Almost all routes from West Africa to Morocco pass through Senegal, and the country has become an important hub for cocaine trafficked to Europe," the statement adds. In 2021, the Institute for Security Studies (p. 37). The tactic drug traffickers employ to conceal or justify the illicit funds they have amassed from the drug trade is known as money laundering. Therefore, the construction and real estate sectors are used by drug traffickers to launder their illicit profits (Abderrahmane, 2022).

In Senegal, a variety of illicit drug categories are used or trafficked. However, due to the widespread market in the problematic Casamance region, cannabis is the most manufactured and utilised substance there. MFDC separatists in this area, particularly along the borders of Guinea Bissau and The Gambia, plant a lot of cannabis (Institute for Security Studies, 2021). The Senegalese government's attempts to combat the drug trade in the nation have been hampered by the ongoing dispute between it and the MFDC. Nevertheless, in their fight against drug trafficking, important Senegalese institutions have created a two-pronged strategy with assistance from the WHO. They have established a National Drug Observatory and expanded access to evidence-based treatment for drug dependence (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014). Additionally, the first victim assistance drug treatment centre in West Africa was constructed in Dakar in 2016 (Institute for Security Studies, 2021).

Guinea-Bissau, Africa's 'narco-state', is a major transit point for illegal drugs from South America to Europe and the US. The economic, military, and political elites are accused of involvement in the lucrative trade (Kaalby, 2021; Shaw, 2015). The elite's involvement in the illicit drug trade in Guinea-Bissau has led to instability and insecurity. The country is experiencing a 'political economy of protection', with transactions facilitated by competing individuals. This overrun of drugs leads to political instability, coups, and assassinations, threatening the rule of law and governance (Felbab-Brown, 2010; Shaw, 2015).

Among other detrimental effects, Bissau's economy has been impacted by drug trafficking, which has also contributed to

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widespread corruption. Poverty makes a large number of people susceptible to and involved in the drug trade. Additionally, there has been a rise in local violence, and disputes between criminal organisations have claimed lives. To participate in the profitable but extremely risky drug trade, young people quit school (Kaalby, 2021). Eliminating drug trafficking from national politics is an issue the nation faces. Drug money is used to pay the parties of prominent politicians who are entangled in the drug trade maze. Likewise, Shaw and Gomes (2020, p. 3) stated:

In Guinea-Bissau, where clientelism is the foundation of the political system, drug trafficking money also serves as a valuable resource for local politics. This led to a vicious loop in which drug money supports some members of the military and political elite who are uninterested in the normative social, political, and economic advancement of the nation. Any kind of sustainable growth or outside financial assistance is thwarted by this political-military misgovernance, which feeds a vicious cycle that increases dependency on drug money. Consequently, the interdependence persists.

Another West African nation that deals with the threat of drug trafficking and the associated crimes is Nigeria. Cannabis is the most often trafficked narcotic in Nigeria, as it is in the majority of the subregion's nations. In 2017, 10.6 million persons, or 10.8% of the population, smoked cannabis (Federal Ministry of Health, Government of Nigeria, 2018). When Nigerian colonial soldiers brought Cannabis Sativa seedlings back to their homeland following World War II, the country's drug situation took a bad turn. The Indian hemp was then abused and trafficked (Wilson, 2018). Because of her advantageous geographic location and her porous land boundaries, the nation subsequently became a transit nation. (Page 204, Olasupo & Olusegun, 2021). Massive quantities of cocaine smuggled from South America on their way to Europe and North America do cross via Nigeria, according to the Nigeria Drug Law Enforcement Agency (Nwannennaya & Abiodun, 2017). Cannabis is most commonly abused and widely grown because of its availability, affordability, and herbal nature. It can be grown and made domestically. In Nigeria, drug trafficking occurs via air or through seaports (Nwannennaya & Abiodun, 2017).

For a long time, Nigeria used an oppressive approach to drug control. Its drug policy takes a reactive and aggressive approach to supply control. Drug suppliers were given priority by the agency, particularly those in urban areas and at ports (Klantschnig, 2016). Despite this tactic, drug misuse is still a major problem in Nigeria. More than one-third of cannabis users, 25% of heroin users, and 20% of pharmaceutical opioid abusers in 2017 had drug use problems, according to the Federal Ministry of Health, Government of Nigeria (2018). Additionally, drug trafficking has numerous social repercussions. "These negative effects include, among other things, relationship problems, domestic violence, and effects on an individual's health and well-being." (Government of Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Health, 2018, p. 42).

During military administration, Nigerian drug control organisations, agencies, programs, and campaigns were established. The drug trade through Nigeria was viewed by the military governments of Generals Buhari (1983–1985), Babangida (1985–1993), and Abacha (1993–1998) as damaging their reputation and that of the elite. To enhance the nation's perception of drugs, the NDLEA was established in 1989 (Klantschnig, 2016). The Nigerian police and the Board of Customs and Excise served as the main government agencies responsible for drug interdiction before the establishment of the NDLEA. Similarly, drug users' counselling, treatment, and rehabilitation fell within the purview of the Federal Welfare Department (Nwannennaya & Abiodun, 2017). The vast majority of Nigerian drug officials believe that the reason NDLEA was so effective in the late 1990s was that the drug war was given top political priority by the military government at the time (Klantschnig, 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews revealed various themes related to drug trafficking in The Gambia, including types of drugs, concealment methods, traffickers, and hindrances to law enforcement, with various drugs being trafficked including cannabis sativa, cocaine, heroin, clonazepam, diazepam, alprazolam, methamphetamine, and ecstasy. As per the Drug Control Act (2003), which sets out the mandate of the DLEAG, drugs trafficked into the country are put into two categories: prohibited drugs and controlled drugs. While prohibited drugs are totally illegal to possess and traffic (except if approved for scientific purposes); controlled drugs can be used only with the approval of a certified medical doctor. Thus far, these remarks were made by interviewees from DLEAG:

The most commonly seized substances that are mainly found in the market when it comes to the drugs that are under our jurisdiction are, generally speaking, different types of cannabis, controlled substances, different types of tablets, heroin, sometimes in trace amounts, cocaine, sometimes seized locally when it is in crack form, and seizures during transit (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

Ecstasy tablets make up the vast majority of drugs that are imported into The Gambia. Now they're bringing this hashish in here. Cocaine and marijuana are also coming into this region. However, cocaine, ecstasy, and other drug tablets—rather than marijuana—are the main problems we are currently facing (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

DLEAG's data shows cannabis sativa was the most trafficked drug in The Gambia between 2017 and 2021, attributed to its accessibility, affordability, and domestic cultivation in the Casamance region of neighbouring Senegal. As a result, it is the most trafficked and consumed. *Because it is the most widely used drug in the nation, cannabis is still the most trafficked substance in*

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The Gambia. Its price also plays a significant role, as you can get it for D50 or D100 and obtain your dosage (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

The statistical tables below, provided by DLEAG, show the various types of drugs that were smuggled into The Gambia between 2017 and 2021. The data backs up the assertion that cannabis sativa is the drug most frequently smuggled into The Gambia. Everyone interviewed by DLEAG came to another agreement. All of them agreed that The Gambia is a transit nation used by hard illegal drug trafficking. They argued that comparatively few of the heavier drugs imported into the country are used here, especially cocaine and heroin. This is due to their belief that the Gambians lack the funds necessary to buy these treatments. These quotes demonstrate the responses:

Additionally, heroin is present and seized in trace amounts, but the majority of cocaine seizures occur while the drug is mostly in transit. We say "in transit" because we consider the purchasing power, the state of the economy, and people's capacity to satisfy their cravings for such drugs, which is why we don't think the Gambia is the intended market (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

These seizures are not intended for use in the Gambia. We don't even have any of these, and they wouldn't have a market for them (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

The statistical tables below, from DLEAG, show the drug types and their quantities trafficked in The Gambia from 2017 to 2021.

Table 1: Statistical Data Durg Seizures in The Gambia for Year 2017-2021 From DLEAG

DRUG TYPE	Quantity-2017	Quantity 2018	Quantity-2019	Quantity-2020	Quantity-2021
CANNABIS	2tn 563kg 213g 416mg	2tn 983kg504g271mg	2tn 282kg 82g 25mg	2t, 582kg, 284g, 765mg	2ton, 749kg, 69g, 203mg
HASHISH	1kg 237g 243mg	1kg,941g 222mg	1kg 32g 585mg	240kg, 919g, 403mg	2kg,447g,14mg
COCAINE	624g 748mg	1kg 73g 545mg	1kg, 181g, 600mg	1kg 181g, 600mg	2t, 953kg, 953g, 870mg
HEROIN	34g 800mg	5g 400mg	11g	8g	213g, 580mg
CLONAZEPAM	35 tabs	299 tabs	325 tabs	528 tabs	2,447 tabs
DIAZEPAM	24 tabs	Nil	17 tabs	13 tabs	232 tabs
ALPROZEPAM	Nil	Nil	Nil	60 tabs	Nil
METHAMPHETAMINE	298g 90mg	Nil	Nil	25 tabs	85 tabs
DIHYDROCODEINE	Nil	Nil	Nil	29 tabs	Nil
ECSTASY	Nil	Nil	Nil	12 tabs	32 tabs

Source: Survey, 2025

Regarding the nature of drug trafficking in The Gambia, drug concealing techniques were another issue that emerged frequently in the respondents' comments. The various strategies used by drug traffickers to conceal their goods from law enforcement and detention facilities are referred to as concealment. Smugglers in The Gambia utilise a variety of advanced techniques to move drugs. The DLEAG interviewees stated that both personal and factory concealment are employed. In addition to this, traffickers distribute and move their illegal goods via additional channels. In order to conceal their drugs and get past borders undetected, traffickers in The Gambia, particularly those involved in the trafficking of cannabis sativa, use locally accessible items. The agency's personnel have reported *concealing drugs in various forms, including vehicles, bodies, and charcoal bags (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025)*. The usage of a variety of concealment methods was corroborated by other interviewees from DLEAG. These extracts from the interviews substantiated that:

Whatever you think is used as a method of concealment. Some others will swallow it, some others will strap on their bodies, some others will use these jujus and rap it there, you know, you will think that this one is a marabout that's untouchable when he is carrying drugs (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

Mostly nowadays they use these vehicles, a time they will even use inside the vehicle tire, you know we have this tubeless, so they can just put in drugs and pump it again and move with it (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

Both traffickers and DLEAG attest to the sophisticated nature of the drug trafficking industry in The Gambia. A former infamous drug trafficker claims that they use extremely complex techniques to hide their drugs and avoid detection by law police.

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According to him:

Even ambulances um for instance, ambulances are used, most of them are used for trafficking drugs simply because they are not suspected. They are not easily suspected, so ambulances and means like bank motors, these banks which supposed to take cash. So, if you have any relation with them those people can easily transport drugs to any destination. And even these bonga fish, chalo, of fish mongers, you know they put it in baskets, so some people use that as a means of transportation (Former drug trafficker, 2025).

They utilise manufacturing concealment to conceal their illegal products as part of their efforts to traffic hard drugs into the nation. Drug cartels collaborate with manufacturers or set up factories to hide their drugs with manufactured goods using this advanced concealing technique. All of the DLEAG interviewees affirmed this, and one of them stated, that *others are using a factory—now they have resorted to factory concealment. Say this is a basin, the last time we had was a basin type, a well-designed basin, this flashy and nice one. It was a factory made, you know but it was all loaded with cocaine (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).* In attempting to expose some of the ways that drug traffickers conceal their illegal commodities, it is crucial to note that traffickers carry their illegal items using land, sea, and river channels. According to the DLEAG interviewees' and a former drug trafficker's comment, traffickers employ all of these channels. They stated that the drug trafficking operation always uses the nation's land borders, seaport, and airport. They stated:

Drugs are trafficked through our borders, both land, sea, and air. These are all ways how drugs are being trafficked into the country. Swallowing is used more by traffickers who use air (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025). Some come through the sea, some come through land, and some come through the airports. If you are a keen follower of our institution, you will hear about the Banta Keita case which came through the sea (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025). Even boats, boats are easily used, these fishermen the boats they use, river transportation is one of the easiest ways to transport drugs to any destination because in the river there is nowhere where you have a checkpoint or you have somebody who will inspect you (Former drug trafficker, 2025).

Interviews reveal numerous obstacles to drug law enforcement, including community behaviour, physical attacks, court judgments, lack of armed presence, and inadequate detection tools, causing frustration and frustration. Interviewees revealed that the judicial system poses a challenge to the successful prosecution of drug trafficking suspects, highlighting a gloomy picture, saying *you go to court today, the magistrate will not come, you go to court tomorrow there is no interpreter. So, the judicial system to they have to help us (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).* Interviews with DLEAG revealed the risks and lengths drug law enforcement personnel face, including a physical attack while pursuing a dangerous drug trafficker.

It discloses that:

I had to jump on his vehicle, lying on top of the vehicle without anyone to help me, my life was at risk, he was swinging the vehicle, applying sharp breaks, applying pepper spray on them, can you imagine drug dealers now having pepper spray and teasers while officers are not even allowed to use that, that was challenging and that matter is still going on in court. The porosity of the border is a factor and not having this sophisticated equipment to detect drugs and the like. And then equally some staff have been abused and attacked here and there (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

Interviewees of drug law enforcement agencies express dissatisfaction with community support, lack of information, obstruction, and information sharing with drug traffickers.

They said we have one Assan in Brikama, when we go for Assan, even the mosque people will be informing Assan about our presence. So, we have started having some of those types of people here and these are people that we cannot convict (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025). In addition, an interviewee also argued that *we have people who feel that they don't owe an obligation to the state to report drug traffickers or dealers (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).*

Interviewees from DLEAG revealed diverse drug traffickers, including men, women, children, and state security agents, as well as numerous incidents of police, military, and law enforcement personnel involved in the trade. DLEAG respondents were surprised by the significant involvement of children in drug smuggling, particularly in urban areas, during interviews. As indicated by one interviewee, *you find out that those within the youthful age are mostly involved. Sometimes 70% or 80% in different years are youths. We also have children who are arrested but we have a Gender and Children Welfare Unit that deals with them and they are tried at the juvenile court (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).* The 2020 DLEAG statistical table reveals the significant involvement of underage children in drug trafficking.

Table 1 Statistical Data of Drug Seizures in The Gambia by Age Distribution In 2020 from DLEAG

	17yrs AND BELOW	18yrsTO 35yrs	36yrs AND ABOVE
BJL	2	13	5
KM	16	145	49
WCR	19	255	85
LRR	NIL	24	10
CRR	NIL	9	5

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URR	NIL	18	6
NBR	NIL	18	12
TOTAL	37	482	172

DLEAG interviewees expressed frustration over state security agents' involvement in the illicit drug trade, arguing it significantly hinders their work:

I wish we give a series of number of cases of military officers that are arrested and a number of police officers that are arrested. So is like the regulator himself, he is also now a player. He is now a player in the trade. You see these are serious challenges. If I show you the seizures of military officers, the seizures of police officers, and the seizures of drug squad officers that are even involved and we laid them off, sometimes it is alarming, sometimes threatening (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).

All DLEAG respondents attested to the fact that women are involved in drug trafficking, and the agency's data supported this claim. According to one DLEAG interviewee, *now we have seen the number of women arrested increasing compared to before although not at a significant level but we have seen more coming into conflict with the law compared to previous years (DLEAG Interviewee, 2025).* The DLEAG statistical table below reveals that women are also involved in the drug trade, though not as much as men.

Table 2 Statistical Data of Drug Seizures in The Gambia by Sex In 2020 From DLEAG

	Male	Female
BJL	19	1
KM	203	7
WCR	353	6
LRR	34	NIL
CRR	14	NIL
URR	24	NIL
NBR	26	4
TOTAL	673	18

The Gambia's drug trafficking, involving both Gambians and non-Gambians, is dominated by Gambians, with a significant gap between the two groups, as shown in a DLEAG statistical table.

Table 3 Drug Trafficking Cases in The Gambia by Nationality 2017-2020 From DLEAG

YEAR	TRAFFICKING CASES	GAMBIANS	NON-GAMBIANS
2017	264	427	41
2018	221	610	76
2019	187	543	67
2020	205	612	79

CONCLUSION

The Gambia's government is working to curb drug trafficking, but the illegal trade continues to rise due to factors such as instability, porosity, poverty, unemployment, and greed among youths and drug barons. Drug traffickers use various routes and concealment methods to distribute their illicit goods globally, despite advanced border systems. They often rely on vulnerable individuals and conspire with ports and border officials to allow drugs to pass, often bribing them to pass. The Gambia's drug trade impacts education, health, economy, and social sectors, burdening the government budget, straining the health system, and increasing crime rates. Emerging drugs like ecstasy and the 'Pam family' pose a significant challenge to law enforcement agencies. The Gambia's drug traffickers use various methods to conceal their illicit drugs, including charcoal bags, fishing boats, ambulances, and swallowing. They use airports, seaports, and land borders for their merchandise. Cannabis remains the most consumed drug, but controlled drugs like diazepam and clonazepam are increasingly consumed by youths. Women and children are also becoming more involved in the illicit drug trade.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively combat the rising drug trafficking issue in The Gambia, a multi-pronged strategy is essential. The government should strengthen border security and surveillance systems with modern technology while increasing transparency and accountability

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among port and border officials to reduce corruption. Public awareness campaigns targeting youth, along with increased access to education, job creation, and community-based programs, can help address root causes such as poverty and unemployment. Moreover, enhanced regional cooperation, stricter penalties for traffickers, and improved support for law enforcement and healthcare systems are crucial. Special attention must be given to emerging drug trends and the growing involvement of women and children in trafficking, through targeted interventions and rehabilitation programs.

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