



A century of drug control

Global health catastrophe prevented—but most vulnerable still face exclusion

In the 19th century, the free trade in drugs created a dire humanitarian situation—the Chinese opium epidemic. At its peak, tens of millions of Chinese people were addicted to the drug, and nearly a quarter of the adult male population used it.

Empires thrived on the opium trade or foundered in its wake. Enormous political and economic interests were at stake. Even a country the size of British India derived 14 per cent of state income from its opium monopoly in 1880. Meanwhile, the Chinese Empire's massive foreign reserves dwindled as imported drugs plunged its trade balance with the West into the red.

Unilateral efforts to address the problem failed until international pressure led to a solution and consigned the opium dens to history.



Opium and opium pipes.

The origins

Before the world had a drug control system, little more than a century ago, global production and exports of opium rose sharply, leading to alarming abuse rates around the world. There was also a considerable increase in global coca leaf exports. Cocaine, first synthesized in 1860 in Germany, was aggressively marketed.

The International Opium Commission in Shanghai in 1909, gave rise to the first instrument of international law to deal with psychoactive substances, the Hague Opium Convention of 1912.

The Shanghai Commission represents one of the first truly international efforts to confront a global problem, although its declaration was a non-binding document. Hammering out a body of international law to deal with the global drug problem would



International Opium Commission in Shanghai in 1909.

require more than a dozen agreements and declarations over the next century.

After World War I, the League of Nations made headway with three Conventions passed during the inter-war period. After World War II, the United Nations stepped up efforts through various Protocols, which eventually culminated in the landmark 1961 *Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs*.



First Assembly of the League of Nations, Geneva, 1920.

By 1950, the licit trade in narcotics had been brought under control, a remarkable achievement given that many national economies had depended on opium. But the drugs market adapted readily. Opium use started to decrease, eclipsed by more modern extractions of the drug; first morphine, then heroin.



Signing of the *Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs*, New York, 1961.

The *Single Convention of 1961*, the foundation of today's drug control system, covered the plant-based drugs, such as opium, heroin (derived from opium), cocaine and cannabis. Since it did not cover the synthetic drugs such as amphetamines



which proliferated in the decade that followed its adoption, ten years later, the *Convention on Psychotropic Substances* (1971) extended control to a number of new substances that had many medical uses, but were increasingly being diverted from licit trade and abused.



Signing of the *Convention on Psychotropic Substances*, New York, 1971.

In 1988, the *Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances* complemented the previous treaties by imposing controls throughout the

market chain, from the precursor chemicals needed to make drugs to the laundering of drug money. Together, these three drug treaties provide the world with a coherent system of international controls.

Adherence to the drug control conventions is now virtually universal, ranking among the highest to any of the United Nations multilateral instruments.

Measurable success

There is clear progress over the last century when we consider opiates (including morphine and heroin) which cause most of the drug-related deaths worldwide.

- In contrast to the massive increase in opium production in the 19th century, global production of opium was some 78 per cent lower in 2007 than in 1906/07 (despite the significant increase of illicit opium production in Afghanistan over the last three decades). This is a significant accomplishment, given that the world's population has more than quadrupled over this period.



Giving farmers alternatives to growing opium in Myanmar.

- If opiate use prevalence had remained the same as in the early years of the 20th century, the world would have some 90 million opiate users, rather than the 17 million seen today.
- Approximately one in every twenty people aged 15-64, or 5 per cent, have used illicit drugs at least once in the past 12 months. Moreover, only an estimated 0.6 per cent of the planet's adult population—about 26 million people—are problem drug users.

This is not to say that the work is done. Cocaine use grew last century. There are also new synthetic drugs which did not exist a century ago that are widely abused today.

However, drug use might have been far greater if international drug control had not been in place. And global illicit drug use still affects far fewer people than the many millions who use legal psychoactive substances such as tobacco and alcohol.