

1 April 2021

English only

Commission on Narcotic Drugs**Sixty-fourth session**

Vienna, 12–16 April 2021

Item 6 of the provisional agenda*

Follow-up to the implementation at the national, regional and international levels of all commitments, as reflected in the Ministerial Declaration of 2019, to address and counter the world drug problem**Conference Room Paper submitted jointly by Germany, Peru, Thailand and UNODC titled, “Opportunities and Challenges for the Role of Development in Drug Control Policies”****

Disclaimer: This report summarizes the discussions of the Expert Group Meeting but does not necessarily reflect the views of all participants.

Summary

Within the framework of a series of annual Expert Group Meetings (EGM) on Alternative Development, a virtual EGM was convened from 15-18 March 2021 to continue to share lessons learned, best practices and expertise. The virtual EGM also continued to promote dialogue on development-oriented drug control policies and programmes and on the implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Alternative Development, with special consideration of the challenges stemming from the global COVID-19-pandemic. The EGM series is co-hosted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) of Germany; the Government of Peru; the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage. The virtual EGM provided a platform to continue discussions on advancing development-oriented drug control policies by focusing on recent trends and developments, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on illicit drug crop cultivation and alternative development interventions, the possibilities and challenges of applying alternative development approaches in non-traditional and urban settings, as well as other recent developments and challenges.

* E/CN.7/2021/1.

** This document has not been edited.



The virtual EGM brought together 100 participants, comprised of representatives from 15 Member States, representatives from regional and international organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector. This paper summarizes the main points discussed over the course of the meeting.

I. Overview

1. The virtual Expert Group Meeting took place from 15 to 18 March 2021 as part of the broader framework of annual Expert Group Meetings on Alternative Development.

II. Illicit drug crop cultivation – Recent trends and research

2. It was observed that there has been an increase in political commitment to development-oriented drug control policies and alternative development interventions in recent years. For example, recent framework documents such as the African Union Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2019–2023) and the EU Drugs Strategy (2021–2025) include renewed and strong commitments to alternative development.

3. Over the past years, increased efforts have been put into the collection and systematization of information and data on illicit drug crop cultivation and the status of alternative development interventions around the globe. Responding to the commitments made in the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action, and the outcome document of the thirtieth special session of the General Assembly in 2016, entitled “Our joint commitment to effectively addressing and countering the world drug problem” regarding the lack of reliable and up-to-date data on illicit drug crop cultivation other than the number of hectares cultivated, a pioneering UNODC-led research study has provided an estimation of the number of households cultivating illicit crops globally, the number of alternative development projects, actual beneficiaries and budgets of such projects.

4. However, participants agreed that data collection, at both global and local scale, remains challenging. Using the unit ‘households’ as a reference has advantages in terms of comparability, while simultaneously raising questions about certain socioeconomic aspects that are not possible to be clearly understood using this metric. Challenges discussed included the difficulties regarding the quantification of small-scale farmers involved in processes related to the illicit cultivation (e.g. harvest, logistics, etc.), the actual number of household members and their distinctive roles, the size and number of plots per household, gender-disaggregated data collection as well as the need for capacity-building on data collection for Member States.

5. Overall, there was consensus that by including all aspects of well-being, including social, environmental and cultural components, human development indicators contribute to creating more accurate, evidence-based impact assessments. Additionally, robust baseline and endline studies are needed to enable measurement of changes before and after the implementation of alternative development interventions. By including control communities not receiving the interventions, which are similar to the communities receiving the interventions, the effect of external factors, such as droughts, can be eliminated and the impact of the alternative development can be more properly measured over time.

6. One indicator that could be used to assess the needs of communities affected by illicit crop cultivation is the so-called ‘development gap’. The development gap refers to the difference between communities affected by illicit crop cultivation and communities not affected by illicit crop cultivation in human development indicators, criteria related to environmental sustainability and other measurements in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g. income, food security, health care, gender equality, education, electricity, employment, market access, infrastructure, public transport, soil quality and climate change mitigation and adaptation, security, governance, responsible consumption patterns, etc.). The development gap can be used for taking decisions related to the design of alternative development interventions and for measuring progress over time.

7. The UNODC World Drug Report 2020 also shows that while the largest share of the total combined budget of alternative development projects went to long-term projects, in terms of the number of projects, 60 per cent of those completed lasted less than six years, which is likely too short for sustainable results. Participants expressed their hopes that future projects last a greater number of years, reflecting the state of expert debate and more recent insights into the impact of alternative development interventions that have highlighted the importance of long-term interventions.

III. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small-scale farmers, alternative development and illicit economies

8. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected countries and drug producing areas in different ways. Some countries have been more affected by health-related aspects of the crisis, whereas other countries, often with lower case-numbers, have been impacted most by the severe lockdown measures and restrictions of movement put in place in response to the pandemic. While there have been reports of an increase in drug crop cultivation as well as increased availability and trafficking of illegal substances in some countries, understanding the long-term impact of the pandemic on the cultivation of drug crops and on licit and illicit value chains requires more in-depth research. The overall trends show that the pandemic has increased inequality and affected already vulnerable communities disproportionately. Heightened uncertainty and unpredictability of the real nature and scope of the impact pose serious challenges for a sustainable and resilient recovery as some countries may need to re-allocate resources from their drug control policy efforts, including alternative development, to other activities. Hence, there is a risk that in the post-pandemic period there may be funding shortages for development-oriented drug control policy programmes.

9. Due to the pandemic, small-scale farmers in drug crop cultivating areas have to cope with additional uncertainties with regards to food security, unstable prices for agricultural products and commodities, as well as uncertain access to licit markets. Some participants pointed out that these potential negative impacts could be mitigated by strengthening alternative development programmes in order to avoid a migration of labour to illicit drug economies, putting the progress of the past years at risk. Implementing early warning or quick response mechanisms, promoting local markets, investing in digital infrastructure nationwide, as well as strengthening local technical assistance could reduce vulnerabilities in the long term.

IV. Alternative development in non-traditional and urban settings

10. There was agreement that the common root causes of illicit drug crop cultivation in rural areas and other drug-related activities in urban areas are poverty, lack of opportunities, lack of access to resources and licit value chains, unemployment, weak infrastructure, violence, marginalization and social disintegration. Therefore, some of the lessons learned and best practices from the implementation of traditional alternative development programmes, as defined in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Alternative Development, may also be relevant in non-traditional and urban settings through a holistic, integrated and balanced approach addressing all aspects of development and taking into account economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as long-term flexible funding and political commitment. Some participants reported that the lessons learned from the alternative development approach have already been applied to drug trafficking in peri-urban and urban settings.

11. Some participants pointed out that the key difference of implementing development-oriented drug control policy programmes in an urban setting is the balance between development and law enforcement. The principle of 'proper

sequencing' which outlines that viable livelihood alternatives must be provided before eradication, is recommended in traditional alternative development interventions. In urban settings, due to the dynamic nature of the drug problem, an amended approach is required which combines development-oriented drug control policy with strategic law enforcement measures. At the same time, empowering people to facilitate a true bottom-up process of community-based agreements can help to foster a culture of lawfulness, which is the basis for a sustainable future of those communities. It was clearly stated by participants that development efforts in urban and peri-urban settings cannot replace law enforcement activities but should go hand in hand in a balanced and coherent approach.

12. Case studies presented over the course of the virtual EGM showed that in areas affected by the production of and trafficking in synthetic drugs, the income from illicit activities tended to be much higher than in the case of illicit drug crop cultivation in rural areas. As such, development-oriented drug control policy interventions in non-rural settings must be focused on generating results quickly and with viable, comparable income-generating streams. The engagement of the private sector from the very beginning can contribute to accelerate income generation through value-addition, innovation, entrepreneurship, and linking communities with long-term existing and potential markets. In addition, cooperation with academic institutions may provide the necessary technology and know-how for a potential value-addition process in licit value chains in urban settings. Participants also discussed the role of social business and its promotion through improving the normative and institutional environment, which would facilitate social and solidarity-minded economic proposals.

13. Moreover, there is a need to address the supply as well as demand of illicit drugs concurrently. Some participants mentioned the importance of comprehensive and voluntary treatment and harm reduction measures, combined with skills training and long-term employment opportunities, while removing stigmatization by the community that can lead to lower relapse rates. Experiences have shown that when people are empowered and perceive the transformation plan as holistic, they will continue their engagement and recognize the benefits of the programme to the communities in the long run. These measures also complement development efforts to help transition the communities once involved in drug production or trafficking to be self-reliant in the licit economy.

V. Applying alternative development in the field of illicit cannabis cultivation

14. The scope of alternative development has evolved and expanded over the last years. New challenges in the field of development-oriented drug control policy require continuous discussions in order to produce a more inclusive and up-to-date understanding of the role of development in the evolving drug control context. With a view to recent policy developments in the field of medical cannabis and industrial hemp, several participants expressed their interest to further discuss the challenges of implementing alternative development programmes to address the cultivation of cannabis as well as constraints associated with promoting medical cannabis in the framework of alternative development.

15. There was agreement about the need to improve data collection on the extent of illicit cannabis cultivation and on the number of households engaged at a global scale. As compared to the global situation with regards to opium poppy and coca bush cultivation, the evidence base in the field of illicit cannabis cultivation is still considered weak. A stronger evidence-base is needed to better understand the issue. However, providing the necessary data is challenging for countries, since a considerable share of illegal cannabis cultivation takes place indoors and is hard to detect. In order to conduct a global study, significant financial contributions and political commitment from Member States are needed. In addition, data on existing

global supply and potential global demand for medical and industrial cannabis should be collected and used as a basis for realistic and strategic interventions.

16. There was a suggestion to link, where applicable, national medical and industrial cannabis production to local needs and to set realistic goals and expectations regarding the actual supply and demand both locally and globally. There was discussion that other legal agricultural products with lower market entry challenges seemed to be more promising in order to provide sustainable and licit sources of income for small-scale farmers in source countries.

17. Concerns revolve around proper sequencing and the involvement of law enforcement, the risk of possible diversion of legally produced medical cannabis into the illegal market, as well as the regulative policies that have been adapted by some countries in light of the International Drug Control Conventions. In addition, factors for consideration include divergences which arise from international scheduling, international market dynamics, and the rigorous quality standard requirements for medical cannabis, which are easier to be met through indoor cultivation and which require major investments. Experiences presented at the virtual EGM show that there are significant entry barriers for small-scale farmers into the medical cannabis market. Participants noted that there are no instances involving small-scale farmers in traditional source countries of illicit cannabis in the regulated market for medical cannabis and related legal products.

18. Some participants highlighted the importance of Member States continuing to adhere to the obligations and requirements established by the International Drug Control Conventions despite the novel conversations around medical cannabis and industrial hemp.

VI. Alternative development and the environment

19. Evidence presented at the virtual EGM shows that there is an increasing trend in some countries of illicit drug crop cultivation taking place in protected areas, such as national parks and reserves. Since traditional agricultural development is usually not legally permitted in protected areas and national parks, new models for creating licit livelihoods need to be developed.

20. As illicit drug crop cultivation often results in over-exploitation and depletion of natural resources, there is a direct link to land degradation, deforestation, water pollution as well as to the loss of biodiversity. Participants recognized that there are regional heterogeneities and that the relation between illicit drug crop cultivation and deforestation is complex. Besides the clearing of land for illicit drug crop cultivation, there are other economic activities that contribute to deforestation: livestock grazing, monocropping, shifting cultivation, unsustainable food crop cultivation and infrastructure development. Furthermore, it was pointed out that forced eradication measures without licit livelihood opportunities can have a direct impact on pushing the agricultural frontier further into protected areas and thereby contributing to deforestation.

21. Participants agreed that development-oriented drug control policy measures need to include responsible environmental management and use practices. As part of a comprehensive and sustainable strategy, alternative development measures should take territorial approaches into account that seek to enhance development in a given region, and not only those involved in the illicit drug economy. Through this approach, moral hazard can be avoided. Additionally, alternative development interventions should consider including measures to strengthen forest governance and conservation instruments, agroforestry, Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), ecological agricultural practices, environmental education, reforestation practices and the promotion of non-timber forest products as opportunities to support licit livelihoods.

22. Trust-building and natural resource management and governance measures play a key role to ensure the commitment of local and regional stakeholders for long-term sustainability. Strengthening community organizations by investing in organizational capacity, entrepreneurship and local leadership can enhance resilience. Alternative development programmes should be adapted to local conditions, be respectful of special management requirements in ethnic territories and national parks and be aligned with national and regional environmental protection strategies.

VII. Conclusion

23. The virtual EGM provided a platform to share best practices and lessons learned, adapting the traditional alternative development approach to changing framework conditions and new challenges. The discussions focussed on how development-oriented drug control policies and interventions can be further improved to better meet the needs of affected communities regardless of the social or geographic context while at the same time reducing the illicit cultivation of drug crops.

24. The participants identified a set of cross-cutting issues that need to be taken into account in the design and implementation of ongoing and future alternative development interventions. These included a clear need for more targeted and disaggregated data collection; proper and coordinated sequencing of interventions, taking into account external factors contributing to increased vulnerability of affected communities; environmental aspects; the inclusion of human rights instruments such as the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy; and the continuous promotion of gender equality as well as participatory approaches. Discussions regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug crop cultivation, recent challenges in the field of illicit cannabis, the challenges around environmental sensitivity of alternative development interventions, as well as applying a development-oriented approach in non-traditional and urban settings clearly showed the need to broaden the conversation to better link and align development-oriented drug control with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.
