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Mekong officials gather to address the Golden Triangle opium economy

Luang Prabang (Lao PDR), 22 November 2016 - Senior government officials, international and civil society partners active across the Mekong region, along with representatives of the Myanmar Peace Centre, the Thai Royal Project and Mae Fah Luang Foundation, have convened in Luang Phrabang in northern Lao PDR to consider new development oriented strategies to address the opium economy. The *Symposium on Addressing the Drug Economy through Wider Development Agendas* follows the recent political commitment of the six [Mekong MOU](#) countries – Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam – to explore ways to better connect drug control measures with other regional development plans.

Illicit opium and heroin remain primary components of the drug economy in the Golden Triangle and East and Southeast Asia. Opium continues to be produced at high levels in the north of Myanmar and Lao PDR with over 60,000 hectares under cultivation producing 20% of global opium supply.



Illicit crop cultivation in the Golden Triangle area of the Mekong

[Socioeconomic surveys of farmers in poppy-growing villages](#) continue to confirm that money generated from opium farming is essential for villagers trapped by poverty and related food insecurity. Difficult living conditions, households in debt, and poor infrastructure and accessibility to market are also contributing factors. Opium poppy is not only cultivated by farmers because it provides a means of subsistence in the face of poverty, but also because it can do so relatively quickly and easily compared to other crops. At the same time, opium from Myanmar and Lao PDR is an essential part of the larger regional transnational crime economy, with heroin produced in, and trafficked from, the Golden Triangle earning [billions of dollars annually for organized crime](#) and groups that challenge peace and stability.



Map of heroin flows

"At a basic level it is vital that programmes address core issues such as poverty and food insecurity, land tenure and instability – issues that are not only confined to drug control strategies", said Mr. Claude Jentgen, Chargé d'Affaires of Luxembourg in Lao PDR. "We remain committed to supporting UNODC to help farmers establish sustainable alternative economies. We also hope other partners step forward with support so that the work can be scaled-up and more farmers are reached."

The recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals go beyond traditional socioeconomic development approaches to encompass the environment, participatory and representative decision-making, as well as security, and rule of law dimensions. The Symposium has been called to discuss options for scaling up comprehensive responses to the regional opium and drug economy in-line with the SDGs and development plans.

“There is no doubt that opium cultivation flourishes in areas where isolation and poverty are entrenched, and where farmers are unable to obtain sufficient income from legal activities due to lack of market access, conflict and absence of basic infrastructure”, said Erlend Falch, of UNODC Lao PDR. “The idea is to connect our efforts to offer alternatives to drug production in Lao and Myanmar to larger development plans.”

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