

Violence, peace and drugs in the borderlands

Policy paper



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Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty. We are a global movement of people, churches and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice worldwide. We are the change makers, the peacemakers, the mighty of heart.

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Cover: Fishermen's homes on the bank of the San Juan river, Colombia.

Photograph: Christian Aid/Federico Rios.

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List of acronyms

PNIS	Programa Nacional Integral de Sustución de Cultivos Illicitos
UN DPPA	UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime

Executive summary

Christian Aid believes poverty is political – that poverty is caused by human structures and systems, and that those systems need changing to eradicate extreme poverty. This is why Christian Aid was an early advocate for an alternative approach to drugs policy that was linked to development and peacebuilding, and that focused on the rights of people most affected by the violence of both armed conflict and the war on drugs in the global South.¹

It was this that prompted our involvement in the Drugs & (dis)order project, which generated the research on which this report is based. This consortium project, led by SOAS University of London, has been engaging with the question of how war economies can be transformed into peace economies in drugs-affected borderlands experiencing, or recovering from, armed conflict.

At the outset of the project, political processes in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, the three countries studied, held out hope of peace, and positive change. But at the time of writing, Myanmar is once again under military rule and violence against pro-democracy protestors is commonplace. The Taliban's rapid seizure of power in Afghanistan has led to authoritarian rule and the sudden shrinkage of civil society space, in tandem with rising humanitarian and economic crises that compound vulnerability and further marginalise already vulnerable groups. While the peace agreement in Colombia still holds, political protests in 2021 have seen the excessive use of force directed at protestors calling for social justice and peace. President Duque has declared his intent to resume aerial glyphosate spraying of coca crops, despite the risk this poses to human health and licit crops.² In all three countries, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have compounded these developments, devastating local economies and livelihoods.

In this paper, we look at how illicit drug economies function in the borderlands where the project works, and the ways in which they connect with violence, conflict and peace. We consider this at three different levels. Firstly, we outline some of the findings on how violence and illicit drug economies intersect in the borderlands. Next, we look at how borderland dynamics are affected by national peace processes, with a particular focus on Colombia, where a progressive crop substitution programme was put in place as part of the peace processes, but has not lived up to expectations. And finally, we look at the role of international actors in illicit drug economies, with a particular focus on the role of the EU. Below are some

policy implications of our findings, and a set of specific recommendations for the EU.

Policy implications

- Regions experiencing armed conflict are high-risk environments, and efforts to promote alternative livelihoods must engage with the implications of this. Few people grow opium or coca as a mono-crop, but such illicit crops can mitigate against the high risks of armed conflict zones, providing a means of survival and social welfare to borderland communities. Opium and coca are high value, low volume and high yield crops that can be easily processed for a long shelf life, making them relatively easy to keep, hide, and smuggle. In order for alternative livelihoods to thrive, basic services, human security and respect for human rights must first be guaranteed, to reduce risk for borderland communities. Implementing actors should first consider what they can do to improve these underlying structural conditions, before implementing alternative livelihood programmes.
- The relationship between violence and illicit drugs is not straightforward. Because in many cases illicit drug economies enable survival, they may actually contribute to stability, but not necessarily end violence. Conversely, many counter-narcotics programmes often lead to increased violence and human rights violations, and many of the measures of counter-narcotics used- hectares eradicated, or killings or captures of traffickers made- are likely to result in human rights abuses. A basic measure of success of all interventions in drugs-affected borderlands should be whether they contribute to a reduction in the immediate triggers of violence, while ensuring compliance with both human rights and drug control standards. Authorities should not engage in militarised forced eradication or fumigation of drug crops, which have a wider negative impact on borderland communities and public health.
- Despite the impact of violence, drug harm and conflict on their lives, women are frequently marginalised in both peace processes and counter-narcotics strategies, and their lived experience not taken into account. In Colombia, for example, the research showed that women were disadvantaged in the crop substitution programme in a way that they had not been in the coca economy. Implementing actors must consider gender dynamics in the implementation of their programmes, including involving

people of all genders in affected areas in the design, delivery and implementation of their programmes.

- In regions affected by armed conflict, involvement in the illicit drug economy is rarely confined to one party to the conflict. Any counter-narcotics strategy or programme should be informed by rigorous conflict analysis and have safeguards to mitigate against the use of counter-narcotics policies and operations as tools for political gain.
- Political agreements do not suddenly bring an end to violence, particularly in the borderlands, where national peace processes can seem very remote. Rather, violence may change in character and distribution, as power balances shift. The opening up of borderlands to market-based development does not guarantee good outcomes for the people who live there, and there are significant transition costs associated with establishing a peace economy that leaves no one behind. Peace processes must incorporate long timeframes, careful sequencing and an acceptance of incremental change.
- Ensuring strong, participatory structures, including in policy making and implementation, is key to ensuring greater political voice and representation of borderland communities, leading to a more sustainable and equitable peace. Implementing actors should engage with local communities and civil society organisations on their beliefs and attitudes towards the illicit drug economy, and create spaces where the people most affected by illicit economies can be involved in designing, implementing and evaluating policy.

Recommendations

Christian Aid's role in the Drugs & (dis)order project has been to consider what the findings of the research mean for policy makers and practitioners, globally and locally. Previous advocacy addressed the Sustainable Development Goals and how they might better address illicit drug economies and engaged with the World Bank on pathways out of conflict in borderlands.³ In this paper, we consider the role of the EU. Drawing on engagement with the EU through the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, of which Christian Aid is a member, we offer the following recommendations.⁴

1. The EU should develop a cross-sectoral approach to drugs, development and peace, acknowledging the root causes and factors which leave peripheral communities with little choice but to engage in the illicit economy, and taking a human-centred and rights-based approach to illicit drug

economies. The EU should strengthen the peace and development focus in the Action Plan of the EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025.

2. Any EU support for counter-narcotics policy or alternative livelihoods must use indicators such as access to public services, poverty reduction, respect for human rights, human security, confidence in the state and access to meaningful employment, rather than using metrics around reduction in illicit drug crops.
3. The EU should consider the role which its own financial and political institutions may play in enabling the illicit drugs trade, and continue to fight against money laundering and illicit financial flows.
4. The EU must place a stronger focus on violence reduction, attention to human rights, and 'do no harm' principles when engaging with fragile states and illicit economies.
5. The EU should work to ensure women's equal rights to participate in and benefit from decision-making and programmes around drugs, peace and development.
6. EU actions on border management should be carefully considered to ensure that they do not cause further harm where communities rely on cross-border exchanges. Ensuring good governance and accountability of State institutions must come before securitised responses.

Introduction

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

Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, Colombia, September 2019⁵

Christian Aid is a humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organisation which seeks to address poverty (reaching those most in need), power (addressing the root causes of poverty) and prophetic voice (building local and collective agency).⁶ Christian Aid, led by our peacebuilding team, is a partner in the SOAS-led research consortium on Drugs & (dis)order in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. Drugs & (dis)order seeks to understand transitions from war to peace economies in drugs-affected borderlands of these three countries.

The consortium has generated a robust evidence base on illicit drug economies, and aims to identify policy solutions to build more inclusive development and sustainable livelihoods in drugs-affected contexts, while highlighting potential challenges and trade-offs.⁷ The project has developed the framework of a 'policy trilemma', to explore the tensions and trade-offs between the policy fields of drugs, development and peacebuilding. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that 'all good things come together' – that the policy goals of a drug-free world, sustainable development and lasting peace are mutually reinforcing and can be pursued simultaneously.⁸ In this paper, we principally explore what the research tells us about drugs, violence and peace.

The Drugs & (dis)order research works in nine borderland regions affected by drugs and conflict in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. The relationship with the State in these borderlands is often characterised by a combination of repression (including harsh counter-narcotics measures) and neglect (such as a lack of public services and social welfare).⁹ The project's longitudinal research with partners in the three countries has enabled the development of detailed spatial histories of the borderland contexts, as well as comparative analysis at the national, subnational and regional levels.

As outlined in the executive summary, the promise held out by political processes in all three countries when the Drugs & (dis)order project commenced has been overshadowed by

political events – with the military coup in Myanmar, the Taliban’s seizure of power in Afghanistan and violence against protestors in Colombia. War to peace transitions are never linear, and at Christian Aid, we believe that only by understanding and addressing the structural causes of violence can we hope to build a lasting peace.¹⁰

Christian Aid’s role in this project has been to consider what the findings of the research mean for policy makers and practitioners, globally and locally. We do this from our perspective as a humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organisation with a focus on economic justice, governance and human rights.¹¹ In 2019, Christian Aid published *Peace, illicit drugs and the SDGs: A development gap*, and in 2020, *Illicit drugs and tough trade-offs in war-to-peace transitions*.¹² This third and final paper explores the connections between the illicit drug economy, violence and peace in the borderlands.

After a brief overview of armed conflict and the illicit drug economy in each of the three countries studied, there are three parts to our paper. Firstly, we focus on the role of illicit economies in the borderland contexts, and the complex ways in which they connect with violence and (dis)order. Illicit drug economies are often assumed to be inherently violent – but illicit drug economies can also afford some protection from violence, and drug eradication strategies frequently engender violence by the State against its citizens.

Secondly, we look at how illicit drug economies have intersected with efforts to build peace, and the types of approaches which have been taken to moving from war to peace economies. Formal peace processes have often struggled to tackle illicit drug economies, and peace agreements that fail to take into account the perspectives of communities engaged with illicit drug economies are unlikely to produce a stable and inclusive peace.¹³ In particular, not all efforts to ‘develop’ borderland economies following peace processes have been beneficial to local populations – some have led to large-scale land acquisitions, leaving small-scale farmers more marginalised, and more vulnerable to both entry into drug production or trafficking, and to the slow violence of drug harms.

Finally, we look at the role played by international institutions in transitions from war to peace in contexts affected by illicit drug economies. What type of approaches have been taken, and what are the challenges, constraints and pitfalls? As a case study, we look at the role of the EU in the three countries, and on drug policy more generally, and we offer some recommendations for the EU specifically.

Central to these recommendations is that the voices of those living in the borderlands, who depend upon illicit economies for their livelihoods and survival, must be heard, understood and amplified in the policy debates that affect them. This has been a leading tenet of the Drugs & (dis)order project in working with local research partners, and is core to Christian Aid's own partnership approach. We have sought, therefore, to draw directly on the stories, perspectives and experiences of people living in borderland communities throughout this report.

Study areas

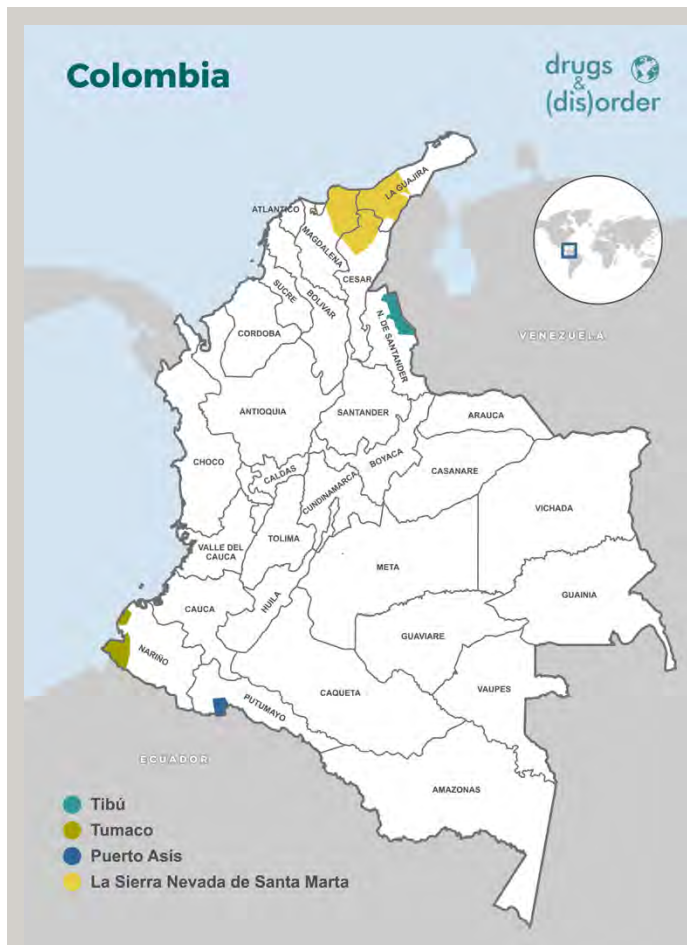
Drugs & (dis)order conducted research in three sites in Afghanistan: Badakhshan, on the Tajikistan and Pakistan border; Nangarhar, on the Pakistan border; and Nimroz, on the Iran border.



Afghanistan has experienced ongoing conflict which has waxed and waned over time since the onset of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979. The Taliban emerged from the civil war which followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and by 1998, controlled most of Afghanistan. Their overthrow in the US-led 2001 invasion gave rise to hopes for a sustained peace. However, after 20 years of large-scale international intervention, and persistent armed conflict, the Taliban swept to power again in August 2021, after the sudden US withdrawal. In the wake of this takeover, Afghanistan continues to be affected by

political uncertainty, an ongoing drought and a major humanitarian emergency.

Afghanistan has long been the world's largest producer of opium, and the structural drivers of poppy cultivation remain deeply embedded in society and the economy. After initial uncertainty following the Taliban's takeover, it appears to be business as usual in the illicit drug economy, while the spiralling levels of food insecurity and poverty are likely to increase participation in opium poppy cultivation.



Research was carried out in four sites in Colombia – Puerto Asís on the Ecuador border; Tibú on the Venezuela border; Tumaco, on the Ecuador border and Pacific coast; and Sierra Nevada, on the Caribbean coast.

Coca has always been grown by some indigenous communities for chewing in plant form. However, in the 1970s and 80s, there emerged an illicit drug economy centred on cocaine exports, interwoven with armed conflict involving the Colombian State, paramilitaries and insurgent groups that had lasted decades. Backed by the US, the Colombian Government implemented a particularly aggressive counter-narcotics strategy, including the forced eradication of coca crops by aerial spraying with glyphosate.

The 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC, the largest insurgent group, heralded a transformative change of direction, both for peace and for illicit drugs policy. The peace agreement included a large-scale crop substitution programme, the Programa Nacional Integral de Sustución de Cultivos Illicitos (PNIS), which was designed to be responsive to the needs of small-scale coca growers. However, five years on, implementation of the PNIS has been impeded by regime change and lack of coordination between implementing institutions.

More generally, political protests which began in April 2021 have led to increasing levels of unrest and violent crackdown against protestors.



The research took place in two states in Myanmar: Kachin State, including sites along the China and India borders, and Shan State, including sites along the China, Laos and India borders.

Myanmar is home to a diversity of ethnic groups, many of whom are concentrated in regions where the power of the central State is disputed. Armed conflict in Myanmar has been ongoing since independence in 1948. The production of opium and, increasingly, the manufacture of methamphetamines have provided finance for combatants on all sides. Involvement in the drugs economy has also provided livelihoods for embattled communities, but increasingly widespread drug use is causing serious harm.

Following ceasefire agreements in the 1980s and 90s between the military government and various ethnic armed groups, the 2010 democratic transition was welcomed by the international community as the start of a new era. But violence continued and increased, particularly in Rakhine State, Kachin State and northern Shan State, and in February 2021, a coup reinstated military rule.

Illicit drug economies and violence in the borderlands

One of the most important achievements of the Drugs & (dis)order research has been to develop a more contextualised and evidence-based understanding of the complex links between drugs and violence at the margins of the State. While borderlands are not the only places where illicit drug economies exist, their geographic distance from the centre, and proximity to borders, can make illicit drugs a more viable livelihood proposition. Borderlands are often viewed from the perspective of the centre of power, as unruly, ungovernable and inherently violent. Yet, from the point of view of communities in those regions, they can be understood as places of turbulence and rapid change, where the State has often failed to provide for its people, and where people improvise and innovate in order to survive and sometimes prosper through illicit drug economies.¹⁴

Where there are few other options available, illicit **drug economies can be a vital source of livelihood and betterment.**

In Afghanistan, one research participant, Jangul, told researchers about his life.¹⁵ He explained how opium production and smuggling has provided a means of survival for his family through repeated cycles of conflict and regime change, starting with how opium and its proceeds enabled his family to rebuild their house following a bombing during the Soviet-Afghan war, through to his experiences as a drug smuggler and finally settling down and setting up a shop in his home village in Nangarhar, east Afghanistan. But he fears for the stability of his country and following the pandemic and the Taliban takeover, individuals like Jangul will rely increasingly on the illicit drug economies as other sector of the economy contract.

The illicit drug economy can be a lifeline for people living in violent contexts, and may also provide public goods in the absence of a functioning State



Above: From *Jangul: Conflict and trafficking in Afghanistan's borderlands*, Positive Negatives, 2020.

As well as providing a lifeline for individuals, **the illicit drug economy can be a source of public goods where the State fails to provide them.** For example, in Puerto Asís, Colombia, one respondent described how the proceeds from coca cultivation were used by small-scale growers to collectively fund a schoolteacher before a teacher was eventually appointed and paid by the State.

'Everything we have done [in this village] was with money from coca, between all of us, our sweat and coca money. When we arrived, we paid the schoolteacher for around two years. She was a neighbour who said she had studied. Later, we got a public teacher'

Male former coca grower and picker, Puerto Asís, Colombia, September 2019¹⁶

As Jenny Pearce puts it: 'the problem is that while coca and opium may in some circumstances offer a developmental path from the perspective of the disadvantaged, it does so without the regulation of a third party, ie, the rule of law.'¹⁷ **This absence of the rule of law and respect for rights leads to increased threats of violence, including from the State itself.** In the project's survey of those participating in the coca

Developmental gains from illicit drug economies in conflict-affected areas, however, are made in the context of an ongoing threat of violence, and a lack of formal protection from human rights abuses

substitution programme in Colombia, 77% of respondents associated coca with increased violence.¹⁸

'Working with coca brings problems... There's been a lot of death here because of the coca cultivations... There are young lads who start to work for the narco-traffickers, and they kill them over any old slip-up'

Female coca farmer, Puerto Asís, June 2019¹⁹

However, it can be difficult to disentangle the violence associated with the illicit drug economy from the violence inherent in the absence of the rule of law. In the Afghan borderlands, the project research points to the fact that all trading networks, both licit and illicit, function with the threat of violence.²⁰

Citizens may also suffer violence by the State in the name of counter-narcotics. In Colombia, for example, the research found confrontations between rural communities and State forces occurred during forced eradication.²¹ Ninety-five such confrontations occurred between 2016 and July 2020 – with 42% concentrated in the lockdown period between March and July 2020. Twenty per cent of these incidents involved the use of firearms by State forces or an unspecified third party.²²

Much of the popular and policy discourse around illicit drug economies tends to be skewed towards male participation in and perspectives on the drug trade. But the Drugs & (dis)order project has produced a number of case studies on the intersection between illicit drug economies, gender and violence.

Monica Parada-Hernández and Margarita Marín-Jaramillo point out that: 'For women, peace is not necessarily tied to the end of an armed conflict, since gender-based inequalities and violence may be present before, during, and after war.'²³

They examined the case of coca-growing women in Colombia and demonstrated that women were, in some circumstances, better off and on a more equal footing with men in the coca economy than in the crop substitution programme.²⁴ The perennial demand for coca labour created a space for women to enjoy more independence and autonomy. It offered better wages compared to non-coca work, and the informal credit systems available in the coca economy enabled women to become entrepreneurs in their own right.

The national crop substitution programme could have contributed to furthering gender equality by including both women and men as autonomous beneficiaries within a

The tensions and trade-offs in illicit drug economies between development, violence and respect for rights may be particularly pronounced for women

household. Instead, each household was required to register a single representative who would receive the payments, and that representative was usually a man. The case study found that some social organisations asked for mechanisms to be established to ensure that women could be titleholders, but this request was dismissed by PNIS officials, arguing that this would create ‘perverse incentives’ or that women would be exposed to family or community conflict.²⁵

This type of structural violence, which excludes women from decision-making processes on peace or drugs, may lead to excluded individuals turning to problematic or physically violent ways to take action.

The Pat Jasan social movement, which includes high levels of female participation, is a response among the Kachin population in Myanmar to the ‘slow violence’ of widespread drug use. The movement carries out drug raids and destroys fields of opium, and forcibly detains drug users in an extreme withdrawal process. Mandy Sadan, Ja Htoi Pan Maran and Dan Seng Lawn argue that, despite its human rights abuses, the Pat Jasan movement appealed to women who could see ‘little immediate benefit’ from national discourse on counter narcotics and were ‘seeking direct interventions for critical problems in households under their care.’²⁶ This implies the need to more deeply understand the context from which Pat Jasan emerged, and to create more inclusive structures around peacebuilding, development and drug policy reform, so that recourse to more violent alternatives may be avoided.

Policy implications

- Regions experiencing armed conflict are high-risk environments, and efforts to promote alternative livelihoods must engage with the implications of this. Few people grow opium or coca as a mono-crop, but such illicit crops can mitigate against the high risks of armed conflict zones, providing a means of survival and social welfare to borderland communities. Opium and coca are high-value, low-volume and high-yield crops that can be easily processed for a long shelf life, making them relatively easy to keep, hide, and smuggle. **In order for alternative livelihoods to thrive, basic services, human security and respect for human rights must first be guaranteed, to reduce risk for borderland communities.** Implementing actors should first consider what they can do to improve these underlying structural conditions, before implementing alternative livelihood programmes.

- The relationship between violence and illicit drugs is not straightforward. Because in many cases illicit drug economies enable survival, they may actually contribute to stability. Conversely, many counter-narcotics programmes lead to increased violence and human rights violations, and many of the measures of counter-narcotics used – hectares eradicated, or killings or captures of traffickers made – are likely to result in human rights abuses. **A basic measure of success of all interventions in drugs-affected borderlands should be whether they contribute to a reduction in the immediate triggers of violence, while ensuring compliance with both human rights and drug control standards.** Authorities should not engage in militarised forced eradication or fumigation of drug crops, which have a wider negative impact on borderland communities and public health.
- Despite the impact of violence, drug harm and conflict on their lives, women are frequently marginalised in both peace processes and counter-narcotics strategies, and their lived experience not taken into account. In Colombia, for example, the research showed that women were disadvantaged in the crop substitution programme in a way that they had not been in the coca economy. **Implementing actors must consider gender dynamics in the implementation of their programmes,** including involving people of all genders in affected areas in the design, delivery and implementation of their programmes.

Drugs and peacebuilding

The first section of this report focused on how illicit drugs, development and violence intersect in the borderlands where our research primarily takes place. In this section, we look at how narratives around illicit drug economies are incorporated into national processes around conflict and peace, before returning to the borderlands to analyse the impact of peace processes on people who live there.

Counter-narcotics is often weaponised against opponents in a conflict

Jonathan Goodhand reflects on the 'narco-frontier imaginary' in both political and popular narratives, which portray drug economies as sinister and destructive, but also glamorous.²⁷ In these narratives: 'Frontiers... provide places of sanctuary for non-state groups' where 'drugs undermine and corrupt' [political goals and motivations]... turning them into economically motivated 'narco rebels'.²⁸

This 'narco-criminal' narrative is frequently seized upon by parties to a conflict, seeking to weaponise counter-narcotics against their opponents. This is often done with the tacit or unwitting support of international donors, playing on anxieties and imperatives around security and drugs, as we discuss in our final section.

In each of the borderlands studied, all parties to the conflict, including the State, have been involved in some way in the drug economies at particular points in time. This ranges from direct control of the illicit drug trade, to taxing and imposing levies on illicit drugs. Counter-narcotics strategies by the State are therefore often applied very selectively, and conflict parties frequently take advantage of the 'narco-criminal' narrative to discredit and weaken their opponents for political purposes.

In Colombia, the Drugs & (dis)order research observed how the term 'narcoguerrilla' was used by right-wing opponents to delegitimise FARC and undermine the peace process.²⁹ In Afghanistan, the research charted how the US in particular linked the 'war on drugs' to counter-insurgency goals and the consequent relabelling of the Taliban as a 'narco-terrorist organisation'. On the ground, US-backed manual eradication, 'became subject to local politics and allowed power holders to direct eradication towards their opponents'.³⁰ Prior to this, in 2000/1, the Taliban had successfully enforced an opium ban, partly as a bargaining chip to attract international funding and recognition.³¹ On retaking power, the Taliban has declared its

intention to end poppy cultivation, calling for international support. This would have a devastating effect on communities with few viable alternatives to opium production, although ground conditions make it very unlikely that such a ban will be imposed or could be enforced.

In Myanmar, international actors have also been drawn into the 'blame game' between the military and the ethnic armed organisations in terms of who profits from the opium trade. The research shows that: 'The UNODC's "Myanmar Opium Survey 2018" report generated significant controversy by making specific – and erroneous – allegations against certain [ethnic armed organisations]', failing to acknowledge the high density of opium growing in the regions controlled by the government or army-backed militias.³²

This 'narco-criminal' narrative finds broader expression in the depiction of borderlands and illicit growing areas as unruly and ungoverned spaces, which are not only exporting illicit drugs, but also insecurity and terrorism. This means that small-scale growers, or indeed anyone living in the borderlands, may be branded as an enemy of the State, and targeted with militarised responses which are characterised by violence and human rights abuses. It also has implications for national peace processes, which we look at next.

Drugs and peace processes: The case of Colombia

The conflation of national conflicts and the 'war on drugs' poses challenges when it comes to considering the transition from war economies to peace economies. The research identified three approaches through which illicit drug economies have been dealt with (or ignored) in peace processes.³³ First, the *co-optation* of elites involved in illicit economies into the peace process. Second, the *criminalisation* of those involved in the drugs trade, including forced eradication. Third, *neglect*, in which peace agreements simply sidestep the issue of illicit drug economies. The deployment of these strategies varies according to a range of factors including the prominence of drugs issues, the engagement of the conflict parties with the illicit economy, and the 'carrots and sticks' employed by international actors.

In Myanmar, illicit drugs were barely mentioned in the peace process. As Patrick Meehan and Nicholas Thomson point out: 'the fact that all sides of the conflict are in some way linked to the drug trade... discouraged efforts to confront this issue beyond broad and banal statements.'³⁴

In Afghanistan an often contradictory combination of co-option and criminalisation was applied. In 2018, for example, increasingly harsh laws for drug offences were largely targeted against low-level drug dealers, leaving elites associated with the government unaffected.³⁵

Colombia's peace agreement, though, was unusual in its provision of a large-scale, and relatively progressive, crop substitution programme (PNIS) as part of the peace accords. The PNIS sought to differentiate between drug-trafficking organisations and small coca growers, *cocaleros*, attempting to disassociate peasant farmers from the 'narco-criminal' characterisation. It promised to put in place legislation to protect small scale growers and harvests from prosecution. The programme also allowed space in its structure for the *cocaleros* to participate. The voices of these growers had hitherto been marginalised, even where alternative development programmes were being planned. The PNIS emphasised voluntary approaches, whereby coca growers were encouraged to enrol in the programme, immediately uprooting their coca crops. In return, they were promised a two-year package including bi-monthly payments for the first year, plus funding and assistance to transition to alternative livelihoods.³⁶

However, the PNIS also retained the more punitive approach. For those coca growers who did not register for the programme, the State would employ forced eradication. This blurring of objectives around eradication and development mirrored tensions and inconsistencies in the preferred approach. Similarly, despite the commitment to treat coca growers as allies rather than criminals, this has not been the case in reality. Camilo Acero and Diana Machua quote one interviewee recalling the words of the attorney general at the outset of the substitution programme: 'In the counter-narcotics councils, he used to tell us "gentlemen, your interlocutors [the coca growers] are criminals. You cannot talk to them. You have to denounce them".'³⁷

As coca growers accompanied by Christian Aid have testified, this attitude means that coca cultivation continues to be perceived as the root of the problem, rather than addressing the underlying economic marginalisation which led to coca growing.³⁸

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the legislation to decriminalise small-scale growers was never put in place. Three bills were presented by government between October 2017 and July 2018, but none passed.³⁹ Similarly, the participation of the coca growers in the administration of the PNIS, already dwindling in the face of disillusion, was curtailed completely following the

election of President Duque's right-wing government in 2018. The participatory structures established for implementing the PNIS were rarely convened, and where they did take place, they were rarely attended by government officials with any real authority.⁴⁰

This failure to engage and work together with communities involved in illicit drug economies may be critical for efforts to reduce violence and build peace. The Drugs & (dis)order research points to: 'The fact that active community participation in decision-making processes is a pre-requisite to building both lasting peace, and a move away from illicit crops.'⁴¹ Christian Aid's own experience draws a similar conclusion.

In 2017, Christian Aid organised a study tour of eight Colombian coca growers to Bolivia, where coca growing had been legitimised in small quantities for non-cocaine use.⁴² One of the study tour's main findings was that the presence of strong and usually non-state participatory structures at local level were key to maintaining low levels of violence and criminality in coca-growing areas.⁴³ Further, Christian Aid found that local support for such structures is dwindling in the face of the lack of engagement by government authorities. The lack of commitment to the PNIS and to the peace process more generally are significantly undermining Colombia's path to sustainable peace.

Violence and poverty in drug-affected borderlands persist during national peace processes, which may even worsen them

While participatory structures may mitigate against conflict and violence, the reality is that the transition to peace is a slow and non-linear process. Therefore, Christian Aid's work on addressing violence, preventing conflict and building peace takes a comprehensive approach to peace and stability, acknowledging that violence is a destructive reality for many communities which are not officially 'in conflict'.

For many in borderlands regions, violence and harm may actually increase after the conclusion of a formalised peace process. This is particularly acute in places with illicit drugs economies, where new operators seek to seize control in power vacuums created by peace processes.⁴⁴

This is illustrated by Jessica's story.⁴⁵ In the 1980s, Jessica, from Puerto Asís was elected as a community police inspector, with the approval of FARC, who controlled the area. Coca farming gave her family enough money to pay for their needs, and helped send her children to university.



Above: From *Jessica: Coca growing, stigmatization, violence and development in Colombia*, Positive Negatives, 2020.

However, violence was ever present, as armed groups vied for control, and Jessica's life was threatened many times. She was held at gunpoint, forced to flee her home, and eventually gave up her job as community police inspector due to threats to her and her family.

When the peace agreement was signed in 2016, Jessica encouraged families to sign up to the voluntary crop substitution agreement. However, most of them did not receive the support which was promised. Meanwhile, when FARC signed the peace agreement, they agreed to relinquish command in the territories which they had controlled. The vacuum this created was filled by competing illegal armed groups, against which the State offered poor defences. After receiving multiple death threats, Jessica was forced to flee her home once again.

Violence and harm were also evident in Myanmar's borderlands during the democratic transition after 2010. Patrick Meehan and Nicholas Thomson demonstrated that rather than opening

up to an inclusive peace, the army prepared the way for the transition by repressive control of contested borderlands. Thus, while aid poured into Myanmar, there was little scope for a peace which truly included all parties and regions.⁴⁶

In Shan State, the Chinese government has supported an Opium Replacement programme since around 2006. While nominally an alternative development programme, it does not directly support crop substitution. Instead, it employs a trickle-down approach based on the premise that large-scale agricultural development in the region would reduce the need for people to support themselves through illicit crop cultivation. In practice, it has had the reverse effect. The large-scale acquisition of land by Chinese investors under the system of incentives and licences put in place forced many smallholders off their land and towards poppy cultivation in marginal sites, as a means of survival.⁴⁷ In tandem with this, the 'slow violence' of drugs has increased sharply in the region.

Policy implications:

- In regions affected by armed conflict, involvement in the illicit drug economy is rarely confined to one party to the conflict. **Any counter-narcotics strategy or programme should be informed by rigorous conflict analysis and have safeguards to mitigate against the use of counter-narcotics policies and operations as tools for political gain.**
- Political agreements do not suddenly bring an end to violence, particularly in the borderlands, where national peace processes can seem very remote. Rather, violence tends to change in character and distribution, as power balances shift. The opening up of borderlands to market-based development does not guarantee good outcomes for the people who live there, and there are significant transition costs associated with establishing a peace economy that leaves no one behind. **Peace processes must incorporate long timeframes, careful sequencing and an acceptance of incremental change.**
- **Ensuring strong, participatory structures is key to ensuring greater political voice and representation of borderland communities, leading to a more sustainable and equitable peace.** Implementing actors should engage with local communities and civil society organisations on their beliefs and attitudes towards the illicit drug economy and create spaces where the people most affected by illicit economies can be involved in designing, implementing and evaluating policy.

Illicit drug economies and international institutions

External actors, illicit economies and peacebuilding

In our final section, we consider the role of international actors in the three countries studied. In all three countries, it is clear from the research that the 'war on drugs' has been driven to a large extent by external actors, and that this action often depends on how much of the illegal drugs end up in the external actors' countries. In Myanmar, for example, the analysis points out that international focus on drugs in Myanmar has shifted, because few of its drugs now reach Western markets, and that China is now the dominant actor in terms of international pressure.⁴⁸

The 'evils' of narcotics (on Western streets) have often justified heavy-handed intervention and enormous pressure from international actors to pursue counter-narcotics strategies in the borderlands, often in parallel to action by the State. As a result, counter-narcotics policy is frequently incoherent, fragmented, un-transparent and anti-democratic.

In Afghanistan, the research highlights how an array of different agencies, taskforces, units and coordination centres were established with a drugs mandate, leading to duplication, competition and wildly differing objectives and visions for success.⁴⁹ Similarly, the research in Colombia points to the fact that, despite the conflict, the 'Colombian political system has been competitive and democratic, but decision-making on drug policy has not.'⁵⁰

In most large-scale counter-narcotics programmes, the human rights of drug producers or drug users are usually not the primary concern, and the approach taken is often based more on ideology and politics, rather than based in evidence and focused on achieving results.

As Goodhand points out: 'The narco-frontier imaginary justifies a focus on supply countries rather than western demand, the role of global financial centres in laundering drug money, or the unsavoury side of western meddling and hidden wars that contributed to the growth and globalisation of illicit drug economies.'⁵¹

International actors often pursue aggressive policies in drug producing regions, much of it harmful to small-scale producers, while paying far less attention to, for example, their own

'In most large-scale counter-narcotics programmes, the human rights of drug producers or drug users are usually not the primary concern, and the approach taken is often based more on ideology and politics, rather than based in evidence and focused on achieving results'

financial systems, which assist much bigger players in the illicit drug economy by allowing them to carry out secretive cross-border transactions.

The focus on threats to countries in the global North is not confined to the problem of illicit drug markets. As we discuss above, the 'narco-criminal' discourse can be used against opponents, and is often caught up with anxieties around security, migration and terrorism. As a result, not only drug policy, but also humanitarian and development interventions, are increasingly securitised, so that they are justified in terms of their capacities to address potential threats.

The securitised approach substantially changes the notion of 'fragility'. From a humanitarian or developmental point of view, fragility is about lack of access to public services, and precarious livelihoods, and persistent violence. But from a security perspective, fragility becomes the proliferation of rebels or criminals, and the creation of havens for potential terrorists.

Of course, international actors approach illicit drug economies very differently, depending on their outlook, sector and priorities, and our ability to influence these priorities is varied. We have therefore chosen to focus on one particular international actor, the institutions of the EU, to consider its role in engaging with illicit drug economies.

The Drugs & (dis)order research focuses primarily on the lived experiences of people living in the borderlands, and has not looked specifically at the role of the EU in each of the countries in any great detail. However, the consortium has engaged with the EU on its role in illicit drug economies, including through a civil society dialogue hosted by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, of which Christian Aid is a member.⁵² This final section, therefore, is a reflection on the role of the EU in illicit drug economies, starting with our three research countries, then the framing of the EU Drugs Strategy, and finally the role of the EU in wider systemic issues around illicit drug economies.

Like other multilateral institutions, the EU does not have a unified approach to considering drugs and peace, and its work is often divided in different policy silos with very different perspectives. While the EU has taken a relatively nuanced approach to counter-narcotics, compared to the US-backed 'war on drugs', tackling illicit economies is still viewed by the EU predominantly through a security lens, rather than being addressed as a development or peacebuilding concern.

'From a humanitarian or developmental point of view, fragility is about lack of access to public services, and precarious livelihoods, and persistent violence. But from a security perspective, fragility becomes the proliferation of rebels or criminals, and the creation of havens for potential terrorists'

The role of the EU in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar

Afghanistan

The Drugs & (dis)order research notes that the EU was one player (along with the World Bank, the UK's Department for International Development [now the FCDO] and the Asian Development Bank) which attempted to take a wider developmental approach towards counter-narcotics in Afghanistan, particularly between 2004 and 2010. This included trying to address the underlying factors and hazards which led to opium cultivation, and consideration of opium poppy cultivation within broader development planning.⁵³

This is reflected in an interview in 2010 with a European Commission official cited in a College of Europe Diplomacy Paper 'doing only crop substitution was a mistake. It has been done by everyone including the European Commission in Nangarhar. National rural development programmes with local ownership are now the main focus of our support.'⁵⁴ However, there was little support from the major players, particularly the US, for this new position, and momentum was not maintained.

Colombia

The activities of the EU in Colombia more directly address peacebuilding and illicit drug economies together, in line with the approach taken in the Colombia peace accord. A European Parliament report in 2019 on EU efforts to support peace in Colombia emphasises that the EU took a softer approach to drugs and peace in Colombia, compared to the 'war on drugs' approach of the US, aiming to be inclusive in its approach, to consult with civil society, and to focus on 'sustainable crop control strategies'.⁵⁵ In April 2021, a European Parliament resolution welcomed the progress so far on substitution of illicit crops and stressed the importance of the peace process being: 'accompanied by a determined effort to combat inequality and poverty, including by finding fair solutions for people and communities forced off their lands'.⁵⁶ The resolution was, however, a compromise, with some EU Member States supporting Colombia's assertion that it is on track with illicit crop substitution and rural development, while others are alarmed by the slow pace and in particular, the threat of re-introducing aerial fumigation.⁵⁷

The 2019 European Parliament report also reveals inconsistencies in the EU approach, particularly around the EU-Colombia/Peru Free Trade Agreement, where one impact assessment argued that a move from small-scale to larger-scale

agriculture would result in higher wages and better jobs, while civil society organisations have criticised the European institutions' monitoring of the agreement, suggesting the European Commission have not focused enough on sustainable development.⁵⁸

Myanmar

The EU was a strong supporter of Myanmar's peace process and democratic transition, and was one of the few international organisations invited to sign the National Ceasefire Agreement as an international witness.⁵⁹ The EU allocated almost €1bn in development cooperation to Myanmar for the period 2007-2020.⁶⁰ From 2007-2012, this was provided in two focal sectors, education and health; from 2012-2013 two further sectors were added: peacebuilding and trade; and the 2014-2020 Multiannual Indicative Programme covered rural development, education, governance and peacebuilding. Peacebuilding activities amounted to 15% of the programme's €688m budget.

There was little analysis by the EU of the illicit drug economy in Myanmar, and no specific activities undertaken have been identified. The European Commission Country Strategy Paper for Myanmar for 2007-2013 has one paragraph on the illicit economy based on smuggling of drugs, gemstones and timber, which concludes that this illicit trade sustains armed groups and does 'not contribute to poverty eradication or livelihood opportunities'.⁶¹ Subsequent strategy papers do not reference the illicit economies at all.

EU response to the changing contexts

In view of the deteriorating situation in all three countries in early 2022 when this paper was published, there are questions around how the EU should be responding. While the peace agreement still holds in Colombia, there have been calls from civil society organisations to suspend the Free Trade Agreement due to the human rights violations which have occurred in Colombia's response to recent protests.⁶²

Since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the EU has frozen any development assistance going directly to the government or which might assist the junta; placed an embargo on the sale or transfer of arms to Myanmar; and imposed three successive rounds of sanctions on individuals and economic entities.⁶³ Its wider trade arrangements with Myanmar remain in place, however.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, overall EU development aid remains frozen, conditional upon five benchmarks agreed by EU foreign ministers that the Taliban should demonstrably meet (including

respect for human rights, in particular the full enjoyment of rights of women and girls).⁶⁴ In October 2021, the European Commission pledged a support package worth around €1bn for the Afghan people. Like other international donors, the European Commission is grappling with how to provide humanitarian assistance to an increasingly desperate Afghan population, while avoiding legitimising the Taliban regime.

EU policy on illicit drugs

Beyond the three countries studied, what is the overall approach of the EU towards drug policy and illicit drug economies? EU drug policy is the responsibility of the Migration and Home Affairs DG of the European Commission (DG HOME), making it very separate from EU policy on either development or peacebuilding.⁶⁵ The internal evaluation of the EU Drugs Strategy 2013-2020 acknowledges this lack of connection, identifying integration of the Drugs Strategy with overall EU foreign policy as 'lagging behind'.⁶⁶

The new EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025 does include priority areas on strengthening the commitment to development-oriented drug policies, and protecting and promoting human rights in global drug policies.⁶⁷ However, the security focus is much more to the fore, with the first policy area being: 'Drug supply reduction: enhancing security'.⁶⁸

The first point of contact for cooperation with international organisations is identified as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), with a more general reference to the EU's engagement in 'other UN fora focusing on health, human rights and development'.⁶⁹ The lack of engagement with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) or the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UN DPPA) has resulted in a diminished focus on development, peace, or tackling the root causes of drug cultivation in a conscious way. This is highlighted in the final evaluation of the EU's Drug Policy (2020) and midterm review (2016), with 9 and 25 references to UNODC respectively, while UNDP or UN DPPA were not referred to at all.⁷⁰

EU-funded projects and programmes in the area of illicit drugs have almost exclusively focused on drug use, crime and security.⁷¹ The Cocaine and Heroin Route Programmes, funded by the Instrument Contributing to Stability, focus on supply reduction, combatting transnational organised crime, strengthening capacity of the Drug and Organised Crime Coordination Unit, and developing cooperation networks along the heroin route in relation to supply reduction.

While position papers cited in the evaluation of the 2013-20 EU Drugs Strategy have suggested that success should be 'measured in amount of dismantled drug trafficking groups and transnational organised criminal groups, rather than drugs seized', no similar indicators of success have been suggested for goals of peace and development.⁷² The EU Drugs Action Plan which accompanies the strategy has an action around applying criteria 'beyond an exclusive focus on illicit drug crop monitoring indicators and ensuring ownership among target communities', with reference to the Sustainable Development Goals, but there is little detail on how these criteria will be designed and applied.⁷³

Wider EU policy affecting illicit economies

Above, we highlighted the tendency of international actors to pursue punitive counter-narcotics strategies in drug-producing countries, while ignoring financial systems that allow for the laundering of drug profits. It should be acknowledged, however, that the EU has taken a lead role in attempts to close loopholes by requiring all Member States to publish registers of beneficial owners of companies, which identifies who ultimately owns and profits from companies.⁷⁴ Since 2020, the EU also maintains a 'list of high-risk third countries', which identifies third countries that have strategic deficiencies in their anti-money laundering regimes.⁷⁵

However, there are other areas where there may be unintended harm to borderland communities through EU action. Jonathan Goodhand and Adam Pain point out that the EU's Border Management Programme in Central Asia invested in border infrastructure, policing and law enforcement in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. However, in the absence of accountable State forces: 'The effects of such interventions are to consolidate state control over drugs flows, rather than reduce them.'⁷⁶ Those with connections and money can circumvent border controls, while the barriers and risks are borne by the smaller players.

In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, the EU has also signalled its intent to pursue a strategy of regional collaboration with Afghanistan's direct neighbours, allocating 'additional funds to support these countries in migration management, as well as in cooperation on terrorism prevention, [the] fight against organised crime and migrant smuggling.'⁷⁷ In designing such a strategy, it is to be hoped that the EU can take account of the experiences and analysis presented by the Drugs & (dis)order research, and avoid causing further harm to the people in the borderlands of Afghanistan.

Recommendations

1. The EU should develop a **cross-sectoral approach to drugs, development and peace**, acknowledging the root causes and factors which leave peripheral communities with little choice but to engage in the illicit economy, and taking a human-centred and rights-based approach to illicit drug economies. **The EU should strengthen the peace and development focus in the Action Plan of the EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025.**
2. Any EU support for counter-narcotics policy or alternative livelihoods must use **indicators such as access to public services, poverty reduction, respect for human rights, human security, confidence in the state and access to meaningful employment**, rather than using metrics around reduction in illicit drug crops.
3. The EU should consider the role which its own financial and political institutions may play in enabling the illicit drugs trade, and continue to **fight against money laundering and illicit financial flows.**
4. The EU must place a stronger focus on **violence reduction, attention to human rights, and 'do no harm' principles** when engaging with fragile states and illicit economies.
5. The EU should work to ensure **women's equal rights** to participate in and benefit from decision-making and programmes around drugs, peace and development.
6. **EU actions on border management** should be carefully considered to ensure that they do not cause further harm where communities rely on cross-border exchanges. Ensuring good governance and accountability of state institutions must come before securitised responses.

Conclusion

As the Drugs & (dis)order research draws to a close in 2022, life for the communities with whom we have been working in the borderlands is more perilous than ever. The Afghan economy is on the brink of collapse following the Taliban takeover, and in Myanmar, resistance to the coup is triggering brutal crackdown, and further waves of refugees fleeing their homes. In Colombia, the threat of aerial eradication still hangs over coca growing areas, and protestors are met with violence.

The 'policy trilemma' raises difficult questions around what choices should be made in considering drugs, development and peace together, and these choices need to be informed by the priorities of those living in drugs-affected borderlands. But institutions and policymakers have shown willingness to engage with these difficult questions, and to step outside of their silos to understand other points of view. In bringing together academics, policy makers, local research, and civil society organisations and international non-governmental organisations, the Drugs & (dis)order consortium has begun the process of setting the course for a more reflective and collaborative approach.

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