



# Jhb and Nairobi, 'shadow capitals' of Africa's heroin economy

The UN estimates that 20-40 tons of heroin enter Africa annually, but the actual amount may be much higher.

by **Riyaz Patel** — 2020-08-23 04:21 in Africa News, Kenya News, Mozambique News, News, Zambia News



Heroin economy on the rise in Africa. Pixabay

Johannesburg and Nairobi are where big players meet to negotiate illicit deals in the booming heroin economy on the African continent, new research by the EU-funded ENACT organised crime programme shows.

The flourishing heroin trade and rising consumption is “enabled by unplanned and dysfunctional urbanisation, weak governance, organised crime and widespread corruption among police and politicians in Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania and South Africa,” says ENACT’S Simone Haysom, author of the new research [paper](#).

***“Governments have scant understanding of the economic, security and social implications of an addictive substance being illegally peddled to vulnerable populations.”***

There are now probably hundreds of thousands of heroin users in the region, says Haysom, adding, that the rapid growth in the smuggling and consumption of heroin is having a dangerous effect on urban development in East and Southern Africa.

## AFRICA’S BIG 5

Haysom’s research found that five port cities are central to the regional heroin economy – South Africa’s Durban and Cape Town, Stonetown on the island of Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and Mombasa in Kenya.

Mombasa is close to coastal landing points, and Cape Town has shipping container-based trade links to Europe. Along with Durban, these cities have seen the development of the largest and most lucrative retail markets and gang structures which make violence a feature of the trade, says Haysom.

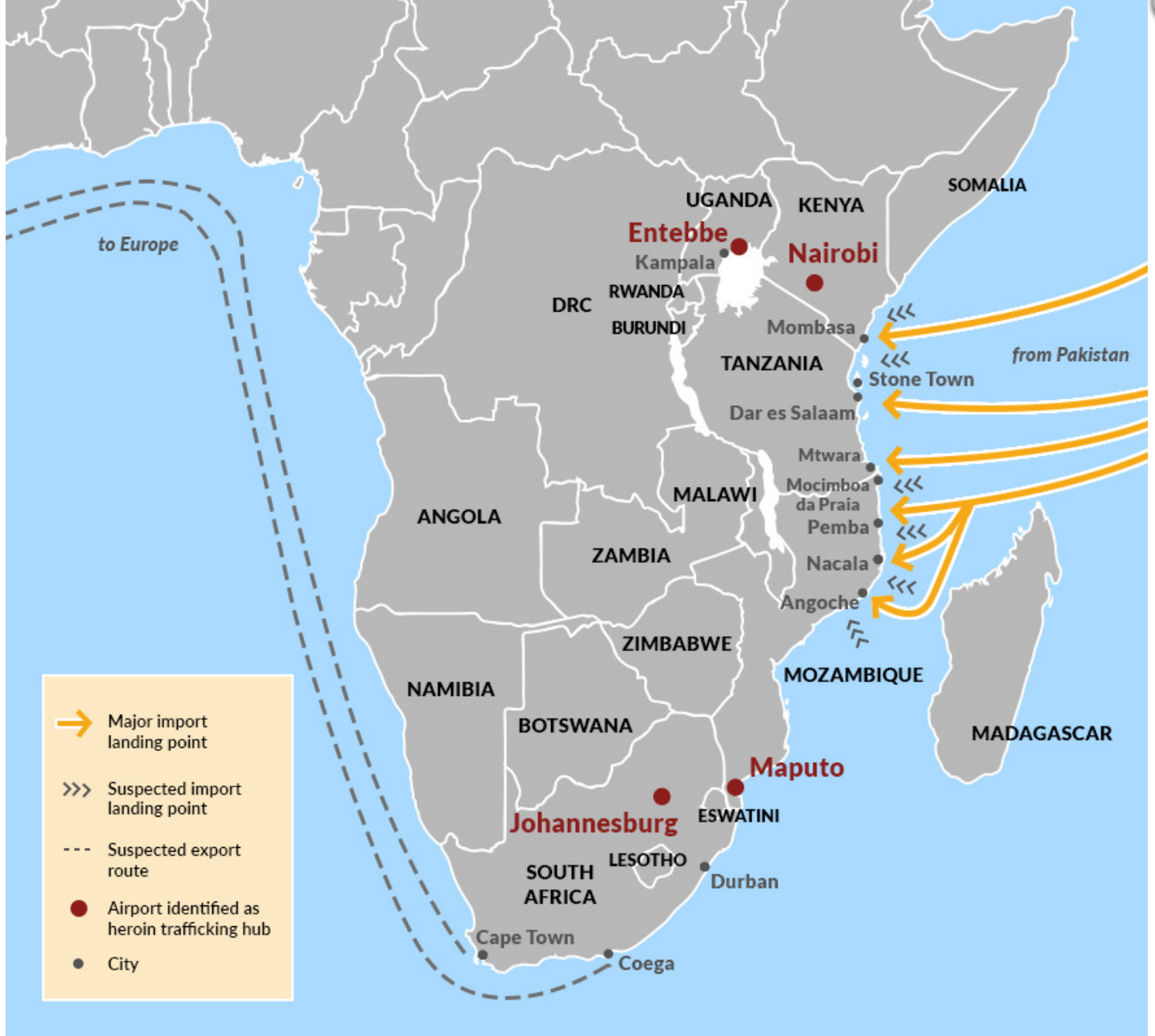
***“Ten years ago, 90% of the drug left the continent for users in the developed world, but a significant amount is now traded and consumed locally, creating a vast illegal market with devastating impact.”***

## ‘FROM THE MASKANI TO THE MAYOR’

Haysom’s report, *‘From the maskani to the mayor: The political economy of heroin markets in East and Southern Africa,’* is drawn from fieldwork in South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

More than 300 interviews were done with drug dealers, traffickers, middlemen, law enforcement officials, business owners, fishermen, religious leaders, taxi drivers, local politicians and civil society organisations.

Johannesburg and Nairobi, says Haysom, are the ‘shadow capitals’ of the heroin economy through their “intertwining of illicit and legal trade, strong connections to central political authority, and ability to connect regional and global economies.”



Overview of heroin trafficking on Africa's east coast(click on the map for the full size image)

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## UNTREATED PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Haysom projects further massive growth in the heroin trade in tandem with the rise of African megacities and expanding towns and smaller cities.

***“Drug markets are evolving with these giant urban spaces, and heroin is accelerating corruption of the police, increasing gang violence, eroding government services and devastating communities in a public health crisis.”***

The ENACT study found heroin users are in every social class, but concentrated in poor communities with deep hooks in low-skilled and unemployed youth.

“African markets for heroin are bigger and more important than is recognised by governments, which have a limited understanding of the economic, security and social implications of an addictive substance being peddled to vulnerable populations.”



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“This is a major development challenge in a region undergoing huge social and economic change, so responses should be developmental and not just based on law enforcement,” Haysom says.

An earlier report by ENACT and Interpol showed how African ports and airports are exploited to move illicit goods, with the support of low-paid officials who lack training and modern technology and are corrupted by criminal syndicates.

**ALSO READ: [Narcos report ranks South Africa as largest market for illicit drugs in sub-Saharan Africa](#)**

Haysom says heroin hubs have developed around airports with regional and international connections, while the drug also moves south and west along a web of roads, creating new markets and pulling in new users in small towns along the way.

## SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The heroin trade uses unscrupulous officials to maximum advantage, who in turn actively seek to corrupt the mechanisms of enforcement and governance.

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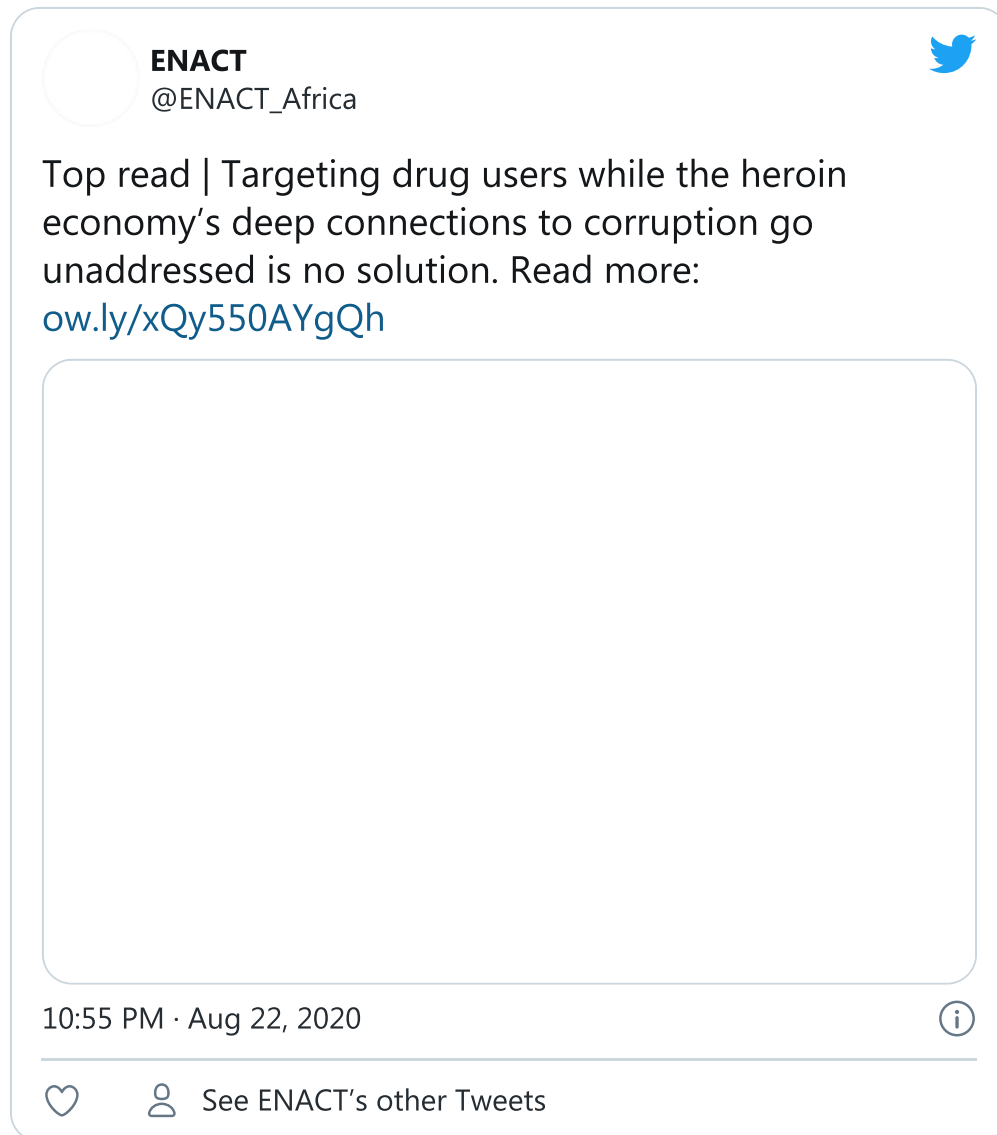
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ENACT found that in some instances criminal drug networks operate from inside local political systems, and as expanding illicit operations need more and more protection from investigation and arrest, so corruption climbs up the police hierarchy and transfers to elected officials.



“Politicians have been linked to these networks and drug money used to fund patronage and election campaigns. In some cases, drug business merges with grey markets, allowing criminal entrepreneurs to adopt a legal front,” ENACT say.

“Without a formal response to the problems generated by illicit markets, there will be a rise in gang violence, police abuses and vigilante attacks.”

Haysom say responses directed at drug users are counter-productive while the heroin economy's deep connections to corruption, urban violence and other illicit economies go unaddressed.

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