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Institutional Synergies and Challenges in Zambia's Drug Law Enforcement: A Thematic Analysis of Field Agents' Perspectives

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Abstract

The research paper explores the operational activities of drug law enforcement (DLE) in Zambia from the perspective of seasoned agents within the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC). Utilizing in-depth interviews with experienced anti-drug agents, the research captured insights through recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed conversations, highlighting key findings and challenges in the fight against drug-related issues. The findings of the research study establish that DLE's gatekeeping role is firmly embedded in Zambia's existing legal and policy framework, which serves as the cornerstone for anti-drug efforts. However, significant challenges emerged, particularly regarding institutional synergies. Weak or nonexistent collaboration among key stakeholders undermined the prescribed multidisciplinary approach, rendering the nation's drug control efforts largely ineffective. Additionally, the research paper revealed a persistent reliance on traditional drug demand and supply interventions, which are often hampered by insufficient logistical support, including inadequate equipment. To address these shortcomings, the study proposed several recommendations. These include, among others, regular research initiatives by the DEC to understand evolving drug trends, the establishment of a national multidisciplinary steering task force to enhance policy implementation, and the adoption of a more robust and context-appropriate operational model. By addressing these gaps, the effectiveness of Zambia's drug law enforcement operations could be significantly improved.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Drug law enforcement (DLE) plays a crucial role within the broader framework of drug control as outlined by international conventions on drugs. These conventions advocate for a comprehensive approach to drug control but have predominantly emphasized prohibitive measures, often prescribing stringent sanctions for any breach of drug laws. Recognized universally by States parties to the United Nations drug conventions—the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (with its 1971 Protocol), the 1972 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances—DLE remains central to global and national strategies.

Zambia, a land-linked country in Southern Africa, is a signatory to all three conventions and has integrated their provisions into its domestic framework through the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act No. 35 of 2021, which serves as a guide for its DLE activities. This article, an excerpt from a doctoral thesis, examines the Zambian experience with DLE, focusing on

its nature and practical implementation. It addresses two key questions: (i) What is the narrative of anti-drug agents on DLE in Zambia? (ii) How is DLE actualized in the Zambian context?

The drug problem in Zambia has historically been monitored and addressed by the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC), the lead institution established in 1989 following the recommendations of the Chaila Tribunal of 1985. This tribunal, appointed by the then Republican President Dr. Kenneth David Kaunda, aimed to investigate the trafficking of methaqualone (commonly known as mandrax) from Asia through Zambia to neighboring southern African countries such as Botswana and South Africa. In exchange for these drugs, luxury goods, including motor vehicles, were imported into Zambia under suspicious circumstances, given the country's economic state at the time (Chaila Tribunal Review Report, 1991) ^[7]. Prior to DEC's establishment, the anti-drug fight relied on outdated laws such as the 1967 Dangerous Drugs Act, which proved insufficient to combat the growing drug problem.

Geographically surrounded by eight neighbors—Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe—Zambia has recently experienced an intensified flow of both licit and illicit drugs across its borders. DEC's 2022 Annual Report highlights the interception of diverse substances, including precursor chemicals such as ephedrine and licit drugs like diazepam, tramadol, and codeine-containing cough syrups, which were diverted from legitimate health and industrial supply chains. Concurrently, illicit drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and miraa (khat) have been seized within Zambian territory. Notably, laboratory tests revealed that some intercepted marijuana had higher potency than local varieties, suggesting trafficking from international sources. Zambia's peaceful political environment and strategic location have rendered it both a transit hub and a destination for drug trafficking, with drugs entering from Europe, Asia, and other regions enroute to southern African nations like Botswana and South Africa. This has exacerbated domestic drug use, as evidenced by rising numbers of individuals seeking counseling and the growing prevalence of youth gangs, particularly in the capital, Lusaka.

In response, DEC has collaborated with key stakeholders such as the Zambia Medicines Regulatory Authority (ZAMRA), the National Food and Drug Laboratory, and other law enforcement agencies like the Zambia Police. International partnerships with organizations including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Interpol, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), and the African Union Commission (AUC) have further supported anti-drug efforts. Despite these initiatives, the drug problem persists, with new intoxicating substances continually emerging.

This research paper aims to uncover the core principles of drug law enforcement and its practical application through the lived experiences of anti-drug agents. By doing so, it seeks to illuminate the drug control efforts in Zambia, fostering awareness and appreciation for the ongoing battle against the country's escalating drug problem. Evidence of this rising challenge is reflected in the 2022 DEC Annual Report, which cites the seizure of significant quantities of illicit drugs and the arrest (5,061 individuals) or counseling (1,212 individuals) of offenders involved in drug trafficking or abuse. Moreover, the alarming proliferation of youth gangs in the capital city, Lusaka, has contributed to increased

community unrest due to theft and other forms of misconduct. This article explores the drug fight through the lens of Zambian drug law enforcement agents, offering insights into the country's multifaceted approach to combating drug-related issues.

1.2 Literature review, models and theory

The global drug problem has persisted for centuries, prompting concerted international efforts to address it since 1912. These efforts culminated in the establishment of international drug conventions, which aimed to unify fragmented national responses to comprehensively combat illicit drugs. Classified as a global security concern (Das, 2019; Odo & Chukwu, 2019) ^[12], illicit drugs have become the focal point of prohibitive and repressive measures adopted by countries adhering to the conventions. These measures reflect the conventions' core objective: safeguarding the health and welfare of humanity (Daniels *et al.*, 2021; Klantschnig, 2016; Crick, 2012) ^[11]

In some countries, drug law enforcement (DLE) operates within the framework of state police, while others, like Zambia, Nigeria, Tanzania, and the United States, have established specialized institutions dedicated to combating drug crimes. These agencies employ advanced policing techniques to address the clandestine and transnational nature of drug trafficking, which complicates enforcement efforts (May, 2017; Haysom, 2020; Bacon, 2022) ^[19]. Scholars have noted that while DLE has achieved some successes, it often falls short of expectations, leading to criticism about its efficacy and unintended consequences. These include the emergence of new psychoactive substances, substitution of banned drugs, and displacement of drug trafficking networks (Vari *et al.*, 2020; Daniels *et al.*, 2021) ^[29]. Despite criticisms, some studies highlight the benefits of DLE, arguing that its absence would exacerbate the global drug crisis (Windle & Farrell, 2012) ^[30]. Positive outcomes, such as Saudi Arabia's policing of unauthorized prescription drug sales, illustrate that effective enforcement can mitigate specific issues (Alrasheedy *et al.*, 2020) ^[3]. However, critics have pointed to the high costs associated with DLE, exemplified by the United States' \$5 billion expenditure on supply interdiction in 2018 (Giommoni *et al.*, 2022) ^[15].

Calls for re-evaluating the prohibitive stance of DLE have gained traction, with proposals for more humane approaches such as harm reduction, diversion, alternative development, and restorative justice. Harm reduction strategies, including needle and syringe exchange programs (NEP) and opioid substitution therapy (OST), have shown promise in reducing drug-related health risks, though adoption varies by region due to cultural and societal resistance (ARASA, 2019; Ajayi, 2020) ^[4]. Diversion programs aim to alleviate the burden on correctional systems by redirecting minor offenders to social services, while restorative justice emphasizes community-based rehabilitation (Busse, 2019; Nnam, 2017) ^[6]. Sustainable development initiatives encourage farmers to transition from drug crops to food crops, addressing the root causes of drug cultivation (UN, 2016) ^[28].

Innovative policing models have also emerged to target resilient drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). For instance, the MADTOR agent-based model analyzes DTO operations to identify strategic points of disruption (Manzi & Calderoni, 2024) ^[22]. Similarly, Problem-Oriented Policing (PoP) employs the SARA (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment) framework, resulting in measurable reductions in crime and disorder (Hinkle *et al.*, 2020) ^[20]. These proactive models were a reaction to the reactive, traditional policing that were previously being employed.

Challenges such as inadequate financial resources, insufficient staffing, lack of specialized equipment, and weak institutional synergies persist in DLE, as observed in Zambia and other jurisdictions (Nwannennaya & Abiodun, 2017). These challenges should be addressed in order to uphold the fight against illicit drugs that were securitized as an existential threat to human beings.

While Zambia has domesticated international anti-drug strategies through national laws, the actualization of DLE remains underexplored. This article provides a comprehensive overview of Zambia's anti-drug mechanisms, practices, and documented efforts, offering valuable insights into the country's fight against illicit drugs.

Through the Securitization theory advanced by the Copenhagen School in the 1990s (Abrahamsen, 2018)^[1] and Buzan, Waever and Wilde's explanation of the securitization framework to extend the understanding of security (Crick, 2012)^[9], the fight against illicit drugs has since been prohibitionist and repressive because of the imminent threats to the existence of human beings. Stemming from the foregoing, the need to understand the link between illicit drugs and other security threats should be prioritized for appropriate interventions to be instituted.

2. Materials and methods

This research paper employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the knowledge and practices of officers engaged in drug law enforcement (DLE). In-depth interviews and document analysis were the primary tools for data collection, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. A total of nine (09) key participants, purposively selected for their expertise and experience within the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC), constituted the study sample. This sample, chosen through maximum variation sampling, provided diverse perspectives on DLE and the mechanisms employed by the DEC in combating illicit drugs. All participants were stationed in Lusaka, Zambia, the hub of DLE activities.

Interviews were conducted in a structured yet open-ended manner, allowing participants to provide detailed narratives. The sessions were digitally recorded to ensure accuracy, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Data analysis followed a hybrid approach: deductive thematic analysis guided by research questions and key terms as a priori themes, complemented by an inductive approach to identify emergent codes and sub-themes. This dual approach enriched the analysis by capturing both expected and unexpected insights. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed strategies such as digital recording of interviews, member checking, and triangulation. Participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm their transcripts, ensuring accuracy and alignment with their intended responses. Furthermore, official and policy documents were examined to corroborate the findings from interviews, providing a robust basis for analysis and interpretation. This methodological rigor aimed to generate credible and insightful conclusions about the nature and execution of DLE in Zambia.

3. Findings of the study

3.1 Diverse perspectives and shared understandings

The research paper findings unveiled both diverse perspectives and shared understandings among participants regarding drug law enforcement (DLE) in Zambia. Despite variations in viewpoints influenced by the participants' specific areas of duty, there was consensus that DLE primarily involves operationalizing the provisions of the

Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 35 of 2021, Zambia's principal drug law. Participants collectively affirmed that DLE constitutes a critical component of the country's broader drug control framework. As one participant aptly summarized:

"So, drug law enforcement in my understanding uhm... it's the enforcement of laws that are put in place to control and prevent the illicit cultivation, production, trafficking of illicit drugs and other substances" (KP-9).

Further analysis revealed that Zambia's approach to combating illicit drugs aligns with international conventions, emphasizing a two-pronged strategy: demand reduction (prevention) and supply control (interdiction). This was exemplified by another participant, who explained:

"...the institution's mandate [is] to ensure that we fight the coming in of drugs that [are] destroying people's lives, from outside, and also the production of drugs inside the country and then we fight it from the preventive side and the reactive side" (KP-5).

This dual approach reflects the Drug Enforcement Commission's (DEC) "gatekeeping" role against illicit drugs, encompassing prevention and control measures. These responsibilities extend to collaboration with both local and international stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, as prescribed by Section 4 of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 35 of 2021. However, findings indicated that while such cooperation is mandated, it lacks the robust synergies necessary for effective implementation. As one participant lamented:

"Not much because it seems each one [is pulling in a different direction] ... there is no pull. The pull on how these stakeholders have to work together. It seems we [are] working [as] individual institutions... until where you feel like now, I can involve this one or this institution" (KP-6).

3.2 Policy gaps and institutional challenges

The findings highlighted a critical gap in Zambia's anti-drug landscape: the absence of a cohesive national drug policy for decades. While the Drug Master Plan (1996-2000) once provided guidance, no comprehensive policy was developed to replace it upon its expiration. It was only in February 2024 that Zambia launched its first-ever National Policy on Drugs and Substance Control, intended to unify stakeholders in a concerted fight against illicit drugs. However, this policy's implementation has faced significant challenges. A participant explained:

"It's [the drug policy] a good document but [only] if stakeholders can start implementing it... because for now we seem not to uh even know what we are supposed to do... maybe a coordinating committee [should] be put in place. By now institutions maybe should have been written to... meetings should have started taking place on the implementation of the document and also activities being uh incorporated in work plans for different institutions" (KP-9). Comparative analysis with the National Policy on Anti-Money Laundering, Countering Terrorist Financing, and Financing Proliferation (AML/CFT-FP) revealed structural gaps in the drug policy. For instance, the AML/CFT-FP policy specifies a National Task Force of Senior Officials with clear terms of reference—a framework lacking in the drug policy.

In parallel, findings noted the legislative advancements achieved with the enactment of the Cannabis Act 33 of 2021 and the Industrial Hemp Act 34 of 2021 to legalize medicinal cannabis and industrial hemp. However, these laws had yet to be enforced as of February 2024 due to the absence of requisite guidelines. Despite these developments, the DEC's

role as a gatekeeper against illicit drugs remains crucial to intercept the misuse of controlled and prohibited substances.

3.3 Dual strategy for drug prevention and control

The DEC employs a dual strategy for drug prevention and control: Drug Demand Reduction (DDR) and Drug Supply Interdiction (DSI).

DDR Strategies: These include awareness campaigns, peer education, family and parenting skills training, and restorative services such as counseling, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The DEC's Education and Counseling Department plays a pivotal role in sensitizing the public and providing support to individuals struggling with substance abuse. As one participant stated:

"...the Education and Counseling Department... is mandated to give awareness to the general public as well as offering education and counseling services to the would-be abusers and even those who are already abusing" (KP-1).

DSI Strategies: These focus on operational activities such as intelligence gathering, drug raids, and arrests. However, the alternative development program, aimed at encouraging drug crop cultivators to switch to food or cash crops, had limited success due to stakeholder misunderstandings of its processes. Another participant elaborated:

"...we pick intelligence, we hear there is this one selling drugs, we follow them up, we pick them up... we would do operations around the country, in hotspots we felt there was a lot of drug peddling" (KP-5).

Despite these strategies, institutional reports indicate a strong bias toward DSI, as reflected in budgetary allocations and staffing (DEC Annual Report, 2022) ^[14].

3.4 Disablers of effective drug law enforcement: infrastructure, resources and borders

Key challenges identified in the fight against illicit drugs include:

Infrastructure Deficiencies: For instance, the lack of dedicated rehabilitation centers has forced the DEC to rely on facilities under the Ministry of Health and private NGOs. One participant lamented:

"We don't have a rehabilitation centre... we depend on other public institutions like Ministry of Health, uh, general hospitals... but still more, these are not enough" (KP-4).

Resource Constraints: Limited funding and insufficient human capital hinder field operations and outreach programs, especially in remote areas. This was compounded by the limited presence of the DEC in the various parts of the country. Logistical support for the extended anti-drug operations and outreach programmes remained insufficient to cover the long distances to be covered. This was amplified by two participants stating that;

"We need to increase in numbers... yeah... to be in proportion with the increasing population" (KP-2)

"The money and probably the suitable transport to get them to far flung areas is also another challenge" (KP-5)

Stakeholder Fragmentation: Weak collaboration among stakeholders, despite signed MoUs, undermines joint efforts. Although some entities had signed agreements with the DEC, the actualization of the said agreements had remained low thus not realizing the set goals. As one participant noted:

"...as a Commission we've signed a number of MoUs with different institutions...after signing the MoU... it's very quiet" (KP-9).

Porous Borders: These continue to facilitate the trafficking of illicit substances, compounding the challenge of enforcement. Zambia shares borders with eight countries with few designated crossing points which opens up the

territory to illegal crossing of persons and goods. However, whether illegal or legal crossing, the passage of illicit drugs remains a challenge even with the insufficient human resource to police the borders and vast borderlines.

"Uh I think we have so many entry points that are quite porous" (KP-9)

The findings underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to address these systemic issues and enhance the effectiveness of Zambia's drug law enforcement efforts.

4. Discussion

The findings unequivocally demonstrated that Drug Law Enforcement (DLE) in Zambia has been well understood and implemented, albeit through predominantly traditional Drug Demand Reduction (DDR) and Drug Supply Interdiction (DSI) strategies. However, the emphasis on metrics such as arrests, drug seizures, and the frequency of awareness campaigns as key indicators of success revealed a limited scope in evaluating effectiveness. These output indicators lacked an evidence-based foundation, a limitation echoed by Greenfield and Paoli (2017) ^[16], who critiqued similar narrow approaches globally. Moreover, the heavy reliance on DSI as part of Zambia's two-pronged strategy mirrored the global tendency toward prohibitionist frameworks, as observed by Ajay (2020) ^[2] and Crick (2012) ^[9] in studies of Nigeria and broader global contexts.

Although prohibitionist approaches have faced scholarly criticism for their limited success in curbing the drug epidemic, DSI remains an indispensable tool in Zambia for intercepting illicit drugs before they infiltrate national borders. This necessity aligns with the observations of Windle and Farrel (2012) ^[30], who advocated for supply interdiction as a means to destabilize and displace criminal networks, thereby safeguarding communities. While such networks often relocate their operations upon disruption, the persistent enforcement efforts prevent them from gaining a permanent foothold.

To enhance DLE, proactive interdiction strategies must address emerging challenges, such as the proliferation of new psychoactive substances that may fall outside existing regulatory frameworks. Achieving this necessitates a shift toward evidence-based interventions. However, findings indicated a dearth of comprehensive research in Zambia since 2014, leaving the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC) reliant on trend analyses derived from annual reports and intelligence inputs. This gap aligns with global patterns, as highlighted by Greenfield and Paoli (2017) ^[16], wherein insufficient research undermines the development of nuanced anti-drug strategies. Ekpenyong (2016) further emphasized that neglecting in-depth research risks overlooking critical dimensions of the drug problem.

The lack of rigorous research impedes innovation, a core value espoused in the DEC's 2012–2016 Strategic Plan. Despite this commitment, the institution's dependence on outdated methods reflects budgetary constraints that hinder the realization of innovative practices. Nonetheless, new initiatives, such as the African Union Commission's (AUC) Family and Parenting Skills training program, have been introduced to engage parents as pivotal allies in early detection and prevention of drug use among children. While promising, the program remained limited in scope, primarily targeting religious groups, and had yet to achieve nationwide coverage.

A significant barrier to effective DLE lies in the absence of a cohesive national framework for orchestrating the fight against drugs. The recently launched National Policy on Drug

and Substance Control, though commendable, offered no actionable roadmap to unify stakeholders. The non-renewal of the 1996–2000 Drug Master Plan has further fragmented efforts, leaving stakeholders operating in silos with minimal coordination. The previous Master Plan, which engaged stakeholders from the Presidency to grassroots communities, underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive and forward-looking framework to guide national efforts.

The lack of synergy among stakeholders and the prevalence of dormant memoranda of understanding (MoUs) have further hampered DLE effectiveness. Joint programs often adhere to pre-existing institutional plans, executed at the convenience of individual entities rather than through coordinated efforts—a reflection of the missing central pull of a robust Master Plan.

An intriguing revelation was the overlap between DLE and public health services. The DEC, tasked with arresting offenders, also provides restorative services, including counseling and reintegration programs for drug users. This dual role stretches the institution's limited resources thin, undermining service delivery. Moreover, the predominance of a prohibitionist approach, focused on punitive measures against producers, traffickers, and retailers, has constrained outreach efforts and community mobilization activities. Consequently, DSI remains the cornerstone of DLE, while DDR occupies a secondary, preventive role. A shift toward a proactive, community-centric approach, with active stakeholder engagement, is essential to balance these priorities effectively.

Furthermore, the DEC's anti-drug strategies lacked integration with contemporary policing models, such as the MATDOR agent-based model (Manzi and Calderoni, 2024) [22] or the SARA model of Problem-Oriented Policing (Hinkle *et al.*, 2020) [20]. This reliance on traditional methods underscores the critical need for continuous research to underpin evidence-based interventions. Adopting innovative tools and approaches would enable targeted and effective anti-drug measures, ensuring that Zambia remains adaptive to evolving drug challenges.

5. Implications and Possible Limitations

- Reallocation of Public Health Responsibilities
Consideration should be given to transferring the public health mandate—encompassing counseling, treatment, and rehabilitation services—from the DEC to designated health authorities. This would allow the DEC to focus exclusively on its law enforcement role, optimizing its operational capacity.
- Re-evaluation of Traditional Approaches to DLE
The prevailing traditional approaches to DLE in Zambia should be revisited. This can be achieved through research and the development of responsive, evidence-based programs that are adaptive to evolving drug trends and societal needs.

By addressing these recommendations and research implications, Zambia can position itself to effectively confront the multifaceted challenges of drug control while fostering safer communities and a healthier society.

This research paper focused primarily on law enforcement within the realm of drug control, addressing public health concerns only to the extent that they intersect with the mandate of the Drug Enforcement Commission (DEC). It deliberately excluded an examination of the value chain of medicinal drugs, despite their frequent diversion into the illegal drug market, thus presenting a gap for future exploration. Geographically, the research was confined to

Lusaka, Zambia's capital city and the locus of DEC headquarters, limiting the scope to a single, albeit pivotal, site of drug law enforcement efforts. Moreover, the study did not incorporate perspectives from other key stakeholders in the drug fight, leaving room for further research to capture a more comprehensive view. Consequently, while the findings are insightful and relevant, they may not be entirely generalizable to other contexts or regions.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to illuminate the dynamics of Drug Law Enforcement (DLE) in Zambia, examining the operationalization of drug control laws by DEC agents and identifying key disablers impacting their efficacy. The findings underscored the centrality of prevention and control as the twin pillars of the drug fight, with collaborative stakeholder engagement serving as the anchor for cohesive and sustained interventions.

To enhance the effectiveness of DLE, it is imperative to adopt innovative strategies informed by rigorous research, ensure robust policy implementation through the establishment of a multidisciplinary task force, and integrate a tailored policing model to standardize operations. Such measures will help transition DLE from reactive to proactive, making it intentional, focused, and capable of mitigating the proliferation of illicit drugs. By doing so, Zambia can advance its efforts to protect its citizens and safeguard public well-being from the harms associated with drug abuse and trafficking. The paper makes the following recommendations.

- Revision of the National Policy on Drug and Substance Control
The policy should be updated to include the establishment of a multi-sectoral national steering taskforce. This taskforce would oversee the implementation of the policy and ensure alignment of all stakeholder efforts in addressing the drug problem.
- Revision of the 1996–2000 Drug Master Plan (DMP)
A revised and updated DMP should provide a comprehensive framework for tackling the drug problem. This would facilitate stronger stakeholder engagement and enable more effective implementation of policies at all levels.
- Prioritization of Research for Evidence-Based Interventions
There is a pressing need to prioritize research as a cornerstone for developing effective anti-drug strategies. This includes allocating resources to address identified problem areas and ensuring that interventions are both contextually appropriate and impact-driven.
- Adoption of the SARA Model of Problem-Oriented Policing
The DEC should consider adopting the Problem-Oriented Policing (SARA) model to foster the development of innovative, targeted, and standardized interventions in the enforcement of drug laws.

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