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Crop Substitution and Narcotics Control, 1972–2010

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1972, a UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (UNFAO) mission outlined four objectives to achieve drug control in Afghanistan:

1. The drafting and passing of new legislation and regulations;
2. The strengthening of the country's law enforcement capacity;
3. Measures of assistance to opium producers in 'hard-core' areas; and
4. Studies of the extent of drug addiction and the amelioration of related health problems.¹

Production of wet opium in Afghanistan at the time was estimated at approximately 200–300 metric tons (mt).

In April 2009, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) presented the Strategy Paper 2009–11 for Afghanistan. The priorities at the national level in counter narcotics were identified as:

1. Afghanisation of policy, planning and coordination in counter narcotics;
2. Upgrading the capacity of law enforcement agencies – an incremental approach;

3. Consolidating success: providing farmers with an alternative;
4. A curse to be avoided: drug addiction and HIV/AIDS.

In 2008, opium production peaked with 8,200 mt, falling to 6,900 mt in 2009. In 2010, only 3,600 mt were produced due to the spread of disease in major poppy growing areas. Because of a 164 per cent price increase at the farm gate in the same year, the overall value of the production remained the same.²

From 1972–2010, counter narcotics policy, strategy and programme formulation had not changed, with the narcotics control programme fluctuating in size according to the political situation in the country: The higher the political instability, the lower the implementation of narcotics control programmes. Simultaneously, the higher the instability, the higher the production of opium.

It was during the 1980s that opium poppy cultivation spread to previously unknown volumes in the Mujahedin-controlled areas in Afghanistan. From no recorded cultivation in the early 1980s, when Pakistan was the main producer of opium, 400–600 mt were produced in Afghanistan by the

¹ 'Problems Concerned with Narcotic Drugs in Afghanistan', Report of Joint UN/FAO Exploratory Mission, Sep–Oct 1972.

² 'Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010', UNODC, Summary Findings, September 2010, 2, available at www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afg_opium_survey_2010_exsum_web.pdf.

end of the 1980s. During the entire 1980s, no substantial narcotics control programme was implemented, except awareness campaigns on behalf of the then government. From 1990 onwards, cultivation expanded (2,000 mt in 1992–93, 2,200–2,400 mt in 1993–94) in the rural areas controlled by the Mujahedin factions, above all Nangarhar and Helmand, which accounted for 80 per cent of Afghan production in the 1994–95 season.

Under the Taleban, production remained steady at about 2,200–2,800 mt until a peak in 1999 with 4,500 mt. In 2000, the Taleban announced a complete ban on opium, resulting in only 185 mt production in 2001. From 2002 onwards, a steady increase followed to unprecedented heights in 2007 with 8,200 mt.³

The correlation between poppy production and insecurity in Afghanistan has now become part of the UNODC assessments in its regular reporting to the international community.⁴

Afghanistan is characterised as an area suffering from both drug cultivation and insurgency.⁵ The same report states that the heroin trade there is 'controlled by well-established trafficking networks of various sizes in cooperation with corrupt officials with a range of international connections.'⁶ Based on the development of the opium economy, it can now safely be assumed that the establishment of these networks dates back to the 1980s.

This brief focuses on the crop substitution approach, also called alternative development or alternative livelihood or rural development, in areas with narcotics production or variations thereof, as noted in the both of the points 3 above. Over the decades the programme's priority was always to substitute the poppy crop with other agricultural products rather than to develop a licit rural economy regardless of drug control issues.

2. NARCOTICS CONTROL AT THE CULTIVATION LEVEL, BEFORE AND AFTER

In the 1980s, while the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC),⁷ like other UN agencies, ran their main programmes from Peshawar, small projects were run in provinces bordering Pakistan. In November 1990, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) in its report on UN Programmes for Afghanistan reported, 'UNFDAC has funded NGOs to run small-scale programmes covering awareness-raising, detoxification and training. Crop substitution programmes cross-border have run into considerable difficulties and many in the UN and NGO community remain sceptical of their value.'⁸ At the time, UNFDAC's geographical priorities were Nangarhar, Badakhshan and Kunar provinces, and the projects followed the classical area development model, though at a very small scale, covering irrigation, water supply, education, reforestation and income-generating activities.

During the decades before 2001, UNODC and its predecessor organisations were the main providers of these alternative development or crop substitution projects. The scale depended on donor interest to fund such projects, and efforts were small-scale, with investment not exceeding a few million USD for all projects. The UN International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) initiatives, still coordinated from Pakistan, were 'targeted at the provincial and district levels in areas where relative peace prevails' and foresaw, above all, a 'heightened advocacy and resource mobilisation role for UNDCP',⁹ a phrase indicating work at up-stream levels and limited, if any, implementation on the ground. A Poppy Crop Reduction and Elimination Project was targeted at

³ 'World Drug Report 2009', UNODC, available at www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2009/WDR2009_eng_web.pdf.

⁴ 'Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010', UNODC (see FN 2).

⁵ 'The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment', UNODC, 2010, available at www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2010_low_res.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁷ UNFDAC was the predecessor organisation to the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), which was then followed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

⁸ Felicity Lawrence, 'UN Programmes for Afghanistan', Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, November 1990.

⁹ 'Programme Design Afghanistan 1996–1998', UNDCP.

Nangarhar, Helmand and Badakhshan for an estimated cost of US\$7.8 million, but only one third of the funds could be raised, and implementation focussed on Nangarhar.

In 1994, under the Islamic government of Rabbani, production in Afghanistan was estimated at between 600 mt (US data) and 2,200–2,400 mt (UNDCP data). UNDCP continued its attempts to reduce poppy, focussing now on a programme of drug awareness and crop monitoring. Actual rural development to substitute opium poppy with other crops had been given up for two reasons: first, lack of funding, as donor priorities had shifted, and second, the political situation, which did not seem to allow sustainable programme development. Small efforts continued in provinces bordering Pakistan, implemented through local NGOs.

After 2001, UNODC never included rural development efforts or the alternative development approach in its Afghanistan portfolio. However, due to the economic significance of the narcotic sector, as established by UNODC data, the World Bank attempted to mainstream narcotics control into its large-scale development programmes, including the National Solidarity Programme.

Mainstreaming drug control objectives into rural development programmes is a sustained long-term effort and was based on the following assumptions:

That the development of governance, institutions and education will progressively create a climate of mutual responsibility between state and citizens, that economic growth will in the long run remove the necessity to engage in opium production, and that judicial reform and law enforcement will progressively tackle criminal elements.¹⁰

This approach has not shown results as measured by either production of opium or hectareage under cultivation. Traditional cultivating areas continue to produce, even increase, production and new areas for cultivation start up and/or give up cultivation independent of alternative/rural development efforts.¹¹

¹⁰ Christopher Ward and William Byrd, 'Afghanistan's Opium Drug Economy', World Bank, December 2004, 120ff.

¹¹ See the series of annual opium surveys by UNODC over the past decade indicating provinces that are starting up cultivation or joining the 'poppy-free' provinces.

In 2002–03, the government of the UK, as the custodian of the Counter-Narcotics Pillar in Afghanistan, attempted to buy up the opium harvest, among others in Nangarhar. Official records of this attempt remain difficult to access. However, the effort resulted in the death of farmers and unrest. The programme showed a remarkable lack of understanding of market mechanisms. In the short term, with a definite certain buyer (the international community), without the need to fear law enforcement, with prices fixed along those paid by the black market, more farmers would cultivate poppy, since a high income would be guaranteed. In principle, it is questionable whether Afghanistan needs to have its poppy crop subsidised in this way and whether funds to buy up increasing productions would be available.

Therefore, neither in the short term (with a steady market and fixed high prices, more farmers will cultivate) nor in the long-term (subsidising poppy crops) can such an approach be successful.

Experience in Latin America has shown this as well. In the early to mid-1990s, a US-backed Bolivian programme paid Bolivian farmers US\$2,000 per hectare to grow and deliver coca. No real impact in coca/cocaine production in the medium to long term resulted as the programme was an incentive to plant more coca to get the cash reward.

A look at the continuously applied crop substitution approach reflects what can effectively be achieved in this development agenda. Within the parameters of international drug control, with its objective to reduce or eliminate production of opium, and with its set conditions of dealing with an agricultural crop with high international demand, rural development in support of developing conditions for farmers to switch to other crops is and remains the main option. In this respect, there is no choice for international drug control but either to advocate this approach or to do nothing and ignore it. Variations over the past four decades simply lay in the scale of the projects, which remained small. A no-win situation for rural development against poppy cultivation is the outcome.

This has been well documented in evaluations and research. A detailed study of alternative development programmes in Afghanistan, released in 2010, reaches the conclusion that 'It is increasingly recognised that only economic and political development can lead to a sustainable

reduction in opium poppy cultivation.’¹² World Bank studies come to the same conclusion: ‘In particular, without strong economic and development underpinnings, other counter-narcotic efforts cannot achieve sustained success.’ And: ‘Chasing quick fixes in the hope of rapid reduction of opium production creates illusions and undermines long-term impacts. A strong institutional framework needs to be built, based on the promising community institutions already set up.’¹³ ‘All in all, and not surprisingly, given past experience and the size of the drug industry, there are no easy answers, only difficult trade-offs in the search for a multi-pronged, sustained and effective response to the drug problem in Afghanistan.’¹⁴

3. OTHER NARCOTIC CONTROL OPTIONS AT THE CULTIVATION LEVEL

Apart from rural development, two other theoretical options for narcotic control at the level of cultivation remain, i.e., serious forced eradication and legalisation. The latter is not possible under current political conditions. The international drug control framework based on UN Conventions and signed also by Afghanistan would need to be reviewed and substantially changed to allow for legalisation of drugs. This would need the approval of a majority of the world’s countries, an improbable event to say the least.

Large-scale forced eradication, specifically through spraying, is currently in nobody’s interest, given predictable political challenges and the impact on the national economy. Too many households rely on income from the opium economy, and large-scale spraying would lead to large-scale political unrest. The side-effects of spraying in Afghanistan, with small land-holdings and poppy land adjacent to land with cereal and vegetable crops, would have enormous side effects on the agriculturally used lands, animals and people, since discriminate spraying is impossible. In addition, high-level Afghan officials’ involvement in the trade and need for allies in the fight against insurgents (even

¹² Charlotte Dufour and Domitille Kauffmann, ‘Strategies to Counter Opiate Production in Afghanistan: Are We on the Right Track?’ Groupe URD, 2010.

¹³ Christopher Ward and David Mansfield, ‘Afghanistan Economic Incentives and Development Initiatives to Reduce Opium Production’ World Bank and DFID, February 2008, iii and xvi.

¹⁴ William Byrd and Christopher Ward, ‘Drugs and Development in Afghanistan’, World Bank Social Development Papers No. 18, December 2004.

though they may be criminals) have prevented large-scale spraying so far. Whether political changes in Afghanistan and the neighbouring countries including Russia will pave the way for a reconsideration of this option is an open question.

4. NARCOTICS AS A PILLAR IN AFGHANISTAN’S ECONOMY

From an economic point of view, a shift in perspective offers a different understanding. In times of economic crisis, the informal sector, including the illicit one, compensates for the shortcomings of the formal sector. The limited reach of the formal economy in Afghanistan has contributed to the narcotics sector becoming one of the main pillars of the Afghan economy.

12. Afghanistan’s economy is dominated by the informal sector, not only in agriculture but also in mining, manufacturing, construction and infrastructure—in addition to illicit activities such as opium. . . .

14. The cultivation of poppies for opium and heroin production remains the most important economic activity in Afghanistan (Box 2). Gross revenues from the illegal drug trade in Afghanistan are equivalent to over one-third of licit GDP. Some 2.4 million people and 370,000 households remain directly involved in poppy cultivation and the livelihoods of a large part of the population are indirectly affected.¹⁵

Within Afghanistan, the narcotic sector is organised exclusively by Afghans. Based on accepted patterns of land holdings, the complicated system of owning, renting, leasing and subcontracting, with all the levels of payments between land-owners, middle-level farmers, renters and seasonal labourers, the poppy production and opium marketing system in Afghanistan works efficiently. With a continuously high production since 2001; with ever more efficient breeding of new poppy varieties; with a harvesting effort involving up to 300,000 migrant seasonal labourers and their needs for food, housing, transport and payment; with market intelligence on prices reaching all relevant communities from the north to the south; and with

¹⁵ ‘Interim Strategy Note for Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the Period FY09–FY11,’ The World Bank, Report No. 47939-AF, 5 May 2009, available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/AFGHANISTANEXTN/Resources/305984-1237085035526/5919769-1245293050780/AFISN2009.pdf>.

a network of collection, storage and conversion facilities geared to national and international market demands, Afghanistan has built a functioning system around its one crop that remains in international demand.

The system not only benefits the poppy farmers, but traders from the local village to national ones, transporters, seasonal labourers, conversion facility workers, exporters, government officials and, last but not least on the other side, the large numbers of national and international counter-narcotics police and administrators. The Afghan farmers, transporters, heroin lab owners and traffickers are meeting the demands of the time and of the international development agencies: building an efficient and profitable agricultural production system responsive to market demands. The problem is that it deals with illegal opium.

5. CONCLUSION

Under the prevailing parameters of the international drug control system, no sensible sustainable solution to reduce drug crop

cultivation is possible. This is evidenced by the well documented global experience of decades. Above all, however, the failure lies in the inherent contradictions of the international drug control system and its global context. A perfectly marketable product, fulfilling all conditions of the market – except one: legality – is supposed to be given up for what? Tomatoes?

Rural development, be it called alternative development or development for alternative livelihoods in crop producing areas, has shown its failure as a crop substituting strategy. While rural development remains a crucial development sector for Afghanistan, above all as a survival sector for the majority of Afghans now and beyond 2014, its objective cannot be to reduce opium poppy cultivation. In this respect, it has failed.

As long as the informal illicit sector guarantees income and survival, benefiting millions of Afghans, it will continue. A perfectly functioning economic system around cultivation and marketing of the drug crop has been built up. This system can only be changed by the Afghans themselves, once new economic opportunities arise.

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Doris Buddenberg has worked in drug control matters since 1986, mostly in Asia and Latin America, covering work areas including demand reduction, law enforcement and alternative development, as well as research and evaluation. Working in and for Afghanistan since the mid-1980s, her last position in the region was as the head of the UNODC Country Office Afghanistan from 2004–06.

ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

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