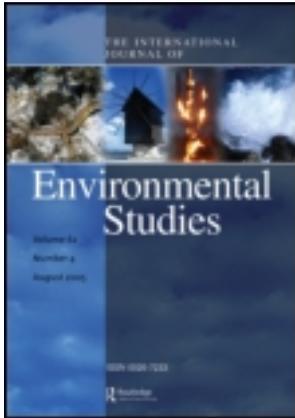


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Finding an alternative to illicit opium production in Afghanistan, and elsewhere

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Prohibition attempts have failed for over a century, as the case of Afghanistan shows. There are many and complex reasons for this. Illicit opium production has benefited from synergies between war economies and drug economies, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It has also thrived on economic under development and poverty. Part of the problem is that illicit opium production largely outlives war and that economic development can only occur in countries and regions where peace prevails. What is needed to reduce poppy cultivation is broad and equitable economic development. Ignoring the causes of opium production or making them worse by increasing poverty through forced eradication, will compromise antidrug policies and stabilisation efforts.

Keywords: Opium; Afghanistan; Counternarcotics; Eradication; Development; War

The failure of over a century of prohibition of *certain*¹ drugs – opium included – is now obvious. In fact, one hundred years of global prohibition and a 40-year US-led global War on Drugs have failed to suppress illicit opium production. It is even likely that these efforts at suppression have spurred and displaced production in an increasing number of countries (from Thailand to Burma, from Pakistan and Iran to Afghanistan, from Southeast Asia to Southwest Asia). Development-based policies, which were designed in the early 1970s, also failed to drive illicit opium production down. Following the Shanghai International Opium Commission, convened by the United States (1909), opium production was to become illicit except when destined for medical uses. In 1906, 41,624 tonnes of opium had been produced worldwide: 85% in China (35,364 tonnes) and 12% in British India (5177 tonnes) [1].

This first step toward a global prohibition of *certain* drugs was going to prove successful, at least initially; since the suppression of opium production in China and in India eventually led to the emergence of illicit production in the so-called Golden Triangle (Burma, Laos, Thailand) and Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan) areas of Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia. Following the multilateral efforts of the League of Nations (1919–1946), then of the United Nations (founded in 1945), and after the Communist government in Beijing succeeded in eliminating opium production in China in 1949–1959, the

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global illicit opium output plunged to as little as 1066 tonnes in 1970 [1]. World opium production was drastically reduced, but the areas where the opium poppy thrived had changed. Indeed, south of recently opium-free China (1959) a new major opium producing region had emerged: mainland Southeast Asia's so-called Golden Triangle. In 1970, 67% of the world's illicit opium was harvested in the Golden Triangle and 23% in the Golden Crescent.

Yet, by 1989 illicit worldwide production of opium had increased by 218% to 3395 tons [2] and a marked change in the relative importance of producing countries had taken place. In 1989, Burma, whose many and complex internal conflicts had spurred opium production, was still the world's first illicit producer of opium. In fact, it was producing more opium than the entire world in 1970, with 1544 tons or 45% of the global illicit output. But a challenger for world supremacy emerged to the west of the Himalayas: Afghanistan, whose opium output had increased 800% in 30 years (from 130 tons in 1970 to 1200 tons in 1989) and represented 35% of the world total. Alone, in 1989 Afghanistan was also producing more opium than the entire world in 1970. At the close of the 1980s then, the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent together supplied 96% of the world's illicit opium – a percentage that has remained virtually unchanged into the 2000s. Then, in a matter of a few years, Afghanistan's opium output snowballed, breaking record after record (3416 tons in 1994, 4565 tons in 1999 and 6100 tons in 2006) and in 2007 its huge 8200-tonne opium crop reportedly amounted to 93% of the global output. In 2007, Afghanistan produced more opium than the entire world in 2006 (6610 tons) [3].

Afghan opium production slightly decreased during the following years and was even halved in 2010 (3600 tons) due to a plant disease [4], while Southeast Asia's output was on the increase (poppy cultivation in the region almost doubled between 2006 and 2010) [5]. The huge and quick decrease of Afghanistan's opium production is reminiscent of but not similar to what happened in 2001–2002 after the Taliban 2000 opium ban. This caused a fall in opium production, from 3300 tonnes in 2000 to 185 tonnes in 2001. The brutal income shortage experienced by opium farmers in 2001–2002 was not repeated in 2010. For those farmers in the south that did cultivate, did not experience a fall in income that matched their loss in yield (around 40%): they more than gained in price as farm gate prices increased by four to five fold. The opium ban issued by the Taliban in 2000 failed by its very success: the economic shock that it caused to the country and to the poorest of its farmers made the ban clearly futile. It drove opium prices up, and encouraged cultivation in provinces where cultivation had previously been uneconomic due to low yields. The ban also made any legal economic alternative to opium production all the more difficult, since opium prices remained too high for most legal agricultural productions to compete with poppy cultivation.

Finding an alternative to illicit opium production in Afghanistan only became more difficult after the 2000 ban and the subsequent fall of the Taliban (December 2001), not only because of economic reasons but also because of rising insecurity – mostly after the Taliban's insurgency in 2004 and especially 2006 – and corruption. Insecurity hampered both development programs and forced eradication campaigns, while corruption stimulated, and benefited from, opium production. Worse, counter-insurgency eventually undermined counter-narcotics, and vice versa [6]. In the mean time, poverty and food insecurity – the main drivers of illicit opium production – were not confronted and opium production kept rising.

War, food insecurity, and opium

The steady increase in global opium production observed since the early 1970s occurred in spite of the many efforts deployed by the international community to suppress or reduce illegal opium poppy cultivation worldwide. Illicit opium production has increased despite countless forced eradication campaigns and in spite of many crop substitution and alternative development programs. It can even be argued that the increase of illicit opium production is due, at least to some extent, to the forced eradication campaigns. Of course, the reasons for such a global failure are many and complex, rooted in the long history and politics of Asia and of the poppy. First and foremost, opium production has benefited from the turmoil of Asian history and geopolitics. The nineteenth-century Opium Wars, the twentieth-century Cold War and its many local conflicts waged by proxy in Burma, Laos and Afghanistan, and even the twenty-first-century War on Terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan have spurred Asia's illicit opium production [3]. Illicit drug economies and war economies share a long common history and have shared many territories in Asia and elsewhere.

Yet, illicit opium production has not benefited only from synergies between war economies and drug economies. It has also thrived on economic under development and poverty, whether war-induced or not: it is now widely acknowledged that the vast majority of Asian opium farmers grow poppies in order to cope with poverty and, above all, food insecurity. But despite the fact that the vast majority of Asian opium farmers are among the poorest of the poor, many observers and policy-makers still doubt that they engage in illegal opium production out of need – and not out of greed. In 2007, even the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has bluntly argued that Afghan opium production was not linked to poverty – quite the opposite [7]. In fact, as shown by history and geography, illicit opium production never thrives better than when war and poverty overlap, as in Afghanistan and Burma.

Part of the problem, in both Afghanistan and Burma, is that illicit opium production largely outlives war. Obviously, peace-building is a difficult task and peace is hard to obtain and sustain. But war often transforms political and economic realities and dynamics to such an extent that time is needed for war-torn countries to achieve transition from war economies to peace economies. To bring an end to illicit opium production has proven as difficult – if not more – as ending wars – and perhaps poverty – in the countries where poppies are illegally grown. In predominantly rural countries such as Afghanistan and Burma, whose conflicts have lasted for decades and have stalled economic growth and development, it seems that the suppression of illicit opium production can only follow – and proceed from – the establishment of peace and the initial reconstruction of the state and of the economy.

But for decades now, especially since the launch of Richard Nixon's war on drugs in 1971, drug supply reduction has been the main goal of antidrug policies. By reducing or suppressing the supply of drugs in foreign countries it was thought, erroneously, that drug prices would rise on the US retail markets, thereby deterring Americans from consuming drugs and forcing them to quit or seek medical treatment [8]. Nevertheless, attempts to reduce and suppress drugs supply failed to diminish not only production but also consumption since new production kept increasing, notably by developing in new areas. Drugs actually became more easily available, cheaper, and purer [9].

Yet, despite its past failures and its lack of cost-effectiveness and despite the stimuli of prohibition, drug supply reduction is not impossible. One of the main reasons why drug supply reduction has failed during the past decades is that it has been conducted through the US-led global war on drugs and its mostly repressive methods, that is, through forced eradication of illicit crops. While development-based approaches have long existed (crop substitution and alternative development) it is only during recent years that international drug policy discourses have revealed ‘an increasing acceptance of the alleged need to integrate AD [alternative development] concepts into a so-called comprehensive “three-pronged strategy of eradication, interdiction and alternative development”’ [10].

But interdiction, eradication, and development have failed to solve the ‘opium problem’ everywhere and especially in Afghanistan, because interdiction and eradication without development is futile and amounts to further deterioration of the livelihoods of opium farmers, and because alternative development is far from having been implemented with adequate economic means and political determination.

The failure of drug supply reduction

There are many reasons why prohibition and drug supply reduction have failed but in the end it appears that this failure has been blamed more on insufficient means than on ill-conceived policies and programs. In fact, the war on drugs has been regularly reinforced and expanded rather than scaled down; in part because a heated debate has long opposed the proponents of forced eradication to the advocates of alternative development, which led to a deadlock and therefore to the repetition of past mistakes.

Drug supply reduction has long been a very controversial issue, not only because of the long-lasting opposition between ideology and rationality but also because of ignorance, misunderstanding, or disagreement about the causes of illicit opium production and the motivations of opium farmers. As a consequence, the failure of both forced eradication and alternative development has not been properly analysed and understood. Yet, it now appears that the main reason why antidrug policies have failed during the past decades largely lies in the fact that both eradication and alternative development have focused on illicit drug production and not on its causes. Alternative development has not proved to be more successful than forced eradication in suppressing or diminishing illicit opium production; notably because it has never been properly implemented (both in scope and means). What alternative development and forced eradication share, beyond their failure, is their focus on drug production rather than on its causes. Yet forced eradication not only fails its ultimate goal, it also often produces worse poverty instead of reducing it. In any case, economic development (whether it is called ‘alternative development’ or not) has had mixed results mostly because of design and implementation flaws, not necessarily because it is the wrong approach.

It is now common knowledge that poverty and food insecurity are the main drivers of illicit opium production, something that, according to UNODC, explains the rebound of opium poppy cultivation in Southeast Asia since 2006 [5]. Therefore, their own causes also need to be identified and confronted, no matter how diverse and complex they may be (labour-intensive rice production and little workforce in Southeast Asia versus limited land availability and large households in Afghanistan), if illegal poppy cultivation is to be diminished or suppressed [3]. Since farmers who have to cope with poverty and food insecurity are those who mostly resort to illicit opium production, what is needed in order to

achieve drug supply reduction is broad and equitable economic development, especially in rural areas. Obviously, since illicit agricultural production tends to occur in remote and hardly accessible areas where the writ of the state barely extends, economic development must reach even the most far-flung areas and populations. Yet, history shows us that in the same way that alternative development has never been properly funded, on a global basis rural development and agriculture have also long been neglected.

Finding an alternative

No matter how diverse Afghan farmers are, they find themselves in a very similar yet very different situation as many of them belong to large households who have to cope with land scarcity and food insecurity. In this semiarid to arid country where irrigation is often crucial for agricultural production, decades of war have contributed to the prolonged lack of water for agriculture, destroying traditional irrigation channels and displacing significant segments of the population. Also, consecutive years of drought have made matters worse. Years of research have shown how Afghan resource-poor households who do not have access to enough land and do not benefit from good irrigation are the most likely to resort to opium production [11]. Such research shows that when lack of land and water allows one annual wheat crop instead of two (and in some cases three) and when the drought affects yields, many Afghan farmers tend to dedicate some of their winter land – if not most of it – to poppy cultivation. Opium production has been shown to be clearly linked to the ups and downs of wheat production and therefore to wheat availability, prices, and market [11].

Opium is a cash crop that is favoured by many Asian farmers when other available cash crops are too difficult to market (either because of distance or deficient transport networks) or are less profitable (because of market prices). Yet it is often explained, in a rather simplistic way, that illicit agricultural production is chosen because of its unbeatable superior economic profitability; and therefore that it is near impossible for legal agricultural productions to compete with opium. Of course, illicit agricultural production often yields gross revenues that are much higher than those allowed by licit agricultural production. But opium is produced less because of its price differential with wheat than because of food insecurity, lack of land availability, large workforce, and lack of off-farm employment. In fact, despite its alleged high profitability, Afghan opium production is far from having ever replaced wheat production in Afghanistan, where the 2006 record-high 165,000 hectares of poppies accounted only for 3.65% of its arable land [12].

While the economic superiority of opium is real, it is also very relative. And this superiority is far from always corresponding to high or even low profitability: opium production is a consequence of poverty and food insecurity but rarely constitutes a way out of poverty. In fact, opium farmers have obviously very little choice but to engage in a production that is very labour-intensive and suffers from high production costs. Opium production is a consequence rather than a cause of the Afghan turmoil and must be confronted through its causes: more than the economic superiority of opium it is the drivers of opium production that matter. Therefore eradication or simple crop substitution falls short of solving the very causes of opium production. Finding and promoting legal crops is only one of the ways of making opium production less profitable, since ‘opium poppy cultivation is not purely a function of the income that it generates’ [13]. Consequently, development programs must not only propose alternative development to opium farmers but also tackle the

socio-economic and political drivers of opium production if illegal poppy cultivation is to be stopped, or at least considerably reduced. Economic development will not only confront these drivers but will also render opium production less profitable and competitive – notably by making off-farm employment more accessible and by rising wages and labour costs (further diminishing the relative economic superiority of opium production given its high labour requirement).

From simply trying to substitute one crop by another to combating the structural causes of illicit agricultural production, the practice of development in drug-producing areas has greatly changed over the decades. The emergence in the early 2000s of ‘alternative livelihoods’ programs is the last step in a 30-year trend to complexity. It is now becoming more widely acknowledged that forced eradication has largely proved to be inefficient and futile (both economically and, in the context of Afghanistan, strategically) and that development efforts should first and foremost focus on the conditions that make opium production imperative for the resource-poor farmers: access to credit, access to land, and development of off-farm and non-farm income opportunities.

Peace before development

From a more political point of view, it is obvious that no development agenda can be reasonably set without first strengthening the state, civil society, and democracy. Obviously, economic development, whether in rural or in urban areas, can only occur in countries and regions where peace prevails and is sustainable. This is hardly the case in Afghanistan, the world’s principal illicit opium producer. In late 2010, nine years after the Taliban regime was toppled, Afghanistan was still far from having achieved peace, notably because the Taliban-led insurgency has considerably weakened the overall security needed for reconstruction and economic development.

Of course, the drug trade is often denounced for allegedly widely funding – if not driving – the insurgency and for fuelling the wide-scale corruption of Afghan authorities. Yet, while it is true that the large cash inflows generated by the opium economy fund the insurgency and fuel corruption, at least to some extent, it is wrong to assume that the suppression of opium production would result in putting down the insurgency or in ending corruption. After all, corruption is also funded by diverted economic aid. In the same way that the failure to recognize the causes of opium production will compromise any antidrug policy, neglecting the causes and mechanisms of conflicts and corruption will prevent or largely postpone their solving. In sum, the causes and motivations of conflicts and corruption and the causes of opium production must be surmounted for peace building, state building, reconstruction, and the development of a legal economy to take place in Afghanistan or anywhere else. Until the conflicts and political crises of Afghanistan have been solved all antidrug efforts there will most likely be futile.

It is crucial to understand that opium production is more a consequence of Afghanistan’s lawlessness, instability, and poverty than its cause. Opium production clearly proceeds from poverty and food insecurity, from Afghanistan to Burma and Laos, where it is a coping mechanism and a livelihood strategy. Opium production is a vital element in livelihood strategies of part of the Afghan rural population, providing peasants not only with a source of income, but also with access to land and credit. It is, therefore, poverty and the shortcomings of the Afghan agrarian system that should be tackled if illicit opium production eventually is to be curtailed. It also appears that proper sequencing is key to successful

antidrug policies. No matter how adequately designed and funded counternarcotics policies may be, if forced eradication is undertaken before or during economic development programs (whatever their scope and name: alternative development or alternative livelihoods programs), or if economic development is undertaken before peace building and state building are well underway, no decrease or suppression of illicit opium production will be possible.

Note

1. Depending on how drugs are defined, not all drugs were prohibited: alcohol and tobacco were not.

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