



## **Alternative Development: How can European countries contribute?**

**By Dag Endal,  
Programme Coordinator of FORUT Norway**

As one of the very few Western development NGOs specialized in alcohol and drugs as a development issue, FORUT warmly welcomes the fact that Alternative Development has become a priority issue under the UNGASS umbrella. This is, in all respects a timely development, in particular because it links UNGASS more strongly to the newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals. Side-events at the 59<sup>th</sup> session of the CND have also shown that Alternative Development is not just a good idea. It has also proved to work in practice, like the examples of Peru and Thailand show.

With this momentum on the international level, it is critical that more donor countries in Europe make drug policies and Alternative Development a part of their development assistance programmes. We are all aware of the rather disappointing figures presented in the World Drug Report 2015 that show that widespread political support for Alternative Development has not been matched by funding. The report says that funds allocated by OECD countries to support Alternative Development declined by 71 per cent between 2009 and 2013, amounting to only 0.1 per cent of global development assistance.

Changing this negative trend in funding for Alternative Development should be a top priority issue in the UNGASS Outcome Document, preferably by setting a goal for a new and higher funding level to be reached by the international community in 2019. This will not only benefit global drug policies and drug producing regions, but also constitute a substantial contribution towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

FORUT has been supporting community development and policy development programmes through local partners in Africa and Asia for several decades, without focusing on crop replacement, simply because our programmes are not in regions where this is a priority issue. But based on our experience from mainstream development work, as well as from alcohol and drug policy programmes, our basic challenge to European countries and to potential donor countries is: More development work in drug policies. More drug policy in development work.

From our perspective the equation is simple: Alternative development work = mainstream development work. We welcome the fact that this is also the basic approach of those Alternative Development programmes that seem to yield the best results.

As mentioned above, FORUT has “Alcohol, Drugs and Development” as our special field of competence. For us it is a paradox that even if alcohol in particular, but also illegal drugs, rank among the most risky consumer products on the market, causing substantial harm also in developing societies, this fact is not reflected in most development policies and programs, not even in health programmes. For many development workers substance use seem to be a non-issue; invisible, ignored, a kind of taboo. This weakness is the same for government programmes and NGO programs alike.

Our first answers to how European countries can contribute to better outcomes must therefore be: Governments and NGOs in European countries should recognize the fact that the use of intoxicating substances, drugs and alcohol alike, is a hindrance to development in many developing societies.

Secondly; we should all realize that the use of alcohol and drugs in developing societies can easily increase in the coming years, followed by higher levels of alcohol- and drug-related harm; - that is if the global community and national governments are not ready to implement interventions that prevent such an increase.

Thirdly, more Western countries should include prevention of substance use problems in their governmental development policies and programmes. Very few countries have done so far. We commend Germany for being an outstanding exception, which we have heard in several side-events.

Terminology is an important aspect. There has been a progress over the years in the understanding what kind of challenge we face. This is reflected in the terms used in different periods. The common term used to be *crop eradication*, which was later replaced by *crop replacement*, and now *alternative development* is the most used term. We recommend the chapter in the World Drug Report 2015 that discusses these changes in terminology. It is important to realize that this is not only a change of words. It reflects a different way of understanding the root causes and also how to define solutions.

One important aspect of this change is that it brings drug prevention through alternative development more in line with the approach that is used in mainstream development programmes. This change also moves the issue of AD from the field of law enforcement over to social mobilization.

The shift furthermore makes it possible to bring experiences from mainstream development work into AD. FORUT is involved in community development in many areas, not only in the alcohol and drug field. Our development strategy, which is similar to many other development NGOs, is based on these components among others:

- \* Empowerment, i.e. working with people rather than for them or against them;
- \* Good governance through the building of local public institutions;
- \* Mobilization of people through NGOs; community groups, faith-based organisations etc.
- \* Real partnerships, where the donor is not only a bank for transfer of money but an equal partner
- \* Livelihoods schemes and savings groups;
- \* Provision of basic health and social services

Each of these factors are important in themselves, but successful community development programmes have to have a mix of several of them, probably all to some degree.

Another response to the question of how European countries could contribute more would therefore be: Donor countries and agencies should prioritize support to AD programmes that take a broad development approach and that draw competence from the mainstream development field, more than from law enforcement or military expertise.

The time perspective is another important factor, which has also been underlined in several side-events. Alternative Development needs a long-term commitment, both from local implementers and from donor agencies. While crop eradication in a given area may take a few hours by using the best available technology, alternative development takes five or ten years by using the best available knowledge.

Finally, some words about a political issue that has a strong impact on the possible outcomes of AD programmes. That is the role of prevention in drug policies and demand reduction as an element in a broad prevention approach. The rationale of alternative development, in addition to improving the living conditions in the target areas, is supply reduction, i.e. to reduce the flow of harmful substances into the global market place. This will hardly be successful without also focusing on the demand side; that means 1) to reduce demand for illicit products and 2) to increase the demand for the alternative products.

In other words, AD programmes must be combined with high ambitions for reducing illicit drug use in the consumer countries in Europe. We can't expect to succeed in reducing the supply of illicit drugs at the production end if the demand for these drugs is high and even increasing in Western countries. Giving priority to health services and harm reduction is far from sufficient to succeed in demand reduction. Applying a public health approach is necessary, and that must be a real public health approach.

Public health interventions are the most powerful harm-reduction interventions that are at hand, simply because they address consumer patterns and attitudes in the larger population and prevent drug use disorders from occurring in the first place. Reducing drug use prevalence in European countries should therefore be an important part of Alternative Development strategies in countries in the global South.