

## Bringing Development In

### Tackling the negative effects of illicit drugs and drug policy on development

In early 2013, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) hosted the Global Drug and Development Policy Roundup, a new forum for discussing the nexus between the production, trade and use of illicit drugs, and development. It was conceived in response to persisting concerns that the international development and drug policy communities do not communicate sufficiently with one another, and that broader strategic cooperation is highly necessary.

The Global Drug and Development Policy Roundup aimed to identify actionable ways to increase the engagement of the international development community in tackling the production, trade and use of illicit drugs and mitigating the serious negative effects of illicit drugs and current drug policies on development. Conducted under Chatham House rules, the event saw the participation of drug policy and development experts and practitioners from across the world. Discussions were informed by recent work on the inter-relationships between drugs and development conducted by scholars at the Melbourne-based Nossal Institute. The event concluded with a call for the creation of a Global Drug and Development Policy Network to drive the integration of drug and drug policy issues in development, thereby boosting its effectiveness.

### Development programming and drugs policy: unmet expectations, unfulfilled promises

Despite a shared commitment to enhancing human wellbeing, dialogue and cooperation between the international development and drug policy communities is limited.<sup>1</sup> This is problematic because in a growing number of countries effective and legitimate policies in both fields increasingly depend on one another. There are indications that the effectiveness of

development programmes may be undermined by not integrating drug issues. Yet many people working in international development still do not readily see what their role could and should be in addressing problems related to the production, trade and use of illicit drugs that impact negatively on poverty reduction, (rural) livelihoods and governance. Their focus is essentially operational and on development issues and activities in individual countries, and not on the larger, global policy issues that are at the heart of the work of the drug policy reformers.

The latter's principal aim is to reform the existing prohibitionist international drug control regime because of the negative effects it has on the wellbeing and security of people, as well as on the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions in – mostly – the drug source and transit countries. Development practitioners, in turn, lack the time, expertise and leverage to take on broader drug policy reform issues and are, if anything, only interested in the question of how to do development in a drugs-affected environment. There is a mutual sense of unmet expectations and unfulfilled promises. Development agencies, it is held, have failed to respond in an appropriate and timely manner to situations where the populations of countries descending into political instability and

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socioeconomic hardship needed to be protected from turning to the massive use of illicit drugs. Others question the very nature and aims of international development, seeing it as increasingly linked to, and as a tool of, Western counter-terrorism and security strategies. On the other hand, the failure to improve current drug policies is perceived as being responsible for undermining the prospects for development in poor and fragile countries.

There are other reasons that explain why the two policy communities are not on the same wavelength and are reluctant to communicate and work with one another. Many governments still stigmatise drug users, portraying them as offenders rather than people in need of health and social attention. With some notable exceptions like Germany's Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), bilateral aid agencies find it difficult to come to terms with illicit drugs, an issue which for many governments and politicians remains an anathema. It is easier and politically less risky to defend the stance, however mistaken, that the production, trade and use of illicit drugs – and the associated organised crime – are essentially law enforcement and security problems which fall within the remit of police forces, and defence and foreign ministries. Short-term policy cycles too work against building political commitment to necessarily longer-term strategies of integrating drug and development policies. The mainstreaming of illicit drugs issues into development programmes in source countries has had little success thus far. There are also highly sensitive issues regarding the involvement of some political elites in source and transit countries in drug-trafficking.

### **Bringing development in, against the odds**

In an ideal world, policy would take a holistic, multi-sector approach to tackling the multiple causes of the production, trade and use of illicit drugs and their negative effects on development and human wellbeing. This would include infrastructure and agricultural development, improving the provision of public services and promoting job creation, among other measures. Such a strategy would necessarily be long-term and, in recognition of the importance of sustainability, would have to involve local communities as key stakeholders. Yet reducing poverty and improving living conditions also requires measures geared at strengthening governance and accountability, reforming the justice and security sectors, ensuring human security and curbing corruption. In source countries access to land, land titling, the enforcement of property rights and creating jobs especially for youth are crucial for curbing illicit drug production and trade. While the illicit drug economy does not necessarily always undermine socioeconomic development, there is no doubt that it has serious negative effects on governance and institutions. Current counter-drug policies are known to exacerbate these problems.

A major barrier for adopting this approach is the existing international drug control regime. The regime is geared toward tightly controlling the production, trade and use of drugs that have been declared illicit, and not at supporting development. Countries that do not comply with the international regulations will be subject to different forms of punitive action by the international community. This regime has manifestly failed in achieving its stated aims and exacerbates development deficits. It has led to mass incarceration, fills the pockets of the most powerful actors in the drug-trafficking chain, and weakens governance as it promotes corruption among the very authorities charged with controlling the illicit trade. The constitutions and laws of a number of states, including source countries like Afghanistan, reflect the regime's prohibitionist nature. Although recently there appears to be some move away from the fixation with eliminating the illicit drugs market, more often than not the metrics used by drug policy agencies are still limited to counting hectares eradicated, arrests made, drug shipments interdicted etc. In effect, the 'war on drugs' narrative determines the criteria used to evaluate 'success'. Human development indicators are not employed to evaluate counter-drug interventions.

This notwithstanding, there are a few national examples that appear to show that a development-oriented approach to drug policy can yield positive results. Bolivia was mentioned in this respect. President Carlos Mesa (2003–2005) allowed coca farmer families in the tropical Chapare region to keep one cato (1,600 square metres) of coca bush. This policy was institutionalised under President Evo Morales (2006 to present). While this has meant that farmers are treated as partners, not criminals, it also revealed the fallacy of the 'zero coca' approach. As farmers have diversified their crops, coca is no longer the most important agricultural commodity in the Chapare. Political commitment and support for this policy on both the central and municipal levels of the Bolivian government have been crucial to achieve this goal, as has been the existence of a strong coca grower federation. However, it would not be easy to replicate the Bolivian experience in other countries and world regions where rural development has been off the policy agenda for a long time.

In other 'drug contexts' the focus has been on promoting 'alternative development' or 'alternative livelihoods' as part of a larger, heavily securitised counter-drug effort. For instance, in the context of the international intervention in Afghanistan, United States policy has focused on promoting alternative livelihoods to achieve a reduction in poppy crops. Both the Department of State's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and USAID appear to agree that development and the promotion of alternative livelihoods should be mainstreamed in order to strengthen the stabilisation and counter-insurgency effort. However, one of the many problems of this policy

has been that in Helmand province the cultivation of poppy crops has merely moved into desert areas that are also highly insecure, where alternative development and other aid interventions are not possible. This case exemplifies that alternative development and the promotion of alternative livelihoods depend on adequate sequencing of interventions, e.g. alternatives and (rural income) insurance mechanisms need to be in place before illicit crop eradication is implemented. It also shows that alternative development is today strongly linked to security and counter-insurgency strategies.

## Building bridges, increasing cooperation

These examples show that close cooperation between the development and drug policy communities is both highly desirable and necessary. Yet there are a number of organisational and political issues that would need to be addressed to make such enhanced cooperation feasible.

- **Making international development ‘drugs-sensitive’:**

It is high time that the international development community becomes drugs-sensitive, including, for instance, with respect to developing the capacity to work in settings with large criminal markets and providing a sound development perspective to help improve alternative livelihoods projects that neither practice good development nor are effective from a counter-narcotics perspective. This challenge is reminiscent of the situation two decades ago, when international aid agencies did not consider violent intra-state conflict an issue they had to deal with when it came to achieving their stated goals, whereas now it would be unusual to find programmes which are not ‘conflict sensitive’. The World Bank’s 2011 World Development Report on conflict, security and development put the issue of drugs and development on the international agenda. This momentum should be used, though expectations *vis-à-vis* the development community should be realistic as it still has a preference for working *around* drugs instead of directly *engaging* with drugs.

- **Building capacity for the development community to engage with drugs issues:** The development community’s capacity to engage with drug issues has to be strengthened, both on the policy and at the operational level. This could be achieved by establishing a network that supports the relatively few officials in development agencies (bilateral and NGOs) that are presently charged with working on drugs issues. It is also necessary to promote information-sharing and peer support, and persuade risk-averse governing boards of development organisations about the importance of engaging with drug issues.

- **Developing a political risk mitigation strategy:** Taking a public position on drugs is still difficult for many in the development community. A political risk mitigation strategy is needed. One way around this

would be for host countries to request that development agencies become engaged in drug issues. Large bilateral and multilateral agencies, such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), Germany’s Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and even the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Afghanistan, could provide political ‘cover’ for such enhanced engagement. Amplifying the voice of populations affected by drugs and counter-drug interventions would also be important.

- **Identifying concrete objectives and common goals:** They should include poverty reduction, good governance and human rights. It would be advisable to appeal to core objectives of the development community and highlight the relationship between poverty reduction and issues related to the production, trade and use of illicit drugs. The focus could be on either countries or world regions. Technical jargon should be minimised and a common language should be developed.
- **Tackling organisational inertia and funding constraints:** Currently, there is no clear institutional champion for enhancing cooperation between the development and drug policy communities. Development agencies would be faced with the challenge of finding funds to establish focal points for drug issues. There is also apprehension on the part of some development NGOs about upsetting their (governmental) funders by engaging with drug issues that would have to be overcome.
- **Addressing key political issues and structural constraints:** What is the alternative to the ‘war on drugs’? How can the development community deal with the structural constraint of donors being signatories of the international drug control conventions? How can illicit drugs and drug policy be dissociated from dominant security discourse and practice? The law enforcement community would need to be engaged in finding answers to these difficult questions.
- **Broadening the base:** Presently, the group of ‘usual suspects’ for taking this agenda forward is too narrow. The drug policy community is – rightly or wrongly – perceived to be a ‘closed society’. New voices should be included in the debate. In the forthcoming 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS), it would be important to get a session on drugs and development on the agenda, serving as a platform for going beyond the eradication-versus-alternative-development paradigm.

- **Sharing the positive experiences:** There are some positive experiences that should be considered when thinking about closer cooperation between the development and drug policy communities: the Transnational Institute's South Asia work, for instance, is supported by Oxfam Netherlands and GIZ.

## Next steps: forming a global network on drugs and development

The debate has been tabled. Now it is a matter of taking action. Despite the existing challenges and barriers, it is in the interest of both the development and drug policy communities to talk much more to one another than they have done so far; and to find ways to significantly increase their cooperation. More development organisations need to start focusing more seriously and systematically on drug issues, and on the negative impact drugs and current drug policies have on poverty reduction and human development. They should do this both on a higher policy as well as on an operational level. Yet to achieve these aims the two policy communities need a platform.

A global network on drugs and development would help to provide this platform. Its creation should be championed by a smaller group of development organisations (including one or two donor agencies with experience in working on drugs issues) with policy capacity, convening power and an interest in making a bold contribution to moving the debate forward and identifying inroads for policy reform. Organisations and individuals from around the world working across the wide spectrum of development and drug policy reform should be encouraged to join.

Ideally, such a network would:

- Produce innovative, high-quality and operational research on a range of development and drug policy issues, including on how development and poverty reduction in countries affected by the production, trade and use of illicit drugs relate to global drug policy reform.
- Mobilise stakeholders in different world regions and promote regional and inter-regional dialogues on the nexus between drugs and development to strengthen much-needed comparative perspectives.

Balancing deliberation and action, the network's activities would be eminently policy-oriented and targeted at influencing decision-makers in both the international development and the reformist and 'orthodox' drug policy communities.

It is high time to tackle this critical issue energetically: let us begin by building the Global Drug and Development Policy Network as a means of driving reform.

## Further reading

Nossal Institute for Global Health (2010) *Dependent on Development. The Interrelationships between Illicit Drugs and Socioeconomic Development*, Melbourne

World Bank (2011) *2011 World Development Report: Conflict, Security and Development*, Washington DC

[www.ids.ac.uk/project/global-drug-and-development-policy-roundup](http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/global-drug-and-development-policy-roundup)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It is important to recognise that each of the two policy communities is composed of a multiplicity of different types of organisations, including bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental, research and advocacy/campaigning organisations. In the case of the drug policy community it is important to distinguish between 'orthodox' organisations that are part of, or adhere to, the international drug control regime, such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) or the US Government Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), and mostly non-governmental organisations and independent groups that work on drug policy reform like the blue-ribbon Global Commission on Drug Policy and the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI). If not otherwise stated, in this briefing the term 'drug policy community' is used to refer to drug policy reform organisations and groups.

<sup>2</sup> It was suggested to adopt the term 'drug-oriented development policy' instead of 'development-oriented drug policy'.

## Credits

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