

# POVERTY REDUCTION IN FOCUS

The real connection between development and drugs control<sup>1</sup>

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## A policy statement as a contribution to the UN General Assembly June 26 session

**Introduction:** The concept note prepared by the Secretariat for the UN General Assembly session on drugs and development emphasizes the importance of drug-related crime and corruption as impediments to development and the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. It is no doubt true that crime and corruption hamper development prospects, and we welcome the discussion of these problems as development issues. But focusing on crime and corruption without including attention to poverty as an important root cause of much of the world's drug consumption, production and marketing is deceptive and may lead to engagement of the wrong policy actors pursuing the wrong ends.

**The poverty connection:** Here are some ways in which poverty or poor socio-economic development can contribute to drug consumption, production and marketing:

Production of drug-related crops: From the Andes to Afghanistan and Morocco to Burma, cultivation of illicit drug crops is the only economically viable option for many small farmers. Transportation and marketing infrastructure may be more developed for these crops than some legal crops. Farmers who are isolated or are in conflict-affected areas may have few opportunities for ensuring a livelihood for their families other than crops such as coca and opium poppy that are used to produce illicit drugs. Many countries and donors have pledged to create alternative livelihood opportunities for farm families dependent on these crops, but few such efforts have been successful on a sustained basis. Some member states, often assisted by donor nations, have engaged in widespread forced eradication of such crops, notably coca in the Andes. As UNODC has noted, forced eradication often causes low-income farm families to be displaced and exacerbates hunger and poverty.<sup>2</sup> Forced eradication targets the weakest links in the production chain – small farmers – and traps them in poverty.

Lack of economic opportunity: Lack of access to education and the absence of job opportunities, particularly for young people, have been shown in many countries to be a recipe for thriving drug markets. This is not just a matter of young people turning to drug consumption when other options are few. A critical mass of unemployed people helps to

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<sup>1</sup> This statement relies heavily on Nossal Institute for Global Health, "Dependent on development: the interrelationships between illicit drugs and socioeconomic development" (2010), available at <http://www.soros.org/reports/dependent-development>.

<sup>2</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime. *Alternative development: a global thematic evaluation*. Vienna, 2005. [[http://www.unodc.org/pdf/Alternative\\_Development\\_Evaluation\\_Dec-05.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/Alternative_Development_Evaluation_Dec-05.pdf)]

create the conditions for drug markets that rely on poor people as couriers or “mules”. Women and girls are often drawn into drug operations as couriers because discrimination limits their opportunities for education and employment. In the worst cases, as drug markets and related organized crime grow in the absence of other economic opportunities, a vicious circle is created as organized crime and repressive policing spiral into violence that affects the whole community and discourages investment in legal economic activity.

- ⇒ **Success in reaching MDG 1 on the halving of hunger and poverty is consistent with and necessary for controlling illicit drug markets.**
- ⇒ **Success in achieving MDG3 by reducing barriers to education and employment faced by women and girls would contribute to drug control.**

**The health and human rights connection:** Crime reduction is important, but policing drug-related crime has been shown in many parts of the world to lead to egregious abuses of human rights, including (but not limited to) the rights of people who use drugs. Police may need to fill arrest quotas, and people who use drugs are easy targets. People who use drugs are also highly vulnerable to abuse of their rights when they are in state custody, including use of painful withdrawal from drugs to coerce confessions during interrogation. Researchers have also documented numerous ways in which harsh policing can undermine access to HIV prevention and care services for people who use drugs – police may target needle exchange points and clinics that serve drug users, health facilities may be required to report to a police registry people seeking treatment for drug dependence, and health services may simply exclude people based on their drug use. In some cases, evidence-based treatment for drug dependence is prohibited outright or harm reduction services are severely restricted or undermined in the name of fighting drug-related crime.

In countries with harsh drug laws, a high percentage of people who use drugs may be in prison or pre-trial detention at some time in their lives, and these facilities often pose high risk of HIV transmission and little access to HIV prevention or treatment services, let alone access to adequate health care generally. It is, of course, people living in poverty who are most likely to be unable to bribe police, afford legal counsel or afford to post bail, and therefore most likely to suffer abusive conditions in state custody.

- ⇒ **Crime prevention is an important goal. But to achieve MDG 6 on control of HIV/AIDS, it is necessary to ensure that drug law enforcement practices do not contribute to senseless violence and that they respect human rights, including the human rights of people who use drugs and those living in poverty, and do not block or interrupt their access to the HIV prevention and other harm reduction services that UN member states have endorsed as central to an effective HIV response.**

## **Conclusion:**

In short, making the connection between drugs and development is not a simple matter of reducing crime and corruption. To focus simply on policing and detention as responses to drugs is to prescribe more of the same response that has predominated to date and failed.

More police crackdowns, and more arrests and incarceration, will not advance economic development. As the UN Office on Drugs and Crime noted recently, development cooperation and all development programs must contribute to states' capacity to carry out drug control activities in human rights-centred ways, and law enforcement must not interfere with people's right to health and earn a living.<sup>3</sup>

To succeed in both drug control and achieving the MDGs, countries must provide other opportunities to those most likely to find drug markets to be their most viable means of survival, and they must ensure that reducing drug crime does not violate human rights or undermine HIV services. This requires the engagement not just of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, but on multiple bodies of the UN system—including UNDP, UNAIDS and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. To really address the threat of drugs, national governments must also commit to community development and poverty reduction.

**In previous General Assembly declarations, member states committed themselves to addressing HIV and illicit drugs in ways that are respectful of human rights. The present session is an opportunity for member states to reject repressive approaches that fail to distinguish minor drug offenses from large-scale trafficking and that allow the police to abuse the human rights of poor people. Those approaches can never be good for development. Member states should reassert that it is good development policy to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of people who use drugs, including their right to comprehensive health services, as well as the rights of people who produce drug-related crops, including their right to earn a living.**

**Statement endorsed by:**

Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (Canada)  
Global Drug Policy Program, Open Society Foundation  
Harm Reduction International (UK)  
International Drug Policy Consortium (UK)  
International Harm Reduction Development Program, Open Society Foundation  
Release (UK)  
Transform Drug Policy Foundation (UK)  
Transnational Institute (Netherlands)  
Washington Office on Latin America (USA)

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<sup>3</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime. *UNODC and the promotion and protection of human rights*. Vienna, 2012. [[http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/UNODC\\_HR\\_position\\_paper.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/UNODC_HR_position_paper.pdf)]