

Greener Pastures? Marijauna

With Jamaica in the economic doldrums and grappling with the ill-effects of the global financial crisis, some suggest the country needs to look seriously at what is arguably its most popular, albeit illegal, product to help plug the massive revenue shortfalls in the economy.

Marijuana is largely renowned as a recreational drug, and its usage is banned in most parts of the world. At the same time, the plant known for possessing medicinal compounds, is increasingly becoming a medically recommended drug in many territories. Marijuana-derived drugs have proven to be useful in treating inflammatory bowel disease, glaucoma, bipolar disorders, and nausea among other ailments. With the changing economic paradigm and the severe challenges to traditional industries in Jamaica, such as sugar, banana and bauxite, the country is being urged to allow for the cultivation and exportation of marijuana for medical purposes. "People are always talking about the young men on the streets and blocks who are selling marijuana, but what we need to do is to get them involved in agriculture by encouraging them to plant marijuana for the pharmaceutical market," said Amsale Maryam of the Association of Developmental Agencies in Jamaica, at a Caribbean Regional Civil Society Consultation last month. "This is the approach we have to take because marijuana can bring in some serious revenue," she said, arguing that for too long "the entire focus has been on the recreational use, but it's time we get away from that thinking and think beyond, the pharmaceutical industry needs marijuana as a major ingredient for medication". In the United States - Jamaica's major trading partner - 13 states have legalised medical marijuana, and four - California, Colorado, New Mexico and Rhode Island- actually utilise special dispensaries to sell the product. California, which has reportedly come closest to outright legalisation of the marijuana industry, has US\$200 million worth of medical-marijuana purchases each year, according to California's State Board of Equalisation. Some of the advocates for an official marijuana industry salivate over this development, saying it's an indication that there is indeed a legitimate international market for local produce.

One small-scale local farmer told Sunday Finance that he plants and exports the product illegally and would welcome the initiative as one which has the potential to earn the country tremendous revenues and result in "never seen before" production levels from local farmers.

"Nothing would motivate farmers more than to tell them that they can produce weed legally," said the grower, who owns a half-acre farm. "Considering the atmosphere that we have here in Jamaica, the soil content is suitable to grow weed not seen elsewhere".

There are critics, however, who scoff at the suggestion that there could be a viable marijuana industry for export.

Commissioner of Customs Danville Walker, who said he favours decriminalisation to free up the criminal justice system to allow officers of the law to address more pressing issues, said that the legal challenges would be hefty, noting that medical-marijuana usage was only condoned on a state level in the US, and not a federal.

In March, US President Barack Obama said he didn't think legalising marijuana is a good strategy for turning around the economy, after acknowledging that one of the most popular questions was whether legalisation of the illicit drug would help pull the nation out of the recession.

"What would have driven all of that is not decriminalising it in Jamaica, but decriminilising it at the federal level in the United States," noted Walker. "Jamaica would be taking on a fight that it would lose on a number of levels... If it's not decriminalised at a federal level, then the US wouldn't see (Jamaica) as an ally in the fight (against drugs) and the country would incur their wrath, which is considerable."

Financial analyst, Dennis Chung said the country is better off channelling its efforts towards other industries which he believes have more to offer than a marijuana industry. One of his arguments is that marijuana may be too costly to process.

"In a place where you have desperation, people come up with all sort of things without thinking," said Chung. "A problem that we have is that our food production cost is too high and similarly, if we were going to produce ganja, the production cost will be high.

"When you compare it against the medical marijuana that they have in California, how do we know whether we can compete with that," he added.

The small farmer acknowledged that the points raised by Walker and Chung are both valid, but said that he would want to at least see the country explore the option first, before dismissing it.

"Yes, the organisation will be important...we would have to justify the cost and analyse the legal ramifications," he said. "But the private sector and Government should put themselves around this issue first to see if it is a viable option before killing it. "Everybody is talking about free trade and that the smaller countries should find and produce what they have a competitive advantage in," he continued. "We have good marijuana here in Jamaica; the government should explore all angles, try to get international partners on board and hold nothing back." Jamaica Observer