POLICY COMMENTARY

Addressing the Development Implications of Illicit Economies: The Rise of a Policy and Research Agenda

Allan Gillies\(^1\), John Collins\(^2\) and Alexander Soderholm\(^2\)

\(^1\) School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, GB
\(^2\) LSE International Drug Policy Unit, London School of Economics and Political Science, GB

Corresponding author: Allan Gillies (allan.gillies@glasgow.ac.uk)

This special issue of the *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* builds on a growing, multifaceted research and policy agenda that advances development perspectives of illicit economies in the Global South. Conventional policy discourses have typically framed this issue as a security problem, drawing direct and often simplistic causalities with underdevelopment. Illicit economies frequently drive violence, corruption, exploitation and failures in governance, for example. However, for many communities living in poverty and conflict-affected areas across the globe, involvement in illicit economic activity can also ameliorate the immediate problems they face. Illicit economies may provide vital sources of livelihood and underpin stable political orders and socio-economic development at the margins of the state. Broad, securitised policy responses may cause more harm than good in such contexts. Scoping the complex relationship between illicit economies and development, this introductory article outlines key themes of the special issue.

**Keywords:** illicit economies; JIED; development; livelihoods; corruption; governance

**Introduction**

Conventional policy discourses have typically framed illicit economies\(^1\) as a security problem and a cause of underdevelopment in the Global South. Examples from around the world are numerous and diverse. In Afghanistan, revenue from the opium-heroin trade has been linked to ongoing-conflict, corruption and political instability (US State Department 2018: 92); piracy off the Horn of Africa has been identified as a threat to international commerce and associated with terrorist financing, drug trafficking and people smuggling (UNODC 2017); in Colombia, the government has declared war against illegal gold mining, highlighting its role in environmental destruction, sustaining armed groups and inhibiting national development plans (Gagne 2015). Illicit economies thus frequently drive violence, corruption, exploitation and failures in governance.

However, for many communities living in poverty and conflict-affected areas across the globe, involvement in illicit economic activity can ameliorate some of the immediate problems they face. Illicit economies may provide vital sources of livelihoods and underpin stable political orders and socio-economic development at the margins of the state. The limitations of conventional policy discourses are exposed in such contexts, with simplistic securitised responses causing further harms to already marginalised communities, for example (Sagredo et al. 2016). This special edition of the *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* builds on a growing and multifaceted policy and research agenda that aims to advance novel development perspectives of illicit economies in the Global South.

---

\(^1\) While accepting the conceptual and definitional complexities in categorising ‘licit/illicit’ and ‘legal/illegal’ (see Chiodelli, et al., 2018: 4–11), for the purposes of this paper, ‘illicit economies’ refers to economic activity formally classified as illegal by national and/or international systems of government.
The special issue stems from a collaboration between various UK universities and international development actors working to bring greater attention to the development implications of illicit economies and their governing policies. It arose from a multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral colloquium held at SOAS, University of London in April 2018, as well as a collection of submissions to the International Drug Policy Unit (IDPU) of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The former, titled *Addressing the Development Implications of Illicit Economies*, brought together academics, policymakers and practitioners to examine the complex relationship between illicit economies and development. The latter is a cross-regional and multidisciplinary project harnessing LSE research and expertise; it represents the institutional home of the newly established *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* (JIED), hosted by the LSE Press.

Both initiatives aim to seize on increased attention towards these issues in international development circles. For example, at the UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem in 2016 (UNGASS), member states asserted that efforts to tackle illicit drug economies and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were complementary and mutually reinforcing (UNODC 2016). NGOs have also turned to this agenda, with Christian Aid, for example, calling for greater engagement with the underlying drivers of illicit economic activity in underdeveloped regions (Christian Aid 2015). Despite the shifting policy environment, there remain significant gaps in knowledge and understanding of illicit economies, and uncertainty over the future direction of this policy agenda. Both initiatives represent a step towards closing these gaps: facilitating cross-sectoral exchanges between development actors and researchers working on illicit economies in the Global South. This special issue aims to continue and build on these conversations.

This introductory article outlines key themes of the illicit economies and development research and policy agenda. It begins with a discussion of the policy environment, before scoping the growing literature on illicit economies and development in the Global South. This brief review is divided according to three overlapping strands of the literature: livelihoods, political economy and policy responses. The final section introduces the articles that compose the special issue, outlining their diverse empirical and analytical perspectives: from the policy landscape of international governance and the historic influence of the ‘covert netherworld’ in shaping political orders around the world, to the proliferation of falsified medicines in North and West Africa and the views of Colombian cocaleros on Bolivia’s approach to coca. Accompanying these are prescriptive papers on new strategic approaches to transnational organised crime, as well evaluations of the institutional opportunities and obstacles to greater mainstreaming of development approaches to illicit economies. These include the German government’s support of the concept of ‘alternative development’; the Thai government’s implementation of comprehensive development policies that have demonstrably impacted the lives, livelihoods and illicit economy formation in their border regions; and efforts to establish the drugs and development debate within the World Bank.

**The Rise of a Policy and Research Agenda**

At the international level, there has long been policy recognition of the relationship between development, crime and conflict. The World Bank’s 2011 World Development Report, for example, argued that underdevelopment, insecurity and illicit economies are often intimately connected in the Global South (2011). State fragility and underdevelopment are framed here as key explanatory factors for the presence of illicit economic activity. This activity may be interwoven with conflict in such cases, undermining peace-building efforts and weakening state institutions. OECD-published research on this theme contends that fragile and/or conflict-affected states are more vulnerable to transnational organised crime and its corrupting effects (Miraglia et al. 2012). This constellation of factors is said to create a downward spiral, where illicit economies and/or conflict further reinforce state fragility and underdevelopment. Security and development are thus bound closely together within this policy discourse (Jesperson 2015: 24). The ‘security-development nexus’ narrative broadly argues that security is a necessary precondition for development, and that development can tackle the causes of insecurity. Addressing underdevelopment by ‘transforming the institutions that provide citizen security, justice and jobs’ (World Bank 2011: 8), for example, is proffered as crucial to effective policy responses.

---

2 This includes the Global Partnership on Drug Policy and Development at GIZ, Christian Aid, University of Glasgow, LSE and SOAS.

3 Supporting this discourse is the implicit ‘security threat’ of these dynamics to the North (e.g. see Wild and Elhawary 2012). Contemporary ‘threats’ range from the spread of organised crime, drug trafficking and terrorism to inward flows of migrants/refugees, environmental damage and the destruction of world heritage.
The influence of the security-development framework has been evident in international drug control, with ‘alternative development’ programmes and institution-building running parallel to militarised, suppression efforts in ‘producer’ and ‘transit’ nations. In 2015, for example, the UNODC argued that alternative development ‘helped to address not only the driving factors, but also the underlying root causes of the cultivation of illicit crops’, forming part of its ‘balanced approach’ to the ‘world drug problem’ alongside ‘crop eradication programmes and law enforcement measures to counter illicit cultivation, production, manufacture and trafficking’ (UNODC 2015: 77).

Policy responses in this area, though, have been criticised for typically centring on the security element to the detriment of development (e.g. Keefer, et al., 2010). Crude measures of counterdrug ‘progress’, such as hectares of poppy/coca/cannabis crop destroyed or volume of drug seized, are prioritised over development indicators. For example, the UNDP noted that many of the harmful ‘collateral consequences’ of this enforcement-focused approach fall on the world’s poor: from increased corruption, violence, and instability to human rights abuses against civilian populations and damage to essential sources of livelihood (UNDP 2015). Drug control efforts, designed to protect societies in the North, not only create lucrative black markets, but actively harm those at the low levels of the trade. Such critiques highlight the dominance of securitised conceptions of illicit drug economies in the Global South: where the security element of the policy response is given more weight than development (Buxton 2015: 4).

Indeed, general fears over the securitisation of development have undermined the involvement of development actors in this policy arena. Traditionally, the issue of illicit economies has fallen under the mandate of security agencies, while being viewed as peripheral to the core missions of development actors. Mainstream human development approaches, for example, encourage close working relationships with communities to formulate programmes, and long-term, context-specific planning (Jesperson 2015: 31). Securitised responses that prioritise the goals of external actors and are predicated on the use or threat of force, may be viewed as incompatible with such principles, while (in)directly harming the target-populations of development actors.

Furthermore, in contexts where illicit economies lift communities out of poverty, development actors may be reluctant to align with suppression efforts. Mansfield (2018) highlights the case of Afghanistan and its opium-heroin trade: adherents to ‘market-based development’ orthodoxy oppose destruction of one of the few economies that functions in conflict-affected areas of the country; and development actors are unable to formulate programmes that match the socio-economic benefits of opium-heroin for rural communities in these regions. Such dynamics clearly pose difficult dilemmas for development actors; where illicit economies cause significant harms—linked to conflict and corruption in the Afghan case, for example—while simultaneously providing ‘solutions’ for the needs of marginalised peoples.

How development actors might confront such dilemmas and advance development-led responses is a central question of the illicit economies and development policy agenda. Here, the growing literature on illicit economies in the Global South offers insights. This broad, multi-disciplinary literature problematises the relationship between illicit economies and development, moving beyond the securitised assumptions of conventional policy discourses.

Work on livelihoods engages with the socio-economic benefits provided by illicit economies at the margins of the state. For example, Mansfield (2016) adopts a rural livelihoods framework to show the neglected agency of Afghan opium-poppy farmers, as well as their responses to challenging local conditions, conflict and prohibition, and the ways in which opium-poppy is enwined with issues of land-access, the wider rural economy and local power brokers. The ability of communities to adapt and survive is also mirrored in Verweijen and Marijnen’s (2018) research on ‘guerrilla livelihoods’ in conflict-affected Democratic Republic of Congo. Conservation efforts backed by Western donors and linked to counter-insurgency are viewed by some communities of the Virunga National Park to run contrary to their interests. Faced with few other options, they engage in prohibited economic activities, such as ‘guerrilla’ farming, fishing and logging under the protection of armed actors. These communities turn to illicit economies and non-state actors partly in

4 Such programmes have involved crop substitution, improved infrastructure and social provision, as well as regional development and growth strategies aimed at helping rural communities access legal global markets.

5 Perversely, legalisation of cannabis in the North, in part designed to decriminalise drug users and target the profits of organised crime, may indirectly harm small-scale producers in countries such as Mexico and Morocco. These producers may be unable to compete with legalised, large-scale producers in the North. In this sense, the illicit nature of these markets created competitive advantages for small-scale producers. New models of drug control should take such dynamics into account. For example, see Blickman (2017).
response to the actions of delegitimised state actors. In both cases, illicit economies operate in areas beyond the reach of development efforts; the drivers and dynamics of community involvement in such activity are more nuanced than typically permitted in conventional policy discourse.

Overlapping with this area of the literature, political economy analysis ‘focuses on the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and on the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time’ (Collinson, 2003: 10). In some areas of the Global South, illicit economies are central to these processes and the trajectory of development. Authors such as Goodhand (2008), Meehan (2015) and Snyder (2006), for example, have challenged the assumption that illicit economies necessarily cause political instability and deepen conflict. Distribution of wealth from illicit economies between key political actors may serve as a basis for state-building and political order. While such orders may be fundamentally corrupt and unsustainable in the long-term, this research calls attention to the potential implications of securitised policies: instability and heightened violence. Similarly, Arias (2017) examines the role criminal groups play in ‘micro-governance’ in Rio de Janeiro, Medellin and Kingston. These groups are often integrated into larger political structures, with links to politicians, state security forces and civil society groups shaping the ‘orders’ they create, patterns of violence and the ‘lived political experience’ of local residents. The presence of these groups and their criminality, therefore, ‘reflects as much ongoing systems of governance and order as it does conflict and state fragility’ (Ibid: 243). Such analyses pose questions for development actors. In highlighting the limitations of security responses and the complex political economy of such contexts, development actors are faced with difficult choices on how best to navigate this complex terrain and serve affected communities.

Finally, the literature also examines the impact of policy responses to illicit economies. For example, there is an extensive literature critiquing the ‘war on drugs’ in the Global South. This includes: the role of supply-side policies in stimulating drug-related violence (Castillo et al. 2014); the effects of prohibition on levels of corruption and poor governance (Mercille 2011); human rights abuses carried out by state security forces (Youngers and Rosin 2005); and the environmental damage caused directly and indirectly by eradication policies (Jelsma 2001). These analyses challenge the securitised premises of the ‘war on drugs’ and, by implication, highlight the need for new approaches. Grisaffi, et al. (2017) explore one such alternative approach: the ‘Social Control’ policy of the Morales government in Bolivia. This approach prioritises integrated development and the engagement of communities in programming over forced eradication of cocoa, while attempting to build the legal market for the crop. Although the replicability of this policy to other contexts and its long-term sustainability remain open to question, this research highlights the advantages of development perspectives of illicit economies. The Bolivian government has practically eliminated violent clashes between cocaleros and security forces, and achieved meaningful development in areas previously at the margins of the state, for example. In such ways, research builds the evidence base in this policy area, advancing development perspectives of illicit economies in the Global South. The special issue continues in this spirit.

Outline of the Special Issue

The special issue mirrors the diverse and multidisciplinary nature of the broad literature on illicit economies and development. The papers engage with different aspects of the topic, applying distinct analytical perspectives.

Alfred McCoy’s historical lens reveals the entrenched and enduring influence of the ‘covert netherworld’ on politics around the world. Drawing on the cases of Burma, the Philippines and Afghanistan, this conceptual framework contends that illicit economies may sustain clandestine domains that challenge or support existing political orders. In the case of Afghanistan, for example, the opium-heroine trade has been associated with the CIA-supported Mujahideen, the rise of the Taliban and the continuing failure of global powers to bring ‘order’ to the country. In illuminating this ‘shadowy realm’, McCoy elucidates the power structures that frequently impact on politics in ‘weak states’ of the Global South. Christoph Heuser’s article on the VRAEM region of Peru strikes a similar vein. Heuser challenges the assumption that illicit economies are always violent and destabilising, arguing that such economies may be closely connected to the creation of distinct local political orders. In the case of VRAEM, the cocoa-cocaine trade is embedded in local social structures that in-turn create mistrust of the Peruvian state and strain state-societal relations. Both papers thus deepen our understanding of the often-hidden role of illicit resources in shaping the political economy of countries in the Global South.

---

See also Durán-Matínez (2018), Gillies (2018) and Van Dunn (2017).
Deborah Alimi shifts focus to the level of international governance. She discusses the increased traction of the SDGs discourse within drug control, and barriers to developing this agenda into concrete policy tools and practices. Key here are changes in policy framing that prioritises SDGs: knowledge dissemination between different policy actors, including better policy metrics, and the creation of platforms for cross-sectoral policymaking. In short, more work is needed to break down sectoral frontiers and open up space for meaningful collaboration between the policy domains of drug control and development. Axel Klein’s article shows the knock-on effects of such policy incoherence at the international level. His analysis of the use of Tramadol—much of it falsified—in North and West Africa not only highlights the shortage of pain medications in areas of the Global South, but also the implications of drug control policies that focus on repression of drug users rather than human well-being. In this case, efforts to bring Tramadol under the international drug control regime would have significant impacts on the treatment of acute and chronic pain in these regions. With parallels to Alimi’s paper, Klein calls for changes to international regulation that are sensitive to these contexts, addressing the trade in falsified medicines and prioritising public health.

Thomas Mortensen and Eric Gutierrez’s paper documents an innovative initiative to develop knowledge exchange between grassroots actors in Colombia and Bolivia. Colombian cocaleros travelled to Bolivia to learn about different policy approaches to coca and the development of coca growing regions. The authors argue that greater integration of Bolivian coca growers in policy development has been a key factor in reducing violence. The paper highlights the vital importance of incorporating grassroots actors into responses to illicit economies, empowering communities to define the path of development. For example, Mortensen and Gutierrez note the determination of Colombian coca growers in the wake of their tour to mobilise politically and demand a shift from enforcement-based policies to development.

Following Mortensen and Gutierrez’s paper, the first paper from the IDPU collection by María Alejandra Vélez and Iván Lobo further discusses the role of local communities in resisting the spread of illicit crops and other illicit economies, building on insights from a research project in Colombia. Communities’ organisational capacity and active local leadership in the context of illicit economies has been understudied and largely ignored in policy debates, the implications of which, and potential ways to support such grassroots movements, have thus been neglected. Vélez and Lobo outline three main forms of community resistance in the context of illicit crops, related to criminalisation or eradication (most visibly illustrated in the cocalero protests), penetration, and expansion (which are much less frequent, however the Afro-Colombian community of the Yurumangú river basin is a notable case). In conclusion, Vélez and Lobo argue that investments in cultural and social capital of these communities is an important means to diversify the scope of traditional policy interventions in the area of illicit crops.

Mark Shaw’s paper develops the concept of a more strategic global approach to transnational organised crime. Shaw argues, for example, that drugs and organised crime policies are generally decided in ‘separate rooms’ despite being deeply and innately connected. Shaw highlights how the concept of harm reduction on the demand-side of the drug market has grown in acceptance in recent years, but that such progress or coherence of approach is lacking on the organised crime front which ‘remains strongly embedded in the language of law enforcement’. He points to the weaknesses of multilateral processes intended to address transnational organised crime. These, Shaw suggests, too often derogate responsibility to states parties, many of which lack the capacity to implement them or indeed are compromised in their ability to do so. He concludes by suggesting a synthesis between the drugs and organised crime debates, where each could focus more coherently on the idea of improving development outcomes through a more strategic grounding in principles of reducing societal harm.

Linking in to Shaw’s arguments, Daniel Brombacher and Jan Westerbarkei evaluate the evolution of development approaches to drug control over the past four decades up to the present day. They utilise a particular focus on their organisation and the German government’s interest in implementing Alternative Development (AD) as a key pillar of their international drug control strategy. They suggest the German approach has been influential in ‘the shaping of the global drugs and development nexus’. They point to the 1998 UNGASS and the 2016 UNGASS as ‘major milestones’ in the four-decade history of the AD concept and suggest that the most recent UNGASS Outcome Document has ‘pushed wide-open’ the door on ‘development oriented thinking in international drug policy’. They suggest that AD, previously viewed as limited to illicit crop production has now been broadened in scope to enable a serious development-oriented discussion on urban drug markets and drug trafficking—areas, as Shaw highlight in their article, that had traditionally been viewed almost solely through the lens of law enforcement and repression.

Following Brombacher and Westerbarkei’s broad discussion of the international principles and evolution of AD, Dispanadda Diskul, Ramrada Ninnad, Andrea Skinner, and Visitorn Rajatanarvin evaluate...
what is often held as the most successful development intervention in a drug producing context, the case of Thailand. Under the title ‘development not drug control’ they make the case that the Government of Thailand ultimately embarked on a long-term development intervention that produced significant and positive benefits for the affected communities, including a reduced reliance on illicit crop cultivation. They highlight the key lesson from the Thai experience suggests that drugs should be seen as a development problem rather than a drug problem. Specifically, they look to the case of the Doi Tung Development Project and what tangible lessons can be learned from that as a case for potential international policy transfer.

William Byrd’s contribution follows a different institutional case study, but encompasses many of the questions and themes both Brombacher and Westerbarke’s paper and Diskul et al. pose. Byrd utilises the experience of the World Bank engaging with the drugs and development issue in Afghanistan as a basis for examining ‘the possibilities and benefits as well as the limitations of World Bank/IFI engagement on drugs and development’. In particular, Byrd focuses on whether the lessons of Afghanistan suggest there are ‘unexploited opportunities’ for mobilising the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions to support development planning and implementation around drugs and counter-narcotics. Ultimately, Byrd’s analysis concludes with what he refers to as a ‘realistic note of pessimism’ regarding such options.

Conclusion

This article has sought to introduce the key themes the illicit economies and development research and policy agenda. The special issue engages with these themes, including livelihoods, the political economy of illicit resources and the development of international governance frameworks. Of course, this leaves some important challenges in advancing development-perspectives of illicit economies within policy circles untouched.

For example, defining a unified policy agenda around illicit economies in the Global South may be deemed problematic. This policy area incorporates an extensive variety of contexts, with distinct constellations of actors, existing and potential responses, and social, political and economic dynamics. Some illicit resources may be viewed as more politically sensitive than others, influencing the willingness of development actors to become involved in such areas. The institutional mandates of particular development agencies make them wary of being dragged into debates around legalisation of drugs, for example. In cases where insecurity is high, the feasibility of pursuing development-orientated policies is reduced. Transposing Bolivia’s model of Social Control to Colombian regions where armed actors continue to operate, for example, seems unlikely. Enforcement will still be required to deal with the harmful effects of crime, insecurity and exploitation. In such contexts, the question of how security agencies and development actors work together remains uncertain. Indeed, security actors may be resistant to efforts to ‘place development first’, while development actors remain unwilling to associate themselves with enforcement efforts that alienate local communities.

Such questions and nuances demand caution. However, creating a space for the exchange of knowledge and perspectives is crucial to advancing development perspectives of illicit economies. Research can deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between illicit economies and development, and provide a strong grounding for the development of this agenda. Here, initiatives such as the colloquium Addressing the Development Implications of Illicit Economies, LSE’s IDPU and this new journal, are of great value; creating platforms for engagement and discussion between academia, policy and practice. This cross-sectoral engagement and discussion may serve as a launchpad for the formulation of policies that more effectively serve the needs of marginalised communities.

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to my fellow guest editors for their diligent work in bringing this special issue to fruition: Deborah Alimi at the Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Julia Buxton at CEU, Axel Klein at GDPO and Patrick Meehan at SOAS. Thanks also to John Collins and Alex Soderholm at LSE for the invitation to guest edit the special issue and their vital support throughout this process, and my congratulations to LSE’s IDPU for the launch of this exciting and important new journal. I would also like to express my gratitude to Eric Gutierrez at Christian Aid, and Daniel Brombacher, Elisa Lorenz and Corinna Wöllner for inviting me to collaborate and their help in organising the Colloquium. Finally, my thanks to the authors and peer-reviewers for their hard work in meeting challenging deadlines and delivering excellent papers. — Allan Gillies.

Funding Information

My work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/P009875/1; and a grant agreement with the Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development at GIZ.
Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

Arias, ED. 2017. Criminal enterprises and governance in Latin America and the Caribbean. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316650073


RESEARCH

Searching for Significance among Drug Lords and Death Squads: The Covert Netherworld as Invisible Incubator for Illicit Commerce

Alfred W. McCoy
Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, US
awmccoy@wisc.edu

In a search for appropriate theory, this essay inserts drug trafficking, the world’s largest illicit economic activity, within a wider analytical frame called the ‘covert netherworld.’ Through the convergence of three factors—covert operations, illicit commerce, and social milieu—such netherworlds can form at regional, national, and international levels, thereby transforming social margins of crime and illicit commerce into potent sources of political change. By deftly playing upon this netherworld’s politics and illicit commerce along the Burma-Thai borderlands, a regional ‘drug lord’ amassed sufficient local power to dominate the global heroin trade for over a decade and simultaneously sustain an ethnic revolt for nearly 15 years. In the Philippines, the illicit traffic in synthetic drugs developed a parallel power to influence the character of national politics, compromising three presidential administrations and shaping the moral economy of political life. For the past 40 years in Afghanistan, an illicit commodity, opium, has shaped the fate of military intervention by the world’s sole superpower, allowing it an initial success and later contributing to its ongoing failure. Through the sum of these cases, the essay concludes that the covert netherworld can serve as invisible incubator for a range of extralegal activities and has thereby attained sufficient autonomy to be treated as a significant factor in international politics.

Keywords: drug trafficking; illicit activity; covert netherworld; netherworld; covert operations; illicit commerce; social milieu; borderlands; Burma; Thailand; Afghanistan

During the half-century that drug trafficking in Asia has been a matter of public concern, analysts of all descriptions—academics, journalists, and policy makers—have generally focused on the elusive, ever-changing details and thus failed to frame a broad model capable of probing the underlying character of these illicit commodities and the deeper implications of their proliferation and persistence. After decades of writing about an endless parade of drug lords, death squads, and covert operations devoid any deeper meaning, this writer came rather tardily to the realization that we need an adequate analytical frame to probe the invisible interstice between the formal and informal sectors where these illicit activities seem to survive and thrive. (McCoy 2017: 9–15).

Absent a literature equal to this daunting task, where might we find some insight to inform our search for a model to encompass this shadowy realm of criminal syndicates and covert operations? Rome’s reputed Mafia boss, Massimo Carminati, recently described this clandestine milieu in words infused with analytical insight. ‘As they say, the living are above, and the dead are below,’ he said before adding some telling words. ‘And we [the mafia] are in the middle’ (Povoledo 2014).

By juxtaposing the classical conception of the ‘netherworld,’ where those dead lie below, with the contemporary term ‘covert,’ signifying state security, we can coin the concept of a ‘covert netherworld’ and deploy it to explore this shadowy domain beneath society’s visible surface that informs and indeed transforms political life worldwide. As the cases discussed below will illustrate, merging these seemingly separate realms—overt and covert, licit and illicit, legal and illegal—allows us a fuller, three-dimensional view
of weak states, world powers, and the international politics that encompasses both. Moreover, journalists and scholars have produced some close-grained studies of covert netherworlds (Bayart 1995; Bouquet 2017), their warlords (Reno 1998), crime syndicates (Lupsha 1991; Correa-Cabrera 2017), state capture (Watt and Zepeda 2012; Flores Pérez 2013; Valdés Castellanos 2013), and illicit traffics (Nordstrom 2007; Gootenberg 2008). By recounting events within particular regions or by detailing specific aspects of this shadowy realm, this growing literature invites an attempt to draw together these disparate cases, asking what they have in common and articulating a more comprehensive framework for their analysis.

A covert netherworld takes form when three critical components—social milieu, covert operations, and illicit commerce—converge in a particular and potent array. At its core, this netherworld is an invisible interstice inhabited by criminal and clandestine actors who are practitioners of what famed intelligence operative Lucien Conein once called ‘the clandestine arts’—that is, the skill of conducting complex operations beyond the bounds of civil society (Conein 1971). Offering some sense of the scale of this social milieu, in 1997 the United Nations (UN) reported that transnational crime syndicates had 3.3 million members worldwide who traffic in drugs, arms, humans, and endangered species (United Nations 1997: 132).

Analysis of the criminal portion of this social milieu, as shown in several cases below, must be mindful of strategic roles: that of law in setting the parameters of the illicit market; security services, both uniformed police and undercover operatives, in influencing the volume and level of syndication within this vice sector through collusion, corruption, incompetence, or a combination of all three; political leadership in either abetting or attacking such collusion; and criminal syndicates in exploiting, as entrepreneurs of vice and violence, both de facto legal immunities and market opportunities. Indeed, throughout much of the twentieth century, there were recurring instances of affinity and alliance between state and criminal actors that inhabit this clandestine political space.

During the Cold War, all the major powers—Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States (US)—deployed expanded, empowered clandestine services worldwide, making our second factor, covert operations, a central facet of geopolitical power. In his eight years in office during the 1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower’s administration authorized 170 clandestine operations in 48 nations, thereby shifting the US exercise of global power from the conventional into the covert realm (Weiner 2008: 87).

For over a century now, states and empires have used their growing coercive capacities to tax, regulate, or restrict economic activity, forcing targeted goods and services into an illicit commerce that can sometimes achieve sufficient scale to sustain covert netherworlds. Moral prohibition campaigns have effectively transferred alcohol, drugs, and gambling to growing criminal milieu; routine taxation can foster a contraband commerce in ordinary goods, as happened with cigarettes in both France and the Philippines after World War II; post-Cold War conflicts created an illicit commerce in ‘blood diamonds’ and ‘blood ivory’ in Africa or bootleg oil in Iraq and Syria; and immigration restrictions have fostered human trafficking worldwide.

But most importantly, for over two centuries the major world powers have enforced a succession of contradictory policies towards narcotics that became the necessary precondition for the most lucrative of all illicit traffics. The conjuncture, nay collision, of these global policy regimes—first free trade, then prohibition—has transformed opium and coca from folk pharmacopeia into major commodities whose high profits have, for the past 70 years, sustained covert netherworlds on five continents.

The free trade in narcotic drugs parallels the rise of capital and the expansion of European empires over the span of four centuries. From 1500 to 1900, each successive stage—merchant capital, mercantilism, and high imperialism—fostered a marked increase in the scale, scope, and sophistication of the world’s opium commerce. During the first two centuries of merchant capital, Portuguese captains pioneered the profitable trade in carrying Indian opium to southern China, and the Dutch East India Company (VOC), based on Java, subsequently expanded the commerce, increasing its shipments of Indian opium from 617 kilograms in 1660 to 87 metric tons by 1699 (Prakash 1988: pp. 145–57).

During the eighteenth century, as European states fused state coercion and commercial monopoly into mercantilism for hyper profits, all the rising empires in Asia traded drugs in some form. The Dutch VOC, starting in 1720, controlled all exports of Java’s coffee to Europe and America. The Spanish financed their rule over the Philippines after 1782 largely from a monopoly on the cultivation and sale of tobacco. And the British East India Company imposed a similar monopoly over Bengal’s opium in 1773, using its exports to southern China, capped at 280 tons annually, to finance the purchase of tea for shipment to Europe and North America (Strachey 1903: 133–42; Richards 1981: 64–65). By the 1820s, these opium exports had become the catalyst for one of the world’s most profitable and balanced trade triangles—with £21.2 million in opium and cotton shipped from India to China; £19.6 million in Chinese tea sent to the United Kingdom; and £23.9 million worth of British textiles and machinery imported into India (Tan Chung 1974: 426–27).
In the succeeding phase that married high imperialism to industrial capitalism, opium became a major global commodity. After its imports from British India peaked at 6,700 tons around 1880, China’s domestic opium cultivation grew rapidly to a massive 35,000 tons by 1906, sustaining some 13.5 million opium smokers (Rowntree 1905: 286–87; International Opium Commission 1909: II, 44–66). By the end of the nineteenth century, every Southeast Asian state, from Burma to the Philippines, had either an opium monopoly or a lucrative licensed franchise. Even as late as 1930, Southeast Asia had 6,441 government opium dens that served 272 tons of opium annually to 542,100 registered smokers (League of Nations 1937: Vol. XI.5, 72–75). In the West, moreover, the fusion of industrial chemistry with commercial marketing created a modern pharmaceutical industry that raised British sales of patent medicines, most of them opium-based, almost seven-fold between 1850 and 1905; while American opium consumption grew four-fold, with the number of addicts peaking at 313,000 in 1896 and legal imports of opium reaching 298 tons in 1907 (Musto 1973: 5; Courtwright 1982: 9–28). By 1900, opium was fully integrated into the commerce and consumer cultures of Asia and the West.

At the start of the twentieth century, however, the world’s great powers reversed this free-trade policy, replacing it with a relentless prohibition. By then, opium was so inextricably intertwined with the global economy that this imperfect suppression simply forced its trade into an invisible interstice where the now-illicit commerce would endure and even expand.

In 1909, the United States launched modern drug diplomacy at the Shanghai International Opium Convention that led, by 1925, to prohibition of the non-medical trade in narcotics by the League of Nations. By the end of the twentieth century, the United Nations had prohibited 245 natural and synthetic drugs under multiple anti-drug conventions and formed its Office of Drugs and Crime to enforce these bans (United Nations 1997: 162–64). In a parallel prohibition effort, the United States banned domestic narcotics use in 1914, and then, starting in 1970, waged a ‘war on drugs’ against opium trafficking in Asia and coca cultivation in the Andes (US Office of National Drug Control 1998; US Cabinet Committee 1972; McCoy 2004: 46–50, 55–58).

Yet by 1997, the global illicit drug traffic had become, according to the UN, a $400 billion industry, equivalent to 8 percent of world trade, that supplied 180 million users or 4.2 percent of the world’s adult population (United Nations 1997: 123–24; United Nations 2000: 69–70). A decade later, the UN reported that drugs were ‘the single most profitable sector of transnational criminality’ with an annual value of $322 billion, far larger than the next illicit activity, human trafficking at $32 billion, or the illegal firearms trade at only $1 billion (United Nations 2007a: 170).

Although the near-perfect coercion synonymous with colonialism in Asia and later communist rule over China could reduce or repress much of the traffic, this illicit commerce would revive time and again via the invisible tendrils that entwine illegal drugs, after these four centuries of legal commerce, within world trade—through seed stocks from global proliferation, incipient consumer demand, and chemistry’s recurring formulation of new synthetics or natural derivatives. Starting with the commercial development of morphine, cocaine, and heroin in the nineteenth century, the number of banned drugs, largely developed by the pharmaceutical industry, would rise from just 17 in 1931 to 245 by 1995. Whether in United States since the late 1970s or the Burma-Thai borderlands after 2000, synthetics such as oxycontin or methamphetamines would fulfill unmet demand whenever suppression impeded supply of natural narcotics. Moreover, by repressing local narcotics cultivation while global drug demand remained unchecked, the powerful US-UN prohibition effort served as stimulus for a ten-fold increase in world illicit opium production—from 1,200 tons in 1971 to 10,500 tons by 2017 (US Cabinet Committee 1972: 11; UN 2018: 8).

Looking back on this century of failed prohibition, the US and UN effort has succeeded only in stimulating the profitability and proliferation of narcotics. Through this distortion in the global political economy, drugs became the economic foundation for covert netherworlds that served as invisible incubators to sustain, for nearly a century, a range of extralegal activities—including syndicate criminality, armed insurgency, and covert operations (Gutierrez 2018).

Reviewing three major cases of drug trafficking from across Asia—drug lords in Southeast Asia’s Golden Triangle, death squads in the Philippines, and covert warfare in Afghanistan—reveals how our model’s three components can converge to form covert netherworlds at regional, national, and international levels, transforming social margins of crime and illicit commerce into potent sources of political change within these wider realms. Apart from illustrating a distinct aspect of the covert netherworld’s political dynamics, these cases will lead us, in their sum, to assess the character of this clandestine domain as an autonomous element within world politics—that is, impervious to the actions of individuals no matter how innovative or influential, resistant to repression by national or transnational agencies, and capable of influencing the course of military operations, whether by weak states or the world’s sole superpower.
Golden Triangle Drug Lord

As narcotics surged into the United States during the late 1980s, Washington declared war on the world’s leading ‘drug lords’—notably, General Manuel Noriega of Panama, Colombian cartel leaders like Pablo Escobar, and an unknown Burmese warlord named Khun Sa. In March 1990, the head of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) branded Khun Sa the ‘king of opium,’ and the US Attorney General called him the ‘prince of death’ while indicting him for smuggling over a ton of heroin into New York City (Cox 1996: 47–50; McCoy 1999: 301). Six years later, however, the defeat of this powerful drug lord had surprisingly little impact on Southeast Asia’s opium trade, indicating that this illicit traffic was part of a domain with sufficient autonomy to defeat Washington’s drug war.

Indeed, when the Cold War came to Asia in the 1950s, a convergence of our three components formed a covert netherworld along the Burma-Thai border in an area called the ‘Golden Triangle.’ For nearly a quarter century, from 1950 to 1972, the CIA used the Burma-Thai borderlands to mount a succession of covert operations as part of its Cold War containment of China. After Mao Zedong’s Red Army pushed 14,000 Nationalist troops across the border into Burma’s Shan States in 1949, Washington, seeking a second front to blunt Beijing’s involvement in the Korean War, ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to mobilize these guerrillas for several clandestine invasions of southern China (Leary 2006: 129–33).

By accident of British colonial conquest in the late 1880s, the Tai-speaking Shan States had been incorporated into the Province of Burma as an autonomous region, creating ethnic tensions still unresolved a century later. After Yangon broke its promises of regional autonomy in the mid-1950s, the Shan minority launched a secessionist revolt that would persist for another 40 years, sustained by rebel involvement in the region’s growing opium traffic (Smith 1994: 24–25, 58–63; McCoy 1999: 304).

Through convergence of Nationalist Chinese trafficking and the Shan revolt, both fostered by CIA covert operations, opium production in the Shan States became the economic foundation for a covert netherworld along the Burma-Thai border. By forcing local hill tribes to produce the drug and then managing its export, these Chinese troops presided over a massive increase of poppy cultivation on the Shan Plateau—from some 18 tons in 1958 to an estimated 400 to 600 tons in 1970 (Yawnghwe 1987: 57). After the Burma Army attacked in 1961, these Nationalist Chinese irregulars retreated into Thailand, where they continued to control the cross-border opium traffic through an informal alliance with the Thai military (McCoy 2003: 349–55).

During its half-century of operation, the Golden Triangle’s covert netherworld transformed a Shan rebel called Khun Sa from boy soldier into the world’s most powerful drug lord. Then, at the peak of his 40-year career, these clandestine dynamics quietly crushed him, leaving little trace of his once-formidable influence. At the outset of this chaos on the Burma-China border, Khun Sa launched his military career in 1950 at age 16 when he formed a local militia in his home area (Khun Sa: 47; Yawnghwe 1995: 25). Ever the deft opportunist, Khun Sa would switch sides over the next 30 years between the Nationalist Chinese, Yangon government, and Shan rebels, winning arms, supplies, and concessions with every shift. By 1967, Khun Sa had become powerful enough to challenge Nationalist Chinese control over the Thai-Burma border by setting out from the Shan hills with a massive, 16-ton opium caravan of 500 soldiers and 300 mules—an ill-fated bid that ended when the commander of the Royal Lao Army, himself a major opium dealer, dispatched aircraft to bomb Khun Sa’s caravan (McCoy 2003: 333–34, 356–61).

With the support the Thai military, Khun Sa’s fortunes soon revived and by the mid-1970s he was operating a major heroin refinery in northern Thailand astride the caravan routes from Burma, using his illicit profits to help finance the election of the country’s prime minister, General Kriangsak Chamanand. In the 1976–77 crop year, for example, his force of 3,500 militia hauled 70 tons of raw opium across the border in 12 caravans with an average of 116 mules and 335 guards each (McCoy 1999: 309). But after some flamboyant interviews with the Thai tabloids in 1980–81 promising to stop the heroin traffic in exchange for diplomatic recognition of a separatist Shan state, Thai commandos attacked his rebel redoubt and drove Khun Sa’s forces across the border into Burma. There atop a highland massif between the Salween River’s deep gorges and the Thai border, he built a new capital city at Homong, protected by 20,000 well-armed troops, for both his rebel Shan State and global heroin commerce (McCoy 2003: 416–19, 427–39).

In March 1984, a truck drove up the driveway of the Nationalist Chinese headquarters at Chiangmai in northern Thailand, detonating a ton of explosives with a devastating thunderclap that marked the eclipse of the Chinese commander and the ascent of his long-time rival Khun Sa as the Golden Triangle’s ‘king of heroin’ (Tomlin 1989; McCoy 2003: 430; Lintner 1994: 264–65). In part through his efforts, Burma’s opium production soared from 550 tons in 1981 to 2,430 tons by 1989, sending pure, low-cost heroin into the US market that made ‘China White’ the drug of choice for rock bands and ramp models. By the late 1980s, Khun Sa controlled
over 80 percent of Burma’s opium production and over 50 percent of the world’s heroin supply—making him a drug lord of unprecedented power (US State Department 1990: 271–79, 286; US State Department 1997; United Nations 2001b: 32–33, 49–51; McCoy 1999: 301–02, 312). Using his profits from these illicit operations, Khun Sa unified the fragmented Shan nationalist movement by assassinating any commander who rebuffed his leadership, including a half-dozen leaders of the more idealistic Shan State Army, thereby creating a serious secessionist threat that roused a lethal response from Yangon (Lintner 1994: 264).

Starting in early 1994, two Burma Army divisions unleashed a giant pinces movement against Khun Sa’s highland bastion. As Yangon shifted control of the heroin trade to its allies, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) joined the fight against Khun Sa in August 1995, thereby winning protection for its own heroin shipments. Then, in one of those bold moves so characteristic of his career, in January 1996 Khun Sa led 1,700 of his rebel soldiers in a dramatic surrender ceremony before cameras from Yangon’s TV Myanmar Network, promising contritely that ‘we will work together to eradicate the opium and narcotic drugs, which endanger the entire humanity of our country.’ Despite strong pressure from Washington, Yangon granted him what the State Department called ‘immunity from prosecution ... or rendition,’ encouraging him ‘to sanitize past illicit proceeds’ through legitimate investments since ‘narcotics profits laundered elsewhere are significant factors in the overall Burmese economy’ (New Light of Myanmar 1996: 9–10; US State Department 2000; McCoy 1999: 316–20). In the aftermath of his surrender, the Shan secessionist movement largely collapsed after 40 years of struggle—with the Burma army occupying the rebel zone, surviving insurgent factions eventually negotiating with Yangon, and most of the remaining 15,000 Shan fighters quitting, many fleeing to a half-dozen refugee camps inside Thailand (Ferguson 2010: 54–57; Pederson 2008: 63–64; Wansai 2018).

Surprisingly, however, the surrender of Burma’s heroin king had little impact on the flow of heroin out of the Golden Triangle. Within a year, Burma’s opium production had increased by 10 percent from 2,340 to 2,560 tons. In response to international criticism, however, Yangon announced a 15-year program for eradication of all narcotics in 1999 and pressed ethnic militia for ‘opium-free’ pledges (US State Department 2000; U.S. State Department 2002; United Nations 2002: 7).

After a careful cost-benefit analysis of the two drugs, the United Wa State Army accepted UN support for opium eradication and reportedly shifted its assets into methamphetamines manufacture, earning enormous profits from the traffic (Kramer 2007: 21–28, 53–57, 72–73; Ferguson 2010: 57–60). By 2002, Burma had become, in the words of the US State Department, ‘the primary source of amphetamine-type stimulants in Asia’ with production of 800 million tablets annually. As some 700 million of these tablets flooded across its northern border almost unchecked, synthetics supplanted opiates for most of Thailand’s 2.5 million drug users, thereby fostering mass amphetamines use far more serious than the limited heroin addiction of earlier years (US State Department 2002). Combined with a parallel illicit flow from south China, whose massive scale was indicated by a three-ton seizure at criminal labs near Shantou in 2014, this burgeoning traffic in methamphetamines soon became the bane of poor communities across East and Southeast Asia, with an estimated 20 million users by 2010 (Lau 2014; UN 2010: 214).

As Khun Sa’s career demonstrates quite clearly, the United States had, in effect, declared war on an illicit commodity so resilient that not even the capture of its most influential entrepreneur could change the course of this vast global commerce. To put it simply, the UN-US prohibition regime could capture a drug lord but it could not contain the illicit commerce that was the source of his extraordinary power.

Philippine Netherworld

Over the past century in the Philippines, the continuity of vice prohibition policies from colonial to national governments has fostered the three requisite components for a covert netherworld—a social milieu of vice entrepreneurs, state security in the form of corrupt or compromised police, and an illicit economic base from illegal drugs and gambling.

Between 1906 and 1908, the U.S. colonial regime, with the support of Filipino reformers, banned opium and most forms of gambling, creating the regulatory preconditions for a thriving vice economy. After independence in 1946, a conservative Filipino moral consensus preserved these prohibitions, thereby making illegal gambling a significant source of campaign funds under the postwar Republic (McCoy 2009: 148–57). Apart from a periodic recurrence of illegal drugs—heroin in the 1960s and amphetamines since the 1980s—illegal gambling dominated the vice economy for several decades through its resilience, sheer size, and political articulation.

A 1999 survey found that 28 percent of all adult Filipinos bet on illegal lotteries called jueteng or masiao (Social Weather Stations 1999). A parallel legislative study estimated the annual gross of all jueteng syndicates on the main Philippine island of Luzon at US $918 million and bribes to police and politicians...
at $180 million (Reotutar 1999: 113–17). If we add this $1 billion in illegal gambling to the $5 billion from illicit drug sales, then their total was a vast underground economy whose revenues equaled nearly half the government’s annual budget. (National Statistical Coordination Board 2000: Tables 15.2, 15.4, 15.5; US Department of State 2002: VIII–50).

In the last days of the twentieth century, the Philippine Congress impeached President Joseph Estrada for taking bribes from syndicates that managed the illegal jueteng lottery. When he televised trial before the Senate failed on procedural grounds, a quarter-million protesters took to the streets for days of demonstrations that soon forced the president from the palace into prison and replaced him with a putative reformer, President Gloria Arroyo. (McCoy 2009: 471–97) As this controversy indicates, illegal gambling had emerged from the country's slums to sustain a costly electoral system otherwise unsustainable in such an impoverished society.

Illustrating the state’s power to favor individual vice entrepreneurs within a covert netherworld, during the 1980s the Marcos dictatorship presided over the rise of a powerful drug lord who sparked a major change in Manila’s illicit economy. With the protection of the regime’s security chief, General Fabian Ver, a petty smuggler named Jose ‘Don Pepe’ Oyson took control of the illegal importation of a methamphetamine called shabu, whose pricing and pharmacology would soon make it a pandemic in the country’s sprawling slums and make Don Pepe a powerful crime boss who could buy protection from Manila’s police command (Sidel 1999: 70–90). But in March 1990, four years after the fall of the Marcos regime, the National Bureau of Investigation seized 44 pounds of heroin at Manila airport and dispatched the drug lord with two bullets to the head while his security detail looked on helplessly (Drogin 1990).

Despite the death of Manila’s most powerful drug lord, methamphetamine use continued to spread unchecked through the city’s slums to reach 1.2 million users by 1998 (United Nations 2000a: 15). Driven by rising amphetamine use during the 1990s, drug trafficking superseded jueteng’s comparatively benign corruption and brought new, disconcerting dimensions to the Philippine netherworld—notably, kidnapping, cold-blooded rubouts, and active police participation in the illicit traffic.

The exemplar of this trend was Panfilo ‘Ping’ Lacson whose elite Police Anti-Organized Crime Task Force (PAOCTF) reportedly became a lethal criminal syndicate—maximizing profits by kidnapping overseas Chinese suppliers, draining their bank accounts, and dumping their bodies. In 2001, after Lacson became a senator and rising political star, President Gloria Arroyo’s security services alleged that his police squad had kidnapped 21 Chinese drug traffickers and executed six after collecting hefty ransoms (McCoy 2009: 454–66, 502–06). Senator Lacson countered the president’s charges by accusing her of running corrupt campaigns financed, ultimately, by the country’s top jueteng boss—producing a sordid spectacle that dominated the 2004 presidential contest when Arroyo ran for reelection against Lacson’s insurgent candidacy (McCoy 2009: 506–10).

In retrospect, this political feud between President Arroyo and Senator Lacson was a bellwether for longer-term changes in the moral economy of Philippine politics. Though it has been illegal for nearly a century, jueteng still enjoys a certain legitimacy within Filipino popular culture, funding both mass electoral participation and an informal social welfare system that binds a disaffected mass to the Philippine polity. By contrast, drug use is universally condemned, its traffic is marked by lurid violence, and its corruption lacks any socially redeeming legitimacy.

By the late 1990s, as noted above, illegal drug sales were five times higher than the illicit income from jueteng, indicating that drugs were superseding gambling as the dominant element in the country’s vice economy. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it seemed that drug trafficking’s displacement of jueteng within the country’s covert netherworld could corrode the moral economy of Philippine politics, introducing a more brutal violence, amoral actors, and escalating police brutality.

**Duterte’s Drug War**

Indeed, the deeper implications of this shift within the illicit economy were soon manifest in the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. During his 21 years as mayor of Davao City from 1988 to 2016, Duterte had presided over 1,424 extrajudicial killings, most done by his Davao Death Squad that marked their victims’ bodies with signature brown packing tape (Reyes 2016: 114–15, 124; Chen 2016; Quimpo 2017: 152–56).

At the start of the presidential campaign in early 2016, Duterte emerged from provincial obscurity through his violent populist rhetoric, threatening death to both drug dealers and users. Although the Philippine economy had sustained a 6 percent annual growth from 2010 to 2016, a staggering 26 million Filipino poor still struggled to survive on a dollar a day, most of them packed into service-deprived slums whose misery was amplified by widespread drug use (Sicit 2016; Yap 2016). At the start of his presidential campaign, Duterte promised publicly: ‘If by chance that God will place me there, watch out because the 1,000 [executed in
Davao City] will become 100,000. You will see the fish in Manila Bay getting fat. That is where I will dump you’ (Human Rights Watch 2017: 4). Apart from a ‘populist logic of painting a ‘dangerous other,’” Duterte’s tough talk, says sociologist Nicole Curato, offered a ‘promise of justice’ and ‘stability’ for the poor troubled by disorder, petty crime, and rampant addiction (Curato 2016: 101–02).

Thus, on President Duterte’s first day in office in June 2016, his handpicked police director, Roland dela Rosa, ordered an attack on drug trafficking, producing, over the next 12 months, 1.3 million surrenders by dealers and users; 86,000 drug arrests; and some 8,000 bodies dumped on city streets, many wrapped in the signature brown packing tape (Dalizon 2017; Reuters 2017). Despite public outrage surrounding police kidnap-killing of a Korean businessman in January 2017 and the shooting of two innocent teenagers in August–September, the drug war continued, after short suspensions, with the number of dead reaching 12,000 by the end of the year (Human Rights Watch 2017a: 429; Villamor 2017; Human Rights Watch 2017b).

Although Human Rights Watch declared his drug war a ‘calamity,’ a resounding 85 percent of Filipinos surveyed were initially ‘satisfied’ with the policy (Reuters 2017a; Human Rights Watch 2017c). If we move beyond the logical realm of policy to the emotions of performative politics, each bullet-ridden body left sprawled on a city street seemed an evocative testament to the president’s promises of order. Significantly, US President Donald Trump, instead of joining the rising international condemnation of the Duterte administration’s human rights violations, cited the success of this Philippine drug war, in March 2018, to urge the death penalty for American drug dealers (Zezima and Dawsey 2018).

The demoralized debate surrounding the 2004 Philippine elections, as well as the sordid spectacle of the current president and his national police participating openly in mass extrajudicial killings, illustrates the power of Manila’s netherworld to influence the country’s political culture at the highest level.

**Intervention in Afghanistan**

Throughout the three decades of US intervention in Afghanistan since 1979, its military operations, conventional or covert, succeeded when they coincided with Central Asia’s opium traffic and suffered when they failed to complement it. Moreover, between 1979 and 1992 this intervention fostered the three critical components for formation of a covert netherworld along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands—covert operations by Pakistani and US security services, a social matrix of Islamic militants to sustain surrogate warfare in the Afghan countryside, and a relentless expansion of illicit opiates trafficking.

During its clandestine campaign against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, the CIA worked through Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence, or ISI, to arm Afghan mujahedeen fighters who funded their resistance by an opium tax on poor farmers. ‘We must grow and sell opium to fight our holy war against the Russian nonbelievers,’ one Islamic teacher told a *New York Times* reporter who trekked across southern Afghanistan in 1986 (Bonner 1986). After just five years of such surrogate warfare, the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands became the world’s largest heroin producer, supplying 60 percent of America’s illicit demand and 80 percent of Europe’s (Smith 1982: 2–3; Falco 1979: 2–3). Afghanistan’s opium production also grew unchecked from about 200 tons annually at the start of this covert war in 1980 to 2,000 tons by its end in 1991 (United Nations 2003: 6). With funding from the opium traffic and weapons from the CIA, particularly the Stinger missiles that proved so lethal against Soviet helicopters, the Afghan mujahedeen warlords fought the Red Army for a full decade, finally forcing Soviet troops to withdraw in 1989 (Pear 1988).

As this covert operation was winding down in May 1990, the *Washington Post* reported that the CIA’s chief asset, an Islamic fundamentalist named Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was the rebels’ leading drug trafficker with a string of heroin labs in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province (Rupert and Coll 1990). In a deft convergence with the covert netherworld, the CIA had sanctioned an alliance between the illicit opium traffic and Islamic guerrillas that sustained their resistance for the decade needed to force the Soviet troops out of Afghanistan.

Over the longer term, however, such covert intervention, so easily unleashed in Afghanistan during the Cold War, produced a black hole of geopolitical instability not readily sealed or healed in its aftermath. Emerging from the bloody civil war that followed the Soviet retreat, the fundamentalist Taliban movement captured Kabul in 1996 and then financed its government via an opium industry freed from prohibition. As the country’s poppy crop climbed to a record harvest of 4,581 tons in 1999, Afghanistan became history’s first opium monocrop—with much of its land, capital, and labor dedicated to producing 80 percent of the world’s heroin supply (United Nations 2000b: 15; United Nations 2001b: 32–38). In July 2000, however, the Taliban suddenly ordered a total ban on all opium cultivation in a desperate bid for diplomatic recognition, cutting the harvest from the 1999 peak of 4,581 tons to just 185 tons within a year—an act of economic evisceration that would leave the regime unable to resist the impending US invasion (Berak 2001; United Nations 2001a: 9).
After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush White House used CIA cash and US airpower to mobilize a coalition of tribal warlords that captured Kabul in October 2001 and then presided over a proliferation of opium planting. Unchecked by any real drug suppression, Afghanistan’s opium production surged from just 185 tons in 2001 to 8,200 tons by 2007—a record harvest that provided 93 percent of world heroin, an extraordinary 53 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the illicit income to revive the Taliban resistance (United Nations 2007: pp. iii–iv, 7, 39, 60, 86).

By 2009, the Taliban were expanding so rapidly that the new Obama administration felt forced to surge US force levels up to 102,000 troops in a bid to cripple the guerrillas (Baker 2009). After months of rising deployments, President Obama’s new-look strategy was officially launched in February 2010 when helicopters carrying hundreds of US Marines landed at Marja, a remote market town in Helmand Province, where almost 40 percent of the world’s illicit opium was grown largely under the Taliban’s protection. By attacking the insurgents but ignoring the opium harvest that funded their annual spring offensives, Obama’s surge soon suffered a defeat foretold (Chivers 2010; Nordland 2010).

While US forces wound down major combat operations in late 2014 as part of their planned withdrawal, the Taliban launched offensives in the north, northeast, and south—killing record numbers of Afghan troops and occupying half the countryside (Nordland & Goldstein 2015). By 2016, the Taliban’s sustained offensive in the heroin heartland of Helmand Province was overrunning Afghan military posts and winning back key opium districts, forcing Obama to suspend his withdrawal by keeping over 8,000 troops in country indefinitely (Jolly 2016; Nordland and Shah 2016).

These dismal trends persisted throughout 2017 as the Afghan opium harvest nearly doubled to a record of 9,000 tons (United Nations 2017: 8). Convinced that opium provided 60 percent of the Taliban’s funds for wages and weapons, the US command dispatched F-22 fighters and B-52 bombers, starting in November 2017, to destroy the Taliban’s heroin laboratories in opium-rich Helmand Province (Lamothe 2017; Hughes 2017; Schmitt 2017; Constable 2017). After three weeks of this bombing campaign, the US command claimed destruction of 25 drug labs that supposedly deprived ‘drug kingpins’ of $80 million in merchandise and denied the Taliban $16 million in drug taxes (Cockburn 2018). By contrast, British drug expert David Mansfield estimated the Taliban’s actual tax losses at $2,863, somewhat less than the US claims of $16 million, while the 25 buildings destroyed were an inconsequential share of the country’s 500 heroin labs (Mansfield 2018: 4–5, 21, 26; Schmitt 2017).

More broadly, the amazing asymmetry of F-22 stealth aircraft, that cost $400 million each, bombing mud-walled huts equipped with cheap electric heaters and rusting steel drums is symptomatic of the US failure to contain an illicit traffic that still remains the economic foundation for this thriving netherworld.

**Conclusion**

Each of these cases offers insights into the political dynamics of the covert netherworld. In the Golden Triangle, this clandestine domain shaped Khun Sa’s rise as the world’s most powerful drug lord and prevented the global prohibition regime from controlling his burgeoning narcotics traffic. By deftly playing upon this netherworld’s political and economic forces, Khun Sa amassed sufficient local power to dominate the global heroin traffic for a decade and sustain an ethnic revolt for nearly 15 years. While his sudden eclipse precipitated the collapse of the Shan secessionist revolt, it had little impact upon the illicit opium traffic, indicating that the covert netherworld’s economic dimension had achieved sufficient autonomy to survive even major political change.

In the Philippines, the netherworld’s illegal gambling and illicit drug trafficking developed a parallel power to shape the character of national politics, compromising three presidential administrations over the past 20 years and exercising a profound impact on the moral economy of political life. While President Duterte skillfully manipulated the symbolism of drug suppression to win strong popular support, the spectacular surge in extrajudicial killings coordinated by his National Police has had little impact upon the illicit methamphetamine traffic—again illustrating the economic autonomy of the covert netherworld. For the past 40 years in Afghanistan, an illicit commodity, opium, has shaped the fate of military interventions by the world’s sole superpower, allowing it an initial success and later contributing to its ongoing failure.

In each of these relatively weak states, illicit commerce sustained a clandestine domain that can compromise the existing political order, as in the Philippines; sustain an insurgent challenge to the established nation state, such as the Taliban revolt and the Shan secessionist movement; or sustain surrogate intervention by foreign powers, as both Bangkok and Washington did in Burma. Even when state power succeeds in crushing the social apparatus controlling the drug traffic, as it did to Khun Sa in 1996 or the Taliban in 2001, the persistence of illicit commerce within this invisible interstice can readily incubate an alternative, either shifting the traffic to a new illicit apparatus or resuscitating an old one. From an economic perspective, illicit commerce persists and
proliferates as it answers a persistent demand for extralegal goods and services. Such illegality thereby becomes an integral component of a clandestine domain beneath society’s conventional surface, either compromising formal politics through corruption or creating an alternative through insurrection.

From a political perspective, it seems reasonable to conclude, from the sum of these cases, that the covert netherworld has now attained sufficient autonomy to be treated as a significant factor in international politics. Such autonomy renders the netherworld and its illicit commerce impervious to the actions of individuals, even the most resilient drug lords like Khun Sa or the most ruthless anti-drug crusaders like President Duterte. Like the couriers and street dealers they employ, drug lords are, moreover, expendable and drug source regions are mutable or moveable, rendering suppression efforts by national police and international agencies not only unproductive but often counterproductive.

From a disciplinary perspective, the essay shifts the analysis of criminal syndicates and illicit commerce from criminology, where it is grounded in the specificity of law or survey research, to the realm of politics and history where it shares similarities with more amorphous concepts such as legitimacy or sovereignty. As literature on the covert netherworld, its syndicates, traffics, corruption, and collusion continues to grow, this concept, or something similar, has the potential to lend comparative breadth and analytical depth to these disparate studies.

Although the Cold War fostered secret services of unprecedented power that roiled whole countries and continents with their covert operations (1987) cyberwarfare (2009), and possibly space warfare (2018), Washington has signaled the shift of its global force projection into this clandestine domain. During 2015, for example, the US Special Operations Command had its 69,000 elite troops deployed, often on clandestine missions, in 147 countries, or 75 percent of the world (USSOCOM 2015: 12, 35–43). As countless covert interventions unfold across the globe in coming decades, there will be ample opportunity for clandestine warfare to corrode conventional statecraft, as it did in Afghanistan and Burma—thereby opening new covert netherworlds that can serve as invisible incubators for illicit activities, drug trafficking among them.

The ongoing convergence of this clandestine realm and geopolitical conflict means that the covert netherworld will likely become even more central to great power competition in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth, continuing to shape international politics in profound yet unpredictable ways. To extract a larger lesson from these three cases, any analysis of changing global politics that does not consider this covert netherworld is not only incomplete but quite possibly inaccurate.

Acknowledgements
Beyond these specific citations below, I am indebted to Dr. Gladys McCormick of Syracuse University, Eric Gutierrez of Christian Aid, Dr. Allan Gillies of Glasgow University, Dr. Axel Klein, and Alexander Soderholm of the London School of Economics for their encouragement in pursuing this project and the specific suggestions that are reflected in this essay.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

References


Khun, Sa. no date. Khun Sa: His Own Story and Thoughts. By the author.


RESEARCH

The Effect of Illicit Economies in the Margins of the State – The VRAEM

Christoph Heuser
GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies, DE
christoph.heuser@giga-hamburg.de

The analysis focuses on the influence of illegal economies on local order and questions the conventional rationale of instability and violence through illegal activities. In an in-depth-case study the analysis provides evidence that illicit economies can contribute to the development of local order rather than destroying it. The VRAEM is the current epicenter of drug production in Peru and therefore a well-fitting case for the analysis. The paper builds on qualitative data from participant observation, interviews and theory-based questionnaires collected in 2016 and 2017. The paper focuses on current center for drug production and on the social consequences, deepens our understanding of the influence of illegal economies on the local order. Understanding this influence is essential for designing policies for and understanding dynamics of state intervention. The drug economy played a significant role in the evolution of local order particularly in the areas of economy, security and rule. Even if this order does not resemble a normative state order, it is in itself stable and legitimate.

Keywords: illegal economies; local order; VRAEM; Peru; drug production; stability; violence

Studying Illicit Economies and the State

Illicit economies are often portrayed in the light of violence, armed criminal groups or drug cartels, and kleptocratic state officials. They are seen as a hindrance to a stable and strong state. Grey and popular literature fuels the perception that ‘Mafia states’ pose a major threat to international security (Naim 2012). However, arguments presented for the ‘illicit economies-weak state rationale’ are often based on anecdotal evidence rather than robust proof.

Recent studies point out the productive aspects of illicit economies and its role for governance instead of highlighting its destructive aspects (Beckert & Dewey 2017; Gillies 2017; Arias 2017). Despite growing attention to illicit economies in academic literature (e.g., Andreas & Wallmann 2009; Felbab-Brown 2010; Lessing 2015), we still know little on the externalities of illicit economies for order and the state and only recently studies scrutinize the interplay of these factors. This represents a crucial gap and highlights the need to analyze the impact of an illicit economy more closely. This analysis contributes to the understanding of this field by studying the relationship between illicit economies and local order. Illicit economies can be an essential aspect for the provision of order instead of being a reason for disorder. Focusing on the center of drug production in Peru the analysis shows how local order is influenced by illicit economies in the margins of the state.

The effect of illicit economies at the margins of the state results in a complex structure of local order that does not necessarily bring about a single dominant actor. This might result in the rule of the state being contested, though not inevitably in a violent manner. At the same time, it might also result in no contestation at all or an entwined connection of formal and informal actors. By analyzing the dynamics of illicit economies in the margins of the state we will further our understanding on state-society relationship in remote regions. The analysis contributes to and bridges two debates: the effect of illicit economies and local order in the margins of the state. I focus on the externalities of illicit economies and move beyond an actor centric approach. Thus, the main research questions are: How do externalities of illicit economies influence local order in the margins of the state? And how this effect on local order linked back to state policies?
Drawing on literature on state formation, non-state local order and illicit economies, I develop a conceptual framework to analyze local orders at the margins of the state. Das and Poole argue that margins are an essential part of the state yet regions that function differently due to alternative practices and norms, which should be best analyzed by in-depth ethnographic research (Das & Poole 2004; see also Scott 2009). I make explicit the importance of the local preconditions and include the historical context as well as the key features of economy, security, and rule into the analysis. These factors are core components of local order and allow for an in-depth analysis on the socio-political consequences and their relation to each other. This structured analysis allows for the possibility of comparing the regions in focus. By questioning the link back to the state, I am interested in the dialogical relationship between the state and the local order (Migdal 2001). That includes how state policies work and how the state and its institutions are perceived in regions that are dominated by an illicit economy. The thematic focus of this paper is the drug business, more precisely on cocaine and Pasta Basica de Cocaína (PBC) production regions in the margins of the Peruvian state. I am concentrating on the consequences of illegal activities, and I examine the effects of these activities on local order once they became institutionalized. The analysis will show how alternative order developed and formed alongside an illicit economy and without greater state interference. Evidence suggests that despite the presence of a drug economy the result has not been disorder but instead the contrary. Furthermore, I will present the dynamics of state intervention in this environment.

In the first section I will propose a conceptual approach for the analysis of local order and illicit economies. This is followed by an extensive case study on the main drug producing region in Peru, the VRAEM. The third section discusses the implication for academic research on illicit economies and the state as well as policy implication.

**Drugs, Local Order and the State**

The discourse on the effect of drugs and illicit economies is still dominated by a Weberian understanding of the state as an ideal type. It is assumed that countries without a control over its complete territory are likely to experience violence or disorder and are described as ‘fragile states’ (Rosen & Kasaab 2017). Moreover, countries with a persistency of ‘ungoverned spaces’ and the presence of illicit economies are portrayed as a potential regional or even global threat (Clunan & Trinkunas 2010). The common ground for these studies is the potential threat by drug economies for state stability. However, they are neglecting that the Weberian liberal state approach cannot be transferred directly to the countries in question and puts limits to a thorough analysis. The variety of state formation processes and particularities of order within states needs to be considered and has been stressed by a number of studies (e.g., Schlichte 2005; Migdal 2001). Certainly, the spatial reach of most states is restricted and the infrastructural capacities to include regions at the margins of the state often remain limited (e.g., Mann 1993; O’Donnell 1993; Das & Poole 2004; Boone 2012; Soifer 2015). Within these margins often rules and order alternative to the state are in place. Hence, states should not be measured against their bureaucratic capacities or their monopoly of violence as is often the case in the fragile state debate (for a discussion see Grimm et al. 2014) Instead, analytically we will gain more by acknowledging the local particularities of each state in our analysis, including local practices and institutions that might be parallel or entangled with state institutions. The result can be a hybrid structure that is affected by local norms and practices and the state alike (Boege et al. 2009; Lemay-Hebert & Freedman, 2017).

Studies of the state have highlighted how informal and formal governance structures are intertwined and how state structures are entangled with non-state authorities within these territories (O’Donnell 1993; Davis 2010; Herbst 2014; Gillies 2018). In this regard, it is analytically more helpful to analyze the productive side of illicit economies or informal structures. In other words, by focusing on the evolution and the externalities of illicit economies, we gain a wider understanding for its social consequences, instead of simply assuming its damaging aspects. Against a popular common reading, I do not assume a priori that illicit economies create disorder or chaos and question the rationale that illicit economies lead to fragility and violence. Part of this complex reality is that criminal actors can take over service provision and control when there are no other dominant institutions to do so (Arias 2017). The relationship between these aspects of alternative order and illicit economies stands at the center of this analysis. I define illicit economies as locally bound economies that depend on the voluntary exchange of goods and services, whose production or consumption is officially banned (von Lampe 2016: 81; Beckert and Dewey 2017). These illicit economies produce externalities, which can not only affect actors but social realities and local order that need to be analyzed.
Norbert Elias has argued that notwithstanding the type, order is always the consequential result of human interaction and in itself an unplanned result of it (Elias, 1976). Based on this notion I acknowledge that local order even appears in regions that apparently seem in disorder, as also Gayer (2014) has shown in his study of Karachi. There is therefore a need to analyze the conditions and understand the dynamics on the ground for the analysis of local order. For this analysis I will refer to local order as a frame that gives a predictability of clear rules (formal or informal) in a given territory and that offers guarantees to meet economic needs and personal security. It is a combination of institutions and practices that structure social interactions, and organization in a given region, which have formed in historical processes. Having in mind that order can vary across space and time, I regard the following categories as essential features to understand local order: the historical development, the provision of security, the provision of economic means and the presence of clear rules (North et al. 2009). These aspects are not stand-alone features of local order; nor is the line of influence a one-way street. Rather, structures are influenced and created by these aspects and linked in a dialogical relationship. Essential for the sustainability of local order is the belief of its rightfulness, which is based on the dialogical process between ruling institutions and the population (Beetham 1991). The state is seldom completely absent but often operates through institutions and policies in the regions as well. The question is how much they can influence local order by that or how they can influence (dynamic) processes.

In this analysis, I bring in the particularities of local historical settings, and local preconditions. Thus, I distance my research from studies that merely focus on state capacity, which has led to reductionist arguments on strengthening institutions. This notion challenges a normative Eurocentric approach to ‘the state’, which is based on Weberian ideal types (Weber 2010) and neglects regions where state control is limited or nonexistent. At the same time, I acknowledge that these regions are not necessarily ‘ungoverned’. Instead, we can find a local order, which is not necessarily opposed to the state but can develop in parallel or be entangled with the state. These aspects have been widely recognized in recent studies on rebel governance (Arjona 2016), or criminal governance (Arias 2017) and more broadly with regard to areas with limited control by the state (e.g., Herbst 2000; O’Donnell 1993; Risse et al. 2018). By analyzing the role of an illicit economy for these regions, this paper contributes to a growing literature on local order alternative to that of the state.

The study further analyses how state intervention affects local order in these marginal regions with low state influence. While anti-drug policies and statements to tackle drug economies are often well formulated, the effects they have on the local level and on local order are often less anticipated. This study gives a better understanding of the interplay of local order and the state after state intervention. Hence, I argue that regions with a low presence of the state and a strong illicit economy (here: drug trafficking and production) can result in local order different to that of the state. This might establish an order that in fact prevents instability instead of provoking it. Analyzing and understanding this order is paramount for designing tailored state policies. The argument therefore stands against the crime-fragility rationale or that the presence of illicit economies results in disorder.

**Method and Case Selection**

The analysis follows a comparative case study design on the sub-national level that scrutinizes a region where the state recently destroyed the illicit economy and a region where the illicit economy is still present. I combine theoretical conceptualization and extensive field work in order to present a thorough analysis on the processes and implications of an illicit economy in the margins of the state. More specifically, I concentrate on the local level and analyze the processes and effects of drug production in the margins of the state. Studying local order in regions with low state control implies the understanding of aspects beyond written sources or data. Direct access to data on criminal activities is difficult since it stays hidden from potential interference. It implies getting to know the everyday and understanding local practices. Therefore, I include ethnographic approaches into my research whenever appropriate and whenever it contributes to understanding the phenomenon. During field work I mostly had the position of an observer but also changed my perspective when directly interacting with the local population. Choosing participant observation opened a unique perspective to analyze hidden structures parallel to the legal state system. This first-hand data allows me to triangulate my findings with official reports and data.

The data is mostly generated through a qualitative approach and four months of field research in the region. During the field research, I conducted 60 topic-guided expert interviews with community members, authorities, politicians, police officers, military officials, researchers, journalists, public servants, (ex) drug traffickers, cocaleros, and prisoners. Due to the weak data availability, I included a questionnaire with 65 participants of the local population. The questionnaire focused particularly on the perception on
socio-economic aspects and trust in institutions and serves as additional source to test the data. Available secondary literature complements the study.

For the analysis I selected a major drug production region in Peru. The country has not only been historically one of the main producers of coca and cocaine but also showcases an unequal reach of state influence and territorial control, which allows us to focus on regions with low state influence and alternative types of order (Dargent 2012; Vergara 2015). In addition to this unequal territorial and political control of the country by the state, Peru became the largest producer not only of coca but also of cocaine in 2012 (UNODC 2013). The UN estimates that in 2012, land used for coca production comprised more than 60,000 ha with the capacity for producing around 340 tons of cocaine (UNODC 2013). While it is difficult to verify the absolute number, coca production levels are a good proxy of where to find variances in levels of illicit drug production. Much of the increase is due to the current epicenter for drug production, the VRAEM.

Named after the rivers Apurimac, Ene, and Mantaro, the VRAEM is located in the Selva Alta and parts of the departments of Ayacucho, Cusco, Huancavelica, and Junin. The VRAEM was created by a Supreme Decree (D.S. N° 074-2012-PCM) and is located in the Eastern part of the Andes in the center and south of Peru. Since 2016, the area consists of 66 districts in ten provinces, in the regions of Ayacucho, Cusco, Huancavelica, and Junin (D.S. 040-2016-PCM). The National Statistics Institute estimates that 654,017 people live in the VRAEM area, which is roughly 2% of the Peruvian population (INEI 2015), yet the official population growth of this area is at 2.4% (1.1% on the national level) in variation from 2005 to 2015. Since 2010, the VRAEM has had the highest levels of coca production in Peru. While the official numbers indicate that around 19,000 ha of coca grow in the area (UNODC 2016), unofficial estimations go up to 30,000 ha. For the analysis, I select cases on a municipality level. As major production sites of coca and PBC, the marginal municipalities of Santa Rosa and Llochegua are the most likely cases. Thus, the following case study will be mainly based on data from these two municipalities.

Local Order in the VRAEM

The case of the VRAEM shows that local order widely depends on the illicit economy. The drug economy evolved during the internal conflict and today deeply affects the local economy, security provision, and local rule. Instead of being a threat for the state or a source of instability, the illicit economy is deeply ingrained in the local society. The following will give a detailed analysis on this interrelation by focusing on local order.

Historical development

The internal conflict played a major role in the development of the illicit economy in the VRAEM and was an important period in the history of the VRAEM. In the early 1980s the Marxist guerrilla-group Sendero Luminoso moved into the valley and established a brutal regime (CVR 2003; Goritti 2013). In reaction to the guerrilla and a lack of state support, inhabitants of the valley formed self-defense force committees (CAD per its Spanish acronym). The CADs fought against the guerrilla, exercised control, and provided internal and external safety for the community. This role is still highly appreciated by the population and displayed in current narratives. This particular role of the CADs during and after the conflict is still a matter of self-esteem for the population, evident in remarks such as the often formulated ‘we won against the guerrilla’. Furthermore, in order to defend themselves, the conflict led to an aggrupation and growth of settlements and thus set the basis for the growth of villages. In the absence of an effective state control, the CADs...
provided security and local order. In addition to this organizational and security aspect, the conflict gave rise to the coca economy we still see today.

The VRAEM has not been a traditional spot for growing coca. Until the 1980s, local economy and development was mainly driven by legal agricultural products. Peasants planted and sold fruits, vegetables, or coffee and the relevance of coca production for the VRAEM was low by the beginning of the 1980s, compared to other crops and in comparison to the national coca production (Soberón 2013: 4). During the conflict, the local peasant organization, FECVRA, fell apart. FECVRA suffered from attacks by state security forces such as the Marina, which accused them of being involved in drug trafficking (Fumerton 2002: 110). The organization was also attacked by Sendero Luminoso, which could not control it from within. In addition, the guerrilla saw the production of coffee and cacao only as a business for the rich class, and their actions against these economies led to a profound economic crisis (del Pino 1996: 127).

In the absence of other economic resources, coca became the major source of income. Coca production grew in the 1970s, and drug trafficking already existed since the beginning of the 1980s in smaller scale. By the end of the decade, drug trafficking and coca cultivation became the major sources of income. Before the CADs received weapons from the government, connections to drug traffickers allowed them to finance their fight against the guerrilla. Those who remained in the region used the abandoned fields to grow food and coca and sold them with the intention of buying arms and paying members of the autodefensas for their ‘service’ (Interview 2; Gorriti 2009: 2). A member of the CADs told me: ‘The money from coca helped during these times to finance food, the weapons. With this one can fight in a war. Until now the coca continues to finance [us]’ (Interview 4). In some cases, drug traffickers and parts of the self-defense forces formed a symbiotic alliance in order to secure the fight against Sendero Luminoso (Fumerton 2002: 144). Money from the drug economy allowed the groups not only to buy arms but also to be involved full-time in the fight against the guerrilla (CVR 2003 IV: 442; interviews Sr., Li, Pi). This is different from the situation in the Upper Huallaga Valley, the historical center of drug production in the country. There the alliance was between Senderos and drug traffickers (Felbab-Brown 2009), while in the VRAEM, drug money was used to fight Sendero Luminoso.

Essentially, coca and the growing PBC trade became a ‘war economy’ and the financing of the anti-insurgent fight led to a growth of the coca economy. After the conflict, coca remained the primary source of income in the region. In the margins of the state, the coca economy became a valuable resource that was able to bridge the infrastructural shortcomings and provided income for the local population.

**Economy**

Today, the VRAEM accounts for 44 percent of the total coca production in Peru (UNODC 2016). At the same time, the efficiency of coca production has improved and more coca per hectare can be produced. Apart from PBC, cocaine production also started in the valley at the beginning of the 2000s. The production capacities in the VRAEM are at 3.6t/ha compared to 2.4t/ha nationally. This results in the potential production of 66,494t of dried coca, which is roughly 69% of the national production (UNODC 2016: 35). The majority of coca is produced in small scale farms of two hectares or less and is mainly destined for the production of drugs. A leading police official said ‘We can assume that close to 100% are either profiting directly or indirectly from the illegal economy’ (Interview 8). The prices of alternative products such as cacao or coffee in relation to coca are very low in comparison to the prices for coca sold for the production of PBC (Leyva & Mendoza 2017: 14). While the exact magnitude and dependency of the local economy is difficult to assess since the illicit economy operates in ‘the shadows’, the economy of the VRAEM is poorly diversified and its income based primarily on the illicit economy (see also Brombacher et al. 2012). The obvious connection of coca production to drug trafficking it is not denied by the population – ‘No hay forma, no vamos a negar esto.’ – There is no way that we will contradict this (Interview 9). At the same time, the direct responsibility for the production of drugs is de-emphasized with reference to the argument that there are no alternatives and therefore people would need to turn to producing coca. Additionally, there is a second argument that does not acknowledge the drug production chain:

---

4 The UNODC estimates that in some areas, a coca plantation of one hectare can produce about 200,000 plants (UNODC 2016: 35).
5 Officially 35.6% do have 2ha or less in the Southern part of the VRAEM (IV Cenagro 2012). Another important aspect are land titles in the area: [http://www.inforegion.pe/30823/cofopri-entrego-3-mil-619-titulos-de-propiedad-a-pobladores-de-tres-distritos-del-vrae/](http://www.inforegion.pe/30823/cofopri-entrego-3-mil-619-titulos-de-propiedad-a-pobladores-de-tres-distritos-del-vrae/) accessed on 10.11.2016.
6 Peasants also produce other crops such as barbasco, pineapple, banana, and papaya, but the economy is primarily based on coca.
We as a farmer cannot do anything. Moreover, to my understanding as a coca farmer there was never a person who pressured me. I sell coca to anyone who offers me [money] like any other product. Supply and demand, the person who offers me a little more, I sell it to. But I do not know who this person is, he only comes in the night, he picks up the coca and leaves. (Interview 1, the leader of the local farmer organization, FEPAVRAEM).

While there is a legal market for the coca economy for farmers that are officially registered, the prices here are unattractive for farmers compared to the illegal market (Zevallos 2016). In addition, coca leaves are picked up at the fields by drug producers while a transport to legal spots for selling coca includes a costly logistical effort. Farmers are selling their coca crops to the drug industry since there is a lack of economic alternatives. At the same time, people stress that there is no pressure by drug traffickers. What is interesting about the farmer’s argument is that there is a consciousness about the connection to the illegal drug economy. At the same time, people try to distance themselves personally from the drug economy and defend the coca economy either by pointing to the cultural heritage or the economic necessities. It is a legitimization of the local economy, stating that there would not be any alternative to the coca. As one owner of a coca field said: ‘I know that I am doing something wrong, but not really wrong. (…) Look, there are simply no alternatives, if there were I would happily do other things but there aren’t’ (Interview 10). The connection to the drug economy is well known, yet, ‘legitimizing’ the illicit is not explicit – there is no open support for the drug trade – but an implicit support for economic necessity of growing coca. At the same time, in the VRAEM, the two aspects of coca production and drug production cannot be simply separated. There are clear signs of drug production in the region, including the proximity of drug labs to villages and coca fields – often the laboratories are located directly at the fields – the availability of drug money allowed investments in expensive cars or hotels and not least financing the acquittances of friends or family members that are in jail because of drug trafficking.

The drug economy brings social consequences as well. Many describe alcoholism as a major problem in the district, with bars and brothels bringing in booming business. The majority of the interview partners mentioned the abuse of alcohol and prostitution as the primary vices in society. In a district that has a total population count of around 11,000 (INEI), the official number of bars in the capital of Llochegua is 52. Those bars also serve as brothels, which are popular among the local population. Prostitution of underage women is frequently mentioned as a big problem. The effect on social life is particularly visible on weekends when people drink heavily in taverns. As we enter the center of Llochegua, the ex-president of the CADs of the area says:

All bars are brothels. Look how the 16-year-olds walk without shirt, all drunk. This is one of the great pains that this area has. And this is because of the drugs. It cannot be denied it is evident and undeniable (Interview 2).

The extent of the ‘consuming industry’ such as bars, restaurants, or hotels is striking in an area with high rates of poverty and shows the close relationship between the licit and illicit economy. At the same time, other businesses seem to do well from the coca economy. There are numerous shops to buy fertilizers and pesticides. Furthermore, a strikingly high number of pharmacies are in the area, most of them empty. But these pharmacies would allow for the import of chemicals that are used for drug production. Finally, also the high number of gas station is striking in the VRAEM, which is not only for the 4 × 4 pick-up trucks but which also provide gasoline as base for cocaine production (Lipolm). This relationship results in a network that connects actors involved in the drug economy with actors of the licit economy and blurs the lines between legal and illegal spheres.

Coca and the illicit economy is a common ground in a socially diverse population in two ways: first, economically, as the only possible income source; secondly, the coca economy seems to result in a common ‘identity’, which is defended against changes coming from the outside. While the political authority defines what is legal and illegal, in areas where this authority is contested or where it has restricted influence, this regulation of legality becomes more difficult (Mayntz 2017). In the VRAEM, with its historically low state presence, the economy is based on an illicit source. The drug production and trafficking already involves a high number of participants (especially young men). An even higher number of the society profits indirectly from the illicit economy, and we see an implicit connection between legal business and illegal drug trade.
Even if the majority of the population understands that involvement in this illicit economy is legally wrong, they argue that morally it is not. Instead, there is a common understanding that the coca (and implicitly also the drug production) is a necessity, because there are no economic alternatives. More precisely, it is understood as an evil necessity (‘un mal necesario’). In the case of the VRAEM, the coca economy seems to be a bonding factor for society in the region.

**Security and Rule**

The perception of the security situation in the VRAEM is fundamentally different outside the region compared to the local security perception. Newspaper articles and reports typically portray the VRAEM as a dangerous place, which is not only dominated by drug trafficking but also plagued by terrorists and violent gangs. Before my research and subsequent stay in the region, I received various warnings, and during several discussions with colleagues and friends, it became clear that most people assume the region is a very dangerous place. Many pointed to the news reports on the region on drug trafficking and assaults by Sendero Luminoso on the police, which sketched a grim image of the region. The local security perception is the contrary, and people in the VRAEM told me that they felt demonized by the media and politicians. When talking about the security situation within the VRAEM it was defended with the words: in the VRAEM ‘todo es tranquilo’ (everything is calm) and often contrasted with the security situation in Lima: ‘Mira a Lima es un infierno’ (Look at Lima it’s hell).

The relationship towards coca and the illicit economy might be a factor that comes into play regarding the security. When relating the interview data on security perception to the perception of the coca economy, we find 28 persons in Santa Rosa and Llochegua that have talked about both aspects in the same interview. We find a correlation between those having a positive view on coca and those who identify positive personal security situations. On the other hand, there is a correlation between those who regard coca as a negative factor and those who perceive insecurity. However, in direct conversations, no incident of insecurity was mentioned that can be directly related to the drug trade. Even if the numbers are too low to give a statistical significance, it can give an indication for our interpretation: It seems that there is a tendency that those attempting to ‘sell’ their positive view on coca tend to highlight the positive aspects of security and vice versa. While none mentioned a negative or violent experience related to the drug trade, it is pointed out that being directly involved in the drug economy might put oneself at risk.

In the VRAEM there is a very important peculiarity, when one is not in the [drug] business (…) nothing happens, that is to say there is honesty here in that sense you do not need to lock [the door]. But (…) you know that people come from other places and the town is growing and there are also thieves (Interview 3).

The analysis of the survey and the interviews shows mixed results on security perception. Of those interviewees that talked about security, the majority mentioned incidents that pointed to security threats, but none felt personally insecure. During the interviews in Santa Rosa and Llochegua of those talking about security 72% mentioned situations or experiences that described insecurity that happened within the last year while only 15.6% explicitly described secure situations. These insecure situations included assaults, domestic violence, bar fights, or even killings. On the other hand, nobody said that they felt personally insecure or described a situation of personal insecurity. A comparison with the survey helps to clarify the perception of security. Here, we find a similar pattern.

**Figure 1** shows the overall security perception in the communities. While 4 indicates an excellent security situation, 1 means the perception of a bad security situation. In the sample, people perceive the security as average, neither good nor bad. All three areas are located in the VRAEM and are defined as major drug production spots (DEVIDA 2015, Interview 11). In Santa Rosa as well as in Llochegua, the majority indicated that they felt personally safe in their communities (**Figure 2**). The average security perception, on the other hand, was on a medium level. Generally, security is related to petty crime such as robbery and bar fights and assaults that typically happen on the connecting roads between different villages. It is also often related to the police and their inability to provide for security. People even relate the presence of state security actors

---

7 Moreover, people interviewed and participants of the survey indicated the reports on the VRAEM would exaggerate the security situation. In fact, they perceive the security outside of their communities worse. Again, the argumentation might give an indication of a common identity of the local population against external definitions.
Heuser: The Effect of Illicit Economies in the Margins of the State – The VRAEM

There is even the perception that the presence of state security actors serves criminals more than they would provide security.

We do not trust the police. Since I became president [of the CADs], I have already arrested men two with a gun, a pistol, and I hand them over to the police with their documents, four days later they are already free in the streets again (Interview 4).

The perception of insecurity can be related to low levels of trust in state security institutions. In all areas, the police presence is mentioned frequently as the main reason for low results in security perception. These state institutions not only fail to prevent and punish crime, but they are also believed to curb the possibilities for castigation. Additionally, the perception on corruption and extortion can serve as an explanation for why this is the case. Non-state actors are seen as the primary providers of security. This perception is closely related to the experience in the internal conflict as autodefensas in the VRAEM and their role in pushing Sendero Luminoso back (Degregori 1996; CVR 2003; Zech 2014). Not only did they fight against the guerrilla, they also controlled the district centers and society rules during and after the conflict. The autodefensas are still perceived as an essential factor for local order and enjoy high levels of trust. Besides their present and historical role, a defining factor of their importance are statements like:

Who plays a very important role is the self-defense committee to give security to the entire population, there is a central self-defense committee and the fencing of the town of Llochegua, they are available 24 hours a day, when there are problems they come, when there are assaults they come, they carry weapons allowed by the state, simple but they are more effective than the policemen (Interview 5).
Nevertheless, the influence of autodefensas in the sector of security provision is decreasing, because of the presence of state security forces, especially the police. This affects the role of the autodefensas in providing security. Their activities are restricted since they now have to cooperate with the police and acts of corporal punishments are officially forbidden. But they still enjoy the highest levels of trust among security actors, reflecting their close connection to the population (Figure 3).

In the survey, the police has the lowest level of trust, which is supported by most interview partners. Historically, trust in the police is low in the region and mainly related to misconduct (Heilman 2018), but when asked, people in the VRAEM frequently explained their distrust in the police in two ways. One is that the police are seen as corrupt or unreliable, and the second claims that the police would only leave their base if they are hopeful of finding drugs. During my research in Llochegua and Santa Rosa, I did not see police patrolling in the street and heard constant complaints about police inaction. Some specified: ‘the police do not leave’ (Ll20). ‘They are in their base they do not leave. They don’t have dignity, they are corrupt’ (StR9). The population sees the police critical and as a threat to the local (illicit) economy. The police understand that they are not completely accepted:

People still reject us, we are rejected mainly because of their work [coca and drug trafficking]. But others already feel identified with the police, because they know that we are not here to annoy them but to have a better quality of life (Interview 6).

A major difference between the autodefensas and the police is that the former do not interfere with the local illicit economy, while the police target precisely that. In the perception of the local community, this becomes a problem since most people see the police primarily as an anti-drug unit. That is related to the negative perception and also because of the feeling that people would suffer if anti-coca and anti-drug campaigns took off.

Look, I’m going to be honest, people here hate the police because they do not intervene when there are problems of robbery, but they intervene in drug trafficking issues (Interview 7).

The growing presence of the state has also changed rules. Before the arrival of the police, corporal punishment was a common penalty implemented by the CADs. While in the outskirts and in smaller villages, corporal punishments are still practiced, today this form of punishment is prohibited and the presence of the police makes these forms of punishments unlikely in or nearby the district capitals. That leads to expressions such as ‘Human rights are a menace. They only serve the thieves and do no good’ (Interview 2; Interview 11). Hence, even if coercive means have been important aspects of autodefensa rules, they have been supported by the population. State rules and rule implementation are regarded more negatively. A statement from the Juez de Paz in Llochegua can be seen as an example of the general perception on state rule in the VRAEM:

Look, more presence of the state, more police, more militarization, prosecutors all that, but there is more crime today. Why is that? Because the law protects you. I cannot grab him [the ‘criminal’] firmly, or shout at him, criminals rely on their rights and go on and steal undisturbed (Interview 5).
The police has another perception on rules in the region and on their influence. A police officer in Lloche-gua assumes that the rejection has to do with drug trafficking:

Before [the arrival of the police] people stole, beat each other up, everybody made up its own rules, but now it is different, we leave on patrol in the district, we impose our presence and if there is a delinquent they go to the remote areas where we cannot intervene (Interview 6).

Perception of police ineffectiveness is related to a different understanding of rules. There are clearly defined rules that are not only connected to coca, but also to the conflict-ridden history. State rules are not the most important and instead the communities are organized are still often organized by internal rules (Interview 7). Even though the state presence influenced the way of rule implementation, the perception of the most important rules is still very much based on local traditional rules. When asked an open question about the most important rules in society, people named 144 rules but many of them (49%) were just named once (Figure 4). Nearly half of the rules named in the survey were just named once, which signals how disperse the perception of rules in the region is. ‘Not stealing’ and ‘being honest’ were the most common answers, both were named in 15% of the answers.

None was referring directly to state laws even though those are now officially implemented in the region. While not stealing is of course also part of state laws, during my interviews it became clear that people are referring to ‘not stealing’ being implemented by traditional rules, similarly to ‘hard working’. These main traditional rules were: not stealing, not being lazy, and not lying. The reference to rules and practices for the time before a growing state intervention can be interpreted as an incomplete assimilation of state rules.

Until recently, the autodefensas have been the dominant security actor in the region; their role has been supported by the local population. Furthermore, the autodefensas supported coca production and still advocate for it due to the lack of alternatives. Yet the increasing presence of the state erodes the former security structure without establishing a viable and effective alternative to security provision and rule implementation. The overall perception is that state security forces cannot provide for local safety. This perception of more insecurity undermines the perception of the state as security provider.

![Figure 4: Most Important Rules in Society. Source: Survey VRAEM (Santa Rosa; Llochegua; Cumunpiari) N = 65.]

8 Please refer to the Annex for the complete list.
Discussion: The Illicit Economy and State Integration

Local order in the VRAEM is widely affected by the illicit economy. The analysis has shown that in the fields of economy, security and rules are different to what we might call ‘state order’ and evolved around the illicit economy. People applied learned behavior and actors carried out ‘routine performances’ which are labeled ‘illicit’ and resemble what Bourdieu (2008) calls ‘practices’. These practices structure everyday life and become important elements for society. In consequence, they are not perceived as morally wrong but as a necessity. Moreover, these (illicit) practices serve as a binding element for society and consequently gives stability to the region. This deep integration of the illicit economy results not only in a territorial marginalization, but also in a normative marginalization of the region from the state. That dependency on illicit economy still withholds further state integration.

As other studies have shown, many cocalero zones show a particular resistance to change and experienced instead other forms of order compared to the rest of the Peruvian state (Arroyo 2012: 35). In the VRAEM this formation was to a great extent due to the illicit economy, which was not alien to but instead deeply ingrained into society. The coca economy became the basis for social structure and ‘illicit behavior’ was ‘socially embedded’ in the society and commonly accepted. Social ties were constructed based on this social behavior (Bourdieu 1987; see also von Lampe 2016; Beckert & Dewey 2017).

The consequence of the illicit economy in the regions was not necessarily more violence but included social consequences, its own rules, practices and ultimately a local order different to that of the state. At the same time the security architecture is broadly affected by the illicit economy. Insecurity is mainly related to the presence of the state since it would be more interested in the fight against drug trafficking than of providing security to the population. The CADs, on the other hand, are not only able to provide for security but are also supportive of the coca economy. In fact, the narrative of being able to fight the guerrilla because of income from the coca economy is still strong. At the same time, the CADs reflect the demands of society and also demand more state services such as legal alternatives or the provision of basic services. But until there is a viable alternative, it is likely that the majority of the autodefensas will support coca production.

The analysis has shown that the illicit economy affected local economic structures, but also the acceptance of security actors or local rules. As it has been argued elsewhere, an overstating of a ‘law enforcement’ approach in itself can damage the state-society relationship and harms the legitimacy of the state (Davis 2010; Arias & Goldstein 2010). This implies that the eradication of coca and the immediate termination of the drug business would not only destroy the livelihoods of the population in these areas but can also put local order and stability at risk.

Although state presence increased in the last ten years, there are no substantial changes in the amount of coca and drug production in the valley. The coca economy resulted in an alienation of the local order from the state-based legal order and is a key hindrance for integrating the VRAEM into the state. This implies the question if state policies that aim to change this local economy and install state order without providing a viable alternative are more likely to be perceived as an outsider’s interference which might increase local resistance instead of improving development. And in a similar direction: state practices are primarily perceived as an invasion of the region and are related to the loss of economic opportunity or changes of rules. In particular, this might be the case when not only the economic alternatives but also the provision of security and implementation of rule seem to be incomplete. In consequence, this predominantly negative perception of state intervention can affect the acceptance of the state and make further state integration more difficult.

State intervention created a dynamic that involves local traditional actors and the state, while the illicit economy is intact at the same time. This dynamic implies diversifications and potential conflicts between state and non-state actors. State policies towards the regions are primarily shaped by the main aim of changing or destroying the illicit economy. Hence, these policies interfere with the basis of the local order. Instead of an upfront rejection of the state, there is a negotiation process for further state integration. While the population demands more provision of goods and services by the state the state’s policies against the illicit economy are rejected. For further state integration, more state services will be key, yet those are expensive and difficult to provide in a remote region such as the VRAEM. At the same time, the fight against the drug economy binds necessary resources and prompts negative perceptions to the state. In consequence, the state is only partly accepted, which can be related to the illicit economy and the historical development. Hence, even if illicit economies did not erode the state they redefine the dynamics of state and non-state interaction.
Conclusion
Focusing on the local level has allowed us to zoom in and to comprehend local order in relationship to an illicit economy. The local order that is present in the VRAEM is not created by single actors instead the illicit economy and the intention to keep that economy intact has led to state and non-state structures. While there are powerful actors, such as the autodefensas and cocaleros, there is no single dominant actor in the region, but the drug economy is the most important factor, which influences local order. A key factor for further state integration and for ensuring stability are nuanced policies by the state towards the provision of alternatives and improving of services.

Even though the regions have developed in absence of effective state control and in relation to an illicit economy, they are not opposed to the state. Instead, I have shown that there exists a clear idea of what is expected from the state. This includes not only the expectations regarding the provision of goods and services, but also the recognition of local structures and practices by the state. In other words, the idea of the state (Bourdieu et al. 1994) is well established in the VRAEM, notwithstanding the deviations in rules or practices. This key finding implies that despite the weak provision of goods and services by the state for most of the inhabitants, the state became a focal point when it comes to demanding goods and service provision. At the same time, the evidence suggests that the presence of an illicit economy affects the relationship to the state and that most of the distrust towards the state and state institutions is related to the illicit economy. Before the arrival of the state, the drug economy was a natural part of community life and security actors did not interfere in the business. With a stronger presence of state security forces, this has changed. Today, one of the most important tasks of state actors includes the fight against the drug economy when there is a lack of social integration that encompasses dialogue with society, which is crucial for building trust and legitimacy of the state. The observance and inclusion of local social preconditions is thus another important factor.

The findings of this study present a profound dilemma for the state at the moment, from which we can draw on similar cases: Overly focusing on the illicit economy and the destruction of this economy by force increases distrust among the population towards state actors. Leaving the illicit economy intact, while at the same time creating pressure on the majority of the population because of their economic practices, also results in high levels of skepticism and distrust. In both scenarios, the state remains an alien actor providing a hollow frame. In a third scenario, the state could look out for cooperation with local powerful actors who might act as brokers for state influence, such as cocaleros or autodefensas.

The question remains whether this cooperation might result in difficulties because of the opposing approaches towards coca production. Nevertheless, this final point may thus be an indication for a way out of the dilemma. As the analysis has shown, there is a clear idea of the state and what it ought to do. Building on this knowledge and developing a coherent concept in connection with the existing local order instead of confronting it can facilitate state integration. Establishing a dialogical state-society relationship would enable the building of trust within the society and finally strengthen the state legitimacy within the regions.

Competing Interests
The author received funding from the University of Hamburg and the Übersee-Club for the facilitation of field work and research.

References
Arias, ED. 2017. Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316650073


Degregori, CI. 1996. *Las Rondas Campesinas Y La Derrota de Sendero Luminoso*. Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, IEP.


RESEARCH

An Agenda in-the-making: The Linking of Drugs and Development Discourses

Deborah Alimi
Université Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne European Center for Sociology and Political Science (CESSP), FR
deborah.alimi@gmail.com

The UNGASS process and the SDGs discussions renewed thinking on illicit drug economy and sustainable development linkages, and opened windows for enhanced policy coherence in that sense. Yet, the fragmentation of the drug policy arena and the complex SDGs task still question whether this will be the way negotiated forward. Drawing on concepts of policy entrepreneurship and idea diffusion, this paper takes stock of the recent dynamics through which the idea of drug and development policy coherence has developed and gained traction. Recognizing the role of knowledge in the construction of alternative policy ideas' acceptability, this paper focuses on knowledge activities and existing platforms where a development-oriented framework for illicit drug-related challenges is promoted and defined. It asks whether the conditions are gathered for that idea to be translated into concrete categories of policy interventions beyond the UNGASS and SDGs moments of opportunity.

Keywords: UNGASS; SDGs; drugs and development; policy entrepreneurship; idea diffusion

The development implications of illicit economies have long raised the international community's attention (Keefer et al. 2008; OECD 2015a; WB 2011). However, concerns over the linkages that the illicit drug economy has to sustainable development are more recent. The complex dynamics the illicit drug trade has with a given socio-economic and governance environment has rarely constituted a baseline for strategic global interventions. Growing evidence documents these interconnections as well as the unexpected spillovers years of unbalanced drug control – mainly deployed in the frame of the ‘War on Drugs’ – had on drug-affected societies (Youngers & Pierris 2016; Gutierrez et al. 2015; Martin 2015; OSF 2015; UNDP 2015; WACD 2014). Exacerbated violence in Central America, marginalized urban enclaves for trafficking across Europe, or emerging hubs of trafficking in Sub-Saharan Africa question the capacity of policy actors to reappraise the role drugs may play for communities involved in or suffering from illicit activities, within contexts of fragile institutional presence, conflict, and/or low levels levels of socio-economic opportunities. Cause and/or symptom of development and governance breaches, the multiple dimensions of the illicit drug economy (cultivation, production, trafficking and uses) encourage a review of the drug policy equation across sectors: from security and health, to socio-economic integration, environmental protection and rule of law.

Recent evolutions in UN-level political debates give signs that a window has been opened to rethink the linkages between drug and development policies. In the midst of a global debate on more effective drug policies that led to a special session of the General Assembly on drugs (UNGASS) in April 2016, the idea to develop greater synergies between drugs and development has gained traction. Despite existing shortfalls, the seven chapter UNGASS “Joint commitment to effectively addressing and countering the world drug problem” (UNGA a/res/s-30/1) proposes more integrated options and translates a more multi-faceted understanding of the world drug problem than in past UN roadmaps. Signatories explicitly propose operational recommendations towards development-oriented and human-right-based approaches (chap.5.v, 6, 7) and welcome the recently adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNGA 2015). In September 2015, the international community recognizes the burden illicit drugs impose on sustainable development prospects, and sets specific targets to curb organized crime and strengthen public care of substance abuse (SDGs 16, 3). Within this dynamic, opportunities for cross-sectoral policies are being explored (Bewley-Taylor...
& Schneider 2016; Mansfield & Fishstein 2016; GITOC 2016; OAS 2013), while possible entry points for a better agenda alignment are being advanced (IEGDPM 2018; GCDP 2018; OAS 2017; UNDP 2016; LSE 2016).

Nevertheless, it is far from obvious this idea of greater policy linkages is likely to take hold; ideas come and go. However, what it takes for an idea to be prominent on a policy agenda and translated into concrete policy tools and practices can neither be taken for granted nor be considered the result of a smooth, linear and total adherence process. Drug policy experts have expressed doubts over the relative fragmentation of the drug policy arena the UNGASS exacerbated (Jelsma et al. 2018; Boister 2016; Cockayne and Walker 2015; Bewley-Taylor 2012). Besides, if some policy actors across boards are thinking about greater coherence on drugs and development, cross-sectoral cooperation is rather limited. Despite increased momentum, it is questionable whether greater coherence on drugs and development policies will be the way negotiated forward. Beyond the opening of a window of opportunity such as the one observed here, the diffusion of policy ideas as solutions to a given problem still needs some level of policy entrepreneurship and organizational mechanisms to induce policy choices (Kingdon 1984; Finnemore & Sikkink 1998; Mintrom & Norman 2009; Zahariadis 2007).

This paper1 takes stock of the recent dynamics through which the idea of drug and development policy coherence has developed and gained traction. It draws upon approaches that apprehend the diffusion of policy ideas through the voluntary mobilization of resources and interests in multi-leveled policy arenas (Dezalay & Garth 2002; Ladi 2000; Nay 2012; Stone 2000). Specific attention will thus be brought to the role of (individual) actors engaged in public organizations and policy networks - including those positioned across fields (Mintrom & Luetjens 2017; Stone 2017) – and to relevant mechanisms in place to foster adhesion and galvanize interests. Recognizing the role of knowledge in the construction of alternative policy ideas’ acceptability, this paper focuses on the policy instruments, knowledge activities and platforms that contribute to generate and circulate information and evidence (definition, instruments, metrics etc.) that ultimately may guide the translation of that idea into a credible policy option. Issues of implementation and political obstacles, although briefly considered, are beyond the scope of this contribution.

Considering three dimensions of policy idea development (framing, dissemination and space), this paper looks first at the way the drugs and development nexus is formally framed through relevant international policy documents. Then, it elaborates on the policy and knowledge activities invested by policy entrepreneurs to give more flesh and bones to that emerging idea, and test the possibility of operational bridges across sectors. Finally, it explores the organizational and governance venues ventured to define the technical implications and orchestrate support towards implementation. The paper argues that although problems compatibility has been acknowledged, the current opportunity for greater policy coherence on drugs and development may turn out sterile without the unlocking of a formal space or “organizational platform” for cross-sectoral policy making. The absence of such space puts at stake the chances to reconcile diverging views around converging priorities, galvanise decision makers’ interests, and eventually favor a healthy emulation of common policy ideas beyond sectoral borders.

1. Framing – A formal recognition of problems compatibility related to drug control and development cooperation

Underlying the emergence of the drug problem as an international policy issue in the 1960s has been the recognition of the harmful potentials of drug abuse on individuals and societies. Soon characterised as ‘deviant’ behaviours, illicit drug trade and use rapidly fuelled drug scares (Reinarman 1994) that entrenched for more than fifty years the policy treatment of drug-related issues into the strict domain of ‘discipline and punish’ (Foucault 1975) and encouraged policy actors to prioritise repressive, security-focused drug control strategies (Andreas & Nadelmann 2008). Historically, there has been very limited recognition of development-oriented considerations in the international drug control framework (Bridge et al. 2017). The challenges and implications such approach would mean for the drug control system’s objectives and instruments have also rarely been assessed (Barrett 2010). Now, more than a coincidence in time, the 2016 UNGASS and the adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) mark turning points in the way problems related to drug control and development cooperation policies can be read.

1 This paper is based on observations of UN-level policy debates on drugs, and series of interviews with actors in the fields of drug policy and development issues.
A long-ignored policy dimension

Although foreign assistance has traditionally been used to stem drug supply, the development aspects of drug-related problems – let alone its policies – have been almost totally ignored (Buxton 2015), at best reduced to the unbalanced and long unconvincing concept of “alternative development” (AD) (Mansfield 2006). Certainly, the drug and development nexus has been first internationally recognized in the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and formalized in the AD definition agreed in the 1998 Political Declaration and Action Plan on the Eradication of Illicit Drug Crops and Alternative Development. But the ‘development’ dimension of drug policy, often ill-defined, has been mainly subordinated to security strategies. Mostly translated into short-term projects to support the economic transition of communities cultivating illicit crops towards viable and legal sources of income, the ‘development’ components of drugs policies have been mainly apprehended as a form of conditional, ad hoc, economic assistance (and often externally donor-driven) to rural areas of producing countries of illicit crops. It usually complemented eradication efforts towards the reduction of illicit crop cultivated areas. On the fringes, and often given secondary importance, the idea of development was used as a deceptive label, at best a tool with mixed results, to advance short-term illicit drug supply reduction objectives.

More recently, however, in an international context challenging the repressive policies in force, a series of policy debates have contributed to a reframing of the narrative. On alternative development specifically, a series of multi-level discussions since 2012 led to the definition of the UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development (2013). These include references to human development indicators and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Principles state the need to address the ‘root causes of illicit crop cultivation’ and the socio-economic inclusion challenges attached (inter alia) access to market and public services, land rights, political participation and, environmental protection. Although oppositions persist on the articulation of law enforcement interventions such as eradication operations and development support, the focus has shifted towards a more comprehensive, integrated and sustainable acceptance of development, where AD interventions are foreseen not only as drug control tools but also entry points to more sustainable objectives (UNODC 2017). Tackling the socio-economic, governance and environmental challenges surrounding participation to the illicit drug economy, both in rural and urban contexts, are now parts of the policy equation.

In the run up to 2016, observations of the 2013–2015 plenary debates at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)3 revealed increased political sensitivity to the issue. Beyond the discussions on alternative development, the costs and harms illicit drug trade has on human development efforts are raising concerns. Although still evasive, several state representatives draw attention in their formal statements to the CND, to the socio-economic and governance issues the drug market exacerbates (access to public services, marginalization, rule of law, institutional accountability, etc.). From a vast array of ideological positions related to drug policy referential, countries from the EU to Mexico and Colombia calling for reform, to states conducting strict repressive policies like Russia or Pakistan, or else African countries struggling with an exacerbating drug problem, references are made to situations where illicit drugs may undermine development efforts.4

---

3 As soon as 2010, whereas the international community engaged into a global reflection on the future of the MDGs, the issue sparked interest. UNODC starts to reflect on the importance of the ‘right to development’ (UNODC 2010) while UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon recognized the interlinks between the fight against drugs and the achievement of the MDGs – an issue debated two years later on the occasion of a Thematic Debate of the UN General Assembly dedicated to that theme (See SG/SM/12969; OBV/892 SOC/NAR/940).

4 The UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs is the main UN policymaking body in charge of following up on the application of international drug conventions and plans of action. Functional commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and Governing entity of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the 53-member entity organize and guide international action against drugs.

Besides expressed support to alternative development (Germany, Peru, Thailand, Afghanistan, Colombia, Ecuador) along the period, more states, yet from different sensitivity, are drawing attention to the interconnections of illicit narcotic trade and development. For instance, at the 2013 opening debate, Egypt representing the Group of African states expressed concerns over the security and health problems related to drugs that are undermining Africa’s ability to achieve the MDGs. Ghana echoed that position while Russia recognized the need for a post conflict development plan for countries affected by drugs like Afghanistan. In 2014, year of a high level ministerial segment reviewing mid-term progress against the 2008 UN Plan of action against drugs, UNODC representative stressed the importance of coherence in the UN as part of the post-MDG landscape and recalled the Office’s actions to develop integrated interventions to place drugs and crime in the development agenda. In 2015, at the interactive Discussion on Supply Reduction, while the European drug observatory (EMCDDA) underlined how the problems of the drug market exacerbate other societal issues such as unemployment and marginalization, development and security, Pakistan explained opium exports from third world countries based on socio-economic development causes (Author’s archives).
Pro-reform civil society organizations have been also particularly vocal on the need to give development perspectives greater prominence in drug strategies notably on health, and to involve others UN specialized agencies accordingly (WHO, UNAIDS, UNDP).

**Open windows for a broader vision of the problems at stake**

The UNGASS and the SDGs discussions opened breaches into dominant policy thinking schemes. Somehow, the drug issue seemed a bit released from its traditional ideological security-oriented straitjacket, and the development dimension attached to drug policy from its narrow understanding of socio-economic viability. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs agenda formally recognises the burden illicit drugs represent for sustainable development. References to illicit drug use and trafficking are made explicitly under SDG 3 target 5 (Strengthen prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol), and indirectly under SDG16 target 4 (By 2030 significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen recovery and return of stolen assets, and combat all forms of organized crime). Admittedly, the SDGs may be inherently imperfect because heavily negotiated and not legally binding. Nevertheless, the introduction of the drug issue under such an agenda, yet not new in its terms, represents a decisive potential to change the narrative.

The SDG agenda introduces the drug issue under a set of universal, interdependent targets that applies to all countries, whether they are producing, consuming or transit countries, rich, middle or low-income ones. Contrary to the preceding MDGs that applied mainly to low income developing countries, the SDGs shift the focus from the symptoms to the underlying causes of development challenges in all countries and thus encourages comprehensive consideration of the root causes of illicit economy realities to be tackled (UNGA 2015, OECD 2015b; Sachs 2012). The SDG goals embrace human well-being from a combination of economic development, social inclusion, accountable governance and environmental sustainability. The ambition to advance an integrative, indivisible agenda, cements the international community’s commitment to greater policy coherence and cross-sectoral interventions grounded in gender and human rights perspectives. Under this overarching vision, progress in one goal is made possible only with simultaneous progress in all other goals. Therefore, it introduces drug-related issues into a multidimensional and interrelated agenda that requires policy-actors to break out of policy silos and greater involvement of key stakeholders across sectors, both within and between engaged states and organizations. Any states’ ability to read drug-related challenges through the lenses of ‘peace, people, prosperity, the planet, and partnership’ – the five critical areas for humanity defined by the 2030 Agenda, is implicitly questioned.

The UNGASS Outcome document unveils in an unprecedented way a more multidimensional reading of the world drug problem. It establishes a strong link to sustainable development, including explicit references to the SDG agenda, and an entire thematic chapter specifically incorporating development-oriented considerations. Not only does it break with the then-dominant vision of a two-fold priority (illicit drug supply and demand reduction), but formulates operational recommendations beyond the tri-pillar foundation of drug policy (i.e. supply eradication, demand reduction and cooperation to fight money laundering). The seven chapter document recognizes the plurality of contexts and problematic dimensions attached to the illicit drug economy, from urban trade to cultivation of illicit plants, from internet trafficking of new psychoactive substances to unequal access to controlled medicines, among others. It rebalances drug control targets and policy treatment towards a greater focus on key dimensions of human development: public health, human rights, socio-economic integration and justice (6.a). Specifically, it translates a political momentum built in the past decade among drug policy actors to address the root causes of, and the enabling conditions for the development of illicit drug economies (often linked to poverty and lack of socio-economic opportunities, institutional fragility and rule of law issues).

These considerations apply to the policy treatment of drug-related crime (chapter 3), misuse of pharmaceuticals that contain narcotic drugs (chapter 5) or of the illicit cultivation of narcotics plants (chapter 7). Signatories acknowledge ‘the need to address the key causes and consequences of the world drug problem, including those in the health, social, human rights, economic, justice, public security and law enforcement fields ... and recognize the value of comprehensive and balanced policy interventions’ (preamble). For the first
time, ‘long-term, comprehensive and sustainable development-oriented and balanced drug control policies’ are foreseen as policy options, while the importance of appropriately mainstreaming human rights and gender in drug-related policies is endorsed. Although it echoes the SDGs rationale for integrated approaches, it also implies the need to broaden the sectorial perspective on drugs. It supposedly creates opportunities for a wider range of professionals and policy participants within and outside the drug control sector to break with a strict law enforcement categorization of public action against drugs.

**Changing narratives, looming difficulties**

If changing dynamics in UN narratives on drugs and development are noted, some underlying difficulties related to operational implications may already be observed. First, a central issue is one of categorization and definition. The qualification operations at stake in the framing of a “public problem” not only depend on context- and actor-specific understandings of particular social realities, but also serve as instruments to define and orient policy priorities and treatment (Gusfield 1981; Lagroye 2003). Now, the SDG agenda seems to still reflect a dualistic interpretation of the world drug problem that resonates very much with the drug control imperatives to cut the illicit supply and demand, that resonate more with the goals of a “society free of drugs” pursued by the international community since the late 1990s than with the 2016 UNGASS debate.

Therefore, the clarification of policy targets’ concepts and metrics are determinant to the nature of future policy choices, and to the SDGs achievement. For example, SDG 3 introduces the prevention and treatment of narcotic drug abuse as part of a 13-target goal that expands effective, accessible and affordable health coverage beyond a core set of targeted diseases as per the former MDGs. Nevertheless, the reductive general language of ‘prevention’ and ‘treatment’ may constrain the understanding of the health risks and social harms attached to drug use, and evade from the policy spectrum, issues such as stigma, unequal/forced access to treatment, or HIV transmission among people who inject drugs (UNAIDS 2016). In addition to the “capability traps” (Pritchett and Andrews 2010) across states, the cultural and political aspects attached to the SDGs interpretation will also be decisive when enforcing the Agenda. Concerning SDG 16, political appraisals of peace, governance and justice, as well as the specificities of territories affected by violence, conflict and/or illicit economy are determinant in the way national targets are framed. With the return of ultra-conservative leaders in power around the world, the risks of a securitisation of so-called ‘development’ policies or imposed conditionality on assistance may not be totally evaded.

Second, with none of these instruments being legally binding, the future of the commitments made rely very much on states’ ownership of the set objectives and their responsibility to establish coherent national strategies. Now, prevailing framework for policy coherence remains unclear, blurring the lines over the direction states may choose. The UNGASS Outcome document appears to limit the extent to which the SDGs can be entrenched into drug control policy. Signatories in fact only ‘welcome’ the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and note the ‘complementarities’ and ‘mutual reinforcement’ of efforts to achieve the SDGs and effectively address the world drug problem. The very overarching and universal nature of the SDGs is somehow overlooked, as if both agendas had to remain on their own stands. Although this might be explained by the limited political channels across the UNGASS and the SDGs discussions, it also casts doubts upon the leeway available to policy-makers to embark on more cross-sectoral schemes.

2. Dissemination – Policy entrepreneurship for coherent drugs and development responses

Although the seeds for greater policy coherence on drugs and development are planted, finding common grounds on its operationalisation does not necessarily imply direct venues of exchange between self-interest driven policy actors. Depending on contexts, ‘entrepreneurs’ (Kingdon 1984), ‘policy brokers’ (Nay & Smith 2002) or ‘transfer agents’ (Stone 2004) convey and shape shared understandings of policy issues through rather fragmented, multi-leveled patterns of idea circulation. The ability to create, mobilize and disseminate

---

As mentioned earlier, besides some level of recognition of the undermining effects of the illicit drug trade on development efforts, the pre-2015 discussions at the CND drew a pretty vague picture of the links between drugs and development cooperation policies, and quasi no references to the post-2015 agenda then-in-the-making. In 2013, UNODC developed a position paper arguing for a better integration of security and rule of law into the future global development agenda – two dimensions that though present in the Millennium Declaration, were not operationalized in the MDGs (Denney 2012). A subsequent paper was also developed, which considers a measurement framework in that perspective (See UNODC (2013) ‘Accounting for Security and Justice in the Post-2015 Development Agenda’ and “Security, the Rule of Law and the post 2015 development agenda”).
knowledge and the capacity to constitute and cultivate advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Haas 1992) represent key resources to nurture an idea's credibility and political acceptability. This section highlights three ongoing knowledge-building dynamics in different settings that fuel policy developments and facilitate idea circulation across sectors.

**International knowledge brokering**

In the last five years, many actors have strategically ventured to position themselves on the edge of their ‘native’ sector, so to speak. Individual agents from drug policy reform and poverty reduction CSOs, foundations, academia, UN-entities, development cooperation agencies, and national ministries have joined efforts across arenas to broker international knowledge and policy-oriented information on drugs and development linkages. Analysts and researchers from civil society organizations across the drug and development sectors have played critical roles in strengthening evidence on the impact of illicit drugs on development efforts. At the political level, agents in the governments of Germany, Thailand, Colombia, Peru and Afghanistan (development agency, ministries, drug agencies) - countries which have pioneered in implementing or supporting alternative development, have been particularly active in exchanging lessons and exploring how to best mainstream alternative development interventions into sustainable development strategies (UNODC 2017). The UNODC Sustainable livelihoods unit and more recently the Research and trend analysis branch (RAB) were also instrumental in documenting progress on development-based drug interventions.8

More or less colluded, these actors have developed sustained channels of discussion by organizing international conferences, formal meetings or workshops. They partner to build communication bridges across policy-making arenas so the produced knowledge is conveyed to multiple fora. For instance, between 2016 and 2018, the number of co-sponsored side events at the margins of the regular sessions of the CND that focused on the challenges and opportunities attached to drug policy and sustainable development has steadily increased.9 Such mobilizations contribute to create a corpus of cross-sectoral references and advocacy analysis that may be used as credible cognitive instruments in the debate. These interactions further participate to build common patterns of understanding on drug- and development-related problems, and joint perspectives on policy options.

More specifically, indicators and measurement instruments constitute critical tools to modify the existing ideological structures of a problem and give account of the evolving realities of priorities. Significant efforts have been deployed by civil society experts, national and UN researchers and statisticians to fill the definition gaps around common priorities and targets. The need for improved drug statistics has been thus recognized by the CND (resolution 60/1). Proposals to develop more adequate monitoring and measurement systems are also emerging. A reflection has been initiated to shift the policy evaluation focus from “process-oriented metrics” concentrated on supply and demand indicators, to the creation of an “outcome-oriented” and impact-based evaluation matrix, to better gauge drug-related issues and policies’ effects on development and human rights (IEGDPM 2018; Werb et al. 2016). For example, to best capture the prevalence and incidence of HIV among people who inject drugs and its links to SDG 3.3, one of the proposal being advanced is to include process indicators assessing the scale and coverage of evidence-based harm reduction services (opioid substitution treatment, and supervised injection facilities).

---

7 Notably on the development side, the Open Society Foundations, Christian Aid, Health Poverty Action and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, and their counterparts in the drug policy reform advocacy sector - Transform, Transnational Institute (TNI) Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC). Local CSOs are also mobilized at the international level such as Thailand Institute of Justice.

8 As the support to alternative development fluctuated, UNODC knowledge production on alternative development and development-based drug interventions has been quite irregular. Between 2005 and 2018, a dozen of reports on success stories and regional experience sharing has been produced by both headquarter and country offices, mostly in 2005–2006, 2008 and 2010. Only one thematic evaluation of UNODC alternative development interventions has been conducted by the Independent Evaluation Unit in 2005. Most recently, however, RAB has dedicated the thematic chapters of UNODC 2015 and 2016 global World Drug reports and its Bulletin in Narcotics (for long not published) to development-oriented drug policies, whereas alternative development impact assessment projects are underway in cooperation with UNDP. The 2018 World drug report further unveils a more gender-conscious reading of the phenomenon.

9 From four events in 2016 where the governments of Thailand, Peru, Germany and Colombia as well as UNODC dedicated units have been lead sponsors, the number jumps to six in 2017 and to nine in 2018. Interestingly, cross-sector CSOs have partnered in 2016 and 2017 to co-sponsored one dedicated event each year, while the topic raised interest among other co-sponsoring stakeholders (Ecuador, Canada, Norway and Organization of American States). Academic institutions such as the London School of Economics or the Social Science Research Council are also becoming part of the discussion and co-partner to diffuse studies and workshops conclusions in the Vienna forum.
At the policy level, a large process is underway, using the SDG indicator framework to guide the broadening of drug statistics. UNODC in collaboration with the UN Statistical Commission and other relevant UN entities such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is discussing how to monitor the ever-changing patterns of the drug problem and develop a measurement system that gauges the effectiveness of programs in addressing all relevant aspects of the world drug problem, including as related to the 2030 Agenda. A roadmap on drug statistics has been discussed in that sense in March 2017. An expert consultation on improving drug statistics and strengthening the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ) opened in January 2018 (E/CN.7/2018/CRP.2) is now exploring concrete options. To palliate to the different levels of data availability, experts proposed a modular approach with fixed components to be fulfilled on an annual basis and other modules of questions, which would be requested less frequently. In addition to systemic sex disaggregation of all relevant questions, experts also considered to incorporate new dimensions (such as gender and socioeconomic criteria) and to revisit the structure.

Although the emerging evidence basis translates a search for shared priorities, some brakes to greater synergies may already be identified, mainly of a cognitive and political nature. The existing corpus demonstrates some gaps that future research will need to fulfill. Existing literature and policy documents identify both the development-related aspects of the drug issue, and the impact of drug policies on development as triggers for greater synergies. Now a critical issue for agents across boards seems here again one of definitions. Available research appears rather unsettled on where to place the cursor. Is coherence needed to better tackle the development implications of illicit drug economy; to address the socio-economic structural causes driving to the illicit drug economy; to reform drug control policies not to hamper development efforts, or else all of the above?

As the policy discussions stand, engaging into a rigorous definition exercise where ‘problems’ and metrics are clarified constitutes complex, sensitive tasks. Now, the future of policy development may very much lie in the outcomes of that exercise. As recent research underlines, the nature of the statistics used to depict the world drug problem can be misleading (Mansfield 2018: 158). UNODC statistics as collected from Member states’ agencies tend to present a rather ‘simplified and ‘profit maximizing' model” (ibid 159) of the reality notably of the factors influencing illicit cultivation farmers’ livelihoods choices. In addition to methodological challenges, several dimensions such as the potential development benefits of the drug economy, the factors explaining its persistence, the perceptions of policy effectiveness or else the role played by actors involved in the drug trade on local governance and service delivery are relatively absent from existing official data. Without a clear knowledge shift or at least some openness from policy makers to complement official knowledge with other sources of information, it is risky to assume policies can respond constructively to the challenges of illicit drug trade in the field. This shift is all the more sure that reservations persist among Member States on the need to include socioeconomic indicators and aspects related to cultural context into drug statistics. The advanced argument is still one of concerns over relevance and countries capacity to report such data (E/CN.7/2018/CRP.2).

**Cross-sectoral dialogue**

In addition, spaces and mechanisms for fostering cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder dialogue are being unlocked. Innovative initiatives seek to bring together like-minded policy practitioners and experts across board to both, encourage information sharing and capitalize support. The launch of a Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development (GPDPD) is a significant example in that sense. Placed under the patronage of the German Federal Government’s Drug Commissioner and implemented by the German cooperation agency GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), this development cooperation project aims at developing cross-sectoral strategies that combine development promotion, health-oriented interventions and drug policy measures. The setting up of a supervision mechanism that comprises representatives from the ministries of health, foreign affairs, interior, and economic cooperation and development illustrates the possibility of a multi-stakeholder mechanism of policy-making. The Partnership engineers intellectual partnerships and co-sponsors the creation of alternative, more fluid spaces for policy dialogue. Through ‘innovation labs’, ‘forum’ or ‘colloquium’, a community of like-minded actors is emerging, with a view of making practical use of produced evidence. In that line, the Brandenburg Forum on Drugs and Development Policies in 2016\(^6\) allows less constrained discussion than in regular settings and paves the

---

43 Organised within the framework of the Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development (GPDPD), and co-hosted by the
way for more sustained support and possible partnerships. However, as promising as these initiatives can be, their continuity depends very much on available resources and the GPDPD’s capacity to rally political interests. So far, such mechanism remains one of its kind.

**Local innovative policy piloting**

At the policy design level, operationalising a coherent agenda on drugs and development is very much endogenous to national choices and decisions. Some states start to explore ways to reconcile policy priorities. Concepts such as ‘food security’, ‘social integration’, ‘gender’ and ‘resilience’ traditionally used in the development cooperation sector are slowly being applied to drug policy research and pilot interventions (Garcia 2017; OAS 2017; WOLA 2017; Sagredo 2018). More surprisingly, engaged Member States claim ‘new visions’, ‘different treatment’ and more ‘comprehensive framework’ to drug policy. Pilots are flourishing, testing the political acceptability and feasibility of implementing development-oriented strategies in drug-affected areas. Colombia provides an interesting example. The Colombian ‘solution to the illicit drugs problem’ of the Peace agreement adopted in the Havana in 2016 promotes ‘a different and differentiated treatment to the (drug) issue’, focused on ‘population and territorial vulnerabilities’. A National Integrated Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (NIPSIC)11 has started to reduce the impacts of illicit crop cultivation and more broadly of the drug trade on the Colombian population. In another area of intervention, Colombia partnered with GIZ and UNODC to build on existing innovative sustainable development tools to combine measures of climate change adaptation with agricultural support to communities cultivating illicit drugs. Since 2013, Colombia, Germany, Norway and the UK have teamed up to develop a Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation initiative (REDD+) that supports the goal of zero-net deforestation in the Colombian Amazon by 2020. In this framework, specific analysis have been conducted with UNODC on the role of coca cultivation in deforestation and on streamlining actions ameliorating market access and alternative livelihoods while preventing deforestation (UNODC 2018).

Although dispersed and timidly ventured, such evolutions give signs that in some ways integrated policy interventions are possible, even politically more or less acceptable. Now, if global norms and agendas may constitute incentives, there is no linear path: all actors (whether individuals or institutional) operate within the context of politics and any hope of progress rests with the political arena. On the paper, NIPSIC in particular intends to respond to the failure of past alternative development initiatives by tackling the social and economic integration of affected territories. A first attempt of a more people-centered approach, the ambitions of the program however overestimated the existing political and logistical challenges12 attached to such a vision. The reported hostility to a less prohibitive approach to drug policy of the winner of the Colombian presidential elections in June 2018, conjugated to the skepticism of the neighboring United States, traditionally highly influential, puts the future of the program into question.

The mobilization of resources such as expertise, networks and partnerships by a more or less colluded group of individual actors has proved to be particularly conducive to shake a bit the sectoral borders. Nevertheless, the existing dynamics do not seem to be sufficient to sustain influence and diffuse the idea beyond a cognitive level. They further appear highly vulnerable to changes in political support and power distribution. While the size, the composition and the degree of support policy entrepreneurs enjoy for...
the organizational structure for international cross-sectoral policy development remains quite embryonic. Among “national practitioners from different fields” (6.c).

They also encourage UNODC to “increase cooperation and recognize the need to broaden the circle of drug policy actors – long pretty much closed to state, diplomatic effects and impacts of policies on development (OECD 2015, 2016). Correlatively, the UNGASS signatories advocate divergent policy objectives through specific institutional mechanisms; and addressing the negative side effects and impacts of policies on development (OECD 2015, 2016). Correlatively, the UNGASS signatories recognize the need to broaden the circle of drug policy actors – long pretty much closed to state, diplomatic and law enforcement institutions (chapter 6). They also encourage UNODC to “increase cooperation and collaboration with all relevant United Nations entities and international financial institutions, within their respective mandates” (6.a and 6.e) to assist Member States in their tasks and enhance information exchange among “national practitioners from different fields” (6.c).

However, looking at the governance dimension of drug policy-making and delivery (Schultze-Kraft 2014), the organizational structure for international cross-sectoral policy development remains quite embryonic.

3. Space – the role of multilateral organizations in the orchestration of cross-sectoral policy development

Policy idea literature emphasizes the importance of specific organizational platforms for entrepreneurs to galvanize interests, reconcile dissenting views and shape technical and operational contents of proposed policy solutions. Such platforms may further have an instrumental function to exert multi-leveled influence and leverage resources and political support so policies may be exported and imitated. In the contemporary global landscape, even if their capacity and level of influence can be uneven or uncertain, multilateral and UN entities may play a leading role in spearheading and diffusing knowledge, in setting rules and standards of policy-making and management (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), but also in providing the necessary platforms to leverage support and stimulate concerted, coordinated public action along fixed standards (Abbott et al. 2015). Examples in recent development cooperation evolutions highlight this role. The adoption of a collective development response to fragility, for instance, followed a rather long process that did not go without tensions and controversies, but counted very much on the facilitating function of specific organizational mechanisms. UNAIDS provides another example of a global cluster mechanism created to bolster international cooperation, and inter-agency work. The universal nature of the 2030 goal-oriented framework drives the international community towards more integrated approaches and thus encourages a broader range of organizational options within the UN-system but also at national, regional and transnational levels (Long 2015). Subsequently, the United Nations Development Group has produced a set of guidelines for the preparation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF 2017) to accompany policy-making processed to go beyond concerted patterns. More specifically, the OECD has updated the concept of policy coherence for development (PCD). The notion of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) now adopts an ‘issue-based’ focus on common challenges like food security or illicit financial flows. It entails fostering synergies across sectoral policies, through a multi-stakeholders approach; increasing governments’ capacities to balance divergent policy objectives through specific institutional mechanisms; and addressing the negative side effects and impacts of policies on development (OECD 2015, 2016). Correlatively, the UNGASS signatories recognize the need to broaden the circle of drug policy actors – long pretty much closed to state, diplomatic and law enforcement institutions (chapter 6). They also encourage UNODC to “increase cooperation and collaboration with all relevant United Nations entities and international financial institutions, within their respective mandates” (6.a and 6.e) to assist Member States in their tasks and enhance information exchange among “national practitioners from different fields” (6.c).
Despite notable advances, existing platforms are rather inadequate to leverage sufficient influence and resources to operationalize policy coherence proposals. Significant limitations and unresolved tensions jeopardize the possibility of future synergies.

**Timid organizational progress towards coherence**

Since the adoption of the UNGASS Outcome document, one can observe efforts to advance multi-stakeholder processes in the drug policy arena. The CND forum has opened to new participants, while UNODC has been quite instrumental in spurring the drug policy community on greater mainstreaming of the SDGs into drug-related issues. The contributions of various UN agencies to the drug debate (notably WHO, UNAIDS, OHCHR, UNDP) and the addition of an explicit item on the CND agenda (item 10: the Commission contributions to the follow-up, review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda) display some level of mobilization towards greater development-related work streams. As part of the UNGASS preparations, UN entities could already contribute to the discussion through the United Nations System Task Force on Transnational Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking, and explore the impacts illicit drug economy and attached policies had upon their respective mandates (Hallam 2016). As a contribution, UNDP for instance released two reports on ‘the future definition of more fit for purpose and balanced inter-agency coordination structures on drug-related issues’. The continuity of inter-agency dialogue represents a positive step forward.

In addition, UNODC has been exerting clear cognitive influence on the issue. The Office has worked at filling the knowledge gap and reinvigorating orthodox views on drug policy. The last *World Drug Reports* (2015, 2016 and 2018) in particular address the linkages between the world drug problem and sustainable development, notably by exploring the particular needs and challenges faced by cultivating farmers, women and young people. Moreover, its participation to initiatives such as the GPDPD, scientific conferences and expert groups on the topic also demonstrates its capacity to integrate and generate evidence on the need to explore more comprehensive drug policy options. The Office cooperation with UN counterparts on drug indicators as underlined earlier also participates to create new representations of drug-related problems. The signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between UNODC and WHO to support national governments in their efforts to achieve the SDGs and the development of international guidelines on human rights and drug policy (Lines et al. 2017) illustrate it further.

Besides, in line with the General Assembly’s requests to mainstream the 2030 Agenda into the work of each entity of the United Nations development system (resolution 71/243) (UNGA 2017), UNODC has delineated the realm of its technical influence on sustainable development. As such, the Office mapped out pertinent areas of work to support Member States to reach multiple SDGs’ targets and monitor progress (E/CN.7/2016/CRP.1). Lead or co-lead agency for compiling 17 statistical indicators, including the number of victims of human trafficking by sex, age and form of exploitation, homicide rate, or pre-trial detention statistics, UNODC appears best positioned to diffuse a more SDGs-conscious reading of drug-related policy challenges through global channels.

However, besides these steps, the drug policy community has been timid and vague about how far or in what other concrete ways a coherent agenda on drugs and sustainable development might be pursued. Besides the reaffirmation of the principle of common and shared responsibility, UNGASS signatories remain unclear on how to increase synergies among actors and policy agendas. Certainly, international workshops are being organized at national levels, bringing together stakeholders from different ministries to map respective activities and possible entry points for joint action to implement the UNGASS recommendations. Nevertheless, the level of implication and the role of non-traditional drug policy actors across fields are yet to be defined. Important questions remain thus unanswered, translating to some extent, the current limits of coherence possibility in this arena.

**Unresolved dilemmas**

The possibility of fully-fledged organizational and coordination mechanisms on drugs and development depends on the existing incentives actors have at stake for greater coherence. Although it would be out of the scope of this article to engage an in-depth discussion on that question, some elements can be highlighted for future consideration.

First, the current configuration of the drug policy arena suggests that divergences prevail. Besides ideological oppositions on the weight law enforcement categories should have on drug policy, different views are emerging on the future of the UNGASS commitments, in the midst of the preparation of the 2019 high-level review on progress made towards the objectives of the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action. It is rather unsettled the extent to which the 2009 targets would be reaffirmed, or whether
UNGASS achievements would be a ‘blueprint’ guiding “efforts to stop organized crime while protecting human rights, enabling development, and ensuring rights-based ... support” as encouraged by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in his remarks to the 2018 CND. Not totally independent of the ideological fractures inherent to the history of global drug policy, these divisions show through the fragmented picture of national drug policies: from legalization experiments, development-oriented measures, harm reduction strategies to revived wars on drug, one can be skeptical on how an international consensus on drugs will develop ahead. The return to power of conservative forces around the world casts further doubts on the future of drug policy. Recent one-sided initiatives such as the US-led “Global Call to Action on the World Drug Problem”, evading most of the dimensions put forward in the UNGASS outcome document, including development-oriented perspectives and the SDGs, increases the chance for more unilateral, repressive policy scenarios.

Second, the organizational incentives for international coordination are currently unclear. The international public sphere developed into a multi-streamed, flexible space of influence and diffused authority, shaped by heterogeneous actor’s interactions (Stone 2008). In this framework, multilateral organizations compete for influence and tend to hesitate to advance innovative, controversial ideas that risk to be rejected by Member States. Driven by bureaucratic concerns and confronted with internal compartmentalization and often a strong competition for funds, UN entities tend to stay reflective organizations, threatened by a loss of autonomy (financial, intellectual and regulatory) vis-à-vis the Member States composing their board and of influence over their partners. Analytically, the traditional aid landscape is evolving. Large development agencies and multilateral organizations are expanding their portfolio driven by the rise of new priorities but also the emergence of new actors (donors, notably) and shortening of resources. As a result, and despite examples of joint efforts and complementary strategies on the ground, competition prevails over mandates. Elaborating an agenda on drugs and development implies to make framing choices that may have strong political implications on multilateral agencies’ mandates and strategies: how to draw the line between security and development with regards to drug issues? How developed economies would understand the “development” dimension of policies? Who would be the targets of future agendas (extensive powerful drug networks; the ‘victims’ of the drug trade; users; marginalized communities, etc.)?

The lack of clarity over these questions and the absence of dedicated organizational platforms to deal with such interrogations reduce the chances for further collective efforts and somehow translate the current limits of engagements in that regards. The open opportunity for greater coherence on drugs and development does not seem to be fully embraced. Such timid organizational dynamics question the likeliness of the construction of a specific governance platform where divergent interests could be merged, policy instruments be defined and teams could be stabilized. There is still an opportunity to be seized to rethink the different roles drug and development actors may play and explore organizational options towards clustered, integrated strategies on drug- and development-related issues. This could take the form of an international ‘forum’, ‘expert group’, an ‘open-ended working group’, a cross-UN task force, a formal SDG-Drug lab, or else regular, systematized joint meetings to bring together all relevant stakeholders across sectors to the table. The UN Secretary General’ reform process related to the restructuring of the UN and the operational activities for developing the UN system may influence future interactions. Nevertheless, political will and power distribution within the drug policy community might in fine represent the real game changers.

Concluding remarks: the challenge of mainstreaming policy efforts of drugs and sustainable development

This paper modestly attempted to provide an overview of the recent evolutions on policy coherence on drugs and sustainable development. If that idea gained unprecedented political traction, nevertheless the conditions do not seem to be yet pulled together for its operational translation. The UNGASS and SDGs processes certainly created enabling environments for the idea of problems compatibilities to be endorsed. However, there are important definition challenges ahead. The affirmation of a “complementary and mutually reinforcing” rationale between drug control and sustainable development efforts has a paradoxical effect. It recognizes the multidimensionality of the drug issue and the universal nature of the attached challenges. However, it keeps the elaboration of the corresponding policy frameworks and attached implementing tools, behind strict sectoral frontiers. Considering that the frontiers of a sector fluctuate as the actors involved are positioning themselves, the structuring of a policy agenda across sectors would therefore highly depend on engaged actors’ capacities to create adequate policy-making spaces to capitalize resources (including knowledge) and exert enough leverage for their solution to be institutionalized further.
Despite attempts of an increasing number of policy entrepreneurs to develop a common language and to position themselves at the edge of both sectors, the organizational mechanisms in place do not seem yet sufficient to fill existing gaps and canalize interests across board. Policy entrepreneurs have successfully managed to build a corpus of evidence demonstrating that a new policy framing is needed. For these efforts not to remain sterile, the challenge seems now one of broadening the scope of the discussion to a more technical level, but also one of strategic channeling and co-opting of operational actors across fields. Unlocking formal spaces for policy-making discussions on defining the development components of priorities, cooperation instruments and available resources seems needed for this proposal to be translated into ‘programming’ and ‘projects’. As examples in development cooperation history highlights, multilateral agencies could have a positive orchestrating role to that end. However, existing political configurations and organizational constrains seem to question the very possibility of a future agenda. The nexus between politics and policy-making remains here a true test to advance an international agenda on drugs and development. Although it would demand involved stakeholders to make firm political choices, to collaborate differently and to measure and frame innovatively, it is not too late to seize the opportunity, and 2019 might be critical on that path.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

References


Mansfield, D. 2018. (Mis)understanding the intersection between development policies and data collection: Experiences in Afghanistan. International Journal of Drug Policy, 58. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.05.007


West African Commission on Drug. 2014. *Not just in transit: Drugs, the State and Society in West Africa*. WACD.


Drug Problem or Medicrime? Distribution and Use of Falsified Tramadol Medication in Egypt and West Africa

Axel Klein
Global Drug Policy Observatory, University of Swansea, GB
axelklein@yahoo.com

Tramadol is a synthetic opioid that is widely used as an analgesic for alleviating pain of moderate to medium intensity. With potency estimated to be about one-tenth that of morphine, tramadol is considered as relatively safe with regard to poisonings or dependency. Yet there are increasing reports of widespread non-medical consumption of tramadol in North and West Africa. The Egyptian government has requested the UN Commission of Narcotic Drugs to put tramadol under international control. This will have profound implications for the treatment of acute and chronic pain across developing countries where tramadol is often the only available analgesic, because controlled substances are impossible to obtain for health care practitioners. The tramadol sold outside of medical establishments is often adulterated and substandard, part of the massive trade in falsified medicines that is possibly far more devastating than the hedonic use of psychoactive substances. Yet the international machinery in place to control medical products is feeble and the penalties for medicrime are modest next to drug trafficking offences. The article suggests that international controls need to re-assess their priorities to focus on human and patient well-being. A further shift is needed away from repressive measures against consumers, to tighter regulation in the production and distribution of medications and pharmaceutical substances. This must involve a wide range of stakeholders, including health care practitioners, the pharmaceutical industry, pharmacists, patients associations, and the public at large.

Keywords: Tramadol; synthetic opioids; West Africa; Egypt; medicrime; regulation; pharmaceutical industry; Falsified Medicines

In March 2017, representatives for the Egyptian government submitted a conference room paper to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in Vienna recommending ‘international cooperation in addressing the non-medical use and abuse, the illicit manufacture and the illicit domestic and international distribution of tramadol’ (CND 2017). In Egypt, according to the paper, the non medical use of tramadol has led to a rise in hospital admissions and mortalities. Though the medication has been under national control since 2012, restricting access to medical users with the authorisation from a qualified health care professional, the Egyptian Anti Narcotic General Administration (ANGA) continues to seize considerable quantities of unlicensed imports. The government is therefore proposing to the United Nations that tramadol be placed on the list of controlled substances. This would mean that it can only be traded in the context of the international import/export authorisation system that is managed by the International Narcotics Control Board.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) is the United Nations commission charged with supervising the application of the international drug control treaties. It is assisted by the International Narcotic Control Board (INCB), an ‘independent and quasi-judicial monitoring body’ that publishes annual reports on trends.

1 ‘Tramadol was later placed in the schedule II, and then currently, tramadol is already placed as schedule I according to the ministerial decree no. 125/2012 of the Egyptian drug law’ (sic) (CND 2017).
in the production and use of controlled substances. In 2017 the INCB reported that: ‘Trafficking in and abuse of substances not under international control remains a serious concern in a number of African countries. The available data suggest that the non-medical use of tramadol, a synthetic opioid analgesic, is growing, as evidenced by seizures in Central, North and West Africa’ and that ‘there was growing evidence of tramadol trafficking and abuse in the countries of the Near and Middle East’ (INCB 2017: 95).

In support of its case, the Egyptian submission cites INCB reports from 2012–2015 on the increase in seizures of Tramadol ‘diverted from international trade’ (INCB 2012) and/or ‘from domestic distribution channels, at the retail level, and through sales without the requisite medical prescription’ (INCB 2013). It is noted that tramadol is ‘controlled under national legislation on psychotropic substances and/or narcotic drugs in Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia’ (INCB 2015).

In 2014 the CND passed resolution 56/14 encouraging member states to take comprehensive measures to prevent and reduce non-medical use (CND 2014b). Both the Egyptian government and the CND are framing the issue of tramadol as a problem of ‘drug abuse’ that should be regulated in accordance with the Single Convention on Narcotic drugs, the treaty that serves as the foundation of the current international drug control system. The problem is summarised in the preamble of the treaty: ‘narcotic drugs while indispensable for pain management can lead to addiction’ (United Nations 1961). In response, the system has established a control bureaucracy to ensure that governments that are signatories to these treaties employ restrictive measures in their national jurisdictions, including the criminalisation and the enforcement of the unauthorised production, distribution, and use of listed substances.

While the Egyptian government and some of the international agencies argue that scheduling of tramadol is right because of the incidence of ‘abuse’, the international experience suggests that controls rarely address the public health problems that accompany non-medical use, but have a range of unintended consequences that may be far more harmful to public good. The question examined in this paper is whether the approach that has been proposed is the optimal response for dealing with the distribution of illicit tramadol. Moreover, is the bundle of interconnected problems surrounding the non-medical consumption of tramadol across Africa, really best responded to by framing it as a drug control issue?

Methods
Field research was conducted in Botswana and Namibia, where the non-medical use of tramadol or other prescription medicines is largely unknown, and five countries in West Africa: Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining formal discussions with office holders in government agencies, senior management of private sector corporations, and professional associations with structured interviews and guided group discussions with health care professionals. The literature review included a discourse analysis of the Ghanaian media and international press reports to complement the reports and documents from official organisations. Structured interviews with non-medical tramadol consumers were held in recreational settings in urban and rural locations in Ghana (65) and Benin (7).

The work fell into two distinct phases, first, in November–December 2016, as part of a programming mission for the regional Anti-Trafficking programme funded out of the 11th European Development Fund. In the second phase from June–September 2018, further visits were made possible by support from the pharmaceutical company Grünenthal, one of the largest manufacturers of tramadol medication globally. Samples of illicitly sold tramadol branded medication were collected from Benin, Ghana and Niger for a qualitative assay at the Grünenthal laboratory in Aachen, Germany.

Theoretical Orientation
While the intention of the research was to gather a comprehensive data set with which to inform policy makers in West Africa and international fora, the theoretical framing of this article was informed by three different traditions. First of all, theories of policy making and the arrival at decisions through spiralling iterative processes as proposed by Turnbull.

Secondly, it draws on the critique of centralised global institutions as inherently rational and benevolent actors (Mazower 2009), and merges insights from studies of origins and construction of the international drug control system (Bruun et al. 1975; McAllister 2000; Nadelmann 1990), with theoretical insights on social systems (Luhmann 2007). The role of the international agencies is predicated on a notion of benevolence and a normative concern with the well being of ‘mankind’. While this does remain a theoretical aspiration, organisational concerns and mandates impose far narrower definitions where the interests of professional sectors can displace the public good. The role of international agencies in the drug control field has rarely been studied in the African context.
Thirdly, it draws on insights from the analysis of African states whose lack of capacity or operational weakness has obliged elites to forge alliances with external actors, ‘extraversion’ (Bayart 1989; Callaghy 1987). One of the presuppositions of the paper is that the institutional fragility of African states creates vacuums that international organisations can move into. In the process they are presenting and shaping the problems to which policy makers are invited to respond in accordance with their mandate and organisational interests.

**Understanding the popularity of tramadol in Egypt and West Africa**

Non-medical tramadol use has been widely reported from Egypt, where it ‘offers an affordable buzz’, and where its reputed properties of raised alertness and sexual stamina are highly prized.\(^3\) The attraction of prescription medicines lies partly in relatively low cost and ready availability (Table 1), but also in the comparative lack of stigma compared to other substances. Particularly in countries whose legislative systems are based on Islamic notions of justice with an injunction against psychoactive substances and where public codes of morality tend to condemn ‘intoxication’ as ‘haram’ or unacceptable, an opportunity opens up for moderately powerful substances that come with a medical alibi (Ghiabi 2018). According to one commentator, the ‘pseudo-medical veneer protects the user from feeling they are involved in an activity that is haram’ (Economist 2015).\(^4\) Similar patterns of non-medical use of prescription medication are reported from other Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (INCB 2016).\(^5\) the most prominent being Captagon (Laniel 2014). It is also of relevance for West African countries with large Muslim populations and strong Islamic influence.

There is no known licit production of tramadol in Egypt or anywhere else in Africa, and the bulk of both licit and illicit imports reportedly originate from India and China (GOE 2017: 2).\(^6\) Up to 2012 at least the biggest seizures were reported in the seaports of Alexandria, Damietta, and Port Said (CND 2017: 2), but there are also overland trading routes across the long land borders with Libya.

Yet Egypt is not the only country affected. According to the World Customs Organisation, tramadol is the third most commonly seized ‘psychotropic substance’ after MDMA and methamphetamine, ‘with 2,050 individual seizures, representing 18.1% of all seizures’ (WCO 2016). In 2014 the third-largest seizure globally was one of 7.3 tonnes reported by Niger (WCO 2015), a country well integrated into the trading and trafficking networks linking the northern Mediterranean with the Sahel, which, according to analysts, consists almost entirely of illicit trade (Shaw & Reitano 2014).

As a landlocked country, Niger depends on its neighbours along the West African littoral for access to global markets. Cotonou in Benin and Lomé in Togo serve as entrepôts for the Sahel region, and have registered significant increases in tramadol seizures. Sold at prices that range between a third to half a dollar for a 225 mg tablet it is well within reach of wide segments of the population.\(^7\)

There are reports about the increase in non-medical tramadol use from right across the region. In Nigeria the Afrobeat rapper Olamide Adedeji brought out a hit song ‘Science Student’ featuring tramadol, while the Ghana pharmaceutical society has cautioned against the proliferation of Tramadol used in high doses of 200–250 mg (Citifmonline 2017).\(^8\) The West African Epidemiological Network has reported tramadol to be the most widely used substance after cannabis across the region. The reasons given are familiar – for increased sexual performance or to increase stamina when performing long and physically demanding tasks (Salm-Reifferscheidt 2018).

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Formal market price for tramadol tablets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>Packet of 10 tablet × 50 mg € 0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>1 tablet × 225 mg € 0.30–80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>1 tablet × 225 mg € 0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) These same properties are ascribed to ‘captagon’, which contains the stimulant amphetamine (Laurent Laniel, personal communication).

\(^4\) Forbidden by the Koran.

\(^5\) ‘There continue to be indications of large-scale prescription drug abuse in the region’ (West Asia, para 694).

\(^6\) The drug was first marketed by Grünenthal, who remain the largest producer for European markets but only exports negligible quantities to Africa.

\(^7\) In the UK pharmacies pay £ 2.58 for a box of 100 tablets with 50 mg of tramadol (personal communication).

\(^8\) Interviews with street traders and consumers between June–September 2018.

Considering the impact and effectiveness of international controls
In the often emotively charged discussion over the impact of non-medical tramadol use, calls are often heard for government to take immediate action. The language used is emotive and rhetorical, with common reference to biblical imagery like 'the scourge of tramadol abuse' (Ebo'o 2018) or evocations of a 'menace' to the young.10 Governments have responded by imposing sets of controls that vary between countries but are designed to counter the risks of abuse and addiction through aggressive interventions in the market. They mobilise the criminal justice system, particularly the police, dedicated law enforcement agencies, courts, and prisons to curtail the sale and use of tramadol. As these measures are being consolidated and extended, it is important that their impact on medical care is taken into consideration and the phenomenon of non-medical tramadol use is studied more systematically.

*The impact of international controls on tramadol-using patients*
This is particularly important in view of the impact that international scheduling will have on the availability of tramadol for medical needs. The difficulty in accessing medication for the treatment of pain in many lower- and middle-income countries is becoming an issue of growing concern ([Table 2](#)) (Lancet Commission 2017). It is not the cost of opiate analgesics, but legal and institutional barriers that have reduced the availability of pain management medication across Africa. These barriers, it has been argued have been constructed by the ‘UN international drugs control agencies … because they have spent 50 years focusing on the war on drugs and are often dominated by representatives from ministries of justice and law enforcement who do not traditionally take a health perspective’ (Hallam et al. 2014; Anderson 2010).

It has been recognised that the ‘burdensome regulations’ are causing delays in the supply chain (INCB 2016).11 The prioritization of repressive measures has resulted in a situation where ‘the obligation to prevent abuse of controlled substances has received far more attention than the obligation to ensure their adequate availability for medical and scientific purposes, and this has resulted in countries adopting laws and regulations that consistently and severely impede accessibility of controlled medicines’ (WHO 2011).

As the main objective of these controls is to prevent any leakage of medicines into the recreational market, countries that produce and export controlled pharmaceutical products are required to ensure that ‘the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Morphine</th>
<th>Hydro- morphine</th>
<th>Fentanyl</th>
<th>Methadone</th>
<th>Oxycodone</th>
<th>Pethidine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>0.6052</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.4169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>0.0190</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>0.0138</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>0.0059</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>0.1251</td>
<td>0.0146</td>
<td>0.0152</td>
<td>0.0076</td>
<td>0.0014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>0.1163</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>0.0141</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>27.6484</td>
<td>0.1709</td>
<td>1.1246</td>
<td>12.9566</td>
<td>22.3535</td>
<td>0.0348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>22.8571</td>
<td>0.1467</td>
<td>1.2740</td>
<td>31.0654</td>
<td>19.9277</td>
<td>2.4830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country with the highest consumption</td>
<td>213.4573</td>
<td>52.2194</td>
<td>4.9350</td>
<td>58.0380</td>
<td>194.4109</td>
<td>26.7676</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: International Narcotics Control Board; World Health Organization population data.


---

10 With sometimes astonishing inversions of priority – one UNODC press release about tramadol ‘abuse’ in Sahel countries mentions en passant chronic food shortages. Action is needed, apparently, to stop children from using tramadol to suppress their hunger pangs, but nothing needs to be done to relieve the hunger (UNODC 2017).

amounts exported must be within the limits of the total estimates that that country has sent to the Board (UN 1961: 31). This means that importing states have to submit their annual estimates of their needs for any pain medications that are scheduled under the drug control treaties to the INCB for authorization.

Calculations for such assessments are complex exercises that need to factor in the dynamics of population growth, changing disease profiles with new conditions including HIV/AIDS, and the needs of an ageing population. Previous studies found that Senegal was requesting the same morphine quota since the 1960s, while Gambia, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau, reported no opioid medicine consumption between 2006–2009. Liberia was not reporting to the INCB and is therefore unlikely to be supplied by legitimate exporters. Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, and Niger were providing estimates that would only suffice for treating a mere 1% of their estimated terminal cancer and HIV/AIDS patients. Nigeria, with a patient population of 173,000, imports quantities of opioids that cover the needs of 274 patients (HRW 2011).

Responsibility for submitting requests to the INCB lies, in most countries, with the Ministry of Health. They in turn receive requests from the purchasing department of the central medical stores of their national health service providers or from accredited private sector importers. A straightforward process on paper, the reality is beset by administrative difficulties. In Botswana, for example, a private sector wholesaler will apply for a permit to the Medicines Regulation Authority (BMRA). The process is expected to take up to four weeks for an import permit with a validity of three months. Then an order is placed with the South African importer, who in turn has to apply to the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA), for an export license, a process that may take between four to eight weeks. By the time the order is despatched the import license may have expired, which means a new permit will have to be applied for. On other occasions, the South African importer may be short of stock and only send half the requested amount or only part of an order for several medicines. Once again, the shortfall can only be made up upon procurement of a new import permit.

In Namibia, wholesalers reported that the process may well take three months, provided that there were no mistakes in the paperwork, either by the private sector company or the regulators. But it had happened that importers would forward products that were coming close to their sell-by date, which were returned, for fear of not being able to sell them in time. In each case the wholesaler would have to commence the process again.

Encumbered by these requirements, companies sought to increase their stock, to be able to respond to requests in a timely manner and to avoid duplicating the paperwork. But that tied up capital and increased the risk of having stock left on the shelves. It is due to these various complications that countries often import only a fraction of the quantity of medical drugs that they requested in the previous year.

The burden is also experienced at a local level by dispensing pharmacists. In Botswana the Drug Registration Unit requires pharmacists to keep records of patients’ prescription, details of the prescribing doctors, and the number of tablets sold. According to the secretary of the Pharmaceutical Society of Botswana ‘Some of them [pharmacists] decide this is too much extra work, they don’t want to be accountable. Because if the DRU comes and you have 10 units missing you have a big problem.’

In Ghana too pharmacists are discouraged from handling controlled medicines by the administrative effort involved (prescription check against name of doctor and stamp, storing of prescription, entry into book or software) and the physical security precautions (locked cupboards, regular stock checks) required. According to Secretary of the Pharmaceutical Society of Ghana, pharmacists are custodians of medicines, not charities, and need to keep an eye on overheads to remain financially sustainable. Besides, profit margins on tramadol medications are low, and patients presenting with pain are most likely to agree to pay for less effective alternatives such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS).

Tramadol, which in Botswana, Ghana, Namibia, Niger, and Nigeria is subject only to national controls, remains available upon prescription to fill a critical gap in the management of both acute and chronic pain, particularly for populations living at a distance from hospitals. The additional layers of control that would follow international scheduling will in all likelihood result in effectively removing the medication from the shelves. For pain patients, the implications are serious. In Egypt the restrictions imposed by successive

---

12 To assist countries in their responsibilities under Article 13 of the Psychotropic Convention, the INCB circulates, each year, an updated list of prohibitions and restrictions on the export and import of substances. This is contained in Part Four of the Annex to the Annual Statistical Form (‘green list’).

13 INCB provides all Governments, in the first quarter of each year, with form B (Annual estimates of requirements of narcotic drugs, manufacture of synthetic drugs, opium production, and cultivation of the opium poppy for purposes other than opium production).
legislation with sharp and well-publicised punishment for unauthorised possession have been already been criticised for further raising the barriers for cancer pain treatment and exposing patients to unnecessary risk by having to resort to the black market (Alsirafy et al. 2015).

**Strict controls do not eliminate availability**

In spite of these controls, Egyptians can still find tramadol. One study of 75 patients found that ‘The new restrictive regulations did not limit access to the trafficked counterfeit tramadol which may harm cancer patients rather than benefiting them’ (Alsirafy et al. 2014).

The question arises whether the proposed use of the criminal justice system – law enforcement efforts to disrupt markets with arrests, fines, and incarcerations – are effective for tackling a public health problem. Sanctions may deter licit suppliers, for instance wholesalers of pharmaceutical products, pharmacists, or doctors, from diverting tramadol medications. But the vast bulk of tramadol entering the market in Egypt and West Africa is illicitly imported through poorly controlled ports and across highly permeable borders.

To stress the point, a comparison with other drugs is instructive. Cannabis has been controlled in Egypt since 1865 (UNODC 2008) and has, at Egyptian behest, been under international control since 1925 (Ghiabi 2018). Yet, according to a 2015 prevalence study on substance consumption patterns among a sample of 115,107 persons, 15.91% reported cannabis use (Hamdi 2016). Clearly, for a significant minority, access to cannabis is not difficult even though a ban, backed up by the threat of punishments, has been in place for many years.

Possibly even more illustrative of the failure of repressive measures is the data on opiate use from the Egyptian substitution therapy feasibility study cited in the 2016 INCB Annual Report (INCB 2016). Of the 100,000 problematic opiate users, half are reportedly dependent on tramadol and the other on heroin. The availability of heroin and cannabis, both substances that have been under international control for decades, puts into question the effectiveness of the proposed international scheduling of tramadol for reducing its non-medical use.

**Adulteration and drug combinations**

It was further noted that the drug effect reported by some of the Egyptian informants, was difficult to reconcile with the known pharmacological action of tramadol. As with other opioids, the expected effect is somnolence rather than alertness, prompting the speculation that the smuggled tablets combine tramadol with ‘a central nervous system stimulant’ (Alsirafy et al. 2014). The suggested combination with other substances was certainly borne out by an unpublished Egyptian study based on the analysis of 300 seized samples. About half of the samples contained paracetamol, diazepam, metronidazole, or carbamazepine – and discrepancies between the dosage indicated on the packet and the actual content. Some of samples contained 540 mg of tramadol, well above the maximum recommended medical dose of 400 mg per day.

The energising effect is also reported by non-medical tramadol users in West Africa, where tramadol-branded substances are popular with drivers, motorbike taxis, and manual workers. ‘Here in Africa you need to work really well – So you have to take tramadol to be able to work hard to keep your job’ (Salmer-Reifferscheidt 2018). Journalists reporting ‘tramadol stories’ have collected little data about drug combinations or what other substances informants may be using. Nor have there been any reported attempts to analyse the actual content of tramadol-branded substances that are on sale in West African markets. In the context of this project, it was possible to obtain eight samples from the Forensic Police in Niamey, Niger, for testing at the laboratories of Grünenthal in Aachen, Germany. The analyses showed that seven were adulterated with other substances and did not contain the dosage indicated on the packet. In fact, none of the samples found in West Africa was in compliance with international or national regulations for medical products.

**Trafficking in falsified medicines**

Only recently have international organisations turned their attention to the trade in counterfeit, falsified, and substandard medical products. The WHO has warned that possibly over half of the medicines sold in Africa are substandard, falsely-labelled, falsified or counterfeit (SSFFC), with devastating consequences. Using annual malaria case estimates, the WHO has calculated ‘that substandard and falsified antimalarials contributed an additional 72,000–267,000 deaths (CFR adjusted case: 31,000–116,000 deaths) annually in sub-Saharan Africa’ (WHO, 2017). In Africa, the impact of medicrime is far more serious than that of drug trafficking, even though, as tramadol shows, these two crime categories overlap.

14 Grünenthal is a German pharmaceutical company that first developed and remains the biggest producer of tramadol.
Yet the response of law enforcement, policy makers, and the donor community remains lukewarm. The law enforcement units that made the tramadol seizures in Cotonou and Lomé were set up, trained, and equipped under the auspices of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, often with funding from the European Union as part of the Global Container Control Programme. Yet, the objective of the units that are based in seaports along the West African coast was: ‘to minimize the exploitation of maritime containers for the illicit trafficking of drugs, and other transnational organized crime activities.’ Interception is at best a by-product of their activities.

One of the reasons for this can be found in legislation. In West Africa only Burkina Faso and Guinea have signed up to the medicrime convention. Elsewhere trading in falsified medicines is treated as an intellectual property crime. Penalties are fines and at best six-month prison terms. According to one organisation campaigning against the trade, ‘the legislative system makes no distinction between drug counterfeiting and other forms of counterfeiting: they see it only as a violation of industrial property and do not take into account the serious harm it can do to people’s health.’ The repercussions of this light touch approach are manifest on the ground, because, according to one officer at the UNODC regional office in Dakar, the low penal tariffs discourage law enforcement agencies from taking the offence seriously.

The West African Health Authority and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are making efforts to push the issue up the policy agenda and have set up a Medicines Anti-Counterfeit Committee (EMACCOM), but these regional initiatives are still at an early stage of development. Better progress is made at national level, with dedicated agencies in Ghana and Nigeria leading the way in setting standards for regulatory agencies. Nigeria’s National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) is under the authority of the Ministry of Health with a mandate to ‘regulate and control the manufacture, importation, exportation, distribution, advertisement, sale and use of food, drugs, cosmetics, chemicals, detergents, medical devices and packaged water.’ To achieve this, NAFDAC runs public awareness campaigns, certifies and inspects manufacturers and importers, checks imports at points of entry and conducts surveillance operations at markets and retail outlets. Critical for effective pharma vigilance is close cooperation with industry, retailers, and the public, all working on the understanding of having a shared interest.

Surprisingly, perhaps given the significance of the issue in terms of public health is the paucity of support from the international community combating the trade in falsified medicines. It its particularly noticeable when compared to the generous assistance lent to fighting illicit drug trafficking.

The international enforcement mechanism for Drug Control vs. Medicrime

Though there is neither coca nor poppy cultivation in West Africa and no cannabis export, the region has been identified as a significant transit corridor. Information on the through-flow of drugs, principally cocaine, to markets in Europe has been compiled principally by UNODC (UNODC 2013), unlocking considerable EU funding.

Strong legal provisions are in place against the production, distribution and consumption of ‘narcotic’ or psychoactive ‘drugs’, in clear contrast to the weak legal provisions governing medicrime. Governments and policy makers are much more likely to get international support if they pass a request through the drug control mechanisms than those for the regulation of medicine or in the interests of public health.

This is evidence of the amounts of support the European Commission, the largest development cooperation partner across West Africa, has been making towards ‘drug control’ and efforts to combating medicrime respectively (Table 3).

UNODC is in the strong position of being firstly, the centre of data gathering, analysis, and dissemination on drug flow information, and secondly, the management agency handling the implementation of donor funded projects. These are often intended to raise capacity of national or regional agencies, such as the Drug Control Unit within the Economic Community of West African States. Nigeria and Ghana have established the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and the Narcotic Control Board (NACOB), respectively, with a narrow focus on combating illicit drugs, modelled on the US Drug Enforcement Administration or

---

19 Concerns have been raised over the ‘dual role’ of UNODC as the main information provider and commentator on drug trafficking in West Africa, as well as the largest management agency of drug control programmes (Klein 2014).
Table 3.

EU-funded projects in West Africa 2013–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug Control</th>
<th>Medicrime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project name</strong></td>
<td><strong>Actions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support to ECOWAS Regional Action Plan on illicit drug trafficking, related organised crime and drug abuse</td>
<td>Airport Communication Project (AIRCOP 1–3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist the ECOWAS Commission and its Member States in the prevention of drug trafficking and drug abuse</td>
<td>Seaport Cooperation Project (SEACOP 1–4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries covered</strong></td>
<td><strong>Budget €</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecowas</td>
<td>West Africa, Caribbean, Latin America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries covered</strong></td>
<td><strong>Budget €</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>16.5 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the Egyptian ANGA. Other countries have specialised units such as the Office Central de Répression du Trafic Illicite des Stupéfiants in Niger. These agencies are the direct partners of EU, but particularly US, law enforcement counterparts. They also get the opportunity to participate in donor-funded transnational operations that are organised and coordinated by international agencies including White Flow (Interpol), COCAIR (WCO/Interpol/UNODC), or Ailes Africaines (France).

Senior officers can also take part in the regular meetings of the international drug networks, for example the Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, (HONLEA), for coordination, information exchange and planning.

The most significant meetings at a policy level are those organised under the auspices of the CND, either in Vienna or in New York, as for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) in 2016. These meetings are now routinely attended by the NDLEA.

There are no comparable mechanisms or platforms for tackling medicrime. In West Africa the basis for regional cooperation is the 2013 Niamey Declaration against counterfeit medicines in Africa, which, at best, amounts to an expression of intent, with no binding commitment and no funding allocation.

At the UN there is no special commission that concerns itself with the production, distribution, and use of falsified medicine, thus there is no pressure on states to adhere to international treaties and comply with the agreements. There are no agencies created specifically to monitor compliance and report breaches and malfeasance to the UN Economic and Social Council. The only international legal instrument, the Medicrime Convention that was sponsored by the Council of Europe in 2010, has only three African signatories and no compliance mechanism.

The best hope of international cooperation at present is via the WHO Rapid Alert System for information sharing on poor-quality medicines between medicines regulatory authorities. But the pharmaco vigilance systems in some West African countries are rudimentary, and with no mechanisms for cross-border cooperation they are ineffective against the intra-regional trade in falsified medicine.

**Conclusion: Reframing Tramadol**

Keeping in mind the ultimate objective and original raison d'être of drug control, the prevention of non-medical use of habit-forming drugs (Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961) it appears that law enforcement agencies are being nurtured as the principle champions for public health objectives. One consequence of this has been that policy makers, possibly at the behest of or in consultation with the dedicated drug law

---

20 The 27th HONLEA, Africa meeting, in Hurghada, Egypt, 18 to 22 September 2017, discussed the trafficking of tramadol and law enforcement responses (INCB 2017).
enforcement agencies, avail themselves of control at the expense of other policy options. It also opens the door for attempts at using public health as a pretext for introducing political, social, or cultural controls or for advancing institutional interests. The authority of a global regime that follows the international scheduling of a drug like tramadol provides an alibi for the repressive actions of even unpopular regimes.

The international forum also provides an opportunity for justifying and normalising policies that have emerged from practice. It has been suggested that policies follow a spiralling, rather than a linear, trajectory, with policy actors at different stages continually reformulating problems in order to adapt and legitimise their actions (Turnbull 2013). The interplay between international and national agencies is interesting in this process, as INCB and national drug control and law enforcement agencies have been reinforcing one another in casting tramadol as a ‘narcotic’, impelled by the gravitational pull of the drug control system and political expedience of unleashing the repressive measures (raids, seizures, arrests) that have now become normalized in the drug control field.

Yet in the case of tramadol there are four distinct arguments for taking an alternative approach.

1. **Patients** – The international scheduling of tramadol will close down access to legitimate sources of last remaining stage 2 analgesic for millions of patients across Africa and other low and middle income countries.

2. **Medicrime** – The unlicensed trade in falsified tramadol branded medication is a medicrime, part of the global trade in falsely-labelled, falsified, or counterfeit medicines that is having a far more devastating effect than the controlled drugs, and needs a systemic response beyond the focus on repressive actions.

3. **Social costs of repressive measures** – Conventional drug control has been both ineffective and costly in terms of collateral damage. Large numbers of people, usually young men, are arrested, often brutalized, pushed through courts and prisons, with many ending up in lifelong criminal careers.

4. **Supporting Medicine Standards Authorities** – National and regional systems for ensuring the quality of medications are effective in improving public health and reducing the availability of all falsified medications, including tramadol. Extending the regulatory web with a clear focus on public health, mobilising professional groups and the public, will effectively combat organised crime by reducing the scope of criminal opportunity.

Instead of including tramadol in the international schedules, regional and national agencies should be assisted in ensuring the continued availability for medical practice. At the same time, the authorities should cooperate with key stakeholders and the international community to curtail the inflow of falsified medicines into the region. Better interception at points of entry and choke points is a good start, but ultimately, better cooperation is needed with partners at the point of origin.

Under the auspices of the Cocaine Route programme, the EU has already funded joint law enforcement investigations into cocaine trafficking between Latin America and West Africa. There is a strong argument for these mechanisms to be used in investigating the import of substandard and adulterated pharmaceutical products from India and other source countries. But it will require a reassessment of threats and opportunities, a rethink of policy objectives and the departure from a set policy path that has by now established its own momentum. One first step is, therefore, to shift the frame from ‘drugs’ control, with all its baggage of vested interest and contested assumptions, and set it around the key problem at hand – the problematic use of tramadol (and other prescription medicines) stems from the illicit production and unauthorised importation and distribution of substandard and adulterated products. The suitable definition and the most promising approach is to treat it as a medicrime.

**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANGA</td>
<td>Anti Narcotic General Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMRA</td>
<td>Botswana Medicines Regulation Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CND</td>
<td>Commission on Narcotic Drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCB</td>
<td>International Narcotic Control Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>Middle East North Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSAIDS</td>
<td>Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAHPRA</td>
<td>South African Health Products Regulatory Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSFFC</td>
<td>Substandard, falsely-labelled, falsified or counterfeit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations on Drugs and Crime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Competing Interests
Data was gathered over several field visits to West and Southern Africa over 2016–2018. The first were undertaken in the context of an European Development Fund supported programme "Fight against Organised Crime in West Africa: addressing all types of trafficking". Subsequently funding was obtained from the pharmaceutical company Grünenthal. The author was free in the use of the data and the analysis is entirely his own.

References


CND. 2017. Conference room paper submitted by the Arab Republic of Egypt on strengthening international cooperation in addressing the non-medical use and abuse, the illicit manufacture and the illicit domestic and international distribution of tramadol. Vienna: Commission on Narcotic Drugs.


INCB. 2016b. INCB calls on countries to ensure worldwide medical access to narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. Vienna: INCB Press Release.


POLICY COMMENTARY

Mitigating Crime and Violence in Coca-growing Areas

Thomas Mortensen1 and Eric Gutierrez2

1 Christian Aid in Colombia, CO
2 Tackling Violence and Building Peace at Christian Aid, GB

Corresponding author: Eric Gutierrez (EGutierrez@christian-aid.org)

Puzzled about why and how coca-growing areas in Bolivia do not have the same levels of violence and criminality experienced in their communities, eight peasant leaders from various coca-growing areas of Colombia joined a study tour to investigate. Notwithstanding differences in histories of conflict, political economy, infrastructure, and state-society relations, two explanations stood out. First, the usually overlooked intermediation role of strong local, self-help, and typically non-state institutions in peasant communities that enables marginalised households to assert their interests in interactions with both state and market structures appear as a key factor in mitigating violence and criminal activity. Second, land tenure security, access to public services, and diversifying local economies that draw land and labour away from illicit coca production could address the factors that draw in poor subsistence farmers, including unemployed and under-employed rural workers, to the illicit trade. This paper presents a documentation of the study tour, elaborates on the thinking behind the two explanations, and flags signposts for possible use in improving public policy on drugs and development.1

Keywords: violence; coca growing; peasant communities; state community relations; public policy; drugs and development; drug crop cultivation

Introduction

Contrary to common understanding, not all locations where the coca bush is grown – even where contentious politics abound – are hotbeds of violence and criminality. The best example perhaps are the coca-growing areas of Bolivia, where no armed insurgencies or drug cartels are found, unlike in similar areas of Colombia. This has puzzled land-poor, displaced, and seasonally migrating Colombian peasants increasingly reliant on coca cultivation for survival while being exposed to the violence and criminality typically associated with the crop. Hence, they have asked: what mitigates violence and criminality in coca-producing areas?2 As the government tries to implement the comprehensive peace agreement negotiated with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), they further ask: what is the future of coca-growing and coca-growers in a ‘post-conflict’ Colombia?3

In response, Christian Aid with the support of the Open Society Foundations organised in 2017 a study tour of eight Colombian peasant leaders to the coca-growing regions of Bolivia to find answers for

---

1 This paper was originally intended only as an internal learning document for the development agency Christian Aid, but then revised and submitted to the April 2018 Illicit Economies Colloquium (www.illicit2018.org). The views and analyses here are from the authors alone and not necessarily reflective of Christian Aid’s views. Thomas Mortensen is the Country Manager of Christian Aid in Colombia. Eric Gutierrez is the Senior Adviser on Tackling Violence and Building Peace, based in London and Dublin.

2 Political reactions from Colombian peasants displaced by conflict are much more complex and varied than often assumed. Some have been displaced by corporate interests, others by the state, and still some more by other poor communities like themselves struggling for survival. For more, see Borras and Franco (2013).

3 Since the 1980s Christian Aid has supported local partner organisations and households displaced by conflict in Colombia to claim their rights to land and territory, to hold state institutions accountable and actively protect human rights, and to fight impunity. See more on https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/colombia. Since the 2016 signing of the peace agreement with FARC, these partners have also stepped up to get their voices heard, by making submissions and participating in processes for a longer-term political settlement. More challenges are now likely with the election of new president Ivan Duque, who has publicly expressed opposition to the peace agreement.
themselves. The participants represented ANZORC (Asociacion Nacional de Zonas de Reserva Campesina or National Association of Peasant Reserve Zones), composed of peasant communities claiming access to land, and COCCAM (Coordinadora Nacional de Cultivadores de Coca, Amapola y Marihuana or National Coordination for Cultivators of Coca, Amapola, and Marijuana), a coordinating mechanism organised to give voice to cultivators of crops considered illicit and to promote more effective and humane public policies.

Logistical support in Bolivia was provided by the Andean Information Network (AIN), which has also published its own version of the outcomes. The OCCDI (Observatorio de Cultivos y Cultivadores Declarados Ilícitos, or Observatory of Crops and Producers Declared Illicit) provided invaluable advice and connections.

Christian Aid’s Colombia Country Manager, Thomas Mortensen, joined the study tour.

The study tour’s participants are not detached observers with bystander anxieties. ANZORC’s membership are peasant communities, many of which were forced to abandon their land to avoid violence and conflict. The association was established in 2011 to provide organisational representation and support for communities that want to establish Peasant Reserve Zones managed by small-scale farmers. Peasant Reserve Zones are a means to serve the interests of those being left behind and displaced by the rapid commercialisation of Colombia’s agriculture and its decades-old conflicts while at the same time protecting the forests and the environment. ANZORC aims to tackle Colombia’s persistent agrarian crisis, fight the concentration of land under the control of large estates and multinational firms, and to look for real alternatives to illicit crop cultivation. Dozens of ANZORC and COCCAM representatives have been killed, jailed, and threatened with physical harm for their activism. As such, they are immersed in the messy politics of agrarian change, human rights enforcement, and alternative crop policies, and are well aware of the whole array of wider factors, including the cross-border roles of capital, that explain differing levels of violence, criminality, and state-society relations not just between countries like Colombia and Bolivia but within Colombia itself. To most of them, the still little-understood experiences in Bolivia offered hope, lessons, and pointers on how they can better reconstruct their lives, and the study tour was welcomed as an opportunity to examine what can be done differently. They went to Bolivia to find out not only what they may be missing in their advocacies and everyday struggles and to consolidate or affirm what else can be done with the challenges they face. They also sought to establish links with the cocaleros of Bolivia that they have heard much about.

After the study tour, the participants held workshops with their grassroots memberships in the Colombian provinces of Antioquia, Nariño, Caqueta, and Guaviare, from which two key explanations stood out:

- The presence of strong, local, self-help, and typically non-state institutions in peasant communities – that give voice to marginalised households and allow them to assert their interests in interactions with both markets and state institutions – is likely a key among various factors that mitigate violence and criminal activity in coca-growing areas.
- The future of coca-growing areas may be better secured not by traditional crop substitution programmes alone, but by drawing land and labour away from illicit economies. Instead of narrowly focusing on the replacement of crops, it is necessary to ensure instead improved land tenure security to peasants displaced by conflict, who can then invest in more sustainable agriculture; to offer secure and longer-term income and employment opportunities; and most importantly, to provide access to public services to the pools of under- and unemployed young people, including seasonally-migrating agricultural workers dispersed across Colombia.

This paper provides a contribution to the wider literature on the relationships between violence, drugs, the state, and development. Though violence, whether in Colombia or Bolivia, is a complex and messy phenomenon that emerge in various manifestations and with many different structural and short-term drivers rooted in local contexts, various forms of agency can be mobilised in such contexts to tackle the violence. Furthermore, as study tour participants found out in their interaction with Bolivian cocaleros,

---

4 ANZORC and COCCAM leaders are seeking to understand how war and conflict transform and shape socio-economic relationships and the distinctive political economies in their communities. In many ways, this is a rejection of, or at least scepticism about, the ‘temptation of the technical’ – or ‘the belief that (development agencies) could help economically transform poor countries by providing timely doses of capital and technical knowledge while maintaining a comfortably clinical distance from these countries’ internal political life’ (Carothers and de Gramont, 2013: 1–4).

5 Note that our comparisons of violence are not based on quantitative measurements, such as incidents and intensity, but on the qualitative historical experience in Colombia and Bolivia. As Gutierrez et al. explained (August 2010), comparisons based on quantitative measurements often fail to reveal nuances in social contexts and are extreme simplifications of reality for purposes of isolation and data manipulation. What we examine in this paper is the wider and larger stories.
political mobilisation rather than market and public services reforms may play a more decisive role in the construction of choices to move out of the illicit economy.

This contribution – which presents a documentation of the study tour and elaborates on the thinking behind the two explanations – is an attempt to draw attention to the ways that development agencies may be able to support ways of mitigating violence in such contexts, in transforming local economies, and in enabling more sustainable peacebuilding.

### A Historical Context of Contentious Coca Policies

The study tour’s key conclusion is that it is possible to develop public policies that simultaneously remove criminal control of the commerce in coca leaves while reducing violent clashes between producers and law enforcers, through constructive engagement with all stakeholders. The underlying statement is that coca is not cocaine, i.e. coca growing is not the same as cocaine trafficking; its growers, therefore, are not necessarily criminals.⁴ The Colombian peasant leaders have been consistent in their restatement – that the public policy problem is not simply about tackling drug traffickers and cocaine producers, but instead should be about drawing more attention to rural marginalisation and addressing the conditions that draw survivors to the illicit trade.

Crafting such policies is difficult because of the intensely contentious politics over coca, where taking sides poses risks. For example, civil society groups opposing state-enforced crop eradication because it destroys livelihoods and violates human rights have been accused of siding with criminals. Similarly, public officials do not want to be seen as deviating from the ‘official line’ of eradication, especially when military and development aid are at stake. These tensions spilled into the study tour, when public discord heightened between ANZORC and the aid-funded National Agency for the Substitution of Illicit Crops. Colombian officials invited to observe the tour were initially open to the idea and subsequently decided not to take part.

ANZORC and COCCAM have long suggested that public policies around coca and other crops disregard the complexity of household decision making on whether to plant an illicit crop or not, or to abandon one crop in favour of another. Decisions are shaped not just by prices and opportunities, but by the daily realities of chronic land tenure insecurity; extreme indebtedness; or lack of access to credit, agricultural extension services, and insurance cover. Decisions will be different in locations where no paved road networks exist or are considered too dangerous and remote for state services and protection to reach. Protection, or the lack of it, impacts significantly on livelihoods and the control of assets like land, livestock, and transportation. Significant parts of Colombia are in reality controlled by non-state actors, and the level of killing of human rights defenders has become the highest in the world.⁵ Those killed include COCCAM members – a total of 38 by the end of August 2018 – promoting voluntary crop substitution. As such, poor farmers in most cases take the choice of the lesser evil – for example when seasonal migrant workers choose to work under slave conditions in the processing of coca to cocaine.

While Bolivia has not suffered from internal conflict and such high levels of drug-related violence, it has had its share of violent clashes between coca growers and state security forces. In the peasant mobilisations of 1988 prior to the enactment of Law 1008 on coca eradication, confrontations with the rural drug police known as the ‘Leopards’ left dozens dead, including in the infamous ‘Villa Tunari massacre’ of June 1988 (Leons & Sanabria 1997: 29). The coca growers responded by further organising sindicatos or coca workers' unions to respond to the violence and better protect their livelihoods. Soon, the identity of ‘cocalero’ emerged. The sindicatos then reached out to allies as similarly affected campesinos (peasants) and indigenous people. They sought to legitimise their struggles to external audiences by raising issues wider than the coca (Durand-Ochoa 2012: 196).

It was in this context that the Bolivian slogan ‘yes to coca, no to cocaine’ emerged, calling on coca cultivation to be protected, while trying to prevent the coca from feeding into criminal markets to be transformed into cocaine. But this policy is most thoroughly misunderstood especially at the international stage, where coca-growing is mostly regarded as a criminal activity itself, and its growers automatically stigmatised as criminals. As such, in June 1998, when the cocaleros applied to speak at the first UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem to argue their case, they were denied visas to enter New York.

Realising, perhaps, that the only way to get their voices heard and be taken seriously is by demonstrating political strength, the cocaleros augmented their social movement building with the establishment of ‘political instruments’ – i.e. parties or organisations that directly entered the electoral arena. And in December

---

⁴ Some authors have suggested that the inclusion of coca in the list of banned products under the UN’s 1961 Single Convention is a ‘historical mistake’. See Henmaan and Metaal (2009).

2005, they scored a dramatic and major victory. One of the cocalero representatives denied a visa – Evo Morales – was elected President with the widest margin ever in Bolivia’s election history (Forero, 2005).

With the cocalero’s effective capture of formal state power, Bolivia then proceeded to reverse the simplifying fictions and historical mistakes of international drug control policy that had become tools for the cocaleros’ repression. The central change came in 2009 when Bolivia adopted a new constitution which stated:

The State shall protect native and ancestral coca as cultural patrimony, a renewable natural resource of Bolivia’s biodiversity, and as a factor of social unity. In its natural state coca is not a narcotic. Its revaluing, production, commercialization and industrialization shall be regulated by law (Article 384, Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia).\(^8\)

The election victory of Morales signifies many things. It showed the transition of marginalised cocaleros stigmatised as criminal actors and peddlers of a ‘social poison’ to a resilient social movement and then to the core of a political coalition that captured formal power via elections. They can now engage the United Nations with their own voice as legal and legitimate players. Most importantly from a legal perspective, the coca plant has been officially recognised as legal and legitimate. In short, Bolivian cocaleros ‘transformed themselves from producers of a good of questionable legitimacy to defenders of Bolivia’s sovereignty, indigenous cultures, and the historically excluded’, who turned the source of illegitimacy – the coca leaf – into a potent national symbol versus the economic elites, traditional political parties, and the United States (Durand-Ochoa 2012: 180–196).

General Findings of the Study Tour

The Colombians in the study tour confirmed the relative success of the Bolivian model. Overall, they came away with the impression that removing criminal control of coca-growing, improving livelihoods, and at the same time reducing human rights abuses by state forces is clearly possible.

The Colombians were impressed that relationships between Bolivian farmers and state authorities have been deeply transformed – something that is difficult for a Colombian farmer to even imagine. The delegation had accompanied a team of the Bolivian armed forces on an eradication exercise. Unlike the arbitrary and typically repressive enforcement of state authority that Colombians often experience, it was the Bolivian sindicatos themselves that identified the locations of excessive coca production, showing that to a certain extent, farmers have some form of control over the operations of the armed forces. Some pointed out that the Army colonel in charge of the exercise was friendly not just to the visitors but to the Bolivian farmers too – sharing a meal together and riding in the same vehicle as they did – something that would be extremely rare in Colombia.

But most significant was how the eradication operation took place without violence.\(^9\) Indeed, the Colombians recognise that problems exist by the mere fact that an eradication exercise still needed to be conducted, as they sympathized with the farmer whose crops were destroyed. However, the overriding concern of the sindicatos is to preserve coca-growing as a livelihood, and in order to do this, they would have to control production from feeding into the criminal market by identifying where over-production takes place. The decision is not without resistance but is overall deemed fair and well-managed, as shown by the relative absence of open rejection of the authority of the sindicatos.

Moreover, meeting the sindicatos and learning about how cocaleros are organised made it clear that the existence of strong and legitimate farmers’ organisations is a prerequisite for controlling the production of coca leaves. The sindicatos were not only effective institutions representing the collective interests of cocaleros in negotiations with state and market actors; they also enforced agreements. Governmental authorities cannot by themselves deal with thousands of individual farmers on the ground. This was seen as a clear structural difference from the Colombian experience.

Hearing the Colombians’ experiences of repression, the Bolivian hosts were keen to emphasize that before 2005, eradication operations in Bolivia were typically violent too. ‘That is how it used to be,’ one of them

---

8 The translation into English of Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution has been published by the Oxford University Press and is available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bolivia_2009.pdf.

9 This validates the observation of Grisaffi and Ledebur (2016) that the launch of the cato policy (discussed in a later paragraph) led to sharp reductions in protests and violence almost immediately. See https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.440/.
said, ‘before the change in public policies and the introduction of the *cato* – the system that allowed a farming household to legally grow a limited and regulated quantity of coca leaves in a cato (approximately one-third the size of a football field). The sindicatos then regulated production, effectively establishing social control, which moves coca away from typical markets that tend to be dominated by criminal interests over time. The system is not without faults, but the Bolivians confirm that it has decreased violence, increased citizen engagement, and limited corruption.10

Most importantly, the Bolivians affirm that the policy stabilised and diversified local economies, leading to a gradual but nonetheless marked reduction in coca cultivation over time. Coca cultivation, they said, peaked at 31,000 hectares in 2010, but has since gone down to 20,000–22,000 hectares, although critics attribute this reduction to more intensive and improved farming methods. Still, the Bolivian cocaleros believe that with more consistent evaluation, the system could be improved and better adapted to different local contexts.

The Colombians took notice of the higher profile of women in Bolivia, especially at the local level. Bolivia is known for its high electoral quotas for women, where political parties are now required to have at least 50% of their lists of candidates to be women. As a result, 69 out of 130 members (53%) in the Chamber of Deputies are women, while women occupy 47% of all positions in municipal councils across the country after the 2015 elections.11 Within the sindicatos, though admittedly still dominated by men, women nevertheless have a bigger voice, aided by strong women campesino federations like the Bartolina Sisa confederation, named after an Aymara woman who led an uprising against Spain in 1781.

This does not mean, however, that there is already gender parity in Bolivia. Many problems remain, including women in elective posts and women anti-corruption campaigners being bullied by men whose power has now become threatened.12 Nevertheless, to the Colombians, there is much to learn from women’s empowerment in Bolivia. Although the study tour did not have a particular women’s focus when it started, it became apparent to the visitors that this may be one of the important structural factors explaining differences in the Bolivian experience.

Despite their favourable impressions of the Bolivian approach, the Colombians were very much aware that tensions continue over coca policy. In fact, during their visit, they saw an anti-government demonstration in La Paz by coca growers from the Yungas region, whose coca leaves are perceived to have better quality. The legal market is said to be at 15,000 hectares, but due to pressure from growers has been increased to 20,000 hectares. With the Yungas protests, a further increase to 22,000 hectares was allowed. This creates, say critics, an oversupply that will feed into the criminal market. The fraught negotiations over national limits and reports of coca plantations within national parks13 confirm that there just is no ‘silver bullet’ to overcome the problem of coca production for drug trafficking. The important point, however, is that this model, despite its imperfections, appears critical in preventing violence.

The visitors expressed the opinion that it is important not to undermine this model, while seeking ways to tackle its imperfections. Colombia faces a tougher challenge as its area planted to coca is about 8 times larger than Bolivia. The most recent estimates by UNODC put Colombia’s coca area at 171,000 hectares in 2017. Hence, it is regarded as the principal source of the world’s cocaine supply.

To be clear, the Bolivian cato policy could not be expected to automatically produce targeted outcomes in what is after all a very contentious and complex issue in an essentially unpredictable context. When it was introduced, the policy did not immediately cause a reduction in the overall production, which peaked at 31,000 hectares before gradually decreasing alongside negotiations and review with Yungas producers. This demonstrates the importance of open and transparent negotiations, paying attention to political factors and ensuring that all voices are heard, and adapting the approach to local circumstances. It also shows that policy makers need to not only be pragmatic as there are no perfect solutions, but also open to learning and adapting policies to local contexts.

The Colombian visitors were also introduced to the agro-industrial potential of coca leaves. Since the ‘golden years’ of drug trafficking in Bolivia in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been talk of creating an indigenous state-supported agro-industry that would produce, process, and export products from coca leaves – i.e. coca

---

10 An extended discussion on social control in Bolivia comes from Ledeber and Youngers (2013).
tea, soap, shampoo, and skin lotions (Painter 1994: Chapter 1). Because of the criminalisation of the crop, no programmes have emerged. Thus, an agro-industry – whether in Bolivia or Colombia – will require a strong push, investments, and state leadership to reverse coca’s stigmatisation and its limited regional and international markets.

Needless to say, the visitors are well aware of problems in replicating the Bolivian model in Colombia. Firstly, the legality of the cato is closely linked to the fact that there is a big legal market for coca leaves in Bolivia, unlike in Colombia. Coca-chewing is a deeply ingrained tradition, especially in the Bolivian highlands, whereas in Colombia the tradition only exists in some indigenous communities. Secondly, agro-projects seem to be relatively successful in Chapare, not only because of strong infrastructure (better roads, electricity, and access to public institutions), but also because of a lack of (unfair) competition from large-scale domestic and foreign agro-industries that capture land and public services at the expense of poor peasant households. As noted during the visit, Bolivia has no free-trade agreement with the US and European Union that allows the unrestricted entry of multinationals into the country. Thirdly, Colombia is a close US ally, while Bolivia openly defies US foreign and drug policy and cut relations in 2008.

UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) monitoring of coca production – from satellite photos, aerial observation, to field visits – has been criticised as expensive and excessive. Yet Bolivian cocaleros praise it for a positive technical role because it provides a very solid methodology for affirming production levels that can withstand US criticism and validate whether the Government of Bolivia is lying in its figures. According to Bolivia-based campaigning group Andean Information Network, the UNODC effectually prevents the US State Department from manipulating data to suit US policy. As such, this technical role, which now informs the European Union’s programmes for coca-producing areas, may be indirectly supporting the Bolivian model altogether.

Finally, the farmers from Colombia were impressed by the capacity of the system to triangulate data on each cato and the owner of the land. This again may be a critical difference – it may be possible only because there is a more stable and reliable land registration and property security in Bolivia. In Colombia’s remote peripheral rural areas where coca leaves tend to be grown, land registration is very weak.

Challenges for the Crop Substitution Policy

The study tour generated some important observations on the challenges ahead for a reformed crop substitution policy in Colombia. For example, the participants point out promising results from EU-supported crop substitution projects, such as performance-based budget support to Bolivia that, in general, enables wider and predictable access to essential public services by poor coca-growing households. In contrast, most of the US ‘help’ to Colombia appears to be singularly focused on law enforcement – i.e. to use crop substitution not as a means to reform the agrarian sector, but to enforce illicit crop eradication. US projects have also been criticised as providing business opportunities to American contractors.

The visitors are keen to explore replicating the Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Integral (FONADAL or the National Fund for Integrated Development) in Colombia. Fonadal is a specialised agency established by Bolivia’s Ministry for Land and Rural Development that, among others, provide funding and technical support for the improvement of infrastructure that enable produce from agrarian communities to reach the markets. The Colombians were surprised to see that small farmers in Bolivia have actual access to roads and formal credit.

It was through such infrastructure projects that cost-benefit analyses were clarified. For example, a Fonadal official explained that from one cato (1600 square meters) of coca, a farmer can generate around 20,000 Bolivianos (approx. USD 2900 or GBP 2046) per year in profit. In comparison, one hectare (10,000 sq. metres) of pineapple generates around 50,000 Bolivianos (approx. USD 7259 or GBP 5116) in profit. Thus, for every square metre, growing coca delivers a profit of 12.5 Bolivianos, while for pineapples, it is 5 Bolivianos. But not only is coca more profitable, it also takes far less effort due to the limited size of the cato and because coca-growing requires less maintenance. This may be the reason why limited coca-growing in catos, along with smallholder access to public infrastructure, is apparently enabling more agricultural diversification in Bolivia’s coca-growing areas.

Fonadal-funded projects and support, most importantly, are provided without any precondition to reduce coca leaf production. A Colombian participant noted a key point that rather than prioritising other goals like security or law enforcement, what is necessary as demonstrated in Bolivia are ‘sound public policies on rural economic development’. The conclusions from the study tour, thus, provide clear inputs to the
peace process on how the issue of illicit crops could be addressed by a combination of integrated rural development reforms with voluntary crop substitution programmes.14

Still there is wide room for improvement. Fonadal’s provision of full subsidies to the poorest households seems to have generally led to dependence, not resilience. Fonadal now wants to make credit and subsidies smarter by reducing it to 70–90%, depending on overall poverty conditions locally. Fonadal also recognises a further challenge – targeting is essential since the poorest tend to be crowded out of access to credit and subsidies by the better-educated and better-connected, especially when more conditions are applied.

Study tour participants met several trainers and agricultural extension experts during the visit, one of whom told the Colombians that he believes Bolivian cocaleros have shown a greater willingness to reduce coca production because of loyalty to Evo Morales. In other words, political mobilisation, rather than market and public services reforms, may play a more decisive role in the construction of choices to move out of the illicit economy. And there will also remain problems of political unity, such as the Yungas-Chapare divide. While projects in the mountainous Yungas have been generally less successful due to soil conditions, less land, and less infrastructure, compared to the flat, low-lying, and infrastructure-equipped Chapare, many Yungas farmers believe that the real reason is government bias for Chapare, which has benefitted from massive public investments on infrastructure projects. Evo Morales is from Chapare and is still the president of the Coca Growers Federation in Cochabamba and he also the candidate for the federation’s upcoming elections in 2019.15 Another point fuelling tensions between the two coca growing regions is that the coca leaves from Yungas is known to be better for chewing because they are smaller, finer, and sweeter, which brings up the question of what happens to the surplus of leaves from the Chapare region.

Conclusion

While various lessons and conclusions can be drawn from the study tour, this paper limits its main deductions to the roles taken by three key actors in the story – local peasant organisations, state institutions, and external aid-providing agencies.

What is clear from the Bolivian experience, as observed by the Colombian peasant leaders, is that the presence of strong, local, self-help, and typically non-state institutions in peasant communities is a key factor that mitigates violence and criminal activity in coca-growing areas. The Bolivian sindicatos used to be criminalised and stigmatised actors that were denied their voice in policy making. Yet they were strong enough to partly weather the stigmatisation, construct wider identities, and then use or create political opportunities that eventually translated into real political strength.

However, it was not only their capture of political power in Bolivia that is historically significant. Also important were their efforts at reaching out to other marginalised actors, consolidating a social movement of the poor, making use of and creating their own political opportunities, and constructing a strategic development path that reclaimed legitimacy at the local, national, and international stages. The cato system enforced since 2005 took years to develop and still has many imperfections but is continually evolving. The cocaleros were not just a social movement; they became a sophisticated political force that claimed power and legitimacy and turned an outlawed commodity into ‘a potent national symbol that signified opposition to the economic elites, the traditional political parties, and the United States’ (Durand-Ochoa 2012).

There are of course stark differences in context between Bolivia and Colombia. But the bottom line is that political mobilisation appears as a pre-requisite for the enforcement of public policies favourable to the poor and marginalised, and which enables them to construct independence, autonomy, and the leverage necessary for successful negotiations with market players, both licit and illicit, as well as with state institutions. The possibilities of how the Colombian peasant leaders will transform their strategy and practice of political mobilisation at home, especially in the context of the peace process and given the new president’s rightward turn combined with the strong pressure from the US, is something to watch.16

14 It should be noted that rural reforms face strong resistance in the Colombian Congress; the Government also tends to enforce crop substitution rather than making it voluntary. There may also be implications now that a politician who has expressed strong reservations with the peace agreement has been elected Colombian president.
16 Colombia has had a long and varied history of political mobilisations, including the September 1996 ‘Cocalero Uprising’ in its southern provinces, that as Ramirez explained, demonstrated how the identity of campesino-cocalero was politicised and shaped by the sense of exclusion and abandonment of poor peasants by the central state. See Ramirez (2011).
The ascendance of cocaleros to power in Bolivia deeply transformed relationships between poor peasant communities and state institutions, including the military. Though much of it remains contentious and fraught with problems, the role of the state appears to have changed from primarily being a law enforcer imposing its will on typically activist local groups to a platform for developing solutions to the problems in the first place. The cato system, despite its imperfections, appears to be working overall. State instruments, like Fonadal, are focused on real rural development. Land and property, comparatively speaking, have become more secure. There seems to be a greater willingness to reduce overall coca production not just because of political loyalties to those in power, but more importantly because there has been a clear movement away from the chronic lack of income opportunities, poor infrastructure, inadequate or costly access to markets – that the criminal and the corrupt tend to exploit to their advantage over time, something which Colombian coca producers are well aware of. The challenges in Colombia appear far greater, not just because its coca areas are eight times larger than in Bolivia, but also because of the more intense repression of marginalised coca growers and the country’s history of powerful and globalised drug cartels. But what has become clear in Bolivia is that conditions for stabilising and diversifying local economies are slowly being put in place. In other words, the state is playing a leading role in drawing land and labour away from the illicit economy and in moving away from the rather limited ambition of law enforcement–focused crop substitution.

The study tour also provides lessons for external actors wishing to support agrarian change, not just in Bolivia and Colombia, but elsewhere. Using crop eradication as a pre-condition for official development aid is clearly counter-productive. The risks to local and state actors posed by being perceived as pro-coca, and therefore ‘pro-criminal’, need to be eliminated. There is useful practice on the ground, such as the experience in EU-supported projects, as well as the technical role of the UNODC in Bolivia.

In conclusion, various of forms of agency and political mobilisation are possible in Colombia. Along with policy innovations to draw land and labour away from the illicit economy and the continued building of links to facilitate learning across different local contexts, these can go a long way in addressing the different drivers of violence that development agencies and policy-makers could consider to support.

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

The voice and role of communities, particularly their capacity to organise and resist, has been understudied in the specialised literature on illicit crops and largely ignored in policy debates. Based on ongoing research in Colombia, this policy paper explores the capacity of communities to organise and resist – as a manifestation of cultural and social capital – in the context of illicit economies. The paper argues that in the context of weak states, the effectiveness of drug policies could be enhanced by drawing upon and investing in communities’ organisational capacity and active local leadership to increase the non-monetary benefits of eradication and substitution. Acknowledging how resistance reflects the experiences of communities and responds to their different needs, the paper offers relevant insights for policy that can inform drug policy formulation in Colombia and similar contexts.

Keywords: Resistance; coca cultivation; cultural and social capital; drug policy formulation

1. Introduction
Colombia continues to be one the most important coca producers in the world despite the ongoing fight against drugs funded mainly by the US government since the 1980s (Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016). In the last years, prominent voices have called for a redefinition of drug war policies. These growing concerns about the ineffectiveness of prevailing drug policies and programmes and the recent peace accord with former rebel group FARC-EP have led some to believe that Colombia is facing a historical opportunity to revitalise the local debate and rethink policy for illicit crops in the context of rural development.

Recent indicators, however, cast a shadow over those expectations. According to UNODC’s Annual Illicit Crop Monitoring System, acreage of coca crops in Colombia in 2016 reached its highest level since 2001 (UNODC 2017). For some, this recent peak is the consequence of a combined effect of the policy shift from forced aerial spraying to manual eradication and precarious local development alternatives. Others argue that the peak responds to the expectation of obtaining government subsidies and financial aid on an eventual substitution programme (see Zuleta 2017 for a discussion on these hypotheses). Equally plausible, the increase in coca crops may well just be the accumulated result of decades of ineffective drug policies. International pressure – mainly from the US government – has mounted, and Colombia is now returning to coercive measures to fight coca crops that the previous government had already abandoned due to their ineffectiveness, which makes opportunities for the reorientation of policy look dimmer.

In fact, academic literature suggests that repressive policies to eradicate illicit crops have very limited long-term effects (Ibáñez & Martinsson 2013; Riley 1993; Zuleta 2017). Aerial spraying, for instance,
does not reduce total coca production; instead, it diffuses production into surrounding territories displacing it to important ecosystems, including areas inhabited by ethnic minorities (Rincón-Ruiz & Kallis 2013; Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016). Aerial spraying with glyphosate creates unintended consequences such as the so-called ‘balloon effect’: the expansion of coca crops frontiers from damaged sprayed land to new areas that overlap with forests and other fragile ecosystems (Mora 1996; Dávalos 2011). In a cyclic pattern, after crops settle in other areas they eventually return to the places formerly affected by fumigation (Rincón-Ruiz & Kallis 2013). Moreover, some literature reports that after some years of intense fumigation, total cultivated area increases as a result of growers’ decision to expand their crops in order to diversify the risk of destruction (Moreno-Sánchez et al. 2003).

Literature also suggests that coca is widely spread in the peasant economy because it is more profitable than legal alternatives. Marginality and the impossibility of making a living out of legal activities is a strong predictor for coca cultivation (Ibáñez 2010). Coca crops are less intensive in areas with significant state presence, and they do not expand to developed regions (Dávalos 2011; Dion & Russler 2008). Some argue that coca crops are most intensive in regions of moderate poverty, where peasants can afford the initial shifting costs. Minimum access to local infrastructure significantly increases the chances for the settlement of illegal economies (Dion & Russler 2008). Importantly, historical concentration of illicit crops in certain municipalities is highly correlated with the presence of two or more illegal armed actors (Zuleta 2017). Moreover, in this context pressure from armed actors on local communities to force them into joining coca cultivation is very likely.

The voice and role of communities is often understudied in the specialised literature on illicit crops. Communities are generally understood as rational actors who respond to economic incentives and passively react to policy. Some communities, however, diver from this view. Not only do they take higher risks to gain voice and visibility but also they are willing to engage in social mobilisation that relies on their organisational capacity as a critical resource and asset (cf. Bebbington 1999; Goodwin & Jasper 2015; McCarthy & Zald 1977). Such mobilisation seems to serve two interrelated purposes. The first one is seeking alternatives for economic development. The other is deploying community resistance manifested in at least three different forms: resistance to criminalisation/forced eradication, penetration and expansion of crops. Mainly focused on the last two forms, this paper explores the role of organised community resistance in the context of illicit economies.

Contrary to pervasive policy assumptions, the effectiveness of the so-called war against coca production does not depend exclusively on monitored state enforcement or alternative development projects (Mansfield et al. 2016). In fact, some argue that – at least for the Colombian case – the effect of aerial spraying is small compared to the effect of social investment (Dávalos 2016). According to Dávalos (2016) an additional USD 5.55 per capita spending in social programmes (i.e. human capital and infrastructure) significantly prevents the appearance of a new hectare of coca. Acknowledging the importance of social investments to provide public goods and other social welfare enhancing mechanisms (Reyes 2014), this paper argues that in the context of weak states (where under-provision of public goods is common), the effectiveness of drug policies can be enhanced by drawing upon and investing in organised communities and active local leadership as a way to increase the accumulated social capital of communities. This, in turn, increases the non-monetary benefits of eradication and substitution and helps communities prevent (or reverse) the deterioration of social relations brought about by the transit to illegality.

Following this introduction, section two explores the forms and challenges of organised community resistance, particularly focusing on (a) the different forms in which resistance is manifested and (b) the risks communities face associated with exposure to violent threats and internal fragmentation. Section three discusses the role of community resistance for the design and implementation of policies for the eradication of illicit crops. Although this article draws on the exploratory phase of a research project conducted in Colombia, it seeks to provide valuable policy insights for similar contexts.

2. Organised community resistance

To understand the phenomenon of organised community resistance in the context of illicit economies and its implications for policy, it is important to clarify first the definition of community. For the purpose of this paper, communities are understood as the set of non-governmental actors who share a close network of relationships and identities, are directly related – symbolically and/or materially – with the territory where coca is produced and (a) directly participate in coca production and/or (b) are somehow affected by the presence of illicit crops and the policies to counteract them. When communities participate directly in production, they generally do so as small coca growers who exhibit three interrelated attributes: peasant economies,
high poverty rates and precarious access to public goods. These attributes pose significant challenges for policy design and implementation. For small coca growers, production decisions primarily obey subsistence needs. Although their illegal activity should unequivocally differentiate growers from non-growers, in reality they coexist within permeable frontiers. Since the benefits of illicit economies are not only shared by those who directly participate, many members of the community may also end up depending on yields from illicit activities. Consequently, social sanction against growers is often imperfect or non-existent.

In the case of Colombia, besides mestizo peasants two other groups are particularly relevant to understand the phenomenon of community resistance: Indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic minorities. A few decades ago, they were the focus of special institutional designs that granted them ownership and administrative autonomy over their collective territories in the form of resguardos and consejos comunitarios, respectively. A large part of those collective territories is located in frontier zones that coincide with the areas of historical influence and recent expansion of illicit crops. This inevitably overexposes these groups to the conflicts associated with illicit crops and drug trafficking.

2.1 Forms of resistance
Resistance manifests in at least three different forms: resistance to criminalisation/eradication, penetration and expansion of crops. Although analytically separable, in reality these forms are often juxtaposed. Also, no specific community or ethnic group exhibits one single form of resistance, which can mingle and change according to specific circumstances.

Resistance to criminalisation/eradication is most visibly illustrated in the case of ‘cocalero protests’ or mass mobilisations of small coca growers (‘cocaleros’) that are common in Colombia and other producing countries. The goal of this type of protest is twofold: (a) resisting criminalisation of coca production and non-concerted eradication mechanisms (e.g. aerial spraying or forced manual eradication) and (b) eliciting responses from the state to the multiple needs of growers. Abandoning their illicit activities has been the offer from growers so that, in return, the state commits to improve their economic conditions. In Colombia, these protests emerged in the mid-1990s and have repeated sporadically ever since, which attests to the difficulty of the state to effectively respond to these demands.

This form of resistance is particularly complicated. While it responds to the legitimate interests of growers not to be indiscriminately treated as criminals and to avoid the collateral damages of eradication mechanisms, it is also a form of political pressure to obtain benefits from the state and achieve related claims (Ramírez 2001). Some have questioned the legitimacy of these mobilisations, claiming that they are co-opted by illegal armed groups interested in using them as a vehicle of violence and a strategy for social destabilisation. For others, these criticisms are examples of the stigmatisation that has historically affected social protest in Colombia. Both positions are substantiated. Responses from the state – which range from repressive measures to short-term negotiated agreements – depend on which of those positions predominate among policy makers. Subject to electoral cycles, budgetary constraints and geopolitical pressures, those responses lack strategic coherence and long-term sustainability. Decades of failed experiences, contradictory policies and the incapacity of the state to honour commitments have exacerbated mistrust and lack of confidence from communities, making subsequent programmes even harder to implement.

Resistance to penetration and expansion have been, in general, much less frequent (or less conspicuous). An obvious reason are the risks incurred by a community that confronts groups interested in the proliferation of crops in a territory. Efforts to resist the penetration of crops are rare for they require acting preventively on perceived risks. Resisting the expansion is more likely. The Afro-Colombian community of the Yurumangú river basin, in the rural area of the municipality of Buenaventura in the Department of Valle, is a notable case. In 2004, the body that represents all communities of the river decided to take a stance against the penetration of coca crops in their territory. From this, an explicit mandate for all members

---

2 Both the category of ‘small’ and the assumptions about the motivations of their production decisions are matters of technical and political debate. These difficulties were evidenced in the heated debate generated in Colombia by a bill proposal to grant legal benefits for small coca growers, as part of the legislative measures adopted by the government to tackle the increase of illicit crops. Source (in Spanish only): http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/choque-fiscal-y-presidente-por-beneficios-penales-a-cultivadores-de-coca/545093 Accessed 9 November 2017.

3 These frontiers are harder to define when certain cultural aspects are considered. For many Andean indigenous communities, for instance, growing coca plants for medicinal and spiritual purposes is an ancestral activity that long predated the so-called ‘war against drugs’.

4 An illustrative comparison of the history and development of the ‘cocalero’ movements in Colombia and Bolivia is presented in Pinto (2004).
of the community ensued. A couple of years later, however, leaders were alerted by the presence of illicit crops in the territory. They called an extraordinary meeting and the decision was made to advance direct collective action to eradicate the crops before they expanded.

In 2007 the community organised a ‘minga’ (the traditional name given to collective mobilisation) that gathered around 250 people in order to eradicate manually 25 hectares of coca planted in the lower part of the river. The firmness of leaders and the volume of the mobilisation dissuaded owners of the crops and set a precedent that continues to influence the community to this day. As attested by another ‘minga’ – albeit a smaller one – set up in 2018 to eradicate new sprouts of coca in the territory, resistance to penetration remains as resolute today as it has been since the beginning. In fact, resistance became part and parcel of a set of political and environmental principles portrayed by the community as one of its defining characteristics (see those principles, as publicly advertised, in Figure 1 below). Those principles have spread to other domains, helping communities resist the entrance of mechanised illegal mining. Notably, this trajectory of resistance has motivated leaders to focus on finding viable economic opportunities more eagerly, not least because of the explicit dissatisfaction expressed by some community members who still see coca crops as an economic alternative.5

A similar case occurred in the Inga indigenous community in the Department of Nariño. In the 1990s, poppy crops – a precursor to heroin – spread across their territory drastically altering their traditional productive practices and demographics. Despite significant income increases for poppy growers, the community began to suffer the violence of armed groups and what they identified as the breakdown of their cultural values. After assessing the social costs brought about by the crops, in 2003 the leaders began a concerted work with all the families in their resguardo. As a result, the community decided to eradicate all 1,500 hectares of poppy in the territory manually. Threats and assassination attempts ensued. According to leaders, direct and permanent protection from members of the community became necessary. At one point,

![Figure 1: Banner in the Community Council of Yurumanguí setting out a clear injunction against coca and oil palm cultivation in the collective territory.](image)
The banner reads as follows: 'Because we don’t want: the government to spray, pollute, bomb, or deprive us of our living space; violence to increase and leave our land in the hands of multinationals; our black political-organisational project to be jeopardised, we the people of Yurumanguí say, united in one voice: NO TO COCA CROPS and NO TO OIL PALM MONOCULTURE in our collective territory.' Source: Authors.

5 This case is further described (in Spanish only) in the following Colombian news site: https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/medio-ambiente/el-desarrollo-se-debe-medir-felicidad-interna-bruta-articulo-621346. Accessed 3 November 2017.
as one leader put it, ‘we couldn’t walk alone anymore.’ In some cases, massive pressure from the community persuaded armed groups to free leaders that were held captive as a form of intensified threat. Supported by their community, leaders were able to eradicate the crops but also to commit to avoid their resurgence based on the restitution of traditional agricultural practices, the adoption of new economic activities (like coffee, beans and trout) and community strengthening. This commitment and the newly agreed rules of coexistence associated with it were explicitly included in the enactment of their ‘Integral Mandate of Life’. 6

These cases are exceptional in that they rely heavily on the capacity of communities to exert and maintain collective action, an often laborious endeavour. Although any rigorous comparison between Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities must necessarily take into account the profound cultural differences between them, from the cases just described it is possible to abstract basic attributes of all three forms of resistance. Only resistance to penetration is preventive in nature for it is the only one that responds to the perceived risk of crops before they enter a territory. The other two, reactive in nature, emerge in response to the presence of crops and/or forced eradication mechanisms already in place. In all three forms, two different strategies may be advanced: direct action – part of the repertoire of revolutionary politics (Epstein 1991) – and negotiation. When crops are not yet present, strategies aim at educating the community about potential risks and, eventually, reinforcing previously agreed collective values. When crops are already present, direct action (e.g. de facto activities, collective manual eradication) and negotiation with growers – either internal or external to the community – are combined. Figure 2 below summarises these attributes.

As means of political expression, all forms of resistance described in this section exhibit ideological elements that are intersected by categories of ethnicity, race and class. They also embrace direct action as a legitimate channel to express concerns. The cases of resistance to penetration and expansion, however, have two distinctive features. First, they show that when the state fails to respond adequately to the materialisation of demands (as has been the case with many illicit crops substitution programmes in Colombia), seeking viable economic alternatives for communities becomes a concomitant (and legitimising) component of resistance. Second, they show that these forms of resistance are particularly exposed to external threats and pressures and hence more vulnerable to internal fractures, as the next section will explain.

2.2 The challenges of resistance

The importance of community organisation cannot be emphasised enough. In the case of Yurumanguí, direct collective action to eradicate was preceded by a collectively concerted stance to reject illicit crops. Arriving to this stance and materialising it into direct action were only possible because of this community’s comparatively strong organisational capacity. In contrast, lacking this prior collective commitment the Inga community was not able to stop the penetration of poppy crops. It was only until they realised how damag-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object of resistance</th>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Antecedents / Triggers</th>
<th>Main strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eradication of crops</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Presence of eradication mechanisms (e.g. aerial spraying, forced manual eradication).</td>
<td>De facto activities (e.g. strikes, demonstrations, blockades).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penetration of crops</td>
<td>Preventive</td>
<td>Perceived risk of presence of crops.</td>
<td>Concerted education efforts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of crops</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Incipient presence of crops / Presence of eradication mechanisms (e.g. aerial spraying, forced manual eradication).</td>
<td>Collective manual eradication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Forms of organised community resistance.

---

6 This case is described in detail (in Spanish only) in the Colombian news website La Silla Vacia: http://lasillavacia.com/historia/la-resistencia-de-los-ingas-la-amanola-45982 Accessed 3 November 2017.
ing the expansion of those crops had become that they decided to strengthen their organisational capacity and put it to work for social reconstruction.

Fully deploying the community’s capacity to organise, however, comes at a price. While all three forms of resistance synthesised in Figure 2 must incur the expected transaction costs associated with collective action, resistance to penetration and expansion incur additional costs. First, the natural antagonists to whom these two forms of resistance oppose – i.e. illegal actors interested in the proliferation of coca crops – pose higher risks for the communities for they willingly resort to violence as a coercive mechanism. Second, negotiated strategies to talk members of the community into the need to either prevent the presence or stop the expansion of crops demand sustained costly efforts.

Those costs can hardly be overstated. Since leaders are the most visible members of the community, risks fall primarily on their shoulders, as recent events in Colombia dramatically show. Caught up in the struggle of illegal armed groups that dispute the control of the territories formerly occupied by the FARC-EP and their associated trafficking routes, community leaders have been subjected to intimidation, coercion and murder. According to the Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia, from 1 January 2016 to 5 July 2017, 186 social and community leaders were killed and more than 500 threats were denounced.8

All this configures a paradoxical scenario for communities. Mobilising to resist depends on the level of organisational capacity; communities with a higher capacity to organise will likely be more apt to resist. But effectively deploying this capacity significantly increases the costs for the communities and, particularly, for its leaders. If those costs are too high, members of the community may feel increasingly discouraged to resist or even find incentives to oppose resistance outright (a form of endogenous ‘counter-resistance’). This in turn creates internal fractures that debilitate community organisation.

There is more to this ‘counter-resistance’ than meets the eye. There are cases where members of the community who are willing to cultivate illicit crops overtly challenge leadership for promoting resistance. A strong leadership and the ability to enforce collective commitments – both of which are correlated with strong community organisation – explain why in some cases those challenges have been effectively kept at bay. However, when dissatisfaction remains it creates tensions within the community that, if neglected, may irreversibly deteriorate social capital and collective achievements. In short, the benefits of community organisation and effective leadership can be compromised when the costs of resistance rise too high. The next section examines how the phenomenon of community resistance can inform policy design and implementation.

3. Closing remarks: Insights for policy

The role of communities, particularly community organisations as manifested in different forms of resistance, has been largely overlooked in the literature of illicit economies, let alone policy design and implementation.9 This is hardly surprising. Cases of resistance that expose communities to higher risks – as is the case of resistance to penetration and expansion of illicit crops – are not only rare but they tend to go unnoticed. When present, however, much can be learnt from them.

As argued by Bebbington (1999), rural communities have different types of assets at their disposal to design their livelihood strategies. Those assets include produced, human, natural, cultural and social capitals. Generally speaking, drug policy and related social interventions have prioritised investment in produced capital as a way to dissuade communities from growing illicit crops through economic incentives: the search for the ‘silver bullet’ or the single crop than can economically compete with illicit crops (Mansfield et al. 2016). The cases we have analysed in this paper show, however, that the spectre of community involvement in the problem of illicit crops – and its potential solutions – can be much wider than both literature and policy acknowledge.

The analysis presented in the previous sections offers key insights for policy. First, it shows that, as a multifaceted phenomenon, resistance comes in different flavours. It thus demands differentiated attention from policymakers beyond simplistic views whereby resistance is ignored, seen as a heroic effort or overtly repressed. If policy is to be more accurately targeted, acknowledging how resistance reflects the diverse experiences of communities with illicit crops and responds to the communities’ different needs and social

7 In the case of resistance to eradication, state actors may resort to violence as a way to tame protesters, as shown in the following press report: http://www.contagioradio.com/9-personas-erradicacion-forzada-tumaco-articulo-47606/ Accessed 20 December 2017.
9 Not so in the literature of civil war and conflict where collective civil resistance – as a function of the quality of preexisting institutions – has been found to be central to explain the extent to which armed groups can expand their control and impose different forms of wartime social order (See Arjona 2016a, 2016b).
characteristics is a necessary condition. Second, the analysis illustrates that communities may not merely be passive receivers. Even in the face of adverse conditions of State abandonment – or, perhaps, because of such conditions – communities can effectively deploy their organisational capacity – as a manifestation of cultural and social capital – to resist penetration or expansion of illicit crops. Third, resistance comes at a price for it significantly increases the risks for the communities involved. This is why community resistance is more the exception than the norm. Only rarely are communities willing to incur the costs of resistance to compensate for the lack of support from the State. In fact, in the absence of effective efforts from the State to improve the sustainable development conditions and livelihood options for communities, transferring the costs of resistance to communities alone is not only counterproductive but also immoral.

Often ignored by policymakers, cultural and social capital help enhance efforts to prevent or reduce the influx of illicit economies. Investing in the organisational capacity of communities and the strength of local leadership is one way to reorient policy interventions. This should translate into more effective and tailored policies with expected spillovers for economic and productive opportunities. In the particular case of Colombia, including community organisation and resistance into policy debates implies reformulating alternative development programmes to respond better to local realities and expectations. Moreover, this investment may also stimulate the development of other forms of capital. This is the case for interventions such as Payment for Environmental Services (PES) that are currently thought of as part of the strategy to fight illicit crops. While it is unlikely that PES alone can cover forgone earnings from illicit crops, they can help strengthen community organisation conditioned on environmental outcomes, thus contributing to enhance both social and natural capital assets. However, while giving voice to communities in the planning, implementation and evaluation of interventions such as PES is a necessary condition for those interventions to be more effective, a wider set of elements need to be put in place if long-term sustainable economic development is to be pursued. Community organisation can only partially compensate for the lack of investment in public goods and social services that have long ailed the region.

Communities do have an active role in anti-drug policy design and implementation. Their capacity to organise, manifested in different forms of resistance, reveals the importance of cultural and social capital as means to diversify the scope of policy interventions. In light of the opportunities that Colombia is facing and the proven ineffectiveness of conventional policy, there is ample room for promising change.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the Centro de Estudios sobre Seguridad y Drogas CESED (Center for Studies on Security and Drugs) of the School of Economics at Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia for their support in carrying out the research project on which this policy paper is based.

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References
Arjona, A. 2016a. Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316421925

The President of Colombia signed Decree 870 of 2017 whereby PES are formally recognised as an environmental conservation strategy.
reviews an open access journal published by LSE Press.

OPEN ACCESS

How to cite this article: Vélez, MA and Lobo, I. 2019. Challenges of Organised Community Resistance in the Context of Illicit Economies and Drug War Policies: Insights from Colombia. Journal of Illicit Economies and Development, 1(1), pp. 72–79. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.15

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Journal of Illicit Economies and Development is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.
POLICY COMMENTARY

Development Not Drug Control: The Evolution of Counter Narcotic Efforts in Thailand

M. L. Dispanadda Diskul, Ramrada Ninnad, Andrea Skinner and Visit-orn Rajatanarvin
Mae Fah Luang Foundation, TH
Corresponding author: M. L. Dispanadda Diskul (Dispanadda@doitung.org)

In the 1960s, Thailand was the biggest opium producing country in the world. This article presents Thailand’s evolving strategy in solving the problem of illicit poppy cultivation through poverty alleviation and long-term national development. It argues that the root causes of drug crop cultivation and proliferation are poverty, insecurity, and the lack of livelihood opportunities for marginalized communities. Thus, the problem is more a ‘development problem’ rather than a ‘drug problem,’ requiring the addressing of multi-dimensional human development facets in response to the geo-socio-economic conditions of the area. The “Thai approach” is focused on improving the overall well-being of communities, before rule of law can be strengthened, and is very importantly part of long-term broader national development plans. A brief close-up is provided of an example of Thailand’s long-term development project, the Doi Tung Development Project, to explain more concretely how Thailand’s approach to solve drug crop production translated into practice. Some of these lessons learned from Thailand can and have been shared with the international community in shaping attitudes and policies to drugs and development that are more people-centered, balanced, and sustainable.

Keywords: Thailand; counter-narcotic; alternative development; livelihood development; sustainable development goals

Introduction

Half a century ago, the Golden Triangle, comprising the border areas of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, became infamous for its opium poppy fields and illicit activities. Most of the world’s heroin came from this area from the early 1960s when the Chinese Government cracked down on their opium production, creating a gap in global markets and pushing cultivation across borders. Soon, Thailand became one of the largest opium producing countries in the world.

Cultivation was mostly carried out by the ethnic minority communities living in the remote highlands of Akha, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, Yao, and Karen. The Thai Government saw that the unmonitored populations living along the country’s porous borders, without citizenship, engaged in lawlessness, drug production and trafficking, arms trafficking and other illegal activities, posed a potential security threat to the nation (Boonwat, 2001: 130–135). Thus, in an act to stabilize the region, Thailand implemented national economic development programmes that also addressed drug control issues (Sagredo 2018 p. 1).

The efforts to eliminate opium poppy cultivation and bring livelihood development to the ethnic minority populations in order to secure the region evolved over 30 years. Between 1960–1968, the Thai military tried to address the opium problem through oppressive law enforcement measures against poppy producers in areas with high communist insurgent activities. Quickly the government realized that coercion was counter-productive to its objectives (Windle 2016: 8). This gave way to a new approach to addressing illicit cultivation that was largely guided by His Majesty late King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, who prioritized livelihood development for the people, believing that these opportunities should be put in place before conducting any eradication campaign (Narcotics Control Strategy Bureau 2016: 50). Instead of immediately criminalizing the people involved in drug cultivation, trafficking and use, they needed to be given a chance. This
article traces Thailand’s experience and lessons, which could offer useful inputs to other countries where illicit economies are found.

It must be understood that Thailand’s efforts against illicit cultivation, which is today commonly associated with the term ‘Alternative Development’ (AD) by the international community, may differ from other countries’ approaches to AD. AD was defined by the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) during the World Drug Problem in 1998 as:

‘A process to prevent and eliminate the illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances through specifically designed rural development measures in the context of sustained national economic growth and sustainable development efforts in countries taking action against drugs, recognizing the particular socio-cultural characteristics of the target communities and groups, within the framework of a comprehensive and permanent solution to the problem of illicit drugs’ (General Assembly Resolution 1998).

This broad definition is translated into practice differently in each country, and in many contexts AD constitutes one component of drug control strategy, alongside law enforcement and eradication. However, in Thailand, the fight against drug crop production predated AD, and evolved around efforts primarily focused on alternative livelihood creation. Rather than being a subset of drug control measures, the efforts Thailand undertook were part of integrated national development efforts which also reached insecure, illicit cultivation areas.

Counter-Narcotic Efforts in Thailand

Drugs and underdevelopment in 1960s Thailand: the notorious Golden Triangle

Opium poppy cultivation was concentrated in Northern Thailand along the porous borders with Myanmar and Laos. The ethnic minorities residing in the mountainous areas grew opium for medicinal purposes and as a cash crop but it was not until the early 1960s, after the opium ban in China, that opium was sold on an extensive commercial scale in Southeast Asia. Although the opium trade was a profitable business, especially for the middle-men, growers received only a small share and remained poor. The highland ethnic minorities living in the region faced many physical, geographical, linguistic, economic and cultural challenges. Most of the ethnic minorities did not have Thai citizenship and received little attention and protection from the government. Nor did they have legal rights over the land they lived on or cultivated because the area was classified as a national park and was meant to remain uninhabited. They were therefore hesitant to grow high value crops requiring long term investment. Furthermore, they were unable to use the land as collateral when they needed to borrow money, so their sources of loans were restricted to local merchants and warlords, who either charged high interest or demanded repayment in opium. To acquire food and some income, the communities had to engage in unregulated slash and burn agricultural practices, also leading to environmental degradation. This desperate reality of limited choices for survival drove the highlanders to rely on opium production (Hernandez 2012: 7).

Evolution of the counter-narcotic efforts in Thailand

In the 1950s, the state became concerned about the possible threat to national security following ethnic minority communities’ expansion of opium cultivation throughout the hill areas along the Thai-Myanmar border. Thus, the Thai government brought in various agencies related to law enforcement, natural resource management, as well as community development to work in the hill areas, including the Border Patrol Police, Public Welfare Department, Royal Forestry Department, and National Tribal Welfare Committee chaired by the Minister of Interior, among others. In 1960, Thailand launched the First Five-Year National Master Plan for Economic Development to guide development for the entire country, including the highland areas. In order to solve problems in the highlands more effectively, Thailand requested technical assistance from international agencies to gather sufficient information and baseline data for planning. From 1965–1967, surveys were conducted to understand the socio-economic conditions of the highlands, as well as the needs of opium cultivation communities, funded by the UN Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND). The study estimated opium cultivation at around 18,500 hectares, with a yield of 145 tons between 1965–1966. This led the government to accept the UN-supported survey team’s advice on the importance of large-scale efforts to improve the social and economic conditions of the highlands in order to tackle the escalating opium poppy production.
The evolution of Thailand’s approach to drugs and development can be traced through three different periods, starting with initiatives involving 'crop replacement,' which made way for more 'integrated rural development projects,' and eventually led to a 'balanced, participatory' development approach, which we commonly associate with Thailand’s contemporary AD approach (Jinawat 2001: 67–68).

1970s: Crop Replacement
In 1969, Thailand’s late King Bhumibol Adulyadej established the Royal Project Foundation to begin implementing the first crop substitution programme in Thailand, conducting research on viable crops to replace opium production. This would eventually expand to integrated livelihood development activities (Narcotics Control Strategy Bureau 2016: 43–44). The Royal Project was significant in imparting knowledge and experience to government and relevant agencies that could be used in formulating strategies to work in the hill areas, in a time when government officials lacked access to and familiarity with the hill regions.

In 1971, the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC) initiated the Crop Reduction and Community Development Project (CRCDP), the first internationally funded crop replacement project in the world, working closely with and extending lessons learned from the Royal Project. Through these and many other UN and donor-sponsored programmes, dozens of cash crops were given trials. However, it was found that no single cash crop could viably compete with opium, due to many variables such as fluctuating markets, transportation difficulties, and limited technical expertise (Renard 200: 80–89). While there were many programmes in this phase, they were mainly donor-driven, aimed at replacing opium with another cash crop, without people’s active participation or coordinated efforts from multiple government agencies, which limited long-term success.

The Office of National Control Board (ONCB) was established in 1976. As the nation’s administrative agency on narcotics control, ONCB coordinated efforts between law enforcement and development agencies (Narcotics Control Strategy Bureau 2016: 44). Unlike some other countries where the counter-narcotics agency takes the lead in conducting alternative development programmes, in Thailand, the ONCB was created mainly as a coordination body with a drug control mandate. The fact that ONCB came to life after development efforts had already been taking place in opium production areas shows that Thailand has always prioritized development over drug control.

1980s: Integrated rural development projects
Following the experiences of the crop replacement projects in the 1970s, a more holistic development approach began to take shape by the 1980s, placing more emphasis on comprehensive rural development efforts to improve the overall standard of living of communities, rather than just crop substitution. Many longer-term highland development projects were initiated in this period, including those funded by foreign governments such as Germany, USA, Australia, and Norway, as well as UN and other international development agencies. Such programmes began to target the overall well-being of communities such as health and education services, road access, and infrastructure development, as well as environmental management as it became apparent that illicit cultivation had resulted in much watershed forest destruction.

In the Thai case, laws prohibiting opium and law enforcement were only enforced after 1983 when alternative livelihood options were introduced. Plans for eradication of opium poppies often began with surveys on the extent of cultivation, followed by negotiations with the communities at the beginning of development projects on the timeline in which the eradication would take place, offering the communities several years to prepare themselves for eradication. At the time of eradication, the Army also provided emergency relief supplies to assist the farmers (Windle 2016: p. 9). This underscores the emphasis that the Thai Government gave attention to putting in place viable livelihood alternatives prior to carrying out law enforcement measures.

1990s: Balanced, participatory alternative development
By the 1990s, it became increasingly apparent that area-bound project interventions under the banner of drug control or alternative development had its limits. There was a need for the integration of projects into sector wide policies and programmes if the Thai Government were to achieve the scale it needed and address the wider problems these highland communities faced, including environmental degradation, land rights, and security. Subsequently, project interventions were strengthened by official government policies consistent throughout the 1990s. The series of National Economic and Social Development Plans and Master Plans
on Community Development, Environment and Narcotic Crop Control in Highland Areas in that decade contained clear objectives to integrate the highland ethnic minority communities into the national mainstream. Provisions included promoting their inclusion in the national administration system, preparation for their permanent settlement and livelihood creation, as well as measures on environmental protection and addressing narcotic crop cultivation in the highland communities.

Government officials and implementers of the various projects over the previous two decades also recognized that without the public’s active participation, lasting development and drug control outcomes could not be expected. A more participatory and inclusive working approach was widely adopted, with donor agencies, government authorities, the private sector, community-based organizations, and community members working more closely together. Many programmes were devoted to strengthening community-led organizations, such as credit groups, rice banks and the sub-district administration organization.

**The outcomes of Thailand’s 30-year journey to ensure national development and security, improve the well-being of ethnic minorities, and solve opium production**

Thailand’s approach was carried out over 30 years to eliminate opium poppy cultivation and uplift the living standards of its marginalized highland ethnic minority communities and contained elements of alternative development, demand reduction, and law enforcement. Thailand’s national development policies emphasized development for the entire country, placing certain priorities on its most destitute highland communities, while incorporating counter-narcotic elements. The Thai government, international donors and organizations, NGOs, and the private sector provided over hundreds of millions of dollars, through more than a hundred projects which eventually established close working relationships with the grassroots communities, in highland development leading to opium replacement. The result was confirmed in 2003 when the UNODC removed Thailand from the list of significant opium producing countries (Narcotics Control Strategy Bureau 2016: 41).

The opium reduction statistics were directly related to evidence of overall economic growth in the country. During the period 1965–2013, the Thai economy grew rapidly, with an average annual growth of GDP of 6 percent per year, compared with a global average of 3.3 percent (UNODC WDR 2015: 112). In the 1960s, Thailand implemented a national development policy designed to promote free enterprise systems, and lead to growth opportunities (Renard 2001: 45). In the 1970s, the presence and cooperation of the United States military further helped to develop national infrastructure. At this point in the 70s, Thailand’s GDP was roughly $7 billion. By 2012, the GDP had increased to $136 billion (World Bank Overview 2018.). Since the 1980s, Thailand’s Human Development Index score has risen very steadily, and progress has been impressive in all key areas—income, health, sanitation, social security, education, mobility, and connectivity (UNDP Human Development Report, 2014: v). This national economic growth allowed the Thai government to direct development programmes to the remote highland areas of the country in order to contribute to national security. At the same time, the economic growth provided additional dispensable income to the Thai population to support the consumption of goods and services produced by the highland communities, including fruits, vegetables and cut flowers, as well as travel for tourism (Peach 2007: 272).

Thailand successfully transitioned its highland ethnic minority population out of poppy production primarily through a long-term process involving investments in roads, communications, health, education, and improvement of social services, much of which was funded and supported by national public policies. This ultimately made the ethnic minority population an integral part of Thai society and able to take advantage of the larger economic and market opportunities available (Felbab-Brown et al. 2009: vii). The various income generating activities and infrastructures implemented made it possible for the opium growers to make a living without poppy. The infrastructures also brought the government and rule of law closer to the communities. Access to health services, including drug prevention education, treatment, and rehabilitation, were also seen as important to the well-being of the community. Measures to address citizens’ drug demand were coupled with supply-side efforts as part of a comprehensive solution. The long-term development programmes provided opportunity to the communities and provided a sense of dignity and belonging, in turn enhancing their respect for the rule of law.

**The Doi Tung Development Project: A Closer Look Through A Practical Example**

A **long-term development project, broken down into different phases**

The Doi Tung Development Project is an example of a long-term development project to improve the overall well-being of the entire community, a majority of whom were involved in opium production or other illicit activities, so that they could instead turn to legal ways of life. It is worth noticing that the project was named...
a “development” rather than “alternative development” project which reflects its overall objective of comprehensive livelihood developments for the whole community, beyond an anti-drug focus. Other projects with similar objectives have also been implemented in Thailand for example, a highland development project in Chiang Mai by the Royal Project Foundation. Many of these projects share the same principles but are applied in different geographical areas and carry out different income generation activities suited to each context and target population.

Doi Tung was once a secluded area amid a mountain range along the Thai-Myanmar border, right at the heart of the notorious Golden Triangle, in Chiang Rai province, Northern Thailand. The area covers about 150 square kilometers encompassing 29 villages with approximately 11,000 residents from six ethnic minority groups. Seventy percent of the population did not have Thai citizenship. Its citizens lived in abject poverty, lacking basic infrastructure and government support.

Her Royal Highness Late Princess Srinagarindra, mother of His Majesty King Bhumibol of Thailand, came to Doi Tung in 1987 and recognized these problems were only symptoms of the larger root causes of the interrelated problems of poverty and lack of opportunity. The Doi Tung Development Project (DTDP) was thus initiated in 1988 under the Mae Fah Luang Foundation (MFLF)’s management to implement The Princess’s vision for livelihood opportunities for marginalized communities by allowing people to live a life of choices, self-reliance and dignity while fostering harmonious coexistence between people and nature (Mae Fah Luang Foundation 2015: 8–9). The Foundation’s ultimate objective is to ‘help the people to help themselves.’ The MFLF assumed the key coordinator role in working with the Government – 35 departments from six ministries, private sector, and the community. A 30-year master plan for the development of the area was established and organized into three phases: ‘survival,’ ‘sufficiency,’ and ‘sustainability’ (Mae Fah Luang Foundation 2015: 8–9).

The first phase, ‘Survival,’ began (1988–1993), began with a comprehensive baseline survey of every household as well as ground surveys to understand the geo-socio-economic reality and to identify the real problems and needs of the community. MFLF provided Doi Tung residents with project-issued land use certificates and identity cards to create a sense of belonging and security. Although neither document held any legal status under Thai law, local authorities accepted them as reference documents, thus recognizing that the people were not new immigrants, and allowing them to remain in the area and be included in future citizenship application processes. Programmes were then designed to address health issues through mobile medical units, health education and disease prevention. A 1,000-day drug rehabilitation center was established to treat drug addiction, provide vocational training and prepare the community to welcome the rehabilitated community members once they return home. Basic life necessities (for example, water systems, roads and electricity, and opportunities for skills training and jobs) were provided to the community. An intensive reforestation programme was also introduced to hire local people to reforest the area and provide them with immediate daily cash wages to allow them to support their families and ensure food security, without relying on opium.

The second phase ‘Sufficiency’ (1994–2002), focused on long-term, higher and more stable, income generation. High value arabica coffee and macadamia were introduced as an economic forestry initiative to eventually generate long-term viable income for the community. Natural resource management committees were set up by the community to manage the use of water and forest resources sustainably.

The Doi Tung Development Project added the value-chain concept to rural development efforts, moving beyond the cultivation of agricultural commodities to processing, branding, and marketing. The people were provided on-the-job training and necessary skills to move up the value chain and were given opportunities to learn from professionals and experts to create a range of market-driven and high-quality products. To minimize business risks while simultaneously offering diverse capacity building and occupation options to the people, jobs were created in on-farm as well as off-farm sectors. MFLF established five business units: Foods, Handicrafts, Horticulture, Cafe and Tourism, combining local wisdom, skills and experiences with business professionalism to generate enough income to compete with opium production in a sustainable manner (Chulalongkorn 2014: 14).

The third phase ‘Sustainability,’ (2003-present), focuses on enhancing capacity building, empowerment, and education to ensure that the people are equipped to take over the development process and manage their own lives without the Project’s interventions. To prepare the next generation of leaders, the Project, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, introduced the student-centered Montessori learning approach, which focuses on constructive learning that adjusts to bring out the most potential from each student. The Doi Tung schools adjusted the curriculum to fit the geo-social reality of the area as well as providing scholarships to Doi Tung residents for further education. In addition, advanced skills training to pursue value-added
livelihood activities and the fostering of local leaders and entrepreneurs within the community were emphasized. Many of the second generation Doi Tung residents have assumed managerial roles and have gone on to become part of the local government administration. The Project, whose responsibility is to connect the people with the technical assistance, financing, and other resources necessary to build potential, will be able to wind down its role once the government agencies and community members incur the day-to-day development and governance functions of the programme (Diskul 2017).

If we compare Doi Tung to other development projects in Thailand, the principles are the same, but all programmes are adjusted depending on where the work takes place. For example, another project in Thailand, the Royal Initiative Project, champions fresh produce and post-harvesting production. The Royal Project Foundation project operates in villages all around Thailand and focuses on produce such as vegetables, flowers and fruit which is sold in shops throughout Thailand. Preceding Doi Tung but still relevant in examination, The Crop Replacement and Community Development Project was initiated out of the United Nations Development Programme in partnership with the Royal Project.

**Outcomes from the Doi Tung Development Project**

After 30 years of continuous development efforts, the Doi Tung community is now on par with other mainstream communities in Thailand. The Doi Tung Development Project measures achievements across economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions, linked to a fundamental people-centered indicator: ‘What benefits do the people get?’ Some outcomes include the following:

- Opium is no longer grown.
- Economically, income per household in Doi Tung has risen 20-fold, from 802 USD in 1988 to 16,026 USD in 2016 (Mae Fah Luang Foundation. Social Development 2017).
- The five social businesses under the Doi Tung brand generate approximately 533 million baht or 16,259,170 million USD per year, enabling the project to be self-sustainable since 2000 (Mae Fah Luang Foundation Social Development 2017).
- Socially, starting from a largely illiterate population, many members of the younger generation have completed higher education. The number of people with a bachelor’s degree and above is 12.6%. Many of them are working at supervisory levels and can go on and lead their communities (Mae Fah Luang Foundation Social Development; 2017).
- The 1,000 day drug rehabilitation programme assisted the nearly 500 residents addicted to opiates, with a low relapse rate of about 15%. (Mae Fah Luang Foundation. Social Development 2017)
- Environmentally, the forest area has been revived, from only 28% of forest area remaining, before the DTDP started, to 86.8% of the area today being habitable (Mae Fah Luang Foundation Social Development 2017).
- Culturally, the six ethnic minority groups in Doi Tung are able to continue their customs and traditions, live harmoniously with each other, while adapting to a globalized world.
- The Project transformed local people of Doi Tung from illegal opium growers to legitimate self-reliant business professionals (Hitosubashi University 2010: 36).
- In 2003, the project was recognized by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime as one of the world’s best examples of Alternative Development (Apolitical: 2017).

**Sharing Alternative Development Lessons with the International Community**

Thailand used its experiences to advise policy making and assist with implementation of programmes to address the drug and development problems at the international level. In November 2011, Thailand, together with the government of Peru and UNODC, hosted the International Workshop and Conference on Alternative Development (ICAD) which contributed to the formation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Alternative Development (UNGPs on AD) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2013 (ICAD2 Background Paper 2015: 3).

According to the 2015 UN World Drug Report, the UN Guiding Principles on AD ‘have pushed the international agenda further, emphasizing a multidimensional approach ... promoting human development and protecting the environment’ (UNODC World Drug Report 2015: 118).

Thailand has contributed to those principles by encouraging the emphasis on incorporating alternative development as part of long-term, comprehensive national development strategies. Furthermore, Thailand has also called for efforts ‘to integrate those communities which are in marginalized regions into the
economic and political mainstream, including supporting access to roads, schools, primary health-care services, electricity and other services and infrastructure (UNPGs, 2013: 8). Instead of outright eradication, the Principles guide that small-farmer households should have opportunities for viable and sustainable licit livelihoods, and that drug control measures should be ‘properly sequenced in a sustainable fashion and appropriately coordinated’ (UNPGs 2013: 8).

Other progressive elements of the UNPGs include active participation from stakeholders at all levels, especially the grassroots community, throughout the development process; long-term cooperation and flexible funding from multi-sectoral partners and a market-driven approach with attention to value-addition, marketing and entrepreneurship. The Thai case provides proof that these people-centric principles coupled with a long-term perspective are important for the success of alternative development programs. Thailand has partnered with Germany on the ‘Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development’ (GPDPD) to assist countries with applying the UN guiding principles on alternative development to national policymaking and project implementation. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GIZ. 2013.

After the launch of the UNPGs on alternative development, several milestones followed augur well for the alternative development agenda. In 2015, the world adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encompassing comprehensive development dimensions including but not limited to, poverty alleviation, health, education, economic development, equality, environmental preservation, governance, peace, justice, and security, among others. As the UNODC World Drug Report suggests, the SDGs provides new incentives for alternative development and offers a valuable framework to help guide alternative development initiatives (UNODC World Drug Report 2015: 118). Furthermore, in April 2016, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) conducted a review of global drug policies which resulted in a document containing a section related to alternative development and addressing socio-economic issues related to drug crop cultivation, consequently evoking more nuanced conversations about the issue (UNGASS 2016: 21–23).

In June 2018, Thailand, along with Japan, submitted a resolution backed by the UN Crime Commission that connects crime prevention, rule of law and the sustainable development goals. The resolution stressed that ‘people tend to commit crimes when they do not have any viable options.’ This focus on crime prevention underscores the close relationship between drugs and development and necessary linkage to the SDGs (CCPCJ L.7 Resolution 2018).

Despite the significant achievements made towards a more balanced, integrated, and sustainable alternative development approach in the international policy arena, a disconnect between rhetoric and reality remains. Often, the implementation of alternative development programmes on the ground, including ensuring consent and inclusion of grassroots communities in the process, are far from the principles contained in the UNPGs. Funding support for alternative development programmes is also limited (ICAD2 background 2015: 17). In 2015, it was reported that a mere 0.2% of global overall development commitments were devoted to alternative development support (UNODC WDR 2015: 84.). Although, according to the UNDP, the links between drug use, drug control policy, and development, and the impact of drug markets have been recognized and documented for more than a decade. Drug control and development institutions have typically operated in isolation and in some cases, with competing purposes (UNDP 2015: 3). Therefore, more serious efforts are necessary to shift from discourse to practice; align drug and development objectives; provides evidence of the interconnectedness between drug and development problems; and integrate cooperation amongst drug and development agencies at local, national, and international levels.

Conclusion

Thailand’s path against opium poppy cultivation spanned three decades, involved long-term planning and large-scale investments in development of the highland areas, required strong commitment of government agencies, international donors, and the private sector, and benefited from the strong leadership of the royal family. Crucial to the success of the efforts was the recognition that the drug problem was very much a human development problem, leading to a people-centered solution which involved the local communities in the development process and empowering them to continue evolve the program. Thailand’s approach to these principles though the implementation of sustainable livelihood development projects to alleviate poverty and provide solutions to drug crop cultivation in other countries including Myanmar, Afghanistan and Indonesia proves the replicability of the approach. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution and the approach must be adapted to suit the specific geo-socio-economic conditions on the ground. Furthermore, as the realities of the drug phenomenon have shifted from illicit crop production in rural areas to manufactured drugs in urban settings and expanding trafficking networks, it is worth exploring
whether some of these lessons learned can be applied in response to addressing the new realities. In its firm belief that the root causes of drug crimes in urban settings are also poverty, lack of opportunity, social marginalization, and other vulnerabilities, Thailand has begun to translate some of its rural-based experiences to suburban and urban initiatives to remove people from the cycle of crime and foster a licit economy.

The experiences of Thailand can hopefully invoke thought regarding the importance of integrating drug and development objectives to not only eliminate drug crops but uplift the overall well-being of communities in a sustainable manner. We have arrived at a critical juncture with the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals and increasing evidence of the linkages between poverty, lack of development and insecurity, weak governance, drug production, crime and violence.

Competing Interests
M. L. Dispanadda Diskul, Ramrada Ninnad, Andrea Skinner and Visitorn Rajatanarvin declare employment by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage.

References

cal.co/solution_article/thailands-world-beating-model-replaces-opium-sustainable-crops/.
V1803382.pdf?OpenElement.
Hitosubashi University. 2010. Graduate School of International Corporate Strategy. Doi Tung Case Study Doi Tung Development Project (DTDP) in Golden Triangle – For the Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development.
Narcotics Control Strategy Bureau. 2016. 40 Years of Dignity and Detremgration Great Efforts on Narcotics Control. Office of the Narcotics Control Board.
The Royal Project Foundation. 2007. The Peach and the Poppy: The Story of Thailand’s Royal Project.
Dispanadda Diskul et al: Development Not Drug Control


Submitted: 10 January 2018  Accepted: 16 September 2018  Published: 14 January 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Journal of Illicit Economies and Development is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.
POLICY COMMENTARY

From Alternative Development to Sustainable Development: The Role of Development Within the Global Drug Control Regime

Daniel Brombacher¹,² and Jan Westerbarkei³

¹ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, DE
² Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development, DE
³ Freie Universität Berlin, DE
Corresponding author: Daniel Brombacher (daniel.brombacher@giz.de)

The concept of alternative development (AD) in international drug control has evolved over the past four decades, with several major milestones between the two United Nations General Assembly Special Sessions on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) 1998 and 2016. However, it was not until UNGASS 2016 that the door for development-oriented thinking in international drug policy was pushed wide open. The Chapter VII of the UNGASS 2016 Outcome Document not only assigns a prominent role to AD, but also seeks to broaden the scope of development towards urban drug markets and drug trafficking, formerly exclusive realms of law enforcement and repressive measures of drug supply control. Therefore, in the field of development a major revolution has taken place through the unequivocal broadening of the scope of development within UN drug control, feeding directly into the much-needed approximation of the UN drug control system and the Sustainable Development Goals. The article sheds light on the evolution of the German approach of alternative development that has been influential at the international level in the shaping of the global drugs and development nexus.

Keywords: Alternative development; German approach; UNGASS 2016; Development-oriented drug policy; Development-oriented drug control

Introduction: Drugs as a Development Issue?

The global drug control regime has not always recognized developmental approaches to be a relevant component within the pillars of the UN drug control system. It is only the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988), the last of the three conventions that constitute the basis of the current control regime, which makes a reference to rural development measures to ‘increase the effectiveness of eradication efforts’ (UN 1988: §14, 3a). It unmistakably assigns development interventions a subordinate role towards repressive measures to deal with the issue of illicit drug crop cultivation. However, single UN member states have started at an earlier stage to understand the persisting supply of plant-based narcotic drugs as a consequence of development deficits among the traditional source countries of drugs such as cocaine, heroin and cannabis. Amidst a domestic opioid use crisis in the 1980s, the German government decided to strengthen its anti-narcotics efforts through development interventions in drug source countries. Starting with the Thai-German Highland Development Programme in 1981, German development cooperation has since then been one of the key proponents of a development-oriented approach to address the world drug problem, focusing on the issue of illicit drug crop cultivation. At the core of the paradigm of a development-oriented drug policy approach is the recognition that many drug-related problems are entrenched with development deficits and are not predominantly incentivised by the purpose of criminal gains. Therefore, according to the German approach of alternative development (BMZ 2013), illicit drug crop cultivation is considered to be driven by underlying root causes that should be properly understood, analysed and addressed with the means of socio-economic development. Phenomena such as illicit drug crop cultivation are considered a symptom of underlying deficits in development, but not as the problem as such. As
fieldwork and research has shown (see e.g. Garzón and Gelvez 2018; GIZ 2014; Reuter 2010; Thoumi 2010; UNODC 2015; Mansfield 2016), illicit drug production is in many cases driven by poverty, lack of access to land and legal markets, poor infrastructure, insecurity and persisting armed conflict that is fed by illegal drug economies.

From Alternative Development to Sustainable Development?
While this understanding may appear to be almost commonsensical in 2018, the notion of drugs as a development issue is rather recent. It has not always been accepted by the governing institutions of international drug policy, such as the Commission of Narcotic Drugs (CND) and related organs, as can be seen in the late appearance of the term ‘rural development’ within the 1988 Convention. Until a few years back, only few governments included development-oriented approaches in their domestic or international drug control strategies, most of them from Southeast Asia (e.g. Thailand) and South America (e.g. Bolivia, Colombia and Peru). Based on the engagement of those governments, on many occasions seconded by Germany and other European governments, alternative development (AD) was established gradually as an element of UN drug supply control policies. The 1998 UNGASS Action Plan on International Cooperation on the Eradication of Illicit Drug Crops and on Alternative Development recognized AD as:

’a process to prevent and eliminate the illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotics and psychotropic substances through specifically designed rural development measures in the context of sustained national growth and sustainable development efforts in countries taking action against drugs, recognizing the particular socio-economic characteristics of the target communities and groups, within the framework of a comprehensive and permanent solution to the problem of illicit drugs’ (UNGA 1998b).

The 1998 Special Session of the General Assembly included AD as one element to attain the then-defined goal of eliminating the totality of global drug crop production within ten years. While the forthcoming ten years passed by without getting overwhelmingly close to this objective, 1998 may still be considered the crucial moment for AD as a future wild card for development within the UN drug control system. Subsequently, AD maintained its role in UN drug control, persisting to be the only development-oriented approach inside the rather repressive set of agreed-upon instruments to tackle the global supply of illicit drugs. The 1998 Political Declaration (UNGA, 1998a) also enshrined the principles of shared responsibility and balanced approach as guiding principles of the UN drug control system, obliging the consumer countries of plant-based drugs to support the source countries – most of them developing countries – in their efforts to tackle the production of coca, opium poppy and cannabis. The universal recognition of a shared responsibility of producer and consumer countries, since then repeated innumerable times by Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) resolutions, is the continuing basis for an engagement of OECD-based donors and development agencies in supporting source and more recently also transit countries in their efforts to reduce the supply of illicit drugs. Thereby, the principle of shared responsibility turned out to be the life insurance for AD in the decades to come, with AD being established as a ‘soft version’ (Reuter 2010: 112) of supply control. It is only until recently that some of the countries affected by massive drug crop production have become increasingly independent from international funding and donor efforts in promoting AD, in some cases taking over a donor or advisory role in third countries, even beyond regional boundaries (Felbab-Brown 2017).

However, the approach of AD was both considered a very limited concept addressing exclusively the illicit cultivation of coca and opium poppy, and – therefore – a regionally very limited approach, with actual implementation only in Southeast Asia and South America. Hence, the concept was far from being universally endorsed, regularly questioned regarding its effectiveness and plagued by widespread misinterpretations of its possible impact. The concept of AD in international drug control has been evolving ever since, with several milestones between UNGASS 1998 and UNGASS 2016. While the Political Declaration and Plan of Action 2009 (...) to Counter the World Drug Problem (UN CND 2009) adopted the broader term of ‘development-oriented drug control’ to describe socio-economic interventions addressing a wide range of drug-related problems beyond the mere drug crops, this term could not sustainably replace the term AD – and by that narrow down the concept (UNODC 2015: 77–78).

It was not until the UNGASS 2016 that the door for development-oriented thinking in international drug policy was pushed wide open. Chapter VII of the UNGASS 2016 Outcome Document not only assigns a prominent role to AD but goes even further in seeking to broaden the scope of development towards urban drug markets and drug trafficking (UNGA 2016: 7h, j, k), formerly exclusive realms of law enforcement
within drug supply control. The global endorsement of a broadened role of development within the widely perceived bellicose UN drug control system may have come as a surprise for observers, but has clearly been the consequence of a process initiated more than a decade before.

The German Approach of AD and Development-oriented Drug Policy

Germany, through the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), is one of the few current and former CND members that has adopted a development pillar in its international drug policy at an early stage (Drug Commissioner of the Federal Government 2012), enshrined within the corresponding EU framework documents on drugs (Council of the European Union 2006, 2012, 2017). The current stance on AD of the BMZ (BMZ 2013) is the product of a long-standing engagement of German development cooperation that goes back to the early 1980s. The Federal Government realized the transnational character of global drug markets at a time when a heroin epidemic heavily hit Germany and other European countries (BMZ 2012).

BMZ started its cooperation with drug source countries earlier than the international recognition of the principle of shared responsibility. The first German government-funded AD project was the Thai-German Highland Development Programme. Lasting from 1981 to 1998, the joint project of the Thai and German governments has until today remained the longest-standing AD programme. Its objective was to promote the development of the northern opium poppy growing regions right at the core of the Golden Triangle. Today, the project is considered a far-reaching best-case study for the success and sustainability of AD and the added value of international cooperation in this field (BMZ 2012: 41).

The Thai-German Highland Development Programme was groundbreaking and turned out to be seminal for the forthcoming approach of development-oriented drug policy within German development cooperation. Within this framework, the understanding of AD as an intervention seeking to address the root causes of illicit drug economies evolved, as opposed to a mere means of narrowly defined crop substitution.

Subsequently, in 1990 the BMZ for the first time commissioned the then GTZ GmbH with the implementation of a headquarter-based international drug policy programme, the so-called Action Programme Drug Control. The multilateral character of the drugs issue and the growing role of the UN in the definition of guiding norms on AD post-1988 led to the initiation of the Programme. It was mandated to internationally promote the approach of AD and related development-oriented interventions on both the supply and demand side within German development cooperation and on an international level. For almost three decades now, the BMZ has commissioned both headquarter-based and field operations in the area of development-oriented drug policies, implemented by the GIZ GmbH, NGOs and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) field offices.

The current BMZ approach of AD and the National Strategy on Drug and Addiction Policy (Drug Commissioner of the Federal Government 2012) is based on the idea of addressing the frameworks leading to the establishment of illicit drug economies: poverty, weak statehood, ongoing armed conflict, lack of infrastructure, lack of technical capacity for legal agriculture and lack of access to productive means such as land. The fact that only very few drug crop producing countries provide almost the universal supply of illicit cocaine and heroin is the crucial argument for a development-oriented approach to address this problem. If only a handful of countries in the world almost monopolize the global production of opium poppy and coca bush, even though many more could do so, it is not criminal rent seeking but the deficits in development that should be addressed (Reuter 2010: 99–100). A common misconception regarding this approach is the highly profitable value chain of illegal drugs, which, thus the assumption, makes it impossible for legal AD production to compete. However, this argument does not properly apply to the farmers cultivating illegal drugs. Their market share of the profit generated from illegal drugs is marginal. The value of the raw material of coca leaf and opium poppy is low and represents only a negligible part of the retail price on major consumer markets in the Global North. Cocaine and heroin are in general derived from cheap agricultural products, where value is generated through the export of these refined substances under conditions of illegality. Small-scale farmers do not benefit from the exponentially growing value generated through the drug export, but they are taking the risk of cultivating drug crops under illegality (Brombacher & Maihold 2009: 18–20; Brombacher 2013: 270–274). The risk of drug crop eradication, exposure to criminal networks and non-state armed groups as well as criminalization by law enforcement agencies heavily diminishes the incentives of drug crop cultivation. Hence, the practice of AD shows that farmers usually display a strong self-interest in turning to alternative options of legal agricultural production. Such options are safer and financially comparable to coca leaf or opium poppy, allowing the farmers to distance themselves from public
repression, highly unpredictable war economies and organized crime players. The medium- and long-term stability and reduced risk environment of a licit livelihood is preferred over short-term financial gains of a drug crop based income system. Even in the traditional and partly legally regulated coca growing areas in Bolivia, Peru and, on a very small scale in Colombia, very similar patterns emerge. The ‘dual use’ (Brombacher 2013: 274) character of growing coca and the under-regulation of the licit market for traditional uses exposes coca farmers in Bolivia and Peru to similar risks as in predominantly illegal drug markets (Thoumi 2003: 79–80; Brombacher 2013: 264–266).

Parallel to the growing awareness that the nexus of development and drugs is key to understand and tackle drug crop cultivation, the indicators of how to measure the impact of those interventions have evolved. The mixed results of AD projects can often be explained with a pattern of short-term oriented supply side indicators, i.e. prioritizing the reduction of highly visible illicit crops in the short-term over the difficult-to-attain data on human development on the mid- and long-term (see e.g. Garzón & Gelvez 2018; Lupu 2004; Reuter 2010: 113–115; Mansfield & Pain 2005; Mejía & Posada 2010; IEGDPM 2018). While the predominant impact measurement paradigm has been the amount of reduced hectares of drug crops, several development agencies and international experts have promoted the use of human development indicators in analyzing the results of AD interventions (TNI 2014: 66–67). Poverty is the crucial element in this changing paradigm of impact assessment, even though the relationship between poverty and the emergence of rural drug economies is complex and controversial (Thoumi 2003: 48–50). If poverty is recognized as a key driver of emerging or persisting drug economies, then poverty reduction should be the key indicator to measure the success of AD – and not the reduction of surface under drug crops. While this logic is widely accepted scientifically, it is politically less attractive than a clear case for short-term reductions in illicit crops. Therefore, the double-target problem (seeking the reduction of crops in the short-term, while promoting development on the long-term) is still dominant in international debates and impedes the operationalizability of AD (BMZ 2013: 8; Farthing & Kohl 2005).

On a domestic level, the respective BMZ terminology evolved in 2008 from the term development-oriented drug control to development-oriented drug policy. This change recognized the non-control character of promoting rural development in drug crop cultivating areas and prioritized the framework conditions as key targets of such interventions instead of the illicit crops as such (BMZ 2012: 43–46). The very term AD may therefore be misleading, since it connotes a rather substitution-oriented strategy in dealing with illicit drug crops. While the BMZ today also operates with the term ‘rural development in drug crop producing regions’ to describe its efforts in this field (BMZ 2013), others use the term ‘promotion of sustainable/licit livelihoods’ (UNODC 2015: 80–81; Mansfield 2017: 9). However, due to the universal inter-governmental acceptance of the term AD and despite persisting expert criticism (see e.g. Mansfield & Pain 2005; Buxton 2015), it has survived any intents for replacement at the UN level. At the same time, the alternative livelihood approach is often used in a similar way to the concept of AD. Both terms coexist without a clear-cut distinction between them, being a ‘concept in flux’ (UNODC 2015: 81).


The logical development of a truly development-led approach to address illicit drug economies in rural settings – with a set of development-based impact indicators – has not been an unidirectional process. Even the recognition of the proper sequencing principle, universally accepted through the 2009 UN Plan of Action (§47f), cannot be interpreted as a general acceptance of a prioritization of development over eradication in dealing with illicit drug crops, since the repressive element of eradication is terminologically only postponed by the very term of proper sequencing. Additionally, this principle has never again found universal recognition in any other of the forthcoming UN framework documents on drugs, with the notable exception of the UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development 2013 (UNGA 2013: §A9), even though based on very controversial negotiations on this issue. The 2014 Joint Ministerial Statement and the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document do not include the literal reference to the term ‘proper sequencing’, a clear setback in terms of UN language.

While BMZ has been a key proponent of this principle and a development-oriented approach within the UN drug control system, only the alliance of several champions from governments, the UNODC and civil

1 Outreach to new Stakeholders in the Field of Alternative Development (United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs 13–21 March 2014 Conference Room Paper E/CN.7/2014/CRP.7)
society has made it possible to emancipate a holistic development approach from a rather phenomenologically superficial and symptom-oriented global drug control system. Due to the well-known difficulties of consensus-based decision making in the creation of unanimously accepted principles at the UN level, BMZ opted early for the promotion of networks of like-minded actors in further defining and promoting the concept of AD. The international 2002 Feldafing Conference, hosted by BMZ and several partners from civil society and the UN, was a milestone at that point. The Feldafing Declaration built the basis for the 2002 CND-Resolution 45/14, calling upon Member States to exploit more fully the potential of alternative development as an appropriate means of drug control, as well as sustainable human development.

The strength of the strategy to convene interested parties outside the formal UN system, afterwards successfully replicated in the Thailand- and Peru-led ICAD initiative (International Conference on Alternative Development 2011 and 2012) that drafted the UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development 2013, lies in the linkage of implementation-based experiences and their ex post translation into UN normative. Germany, through BMZ and its implementing agencies, has used its decades-long experience of implementing AD projects in countries as diverse as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Afghanistan, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia as basis for feeding those experiences back to the international level and into the drafting processes at the UN level.

The club character in promoting AD globally was maintained through the ICAD II in 2015, hosted by the Government of Thailand, seeking to foster the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles (GDPPD 2015; ICAD 2 2015). The spirit of ICAD has been taken up by the Thai Mae Fah Luang Foundation – a widely acclaimed royal Thai foundation with decades of experience in implementing AD projects within Thailand and other countries in Asia. Furthermore, the UNODC secretariat and BMZ established a series of Expert Group Meetings, which have meaningfully contributed to the broadening of the scope of development within the UN drug control system. Through a continuous expert dialogue, the negotiations for the UNGASS 2016 Chapter VII were seconded and the respective negotiations accompanied (UN CND 2016). Civil society played a crucial role in this process, since relevant NGOs such as the Transnational Institute (TNI) and Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) thrive to bring in the perspective of affected communities in drug crop producing areas into the international debate that is frequently government-centric.

Not surprisingly, the process of widening the leeway for development within international drug control was favored by the increasing disenchantment of some UN Member States, civil society and academia with the high societal and political costs of a merely repressive approach in dealing with their domestic drug policies (Collins 2014: 9). While some have opted for blaming the UN conventions for the unintended consequences of drug control, others have started to seek alternative drug policy options within the UN drug control framework, i.e. adopting certain elements of the AD approach and translating them into their domestic drug policies. While for decades, only a few UN Member States had engaged in the international debates on AD, recently more and more governments have taken over a development-oriented stance (UN CND 2014). AD appeared to be almost universally accepted in the framework of the UNGASS 2016 preparation process. A whole range of non-traditional drug-crop producing and also transit countries from South and East Asia, Northern and Western Africa and Latin America started to include AD and other elements of a development-oriented drug policy in their respective domestic or regional drug policy framework documents. Thereby, these countries have contributed to a moment of unprecedented recognition of socio-economic factors and interventions to address the world drug problem. The annual reporting scheme to the UNODC also reflects the grown-up role of AD as an increasingly diversified element within global efforts of drugs supply control (UNODC 2015: 88–90). The formerly predominant approach of AD as a drug-crop substitution scheme has evolved into a plethora of highly diverse national approaches, stretching the once universally accepted AD definition from 1998 very far. AD may today combine rural development elements with regulatory mechanisms, the geographical or ethical acceptance of traditional growing and use of plant-based drugs, private business development or counterinsurgency measures (see e.g. Felbab-Brown 2010; Lupu 2004; Farthing & Kohl 2010; TNI 2010; Brombacher 2013; Windle 2015; Blickman 2017). The most remarkable observation within the UNGASS process is that not only some of the non-traditional proponent countries of AD reported cannabis or opium poppy cultivation on their territories, but that also non-growing countries called for AD and announced AD to be implemented in their

2 See the contributions of UN Member States, regional bodies and civil society to the ‘zero draft’ for the 2016 UNGASS: https://idpc.net/alerts/2015/09/the-zero-draft-for-the-2016-ungass-contributions-from-member-states-and-regional-bodies, accessed 25.01.2018.
respective countries or regions. Considering the very much rural character of traditional AD, many observers wondered how to interpret this renewed interest in the concept by non-traditional source countries for plant-based narcotic drugs.

UNGASS 2016 shed some light on this potential contradictory evolvement: as manifested through the national and regional contributions to the UNGASS Outcome Document (see section 3), a growing number of UN Member States have moved towards the recognition of their domestic drug problems as a direct result of underlying development deficits. This resulted in an expansion of the scope of development responses to drug issues beyond rural drug crop cultivating areas, calling for socio-economic interventions to deal with urban drug markets and drug trafficking (UN 2016: VII §h, j, k), once the exclusive economic zone of law enforcement.

Even though for many practitioners and experts this terminological widening has turned out to be a conceptual headache, it is fair to say that the monopoly of AD as the sole developmental response within UN drug supply control policy has been broken, opening leeway for a more coherent development-oriented drug policy for implementing agencies, the UNODC and affected countries. This new narrative can hardly be overrated. If some critics consider the UNGASS Outcome Document to be not innovative enough in its provisions – in the field of development a major yet silent revolution has taken place through the unequivocal broadening of the scope of development within UN drug control, feeding directly into the much-needed approximation of the UN drug control system and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A Driver of Sustainability: The Link Between SDGs and AD

Global drug control policies are interrelated with developmental issues in many ways, and therefore have an impact on the achievement of global sustainable development objectives (UNODC 2016a). However, some observers have found drug control policies to be inconsistent or even contradictory to the global development agenda, especially in the field of illicit drug crop cultivation and production (Health Poverty Action 2015; Buxton 2015; IEGDPM 2018). By taking a closer look at the policy linkages, much speaks in favor of locating AD into wider development roadmaps.

UN Member States adopted the SDGs on 25 September 2015 with a term of 15 years. The ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ contains 17 goals and 169 targets that are universal in its coverage and are based on the pillars of social and economic development as well as environmental stability. Peace and security are recognized as essential elements for securing sustainable development (UNGA 2015). A fundamental pillar of the AD strategy is to address the root causes of the emergence and persistence of illicit drug economies in marginalized rural regions, which is complementary contributing to the achievement of the SDGs (UNODC 2016b). Only if social development measures are successful, communities can reduce illicit drug crop cultivation on the long-term and build sustainable economic alternatives. The linkages to the SDG system are obvious: The key element of AD targets SDG 1: ‘End poverty in all its forms everywhere’. Food security and licit livelihood opportunities are accomplished by the principles of non-conditionality (BMZ 2012: 29–31) and the rejection of eradication before alternative sources of income are established – proper sequencing, as endorsed by the UN Plan of Action 2009 (§47f) and the UN Guiding Principles 2013 (§A9). Household food security is today a top priority in AD programming and is a key element contributing to SDG 2: ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture’. Also, SDG 5, ‘Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls’, is considered by contemporary AD strategies due to the high level of gender-sensitivity of the global drug problem (UNODC 2015: 13–18; UNODC 2016a: 66–68).

Yet the links between global drug policies and the SDGs may be taken even further. It is only until recently that the negative effects of (rural) drug economies on the environment and climate have come to international attention. Illegal drug crop cultivation is one of the main drivers of deforestation in several major illicit drug crop growing regions, a nexus that has been ignored for very long (UNODC 2016a: 86–94). Replacing monoculture coca cultivation through sustainable agroforestry models strengthens the biosphere, protects against soil erosion and desertification (GIZ 2014; GPDPD 2017) and adds to the indicators of SDG 13, ‘Climate Action’, and SDG 15, ‘Life on Land’. AD is a crucial element to tackle the nexus of drugs and development, which is highly interrelated with the relationship of drugs and conflict. SDG 16, on ‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’, acknowledges that peace and stability are necessary conditions for an inclusive and sustainable development (IEGDPM 2018: 13–15). Communities that pursue a drugs-based livelihood

---

3 See General Assembly Resolution 70/1.
system are often located in rural conflict zones and experience fragility, violence as well as the presence of armed groups and organized crime. AD aims to build trust between state institutions and local communities by integrating them in broader rural development strategies, including through the improvement of social services like health and education. Colombia is a current example of a peace process interlinked with the illegal drug economy. In order to achieve a long-lasting and stable peace, the agreement between the government and former FARC guerrilla includes the formalization of land rights and a large scale substitution programme for illegal crops to end decades of internal armed conflict that was partially financed by coca cultivation and cocaine trafficking (OACP 2016: 104–123).

The above-listed direct contributions to the SDGs are a sample of the main targets that can be addressed through a development-oriented drug policy approach. It reveals the potential of innovative drug policy: By measuring the impact of drug control through SDG indicators and not through a mere symptom assessment like hectares of drug crops, its impact on vulnerable populations, human rights, development as well as conflict and peace can be analysed. Global drug policy has the potential to have a mutually reinforcing impact on the SDG framework. For example, the interconnection of AD and the SDGs in the fight against poverty, rural development, environmental sustainability, food security and climate change addresses at the same time the goals of sustainable development and the root causes for illicit drug crop cultivation (UNODC 2015; Alimi 2016a; Alimi 2016b; IEGDPM 2018).

Despite the potential of development-oriented drug policies in contributing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, a gap between the high expectations and the actual funding situation for AD is visible. From 1998 to 2013, only 0.2 percent of Official Development Assistance was spent on AD programmes (UNODC 2015: 83–85; Alimi 2016a: 4). The currently quite broad political support for AD at the international level does not reveal itself in a properly funded implementation agenda. Rather, AD can still be considered as a niche of policy intervention. However, recent funding trends seem to move towards broader AD portfolios with long-term AD interventions and diversification of the financial burden. A small number of donor countries and organizations – such as the European Union (EU) – stands out and revitalizes the support by mainstreaming AD into a broader development framework. Given the complementary link between AD and the achievement of the SDGs, embedding the AD approach into the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda reveals potential for innovative funding mechanisms by ‘taking the risk of sustainability’ (Alimi 2016a: 22).

Conclusion

UNGASS 2016 was the preliminary result of an impressive conceptual evolvement and political emancipation of the role of development within the international drug control system and its consensually approved guiding norms. In the post-UNGASS world, development-oriented drug policies – or drugs-oriented development policies – have acquired a role that is more relevant in scope and recognition than at any other stage of the history of international drug control since the Shanghai Opium Protocol. The UNGASS 2016 Outcome Document exhibits the evolution of drug control towards the emancipation of development as an independent element of the guiding norms addressing the world drug problem, emerging from an assistant role in drug crop eradication efforts towards a narrative that covers the whole supply side spectrum.

Nevertheless, the enhanced leeway to integrate development-oriented responses is rather poorly defined in conceptual terms, currently creating more confusion than guidance. How should effective development interventions in urban drug markets be designed? How could development interventions possibly take place in highly violent drug markets? What should be the target group of development interventions in drug trafficking situations? And how should the contributions of the plethora of potential AD and related interventions to the SDG indicators be credibly measured without losing sight of drug control targets? These are just some of the critical questions currently at stake, to be considered by the international drug policy and development community. The UNGASS Outcome Document does not give any conclusive answers to these pressing issues. At the same time, and beyond these conceptual concerns, the funding situation for AD remains to be worrisome. The gradual but steady enhancement of the development issue within the UN drug control system between the 1988 Convention and UNGASS has created expectations that cannot be fulfilled with the amount of funds invested for AD and related interventions.

The resilient orientation of the global public on short-term reduction in drug crops, seizures and other easy-to-grasp indicators remains a major challenge for an increased funding and piloting of innovative approaches on the ground that seek change in the mid- and long-term. Nonetheless, this challenge is not new. It has existed since the very first AD projects decades ago and not been a decisive obstacle in making development a universally accepted element in global drug control – against great odds.
Competing Interests
DB is member of the JIED Global Advisory Board and an employee at the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

The article reflects exclusively the opinions of the authors and not of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) or GIZ GmbH.

References


GIZ. 2014. The Nexus between Drug Crop Cultivation and Access to Land. Insights from Case Studies from Afghanistan, Bolivia, Colombia, Myanmar and Peru. Published by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.


How to cite this article: Brombacher, D and Westerbarkei, J. 2019. From Alternative Development to Sustainable Development: The Role of Development Within the Global Drug Control Regime. Journal of Illicit Economies and Development, 1(1), pp. 89–98. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.12

Submitted: 30 January 2018 Accepted: 04 July 2018 Published: 14 January 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Journal of Illicit Economies and Development is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.
POLICY COMMENTARY

What Could an Asymmetrical Strategy Against Organised Crime Look Like? A Lesson from the Drug Policy Debate

Mark Shaw
Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime, CH
Mark.Shaw@globalinitiative.net

The debate regarding the ideal response to organised crime is quickly evolving, although it remains often remarkably disconnected from the even more rapidly moving discussion on drugs. One important connection between these two debates is the application of a similar set of terminology – namely that of harm reduction. Harm reduction focuses on examining policy responses in ways which both highlight prevention and individual and community impacts, including the impact of law enforcement itself. If such a lens is applied to organised crime it is suggested that the three areas of focus should be: the reducing of violence; protecting political processes, and reducing impunity through high level and "symbolic" prosecutions.

Keywords: Organised crime; harm reduction; asymmetrical strategy

Introduction

The discussions around drug policy and approaches to responding to organised crime are generally conducted in separate rooms and by different people, which is unfortunate because both discussions impact and overlay the other. Not least of which is because drugs remain a major source of profit for criminal groups.

Yet these important debates are conducted, for the most part, in parallel. Different international fora handle the issues separately, and while policy integration is at least closer in some states, there is still a remarkable divide between people who work in each of the areas. However, that divide may narrow in the future. One reason is that shifts in national drug policies may more clearly impact the nature and evolution of organised crime in the years ahead. If that occurs, a stronger connection may evolve between the two largely segregated discussions. Importantly, both debates are at interesting inflection points.

The debate around what is generally termed ‘harm reduction’ – treating drug abuse as a health issue rather than a law enforcement one – has been a central feature of discussions around drug policy for at least the last decade. It is now gathering significant momentum as countries, most notably in Latin America and Europe, have embraced its core tenants.

Although a clear global consensus has emerged, what is remarkable is the degree to which the health policy aspects can be openly discussed in a way that was not possible even a few years ago. While this may not lead in the medium term to a change in the overall drug control framework itself, it has and will continue to, stretch the boundaries of what is possible within the current international drug control regime.

In contrast, on the organised crime front progress is far less clear – at least in regards to formulating a clearer set of more unified global responses. There are multiple initiatives underway and a clear recognition in the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda that the issue of organised crime and poor development are closely intertwined (Reitano and Hunter 2018). Nevertheless, unlike the drugs policy discussion, the organised crime debate remains strongly embedded in the language of law enforcement.

The UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (TOC) has only just agreed to a uniform review mechanism and has barely broached the subject of its prevention provisions, nor drawn clear agreement
on how these could be implemented. Law enforcement remains the over-riding prerogative of states, although this belies the complexity of what is in fact the nature of organised crime in many parts of the world. The phenomenon covers multiple, although often overlapping, criminal markets: drugs, extortion, gangs, environmental crime, organised fraud, etc., which often means that the overarching discussion on ‘organised crime’ in multilateral fora can seem far removed from how people experience in actuality. The TOC Convention is also heavily reliant on states as partners for implementation, while much of the challenge of organised crime is in places where state governments are weak or compromised (Van der Lijn 2018).

All of this suggests that these two connected (but strangely disconnected) debates on drugs and organised crime could draw from each other, particularly by building on the concept of what constitutes harm, and how that can be reduced.

**In harm’s way**

If asymmetrical strategies can be regarded as recognising that the particular policy problem in question defies a set of straight forward (symmetrical) solutions, then debates around drug policy and organised crime responses have some powerful connections. However, neither have easy solutions.

The term asymmetrical (a word with heavy military connotations), has its own limitations. But it is a term that will resonate within security establishments in that it suggests that complex problems of insecurity cannot be tackled by a simple resort to force. Assymmetric strategies are also intimately linked to the recognition of the harms that may be being caused by an opponent as they ‘attack vulnerabilities not appreciated by the ‘target’ (victim) or capitalize on the victim’s limited preparation against the threat’ (Bennett et al. 1999: 3). Reapplied to organised crime, that sentence neatly encapsulates the eroding ‘slow burner’ effect that the growth of criminal organisations has on communities and societies.

Asymmetrical strategies are defined by the acceptance that security challenges are multifaceted and that several approaches are necessary, and that these may need to be calibrated differently for different places and problems. And, like all effective strategies, the application of asymmetrical tools must evolve over time (Smith 2006: 371–404). That notion applies to organised crime strategy as well because of the diversity of what the term ‘organised crime’ implies, and because the policy tools range from communication, to market regulation to enforcement, etc.

It is also worth noting here that the term ‘strategy’ occurs far too seldom in the debate on responding to organised crime. That is in part because such multi-faceted strategies, whether on the local, regional or national level, are complex and often opposed by law enforcement, which views response as purely within its domain. In the often limited viewpoint of some law enforcement leaders, such strategies do little to reduce organised crime and take away resources from law enforcement itself. They can also appear fragmented and lacking a central idea – a mass of activity without always a clear theme. There is much to learn from the harm reduction discussion in the drugs debate.

Reducing the harm from drugs and from organised crime arguably requires a constellation of various responses at different levels, to achieve success. But every strategic policy package needs a golden thread. In the drug policy discussion, the harm reduction responses have been quintessentially that: an attempt to broaden the debate from law enforcement policies alone to a wider set of alternatives, all based around the harm caused to individual drug users, and strategies to reduce or prevent that harm.

**Harm at the back end**

Language and labelling has always been an important feature of the drug policy discussion. Even though terms many terms such as ‘harm reduction’ are used, they may have widely different meanings in different contexts. However, it is seldom noted that in the context of the current debate, ‘harm reduction’ most often refers to a policy options where drugs are bought and used at the ‘front end’ of the market.

The term ‘harm reduction’ has over time become exclusively associated with health care policy interventions related to drug use – a result of the siloed debate within the drug policy discussion itself. Yet, the term ‘harm reduction,’ is far from a unique concern for only protagonists in the drug policy discussion, and one that occurs in a wider set of public policy debates (see Wolff 2011) – although the term has been historically excluded from debates about organized crime.

For example, development and humanitarian practitioners often refer to the ‘do no harm’ principle, meaning that their actions should not exacerbate any situation where they intervene (Anderson 1999). The arguments around ‘harm reduction’ in the drug policy field and the response to the war on drugs itself revolve around a similar premise: policy interventions should be people-centric, should aim to reduce harm, and should not create a greater set of harms in their implementation than are already present.
Despite this focus on ‘harm reduction’ and its alignment with medical and health interventions in the drugs debate, the orientation of the current discussion has led to ending harm reduction principles once the upper reaches of illicit economies are discussed: that is, essentially along the supply chains which move the drugs, and in countering the organised criminal groups who control them.

In fact, the failure to extend the principle of ‘harm reduction’ throughout the drug trafficking chain is leading to an unexpected anomaly. While ‘harm reduction’ principles applies to the front end of drug markets, where substances are sold and used, further up the chain, we need to renew our efforts on ‘supply reduction,’ identifying traffickers and combatting organised crime. This was the conclusion for example of the two regional Commissions on Drugs for Latin America and West Africa (OAS 2013, WACD 2014) – both of which were crucial to shifting drug policy debates at regional level.

All of this suggests that at the very least a new set of standard terminology is needed, one that can span analysis and responses across illicit drug markets from beginning to end, and particularly in responses to organised crime. If such a terminology can be applied across the full chain where drugs as an illegal commodity is concerned, then it can presumably be applied to all illicit commodities traded by criminal groups – and indeed to the harm caused by some of core activities of criminal operations such as extortion, targeted violence and the disruption of state services such as education and health.

**The harm of organised crime**

Identifying the harm caused by organised crime varies by market. Illicit markets and organised crime erode sustainable development across a range of sectors. In contexts that are fragile and livelihoods are tenuous, the shocks resulting from organized crime erode communities, families and individual resilience.

Whether this is in the case of the trafficking of environmental commodities such as timber or animal products that cause soil erosion or undermine livelihoods from tourism; the illegal mining of state resources; overfishing by criminal operations; health systems that are infiltrated by counterfeit pharmaceuticals; or the control of local drug markets decimating school systems, the cost is incalculably high (GI 2015). All the UN’s Sustainable Development goals are impacted by organised crime – in just over ten percent of cases achieving the goals are directly linked to reducing organised crime (GI 2016: 1).

But three broad and particularly powerful harms characterise most organised crime supply chains and across a variety of criminal markets. These are primary or significant harms – addressing them may reduce other harms too. They are: the harm caused by conflict or violence fuelled or associated with illicit markets; the harm caused by the distorting impact of illicit funds on politics and political processes; and the harm caused by long-standing impunity and damage to the rule of law.

In none of these cases will an exclusively law enforcement or security based response be adequate to address the scope of the challenge – and rational law enforcement officials are the first to recognise this reality. Each of the three harms results in an erosion of personal security and undercut the institutions of governance. Other than violence and death, the impact of all these areas is intangible. Nevertheless, each constitutes a powerful eroding force, subverting the very systems that allow democratic governance and livelihoods to be sustained. Thus, none of the responses in these three areas is on its own a law enforcement response.

Indeed, to conceive of the responses too narrowly will mean that a focus on developing more comprehensive and sophisticated alternatives would have been lost from the outset. These three issues are novel ideas, but they have not been as directly connected to the discussion on global policy responses to organised crime as is warranted by a more coherent and strategic approach. Each of the three areas is discussed briefly in turn.

**Ending conflict and violence**

There is perhaps no clearer connection between conflict, fragility and the presence of organised crime or illicit trafficking than the steady uptick of Security Council resolutions which link them. The Council, concerned as it is with issues of ‘peace and security,’ has mentioned or referred to the issue of organised crime or illicit trafficking in just over a third of all its resolutions between 2000 and 2017.¹

Also important is the fact that the number of mentions of organised crime in Security Council resolutions has increased; peaking in 2014, when a remarkable 63 percent of resolutions mentioned or referred to the issue of illicit trafficking and organised crime. That is a remarkable development – but it is one that is not often mentioned nor well understood.

¹ The data Security Council Resolutions is drawn from a yet unpublished review of all resolutions between 2000 and 2017 conducted by the GI.
Such an increase suggests that there is a rapid growth and connection between a diversity of conflicts in the current global context and linkages to organised crime. Yet, policy responses are narrow, often confined to, for example, increasing the police component of UN peacekeeping missions – and not necessarily ensuring that they have the skills or mandate to take on complex investigations (see Van der Lijn 2018).

The policy discussion on conflict spaces and organised crime therefore remains remarkably restricted, with great scope for rethinking how we approach this area. For example, efforts to build better information resources and empower the UN to collect ‘crime intelligence’ have edged slowly forward, but capacities remain weak. Furthermore, a narrow focus only on conflict zones is itself misplaced. Outside of countries in conflict, violence and homicide cause great human and financial costs: in fact, in some cases ordinary levels of criminal violence are greater than reported deaths from conflict zones (Fearon and Hoeffler 2014).

The 2011 World Development Report calculated that areas exposed to prolonged violence and conflict experienced a 20 percent loss in development performance in comparison to more stable and peaceful peers (World Bank 2011). Yet pervasive violence is often the result of a complex overlay between political and criminal elements as well as economic exclusion. In marginal areas, such violence, particularly high homicide rates, is often the result of street or gang violence around low-level drug markets, which is at its highest when the markets are the process of consolidating. As Nicholas Barnes notes in an important recent article,

> ‘organised crime and its violence is very much a political phenomenon as criminal organisations negotiate (sometimes violently) with the state over not just the control of the drug trade or access to illicit markets but over who is the dominant authority on a local level: who controls violence, provides order, and makes the rules that govern society’ (2017: 967).

Take the case of Cape Town, where the 2014 homicide rate is 60 murders per 100,000 people (and in some places over 100 per 100,000, closer to what might be regarded as a conflict zone) (Kriegler and Shaw 2016). That rate, which has increased exponentially over the last couple of years, is a direct result of gang conflicts fuelled by efforts to control local drug markets in alignment with corrupt police. The negative impact has been significantly more severe because of the criminal sale of surplus weaponry from the police armoury to gang leaders. These are in essence criminal conflicts overlain with politics, competition between the state and gangs, and collusion between parts of the security establishment and criminal networks (Shaw 2017).

A number of the governments in Central and South America have noted that the war on drugs is just as potent and violent as any intra-state conflict or insurgency (Whaites 2015). The increasing power of criminal groups in Latin America has created a violent threat to children and youngsters who cannot achieve a decent lifestyle in their home states, triggering large scale displacement of populations both inside and outside their countries, with significant humanitarian and protection consequences (Atuesta 2014).

Central American cities, many of which have homicide rates above 100 victims per 100,000 people, suffer from the problem in an extreme form. In Central America and Mexico, an estimated 30 percent of murders are directly attributed to organised crime or gang violence (UNODC 2013) although some estimates for Mexico are far higher – up to 75 percent (Dittmar 2018). Violence, and the threat thereof, is used as a means of criminal control, with extortion serving as system of distorted taxation aimed at buying security.

Regrettably, despite extensive efforts, we have surprisingly little to show for our efforts to reduce street-level gang related drug violence in the cities of the developing world. Efforts that have focused on the manifestations of violence and conflict without assessing the role of illicit flows and criminal networks as causal factors have similarly been unsuccessful. For example, analysis of experimentation with gang truces, including those most recently in the Americas between 2012–14, showed that the most successful truces achieved their primary objective to reduce the rate of violent homicides in the short term, but in the medium to long-term they struggled to achieve sustainability whilst trafficking activities continued (Katz and Amaya 2015).

This debate is not new, but the challenge is now of great urgency, with the growth of mega-cities and the intersection between drugs, criminal networks and terrorism in several of them (Shelley 2014). However, violence is not associated with all criminal markets, and is often locally contained, amongst the most marginalised, in major urban complexes. This necessitates that we need to consider urban security, redoubling our efforts to seek better solutions for the urban poor, and a concerted effort to make a linkage between security and development issues, not in order to “securitise” development, but in order to protect development interventions from criminal exploitation – and to deliver services where they are needed most.
Protecting political processes
A second, and related question, is the harm related to illicit trafficking and its impact on political processes, most pertinently illegal money entering into politics or funding political interests. This is of increasing concern in many developing countries where drug trafficking is prevalent. Our own recent study of the burgeoning heroin trade along the East African coast suggests just how significantly drug profits can influence local political economies (Haysom et al. 2018). For example, in Mozambique an apparent long-term pact between the ruling party and drug traffickers has allowed the country to be used as a transit route, while filling political party coffers and sustaining patronage networks (Ibid.). The same applies in many other countries, particularly as the emphasis on reducing the levels of violence around political campaigning has required more insidious and covert levels of political manipulation (IDEA 2013).

Given the absence of electoral transparency, legislation in the majority of jurisdictions is lacking, and even where the legislation exists, the capacity to oversee, regulate and enforce that legislation is inadequate. Consequently, understanding the influence of key criminal figures on political and electoral process is a significant challenge. The modus operandi of important criminal figures is to ensure that they have political protection to safeguard their businesses and ensure that they are not prosecuted.

One of the most effective ways of ensuring political protection is to provide much needed funding to political parties, and by securing the political endorsement of those in a position to create and enforce the law. This has created a degree of complicity between criminal enterprises and politics in many jurisdictions. In South Africa, in what has been termed locally as 'state capture,' a single family owned business dominated engagements between the private sector and the state, dramatically eroding the institutions of governance while strengthening systems of patronage (Myburgh 2017).

It follows that a set of policy solutions beyond simple support to law enforcement agencies is required. This new policy must focus on raising the costs of blurring the distinctions between crime and politics: or what a pathbreaking recent study of India shows to be a 'symbiosis of crime and politics' where 'democratic elections and large numbers of elected officials tied to illegal activity can comfortably exist' (Vaishnav 2017: 13). There are no easy solutions, but we must start with a greater focus on the issue of political party funding and from where it is drawn. This must be combined with sustained support for civil society and free media in countries where criminal funding plays a significant role in shaping political choices.

An end to impunity
As this association and criminalisation of the state continues and strengthens, the result is the creation of widespread impunity for criminal acts. Impunity is harmful because it generally allows high-level traffickers (often with political connections) to operate illicit activities unimpeded, while lower-level individuals are targeted: people who are almost always from excluded and marginalised communities. In many contexts, those involved in protecting drug trafficking activity accumulate enormous influence and are nearly immune from punishment. This is particularly true in states where justice institutions have been compromised or weakened, such as in periods of conflict or post-conflict.

In many, although not all, such instances there is little chance of justice being served. In Guinea-Bissau and in several Central American states, police, prosecutors, and judges are often too scared or too compromised to challenge the powerful (ICG 2017). Those who engage in drug trafficking and those who protect them are highly unlikely to be prosecuted. That level of impunity causes severe damage to states, undercutting their long-term ability to deliver services and compromising key institutions – a tangible set of harms, in particular for the poor who rely on state services and infrastructure. How to end impunity in such cases is and will be a key challenge for future policy making. So, what options are available?

The standard international response has been to provide training and institutional support for law enforcement agencies. But such efforts are largely wasted when there is little protection for those officials who will have to conduct high-level investigations, arrests and prosecutions. No matter how willing or well-trained the police were in Guinea-Bissau for example, there was little chance of making significant progress (Shaw 2015). Where arrests were made and drugs or money seized, ‘high-level’ interventions quickly ensured that the good work was undone.

What is required are responses that partner across borders, to provide alternatives to compromised institutions. In many cases this is only possible when states have become so weak that international intervention is mandated by the Security Council, or at least when an intervention can no longer be resisted by corrupt elites. Such partnerships create important precedents and lessons that can be applied in future cases (Cockayne 2013).
An important (and unexplored) example of rule of law partnership occurred in the case of maritime piracy where courts in neighbouring states (Kenya, and the Seychelles) tried suspects from a state (Somalia) where justice infrastructure was weak or compromised (Warner 2013). Although admittedly this did not lead to the arrest and trial of high-level people, it was a unique partnership between developed and developing countries. While it presented a range of political challenges for both sides, it was largely successful in bringing to trial low-level pirates, sending an important and widespread message about the need for respect for the rule of law.

Over a longer period, a UN Commission has acted to investigate high-level government officials in Guatemala on organised crime and corruption charges. While the results have arguably been mixed, the Commission has played a key recent role in a major corruption scandal that brought down the government (ICG 2011).

While important, high-level targeting and prosecutions are not by themselves sufficient to revitalize a weak justice sector and support it in a fight against organised crime. In order for actions that reduce impunity to have a long-lasting effect, they must be coupled with measures to increase the exposure of criminals and other drivers of illicit activities and organised crime in general. Such programmes complement the high-level interventions to reduce impunity by making it more difficult to achieve impunity in the first place.

In the future, the question should be less about how assistance can be delivered to law enforcement agencies, but rather how a set of institutions can be created that build a partnership between different interests and seek to isolate corrupt or criminal elites. Could a regional court to try drug trafficking cases be agreed in West Africa for example? Can we push forward more cases (such as in Guatemala) where internal and external partners work together in new hybrid institutions, protected from local corrupting influences, to bring high-level traffickers, within the framework of the rule of law, in front of legitimate and working courts? Developing such arrangements must be the focus of global public policy responses to organised crime.

**Conclusion: Towards asymmetrical organised crime strategies**

If the concept of reducing harm is applied to the challenge of countering organised crime, the policy filter through which we measure success shifts significantly. At the outset it changes the debate on which policy areas to concentrate, and within these areas it challenges us to think more clearly about how to measure actual achievement through a reduction in harm. However, adopting this approach requires a significant reallocation of resources and a more global response to the challenge. It also shifts the response to one that is only about strengthening domestic law enforcement.

That is not easy to achieve: much aid and donor assistance in the area of organised crime is now channelled in ways that seek to reduce the threat to the donor country alone. These are understandable, but often short sighted, ways of combating a problem that is acting as a ‘slow burner.’ The extent of the damage to these countries becomes public in spurts in the form of high profile cases or damaging incidents, while the overall impact of the illicit economy is to erode governance and development over time.

Issues such as urban violence, while spoken of as key policy challenges, seldom received significant resources, often because they occur in marginalised and impoverished communities. But these ‘bleeding sores’ require resolution if effective stability and development are to be attained in many parts of the world.

It is an oft-mentioned conclusion to speeches at global policy fora on organised crime that we need a unified and global approach. Without a clear and simple policy framework, such as that proposed in the drug policy discussion to ‘reduce harm,’ we will not be able to craft a truly strategic response to organised crime.

**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

**References**


Dittmar, V. 2018. ‘Study: 2017 was deadliest year in Mexico for homicides linked to organised crime.’ Insight Crime. Available at: https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2017-deadliest-year-organized-crime-related-homicides-mexico/.


This paper assesses the potential for and obstacles to engagement on drugs issues from a development perspective by the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions, based on a review of the World Bank’s experience in Afghanistan as well as more general institutional aspects. Afghanistan demonstrates both the possibilities and benefits as well as the limitations of World Bank/IFI engagement on drugs and development. Prospects for duplicating, let alone exceeding, the level of Bank engagement on drugs seen in Afghanistan would not appear to be good. With pro-active encouragement and support by member countries of the World Bank/IFIs, however, there may be some entry points in major drug-producing countries and relating to global themes such as money-laundering or illicit-economic activities.

**Keywords:** Illicit narcotics; Drugs and Development; World Bank; International Financial Institutions; Afghanistan

**Introduction**

As the premier development actors in the world, the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions (IFIs)—mainly the regional development banks—bring together sizable human and financial resources along with broad development mandates and their nearly comprehensive country membership including powerful shareholders. They still provide substantial (though relatively declining) financial support and technical assistance for developing countries. The question therefore naturally arises as to whether there are unexploited opportunities for the Bank and other IFIs to engage more on drugs and counter-narcotics issues from a development perspective, and if so how?

This paper approaches this question mainly based on a review of the World Bank’s experience in Afghanistan, where the World Bank meaningfully engaged on drugs with both significant accomplishments and some disappointments. The paper first briefly lays out the main interfaces between drugs and development, both more generally and in the case of Afghanistan. It then discusses the main obstacles to the Bank and other IFIs’ engagement on drugs and development. The Bank’s experience in Afghanistan is then summarized, including country-specific enabling factors, initial progress, and subsequent loss of momentum and reversals. The final section looks at prospects and possible entry points for Bank and IFIs’ engagement on drugs and development in the future, before concluding on a realistic note of pessimism.

**Drugs and Development Interfaces**

This section discusses the multiple impacts of drugs on development (there is also reverse causation from development to drugs—for example, sustained economic growth may provide numerous attractive alternatives to drug crop cultivation, but these tend to be more general and the effects are felt over much longer periods of time). Table 1 presents a stylized summary, dividing the drug industry into five main vertical stages: drug crop cultivation, processing and refining (or production in the case artificial drugs with no crop base), long-distance transport, wholesale and retail trade, and consumption. These stages interact with development in differing ways, some more important than others.
Byrd: Unexploited Potential? What Role Can International Financial Institutions Play in Drugs and Development?

When a country is a major drug crop cultivator, this has a wide range of development impacts, as shown in the table, though it must be remembered that only a tiny handful of countries in the world cultivate large amounts of illicit narcotic drugs. Processing and refining has narrower, but still potentially important impacts on development, which are very much affected by the size of these activities in the country concerned. The long-distance trade—i.e. ‘transit countries’—primarily impacts development in proportion to the amount of money involved, which in some countries such as Tajikistan may amount to a non-negligible share of total economic activity. There also may be a tendency for transit countries to suffer from higher rates of problem drug use as a spillover from the flow-through of narcotics. The wholesale and retail illegal drugs trade in consuming countries is typically associated with organized crime and with corresponding development-related impacts to varying degrees. And finally, high rates of addiction to illegal drugs, and inappropriate policy responses, are associated with a range of human development issues particularly in the sphere of public health.

Table 1: Impacts of Illicit Narcotics on Development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Development Interfaces</th>
<th>Drug Industry Activities</th>
<th>Economic Growth; Macroeconomic Structure</th>
<th>Employment and Livelihoods</th>
<th>Human Development</th>
<th>Governance</th>
<th>Corruption</th>
<th>Political Economy</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultivation of Drug Crops</td>
<td>Processing and Refining</td>
<td>Long-distance Transport</td>
<td>Wholesale and Retail Trade</td>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raises rural demand; multiplier effect on economy</td>
<td>Multiples ‘value-added’, impacts macro variables</td>
<td>In some countries, this is significant in relation to GDP</td>
<td>Significant jobs and incomes in rural areas</td>
<td>Funds for better rural nutrition; health, education</td>
<td>Weakens credibility and legitimacy of government</td>
<td>Undermines rule of law, enforcement agencies, judicial system; at extreme, risk of ‘narco-state’</td>
<td>“Petty” corruption, official extortion against farmers</td>
<td>Drug cultivation influences local political economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Growth; Macroeconomic Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment and Livelihoods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Economy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
In the case of Afghanistan, all the interfaces outlined in Table 1 are operative (see also Ward & Byrd 2004: Table 7, p. 37), but the most striking feature is the country’s role as the global near-monopoly producer of illegal opiates. This, combined with the processing of most opium into heroin or morphine within Afghanistan, means that the development implications of drugs in Afghanistan have a macroeconomic dimension as well as a profound interface with rural development. The large amount of money involved—well into the billions of dollars—increases the impact of the drug industry on governance, corruption, political economy aspects and conflict. At the demand end, despite the fact that the vast bulk of opiates produced in Afghanistan are exported, rising problem drug use (not confined to opiates), reaching what many term ‘drug epidemic’ levels, has generated major public health issues as well as other adverse development impacts.

In a nutshell, Afghanistan provides a unique microcosm of drugs and development, with all of the different interfaces prominently exhibited. There has been variation over time, for example the earlier trend of increasing processing of opium within Afghanistan, the progressive rise in problem drug use and the size of drug-related financial flows—not only in absolute terms but also in relation to other inflows, most notably the enormous international military expenditures within the country and flood of aid during the ‘surge’ period.

Obstacles To Development Agencies’ And IFIs’ Engagement

Given the multifaceted linkages between drugs and development outlined above, why have IFIs generally shied away from fulsome engagement let alone direct involvement on drugs issues? There have been several main constraints.

The “non-political” mindset of development agencies constitutes an underlying obstacle to meaningful engagement with drugs issues. The World Bank’s Articles of Agreement are explicit:

The Bank and its officers shall not interfere in the political affairs of any member; nor shall they be influenced in their decisions by the political character of the member or members concerned. Only economic considerations shall be relevant to their decisions, and these considerations shall be weighed impartially in order to achieve the purposes stated in Article I (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 1944: Article IV, Section 10).

The regional development banks followed suit; the African Development Bank (1963: Article 38), Asian Development Bank (1965: Article 36) and Inter-American Development Bank (1959: Section 5f) have the same political prohibitions written into their charters, with virtually identical language. Even the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, recently established under Chinese auspices, contains a similar political prohibition in its Articles of Agreement (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank 2015: Article 31). Thus, the approaches of other development banks appear to be broadly consistent with that of the World Bank with regard to the political prohibition, and the discussion below focuses on the World Bank.

This prohibition has been interpreted fairly expansively over the years, though with clarifications that allowed the World Bank to engage with developing countries on issues of governance and corruption, for example (World Bank 1991 and 1992). Nevertheless, there are strict limits on what kinds of activities the World Bank can finance through its loans and grants. Another longstanding limitation is that the World Bank cannot freely comment on member countries’ defense budgets, except to the extent of assessing any adverse impact the level of defense spending may have on the adequacy of expenditures on development, though it may support developing countries’ efforts to achieve greater budget transparency overall—including in the security budget (World Bank 1992: 46).

In this context, law enforcement, particularly the military and police, have constituted ‘red lines,’ as they are seen as not only political but also carrying reputational risks due to their mandate to use violent methods, potential for human rights abuses, etc. Therefore, funding of police salaries and other non-lethal police expenditures has been prohibited, sometimes to the detriment of sound public financial management in the concerned developing countries. The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) is a notable example. With the World Bank as its administrator, the ARTF could not directly fund any police costs (nor defense). Therefore, a separate UNDP-managed trust fund, the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA),

---

1 Interestingly, the Bank is permitted to engage with and provide support for the justice sector; see World Bank (2015) for a summary and list of publications.
was established to pay for police salaries and some other security sector costs. The performance of LOTFA, unfortunately, has been poor. LOTFA faced problems of reporting, waste and accountability, as well as a corruption scandal (see Byrd & Smith 2015). The kinds of financial management, accounting and financial reporting skills required were not a core competency of UNDP (unlike in the case of the World Bank), and nor did UNDP, for a number of years, bring in the requisite skills from outside.

The obstacles to engagement on law enforcement issues naturally carry over to the law enforcement aspects of illicit narcotics. Beyond this, the Bank has not until recent years focused on the development side of illicit economic activities more generally, either. Related, more narrowly-focused risk aversion on the part of IFIs also may have been a factor. Illicit narcotic drugs are a complex, often highly politicized topic, understandably leading to a tendency to avoid this issue.

Perceived lack of expertise on drugs was another, self-reinforcing obstacle. Whether accurate or not, there was a perception that other agencies whose mandate explicitly focuses on drugs, most notably the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), are better equipped to deal with the issue. Moreover, some bilateral development agencies, such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) especially during the period when the UK was designated as the ‘lead nation’ for counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, did deploy development expertise on drugs from a development perspective, especially in the early post-2001 period.

Yet another obstacle, in some cases, may have been that key stakeholders such as the government of a developing country, and/or a major foreign donor or ally of the country and shareholder of the World Bank, did not want the World Bank to engage on the drugs issue in that country. The former effectively blocks the Bank from acting, as it is mandated to work with the national government (represented on the World Bank’s Board of Governors, normally by the Finance Minister, and on its Executive Board of Directors). It has also been difficult for the World Bank to engage on drug issues in a country if a large shareholder of the Bank opposed such engagement. It may be that past opposition by the US government, and probably also by governments of regional countries, may at least in part explain the lack of earlier World Bank engagement on drugs issues in Latin America, in particular Colombia.

Only a handful of countries in the world are sizable producers of illicit narcotic drug crops. Others are located along major drug transit routes and are affected by the associated criminality and large financial flows carrying the risk of grand corruption. But in most countries, drugs are not an important part of the rural economy, or of the economy in general, and to the extent those countries are affected, it may be primarily by problem drug use, which varies across countries. This militates against organizations like the World Bank taking a comprehensive approach to drugs and development across the many developing countries they work with, since for the large majority of them the drug trade is not a major issue except perhaps in terms of consumption and public health issues, as well as the criminality associated with trade and distribution.

A final factor that may partly explain the Bank’s lack of engagement with the drug industry is what might be called ‘safeguards aversion.’ When viewed holistically, the drug problem is a multifaceted cross-cutting issue that affects development in a number of ways (see Table 1). At the operational level, the World Bank (or other IFIs) typically might handle such an issue through a ‘safeguard’ mechanism. Projects would be assessed with regard to their interrelationships with and potential impacts on the issue concerned (positive or negative), with the objective of safeguarding that the project does not adversely affect the cross-cutting issue but on the contrary, is at least consistent with or even promotes progress. Environmental and social assessments, and a number of specific issues including natural habitats, pest management, indigenous peoples, physical cultural resources, involuntary resettlement, safety of dams, projects in disputed areas and projects on international waterways are the subject of safeguards policies applied to World Bank-supported projects (World Bank 2017a).

Safeguards impose a substantial burden on preparation and appraisal of projects, so there would be reluctance to carve out drugs as a new area for safeguards that would need to be assessed project-by-project. Moreover, the benefits of a global safeguard approach to drugs and development in respect of Bank-supported projects would be very low compared to the costs in the large majority of countries that are not major drug crop producers or on main transit routes. On the contrary, in most countries it would be more convenient to compartmentalize and treat the drug industry’s interface with development as a sectoral issue. For example, in a country whose primary interface is illegal drug consumption (accompanied by wholesale and retail trade), it may make sense for IFIs and other development agencies to view drugs as primarily a public health issue, possibly along with to gang criminality and violence.
Emblematic of the Bank’s limited engagement on issues around drugs and development is that a search of publicly available World Bank documents reveals that the vast majority of those which have illegal drugs or narcotics in their title are focused on Afghanistan and were published in the first decade of the 21st century. This paper now turns to a consideration of the World Bank’s engagement on the drugs issue in that country.

The World Bank And Drugs In Afghanistan—An Evolving Role

Enabling factors

There was a resurgence of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan following the Taliban ban of 2000–2001 and the international intervention in the latter year that overthrew the Taliban regime. As a result, opium became too important to ignore from a development perspective, particularly in terms of macroeconomic and rural development impacts. Aside from this general recognition, extensive dialogue with David Mansfield, who has conducted extensive fieldwork on opium in Afghanistan from a development and livelihoods perspective, as well as receptivity from other Kabul-based development agencies, were important contributing factors leading up to the Bank’s initial engagement in 2003. Moreover, the US government never opposed Bank engagement on drugs and development issues in the case of Afghanistan. Some US agencies were positively supportive, while the UK, the lead nation for counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, proactively encouraged such engagement in variety of fora and through direct lobbying.

Encouragement of Bank collaboration with UNODC on counter-narcotics issues by UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa was another strand in the early post-2001 years. Costa had several meetings with World Bank President James Wolfensohn and with Bank staff in Kabul. Although Costa’s initiative ultimately failed to bring about broad-based Bank engagement on counter-narcotics issues in general, it was agreed that an on exceptional basis the Bank could be pro-actively involved in this area in the Afghanistan context, particularly on the analytical side. Though less important than the substantive aspects and partnerships with other agencies in Kabul, this dialogue provided high-level ‘cover’ from the Bank’s top management for Bank engagement on drugs in Afghanistan to move forward.

A final enabling factor was the openness of the Afghan government, or at least important elements of it, to Bank engagement on drugs issues as well as other controversial subjects, such as conducting a security sector public expenditure review and work on vulnerabilities to corruption. The Ministry of Finance, led by then-Finance Minister (and current President) Ashraf Ghani, as well as some other Afghan government agencies and other stakeholders, saw the Bank as a disinterested and objective (if, at least initially, unknowledgeable) party that could bring to bear a development perspective undistorted by political, security or law enforcement mandates.

Early evolution, achievements and disappointments

There were three distinct, yet intertwined, strands of World Bank engagement on drugs in Afghanistan: (1) analytical and policy work and associated publications; (2) collaborating with other donors and convening events; and (3) efforts to factor the drugs issue into World Bank-supported projects. These different strands were characterized by differing inputs, longevity, and degrees of success. The discussion below is largely chronological, in the interest of outlining the evolution of the Bank’s role across the three interrelated strands.

Analytical work quickly began near the end of 2003, starting with a familiarization mission for the Bank to learn about the issue, which resulted in an internal report that later spawned two publications (Ward & Byrd 2004; Byrd & Ward 2004). These publications comprehensively explained the initial understanding gained by the World Bank on drugs in Afghanistan, building on the in-depth research of others. The Bank’s first country economic report on Afghanistan since the 1970s incorporated this early analysis of the opium economy in a chapter on the subject (World Bank 2005: Chapter 7).

In 2004 the Bank also convened two events that brought together Afghan government officials, interested donors and outside experts: (1) a small informal brainstorming meeting on drugs in Afghanistan, held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates during 16–17 September, 2004; and (2) a larger workshop on Rural Finance in Afghanistan and the Challenge of the Opium Economy, held in Kabul, Afghanistan during 13–14 December, 2004 (see Zia et al. 2005).

---

2 One of the few exceptions is Keefer and Loayza (2010); there are also some publications dealing with drug trafficking in the context of crime and violence in Latin America.
The Bank’s early work also involved developing an initial approach to ‘mainstreaming’ of the illicit narcotics dimension in development operations in Afghanistan (Ward & Byrd 2004: Annex 8). A screening process was put forward for prospective World Bank supported projects that would assess their interfaces with the opium economy, identify associated risks and opportunities, and put forward recommendations for inclusion in the design of projects and in implementation arrangements to exploit potential opportunities and mitigate risks. The mainstreaming initiative was devised along the lines of familiar ‘safeguards’ provisions applied to World Bank projects with respect to environmental and social issues. Building on this work, the Asian Development Bank and European Commission forayed into mainstreaming, relying on expert analysis and advice from David Mansfield (see, for example, Mansfield 2006). After a pilot application of the mainstreaming approach to several World Bank supported projects, an effort was later made to formalize the mainstreaming process and apply it routinely for projects under preparation and appraisal, but the initiative did not move beyond this stage and was not integrated into the implementation phase of projects.

The Bank’s analytical work on drugs in Afghanistan expanded and deepened during the next several years, in collaboration with other agencies. One highlight was a major World Bank-UNODC report published in 2006, which covered the full range of activities of the drug industry in Afghanistan (including trading, organized crime and money-laundering aspects, among others), from macroeconomic, development, and counter-narcotics policy perspectives (Buddenberg & Byrd 2006). Another highlight, where DFID took the lead, was a joint report focusing on economic and development-based approaches to reduce opium production in Afghanistan over time (Ward et al. 2008). In addition, several individually authored publications conveyed this analytical work and policy recommendations in differing formats, generally advocating for a comprehensive perspective and multi-faceted development-oriented approach (see, inter alia, Byrd & Ward 2004; Byrd 2008; Byrd 2010).

There was also an effort to link the Afghanistan-specific work with drugs and development more broadly. One example was a World Bank Poverty Reduction and Economic Management (PREM) Conference session on “Drugs, Security, and Development” (on 26 April, 2006), at which panelists included experts on drugs in other countries and general illicit economic activities and development (see Byrd 2006). Another was inputs and a contribution to a Bank publication that attempted to deal with drugs and development issues more broadly across countries and at a global level (Keefer & Loyaza 2010). However, despite some success in bringing attention to drugs and development, little progress was ultimately made in expanding the Bank’s engagement, in contrast to its active role on this issue in the Afghanistan context.

**Loss of momentum and reversals**

Despite the promise of its (for the World Bank) pathbreaking analytical work on drugs in the Afghanistan context and the fruitful collaboration with other agencies and serious efforts to develop the mainstreaming initiative, there were signs of loss of momentum by the second decade of the 21st century. The Bank has written and published less on drugs in Afghanistan, engaged less pro-actively with partners on this issue, did not implement counter-narcotics mainstreaming in any of its operations beyond the early pilot initiative, and may have suffered from loss of institutional learning and memory. The only notable exception, which however may prove the rule, is an extended background paper on the opium economy (Byrd & Mansfield 2014), prepared for the World Bank’s Afghanistan Agricultural Strategy Review (World Bank 2014), which incorporated some of the background paper’s main findings. While still in a better position regarding drugs in Afghanistan than when the Bank started out in 2003, there has been not only a loss of forward momentum but also backsliding from the peak level of engagement in the second half of the previous decade.

Why this change? Some erosion of momentum and forward progress is fully understandable, particularly on the analytical side—after several major reports and a number of publications, repetition of such initiatives would not have been warranted, and could have been replaced by lower-profile maintenance and updating of the knowledge base on drugs in Afghanistan. It also seemed clear by the end of the previous decade that the mainstreaming initiative had become stalled after the initial progress achieved, and despite occasional efforts to revive it, that has remained the situation in recent years. However, the reduced engagement with partners and the apparent partial loss of institutional knowledge need explanation.

Beyond the daunting pre-existing obstacles to Bank engagement on drugs and development outlined earlier, two additional factors likely contributed to such an outcome. First, changes in staff and management meant that those engaged on the drugs issue in Afghanistan at both levels moved on to other positions. While such turnover is quite normal, the lack of expertise in the World Bank on drugs and development
more generally meant that, inevitably, replacements had to start from scratch on the subject matter even if they had some background on Afghanistan (which often was not the case). And the ending of the high-level World Bank-UNODC dialogue when Wolfensohn and later Costa completed their terms, may have weakened over time the top-level interest and support for continuing pro-active Bank engagement on the drug issue in Afghanistan.

Second, the extremely rapid, near double-digit growth of the Afghan economy during the dozen years after the 2001 international intervention, combined with modest reductions in poppy cultivation and opium production following the 2007 peak, meant that the share of the opium economy in overall economic activity was progressively declining over time—the opium economy (at border prices) shrank to the equivalent of 10–15 percent of GDP, as compared to 25–40 percent in the early years after 2001. This reduced its relative impact compared to other factors, especially the enormous inflow of international military expenditures and aid during the “surge” period. Thus, from a macroeconomic perspective, the opium economy was becoming less important, with the corollary that it became lower-priority for economic analysis. These trends have reversed with the decline in the GDP growth rate since 2012 and the resurgence of opium cultivation and production.

With regard to mainstreaming, risk aversion and inertia in development agencies understandably may have played a role in the lack of progress. In the face of the efforts of counter-narcotics agencies (both Afghan government and international partners such as UNODC and USAID) to carve out space and funding for ‘alternative livelihoods’ projects (see EastWest Institute, 2016), the World Bank and other development agencies may have found it easiest to cede this space to the counter-narcotics community. The initial design of counter-narcotics mainstreaming, which focused on individual projects and on ‘screening,’ may have given rise to a perception that mainstreaming was a kind of ‘safeguards’ exercise, adding a further burden to that of the other safeguards that development agencies already had to deal with. Beyond the initial analytical work and project reviews to develop the mainstreaming concept, lack of expertise and resources for mainstreaming work on a continuing basis also would have hindered mainstreaming from being taken forward. Sector and project staff could not be expected to have the necessary familiarity with the opium economy and its linkages to development, so without outside expertise it would have been very difficult for them to carry mainstreaming forward.

And finally, as aid focused on short-run stabilization during the surge period and counter-narcotics efforts were incorporated into the counter-insurgency campaign, the demand for economic analysis of the drugs issue, let alone receptivity to well-founded cautionary messages from a development perspective that progress takes time—measured in decades rather than years—became much attenuated. Hence there was little external pressure, or even necessarily strong support, for the World Bank to continue in the relatively proactive roles it had taken on earlier with general encouragement from partners.

**Possible Ways Forward**

The World Bank’s experience in Afghanistan provides both a demonstration of the potential for proactive engagement by IFIs on drugs and development and a sobering reminder of the limitations such efforts encounter. Looking to the future, what are the prospects and options? What is the potential for the World Bank and other IFIs to engage on the drugs issue in other countries? The discussion below first looks at possible entry points for engagement on drugs from a development perspective, both longstanding entry points and potential new ones including at the global level. Then, after revisiting the mainstreaming issue, the paper concludes with some final thoughts.

**‘Older’ Entry Points**

The public health dimension is a longstanding potential entry point, which extends to the implications of drug use for HIV/AIDS, a global theme for the World Bank. This entry point is available in any country where there is relatively high problem drug use and the Bank provides support to or is otherwise engaged with the public health sector. So, at the country level public health constitutes by far the most common possible entry point for IFI engagement on drugs and development, albeit compartmentalized.

Drug crop cultivation and its nexus with agriculture and rural development constitutes a broader entry point for World Bank and IFI engagement. This was the main entry point in the case of Afghanistan, and does potentially allow a more comprehensive approach, including macroeconomic, agricultural, rural development and other impacts. However, this entry point is relevant only for the tiny handful of developing countries that are major producers of illicit narcotic drug crops.
The governance impact of drugs is another entry point, though challenging to utilize unless in combination with other dimensions. For example, the Bank’s 2017 World Development Report on governance includes a number of references to drug trafficking (World Bank 2017b).

Related, in the small number of countries that are large producers of illegal drugs and/or lie on major transit routes, macroeconomic linkages may provide, together with others, an additional entry point. Limited data and poor data quality on illicit activities (including drugs) constrain the ability of economists to incorporate them in quantitative analysis of countries’ economies. However, when the illicit economy of a country is large enough, not incorporating it can result in distorted findings and recommendations, so at least crude efforts to do so are warranted. Moreover, in the case of Afghanistan, data on the area of opium poppy cultivation, though far from precise, arguably is more reliable than some of the standard macroeconomic indicators.

**Possible ‘Newer’ Entry Points**

Political economy is a relatively recent area of Bank emphasis, including at the individual project level as well as at the broader level of country assistance strategies. Examples of the latter are the World Bank’s most recent Systematic Country Diagnostic and Country Partnership Framework for Afghanistan (World Bank 2016a; World Bank 2016b), both of which explicitly include mention of the importance of the political economy dimension. Where drugs, their economic impact, and especially the associated financial flows are important enough to have significant political economy implications, this could be at least an indirect entry point for engagement on drugs and development.

Money laundering and illicit financial flows are a serious concern for the World Bank, which is heavily engaged in the anti-money laundering/countering terrorist financing (AML/CFT) agenda (see, for example, World Bank 2016c, and on the issue of illicit financial flows World Bank 2017b: Spotlight 13). Wherever the drug industry generates substantial financial flows in-country and outward to money laundering havens etc., this could be an entry point for the Bank and other IFIs on drugs and development.

More generally, illicit economic activities and their development impacts are of increasing interest, and drugs comprise one of the most important components both globally and in some countries.

The conflict dimension provides yet another potential entry point. For example, a recent World Bank – UN publication on conflict prevention refers to drug trafficking in several places (see World Bank Group and United Nations 2017). Specific interfaces may include violent conflict over control of drug activities and profits, narco-financing of insurgencies, organized crime, violence associated with distribution and consumption of illegal drugs, and not least the adverse development and human impacts of ill-considered counter-narcotics actions such as violent eradication of drug crops or chemical spraying. Related, in some countries the drug industry plays an important role in state fragility, which may provide an entry point as well.

Beyond their applicability in particular countries, some of these ‘newer’ possible entry points may also be relevant for Bank engagement on drugs at the global level, to a much greater extent than the ‘older’ entry points.

**Better Mainstreaming**

The attempt to articulate and implement counter-narcotics mainstreaming in Afghanistan did not take off, but it yielded lessons that are relevant for developing an improved approach to mainstreaming. First and foremost, integration of the illicit narcotics dimension in development initiatives must occur at the strategic level. If the drug economy is not integrated in broader development strategy and relevant sector strategies (such as agriculture and public health), trying to mainstream counter-narcotics in individual programs and investments would not work. However, such a strategic approach on the part of the World Bank might well be controversial, and could be contested by various other actors that have explicit counter-narcotics mandates.

In assessing whether and how to try mainstreaming in a given country, the first step would be to identify the salient interfaces between drugs and development in that country and the most promising entry points for engagement. In the overwhelming majority of developing countries, the drugs issue is not likely to be of sufficient importance as a development issue to justify mainstreaming, and if it is of major importance in only one dimension, for example, public health, it would make sense to employ a compartmented sectoral approach rather than attempting to engage in broader mainstreaming. On the negative side, it would also be important to assess the receptivity of the government of the country concerned to Bank/IFI engagement on drugs as a development issue, and in some cases that of other key partner countries as well.
In the small number of countries where the drugs-development nexus is of great importance and the government is receptive to Bank/IFI engagement, the drug economy needs to be integrated in country macroeconomic and development analysis, as well as in work on political economy, governance and corruption. It would also be necessary to incorporate drugs in sector strategies for the key sectors where important entry points have been identified (e.g. agriculture and rural development in major drug crop cultivating countries).

Starting from a broader strategic and sectoral level, mainstreaming at the program and project level could use a screening approach similar to that in the Afghanistan counter-narcotics mainstreaming approach, but emphasizing opportunities as well as risks. As noted, counter-narcotics mainstreaming is unlikely to work if it is seen solely as a ‘safeguard’ exercise, imposing yet another burden on already overburdened project staff, and running the risk of degenerating into a bureaucratic ‘checking-the-box’ process. Any future mainstreaming initiatives should move away from a solely safeguards-like approach, and emphasize positive synergies, bring different forms of expertise to bear, and take a practical, solution-oriented approach.

It will be important that, for the countries where mainstreaming is attempted, relevant expertise is deployed, since project staff of the IFIs cannot be expected to have or quickly build up expertise on the drugs-development nexus, both in the country concerned and more generally. Therefore, outside expertise (of the right kind) will be required, that can help both in understanding the country context and its drugs dimension, and how to implement effective mainstreaming. This should be adequately resourced.

Mainstreaming should not become a justification for excessive caution and risk avoidance. Drugs are a complex and often politically sensitive problem, but there are also risks associated with not approaching drugs as a development issue, in the small number of countries where it is of high importance. For example, the risk that newly irrigated land will be allocated by Afghan farmers in part to opium poppy cultivation is real, but it does not mean that no irrigation projects should be undertaken. On the contrary, irrigation is a prerequisite for moving Afghanistan away from dependence on poppy cultivation over the longer term.

Finally, mainstreaming drugs as a development issue could be considered at the global level, not just at the country level where few countries are suitable candidates. This means identifying key interfaces at that level, and entry points that are consistent with World Bank/IFI global themes (such as illicit financial flows, conflict dimension, etc.). Such an approach would require a favorable ‘authorizing environment’ at the level of top institutional leadership and shareholders, which may not be present or easy to develop.

**Conclusions**

Afghanistan demonstrates the potential and benefits as well as the limitations of World Bank/IFI engagement on the drugs issue in a country context. The Bank did meaningfully engage in several ways, and its involvement was well-received by at least parts of the Afghan government and donor community. In a modest way, it made a difference. However, the Bank’s engagement, after peaking in the second half of the previous decade, subsequently lost momentum and suffered reversals for reasons discussed in this paper.

Given the constellation of positive factors that came together and supported Bank engagement on drugs in Afghanistan and helped enhance its impacts, it is hard to envision the World Bank or other IFIs advancing farther in other countries, or even in Afghanistan in the future, in terms of the breadth, depth, and longevity of its engagement in the drugs issue. Realistically, therefore, expectations for Bank/IFI engagement on drugs need to be modest. There may be opportunities here and there to exploit, but no sign that a sea-change would be possible.

Whether progress may be possible in terms of engagement on drugs and development at the global level, where the World Bank is emphasizing several global themes that are related to drug trafficking, is an interesting question. There may be some opportunities, especially in the areas of illicit financial flows and violent conflict. However, past experience does not provide much ground for optimism that the Bank could take on a proactive role with regard to drugs at the global level. It would seem more likely that given so many other priorities and challenges the Bank faces, as well as shareholder sensitivities, the Bank and other IFIs will not lead the global drugs and development agenda but may be brought in over time by other stakeholders, particularly member countries concerned about drugs and drugs policy as a development issue.

**Competing Interests**
The author has no competing interests to declare.
Author Information
William A. Byrd is a development economist with a PhD in Economics and an MA in East Asian Studies from Harvard University. At the World Bank he worked in China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and was based in Kabul during 2002–2006. Since 2012 he has been a senior expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). He has published extensively on Afghanistan’s economy, public finances, governance, corruption, opium economy, security sector, political economy, aid issues, extractive sectors and other topics. The views expressed in this paper are his own and do not reflect the views of USIP, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

References


Mansfield, David. 2006. “Development in a Drugs Environment: A Strategic Approach to Alternative Development.” Eschborn, Germany: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) and


Submitted: 18 December 2017 Accepted: 24 January 2018 Published: 14 January 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

*Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.