

**WACSERIES Op-Ed**  
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# **MEDIA REPORTING ON SUBSTANCE USE:**

## Magnifying or Reducing the Harm

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The WACSeries Opeds are more thought provoking and intellectual engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society development effectiveness.

## Objectives of WACSERIES

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

# Media Reporting on Substance Use: Magnifying or Reducing the Harm?

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Over the past four months, phrases such as “sweet, sweet codeine” and “end tramadol abuse now” have become very popular in Ghana and Nigeria. These terms emanated from a title of a documentary on codeine abuse in Nigeria produced by BBC - Africa’s Eye, and a campaign launched by the [GHOne](#) after a series of documentaries on tramadol abuse in the country. These documentaries have played a significant role in shaping public discourse on substance abuse.

### I. Media and Policy Influencing

Drug use in general is a topic that rarely features in Nigeria media outlets. The focus has mostly been on arrests and seizures of drugs by law enforcement agencies to show how well the government is doing in terms of fighting the “war on drugs”. Aside specific global campaigns such as the Support Don’t Punish Global Day of Action (26 June)<sup>1</sup>, very few programmes and documentaries report and discuss drug use from a public health perspective. Even though the non-medical use of codeine has been occurring for the past decades in the country, it has rarely been discussed as much as now. The coverage helped to reveal how codeine-based products are smuggled out of pharmaceutical companies.

In Ghana, media reporting on drugs and substance use dates back several years. While it is not a new phenomenon, significant media

attention has focused on tramadol use in recent times, sparking a national conversation. This has gained nationwide interest, as the media is awash with anecdotes of the extent to which citizens use the drug for varied reasons. A campaign dubbed #EndTramadolAbuse was officially launched by a media channel who screened series of documentaries in collaboration with celebrities and musicians. Thanks to these documentaries, vigorous debates are taking place on social media and traditional media on the best way to address the emergence of these issues.

It is important to state that the media is critical in shaping public opinion and influencing policy in society. It has been established in previous researches that societal behavior and attitudes can strikingly be impacted by the very nature of how news and information is framed in the media. Unlike in previous years, public discourse and opinion is no

<sup>1</sup> <http://supportdontpunish.org/>

longer shaped by only the traditional sources of media. Digital media now plays a significant role in disseminating information and shaping public discourse including tramadol use. The media's influence and reach help to establish an agenda, which ends up determining how politicians, policymakers and other actors address an issue at different levels. In this regard, it is important that the media relies on facts and expert analysis all times.

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*“mass media is critical in shaping public opinion and influencing policy in society.”*

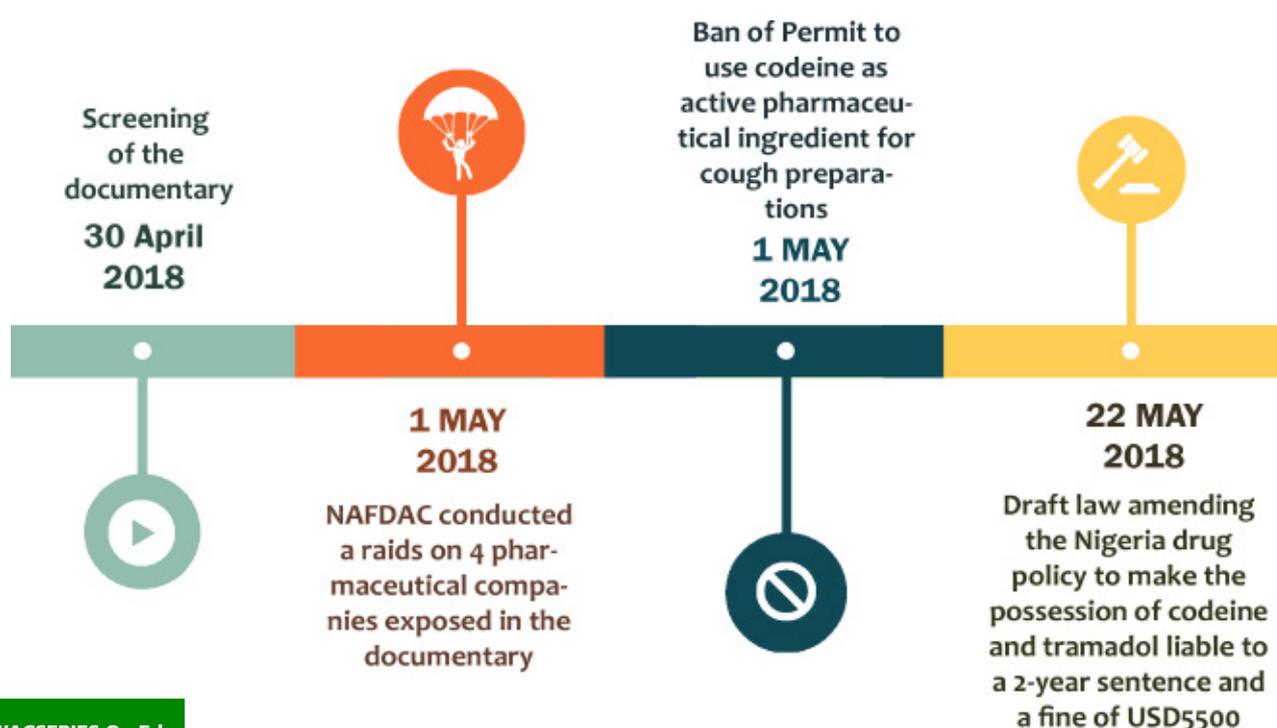
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However, the media often falls short of inte-

grating a diverse perspective when reporting on sensitive topics such as substance use. Unfortunately, these reporting gaps contribute to reinforcing misconceptions and stigma on drug consumption, which lead to the establishment of ineffective public policies. For instance, in Nigeria, the National Agency for Food & Drug Administration & Control has banned the production and import of codeine-based products. Subsequently, the Nigerian House of Representatives drafted a law amending the country's drug policy to make the possession of codeine (e.g. cough syrup) and tramadol liable to a 2-year sentence and a fine of USD5500. In addition, there are continued international calls from Egypt to add tramadol to the list of internationally controlled substances.

*Government response to the Reportage on Codeine in Nigeria*

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## II. Analysis of Recent Media Reporting

### a) Case Study I: Documentary on codeine in Nigeria

The documentary “Sweet Sweet Codeine” is a remarkable piece of investigative journalism. The authors succeeded in exposing how large quantities of codeine-based cough syrup can be illegally bought from crooked agent of pharmaceutical companies. The documentary abetted to reinforce the need of pharmaceutical company to implement strict control procedures to ensure that such products are sold only to accredited retailers. However, the documentary displays more than a few reporting gaps, which may negatively influence the policymaking process within the region.

The report claimed that the abuse of codeine causes schizophrenia. This statement is un-

proven and reinforces the stigma associated with people who use drugs, which further creates barriers to an effective response to the codeine crisis. Several researches concluded that there was no causal effect between substance abuse and schizophrenia. However, people suffering of schizophrenia are much more likely to have a substance or alcohol abuse problem than the general population<sup>2</sup>.

Stigma has a harmful effect on the psychological well-being of persons who use drugs and negatively affect their quality of life. This can lead to a complete rejection by society, discrimination or labelling of people who use drugs. In this regard, efforts must be made especially by the media to change the narrative on people who use drugs.

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*“Several researches concluded that there was no causal effect between substance abuse and schizophrenia.”*

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Furthermore, the documentary failed to address palpable human rights violations against people who use drugs. The documentary showed people who use drug as being

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/schizophrenia/index.shtml>

shackled during their withdrawal stages<sup>3</sup>. These acts of gross human rights violations were presented as normal on the premise that people who use drugs were supposedly violent. The documentary never condemned such inhumane treatment, nor was the head of the rehabilitation centre challenged in his interview about why his patients were being shackled and detoxified without medical assistance, against international guidelines.

Sadly, several so called “rehabilitation centres” across the region offers unmedicated withdrawal services made of beatings, drills, verbal abuse. These abuses violate the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and punishment; the right to health; and other fundamental human rights<sup>4</sup>. As Kofi Annan argued, health should not be seen as a blessing to be wished for, but as a human right to be fought for.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I\\_Lche2otU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I_Lche2otU)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/treatmentabuse\\_20090309.pdf](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/treatmentabuse_20090309.pdf)

The documentary failed also to capture the views and perspectives of people who use drugs, and the perspectives of this community were entirely overlooked in the documentary.

The Nigerian Government’s punitive approach to solving the codeine issue has historically been ineffective. The law prohibiting codeine consumption does not only give room for a black market to escalate but also infringes on access to the drug for genuine patients. Many experts are of the view that the abuse of codeine is a public health concern therefore it must be addressed using measures rooted in a public health approach.





## ***b) Case Study II: Media coverage of tramadol use in Ghana***

Interestingly, in Ghana, the media coverage of the tramadol use has focused on non-medical consumers who supposedly gain access to the drug illicitly. This representation of the issue is unproven and requires further investigation – especially as tramadol products available on the illegal market often have a potency far higher than the common medical products. The media reports have also failed to present the consequences of the crisis on patients who genuinely use tramadol as part of their pain treatment. In fact, health practitioners have reported an increasing number of patients suffering from moderate pain rejecting tramadol prescription due to the stigma being attached to this essential medicine<sup>5</sup>.

The Ghanaian Food and Drugs Authority seized over 4000 tablets which are beyond the registered dose of 50 and 100 milligrams. According to the Head of Tobacco

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Porous-borders-aiding-Tramadol-smugglers-FDA-645006>

and Substance Abuse of the Ghanaian Food and Drugs Authority (FDA), the increase in Tramadol abuse in the country is due to the porous nature of the borders<sup>6</sup>.

The media reports conspicuously failed to present the consequences of the crisis on patients who genuinely use tramadol as part of their pain treatment. There was a call from African countries such as Egypt during the 2017 Commission of Narcotic Drugs (CND) to add Tramadol to internationally controlled substances<sup>7</sup>. After the screening of the documentaries, this call has been reiterated by several stakeholders as a way to solve the current situation.

The proposal to add tramadol to the list of internationally controlled substances will not contribute to solving the current problems. This action will subject the supply and availability of tramadol to the same challenges as morphine and other opioids in Africa. Currently the quantity of morphine – the primary opioid used to treat moderate to severe pain such as after an operation, serious injury or cancer – imported by African countries is very low and does not meet the demand. Health centres, doctors and pharmacists report frequent supply interruptions.

Palliative care medicine, care for the elderly and pain management are underdeveloped

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.myjoyonline.com/lifestyle/2018/April-12th/fda-seizes-over-4000-unregistered-tablets-of-tramadol.php>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND\\_Sessions/CND\\_60/CRPs/ECN72017\\_CRP4\\_V1701497.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_60/CRPs/ECN72017_CRP4_V1701497.pdf)

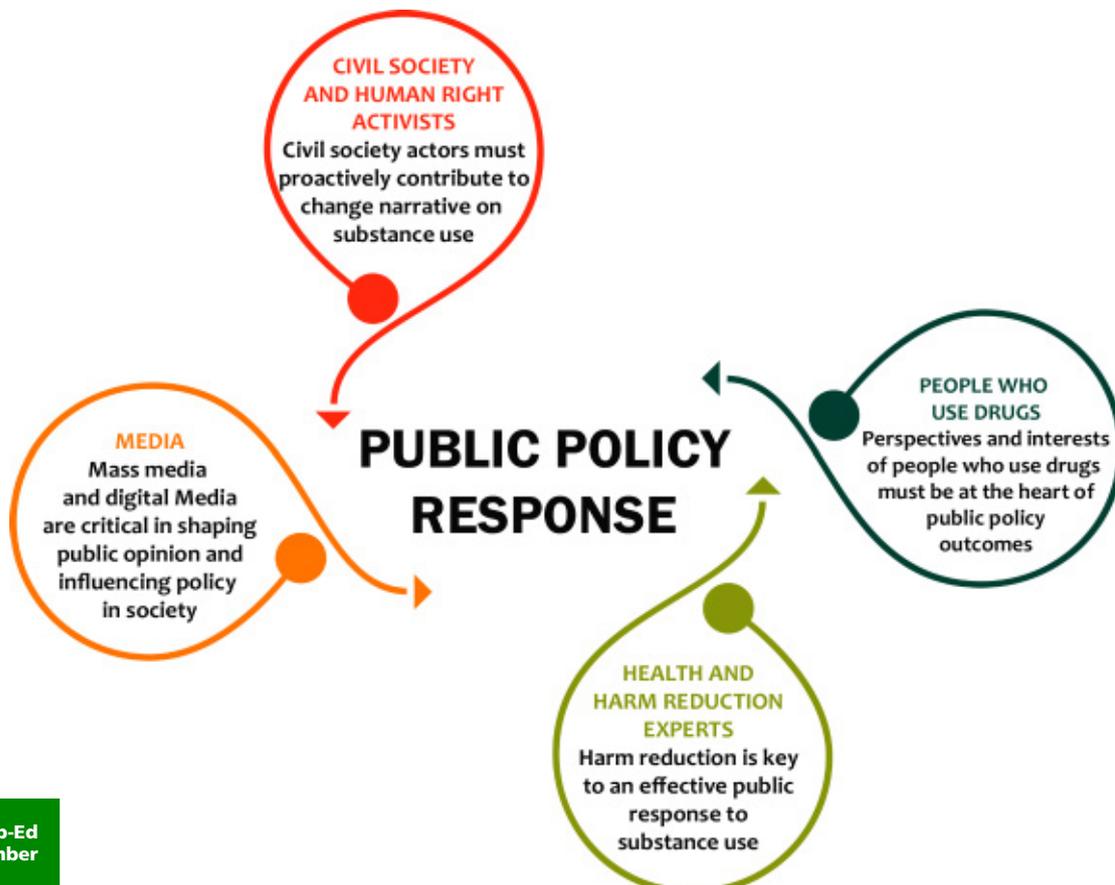
and neglected sectors of the Ghanaian health system. This situation, combined with the fear of overuse, misuse, abuse and addiction in prescribing opioids to patients with chronic pain, leads to wholly inadequate pain treatment in Ghana and across most of Africa. Currently, tramadol is a very affordable, accessible and efficient alternative to other opioids for pain management

### III. Multi-stakeholder Collaboration

In a nutshell, media reports have a huge impact in building public opinion and influence policy making processes. The media has been traditionally used as a channel to disseminate messages portraying substance use through a distorted lens. In order to project

a more holistic picture of the topic, there is need for a stronger collaboration between relevant stakeholders and media organisations at the local and regional levels. Ideally, messages from mass media campaigns should be guided by a common strategy involving work being done by other stakeholders in the sector.

The reports on tramadol and codeine abuse could have yielded more meaningful and significant impact if they had involved the participation of civil society organisations, health experts, key government agencies and the people most directly impacted: people who use drugs. It is imperative that civil society and community organisations working on drug-related issues are able to engage with the media to ensure informed reporting



on these complex and emotive subjects in the future.

Policy makers and Government must conduct further in-depth research and analysis of the situation before drafting its response. Imposing sanctions on persons who use drugs or prohibiting the production or distribution of drugs by adding them to international schedule have been proven inefficient since decades.

A more balance approach consisting in tightening national and regional restrictions on trade in falsified medicines will be more effective. This will involve reinforcing the control measures at national borders. It is also critical to enforce the current/ existing laws on dispensing and stocking of prescription drugs only. On the other side, traffickers of unauthorised doses or falsified medicines should be punished.

Key Activities of WACSI - WADPN\*  
DRUG POLICY REFORM PROJECT



Support Dont  
Punish Campaign

26  
JUNE  
(Annually)

5

Public Dialogues on Drug  
Policy Reform  
(Benin, Ghana, Sierra Leone  
Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia)



Capacity Building  
and Regional  
Convenings

3

1

Parliamentarian  
Engagement in  
Guinea



\* WADPN: West Africa Drug Policy Network



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Strengthening Civil Society

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