

Alternative Development - Drug Control through Rural Development

Confronting the illicit trade in drugs and its effects remains a major challenge for the international community. As the organization responsible for leading United Nations action against the global drug problem, UNDCP sees the effects which drugs have today on people's lives. From this perspective UNDCP tries to identify, understand and contain the forces which lead individuals to resort to illicit drug production, trafficking and abuse.

The illicit cultivation of opium poppy and coca is directly linked to rural poverty. The reduction of rural poverty - particularly through sustainable natural resource management - is therefore a necessary component of UNDCP supply reduction programmes. So called Alternative Development Programmes aim to reduce and eliminate the illicit cultivation of drug crops through development measures which are often more sustainable, more promising and more readily accepted than strategies based on repression only.

Over the last twenty-five years, UNDCP has actively promoted and supported international efforts to reduce illicit cultivation of opium poppy in South East and South West Asia and twelve years ago, a similar action was launched in the Andean Subregion in respect of coca cultivation. In the course of those years UNDCP's approach in the field has been substantially improved. The crop substitution projects of the early 1970s which focussed on direct replacement of illicit crops by licit ones, have led to refinement and improvement of the approach applied.

Alternative Development programmes now aim at elimination or prevention of the production of illicit crops through a methodology encompassing a broader conception of rural development aimed at improving the overall quality of life of the target population by addressing not only income but also education, health, infrastructure and social services.

UNDCP estimates that the global hectareage devoted to illicit opium poppy cultivation was about 280,000 hectares in 1996 with 90% of illicit cultivation taking place in Afghanistan and Myanmar. Most of the world's coca is grown in the Andean countries (220,000 ha); Bolivia, Colombia and Peru together account for more than 98% of the world cocaine supplies. Altogether about 700,000 families, or around 4 million people, depend on income derived from the cultivation of coca bush and opium poppy. Most of these people live below the poverty level and receive on average 50 per cent of their income from this activity. Although the drug trade often helps them cope with food shortages and the vagaries of other agricultural markets, economic dependence on illicit crops is not sustainable in the long run. Forming an enclave in the national economy and excluded from mainstream development, the cultivation of coca bush and opium poppy leaves farmers in the hands of ruthless and unreliable middlemen. Also, there is always the threat of forced eradication of their illicit crop by the Government. In some countries, such as Colombia, many have become mere employees in large commercial farms owned by traffickers of narcotic drugs. Most of the 700,000 families, given suitable alternatives, would gladly switch to other sources of income.

The commonalities of communities with illicit cultivation across the regions lie in the fact that they live in remote, often backward areas, and in subsistence economies where cash and credit

needs are met by the opium/coca crop. In order to reach these remote groups through project interventions, and to induce the cultivators to change the agricultural production system as well as their household planning and survival strategies, any intervention will have to be tailored to the specific needs of the local population with its specific characteristics. **Gradual reduction of illicit cultivation over a period of several years (6-10) in accordance with locally determined rural development plans, within realistic time frames, are essential elements for drug control interventions in such areas.** Sustainability of these interventions should be achieved through a systematically applied participatory approach

Ideal conditions for Alternative Development are:

- i. Effective control of the area by central government and an absence of counter pressure from insurgent groups.
- ii. The provision of an enabling sustainable economic environment at the national and international level which facilitates the presence of market forces that make illicit cultivation less attractive.
- iii. Consistently applied disincentives through law enforcement and eradication.

However, these conditions are often not fulfilled and efforts in Alternative Development - narrowly or broadly targeted - need to include measures to build up these prerequisites.

During the last ten years of investment into Alternative Development, the methodology of project design, planning and implementation has been developed. The three most important developments are:

- (i) **Community participation:** Emphasis is placed on community-based approaches to natural resource management in sustainable production systems. Such an approach is consistent with participatory, people-centered methods of development that rely on local people's knowledge, skills, interests and needs as a basis for appropriate interventions. This approach is especially important for Alternative Development given the socio-cultural dimensions of illicit drug-crop cultivation.
- (ii) **Institution building:** Institution building at all levels of project design, planning and implementation is necessary to the development of sustainable local institutions through community development approaches. A parallel supporting measure is institution building specifically for drug control by providing support and technical advisory services to governments.
- (iii) **Constant monitoring and evaluation:** All Alternative Development projects need to make provisions for data collection and monitoring of trends in respect of illicit crop reduction and improvement of education, health, infrastructure and social services. Regular analysis of data should provide lessons to be shared, permit adjustments and are required in order to identify those intervention models which can be sustained and which should be replicated on a larger scale.

Alternative Development can be targeted on cultivation areas only and/or more broadly targeted,

trying to improve growth in outputs and jobs area- , nation - or even region wide. A combination of the two has proven to be most successful, because the application of generalized development assistance to non-growing areas mitigates the risk of displacing cultivation to adjacent areas with similar social, economic and agricultural characteristics. UNDCP, with its specific mandate of drug control, has shown that narrowly targeted Alternative Development programmes can be successful in the immediate area of intervention. In project areas in Peru, coca cultivation has been reduced by 95 per cent. In the Dir district of Pakistan, poppy cultivation may soon disappear. In Thailand, Alternative Development measures have led to virtual elimination of opium poppy cultivation. However, it has been argued that excellent results achieved in countries such as Pakistan and Thailand were greatly facilitated by the displacement of cultivation into neighboring Afghanistan and Myanmar (the “balloon effect”). Therefore, Alternative Development today, while still focussing on major illicit cultivation areas, recognizes the importance of a broader approach, tackling several cultivation areas at the same time with concomitant monitoring of the areas where new cultivation could start.

Global investment into Alternative Development measures over the last ten years has amounted to US\$ 718 million, of which UNDCP provided 36% and other sources, mostly bilateral, provided 64%. With an annual investment of approx. US\$ 70 million globally, the total investment to control and eliminate production of illicit cultivation has been relatively small. Also, the area covered by Alternative Development programmes are only a small part of the total area under illicit cultivation. For example in Peru, the country with the largest coca growing areas, approximately 10% of the area under cultivation is covered by UNDCP supported Alternative Development projects.

The above confirms the pioneering role of UNDCP, contained in the selection of investment areas counting among the most remote and difficult and the ones avoided by other multilateral, bilateral and private investors. The opening up of these areas with initial investment, however limited, and the attempts to link such areas to national mainstream economic development has been a major achievement of Alternative Development interventions. However, the sustainability of Alternative Development depends essentially on whether and how farmers capitalize on the economic alternatives made available to them. Alternative Development must have two pillars as its foundation, national drug control plans and agricultural development plans. The long-term sustainability of illicit crop reduction and elimination is inextricably linked to agricultural development. Progress in reducing illicit supply will depend not only on the political commitment to drug control but also on Government efforts to provide and or nurture genuine alternatives and additional off-farm income opportunities.

At present, UNDCP is moving towards a global approach to Alternative Development. There is sufficient evidence to conclude at this point in time that Alternative Development can indeed be successful: the methodology has been developed, experiences and knowledge have accumulated and successes in project areas have been achieved. Future Alternative Development projects will need to involve active partnerships with Governments to a greater extent than in the past, making a move away from the benefactor/recipient model that has been the basis for many previous programmes. UNDCP’s role will involve a greater element of advice to the Government, mobilizing political support and facilitating bilateral and multilateral funding. At the Special

Session of the General Assembly in 1998, a first step was taken when governments reaffirmed their strong support to UNDCP's work in Alternative Development.

With the broad membership including Government, civil society, private sector, donors and UN organizations, an appropriate combination of political and civil society commitment and financial resources could be obtained for the implementation of Alternative Development projects with the reduction in supply as one important outcome.