



# COUNT THE COSTS

50 YEARS OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

## The War on Drugs: Undermining international development and security, increasing conflict

### The War on Drugs: Are we paying too high a price?

The global “war on drugs” has been fought for 50 years, without preventing the long-term trend of increasing drug supply and use. Beyond this failure, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has also identified the many serious ‘*unintended negative consequences*’ of the drug war. These costs result not from drug use itself, but from choosing a punitive enforcement-led approach that, by its nature, places control of the trade in the hands of organised crime, and criminalises many users. In the process, this is undermining development and security, and fuelling conflict in many poor and fragile countries.

### Introduction

Attempts to control global drug production and supply took their current form with the 1961 UN single convention on drugs. Whilst this international agreement was promoted with public health goals, it took a prohibitionist approach, based on police and military enforcement intended to suppress production and supply, and punish users.

However, prohibiting a commodity for which there is high demand inevitably creates profit opportunities for criminal entrepreneurs, pushing production, supply and consumption into an illicit parallel economy.

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“Where are the voices of the development community? Prohibition is putting money in the pockets of criminals and armed groups. Profits from the illegal trade in drugs are not only used to buy guns, they also buy police chiefs and judges. Corruption is off the scale and, as it grows, democratic accountability, the key plank necessary for poor people to access and defend their rights, is progressively eroded...The families caught up in this nightmare are the victims of an unworkable ‘war on drugs’.”

Jonathan Glennie  
ODI Research Fellow,  
former Head of Christian Aid’s Colombia Programme  
2010

Drug cartels and traffickers can be more confident of a cheap and reliable supply of key drug crops (coca leaf, poppy or cannabis) if state authorities can be kept at bay, and if farmers have few alternatives to drug production. As a result, traffickers prefer drug producing and transit areas with little economic infrastructure or governance. So they target geographically remote regions and already fragile or failed states, then protect and expand their interests using violence, intimidation, and corruption.

Further destabilising an area in this way deters investment, restricts the activities of NGO and government agencies, and diverts limited development aid and other resources into enforcement.

The negative effects invariably fall hardest on the poorest and most marginalised, including indigenous populations and ethnic minorities, young people and women. The same corrosive consequences historically seen in drug producing regions are now increasingly replicated in drug transit regions as traffickers trans-ship drugs through the Caribbean, Central America, Central Asia and West Africa.

Evidence from around the globe shows that enforcement at best displaces illicit markets and transit routes to new areas, and at worst actually increases the violence and harm it is intended to stop. In short, the inevitable result of drug markets being entirely controlled by organised criminal profiteers is to lock vulnerable producing or transit regions into multi-dimensional underdevelopment, where existing problems are exacerbated, and governance further undermined.

## The Costs to Developing Countries

The negative impacts of the war on drugs on international development and security outlined below all overlap with each other, and with the problems faced by rich countries. See [www.countthecosts.org](http://www.countthecosts.org) for more information.

### 1. Fuelling conflict and violence

There are a number of ways in which the war on drugs is contributing to conflict and violence, mainly stemming from handing control of the lucrative illegal market to adaptable and ruthless criminal entrepreneurs. In the absence of any formal market regulation, violence is their default regulatory tool.

To secure and expand their business, cartels can and do equip private armies and militias – which are in many cases able to outgun state enforcement. Organised criminal networks can also finance or merge with separatist and insurgent groups, and illicit drug profits have become a key source of funding for various domestic and international terror groups.

Corruption, combined with intimidation and actual violence against politicians, police, judiciary, armed forces and customs officers, then further undermines governance and promotes conflict.

Police and military interventions can involve significant violence in themselves. For example, there were 2,819 extrajudicial killings under the banner of the Thailand Government’s ‘war on drugs’ crackdown in 2003.<sup>(1)</sup> State interventions can also precipitate a spiral of violence in which the cartels both fight back against government forces with ever increasing ferocity, and also fight each other for control of the trade as state action disrupts established illicit market structures, shown most clearly in Mexico in recent years.

In the longer term endemic violence can traumatise populations for generations, in particular fostering a deeper culture of violence amongst young people.

“The control system and its application have had several unintended consequences:

- A huge criminal black market... There is no shortage of criminals competing to claw out a share of a market in which hundred fold increases in price from production to retail are not uncommon.
- Public health was displaced into the background
- The “balloon effect” because squeezing (by tighter controls) one place produces...an increase in another.”

Antonio Maria Costa  
Executive Director,  
UN Office on Drugs and Crime  
2008

## Mexico: A case study in violence and corruption

Mexico is the key transit route for cocaine from the Andean region to North America, and a major source of cannabis for the US market. Whilst Mexico has a long history of internal violence, this was in decline until 2006 when President Calderon brought the full weight of Mexico’s police and military to bear on the criminal drug cartels.

Far from ending the violence, stepping up the war on drugs led to a dramatic escalation, as the cartels fought back against government forces, battled each other to seize control of areas where competing gangs were weakened, and stepped up efforts to corrupt officials. Since 2006 there have been over 36,000 deaths related to the drug war, 1300 of whom were children and 4000 women.

“Mexico’s police and armed services are known to be contaminated by multimillion dollar bribes from the transnational narco-trafficking business. Though the problem is not as pervasive in the military as it is in the police, it is widely considered to have attained the status of a national security threat.” Transparency International <sup>(2)</sup>



Mexico’s drug war: more than 36 000 deaths since 2006

## 2. Increasing corruption and undermining governance

The war on drugs and the huge criminal market it has created have led to the corruption of institutions and individuals at every level in affected countries. This is a result of the huge funds high-level players in the illicit trade have, their readiness to threaten violence to force the unwilling to take bribes (as they put it in Mexico “plomo o plata” – “lead or silver”), and the poverty and weak governance of targeted regions.

Corruption can have a dire impact on social and economic development:

*“Corruption not only reduces the net income of the poor but also wrecks programmes related to their basic needs, from sanitation to education to healthcare. It results in the misallocation of resources to the detriment of poverty reduction programmes...The attainment of the Millennium Development Goals is put at risk unless corruption is tackled...”* Transparency International <sup>(3)</sup>

As the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has described it:

*“The magnitude of funds under criminal control poses special threats to governments, particularly in developing countries, where the domestic security markets and capital markets are far too small to absorb such funds without quickly becoming dependent on them. It is difficult to have a functioning democratic system when drug cartels have the means to buy protection, political support or votes at every level of government and society. In systems where a member of the legislature or judiciary, earning only a modest income, can easily gain the equivalent of some months’ salary from a trafficker by making one “favourable” decision, the dangers of corruption are obvious.”* <sup>(4)</sup>

Ultimately, the combination of violence and corruption seriously harms the governance and development of many countries across the globe.

## Colombia – a case study in conflict and insecurity

Since the 1970s, Colombia has been at the epicentre of illicit cocaine production. The vast profits generated have fuelled a disastrous expansion of the already problematic internal armed conflict between the government and guerrilla movements, most significantly FARC, and has driven corruption at all levels of police, judiciary and politics.

- Colombia’s armed conflict and related human rights abuses had, by 2010, displaced over 4.9 million people. <sup>(5)</sup>
- US funding for anti-drug operations has become increasingly militarised and largely indistinguishable from counterinsurgency. The US has also pushed aerial crop eradication that has had little impact on coca cultivation, but serious impacts on human health, indigenous cultures and the environment.
- According to Transparency International, Colombia has suffered worse underdevelopment and lawlessness as a result of the drug trade, reporting that: *“A World Bank survey released in February 2002 found that bribes are paid in 50 per cent of all state contracts. Another World Bank report estimates the cost of corruption in Colombia at US \$2.6 billion annually, the equivalent of 60 per cent of the country’s debt.”* <sup>(6)</sup>



Coca production has more than met demand, despite decades of crop eradication

*“Billions of dollars have gone into the anti-drug war and it has brought only huge criminal organizations. When you have poured in money for a century surely it is time for you to decide it is not working.”*

Dr E.K. Rodrigo  
former Drug Tsar of Sri Lanka  
2005

## 3. Huge economic and opportunity costs

The negative consequences of a country relying economically on the export of a single product are well understood for legitimate commodities like oil. Similar problems can arise from illicit exports as well, with the potential threats to development made worse by the lack of taxation and the isolation from legitimate economic and social activity of illicit drug production. The related problem, a shift of labour and capital to the unregulated criminal sector, may also undermine long-term development and economic growth.

As the economy and institutions of a country become progressively more criminalised, other illegal businesses under the ownership or protection of criminal cartels can gain preferential treatment, making it more difficult for legal enterprises to compete, and forcing them to bear a greater burden of taxation and regulation.

The more a region becomes destabilized, the more it:

- Deters inward investment by indigenous or external businesses
- Restricts the activities of development groups and other bodies that would otherwise assist in economic and human development

- Diverts aid and other resources from development into police and military enforcement (reducing accountability and increasing the likelihood of human rights abuses)

Globally, in excess of \$100 billion a year is spent on fighting the war on drugs – roughly the same as the total spent by rich countries on overseas aid.<sup>(7)</sup> The US, and other countries, have diverted development aid from where it would be most effective, blurring it into military spending for its allies in the war on drugs – most significantly in Latin America.

While any approach to drugs requires funding, there is a huge opportunity cost from this scale of expenditure on a policy that is not even delivering its intended goals. As a result many of the poorest areas of affected countries are being further impoverished through wasting money that could have been invested in everything from education to infrastructure.

## The problem with ‘alternative development’

A cornerstone of the international response to the illicit drug trade has been ‘alternative development’ (AD) to encourage drug crop producers to move to other crops, such as wheat. There are major problems with many AD projects, but when undertaken appropriately, AD can help illicit crop growers make the transition to non-drug livelihoods.

But there is a bigger issue. Like eradication efforts, in the long term it does not impact on overall drug crop production. Any localised impact just displaces production – and the accompanying problems – to another region or country. So there is no net development benefit.

#### 4. Criminalising poverty

Drug crop production is generally found in socially and economically marginalized populations that are not made rich by their involvement in the trade. Farmers earn only around 1% of the overall global illicit drug income (most of the remaining revenue is earned by the traffickers). They often have small landholdings, face volatile market prices for non-drug crops, high transport-to-market costs from isolated areas, or would require high levels of investment to grow alternative crops, but have limited access to credit. For example, in Myanmar and Lao PDR, drug-growing households are estimated to earn just \$200 cash per annum, and drugs are grown in areas where poor health and illiteracy prevail, where physical and social infrastructures are negligible, and populations find themselves marginalised and discriminated against by the dominant ethnic group.<sup>(8)</sup>

So involvement by poor farmers in drug crop production results from a lack of options; the *'migration to illegality'* driven by *'need not greed'*, as the Transnational Institute describes it.<sup>(9)</sup>

Production and trafficking of drug crops is facilitated when government control and military or police enforcement is minimal, or can be kept at bay. So the criminals who control the illicit trade naturally prefer production and transit environments with limited economic and governmental infrastructure. Consequently they seek out such environments, or create, maintain and control them using violence and corruption. This in turn entrenches the problems that force poor farmers into drug crop production in the first place – catching them in a vicious circle that is not of their making.

Drug control responses in these areas usually take the form of crop eradication, alternative development and the criminalisation of producers. The results, in terms of sustainable reductions in poverty, have been mainly negative. Opium bans and crop eradication programmes in South-East Asia, Colombia and Afghanistan have been linked with increasing poverty among farmers, reduced access to health and education, increased indebtedness, large-scale displacement, accelerated deforestation, and

social discontent. They have also resulted in an increase in young ethnic minority women entering the sex trade, often through human trafficking.

Drug control measures can also drive sections of the population to support insurgent groups, or seek employment with criminal gangs, further undermining security and governance, and with it the prospects for development.

#### Afghanistan – a study in insecurity

Afghanistan faces many development challenges, and has a long history of involvement in the opium trade. Today it supplies more than 90% of global illicit opium/heroin, despite poppy eradication being one of the stated goals of the coalition invasion in 2001. Opium production has in fact increased dramatically, now dominates the economy, and is fuelling unprecedented corruption and funding insurgency, conflict and terror groups – nationally and internationally.

- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that 52% of the nation's GDP, \$2.7 billion annually, is generated by the drug trade, of which \$200-\$400 million went to Taliban insurgents and warlords in 2006-7
- Afghan government officials are believed to be involved in at least 70 per cent of opium trafficking, and at least 13 former or present provincial governors are directly involved in the drug trade
- The UNODC December 2010 Afghan Opium Survey demonstrates the economic realities faced by Afghan farmers when it states: *"At current prices, planting opium poppies is six times more profitable than growing wheat."*<sup>(10)</sup>

#### 5. Increasing deforestation and pollution

An often overlooked cost of the war on drugs is its negative impact on the environment – mainly resulting from aerial spraying of drug crops in ecologically sensitive environments, such as the Andes and Amazon basin. Chemical eradication not only causes localised deforestation, but has a devastating multiplier effect because drug producers simply deforest new areas for cultivation – the so-called 'balloon effect'. This problem is made worse because protected areas in national parks – where aerial spraying is banned – are often targeted.

The past twenty years have seen the bulk of coca cultivation shift from Peru and Bolivia to Colombia, and then from region to region within Colombia, or more recently, back to Peru and Bolivia. In an example of this futility, the US Office of National Drug Control Policy admitted that despite record aerial spraying of over 1,300 km<sup>2</sup> of coca in Colombia in 2004, the total area under coca cultivation remained "statistically unchanged".

Illicit unregulated production is also associated with localised pollution as toxic chemicals used in crude processing of coca and opium are disposed of in local environments and waterways.

Concerns have also been raised about the myco-herbicides (killer fungi) engineered to attack opium poppies and coca bushes; scientists fear they may affect food crops, wipe out entire plant species and seriously harm ecosystems.

#### 6. Fuelling HIV infection and other health impacts

The war on drugs results in a number of health-related harms that impact on development. Firstly, levels of drug use and the associated direct health harms tend to rise in the vulnerable and marginalised countries and areas used for producing and transiting drugs, as availability rapidly increases, including from employees being paid in drugs.

Secondly, criminalising users encourages risky behaviour, like sharing needles, and hinders measures to help those infected with blood-borne viruses via drug injecting. As a result, there are epidemics of HIV and hepatitis B and C among people who inject drugs in many developing countries. Roughly, one tenth of new HIV infections result from needle sharing amongst people who use drugs, with this figure rising to just under a third outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, and approaching or exceeding a half in some regions, including many former Soviet republics.



Drug enforcement is encouraging high risk behaviours and fuelling the HIV epidemic

“Developed countries – the major consumers – have imposed harmful policies on the drug-producing countries. These policies have had dire consequences... for the economic development and political stability of the producer countries. The ‘war on drugs’ strategy did not have a significant impact on its goals to increase the street price of drugs and to reduce consumption. Instead...prohibition created economic incentives for traffickers to emerge and prosper; crop eradication in the Andean region helped increase the productivity of the remaining crops; and the fight against the illegal heroin trade in Afghanistan mostly hurt the poor farmers and benefited the Taliban.”

Fernando Henrique Cardoso  
34th President of Brazil  
2010

## 7. Undermining human rights, promoting discrimination

The UN is tasked to both promote human rights and oversee the international drug control regime, yet in practice human rights abuses in the name of drug control are commonplace.

State violence including corporal punishment, executions and extrajudicial killings are frequently associated with drug enforcement. In direct contravention of international

law, over thirty countries maintain the death penalty for drug-related offences with more than 1000 such executions taking place annually. China is the worst offender, even marking UN International Anti-Drugs Day with mass public executions of drug offenders.<sup>(11)</sup>

Widespread use of disproportionate punishments for minor drug offences can overwhelm criminal justice systems, fuelling prison overcrowding and related health and human rights harms. People who use or grow drugs are also easy targets for ill-treatment by police, subject to violence, torture or extortion of money using threats of detention, or drug withdrawal to coerce dependent users into providing incriminating testimony.

Criminalisation of drug treatment and harm reduction activities also remains widespread. Established opiate substitution therapy (most commonly methadone, but also buprenorphine) remains illegal in many countries, such as Russia. Similarly, criminal laws banning syringe/needle provision (and possession) create a climate of fear for people who use drugs, driving them away from life-saving HIV prevention and other health services, and encouraging high risk behaviours. People who use drugs are also often discriminated against when accessing healthcare and antiretroviral and hepatitis C treatment.

In China and South-East Asia, those arrested for possession and use of illicit drugs are often subject to arbitrary detention without trial in the form of forced or compulsory ‘treatment’ in facilities where further human rights abuses are common, for periods from a few months to years.<sup>(12)</sup> Estimates of numbers detained in such ‘treatment’ centres in China alone are as high as 500,000.<sup>(13)</sup>

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that the UN’s Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 8 included ‘access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries’, yet every year, tens of millions of people in poor countries suffer moderate to severe pain due to legal and political restrictions on essential medicines, such as morphine. The WHO has also listed restrictions on ephedrine and ergometrine as obstacles to achieving MDG 5, which is to reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio.

Crop eradication efforts, as well as having the environmental costs already mentioned, can impact on basic rights. Chemical spraying can lead to health problems, for example the glyphosate sprayed by US planes over coca fields has caused gastrointestinal problems, fevers, headaches, nausea, colds and vomiting. Legal food plants are additional casualties. The spraying has sometimes forced whole villages to be abandoned and the rapid elimination of farmers’ primary source of income results in economic and social harm. The dangers of forced eradication are similarly significant in Afghanistan, where an estimated two million subsistence farmers live off the drug crops.

## Are there benefits?

The claims that the war on drugs can reduce or eliminate drug production and availability are simply not borne out by the experience of the past half-century. Production and supply of key drug crops and related products have more than kept pace with demand, with a long term trend of falling prices and rising use and availability. As already

noted, localised enforcement ‘successes’ just move problems from one location to another.

The key beneficiaries of the war on drugs are those who use it for political ends, whether for populist political reasons, or to justify military interventions, as well as the military and suppliers of military/police hardware, and the criminals who end up in control of the trade.

Drug production and trafficking does, however, represent real economic activity. For certain populations and individuals with limited options, drug production, or involvement in the criminal supply chain, offers one of the few sources of income, albeit with risks attached. Some of the illegal profits also feed into local economies when spent in legal markets.

These benefits are hugely outweighed by the devastating social and economic costs of the drug war, but any change in drug control policy should consider the development impacts – particularly for the majority of individuals involved in the illicit economy, who do not fit the stereotype of the billionaire drug barons.<sup>(14)</sup>



The war on drugs has led to widespread human rights abuses and mass criminalisation of vulnerable populations

## Guinea Bissau – the spreading threat to security

Demand for cocaine in Europe, combined with the stepping up of policing in the Caribbean has simply shifted transit routes to West Africa – *the balloon effect*. Guinea Bissau, already with weak governance, endemic poverty and negligible police infrastructure, has been particularly affected - with serious consequences for one of the most underdeveloped countries on Earth.

In 2006, the entire GDP of Guinea-Bissau was only US\$304 million, the equivalent of six tons of cocaine sold in Europe at the wholesale level. UNODC estimates approximately 40 tons of the cocaine consumed in Europe passes through West Africa. The disparity in wealth between trafficking organisations and authorities has facilitated infiltration and bribery of the little state infrastructure that exists. Investigations show extensive involvement of police, military, government ministers and the presidential family in the cocaine trade, the arrival of which has also triggered cocaine and crack misuse. <sup>(16)</sup>

The war on drugs has turned Guinea Bissau from a fragile state into a narco-state in just five years. Other countries in West Africa are also under threat, as are all fragile states with the potential to be used as producer or transit countries.



Undermining already fragile states

## ‘What we don’t know keeps hurting us’

No genuine effort has been made by any international body or national government to properly assess the negative unintended consequences of the current approach to drugs, let alone to meaningfully explore alternatives.

Given the appalling impacts on international development, human rights, the environment and many other sectors this is both shocking and unacceptable. As the US National Academy of Sciences made clear as long ago as 2001 in its report ‘Informing America’s Policy on Illegal Drugs; What We Don’t Know Keeps Hurting Us’:

*“It is unconscionable for this country to continue to carry out a public policy of this magnitude and cost without any way of knowing whether, and to what extent, it is having the desired result. Our committee strongly recommends that a substantial, new, and robust research effort be undertaken to examine the various aspects of drug control, so that decision-making on these issues can be better supported by more factual and realistic evidence.”* <sup>(15)</sup>

The committee identified “international policies to reduce the supply of drugs through crop eradication and the disruption of drug trafficking” as a key area of concern, specifically calling for “additional research on the extent to which producers and traffickers thwart enforcement in one geographic area by moving their smuggling routes or production elsewhere” and that “research is needed to determine how the effects of supply-reduction activities should be measured.”

There are difficulties in assessing the impacts of drug control measures. However, the main challenge is the emotive and highly politicised nature of the debate around drugs, which has led to the war on drugs becoming largely immune from scrutiny. Worse still, harms caused by the drug war itself are conflated with those from drug use, to bolster the apparent ‘drug menace’ narrative then used to justify yet more of the same failed approach.

## Conclusion

All poor countries face major challenges, including lack of resources, poor governance, conflict and corruption. The last thing they need is to have these problems made still worse by a futile and counterproductive war on drugs. These policies are not just a disaster for producer and transit countries. Globally, the unintended consequences of the war on drugs:

- threaten public health, spread disease and cause death
- undermine human rights
- promote stigma and discrimination
- create crime and enrich criminals
- waste billions on ineffective law enforcement

The war on drugs is a policy choice. There are other options that, at the very least, should be debated and explored using the best possible evidence and analysis. Because if there is one thing development experts agree on, it is that development in a war zone is next to impossible.

We all share the same goals – a safer, healthier and more just world. It is time for all sectors affected by our approach to drugs, and particularly anyone who cares about international development, to call on governments and the UN to properly *Count the Costs of the War on Drugs, and explore the alternatives.*



Afghanistan: still producing 90% of the world’s illicit opium

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## To find out more about

The War on Drugs: Count the Costs campaign, and how you can get involved, visit:

[www.countthecosts.org](http://www.countthecosts.org) or email [info@countthecosts.org](mailto:info@countthecosts.org)

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