

Forum: United Nations Third General Assembly (GA3)

Issue: Addressing the impact of Global illicit crop cultivation

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Introduction

Illicit crop cultivation is dangerous to all parties involved. The negative effects of opium poppy leaves and coca bush, the two most commonly grown illicit crops in the world, range from life-threatening medical issues to heart failure, stroke or infections. Yet the cultivators of such crops use it as a necessary means for livelihood, though it has proven to be unsustainable in the long term.

Cultivating illicit crops acts as a breeding ground for crime, including transnational organized crime which exploit weak law enforcement act as a catalyst to illicit crop cultivation. Narco trafficking and Human trafficking help such groups maintain control over these illicit supply chains, leading to human rights violations in undermining efforts to cease drug production in transit regions. The need for stronger protections for rural workers and an advanced labor rights framework should be implemented.

The social issues involving the cultivation of illicit crops run deep, including intergenerational dependence on the cultivation of illicit crops for economical means, hence supporting the cycle of exploitation and violence through many generations to come. The social stigmatization associated with illicit crop cultivation may result in the marginalization of cultivators from social services, loss of legal protection and limited access to markets for alternative crops.

Additionally, the consequences of illicit crop cultivation extend to the community around it, with crop eradication programs, conflict and environmental degradation from illicit crop cultivation forcing entire communities to abandon their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. Long term environmental degradation can make the future possibility of legal agriculture redundant. On a humanitarian level, the chemicals used to process illicit crops contaminate local air, water and soil, proving to have negative effects on health like; respiratory issues, skin problems, poisoning, and other serious health conditions.

With nearly 4.5 million people being dependent on the crops for income and 50% of it coming from illicit cultivation, and the majority being on the poverty line, it is vital to take a multi-faceted approach towards this issue, by counteracting the positive financial incentive these people get from cultivating narcotic drugs and investing into programmes that would create chances for upward mobility and integrating the target population into legal agricultural economies through alternative development programmes.

Definition of Key Terms

Illicit Crop Cultivation

The farming of crops that are prohibited by international or national laws due to their association with the production of illegal drugs, including coca bush (used for cocaine), opium poppies (used for heroin), and cannabis (used for marijuana).

Narcotics Trafficking

The illicit trade and distribution of drugs, typically controlled by organized criminal groups that use violence, corruption, and exploitation to maintain control over supply chains.

Balloon Effect

A term in drug policy where efforts to reduce drug cultivation or trafficking in one region leads to a shift in production or trade to another region, rather than eliminating it.

Smallholder Rural Farmers

Farmers who operate on small plots of land and rely primarily on family labor. In many regions, smallholder farmers engage in illicit crop cultivation as a survival strategy due to the profitability of such crops compared to legal alternatives.

Socioeconomic Marginalization

A process where communities, particularly in rural and indigenous regions, are pushed to the fringes of society with limited access to economic opportunities, healthcare, education, and legal protections, often leading them to engage in illicit crop cultivation.

Environmental Degradation

The damage caused to ecosystems by the cultivation of illicit crops, such as deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination due to the use of harmful chemicals and the need for clearing land in protected areas.

Aerial Fumigation

A crop eradication technique where herbicides are sprayed, often from aircraft, to destroy fields of illicit crops like coca bush or opium poppies

Alternative Development Programmes

Initiatives that provide alternative income sources and development opportunities to communities involved in illicit crop cultivation. Involving vocational training, microfinance programmes and access to legal markets, in order to help farmers participate in legal means of making money.

Key Issues

Poverty and Economic Dependence

Alternative development programmes have not been successful in providing comparable income for legal crops, which leaves many farmers still economically dependent on illicit cultivation on crops. The poor infrastructure of these regions further complicates the problem. Getting products to the market can be expensive and challenging. Until and unless the root cause of illicit crop cultivation (Poverty) is addressed, not a lot of progress can be made in eradicating illicit crop cultivation. Illicit

crops often provide significantly higher income compared to legal alternatives. For example, in Afghanistan, opium can be 4-5 times more profitable than wheat cultivation. Additionally, established trafficking networks ensure a stable demand for illicit crops, reducing market uncertainties for farmers like often providing advance payments or loans to farmers, creating a cycle of debt and dependence. In Colombia's coca-growing regions, a hectare of coca can yield about \$4,000 per year, compared to only \$1,000 for coffee.

Regional Conflict and Political Instability

A pattern is seen in key regions where illicit crops are cultivated. Afghanistan, a major producer of Opium, has experienced decades of war and instability, through which insurgent groups protect and profit from illicit crop cultivation. This makes it difficult to implement long-term strategies towards tackling illicit crop cultivation. Countries with weak governance like Myanmar and Colombia, two key stakeholders, lack the ability to prosecute drug trafficking groups which hold significant power over the government. Law enforcement intervention in such areas are met with corruption, violence and a lack of resources. For example, in Myanmar's, ongoing ethnic conflicts have hindered efforts to implement alternative development programs. Conflict can also destroy infrastructure and communities, further hindering efforts to implement alternative development initiatives.

Eradication Strategies

Aerial spraying of herbicides like glyphosate has not only been linked to respiratory problems, skin disorders, and miscarriages in affected communities, but it is also unsustainable in the long term. It leaves the Smallholder Rural Farmers in deeper poverty and does not address the root cause of illicit crop cultivation. It also is a Human Right violation, as it contaminates water supplies, displaces communities and causes long-term irreversible environmental damage like deforestation, soil degradation and harms the biodiversity of the area. Destruction of illicit crops, which are often in the same vicinity as food crops, can lead to food shortages for local communities. The Balloon

Effect is seen when implementing eradication strategies, which is when eradication in one area often leads to increased cultivation in others, shifting the problem rather than solving it. A study in Colombia found that for every hectare of coca eradicated, farmers planted 1.2 hectares elsewhere, indicating the ineffectiveness of eradication without addressing key economic issues.

Implementing Alternative Development Programmes

Many programmes lack long term funding and do not offer sustained financial support, causing farmers to revert to illicit crop cultivation in order to make ends meet. The Chapare region in Bolivia saw coca cultivation rebound after alternative development projects ended, highlighting the need for sustained support. These programmes often don't tackle issues like environmental conditions, cultural practices and market preferences when implementing these alternative strategies, making them redundant. Programmes focus solely on crop substitution without addressing broader development needs. For example, in conflict-affected areas, alternative development projects can be disrupted or destroyed by armed groups, making it only a short term form of relief for farmers, and not a long term solution.

Global Demand for Illicit Drugs

High demand in consumer countries, like the United States, incentivises farmers to continue the production of them. According to the UNODC World Drug Report 2023, over 296 million people used drugs in 2021, a 23% increase over the previous decade. The well established illicit trafficking networks ensure farmers have a stable market for their crops which makes it harder for them to switch to legal alternatives. High demand also ensures a profitable market for illicit crops, incentivizing production despite risks. These networks generally involve Transnational Criminal Organisations which makes it harder for them to dismantle such complicated, deep networks. To add on, trafficking networks quickly adapt to changing demand patterns, shifting production methods or locations as needed.

Balancing Human Rights with Drug Control

Finding the balance between prosecuting small-scale farmers who grow illicit crops needs to be eradicated, and the emphasis on providing such farmers with legal alternatives rather than punishment needs to be implemented because harsh punitive measures can violate farmers rights and foster poverty and these programmes usually don't involve local communities in decision-making. Additionally, only a development based approach may not address the problem of criminal organizations which host the market for such illicit crops. Thus a balance between Social and Economic development and Punitive measures needs to be accounted for. For example, Peru's San Martín Model demonstrated success by combining alternative development with improved governance and community involvement.

Environmental Challenges

The cultivation of illicit crops leads to environmental challenges like large-scale deforestation, forced fumigation and eradication of crops also increases environmental degradation. Intensive monoculture of illicit crops can deplete soil nutrients and can destroy habitats which impacts local ecosystems. Even legal alternatives of agriculture, like coffee or cacao also have environmental implications. Sustainable farming practices should be implemented in order to prevent more environmental harm. In Colombia, coca cultivation was responsible for the destruction of nearly 300,000 hectares of forest between 2001 and 2019.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a leading producer of opium poppy, which is processed into morphine, heroin, and codeine. According to the UNODC Afghanistan Opium Poppy

Survey, in 2018, the country's opium poppy cultivation area was estimated at 263,000 hectares, surpassing any other nation. This is largely due to the poppy's central role in the Afghan economy, especially in rural areas where entire communities rely on it. The lack of viable alternatives means Afghan farmers are heavily dependent on this crop, which supports around 354,000 full-time jobs through activities like weeding and harvesting. For many, it is essential for their livelihood

Colombia

Colombia is one of the top producers of coca and opium plants, the raw materials for cocaine and heroin. Along with Bolivia and Peru, Colombia accounts for over 98% of global cocaine supplies. Around 4 million families in these countries depend on these crops, living in isolated rural regions. These families often face exploitation by middlemen working for narcotics traffickers, and they also live under the constant threat of government-led crop eradication efforts. Despite this, it is believed that the majority of the 700,000 families involved in the trade would switch to legal alternatives if tailored solutions that meet their community needs were available.

Mexico

Mexico is also a significant producer of opium poppy, the largest in the Americas. In 2016-2017, Mexico's opium poppy cultivation reached 30,600 hectares. Much like Afghanistan, the production of illicit crops in Mexico is driven by poverty and the influence of organized crime. For many poor farmers, growing opium poppy offers a high-paying, albeit dangerous, job secured by criminal networks. This high demand for narcotics, coupled with the lack of other economic opportunities, leads many to participate in the illicit drug trade.

Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, known as the Golden Triangle, the region contributes over 60% of the world's opium production and is a key player in the global heroin trade. The

narcotics industry in this area has had devastating social and economic impacts, including widespread corruption, illness, and social instability. The rise of organized crime and the spread of diseases like AIDS are directly linked to the heroin trade, which continues to destabilize the region and hinder economic growth.

United States

Although the United States is not a major producer of narcotic crops, its role as one of the largest consumers of illicit drugs contributes significantly to the global problem. The demand from the U.S. creates a strong incentive for countries like Mexico and Afghanistan to continue cultivating these crops. The U.S. government has recognized this issue and has supported various initiatives, such as Plan Colombia, to combat drug trafficking and reduce illicit crop cultivation globally.

Development of Issue/Timeline

| Date | Event | Outcome |
|------|---|--|
| 1961 | The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs | Consolidated previous treaties to control narcotic drugs and established a framework for controlling the cultivation of illicit crops |
| 1988 | The United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances | The Convention addressed drug trafficking and the production of illicit drugs, and called upon international co-operation in eradicating illicit cultivation and |

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| | | encouraged various crop substitution programmes |
| 1998 | UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) 1998 | Set the goal to eliminate/ significantly reduce coca, cannabis and opium poppy cultivation by 2008, by targeting root causes of illicit cultivation like poverty and lack of access to markets. |
| 1998 - 2008 | Establishment of the UNODC Global Illicit Crop Monitoring Programme (ICMP) | Surveys collected estimated the value of the illicit drug market in the area of interest, implemented through the help of the government in that area and ICMP project teams. |
| 2009 | The High-Level Segment of the 52nd Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) | The 2008 target of UNGASS was not met, and so a follow up was done, emphasizing on more balanced approaches and alternative development to tackle the agenda. |
| 2016 | UN General Assembly Special Session on World Drug Problem | Moved past punitive legal based solutions to problems and shifted to strategies involving human rights, public health and sustainable |

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| | | development in terms of providing infrastructure and promoting rural development. It was created in light of the failure to meet 2008 and 2019 reduction targets and was a stepping point to identifying new methods of reducing illicit crop production. |
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Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

UNODC “Strategic Vision” for Africa 2023

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched a long term strategy to tackle the issue of illicit crop cultivation in Africa, with Africa being a major stakeholder in this agenda. The strategy includes boosting alternative livelihoods and sustainable development by strengthening legal frameworks, reducing poverty and increasing access to legal economic means of production. However, it addresses complex, long-standing challenges that require sustained effort over time, including organized crime, terrorism, corruption, and drug trafficking and UNODC continues to call for international support and redoubled efforts to address these issues, recognizing that much work remains to be done.

The UNGASS 2016 Follow-up: “Comprehensive Policy on Drugs.”

The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs aimed to align drug control policies with human rights and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The shift in policy moved away from militarized approaches into resolutions that consider the social and economic conditions which drive illicit crop cultivation. However, there were significant differences between countries advocating for more progressive,

health-oriented policies and those favoring traditional prohibition and law enforcement approaches. Additionally, Many countries lacked the resources or political will to fully implement the multifaceted approach.

The Global Action for Sustainable Development (GLO.ACT) (2020-present)

The initiative was led by UNODC in collaboration with the European Union. It emphasized on the approach wherein anti drug efforts directly align with Sustainable Development Goals, linking it with education, healthcare and economic resilience with communities affected by the dependency on illicit economies. However, events like the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan created barriers to implementation or the isolation of Iran which led to the near-complete suspension of the project in Iran. Hence, the project was not reaching as many target groups as ideally it should.

The World Bank's Support for Rural Livelihoods and Alternative Development (2018-present)

The World Bank partnered with countries like Peru, Colombia and Myanmar, where illicit crop cultivation is prevalent within communities, and invested in better infrastructure, education and healthcare and by improving access to markets and basic services, the bank aims to provide long-term alternatives to drug economies. However, the poorest among the poor, including tribal people, scheduled castes, migrants, and minorities, still face exclusion from some program benefits. To add on, the political economy of program implementation varies across states.

Possible Solutions

Supply and Demand Reduction

Policies aimed at reducing both the production (supply) of illicit drugs and the consumer base (demand). This includes law enforcement strategies, education programs, and rehabilitation services. Increased transparency in agricultural supply chains would

help monitor the development of alternative initiatives to illicit crop cultivation. While this comprehensive approach tackles aspects of the drug problem, it has faced criticism for its heavy reliance on law enforcement, which can lead to human rights abuses and affect marginalized communities.

Land Tenure Security

Promote land tenure reforms in areas where illicit crop cultivation is widespread. By securing land rights, farmers' dependency on criminal organizations would be reduced, allowing them to participate in formal agricultural markets. This would address the root cause of the cultivation of illicit crops which is poverty. This approach shows promise in addressing the underlying economic factors driving illicit crop cultivation. However, implementation can be challenging in areas with weak governance or ongoing conflicts. The long-term impact on reducing illicit crop cultivation still needs more research.

Encourage public-private partnerships

Promoting partnerships between stakeholder governments and international development agencies, countries can ensure a viable market for alternative crops like coffee, cacao and tropical fruits. This can be fostered through agricultural training and equipping farmers with certain skills to grow legal crops. They can provide the resources and market access needed to make alternative development programs sustainable. However, care must be taken to ensure that these partnerships benefit local communities and don't lead to exploitation. The success of such programs often depends on broader economic conditions and global market demands for alternative crops.

Income diversification

Invest in conditional cash transfers to provide immediate financial relief to communities shifting away from illicit crop cultivation and encourage a diversity of

incomes other than agriculture like eco-tourism, renewable energy product creation or handicrafts, this would reduce the dependency on illicit crops while providing an alternative long term solution. This can provide more stable and resilient livelihoods for rural communities. But, the success of such programs depends on the availability of viable alternative economic opportunities in remote and underdeveloped regions. The implementation of conditional cash transfers must be carefully designed to avoid creating dependency and debt.

Healthcare Access

Addressing the public health risks associated with illicit crop cultivation for both the suppliers and consumers, promoting primary healthcare services would help mitigate the effects of long-term illicit crop production on the people. Improving healthcare access can remove some of the negative impacts of the drug trade on local communities. It aligns with a more health-oriented approach to drug policy. However, it doesn't directly address the economic factors driving illicit crop cultivation.

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Appendix

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