

Khat in Kenya: Why efforts to ban this popular stimulant are unlikely to work

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Credit: Evan Galib from Pexels

Khat—the stimulant leaves and twigs of the plant *Catha edulis*—seemed to have secure legal status in Kenya despite [being illegal elsewhere](#). It had been declared an [official cash crop](#) in 2016, and efforts were under

way to formalize its mostly informal production and trade.

But debate about its legality was revived after Abdulswamad Nassir, the governor of Mombasa County at the Kenyan coast, used his executive powers to [ban muguka, a variety of khat](#), in May 2024. This was on the grounds that it was bringing harm, especially to children. The ban also followed a [trade dispute over levies](#) charged by the county on muguka imports.

The situation is testing constitutional relations between the central government and the counties, as President William Ruto and other national leaders [push back](#) against the ban.

I have conducted anthropological and historical [research into khat](#) and other drugs, including a current project on [cannabis](#).

This research suggests that khat prohibition in Kenya would be ineffective and counterproductive. It would be better to regulate khat's trade to minimize harm, while protecting the livelihoods dependent on it.

Khat

Khat consists of the leaves or tender twigs of *Catha edulis*, chewed for their stimulant properties. Cathinone, the main compound, is similar to [amphetamine](#). Its release is gradual in the chewing process, producing a milder effect than amphetamine in pill or powder form. The effects involve increased alertness, focus and feelings of well-being.

Khat is cultivated in several other countries, including Madagascar, Uganda, Yemen and Ethiopia. How it is cultivated varies. Khat produced in central Kenya's Meru is grown as trees, while in other places, such as Mbeere in Embu and in parts of Ethiopia, it's grown as a smaller shrub.

Khat has become an integral part of livelihoods in these Kenyan regions, bringing farmers [greater returns](#) than tea and coffee. Somalia is a key destination for Kenyan khat, with [19 tons](#) shipped daily in 2022 and earning billions of shillings. Trade within Kenya has also provided revenue for thousands of retailers, transporters, and county and national governments.

The current Kenyan debate has highlighted the distinction between miraa and muguka. Miraa consists of longer stems, while muguka is sold as handfuls of leaves from the tips of the plant. Both have a long history of cultivation in Meru and Embu counties, respectively. Key to [muguka's popularity](#) is affordability, as handfuls are bought for a few coins, while miraa is pricier. This affordability has established muguka as a work boost and leisure pursuit for many across Kenya.

Views towards khat consumption are [polarized](#). Some praise it as a source of sociability, and a part of culture and heritage. Others see it as an addictive "drug" linked to all sorts of harms. [Research](#) suggests moderate use has few medical harms, although there are problems associated with overindulgence. Khat is also associated with [social harms](#), such as unemployment, although causality is unclear. For example, people might chew to pass the time when there are few opportunities for work, rather than not having work because they chew.

To ban or not to ban?

Khat has been banned in several countries, including [the Netherlands](#) in 2012 and [the UK](#) in 2014.

The argument is sometimes made that illegality elsewhere proves khat is harmful. However, [little research](#) underpinned bans in the US and Canada in the 1990s. In the UK, [research](#) was conducted in-depth a decade ago. Official advice based on the findings argued that a ban

would be disproportionate. The UK government went against this advice when it banned khat.

Given the current debate in Kenya over whether to ban khat or not, it's worth considering what the consequences of a ban would be. Those promoting prohibition hope that a ban would get rid of khat. However, a comparison with cannabis suggests otherwise.

Cannabis is subject to harsh penalties in Kenya, including imprisonment and fines under the [1994 Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act](#), even for possession of small quantities. Still, cannabis remains [widely smoked](#) within Kenya. Many see smoking it as a socially and medicinally valuable practice, even though it's illegal and some people disapprove. Trade is [vigorous](#) as illegality increases its value and traders often have working relations with police who turn a blind eye to business in return for payments.

A khat ban would likely be similarly ineffective in curbing consumption, as was an [attempted khat ban](#) by the British in colonial times.

A ban would likely increase corruption and spur a thriving illegal trade. Chewers would still chew, as they continue to in the UK and [Netherlands](#). Measures to control khat would additionally drain state resources. And revenue from legal trade would be lost. Too many people see khat as a legitimate crop, commodity and item of consumption in Kenya for bans to succeed in eradicating it.

Beyond the current debate

No solution will be perfect and please all sides. But finding ways through regulation to encourage responsible khat trade and consumption, while protecting livelihoods, is surely the way forward. Some revenue from khat's trade could be earmarked for measures to boost employment

opportunities and improve tough socio-economic conditions that often underlie problematic substance use.

This will require collaborative work between different parties and learning from experiences with other substances.

Alcohol is a useful comparison here. It is a substance associated with [far greater harms](#) than khat. Yet, it's a socially accepted part of leisure for many. It raises revenue and supports thousands of livelihoods.

Getting a balanced form of khat regulation won't be easy, and alcohol shows you cannot regulate away all problematic consumption. But this is a more pragmatic approach to dealing with khat than the utopian idea that a ban would simply eradicate the stimulant from society.

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