



13 May 2014 – Whack-a-mole is supposed to be a game reserved for arcades, but its principle seems to be characteristic of the global fight against drug trafficking. When one drug route, supplier or trafficker is stopped another pops up somewhere else in a phenomenon known as the “balloon effect”. This has led to a growth in drug trafficking through West African countries and a shift of conflict in the Americas from Columbia to Mexico.

Attempting to study the drug trade and pinpoint the cause and effect for the emergence of new suppliers is a Sisyphean task. This underground industry, where many complex factors influence the intricate and ever-shifting web of drug trafficking, is constantly relocating and evolving as all levels of players risk legal repercussions.

There may be a number of reasons why traffickers choose one country through which to ship drugs over another. Bribe costs, risks of incarceration, immigration, cross-border family ties and connections all play a factor in determining shipment routes. Furthermore, geography is not always the determining factor. Nigeria, despite the fact that the country itself is far from any of the main producer or consumer countries of cocaine or heroin, has become a trade route. Peter Reuter, writes in *Ending the Drug Wars*, released this week by the London School of Economics' International [Drug Policy Project](#) and the [Open Society Foundations](#) that this is in part to the fact that “Nigerians are highly entrepreneurial, have been misruled by corrupt governments over a long time and have large overseas populations, weak civil society, very low domestic wages and moderately good commercial links to the rest of the world.”

The opening of drug routes in West Africa may be a possible response to “a Dutch crackdown on an existing route from the Netherlands Antilles to Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport” in the early 2000s, according to Reuters. When Dutch authorities started seizing cocaine in 2003 from the Antilles the detection of couriers rapidly declined. Nevertheless, cocaine continued to flow into the country in vast amounts. Then, from 2003 to 2007, five times more cocaine was seized in West Africa. The small, impoverished nation of Guinea Bissau was soon awash with cocaine, its fragile government easily corrupted by it. Ghana soon followed suite, and huge amounts of cocaine were seized from there in 2007. “Was the opening of the West African route a response to the closing of the Netherlands Antilles smuggling channel? The time is roughly right,” Reuter writes.

Daniel Mejia, director of the Research Center on Drugs and Security at the University of the Andes, Colombia, is unequivocal that the “balloon effect” explains the movement of drug-related violence from Colombia to Mexico. He [told IRIN](#) , “We find that successful interdiction policies implemented in Colombia, starting in 2007, then displaced the cocaine trade to Mexico and Central America, increasing violence in these countries.” The clampdown in Colombia shrank the supply of cocaine, pushing the price in US and international markets up by 50 percent, he said. “This increased the market rents associated with the cocaine trade and increased violence between cartels who now fight over the control of a more valuable [illegal] business.”

Another metaphor can be invoked to describe drug trafficking organizations, “The hydra-effect”. The greater the interdiction and prohibition efforts against hard drugs, the higher the prize in getting them across the border and into the hands of drug users, and therefore more creativity in creating new routes (heads) by the traffickers is used. As with the bootleggers of old, prohibition simply leads to innovation. New tactics to cross borders and ensure supply for the demand are constantly being tested.

“We need honest and effective treatment, prevention and education programmes. There is no substitute for building a healthy society. When you have poverty, despair and alienation, then people are going to self-medicate.” Says Sanho Tree, director of the [Drug Policy Project](#) at the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies. He believes that the only way out of the conundrum is to introduce policies such as relaxing restrictions on hard drugs to drive down prices, and focusing on decreasing demand for the drugs in the first place.

Source: [Irin News](#)