

2008 World Drug Report: A More Pragmatic Approach Needed to Combat Illicit Drug Use

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), a global leader in the multilateral effort against illicit drugs and international crime, publishes World Drug Report (WDR) annually since 1999. WDR 2008 presents comprehensive information and statistics on the illicit drug situation including detailed estimates and trends on production, trafficking and consumption in the four main drug markets namely opium/heroin, coca/cocaine, cannabis, and amphetamine-type stimulants. In addition, it contains an in-depth look at the development of the international drug control system.

KEY FINDINGS

The World Drug Report 2008 shows that the stabilization trends in the world drugs market is under threat because of a surge in opium and coca cultivation in rebel-held areas of Afghanistan and Colombia(1). Higher drug use in developing countries could also undermine recent progress in drug control. The report mentions that about one in every twenty people aged between 15 to 64 years have tried drugs at least once in the past 12 months. Out of these, about 10% (26 million people or 0.6% of adult population) are 'Problem drug users' (people with severe drug dependence). Illicit drugs kill around 200,000 people a year worldwide in comparison with figures of 5 million and 2.5 million, respectively for tobacco and alcohol(1). There are an estimated 165.5 million users of cannabis products compared with 24.7 million users of amphetamines, 16 million users of cocaine, 12 million users of heroin and 9 million users of the psychedelic methamphetamine drug known as ecstasy(1).

The Afghan opium cultivation is responsible for 92% of its production in the world(1). Afghanistan

had a record opium harvest in 2007 because of which the world's illegal opium production almost doubled since 2005. Most cultivation (80 per cent) took place in 5 southern provinces, which are the most unstable. The Taliban, the extremist group in Afghanistan that controls almost entire poppy crops, earned \$200 million to \$400 million last year through taxes on poppy growers and drug traffickers in areas under its control. The Afghan poppy farmers and drug traffickers last year earned about \$4 billion, half of the country's national income(2). The situation in Afghanistan is most disturbing and has far reaching security implications for India. Increased flow of drugs by Taliban through Pakistan is bound to affect India and make it a transit zone. Drug money finances terrorism which has been intensified against India in recent times. Large availability of drug money may facilitate the traffic of terrorists, corrupt border security personnel and finance formation of more terrorist cells in India(3).

The same pattern is evident in Colombia, where coca cultivation increased by a quarter (27 per cent) in 2007. Coca leaf and cocaine production were highly concentrated: ten municipalities accounted for almost half of all cocaine production and for one third of the cultivation. A "heroin tsunami" is starting to wash up on shores of Europe, which is seeing a fall in heroin prices on the street.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS?

The present Report is based on data obtained primarily from the annual reports questionnaire (ARQ) sent by Governments to UNODC in 2007. Two of the main limitations herein are: (i) ARQ reporting is not systematic enough, both in terms of number of countries responding and of content, and (ii) most countries lack the adequate monitoring systems required to produce reliable, comprehensive and internationally comparable data. National monitoring systems are, however, improving and UNODC has contributed to this process. The title of the Report is also a misnomer. It should more explicitly depict what it denotes, and

instead of 'drug', 'illicit drug' would have been a more appropriate term to use.

WHAT IS NEEDED?

The world today is not any closer to achieving the ten-year targets of "eliminating or significantly reducing the illicit cultivation of coca bush, the cannabis plant and the opium poppy by 2008" set by the 1998 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs(4). Instead global production of opiates and cocaine has significantly increased over the last ten years. More resources are needed to prevent people from taking illicit drugs, to treat those who are dependent, and to reduce the adverse health and social consequences of drug abuse. The drug control should be looked at in the larger context of crime prevention and the rule of law in order to cut links between drug trafficking, organized crime, corruption and terrorism.

In the past decade international drug control emphasized eradication of illicit crops, before having alternative livelihoods in place. Hundreds of thousands of peasants have been condemned to poverty and robbed of a life in dignity. In several key producing countries, crop eradication has aggravated violent conflict rather than contributing to conflict resolution(4). Eradicating poverty and hunger, the number one Millennium Goal, should be a clear priority. Drug control efforts should never lead to more poverty and hunger, as now often happens with the opium bans and forced eradication(4). When formulating policies on drugs, there should be full participation by all the main players: farmers, users, health care practitioners, and local and international NGOs working closely with them(4).

The current approach to drug control has failed. The ideology of 'zero tolerance' needs to be replaced by the more pragmatic approach that favors policies capable of reducing drug-related harms as far as possible, for the consumer and for society in general. Drug control policies should be based on evidence and experience and should fully respect human rights; otherwise, we might see another ten years of failure.

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