

Cannabis Decriminalization and the Limits of Liberal Reform: A Malta Case Study

Contemporary Drug Problems

1–23

© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00914509261470381

journals.sagepub.com/home/cdx

Julia Buxton¹  and Felipe Neis Araujo² 

Abstract

The initial research enquiry concerned the political and social context of national drug policy reform. Why and how have some jurisdictions boldly contravened the international criminalization consensus set out in the United Nations 1961 Single Convention on Drugs and decriminalized cannabis, and in some cases, other controlled drugs? A qualitative case study using Malta as a small-scale (population $N = 545,000$) reform jurisdiction set us on a different path, exploring obstacles to the consolidation of national decriminalization initiatives after legal change. Key informant interviews in Malta ($N = 12$) emphasized the difficulties of resetting the national political consensus. The question that emerged was not why was Malta one of the first countries to legalize, but why has progress stalled? To address this question, our analysis drew on the Advocacy Coalition Framework and the Historical Institutionalist approach. We found that progress had stalled not due to coalition behavior alone. Our analysis highlights the important role of past institutional choices, elite bargains and administrative structures in not only containing cannabis decriminalization in Malta but shaping the political forces that threaten to roll it back.

Keywords

Cannabis, decriminalization, NGO, leadership, Malta

Received: July 8, 2025; accepted: July 5, 2026

Introduction: Investigating a “Quiet Revolution” in Drug Policy

In the 2010s, cannabis policy reform gained traction worldwide (Eastwood et al., 2016). Over 30 countries and a host of U.S. states and Australian provinces introduced some form of medical or adult recreational cannabis decriminalization scheme (Stevens et al., 2022; The Global Commission on Drug

¹School of Justice Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

²Department of Criminology, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Corresponding Author:

Julia Buxton, School of Justice Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, John Foster Building, Mount Pleasant, Liverpool.

Email: j.d.buxton@ljmu.ac.uk

Policy, 2016; Unlu et al., 2020). Our research enquiry focused on the potential global expansion of national cannabis and other drug-decriminalization initiatives.

Understanding how countries break with the “prohibitive ethos of the [1961 UN] Single Convention” (Bewley-Taylor 2013) was of interest for three reasons: first, because public policy change is generally uncommon (Bardach, 1976; Baumgartner et al., 2009). Second, because drug policy change is especially rare, a globally agreed consensus on prohibition has prevailed in the post-war period (Bewley-Taylor 2013; Boister, 1997; Paoli et al., 2012; Sinha, 2001). Finally, the number of countries softly defecting from the 1961, 1971, and 1988 UN drug treaties generated optimism in some academic, advocacy, and policy circles that national reform can drive bottom-up change of UN drug control institutions and adjustment of repression-based enforcement strategies.

The potential for national cannabis policy pluralism within the global prohibition regime was given momentum by the United States, the principal founder, architect, and enforcer of international drug control efforts since the 1900s. The 2014 “Brownfield Doctrine” emphasized flexible interpretation of UN drug treaties, tolerance for national policy divergence, and a focus on “criminal organizations – not those who buy, consume.” One observer of the thaw set out that “a new control system or ‘regime’ is emerging, driven by local policy reforms, normative shifts, international legal reinterpretation and a more nuanced implementation of the international drug control system” (Collins, 2014).

We set out deductively to explore if this thaw could be predicted or even accelerated in other national contexts by identifying the drivers of legal and regulatory change (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). In this endeavor, we focused on the drug policy subsystem as employed by the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Hayle, 2015; Kübler, 2001; Ritter et al., 2018). The ACF “deals with policy change over several decades, yet specifically considers the role of policy-oriented learning over shorter periods of time within that broader process” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994, p. 176). Use of the ACF was intended to identify and theorize conditions in which political and civic reform coalitions emerge and evolve, how beliefs alter, and to understand the “force or forces that can drive the policy process from one stage to another and generate activity within specific stages” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994, p. 177). This includes the catalytic effect of “spectacular events” capable of altering political agendas and public opinion (Csete & Grob, 2012; Domosławski, 2011; Geva-May, 2004).

Data collection and analysis underscored the significance of institutional legacies, historical trajectories, and structural constraints that extend beyond the interaction of advocacy coalitions and the initial legal-change event. We refined our analytical lens with a Historical Institutionalism perspective (Mahoney, 2000; Sorensen, 2022), identifying “critical junctures” (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007) as moments of heightened contingency and exploring how these have influenced long-standing institutional arrangements. We argue that historical, path-dependent processes lock in trajectories of power, resources, and influence over time. These shape and limit the possibilities of cannabis decriminalization initiatives consolidating and normalizing at the national level, and “bottom-up” reform of the UN system by default. Accordingly, after a discussion of method, the article firstly establishes “intimacy” with a country case study, establishing “a deep, ‘thick’ understanding” (Ragin & Rihoux, 2004, p. 6) of how historical trajectories influence the policy reform environment and drug policy path.

Method and Case Study

The research proposal received ethical approval at the first stage, with “low to no” concern on the University of Manchester ethics process dashboard. We adopted a qualitative research design guided by a two-stage search strategy encompassing peer-reviewed academic literature and gray sources. The first stage involved a social science and humanities review across international relations, law, history, public policy, and political science to identify scholarship addressing the UN treaty system and the global governance of drug policy. The second stage entailed a systematic examination of academic

publications, conference proceedings, advocacy documents, and policy reports related to second-wave cannabis decriminalization initiatives globally.

Source selection for the literature review was purposive rather than search-driven, beginning with recognized authoritative outlets, including specialist drug policy journals, established international conferences, UN and EU agencies, and curated reference lists from key texts in the field. Following this preliminary stage, targeted searches were conducted using databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Scopus. These searches employed a series of cannabis-reform-related strings (“cannabis reform” OR “cannabis policy” OR “drug policy” OR “drug law reform”) AND (“drug policy change” OR “policy process” OR “policy reform” OR “advocacy coalition” OR “civil society”) to identify relevant academic analyses and policy-focused studies. This combined approach enabled the identification of foundational and contemporary sources central to debates on decriminalization, national drug policy reform processes, and reform pressures within the UN system of international drug control.

The literature review indicated that Malta remains substantially understudied within the broader scholarship on drug policy change. This is despite Malta being the first country in Europe to regulate adult recreational cannabis activities and the third globally after Uruguay (2013) and Canada (2018) (Corva & Meisel, 2021). In December 2021, the Labour Party government in Malta (*Partit Laburista*, PL) approved legislation permitting adult cultivation of up to four cannabis plants, personal use possession of up to 7 g of cannabis, and home cannabis storage to a maximum of 50 g.

Malta was therefore selected for in-depth contextual analysis, enabling what Creswell and Poth describe as “a detailed description of the setting for the case” (2016, p. 103) and facilitating an exploration of the “how and why” underpinning national cannabis policy change (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). Malta was incorporated as a third tier within the literature review strategy. This stage involved the examination of historical scholarship alongside contemporary gray literature, including reports produced by non-governmental organizations, local media, official data issued by Maltese governmental agencies including the Authority for the Responsible Use of Cannabis (ARUC), and regional specialist bodies such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

We conducted 12 semi-structured interviews over 6 months in 2024, both online and in person, in Valletta, Msida, and Marsa. Interviewees were key informants who were influential in Malta’s cannabis decriminalization campaign and design of the subsequent regulatory model. Participants were identified through the literature review and recruited using homogenous purposive sampling. There were five in the first set of interviews: a campaigner and activist who later briefly worked at the ARUC, a journalist, a solicitor with long-standing government and policy advisory experience, an academic adviser to government, and a minister.

Snowball sampling was used to identify seven additional high-level actors in the reform coalition: two activists, two academics involved in advising government on drug-related issues, a senior civil servant at ARUC (interviewed twice), and two directors of drug and alcohol services. Interviews were conducted in English, typically lasting 1 hr. A semi-structured format was adopted to ensure consistency and depth. Interview questions solicited opinions and views on the drivers and course of cannabis policy change in Malta, the political and social context, and the coalitions, actors, and interests that supported, contested, or otherwise influenced decriminalization.

All participants consented to anonymization and were informed of their right to withdraw and the purpose of the research. Digital audio files were assigned anonymized filenames (e.g., “01. Respondent 1, Interviewed on...”) and stored in encrypted virtual repositories. A separate encrypted file containing the identification key was held independently. Each interview transcript was read independently and transcribed fully by both researchers to ensure analytic rigor and reduce individual interpretive bias. Analytic memos were used in the data-engagement process to document insights and support corroboration. Given the small-N design, a light-coding strategy was adopted, using manual annotation and an Excel-based matrix to organize the material.

Coding employed straightforward descriptive labels such as harm reduction, public health, justice, Labour Party, technical, NGO, and Catholic Church which appeared consistently across the dataset (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) and provided the basis for the development of higher-order thematic categories: public concern with the injustices of cannabis criminalization, political leadership and professionalization of civil society NGOs, the technical character of the decriminalization process, and the efforts undertaken to accommodate opponents. The themes are presented in the second section and form the analytical framework for assessing Malta's cannabis policy change and explaining its limitations.

Malta: Institutional Paths and Political Context

A review of the post-World War Two period does not reveal Malta as one of the future first countries to break with the 1961 UN Single Convention. Legal regulation of adult recreational cannabis use in 2021 does not conform to a “general linear reality” (Abbott, 1988) or outgrowth of earlier policy trajectories (Pierson, 2004). Outmigration preserved old traditions among an aged, pious, and diminished post-war population of just 270,000 people. Roman Catholic Church influence was pervasive, including in the education system and national laws prohibiting divorce, adultery, and abortion. There was no female suffrage until 1947.

For 250 years, the Catholic Order of Saint John ruled Malta island, Gozo, and Comino as a theocratic oligarchy (Veenendaal, 2019). On seizing the archipelago in 1800, Protestant Britain committed to respecting the Catholic faith (Cassar, 2003). Protected and empowered by colonial authorities, the Catholic Church remained embedded in Maltese political and private life. British penal codes reinforced this authority. For example, the 1854 Criminal Code criminalized male homosexuality as an act of “unnatural carnal connection” (Harwood, 2015). “Procuring miscarriage” became punishable by a maximum 3-year prison term. Protestant minorities were outraged at British accommodation. An 1838 article in the Methodist newspaper *The Phosphorus* fumed “The two great and radical causes of the social degradation of the Maltese nation are, their poverty [...] and their ignorance which chiefly results from an uninstructed and bigoted priesthood” (Cassar, 2003, p. 101).

According to Veenendaal (2019), Catholic moral and political authority and British colonialism “both left a strong mark on Maltese politics, and language, religion, and sovereignty questions have historically acted as political fault lines.” This was reflected in elevated levels of partisan alignment and one of the purest two-party systems in the world. Ninety-eight percent of the electorate traditionally voted for the center-left Labour Party (PL), which was founded in 1920, identified with British democratic socialism and supported full integration with the UK, or for the center-right Nationalist Party (*Partit Nazzjonalista*, PN). Founded in 1927, the PN promoted the Italian language, Catholic teaching, Christian Democrat traditions, and full independence from Britain (Cini, 2002; Friggieri, 1988; Zanella, 1990).

Rupture and Accommodation

Malta has experienced multiple “critical junctures” (Mahoney, 2000; Sorensen, 2022) in its political history. Major discontinuous change processes in this “nationless state” (Baldacchino, 2002; Montebello, 2021) have had an enduring legacy, shaping institutions, partisanship, and the distribution of power and resources between the PL, PN, and Catholic Church. This includes colonization and decolonization from the British (1964), the declaration of a republic and constitutional independence a decade later, and accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004.

In the context of political and identity divisions, the national direction to be taken during momentous change has sometimes been violently contested (Monteforte, 2019). *L-Interdett* decree of 1961, issued under Archbishop Sir Michael Gonzi, reflects the political leverage of the Catholic Church at the time.

This declared it a mortal sin to vote PL “Supporters of Labour who died during the period were denied a burial in consecrated land.” Marriages were not permitted in church and the PL’s “mass and street corner meetings were interrupted by the pealing of church bells” (Mayo, 2013). Dom Mintoff, the first PL Prime Minister of the independence era elected in 1971 faced down ongoing intense Catholic Church hostility to the PL governments program of social and secular reforms. These were condemned as Godless and communist (Bonnici, 2019; Fenech, 2012).

After the rupture, political stability and agreement on new constitutional, governance, and legal arrangements were made possible by macro-level accommodation between the PL, the PN, and the Catholic Church (Abela, 2005). For example, the PL gravitated away from positions hostile to independence from Britain in 1964 and EU membership in the 2000s (PL Prime Minister Alfred Sant suspending a 1990 application to the EU by his PN predecessor Eddie Fenech Adami). PL’s revisions were incentivized by the ideological and financial opportunities to be gained from compromise, including the pursuit of non-alignment and neutrality principles after independence from Britain, and access to EU-related economic development funds after accession. Center-right convergence on social agendas was facilitated by successive electoral defeats to the PL and popular backlash against *L-Interdett*, pushing the PN and (glacially) the Catholic Church to (selectively) accommodate PL secularization initiatives in the 1970s and liberal reforms in the 2010s.

Informal traditions of patronage are also important in explaining party political capacity to maintain member loyalty and support during periods of ideological revision and elite accommodation (Boissevain, 1965; Veenendaal, 2019). The power to distribute public goods, money, contracts, and services that came with control of government after independence from Britain in 1964 was layered onto clientelist networks. Members of the PL had political access and opportunities; partisan opponents were excluded from government contracts, booming manufacturing sector jobs, public subsidies, and other spoils of public office. Civil marriage, divorce laws, public education, and the decriminalization of homosexuality were contentious when introduced by the Mintoff government in the 1970s, but PL members had economic incentives to vote PL, even if in disagreement with the party’s social agenda.

EU Membership and Modernities

EU accession in 2004 transformed Malta into a “gateway to the EU for non-EU financial services firms and industries” (Transparency International, 2017). By 2018, Malta had received over €700 million from EU Structural and Cohesion Funds, allocated to members with a gross national income per capita less than 90% of the EU average.

Rapid economic development and regional and international exposure accelerated social change in Malta (Guillén & Palier, 2004; Katsanidou & Jungmann, 2025; Peplow, 2025). Malta experienced a “rapid transition from a homogeneous Catholic community to a multicultural secular society” (Gellel et al., 2021). Using data from the European Values Study and Eurobarometer, Abela (2005) demonstrates a reshaping of identity, one less defined by religion, language, partisanship and traditionalism, and more secular, national, European, and individualistic.

EU membership, including obligations under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights “led to the establishment of NGOs advocating for various causes, including the reinforcement of the rule of law in Malta” (Cachia, 2025). In relation to gay equality, “This new European identity facilitated greater awareness of human rights standards and created additional pressure for reform” (Attard Baldacchino, 2025). The increasing visibility of LGBTQI+ individuals and organizations “gradually shifted public discourse, allowing for more open conversations about equality and inclusion in Maltese society.”

Notably, the Catholic Church was not vocal in opposition to policy reforms in the 2010s that recognized gender and sexual rights. This included a 2011 referendum legalizing divorce, recognition of same sex civil unions (2014), the Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics

Act (2015), a ban on gay conversion therapy (2016), and legalization of same sex marriage (2017). Accommodation and adaptation between and within Malta's three historic nodes of power was exemplified by Archbishop Charles Scicluna, who recognized "Maltese society is changing at a sustained momentum [and] that there are positive aspects to the increased respect for the dignity of every person, irrespective of their gender or their sexual orientation" (Branford, 2016).

From this brief overview, it could be assumed that cannabis decriminalization in Malta in 2015 and regulation in 2021 are nested within broader trends of liberalization, secularization, and the erosion of deep conflicts over fundamental values and identities (Banchoff, 2007; Nicholls, 2025). This is not the case.

Drug Market Growth and Reform Pressures

Decriminalization of drugs has not historically been part of the framework of political accommodation between the PL, PN, and Catholic Church. Decriminalization was not an issue of national debate or part of the PL's agenda of social reform in the 1970s. PL and PN governments converged on drug prohibition in line with the 1961 UN Single Convention on Drugs. A robust criminalization framework was maintained, inherited from the colonial era and framed by Britain's Medical and Kindred Professions Ordinance (Government of Malta, 1901) and Dangerous Drugs Ordinance 1939 (Government of Malta, 1939).

The law was robustly policed, carried harsh penalties, and did not distinguish between personal use drug possession and drug trafficking. In 1973, as the United States, United Kingdom, and other Western countries intensified cannabis and other drug penalties and prosecutions in line with the 1961 UN Single Convention, Malta formalized counter-narcotics collaboration with the United States. This came amid U.S. concern that Malta was a potential trafficking hub for Sicilian mafia groups (U.S. Embassy in Malta, 1974).

Malta was a traditionalist, conservative state in drug policy. Unlike some reform jurisdictions, notably Portugal and Switzerland, there was no "catastrophic event" of an epidemic of HIV linked to injecting drug use in the early 1980s (Malta Association of Occupational Therapists, 1993). Heroin use and injecting drug use rates were low, and Opiate Substitution Therapies were available from 1987.

Despite no immediate crisis event to drive policy innovation (Lancaster & Ritter, 2014), the criminalization strategy demonstrated major limitations in Malta. The archipelago exhibited strategic vulnerability as the post-Cold War drug trade ballooned in the 1990s (Andreas, 2004). Imports for the domestic market and re-export included Afghan heroin through Türkiye and North Africa, cocaine via Spain, and MDMA/ecstasy and amphetamine from Italy and the Netherlands. By the late 1990s, an estimated 3.2% of the adult population aged 18–65 years had used a controlled substance over the previous year, the majority moderately (International Monetary Fund, no date). Cannabis was the most widely consumed illegal substance, reported by 40% of past-year users, domestically cultivated, and supplemented in local markets by cannabis resin from Morocco.

The 2000s saw increased demand for drug treatment services (primarily focused on cocaine) and rising rates of drug-related incarceration (primarily for cannabis possession) as Malta struggled to adjust its arcane legal framework to changing market and consumer trends. By 2010, nearly 2,000 people were in rehabilitation, a 10% increase on the previous year (Farrugia, 2019). The Malta National Audit Office (2012) noted "clear concern" with the poor reintegration and employment prospects for those exiting treatment programs, a "lacuna" of service provision for minors, an absence of uniform standards and qualifications among workers in the treatment sector, and a lack of pluralism in treatment options. The three main treatment providers, state agency Aġenzija Sedqa (established in 1994), Catholic organization Caritas (established in 1968), and Gozo-based OASI Foundation (established in 1991) were informed by abstinence goals unsuitable for some problematic users. Half of the prison population had problematic substance use histories (Farrugia, 2019).

In addressing and redefining the national “drug problem” and ultimately determining a pathway toward decriminalization, Malta had no prior experience navigating drug policy liberalization. Unlike the progressive social measures of the 1970s, for example, in relation to LGBTQ+ equality, there is no ideological lineage or policy trajectory that foreshadowed cannabis decriminalization. Nor was their external technical assistance or guiding minimum standards from the EU or the UN.

The function of international drug control institutions such as the 13-member International Narcotics Control Board and 53-country Commission on Narcotic Drugs is to preserve the fragile international consensus on criminalization and a system of international co-operation on the flows of mind-and mood-altering plants and chemicals that was founded over a century ago (Csete and Wolfe, 2007; Fazey, 2003). These institutions do not support, endorse, or have a mandate to deviate from the UN drug conventions or the strict prohibition on the unauthorized, nonmedical use of controlled substances that are listed in the drug treaties. These engineered limitations explain the unresponsiveness of the international system to major post-war change in illegal drug markets, and the optimism of the 2010s surrounding the transformative “bottom-up” reform potential of the “second wave.”

The following section presents key informant perspectives on the conditions and coalitions that explain cannabis policy change in Malta and navigating legal transformation in the absence of party political and church consensus, international institutional support, or prior policy learning.

Cannabis Regulation in Malta: The Why and How

In response to the release of the Global Commission on Drug Policy report “The War on Drugs” in June 2011 (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2011), which called for decriminalization, a spokesperson for the PN government of Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi set out:

The basic fact is that drugs are illegal because they are harmful and we are still to be persuaded that giving a free hand to people to possess and consume dangerous substances without having an effective deterrent in place will solve this problem.

Maintaining the cross-party consensus, the PL responded that decriminalization “is not the solution” and emphasized stepping up prevention and treatment efforts (Peregin, 2011).

Two years later, in March 2013, the PL won the general election with a manifesto that acknowledged the need for a drug policy review, and a leadership prepared to study “the current legal scenario and propose a better way of regulating” one specific controlled drug—cannabis, according to Respondent 05 in our interviews (R05). Legal change followed quickly. The 2015 Drug Dependence (Treatment not Imprisonment) Act removed criminal penalties for personal possession of 2 g of all controlled substances, including cocaine, heroin, amphetamine, and cannabis. The legislation was subsequently amended to increase the possession threshold for cannabis to 3.5 g and to permit medical cannabis access with a prescription (2018).

Further legal revision at the end of 2021 formalized adult recreational cannabis possession (to a maximum of 6 g) and established a new regulatory body—the ARUC. The agency was charged with creating a regulatory framework for non-profit, membership-based cannabis associations. Two years later, KDD Society, Malta’s first legally regulated cannabis “social club,” began operating.

Injustice and Crisis of Law

In discussing the social context of rapid change to cannabis policy between 2015 and 2021, Maltese interviewees were of the view that there was deep public concern with the punitive nature of national drug laws. The close ties between the PL and PN parties and their membership base made politicians

aware of a perceived justice gap amid rising rates of cannabis incarceration “if you were caught you would be sent to prison, there was no consideration whether you were a first-time offender” (R07).

Malta was framed by the interviewees as a small place, where everybody knew somebody who used cannabis and/or suffered a perceived enforcement-related injustice. Personal anecdotes were recounted. R04 discussed people

that haven’t been able to continue with either their studies or move forward in their jobs because of ongoing court cases. Sometimes it can take up to 10 to 15 years just waiting and waiting, and you have to get special permission to travel.

R03 discussed a person “who had to sell his apartment because he had a wife and a kid, and he was in prison [for minor cannabis possession].” Years after serving his sentence, he was struggling financially and unemployable with a criminal record. R02 discussed a skilled teacher they knew who lost her job after arrest and criminal record for cannabis personal use possession. It ended her career in education.

While living under a draconian anti-cannabis regime, interviewees believed Maltese society had a more relaxed attitude to cannabis use in private, and that private use was very common. They discussed knowing cannabis users and how the plant grew wild on the islands. Three of our participants suggested that cannabis experimentation was a rite of passage for young people in Malta. R05 (a government official) noted cannabis

was really criminalized, it was very stigmatized (...). However, it’s always been something that in private it’s not stigmatized. In public it is. And if anybody was unlucky to get caught even with a minimal amount of cannabis they would have ended up with problems with the law.

According to R08, public opinion and government officials “started realizing that putting [drug users] in prison, putting them through a process of criminalizing them, is not going to help them” and that being “caught in the criminal justice system, that label affects their education, their careers, their relationships.” R02 surmised “the law is a living instrument that has to change with society and the times.” Interviewees commonly discussed shifting public opinion on cannabis and perceived unfairness of the law as the most important environmental condition of drug policy change in Malta. However, in the 2000s, neither of the two main political parties prioritized or led on the type of legal and regulatory revisions that polls showed over half of Maltese voters supported. NGOs stepped into this gap between politicians and the public, according to interviewees.

NGOs and Policy Learning

Interviewees emphasized the decisive role played by NGOs as “policy entrepreneurs” (Roberts & King, 1991), putting credible and costed alternative models on the table and building a political coalition for change.

The first public protest for cannabis decriminalization was in Valletta in December 2011. The organizer, David Caruana, was previously sentenced to 2 years in prison for cultivating two cannabis plants. Around 300 people attended. A parallel advocacy case involving two British men resident in Malta exemplified wider systemic failings. Daniel Holmes and Barry Lee were arrested in 2006 for possessing five cannabis plants and charged with drug trafficking. Lee hanged himself in February 2010, 4 years after his arrest and still awaiting trial. Holmes was convicted in November 2011 and received a ten-and-a-half-year prison sentence (The Botton News, 2012; The Malta Independent, 2011).

Following the road to policy change common in other reform jurisdictions, for example, Switzerland (Csete & Grob, 2012; Kübler, 2001) and Portugal (Domosławski, 2011), the Ministry of Justice in the new PL government elected in 2013 convened a series of expert meetings around a decriminalization

white paper, “Raising the Bar.” The pluralizing of the policy space was an opening for traditionally excluded NGOs to participate in policy deliberations (R08). They were in a minority.

Out of maybe 10 stakeholders we were the only one that were in favor of reform. Everyone else was like “this is madness, we should not do it.” Obviously, most of them are controlled by the Christian groups which have a stronghold in Malta and we’re a very conservative country on the whole. (R04)

The media was also hostile.

Nationally, whenever it was brought up in the press, we got lots of bad comments and insults, and [people] thinking that we’re crazy, and we just want to liberalize and have it free for all. We were invited on a lot of TV programs and morning shows, so I just kept calm and tried to get the message through that, you know, the free-for-all is what we have now. (R04)

The first government and NGO interactions leading up to the 2015 Drug Dependence (Treatment not Imprisonment) Act, and exposure to the media and policy makers, highlighted the importance of professionalization for NGO organization and leadership.

I realized that the problem was that we weren’t organized (...). So, in 2016, 2017, ReLeaf first formed as an NGO basically concentrating on cannabis reform. In 2019 I decided together with my team, to create a new direction. I wanted to open dialogue with the governments, I wanted to make sure that we could meet as often as possible so we could present them with the research that I commissioned both nationally and internationally. (R04)

Government officials in our sample emphasized that ReLeaf Malta “were crucial for lobbying not only for cannabis reform but the model which we eventually adopted.” Once the Labour government “were onboard” and willing to reconsider strategy, ReLeaf was a crucial source of advice “we consulted with them on the research we had done; they shared their one; they shared even their contacts, and together we drafted this law. So, the law is a result of research, yes, but also consultation” (R05). R04 told us ReLeaf gave lawmakers “everything on a silver platter.”

Policy learning (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Sabatier, 1988) from governments and NGOs in other reform jurisdictions was stressed by all participants in the research. ReLeaf, for example,

discuss[ed] a lot with organizations like the Transnational Institute, Transform Drug Policy Foundation in the UK, the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy, Drugs and Me, and all of these people were very happy to help us which was a beautiful thing because as a small NGO we don’t have any funds to really commission stuff, it’s all voluntary, so it was really a beautiful thing to see these people come together and help us out (R04).

Research and proposals drafted in Malta would be ‘run through’ NGO colleagues overseas

some of them love it straight out and some of them gave us some really good tips on what to change and what to include (...) when everything was ready we could present it to the government and obviously make it public to for other stakeholders to participate. (R04)

A civil servant and longtime advocate of decriminalization (R01) emphasized the importance of this indirect support to the government from international and regional NGOs and policy foundations.

Political Leadership

Pressure for policy reform and shifts in public attitudes are not sufficient conditions for change (Capano & Galanti, 2017). In the ACF, political leadership is consequential, a key resource that facilitates the amplification of reform coalition strategy (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In the opinion of our interviewees, this was provided by the Labour Party under Joseph Muscat, who was elected Prime Minister in March 2013. Muscat steered party-political belief alignment, brought legal authority to the reform coalition, and facilitated Labour Party learning through routinized engagement with experts and advocates.

The Labour government's commitment to consultation on drug policy change continued after approval of the 2015 Drug Dependence (Treatment not Imprisonment) Act, which first decriminalized cannabis possession, and it continued despite a severe political crisis in 2020. This enabled ongoing reform coalition interaction and NGO adjustment to cannabis policy. For example, cannabis NGOs were disappointed with the changes introduced by the 2015 Drug Dependence (Treatment not Imprisonment) Act. This had removed criminal penalties for personal possession of 2 g of all controlled substances, including cannabis, heroin, and cocaine. R04 outlined

obviously, as I was there representing the cannabis community, we complain that, you know, you can't put 2 g of cannabis and 2 g of heroin in the same basket. We were asking for 6 g for possession, and they finally agreed to up it to 3.5 g.

There were other concerns with the limitations of the 2015 decriminalization measure. "I said it wasn't a decriminalization it was depenalization because the police still had the right to interrogate, to keep you locked up for 48 hours, and maybe even fine you" (R04). Fines for possession within the threshold amount ranged from €65 to €125 (€50 and €100 for cannabis), and the 2015 law did not expunge records of cannabis-related offences acknowledged to be damaging to careers and family life. Offenders were directed away from the criminal justice system but required to appear before a new Justice Commissioner, a social worker, and a community drug specialist from Sedqa Victoria Scicluna (Martin, 2015). Stigma around cannabis and other drug use persisted.

In January 2020, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat resigned following a public enquiry into the 2017 murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. This revealed links between government officials and business groups involved in money laundering and other criminal activity (Cachia, 2025; Pace, 2017). Muscat's successor, Robert Abela, served as Prime Minister until the re-election and a third-term Labour government in 2022.

In the opinion of four (one third) of our interviewees, Muscat's resignation and the circumstances of his departure were significant for advancing cannabis debates from decriminalization (in the 2015 Drug Dependence Act introduced by Muscat) to legal regulation in 2021. The Abela administration brought "an increased urge to work on this reform" (R05). Amid a seemingly preponderant threat from organized crime, the government was prepared to consider the next step of cannabis market regulation to limit revenue streams to criminal groups.

ReLeaf

decided also to put together the proposal for regulated market so that they [the government] would have some [information] to which direction they should go. That was very useful, I presented it to all the political parties, to some MEPs and, obviously, the Prime Minister himself and then from there we started getting into some serious dialogue because we could tell that the government wanted to move on it, although it was an unpopular decision. (R04)

For some reform advocates, the illicit drug situation required more far-reaching change. By 2019, the EMCDDA reported Malta to have the fourth highest rate of per capita cocaine consumption in Europe, with increased pressure on underperforming and under-resourced treatment services, and a police force still locked on intercepting cannabis. R04 outlined

I had to go to the ministry and meet the minister to explain to him in simple terms [...] it's not a human right to be able to take substances but taking substances should not remove your human rights. When I explained it to them like that, that's when they seemed to understand a little bit more.

Advancing wider change required addressing the concerns of powerful critics and spoilers, nationally as well as international drug control bodies. In the opinion of interviewees, the government pragmatically emphasized a public health rationale (Csete et al., 2016) for legal revision, an approach that was intended to consolidate "instrumental preferences" rather than transform "deep core beliefs" (Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

Regulated Adult Market: A Public Health Strategy

As acknowledged by R04, the move from decriminalization of adult personal cannabis possession (as in 2015) to fully legal, regulated adult recreational cannabis use (2021) did not have the support of key stakeholders, the PN, and the Catholic Church. To defuse the concern of "spoilers," interviewees outlined that decriminalization was presented as a responsible public health approach, and not ideologically motivated. It was a purely technical response, not the validation of a new set of basic values (Mooney, 1999). One government official emphasized

We do not promote cannabis, we do not suggest that this is the only way you can relax, and chill out, and feel good, and be creative, and all the benefits that exist in cannabis because there are obviously side effects and it can be very addictive so we will not be promoting the use of cannabis, but we will be understanding it. (R05)

For R09

As a government, we are not inducing people to use cannabis or any other substance. It is a question of regulating rather than letting the underground, well, call them what you like, underground currents, underground pushers do that. That is one of the aims, right? To curb that sort of drug trading.

According to R07, "our model is based on (...) speaking our language in a different way, with a different tone, and it is also about killing, lowering, you never kill it, lowering the black market because that is very important for us."

The centering of public health shaped the reform coalition's implementation design and choice of trading mechanisms in the formal cannabis economy. In a further example of informal and formal policy learning from abroad, one official (R02) told us

I really insisted that the model to be used, be it legalization or decriminalization, could not be a capitalistic model, which is why I really liked the Spanish social clubs and advocated for them. So did ReLeaf and other civil society organizations.

There was a rejection of North American models of adults-only, commercialized recreational cannabis sales through retail stores (Fataar et al., 2024; Myran et al., 2022), and uptake of the not-for-profit Cannabis Social Club (CSC) model as rolled out in Uruguay, Chile, Switzerland, Mexico, Italy, and Spain (Decorte et al., 2017; Pardal, 2022; Queirolo et al., 2025). Social clubs allow licensed collective

cannabis cultivation and harvest sharing between groups of between 5 and 40 people registered with national cannabis authorities. In Malta, the proposed CSCs were called Cannabis Harm Reduction Associations (CHRAs). The government official in our sample emphasized that the steer away from commercialization was ethical and pragmatic: “We are making it very clear that there is nothing commercial in what we are doing, that this is all about risk reduction and harm reduction” (R05).

R05 emphasized the benefits of CHRAs for members

they are not privy to the black market, and they will have a choice, that they will be taking cannabis that is checked for its quality, for chemicals, pesticides (...) people who use cannabis will be educated, stigmatization will be lowered. At the end of the day, we are lowering risk and harm for people who take cannabis.

The rejection of retail store sales was expected to compress interest in cannabis among non-traditional users and young people. R05 referred to this as “Aquarium Syndrome” and explained as

where you have shops advertising, promoting all the paraphernalia you need to grow cannabis, so a lot of money, and now the lamps, and the seeds that are legal (...) everybody posting [on social media], they put a picture of a massive plant (...) So just like when people decide ‘I want an aquarium’ and then they have dead fish after three months, I think that a large percentage are going to give up on it because, actually, to grow cannabis, you have to be very attentive to it.

Evidence Informed Policy

Officials and reform NGOs viewed cannabis regulation and the December 2021 founding of ARUC as an opportunity for collecting improved data on user numbers, experiences, and treatment needs. Information gathering and public scrutiny were viewed as mechanisms for shifting deliberation onto a technical footing (Engeli & Varone, 2011) and for refining the new policy approach.

One of the functions we explicitly gave to the new cannabis authority was to collect data and to monitor the situation vis-a-vis the law. So, if the circumstances show that a particular provision is not working, or is not working as intended, then it needs to be changed, and the authority can make recommendations to the government to that effect (R02).

Respondent 5 explained

Right now, prior to issuing licenses for non-profit organizations, we are conducting a prevalence study, a baseline (...) we are conducting it after the law has been passed because we believe that people are going to be more comfortable in saying that they take cannabis, and we will get a more realistic picture of who takes it.

An early finding was that

really and truly people (...) are not necessarily looking for really high levels of THC to be out of their mind. This is not what they look for. What they look for is something calming, and they do not wish, for example, to take any form of medication or they don’t enjoy a drink as much as they would enjoy taking cannabis. (R05).

R05 acknowledged that the 2021 legislation

changed everything upside down (...). When something new is introduced in everyone’s lives (...) there are going to be reactions. Now there are people who, when control is lifted, become very anxious and very angry.

So, you have a lot of entities that reacted very badly (...). They believe that by doing this, cannabis use is going to increase. Research will determine that.

There was high official confidence that careful management of the scope and pace of change, supplemented by data, debate, and consultation, would enable opponents to reach accommodation with the new law. According to R07

If we do a good job with educating people and getting them to feel safe and getting them to understand that this is really harm reduction, then we can discuss further on down the line other substances. This is why I think it's very important that we do a good job of, actually, really, really, creating a harm reduction and risk reduction approach.

Officials emphasized that consultation with stakeholders and the public on the new direction in cannabis policy was an ongoing process, necessary to consolidate and normalize policy shift and allay “unfounded” concerns.

You have part of society that is angry, and afraid, and worried and not happy, and the first thing I did was, I met all of the entities of the people who felt these feelings. When I explained our aims and our goals and how we are going to work already the anxiety was lowered. Why? Because I allowed them to understand that we all have a bit of control, we all have an input if we work together. If we don't work together, we will never have any control. So, I am giving that message to lower the anxiety. (R05)

As discussed below, officials have not been wholly successful in lowering public and political anxiety. Recent surveys suggest dipping public support and deep polarization, with 46% of respondents in a Eurobarometer survey wanting cannabis use banned (Debono, 2024).

Outcomes and Constraints

A procedural and technical grounding, public health approach, and ongoing consultation with critics did not attenuate opposition to cannabis regulation and the CHRAs. This was despite early positive impacts and outcomes of decriminalization, as reported across other reform jurisdictions (Cantor et al., 2024).

According to the 2025 Government of Malta submission to the European Union Drugs Agency, police arraignments for drug-related offences were down from a high of 613 in 2018 to 80 in 2023, with the largest falls within the categories of possession and cannabis related offences. The potency of cannabis reportedly receded, from a high of 17% THC in 2018 to an average of 7% by 2023. A 2024 Eurobarometer survey reported a 7% fall in cannabis use in the 3 years since regulated adult markets (Debono, 2024).

There was no increase in cannabis treatment demand (14% of all drug treatment demand in 2023, 83% male), but numbers seeking support for problematic heroin and cocaine use did increase—cocaine from 26% in 2019 to 41% in 2023 (Government of Malta, 2025). There was no reported increase in “cannabis tourism” as feared by critics. Commonly with other cannabis regulating jurisdictions, legal regulation did not lead to uptake by young people or the wider, non-cannabis-using adult population (Calleja, 2025; Degenhardt et al., 2008; EMCDDA, 2018; Hughes and Stevens, 2012; Monshouwer et al., 2011; Room, 2010; Vuolo, 2013; Zabransky et al., 2001). From this snapshot, the 2021 law seems to be addressing many of the concerns that prompted change.

The interviews revealed regret that UN drug control bodies did not acknowledge the progress made in public health indicators under the decriminalization scheme in Malta and other jurisdictions. All participants did not view Malta's model as a violation of the 1961 UN Single Convention.

There is nothing commercial in what we are doing, this is all about risk reduction and harm reduction (...). We are lowering the black market, we are increasing the possibility of people working within the legal system, and we are reducing the harm and the risk for substance abusers, so that is very much in line with any convention that is supporting the idea of safety in the face of substance use. (R05)

The absence of endorsement from international drug control bodies was seen to “leave a question mark” over Malta’s regulatory framework (Habibi and Hoffman, 2017). This incentivized domestic opponents not to concede ground or accept policy accommodation, in turn creating legal uncertainty. For R05,

it’s very sad that at the end of the day a lot of people unfortunately are doing a lot of good work and basically, they are just being very clever and going through the back door and the window in order not to get into too much trouble with the UN Convention.

The Limits of Accommodation

Interviewees acknowledged that the rapid change in the status of cannabis between 2015 and 2021 was unsettling. According to Respondent 12, “You know, a policy tends to be successful when everyone is in line.” This has not been the case with cannabis regulation in Malta, much to the frustration of an official (R07) who told us

Honestly the longer I am in this cannabis world the more I realize how difficult it is for people to understand (...) risk reduction. It can only be done on a level of acceptance; it cannot be done on the level of being judgmental.

Opponents remain an influential lobby cohering around the PN, Roman Catholic Church, church schools, and state-funded treatment services. The concerns of reform “spoilers” focus on ubiquitous themes and “moral panics” in the history of drug prohibition: that legal regulation will lead to permissive drug use, that cannabis is a gateway drug, and that regulation is a danger to children (Flacks, 2018; Reinerman & Levine, 2004).

The PN did support the 2015 decriminalization of possession but did not accept legal regulation of cannabis, claiming that this would “normalize and increase drug abuse in our country” (The Malta Independent, 2021). Having demurred from criticism of other liberal reforms, including gender and gay rights, the Catholic Church did mobilize its authoritative social position to oppose cannabis decriminalization and subsequently regulation. According to R04 “we had the church schools emailing parents telling them to confront their MPs and to email the government in opposition of this law.”

With the creation of ARUC in December 2021, the Catholic Church joined 21 allied NGOs to publish a position paper arguing that legalization “normalizes and popularizes” drug use, especially among youth (Archdiocese of Malta, 2021). Treatment provider Caritas’s 2021 white paper likewise framed cannabis as incompatible with “healthy lifestyles” (Caritas Malta, 2021). The continued coherence of this hostile coalition was reflected in Sedqa’s joint 2024 “natural buzz” campaign with local influencers under the slogan “no drug use is good.”

It was acknowledged by interviewees that treatment, education, and health sectors felt unsupported and under-resourced for new cannabis education responsibilities (R11 and R12; Bonnici and Clark, 2021). Constant policy amendments intended to placate the Church and PN were a further source of confusion for the multiple agencies and institutions responsible for the implementation of legal change.

From de Jure Legalization to de Facto Recriminalization

In response to resistance and orthodox veto players (Tsebelis, 2002), the PL government continued to amend cannabis regulations. Official strategy saw engineered, self-imposed limitations on the scope

and scale of decriminalization reforms. For example, interviewees were firmly of the view that cannabis regulation should not and would not be extended to other controlled substances “any time soon” (R05 and R09). This included psychedelic therapies. R07 outlined “I’m very aware that there are some drugs that if used under the supervision of medical staff can be very, very effective for depression for example, but you have to be very ready to introduce these things.”

The existing legal framework was seen as effective for addressing ongoing and other drug-related challenges, such as cocaine use and new drug user cultures. R05 told us

We are very aware that poly drug use, sometimes, is a bigger problem than using one substance. The fact that a person, instead of going to a dealer who is selling more than one type of drug, is going to have the opportunity to go to an organization where there is only good quality cannabis being sold, information is given, education is given, there isn’t this feeling of “you’re an addict, and you’re bad, and we don’t care about you.” It is the opposite; it is a community feeling. I think that will increase the safety, the dignity, and the integrity of people who choose to smoke cannabis.

Accommodation did not draw opponents to a minimum consensus. Legal adjustments were ongoing and detrimental to the objectives of the legal change. There are three examples. Firstly, policing has been selectively robust since the enactment of the 2021 law, with a particular focus on youth and the public use of cannabis (Neis Araujo, 2025). Secondly, 2024 onwards saw a moral reframing of government public information. ARUC’s executive chair highlighted “multiple complaints from people saying that the smell of cannabis coming from a neighbor was becoming a nuisance” (Galdes, 2025). The high-visibility “Responsible Cannabis Use” campaign involving billboard and Instagram slogans such as “€235 multa jekk tfixkel lil-ġirien” (“€235 fine if you bother the neighbors”) and “Żomm lit-tfal ‘il bogħod mill-kannabis” (“Keep children away from cannabis”) reproduced adult cannabis use as a child-protection issue rather than a legal activity.

A third aspect of legislative tightening was Bill 128, adopted as Act XII of 2025. This introduced new administrative offences. Cannabis growers face fines of €300–500 if plants “emit odors that constitute a nuisance” or are visible to minors. The €235 ticket that once applied only to public consumption now covers private smoking if neighbors complain about the smell (Calleja, 2025; Neis Araujo, 2025). Cultivating even the permitted four plants at an address other than a registered residence incurs a mandatory €1,000 penalty and confiscation. Collectively, these provisions transform every balcony, shared flat, and terraced house into a potential site of sanction. Moreover, the new smell-based offence grants police discretionary authority, re-creating criminalization and targeted policing through the “smellscape.”

Bill 128 simultaneously raised the regulatory burden and compliance costs on CHRAs. Associations must now locate at least 250 m from schools or youth facilities, maintain a real-time seed-to-sale database, and disclose membership lists to ARUC on demand. Non-compliance triggers criminal and not administrative prosecution. ReLeaf Malta and Moviment Graffiti denounced the rules for “re-weaponizing the criminal courts against consumers” (Farrugia, 2025). ARUC’s rulebook, revised five times between December 2022 and April 2025, also requires a €7,000 license fee, separate cultivation and retail premises, a professional security plan, and disclosure of every member’s personal data. NGOs argue that such hurdles criminalize the poor and protect the wealthy with detached homes.

Labour ministers presented Bill 128 as a means of “strengthening enforcement” and “safeguarding public order” without undermining the 2021 reform. Yet the policy outcome is striking. Adults remain free to possess cannabis, but exercising that right now may incur odor fines, neighborhood surveillance, and police intrusion. In this context, Malta also faces the real risk of policy rollback and reversal. While the opposition PN ruled out recriminalizing cannabis, party leader Bernard Grech committed to a new “war on drugs” if elected, and a national review of the 2021 drugs law “based on consultation and a proper discussion with experts, backed by data, that would aim at striking the right balance” (Ellul,

2025). Such a political shift will be advantageous to the Catholic Church as a veto player and underscores the vulnerability of long-term processes of transforming institutions and normalizing legal and policy change to short-term electoral cycles.

Conclusion: Institutions and Temporality

The 2010s and 2020s were marked by optimism that the most damaging consequences of drug criminalization could be mitigated with a combination of bottom-up national decriminalization efforts and top-down reform—or at least tolerance of pluralism within the international drug control regime. Our findings lead to cautious and pessimistic conclusions. The Malta case study demonstrates that decriminalization is not a linear or teleological process that will inevitably result in flexibility, liberalization, and necessary alignment of drug policy with health and human rights obligations, or with evidence-informed approaches. Any assessment of the prospects for an expansive second wave or “bottom-up” reform of the UN drug control regime must engage with the nuance of local context and constraints. Statutory revision alone does not ensure liberal outcomes.

Historical, institutional, and societal forces shape how reforms are consolidated, contested, or reversed over time. This makes detailed country-level institutional and historical analysis essential for anticipating post-reform dynamics and for evaluating the prospects for roll back and reassertion of conservative, repressive, and punitive responses, legitimized externally by the symbolism of the 1961 UN Single Convention.

Malta’s 2021 cannabis reform offers a clear illustration. While groundbreaking in its ambition, developments between 2021 and 2025 reveal a pattern of retrenchment and ambiguity: users have been recast as offenders, abstinence narratives promoted by the state agency Sedqa have resurged, and institutional preferences have shifted back toward deterrence over public health or education. Under these conditions, decriminalization risks becoming a symbolic gesture overshadowed by punitive practice. Clauses associated with smell-based offences, expansive licensing authority, and child-safety framings create openings for de facto recriminalization, revealing how institutional design can be reinterpreted through time.

Formal legalization altered legal statutes but left intact the deeper power structures historically aligned with criminalization. Although Malta benefited from strong political leadership on cannabis policy change, this was insufficient to dislodge entrenched interests that reproduce and legitimize prohibition. Operating within Malta’s transactional political culture of bargaining and accommodation of opponents, the Labour government ultimately weakened its own reform project by failing to transform the institutional environment necessary for durable change. Post-reform “fine-tuning” widened an existing implementation gap.

Institutionalizing policy reform requires leadership that extends beyond political will to reshape governance practices, administrative routines, stakeholder interests, and wider civic culture. Where Maltese leadership was political, “successful” consolidation of decriminalization demands *policy leadership* that is collective and sustained, a form of “multi-level stewardship” capable of embedding new norms across institutions and everyday social life (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). Without such transformation, legal change remains fragile, less a durable shift than a reversible experiment. This is more particularly the case in relation to drug policy, where the capacity for system and institutional “snap back” at the international level has been demonstrated by the shifting position of the United States, from the liberalism of the Brownfield Doctrine in 2014, to the second Donald Trump administration and deeply conservative retrenchment.

Future Research Agendas

Our literature review identified a set of common challenges faced by jurisdictions undertaking drug policy reform, particularly those associated with what is often termed “stage two” implementation, when

legal reforms must be translated into operational practices and institutional routines (Metcalf McGrath & Beckett Wilson, 2025; Moury & Escada, 2023; Queirolo et al., 2025). Because our primary domain of enquiry concerned policy change rather than policy execution, our research design and data collection were not structured to interrogate in depth the administrative implementation of reform in Malta, or the ways in which legal change reverberates through the extended networks of agencies and services responsible for delivery. Nevertheless, the implementation literature provides a rich foundation for future research seeking to map and differentiate the generic and the *sui generis* features of cannabis policy change, consolidation, or reversal across national contexts (Lipsky, 1980; Matland, 1995; O'Toole, 2000; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973/1984; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). These approaches will be valuable for future research aiming to identify how specific institutional ecologies mediate reform trajectories and how broader implementation dynamics intersect with national histories, capacities, and constraints.

ORCID iDs

Julia Buxton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1423-8074>

Felipe Neis Araujo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7119-5664>

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with consenting adult human subjects and posed no legal or moral hazard. On this low-risk threshold, it passed at the first stage of the University of Manchester ethics approval tool.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research is funded with a British Academy Global Professor Grant number GP300098.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Qualitative data from interviews is held by the authors, anonymized, and available on request.

References

- Abbott, A. (1988). Transcending general linear reality. *Sociological Theory*, 6, 169–186. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202114>
- Abela, A. (2005). Shaping a national identity: Malta in the European Union. *International Journal of Sociology*, 35(4), 10–27. <https://doi.org/10.2753/IJS0020-7659350401>
- Andreas, P. (2004). Illicit international political economy: The clandestine side of globalization. *Review of International Political Economy*, 11(3), 641–652. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969229042000252936>
- Archdiocese of Malta. (2021). *22 entities present position paper on the recreational use of cannabis to members of parliament – Archdiocese of Malta*. <https://church.mt/22entitiespositionpapercannabis/>
- Attard Baldacchino. (2025). *LGBTQI+ rights in Malta: From conservative roots to progressive leader*. Blog. Available at <https://www.attardbaldacchino.com/news/lgbtqi-rights-in-malta-from-conservative-roots-to-progressive-leader>
- Baldacchino, G. (2002). A nationless state? Malta, national identity and the EU. *West European Politics*, 25(4), 191–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713601632>
- Banchoff, T. (2007). *Democracy and the new religious pluralism*. Oxford University Press.

- Bardach, E. (1976). Policy termination as a political process. *Policy Sciences*, 7(2), 123–131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00143910>
- Bass, B., & Stogdill, R. M. (1990). *Bass & Stogdill's handbook of leadership: Theory, research, and managerial applications*. Simon and Schuster.
- Baumgartner, F., Berry, J., Hojnacki, M., Leech, B., & Kimball, D. (2009). *Lobbying and policy change: Who wins, who loses, and why*. University of Chicago Press.
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544–559. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573>
- Bennett, C., & Howlett, M. (1992). The lessons of learning: Reconciling theories of policy learning and policy change. *Policy Science*, 25, 275–294. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138786>
- Bewley-Taylor, D. (2013). Towards revision of the UN drug control conventions: Harnessing like-mindedness. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(1), 60–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2012.09.001>
- Boissevain, J. (1965). *Saints and fireworks: Religion and politics in rural Malta*. Athlone Press.
- Boister, N. (1997). The historical development of international legal measures to suppress illicit drug trafficking. *Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, 30(1), 1–21.
- Bonnici, J. (2019). L-Interdett: How Malta's Church made supporting the Labour Party a mortal sin. *Lovin Malta*, 24 February.
- Bonnici, J., & Clark, M. (2021). Maltese Health and social wellbeing student knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about medical cannabis. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 60, 102753. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2021.102753>
- Branford, B. (2016). *Malta's paradox: A beacon of gay rights that bans abortion*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-38235264>
- Cachia, J. (2025). Scandals and a murder expose Malta's weak rule of law. *Current History*, 124(860), 107–112. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2025.124.860.107>
- Calleja, C. (2025, March 1). *Legalising cannabis did not make it more attractive to drug-free youth – study*. Times of Malta. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/legalising-cannabis-make-attractive-drugfree-youth-study.1105564>
- Cantor, N., Silverman, M., Gaudreault, A., Hutton, B., Brown, C., Elton-Marshall, T., Imtiaz, S., Sikora, L., Tanuseputro, P., & Myran, D. (2024). The association between physical availability of cannabis retail outlets and frequent cannabis use and related health harms: A systematic review. *The Lancet Regional Health–Americas*, 32, 100708. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2024.100708>
- Capano, G., & Galanti, M. (2017). Agency as a functional pattern? Leadership, entrepreneurship and brokerage in public policy. Paper presented at 3rd International Conference on Public Policy (ICPP3).
- Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. (2007). The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics*, 59(3), 341–369. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852>
- Caritas Malta (2021). *Toward the strengthening of the legal framework on the responsible use of cannabis*. Caritas Malta. <https://cdn.newsbook.com.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/14190526/Caritas-Malta-position-white-paper-cannabis-2021.pdf>
- Cassar, G. (2003). Politics, religion and education in nineteenth-century Malta. *Journal of Maltese Education Research*, 1(1), 96–118.
- Cini, M. (2002). A divided nation: Polarisation and the two-party system in Malta. *South European Society and Politics*, 7(1), 6–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004966>
- Collins, J. (2014). *The State Department's move to a more flexible diplomatic policy on drugs is a rational approach to a difficult question*. LSE Blog. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2014/12/01/the-u-s-new-more-flexible-diplomatic-doctrine-on-drugs-is-a-rational-approach-to-a-difficult-question/>
- Corva, D., & Meisel, J. (Eds.). (2021). *The Routledge handbook of post-prohibition cannabis research*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Csete, J., & Grob, P. (2012). Switzerland, HIV and the power of pragmatism: Lessons for drug policy development. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 23(1), 82–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2011.07.011>

- Csete, J., Kamarulzaman, A., Kazatchkine, M., Altice, F., Balicki, M., Buxton, J., Cepeda, J., Comfort, M., Goosby, E., Goulão, J., Hart, C., Kerr, T., Lajous, A. M., Lewis, S., Martin, N., Mejía, D., Camacho, A., Mathieson, D., Obot, I., ... C. Beyrer (2016). Public health and international drug policy. *The Lancet*, 387(10026), 1427–1480. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00619-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00619-X)
- Csete, J., & Wolfe, D. (2007). Closed to reason: The International Narcotics Control Board and HIV/AIDS. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.
- Debono, J. (2024). Part-legalisation of cannabis has not led to higher consumption, survey suggests. *Malta Today*. https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/132681/partlegalisation_of_cannabis_has_not_led_to_higher_consumption_survey_suggests
- Decorte, T., Pardal, M., Queirolo, R., Boidi, M., Avilés, C., & Franquero, Ò (2017). Regulating Cannabis social clubs: A comparative analysis of legal and self-regulatory practices in Spain, Belgium and Uruguay. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 43, 44–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.12.020>
- Degenhardt, L., Chiu, W., Sampson, N., Kessler, R., Anthony, J., Angermeyer, M., Bruffaerts, R., de Girolamo, G., Gureje, O., Huang, Y., Karam, A., Kostyuchenko, S., Lepine, J. P., Mora, M. E. M., Neumark, Y., Ormel, J. H., Pinto-Meza, A., Posada-Villa, J., & Stein, D. J., ... J. E. Wells (2008). Toward a global view of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and cocaine use. *PLoS Medicine*, 5(7), e141. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0050141>
- Domosławski, A. (2011). Drug policy in Portugal: the benefits of decriminalizing drug use. Open Society Foundation. Available at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/52ff6eb9-76c9-44a5-bc37-857fbbfedbdd/drug-policy-in-portugal-english-20120814.pdf>.
- Eastwood, N., Fox, E., & Rosmarin, A. (2016). *A quiet revolution: Drug decriminalisation across the globe*. Release.
- Ellul, D. (2025, February 27). *PN will not repeal cannabis law, despite Grech vowing a 'war on drugs'*. Times of Malta. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/pn-repeal-cannabis-law-despite-grech-vowing-war-drugs.1105774>
- Engeli, I., & Varone, F. (2011). Governing morality issues through procedural policies. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 17(3), 239–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1662-6370.2011.02025.x>
- European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2018). *Cannabis legislation in Europe: An overview*. Office of the European Union.
- Farrugia, C. (2019). *Half of prison inmates have drug history*. The Times of Malta. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/half-of-prison-inmates-have-drug-history.712138>
- Farrugia, M. (2025, May 18). NGOs heavily oppose cannabis law amendment. *Malta Today*. NGOs heavily oppose cannabis law amendment.
- Fataar, F., Driezen, P., Owusu-Bempah, A., & Hammond, D. (2024). Distribution of legal retail cannabis stores in Canada by neighbourhood deprivation. *Journal of Cannabis Research*, 6(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42238-023-00211-x>
- Fazey, C. (2003). The commission on narcotic drugs and the UN International Drug Control Programme. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 14(2), 155–169. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0955-3959\(03\)00004-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0955-3959(03)00004-5)
- Fenech, D. (2012). Labour's ideology and the dilemmas of adapting. In J. Chircop (Ed.), *Revisiting labour history* (pp. 337–355). Horizons.
- Flacks, S. (2018). Drug-law reform, performativity and the politics of childhood. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 51, 56–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2017.10.003>
- Friggieri, O. (1988). *The language question in Malta: The consciousness of a national identity*. University of Malta. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/60394/1/1988_The_language_question_in_Malta.pdf
- Galdes, M. (2025). Smoking cannabis at home could cost €235 if smell annoys neighbours. *Times of Malta*. Available at <https://timesofmalta.com/article/smoking-cannabis-home-cost-235-smell-annoys-neighbours.1109700>.
- Gellel, A., Arvanitidou, Z., & Rossi, C. (2021). Religious diversity and the secularization process in Malta: A reflection through the experiences of health, social work and education professionals. In A. Unser (Ed.), *Religion, Citizenship and Democracy. Religion and Human Rights* (Vol. 8). Springer.

- Geva-May, I. (2004). Riding the wave of opportunity: Termination in public policy. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14(3), 309–333. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muh020>
- Government of Malta (1901). Medical and Kindred Professions Ordinance 1901 (Cap. 31). Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/31>.
- Government of Malta (1939). Dangerous Drugs Ordinance 1939 (Cap. 101). Available at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/101>.
- Government of Malta. (2025). *2024 national report: The drug situation and responses in Malta*. Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights. <https://familja.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/NDR-2024-Response-2025-EN.pdf>.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18, 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Guillén, A., & Palier, B. (2004). Introduction: Does Europe matter? Accession to EU and social policy developments in recent and new member states. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 14(3), 203–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928704044619>
- Habibi, R., & Hoffman, S. (2017). Legalizing cannabis violates the UN drug control treaties, but progressive countries like Canada have options. *Ottawa Law Review*, 49, 427–460.
- Harwood, M. (2015). Adopting same-sex unions in catholic Malta: Pointing the finger at 'Europe'. *South European Society and Politics*, 20(1), 113–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2014.953350>
- Hayle, S. (2015). Comparing drug policy windows internationally: Drug consumption room policy making in Canada and England and Wales. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 42(1), 20–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091450915569724>
- Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science and Medicine*, 292, 114523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Hughes, C., & Stevens, A. (2012). A resounding success or a disastrous failure: Re-examining the interpretation of evidence on the Portuguese decriminalisation of illicit drugs. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 31(1), 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3362.2011.00383.x>
- International Monetary Fund (No date). <https://www.imf.org/en/Data/Statistics/informal-economy-data/Reports/Malta-Smuggling-of-Illegal-Drugs>
- Jenkins-Smith, H., & Sabatier, P. (1994). Evaluating the advocacy coalition framework. *Journal of Public Policy*, 14(2), 175–203. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X00007431>
- Katsanidou, A., & Jungmann, N. (2025). Rethinking political space in Europe: The modernisation and globalisation dimensions. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 33(2), 583–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2501091>
- Kübler, D. (2001). Understanding policy change with the advocacy coalition framework: An application to Swiss drug policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 8(4), 623–641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760110064429>
- Lancaster, K., & Ritter, A. (2014). Making change happen: A case study of the successful establishment of a peer-administered naloxone program in one Australian jurisdiction. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25, 985–991. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.02.003>
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mahoney, J. (2000). Path dependence in historical sociology. *Theory and Society*, 29(4), 507–548. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007113830879>
- Malta Association of Occupational Therapists. (1993). HIV/AIDS and substance abuse: The Malta situation. *World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin*, 28(1), 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14473828.1993.11785283>
- Malta National Audit Office. (2012). *Performance audit: Tackling problem drug use in Malta*. Accessed via the European Union Drugs Agency https://www.euda.europa.eu/document-library/performance-audit-tackling-problem-drug-use-malta_en

- Martin, I. (2015). *Rehabilitation worker is to head drugs court*. The Times of Malta. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/Rehabilitation-worker-is-to-head-drugs-court.550893>
- Matland, R. (1995). Synthesizing the implementation literature: The ambiguity–conflict model of policy implementation. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 5(2), 145–174.
- Mayo, P. (2013). Social democracy in a postcolonial island state: Dom Mintoff's impact. *Socialism and Democracy*, 27(2), 130–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2012.759743>
- Metcalf McGrath, L., & Beckett Wilson, H. (2025). Stigmatised and stressed: UK cannabis patients living in the context of prohibition. *Critical Social Policy*, 45(2), 280–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183241262777>
- Monshouwer, K., van Laar, M., & Vollebergh, W. (2011). Buying cannabis in coffee shops. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 30(2), 148–156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3362.2010.00268.x>
- Montebello, M. (2021). *The Tail that wagged the dog: The life and struggles of Dom Mintoff 1916–2012*. SKS.
- Monteforte, V. (2019). Moral Balance, Reciprocity and the Politics of Memory in Post-colonial Malta. *Journal of Maltese History*, 6(1), 1–18.
- Mooney, C. (1999). The politics of morality policy: Symposium editor's introduction. *Policy Studies Journal*, 27(4), 675–680. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1999.tb01995.x>
- Moury, C., & Escada, M. (2023). Understanding successful policy innovation: The case of Portuguese drug policy. *Addiction*, 118(5), 967–978. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.16099>
- Myran, D., Staykov, E., Cantor, N., Taljaard, M., Quach, B., Hawken, S., & Tanuseputro, P. (2022). How has access to legal cannabis changed over time? An analysis of the cannabis retail market in Canada two years following the legalization of recreational cannabis. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 41(2), 377–385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13351>
- Neis Araujo, F. (2025). *Malta rolls back historic cannabis legalization*. Filter Magazine. <https://filtermag.org/malta-cannabis-law/>
- Nicholls, J. (2025). Liberal moralities and drug policy reform. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 32(4), 299–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2024.2429588>
- O'Toole, L. J. Jr. (2000). Research on policy implementation: Assessment and prospects. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 10(2), 263–288. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024270>
- Pace, R. (2017). Will the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia lead to wholesale institutional reform in Malta? *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP)*. Blog.
- Paoli, L., Greenfield, V., & Reuter, P. (2012). Change is possible: The history of the international drug control regime and implications for future policymaking. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 47(8-9), 923–935. <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826084.2012.663592>
- Pardal, M. (Ed.). (2022). *The cannabis social club*. Taylor & Francis.
- Peplow, L. (2025). *20 years of Malta's EU membership: Opportunities and tensions*. Times of Malta. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://timesofmalta.com/article/20-years-malta-eu-membership-opportunities-tensions.1104780>
- Peregin, C. (2011). *Drug decriminalization “not a solution”*. Times of Malta. <https://timesofmalta.com/article/Drug-decriminalisation-not-a-solution-Labour.369662>
- Pierson, P. (2004). *Politics in time: History, institutions and social analysis*. Princeton University Press.
- Pressman, J., & Wildavsky, A. (1973/1984). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; or, why it's amazing that federal programs work at all*. University of California Press.
- Queirolo, R., Repetto, L., Alonso, J., Álvarez, E., Sotto, B., Pardal, M., & Kilmer, B. (2025). Intended and unintended effects of cannabis regulation in Uruguay. *Policy & Politics*, 53(3), 553–570. <https://doi.org/10.1332/03055736Y2024D000000051>
- Queirolo, R., Repetto, L., Alonso, J., Álvarez, E., Sotto, B., Pardal, M., & Kilmer, B. (2025). Intended and unintended effects of cannabis regulation in Uruguay. *Policy & Politics*, 53(3), 553–570. <https://doi.org/10.1332/03055736Y2024D000000051>
- Ragin, C., & Rihoux, B. (2004). Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA): State of the art and prospects. *Qualitative Methods*, 2(2), 3–13.
- Reinarman, C., & Levine, H. (2004). Crack in the rearview mirror: Deconstructing drug war mythology. *Social Justice*, 31(1/2), 182–199.

- Ritter, A., Hughes, C., Lancaster, K., & Hoppe, R. (2018). Using the Advocacy Coalition Framework and Multiple Streams policy theories to examine the role of evidence, research and other types of knowledge in drug policy. *Addiction*, 113(8), 1539–1547. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.14197>
- Roberts, N., & King, P. (1991). Policy entrepreneurs: Their activity structure and function in the policy process. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 1(2), 147–175.
- Room, R. (2010). *Cannabis policy: Moving beyond stalemate*. Oxford University Press.
- Sabatier, P. (1988). An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein. *Policy Sciences*, 21, 129–168. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00136406>
- Sabatier, P., & Jenkins-Smith, H. (Eds.). (1993). *Policy change and learning: An advocacy coalition approach*. Westview Press.
- Sabatier, P., & Mazmanian, D. (1980). The implementation of public policy: A framework of analysis. *Policy Studies Journal*, 8(4), 538–560. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1980.tb01266.x>
- Sabatier, P., & Weible, C. (2007). The advocacy coalition framework: Innovations and clarifications. In P. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the policy process* (2nd ed., pp. 189–222). Westview Press.
- Sinha, J. (2001). *The history and development of the leading international drug-control conventions*. Library of Parliament.
- Sorensen, A. (2022). Taking critical junctures seriously: Theory and method for causal analysis of rapid institutional change. *Planning Perspectives*, 38(5), 929–947. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2022.2137840>
- Stevens, A., Hughes, C., Hulme, S., & Cassidy, R. (2022). Depenalization, diversion and decriminalization: A realist review and programme theory of alternatives to criminalization for simple drug possession. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(1), 29–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819887514>
- The Bolton News. (2012). Hanged man was waiting 4 years after drugs arrest. Available at <https://www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/9838911.hanged-man-was-waiting-4-years-after-drugs-arrest/>.
- The Global Commission on Drug Policy. (2011). *The war on drugs*. Geneva. <https://globalcommissionondrugs.org/gcdp-reports/the-war-on-drugs/>
- The Global Commission on Drug Policy. (2016). *Advancing drug policy reform: A new approach to decriminalization*. <https://globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GCDP-Report-2016-ENGLISH.pdf>
- The Malta Independent. (2011). Court: British Man sentenced to over 10 years imprisonment. Available at: <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2011-11-25/news/court-british-man-sentenced-to-over-10-years-imprisonment-302316/>.
- The Malta Independent. (2021). Government's cannabis legalisation proposal would 'normalise and increase drug abuse' – PN - The Malta Independent. Available at <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2021-11-12/local-news/Government-s-cannabis-legalisation-proposal-would-normalise-and-increase-drug-abuse-PN-6736238258>.
- Transparency International. (2017). *Country profile: Malta – overview of corruption and anti-corruption*. Transparency International.
- Tsebelis, G. (2002). *Veto players: How political institutions work*. Princeton University Press.
- Unlu, A., Tammi, T., & Hakkarainen, P. (2020). *Drug decriminalisation policy: Models, implementation and outcomes*. Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.
- US Embassy in Malta. (1974). Presidential Directive on Narcotics Control Activities [Telegram]. Available at: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1974VALLET01822_b.html.
- Veenendaal, W. (2019). How smallness fosters clientelism: A case study of Malta. *Political Studies*, 67(4), 1034–1052. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719828275>
- Vuolo, M. (2013). National-level drug policy and young people's illicit drug use. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 131(1-2), 149–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2012.12.012>
- Zabransky, T., Mravcik, V., Gajdosikova, H., & Miovsky, M. (2001). *Impact analysis project of new drugs legislation*. National Drug Commission.
- Zanella, R. (1990). The Maltese electoral system and its distorting effects. *Electoral Studies*, 9(3), 205–215. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794\(90\)90026-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794(90)90026-5)

Author Biographies

Julia Buxton is a Professor of Justice. She is a Latin Americanist by background, and her research, training and teaching activities have had an international, policy and practitioner focus, including around themes of conflict, peacebuilding, security sector reform and violence reduction.

Felipe Neis Araujo is a Lecturer in Criminology. He is a social anthropologist focused on the politics of criminalization, with a particular interest in how cultural practices are framed, regulated, and repressed through legal and institutional mechanisms. His teaching and research engage with questions of state power, marginality, and resistance.