

Drugs and development – caught in a vicious cycle

Posted by Nick Crofts
Thursday 7 April 2011 07.00 BST
guardian.co.uk

As we mark the 50th anniversary of the global war on drugs, the world can no longer ignore the intricate links between narcotics, development and conflict



An Afghan man harvests opium in a poppy field. Conflict and drugs are closely linked, and socioeconomic development is also part of the equation.
Photograph: Goran Tomasevic/Reuters

Conflict and drugs (see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/drugs>) almost inevitably go together. The vast majority of opium and often coca production is in countries subject to generations of conflict. This is usually attributed to two main factors: illicit drug production provides profits that fund wars, and conflict areas tend not to be subject to ordinary structures of law enforcement.

What is not obvious at first glance is the more deep-seated reason why the drug trade and conflict are so closely linked (see: <http://www.countthecosts.org/>): the state and progress of social and economic development. This is a vicious cycle – poor development fuels conflict, which fuels the drug trade, which fuels conflict, which fuel poverty. As with most vicious cycles, this one is extremely hard to break.

This issue is particularly salient as this year marks the 50th anniversary of the UN conventions that declared a global war on drugs. The UN agency in charge of

implementing and overseeing the conventions is the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which often views drugs issues as only relating to law and order and security. Despite being part of the UN system, the body rarely looks at the implications of socioeconomic development.

This has to change. It is imperative that the UNODC and the parties to the UN conventions inform themselves of the links between development, conflict and drug cultivation. These links are all too apparent in places such as Burma, the Balkans, South America and the Indian subcontinent.

Instability stemming from poor and highly inequitable socioeconomic development is a major catalyst for civil conflict, which itself is often funded by the drug trade. Drug lords in turn take advantage of the poor and force them to produce drugs, which often leaves them more vulnerable.

The world has watched how poverty has given impetus to a wave of civil unrest that has swept across north Africa and the Middle East. This wave could turn into a tsunami as the countries most deeply involved in drug production have even lower socioeconomic development than those inspired by the "jasmine revolution", and have drug money to fund their rebellion. Thus, for better or worse, the ground is ripe for more Colombia-style conflicts than the peaceful democratic revolution of the Egyptian people.

The situation in Afghanistan, for example, is well known: there is an intimate connection between opiate production and the ability of the Taliban and warlords to engage in long-term conflict. Destitution in the province of Kandahar has made poppy one of the top three cultivated crops in Afghanistan despite attempts at eradication and "alternative development". The reality is that the poppy cultivation will not be eradicated until farmers have more secure livelihoods. That will not happen soon, because that's not the mission.

In Burma, 73% of households rely on income from opium to provide food, shelter, education and healthcare for their families. Drug enforcement agencies have tried to work towards opium eradication in southeast Asia for years, claiming that the drug economy creates a difficult environment for socioeconomic development. They've got it backwards – the lack of socioeconomic development makes it imperative for many Burmese people to produce opium. Not to mention that the government and the rebels are both dependent on the drug trade to fund their fight against each other. Clearly, it's a problem that will not disappear overnight.

The world is gradually awakening to the reality that our current drug policies have failed. They have not achieved their stated goals and perpetuate conflict, violence and poverty. We are becoming more aware of the disenfranchisement of hundreds of millions of people in less developed nations and how this has the propensity to spill out on to the streets and directly challenge state authority.

Though we understand the system is broken, little is done to change or fix it. Development agencies frequently skirt their role in helping to change the environment in which the drug economy flourishes and drug control agencies rarely consider the development context in which their activities take place. As this year marks the 50th anniversary of the global war on drugs, the world can no longer ignore the intricate links between drugs, development and conflict.

Donor agencies must become more aware of the role they can play in changing the conditions that precipitate drug trade and use, particularly if we are to meet the millennium development goals by 2015.

Drug control agencies must learn to better look beyond the simple realities of drug production, and take into account the social and economic factors that fuel cultivation and consumption.

Both must learn to live and work together – achieving common goals is often hard work, but it is work that must be done if we truly want to make development work for everyone and break the vicious cycle.

• *Nick Crofts is senior research fellow at the Nossal Institute for Global Health at the University of Melbourne, and principle author of the Dependent on Development report (see: http://www.soros.org/initiatives/drugpolicy/articles_publications/publications/dependent-development-20110313)*