Introduction

The recent increase in the number of young South Africans arrested for being involved in drug trafficking calls for a discussion on the matter. Many young people in South Africa are reported to be involved in drug abuse and drug trafficking. There are also many young people who are reported to have been through rehabilitation programs to deal with substance abuse. The government has put in place programmes and campaigns to discourage and prevent substance abuse. Many campaigns have been run by the government, the private sector, and NGOs to discourage the youth of this country from being involved in drugs abuse. However, these campaigns have to a large extent neglected the side of drugs that pertains to drug trafficking. This side involves drugs as organised crime that involves syndicates that often target young people to traffic drugs. Recent statistics shows an increase in the number of young people from South Africa who have been arrested in foreign countries as they try to smuggle drugs into or out of those countries.

This piece will focus on drug mules – these are people targeted by drug syndicates to transport drugs for the syndicates (knowingly or unknowingly) from one country to another. The drug mules are often hoodwinked into thinking that they are being offered legitimate employment. They are then sent abroad for “training” or to collect “work related imports”. Once they are outside the country they are forced to do things they would not normally agree to, like swallowing large amounts of condoms filled with drugs. The syndicates are increasingly targeting young people in South Africa to smuggle drugs. The piece will explore the reasons why young people involve themselves in these crimes; it will also look at the number of young people detained abroad, as well as common drugs that are transported by drug mules. The crime of drug trafficking has consequences, which differ from country to country, this piece will also look at penalties that one can be subjected to for being found guilty. Although drug trafficking involves a relatively small percentage of the total youth of South Africa, the recent astronomical increase in young people involved in drug trafficking calls for policy interventions and awareness messages to be sent to young people so that the problem could be arrested before it spirals out of control.

Background and history

South Africa is reported to be number 8 out of 159 countries with highest prisoners in foreign countries for drug trafficking crimes. The country is now gaining reputation as a target
emerging market and transportation point for illicit drugs. This has exposed South African young people to the crimes of smuggling drugs, which often have dire consequences. The country is not doing enough in security measures in terms of entry and departing of individuals in the country. The following factors have been attributed to the exacerbation of the problem:

- the dramatic increase in the number of international flights to the country,
- relaxed visa requirements for South Africans to travel overseas,
- movement of large numbers of legal and illegal people across the borders,
- poorly monitored borders, and ill-equipped customs.

The policies dealing with the movement of people in and out of the country are there, but they are not implemented or applied as they are stated. Where there is shared mandate there could be some confusion at times in terms of responsibility to deal with drug usage and transportation. The Department of Social Development had drafted Consolidated Regulations for Treatment of and Prevention for Substance Abuse Act, 2008 which focuses on rehabilitation of drug abusers. There is Prevention of Organised Crime Act of 1998 which defines the sentencing and penalties, for drug and drug trafficking activities. Although some laws are in place, they never really address the issue of specific responsibility therefore this causes confusion in the implementation of the policies. While all this happen the damage on the side of young people increases, because of their vulnerability, young people get involved in drug smuggling for easy and fast cash.

**Young South Africans as target of drug trafficking syndicates**

Over the past few years, youth in South Africa have increasingly become the target of drug syndicates who use the youth as drug mules. Though poverty is partially the reason why young people get involved in drug trafficking, there is also evidence that young people from middle class families are increasingly involved in drug trafficking. Over and above poverty issues, drug trafficking syndicates take advantage of young people’s vulnerability. These drug lords have a way of making young people “trust” them. Young women in particular have been the targeted because of their vulnerability. In this regard drug trafficking has an element of human trafficking in it. Some young people intentionally involve themselves because they are desperate as a result of their own addiction to drugs. However, others are tricked into trafficking drug under the guise that they are being employed in a legitimate business. So, drug trafficking thrive on a combination of poverty, vulnerability, and greed. The South African government is not doing enough to prevent young people from exposing themselves to such crimes, either by the policies they put in place or by the level of enforcement of existing laws. There is not much that is being done on awareness on drug trafficking as a crime and the modus operandi of drug trafficking syndicates.

**Statistics of South African detained abroad for drug trafficking**

According to a study published in April 2010 by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), South Africa has become the central hub for the spread of organised crime across southern Africa. This view is supported by the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report which indicates that South Africa is the origin, transit point, and/or destination of many drug
trafficking routes. More than 600 South African drug mules are arrested in foreign countries (the latest statistics by the Department of International Affairs is 619). The majority of the arrested people are young people. However, this figure cannot be fully representative of all South African citizens imprisoned in other countries for drug trafficking as many do not contact the South African embassies in those countries to report their arrest and imprisonment. It is possible that the number could be significantly higher than the reported. It is also likely that there are many drug mules that are not caught and may never be known to be participant in drug trafficking. The possible phenomenon is that, most of these drug mules do not get caught at their first attempt; this motivates those who enter the market for the first time.

One can argue that the pattern or the trend of trafficking starts within the country, province by province and thus the practice further spreads as people learn that it is easy to get away with it. More should be done to curtail the trafficking of drugs within and without provinces. The tightening of measures to deal with drug trafficking will deter young people from trafficking drugs both inside the country and internationally.

**Common Drugs in trafficking**

Although South Africa is internationally regarded as one of the primary cannabis producing countries, drug mules recruited from the country mainly traffic methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin. These drugs are mostly collected from South American countries and transported elsewhere in the world.

**Criminal Penalties**

Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking in illegal drugs in South Africa are severe, and convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines. However, in other countries the severity is more pronounced as penalty could be death or very long jail terms in very harsh prison conditions. Other countries do not leave a room for negotiation with countries of origins to bargain for lesser penalty, if death penalty is the sentence then the country of origin cannot do anything about it even if it does not subscribe to capital punishment.

In South Africa, legislation guiding penalties of drug trafficking crimes include, the Prevention of Organised Crimes Act no 121 of 1998. The act imposes sentences as harsh as R1000 Million fine or life imprisonment. The imposition of these penalties depends on the successful arrest and successful prosecution of drug traffickers. In many instances, the individuals behind the syndicates are not arrested as they use mules to traffic drugs. So, it is drug mules that are arrested and convicted.

**Interventions by NYDA**

The mandate of the NYDA is about overall wellbeing of young people, including advocating and lobbying for protection of young people from harm through its programmes and through appropriate government institutions. The NYDA made inputs, as part of the organisations contribution on creative good heath amongst young people. The inputs mainly focus on young people that are already hooked, programs that will focus on rehabilitation and
also raise awareness of the dangers of drug abuse.

The National Youth Policy (2009-2014) acknowledges that problems experienced by youth concerning health and well-being due to drugs and substance abuse are complex, hence they require a multi-sectoral approach at all levels of government, private and civil society. The NYDA needs to do more to ensure that the relevant state organs raise awareness on drug trafficking and develop appropriate policy interventions to deal with the problem. The NYDA should highlight the overemphasis on prevention of drug abuse and also highlight the relative neglect of drug trafficking as a problem facing young people. Whilst one of the objectives stated in the Integrated Youth Development Strategy (IYDS) is “to educate youth on the consequences of alcohol and substance abuse”, we should go beyond this and look at the supply and transportation of drugs. The objective derives from the National Youth Policy which lists “youth abusing dependency-creating substances” as a priority category of youth development. The emphasis is on those abusing drugs as oppose to those transporting them. The NYDA should highlight and discourage this binary approach to dealing with drugs, which separate abuse of drugs from trafficking of drugs. Drug trafficking affects young people through exposing them to crime and it also affect them in that it increases availability of drugs. It also poses serious threat to the physical wellbeing of the mules as they are often expected to swallow the drugs.

Whilst the problem of drug trafficking is relatively small compared to other issues that the NYDA has to deal with (like unemployment), it is important that the problem is arrested before it balloons. The problem of drug trafficking is often a manifestations of other bigger problem like poverty, unemployment or even psychological challenges facing young people. A proactive approach to dealing with drug trafficking will save the country a lot of resources that could be lost if the problem is not dealt with in its infancy. The drug consumption and trafficking in the Western Cape has spiralled over the years and now it is difficult to deal with it as it has become huge and complex. A survey by the Western Cape Social Development has shown that Mitchells Plain in the Western Cape has higher than national and internal averages on substance abuse.

**Conclusion**

The number of young people involved in drug trafficking is increasing at a faster rate. Drug syndicates take advantage of young people’s vulnerability. It is, therefore, important that the NYDA and other state organs increase interventions that will reduce vulnerability of young. Interventions that deal with substance abuse tend to emphasise prevention of drug abuse and rehabilitation of those who are already abusing drugs more than dealing with drug trafficking. This has to change. It is necessary that the NYDA influence the relevant policies to fight drug trafficking and by extension drug usage.

**References**


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