Drugs, development and violence in war-to-peace transitions

Voices from the borderlands

War-to-peace transitions are often shaped by illicit economies, particularly in borderland regions. In these areas, the production, trade and use of drugs are integral to both development and conflict. There is growing recognition of the need to align drug, development and peace building policies. But developing more effective and integrated policies means taking into account the complex trade-offs between these fields.

Voices from the borderlands

Voices from the borderlands 2020 focuses on the testimonies of people living in border areas of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, gathered during field research for Drugs & (dis)order.

All three countries have experienced years of violent conflict and have some form of ongoing peace process. Together, they also account for more than 80% of illicit global opium production and some 70% of global cocaine production (UNODC World Drug Report 2019); their borderlands are hubs in transnational drug economies.

The voices of people from these borderlands challenge the assumption that development, peacebuilding and counter-narcotics are mutually reinforcing. They offer insights into the intersections and tensions between drugs, livelihoods and experiences of violence along the drugs value chain: from production in Colombia, to trade and transport in Afghanistan, to consumption in Myanmar.

This policy brief shares some of these insights, and reflects on their implications for those supporting peace processes, poverty alleviation and development in fragile contexts affected by drugs.
A policy impasse

In practice, there are barriers to reconciling drugs, development and peacebuilding policies. Within the drugs control community, drugs continue to be treated primarily as a law enforcement problem. At the same time, many development and peacebuilding agencies are reluctant to engage directly with the issue of drugs.

In countries affected by illicit economies and struggling to transition from war to peace, there is often a disconnect between agencies working on drugs, and those working on development and peacebuilding. Whilst these different mandates carry significance for the agencies themselves, they often make little sense for local communities and public officials attempting to grapple with the challenges of violence, illicit economies and chronic poverty.

As well as overcoming the disconnects between agencies, difficult questions need to be asked about the trade-offs between drug policy goals, poverty alleviation, and efforts to reduce levels of large-scale armed violence.

The relationship between counter-narcotics, pro-poor development, peace and statebuilding objectives is neither straightforward, nor necessarily complementary.
In Afghanistan we look at trafficking, talking to opium traders and transporters.

In Colombia we look at production, talking to coca growers and pickers.

In Myanmar we look at drug consumption, talking to communities affected by rising levels of drug use.
Rethinking the relationship between drugs, development and violence in war-to-peace transitions

The testimonies in Voices from the borderlands 2020 suggest several entry points for re-thinking the relationship between drugs, development and violence, including those below. In particular, these challenge the conventional assumptions that drugs are necessarily counter to development and peacebuilding, or that economic development will automatically dismantle illegal drug economies and provide a foundation for peace.

Illicit economies: think in terms of livelihoods, poverty and inequality

Drug economies cannot be tackled primarily as a crime and security issue; they are a long-term, complex development issue. Simplistic narratives of drugs as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for poverty alleviation are to be cautioned against. Instead, we need to analyse the distributional impacts of drug economies in different places and times, asking ‘who benefits?’ and ‘who loses?’

Drug production: change the way drug producers are viewed

In Colombia, coca growers and pickers gave us a clear message: they are peasant farmers, not wealthy narco-criminals. Despite facing social, economic and political exclusion, they are also organised and active citizens.

A peasant coca farmer, a normal farm owner, just like with any other crop, gets up, [makes sure] everyone has breakfast, organises the pickers. (Female former coca farmer, Santa Marta, Colombia.)

In Colombia, many borderland households can invest in education, healthcare and land because of coca, but also live with the increased violence and insecurity that coca brings.

In Afghanistan, testimonies show how illicit trading networks are central to household incomes in the borderlands, but how increased trade flows have created both economic opportunities and growing inequality.

In Myanmar, opium production is essential to the livelihoods of many poor households, but changing patterns of drug use are creating new forms of vulnerability and poverty.
Drug trade: see endemic violence as integral to illicit and licit economies

Voices from Afghanistan’s borderlands challenge the commonly held idea that the drugs trade is exceptionally violent. They indicate that violence and coercion, or the threat of coercion, are central to the functioning of all trading networks. Small-scale traders and transporters are vulnerable to exploitation and violence at the hands of government and opposition forces alike. This suggests that tackling illicit economies and extending state control will not necessarily deliver less violent and more secure livelihoods.

We don’t know what party to pay money to. It is a bad situation and we don’t know enemy from friend. (Trader, Ghani Khel, Nangarhar, Afghanistan.)

Drug use: contextualise drug harm

In Myanmar, people from across Kachin and Shan States expressed concern that drug-related harms have grown in the wake of the ceasefires and amidst forms of economic development. Worsening drug harms, especially amongst young people, must be understood against a backdrop of ongoing systemic marginalisation of ethnic minority populations, a lack of opportunities, and easy access to cheap drugs. This warns against assumptions that reductions in armed conflict and investment in borderlands will necessarily provide a way to address drug issues.

Instead, it emphasises the need to assess what kind of ‘peace’ and ‘development’ actually materialises in borderlands.

After the ceasefire...road construction started, then the logging started in the area. The heroin started coming in when the area became more populated. Then the local youth started using different kinds of drugs. (Elderly man, Kachin State, Myanmar.)

War-to-peace transitions: focus in on reducing violence

Borderland communities referred to a wide range of individual and collective violence. These included: continued large-scale violence involving government forces and non-state armed groups in northern Myanmar and Nangarhar province in Afghanistan; the violence associated with counter-narcotics policies and interventions, including the forced eradication of coca in Colombia; the ‘slow violence’ linked to exploitative labour practices and extensive drug (ab) use in Shan State, Myanmar; the bombing of drugs labs in Afghanistan; and interdiction efforts on the Nimroz border that resulted in smuggling networks becoming increasingly militarised, and the use or threat of coercion in order to close, police and manage borders.

As well as showing the diversity and embeddedness of violence, these testimonies also showed that ceasefires and peace agreements can expose borderland populations to new and different forms of violence.

Read Jangul’s story

This comic tells the story of Jangul, a man from Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. From helping his father in the poppy fields as a child, to smuggling heroin all the way to Moscow as an adult, opium has been a part of his life through conflict and desperation, and relative peace and prosperity.

Recognising trade-offs

Alternative approaches to war-to-peace transitions must start by recognising that both policymakers, and individuals and communities living in drug-affected environments, face tough trade-offs. The narrative of ‘win-win’ solutions is an illusion. Recognising the trade-offs faced, and the context that determines them, gives an understanding of who wins and who loses from policy decisions. These testimonies highlight just some of the complex trade-offs found in drug-affected contexts.

Income vs. violence

Households face trade-offs when deciding whether to engage in illicit economies, often constantly balancing short-term survival and long-term development. In the Colombian borderlands, for example, coca-producing communities have obtained significant socio-economic advances, but at the cost of enduring violence.

*The state has abandoned us and we survive with the coca bush because we have to. Many of us have become more aware, with so many deaths [of the problems coca brings...] If there were opportunities, no one would work with coca because it's enslaving* (Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, Colombia.)

Licit vs. illicit crops

High levels of informal land tenure and deficient transport infrastructure in coca-producing areas make it very difficult for peasant families in Colombia’s borderlands to participate in licit agricultural markets. The National Illicit Crop Substitution Programme (PNIS), part of the 2016 peace agreement, was supposed to be tied to improvements in rural infrastructure and access to public services. However, so far, the government has done little to advance these aspects of PNIS.

Violence of armed conflict vs. the ‘slow violence’ of drugs

In Myanmar, although ceasefire agreements helped to reduce levels of outright armed conflict in many areas, they left populations vulnerable to the ‘slow violence’ of drug misuse.

*Drugs destroyed our family, I really don’t like it, we will never be successful... Even if we have just 1 or 2 kg of rice, he [my husband] exchanges it for drugs.* (Woman, Nantu township, Shan State, Myanmar.)

Under ceasefires in borderland regions, strong links also emerged between drugs and some of the systems of armed peacetime governance and certain economic sectors, especially mining.

Opportunity and investment vs. inequality and insecurity

In Afghan frontier towns such as Ziranj in Nimroz province, rapid accumulation linked to licit and illicit trade has been accompanied by investments in housing and public services, and regional roads and infrastructure. But there are trade-offs for people living in the area. Boom towns can be unruly, violent and insecure places; and a new class of elites is associated with large-scale corruption, land seizures and rising inequality.

Border security vs. borderland livelihoods

Iran and Pakistan have both tightened their respective borders with Afghanistan, with significant consequences for local economies. One testimony describes the negative impact on young people of a wall built along the border.

*When this border was open, young people were busy trading and transporting business goods, but currently there are no work opportunities and youths can’t go for work to Iran... So, they risk their lives to provide for their families and smuggle drugs in the night, which is their only source of income.* (Ex-Militia Commander, Zaranj City, Nimroz, Afghanistan.)
Bringing a borderland perspective to policy debates

Governments often frame better political and economic integration of borderlands as key to addressing illicit economies. But our research suggests that the drivers of marginality and illicit economies in the borderlands is less about a lack of integration between centres and margins, and more about the ways these processes of integration are imposed, resisted and brokered.

Drugs are the subject of multiple and contested narratives, dominated by those associated with national elites and international donors. Participants in illicit borderland drug economies – producers, transporters or consumers – are scarcely represented in debates or decision-making at this level.

By listening more to voices like those from the borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, drugs policy and development specialists alike can become more attuned to the ways that illicit drug economies impact poverty alleviation, access to services, economic development, and strategies to fight inequality, human insecurity and reduce violence and harm.

They could begin to do this by:

- actively engaging with borderland perspectives, to better understand and address the factors that generate engagement in illicit economies
- using participatory approaches and political economy frameworks to develop strategies to overcome the silences and promote the interests of marginal groups
- building alliances and partnerships with social and political organisations that represent or are composed of marginal groups including those engaged in illicit economies
- questioning and countering the stigmatisation and stereotypes surrounding borderland communities involved in illicit economies
- integrating regional perspectives and ways of working into analysis and programming.


This briefing, based on Voices from the borderlands 2020, is a collective effort. It was drafted by Karen Brock with input from Louise Ball, Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan, but draws on many voices from the across the Drugs & (dis)order partnership.
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Front cover photo: Poppy farm in Chipwi Township, Kachin State. Photo by KRC. Below: Coca harvest, Puerto Asis, Colombia. Photo by Frances Thomson, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.