



UNITED NATIONS  
*Office on Drugs and Crime*

Myanmar Country Office

# Life in the Wa Hills: Towards Sustainable Development



September 2006

**For Information Only.**

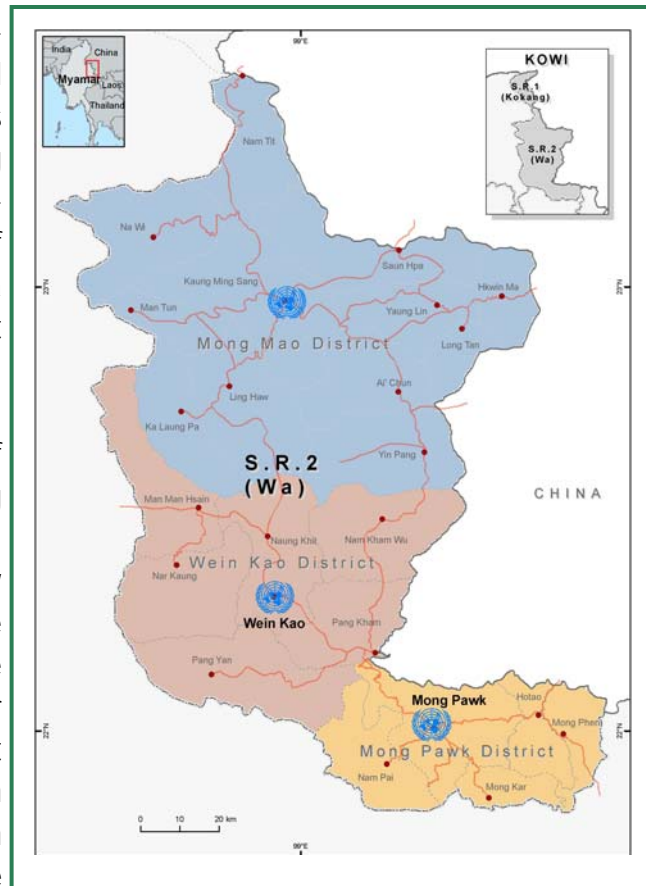
Not an Official Document of United Nations/United Nations Office on  
Drugs and Crime

This information brochure has not been formally edited.

The designations employed and presentation of the material in this information brochure do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the United Nations/United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area of its authorities or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

## A UNIQUE Wa

Wa Special Region 2 is a remote picturesque region in the Northern and Eastern Shan State of Myanmar. Its three districts – Mong Maw, Mong Pawk, and Wein Kao and its 23 townships are home to 470,000 people. Of the Wa, Lahu, Shan, Chinese, Akha and Tai Loi ethnic groups that inhabit the region, the majority rely on livelihood strategies that have conventionally been based on the cultivation of rice in the infertile upland fields during the monsoon season and opium poppy cultivation throughout the dry season, September to March. The mountainous terrain and dry climate have made the Wa land suitable for the cultivation of opium poppy. Most of Myanmar's opium poppy cultivation and production takes place in Shan State, and the Wa region used to be the principal location.



Household economies in the Wa have long been impeded by the pressures of stark surroundings; opium poppy cultivation resulting in decreased household productivity and increased poverty, more than two decades of conflict, and most recently, the imposition of fast opium reduction strategies.



The Wa hills

## OVER THE YEARS

Opium poppy has been grown in the Wa Region for over a century. A steady and lucrative market for the crop guaranteed profits that were high enough to transform many previously self-reliant farmers into economic dependents of opium. As the growers expanded their poppy fields to



earn more income from opium sales, they grew fewer food crops and produced less tools and handicrafts so that they now lack the initiative and skills to survive without opium.

Seclusion from the core centres of power, isolation and a legacy of conflict prevented the Wa from developing the administrative, economic, and social structures necessary to provide for the welfare of its inhabitants. Additionally, earlier attempts to confront

the problems associated with opium poppy cultivation were hindered by the inability of the Government of Myanmar to contribute in the development of the Wa Region.

However, following ceasefire agreements reached with the Wa and other insurgent groups in 1989, the government, as well as local authorities, began to pursue livelihood development activities in the area.

In May 1995, the Wa leadership established a drug control committee which announced that opium poppy cultivation would be banned as of 2005. The Wa demonstrated their commitment to this initiative by successfully declaring the first opium-free zone in Ho Tao, starting with the October 1995 planting season.

As a result of this initiative, and as per the request of the Government, UNODC was able to provide technical assistance and promote alternative development for the improvement of the livelihoods of opium-dependent farmers.

Today, UNODC operates in the Wa under the KOWI (Kokang and Wa Initiative) umbrella, which establishes a holistic, partnership-based approach to the development of sustainable livelihoods in the region.

UNODC is working to provide for the basic human needs of ex-opium farmers,

whose livelihood has been jeopardized by the lack of access to markets and services, and by opium poppy cultivation.

### STATE OF THE PEOPLE

Ultimately, opium poppy cultivation is a sign of poverty rather than wealth. As striking as it may seem, opium poppy growers earn less than non-opium poppy growers per year. According to statistics, non-opium poppy growing households in the Shan State earn on average US\$364 per year, against only US\$292 for opium growers.

Opium production has brought about addiction, drug trafficking, mono-crop dependence, and has rendered people vulnerable to other diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.

Akher woman cultivating opium



Opium poppy cultivation led to opium addiction in several areas of the Wa. Although opium poppy is chiefly grown for medicinal purposes, it is also grown to sustain family members' opium addiction. In

fact, every opium poppy growing village is home to addicts. Estimates suggest that between 2 and 4 percent of the Wa population are addicted to opiates.

Addiction reduces family productivity. Since on the most part men, heads of the households, are the addicts, the women and children are forced to take on additional work. The lack of one productive member of the household decreases productivity resulting in an additional negative impact on the households' food security. Surveys in the region have found that when men stop using opium, productivity goes up again. Through drug demand reduction activities (including treatment, rehabilitation, training and after care services) UNODC helps to decrease the number of addicts and to their return to a productive way of life.

HIV/AIDS is a growing problem throughout the region alongside addiction. While injecting drug use is a primary mode of HIV transmission in Myanmar at large, in the Wa the problem remains largely confined to Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs). UNODC is actively improving public health conditions and raising awareness about drugs and HIV/AIDS in the region.

The production and trafficking of heroin is possible due to the large availability of opium in the region and the lack of effective law enforcement apparatuses.

Myanmar is the main producer of heroin in South East Asia, with most of its heroin laboratories situated in the border areas near Thailand and China. In addition, there has also been a steady increase in amphetamine production. ATS production is not dependent on weather conditions, it is cheaper to produce, and easier to conceal than opium. Cross border trafficking networks play a significant role in the smuggling of incoming chemicals and outgoing illicit drugs across permeable borders.

Poppy capsules at harvest time



### A CHANGE IN LIFE STYLE

Since 1996, opium poppy cultivation has declined progressively, the result of increased eradication and control efforts by the central government, as well as the local authorities. June 2005 marked the enforcement of an opium ban that ordered farmers to stop cultivation throughout the region. Besides showing the commitment of the Wa authorities to reducing opium poppy cultivation, this ban accommodated to drug control pressures from the Myanmar government and the international community.

While this ban has almost entirely eliminated opium and heroin production, farmers who have previously relied on opium poppy cultivation to feed their families and meet their basic human needs have had to look for alternative sources of income and, in the mean time, rely on emergency assistance to overcome economic dislocations triggered by the ban.

One of the most direct consequences of this has been the lack of cash income for food. About 82% of farmers cultivated opium mainly to offset rice shortages. Though overall a positive and welcomed development, the rapid pace in which the ban was implemented meant that farmers are suffering from the lack of readily available alternative strategies. Sound income-generating alternative measures are needed in order to sustain the reduction of opium poppy cultivation and production.



Before the ban, 55% of households in Shan State were faced with a rice deficit of up to 3 months; and 45% from 3-12 months. These levels of food deficits are very high and explain the strong reliance on opium poppy cultivation of these communities. According to the 2005 Opium Survey, food deficiency is a serious problem in the Wa Region with 89.5% of the villages reporting food insecurity. Since they are now unable to rely on the income generated by the cash crop, it is likely that they will see their suffering increased in the absence of other options.

Children, especially, stand to suffer disproportionately, as they could have even less access to education and health services. Moreover, as the family sells assets to cope with the loss of income and to pay debt, malnutrition is likely to follow.

An additional consequence has been the relocation of Wa communities. Numerous farmers have been relocated from their mountainous highlands to the lowlands in search of substitute livelihoods. They often have to adopt to new living conditions, and are exposed to new diseases, such as malaria, which is more prevalent in the lower-lying areas.

If alternate means of acquiring income are not provided, women and children may become more vulnerable to trafficking and prostitution. Anecdotal evidence suggests

that trafficking in humans is on the increase, partly as a consequence of poor information and awareness among the 'at risk' population, but also due to the grim work opportunities and economic hardships facing much of the population. Most victims are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, which in addition renders them especially vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.



**With the opium ban there is a possibility that the Wa Region will enter a downward spiral of poverty, malnutrition, and disease.**



Under the auspices of the KOWI partnership, UNODC helps Wa villagers to find sustainable alternative means of subsistence with the aim of replacing the income derived from opium poppy cultivation, and its related consequences.

The KOWI initiative is based on a three-phase approach of emergency relief, recovery and development assistance. This approach ensures that interventions are embedded in a long term, holistic strategy (that includes activities on diverse sectors such as education, health, economic development, the environment, infrastructure, and capacity building) towards sustainable development in the Wa Region.

#### THE FUTURE: LENDING A HAND

The decline in opium poppy cultivation is more than welcome; however a sudden end could have grave effects if the problems associated with it are left unaddressed. Current challenges of the Wa Region -isolation, poverty, lack of markets, unclear land access and ownership laws and rudimentary infrastructure, have resulted in the need for a holistic approach to a more sustainable alternative development.

One immediate action that the government and its development assistance partners can take to guarantee the future of these communities is to improve farmers' food security through alternative income generating programmes; alternative livelihoods must be set

up in order to support farmers' efforts not to plant opium poppy and the authorities' enforcement measures to eradicate the illegal crop.

The need for more immediate integrated livelihoods programmes needs to be emphasized.

Long term drug eradication measures can only be sustainable if concerned actors commit to the implementation of more comprehensive approaches.

Finding alternate sources of income through forest produce, manufacturing handicrafts and textiles, and other agricultural activities will help improve farmers' livelihoods and access to basic needs. This is particularly urgent as basic food security, health care and education require immediate access to cash.

To achieve progress in this area, UNODC recognizes the importance of drug demand reduction. In collaboration with community groups, UNODC implements programmes that include treatment, rehabilitation, training and post care services for drug addicts.

Strengthening the existing infrastructure by improving water supply structures is also of crucial importance. Water infrastructure (for both domestic and agricultural purposes) should be fortified so that farmers can grow alternative crops throughout the year.



External assistance can help in constructing and maintaining these structures, but of utmost importance is the community's capacity to build and sustain these initiatives by themselves. A core element in the strategy employed by UNODC is capacity building, by which communities empower and prepare themselves for the future.

Furthermore, regional cooperation between governments in response to cross-border trafficking should be broadened. UNODC provides technical assistance to improve the regional response to drug trafficking, and other types of transnational crime, thus strengthening the alternative livelihood effort. Commitment to bring about change will enable the people of the Wa to continue transforming until they reach their desired state of living.



**"Some of the poorest people are being affected by the loss of income as cultivation declines. Thus, the international community must have the wisdom to fight drugs and poverty simultaneously, to eliminate both the causes and the effects of these two afflictions."**

**Antonio Maria Costa**  
Executive Director  
UNODC



UNODC promotes traditional skills

Villagers planting rice on a field prepared with UNODC support



UNODC carpentry training

**Vocational skills and alternative livelihoods can provide for self-sufficiency and improve the overall socio-economic situation of the Wa people**



## Facts and Figures

- Myanmar, after Afghanistan, is the world's largest producer of opium - the raw material for heroin.
- Myanmar's total potential opium production in 2005 was an estimated 312 metric tons.
- Non opium growing households in the Shan State earned on average US \$364 annually, against only US \$292 for opium growing households.
- 40% of national opium poppy cultivation, or 42% of Shan State cultivation, used to be in the Wa Region.
- In 2004, the Wa Region accounted for 1/3 of Myanmar's total opium production.
- In 2004, 12,960 hectares of land were used for opium poppy cultivation in the Wa Region.
- Approximately half, 1,032 out of 2,177, of the villages that grow poppy in the Shan State used to be in the Wa Region.

NB. Based on information provided by UNODC's 2005 Myanmar Opium Survey

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime  
(UNODC)  
11(A) Malikha Road, Ward-7  
Mayangone Township, Yangon, Myanmar  
Tel: (+95 1) 666903/ 660556; Fax: (+95 1) 651334  
Email: fo.myanmar@unodc.org