



COUNT THE COSTS

50 YEARS OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

The War on Drugs: Are we paying too high a price?

The global ‘war on drugs’ has been fought for 50 years, without preventing the long-term trend of increasing drug supply and use. Beyond this failure, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has also identified the drug war’s many serious ‘unintended negative consequences’. These result not from drug use itself, but from choosing a punitive enforcement-led approach that, by its nature places control of the trade in the hands of organised crime, and criminalises many users. In the process this:

- undermines international development and security, and fuels conflict
- threatens public health, spreads disease and causes death
- undermines human rights
- promotes stigma and discrimination
- creates crime and enriches criminals
- causes deforestation and pollution
- wastes billions on ineffective law enforcement

The war on drugs is a policy choice. There are other options that, at the very least, should be debated and explored using the best possible evidence and analysis. We all share the same goals – a safer, healthier, and more just world. It is time for all sectors whose work is affected by our approach to drugs to call on governments and the UN to properly *Count the Costs of the War on Drugs*, and explore the alternatives.

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A war on people and communities

Politicians are shying away from the phrase ‘war on drugs’ because of its increasingly obvious failures. Yet the description is more appropriate today than ever before, as the illicit trade continues to grow, while vast resources are poured into increasingly militarised and punitive enforcement responses. In Afghanistan and Mexico for example, the term ‘drug war’ is far from mere rhetoric.

Yet the idea that this is somehow a war on certain substances or plants is absurd. This is a war on people, and not just people who use drugs.

The failure of this policy is creating a range of terrible social and economic costs affecting all our communities, and targeting the most vulnerable members of society – the poor, the young, and the socially marginalised – while producing few, if any, meaningful benefits.

To find the best way forward it is vital to distinguish between the real public health challenges caused by problematic drug use, and the harms created or exacerbated by the drug war itself, which are outlined in this briefing.

“ These [war on drugs] policies have had dire consequences – corruption of the police forces and judiciary and traffic-related violence – for the economic development and political security of the producer countries. ”

Fernando Henrique Cardoso
34th President of Brazil
2010



Credit: Cpl Rupert Frere RLC, UK anti-drug operation in Afghanistan, 2009



Favela de Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The poor and marginalised pay the highest price

1. Undermining development and security, fuelling conflict

The war on drugs is actively undermining development and security in many of the world’s most fragile regions and states.

Drug traffickers can be more confident of a reliable, cheap supply of coca leaf, poppy or cannabis if government employees, honest politicians and armies can be kept at bay, and if farmers have few alternatives to drug production because they have little access to alternative sources of credit, and have to pay high prices to transport fertilizer or ship bulkier non-drug crops to market.

As a result, traffickers prefer it if there is little economic infrastructure or governance in producing and transit areas. So they target weak states through equipping private armies, financing or merging with separatist and insurgent groups, and simultaneously corrupting politicians, police, judiciary, armed forces and customs officers. Key examples include the internal armed conflicts in Colombia and Afghanistan.

Once an area is sufficiently destabilised, it deters investment by indigenous or external businesses and restricts the activities of international development NGOs and other

bodies. It also diverts large amounts of valuable aid and other resources from health or development efforts into enforcement – often through the military, which can undermine accountability.

The same corrosive consequences for health, governance, public authority, and democracy are replicated as traffickers trans-ship heroin, cocaine and cannabis through the Caribbean, Central America, Central Asia and West Africa.

In short, the profitability of illegal drugs encourages traffickers to lock producing or transit areas into multi-dimensional underdevelopment.

- There has been an explosion of violence in Mexico, with over 30,000 deaths since 2006, as the government has tried to use military force to crush the drug cartels. Instead, they have become sufficiently empowered and enriched to corrupt or outgun state enforcement efforts
- Over a quarter of all cocaine consumed in Europe in 2007 (more than 140 tons, with a wholesale value of about \$1.8 billion) was transited through West Africa, Guinea-Bissau has become a narco-state in just five years, with the value of the drugs trade now much greater than its national income ⁽¹⁾

2. Undermining human rights

The human rights of drug users and local farming communities growing drug crops are rarely even mentioned in political discussions, whether at the domestic or UN level. Yet in many countries, drug control efforts result in serious human rights abuses: torture and ill treatment by police, mass incarceration, executions, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and denial of basic health services.

Poorly scrutinised drug control policies and enforcement practices often entrench and exacerbate systematic discrimination against people who use drugs, impede access to essential medicines, and prevent access to harm reduction and HIV treatment services for marginalised high-risk populations.

Young people in particular, as both a key using group, and vulnerable population more broadly, have suffered a disproportionate burden of these human rights costs.

Local communities in drug-producing countries also face violations of their human rights as a result of campaigns to eradicate illicit crops, and related criminalisation of certain indigenous cultural practices.

- Up to 1000 people are executed for drug offences each year, in direct violation of international law ⁽²⁾
- Between February and April 2003 there were 2,819 extrajudicial killings under the banner of the Thailand Government's 'War on Drugs' crackdown ⁽³⁾
- Over 500,000 people are arbitrarily detained in drug detention centres in China – frequently subject to forced labour, and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment ⁽⁴⁾

3. Promoting stigma and discrimination

As with wars throughout history, the negative consequences of the drug war fall heaviest on the most vulnerable, excluded and marginalised.

Being positioned on the frontline, children and young people in particular have borne the brunt of the war on drugs, whether forced by poverty and desperation into becoming drug growers or foot soldiers of the cartels;

“The current international system of drug control has focused on creating a drug free world, almost exclusively through use of law enforcement policies and criminal sanctions. Mounting evidence, however, suggests this approach has failed ... While drugs may have a pernicious effect on individual lives and society, this excessively punitive regime has not achieved its stated public health goals, and has resulted in countless human rights violations.”

Anand Grover

UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health
2010

as casualties of the drug war through prison time or criminal records for youthful experimentation; or by being orphaned as a result of the incarceration of parents on drug-related convictions.

Women have similarly suffered through exploitation by the trade itself (female drug mules are notably over-represented in prison populations), while drug-using mothers experience children being removed and denial of social services on release from prison.

Drug law enforcement can also become a conduit for institutionalised racial prejudice. Traditional practices and indigenous cultures have been criminalised and persecuted, while racial minority groups have frequently been disproportionately targeted and punished by enforcement and sentencing.

- Despite similar rates of drug usage, African-American men in the US are sent to prison on drug charges at 13.4 times the rate of white men, resulting in one in nine 20 to 34-year-olds being incarcerated on any given day, primarily as a result of drug law enforcement
- Entire Andean populations that continue the traditional cultural practices of coca leaf chewing and drinking coca tea continue to be criminalised ⁽⁵⁾

“As things now stand, governments across the world continue to incarcerate drug users, and the cycle of stigma, HIV infection, and mass inequity goes on.”

Stephen Lewis

former Special Envoy to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Co-Director of AIDS-Free World
2010

4. Threatening public health, spreading disease and causing death

The global war on drugs has historically been promoted as a policy that protects public health, on the basis that it can restrict or eliminate drug availability and use. Research shows it has failed to achieve either, with global trends in drug use – particularly high risk use – rising consistently over the past half century, and illegal drugs cheaper and more available than ever.

Worse, the policy has increased the risks associated with drug use, tilting the market towards ever more potent and risky products often cut with contaminants, and encouraging high risk behaviours (such as injecting) in unsupervised and unhygienic environments. As a result, users suffer avoidable neonatal problems, overdoses and poisonings, and contract blood-borne diseases – such as HIV

and hepatitis – that can spread to the general population, as well as devastate drug-using populations.

Populist drug war rhetoric has also tended to push scarce drug policy resources into counterproductive enforcement, at the expense of proven public health initiatives, including prevention and treatment. It has also created obstacles to pragmatic harm reduction measures for the most vulnerable high-risk users.

- Outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, injection drug use accounts for approximately one in three new cases of HIV. In Russia, where injection drug users now number over 1.8 million, 37% are HIV-positive ⁽⁶⁾
- In China, figures from 2006 showed that 48% of HIV cases were people who inject drugs ⁽⁷⁾, but only 15% of those on antiretroviral drugs were people who inject drugs ⁽⁸⁾
- Despite official guidance, in the UK, active injectors are often refused treatment for hepatitis C virus

“One of the priorities is to stop wasting resources on the failed ‘War on Drugs’ that has turned into a war against people and communities. This war must end. Resources should instead be devoted to providing, to everyone who needs them, evidence-based and human rights-based interventions that prevent problematic drug use, treat drug dependence and ensure harm reduction services for people who use drugs.”

Michel Kazatchkine

Executive Director of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria
2010

5. Creating crime, enriching criminals

Far from eliminating drug use and the illicit trade, prohibition has inadvertently fuelled the development of the world's largest illegal commodities market, estimated by the UN in 2005 to turn over more than \$300 billion a year. Just as with U.S. alcohol prohibition in the early 20th century, the profits flow untaxed into the hands of unregulated, often violent, criminal profiteers.

The negative consequences can be felt from the producer countries, where drug money fuels instability, conflict and corruption, through to the streets of Western consumer countries, which are occupied by warring drug gangs, street violence and high volumes of property crime committed by low-income, dependent users. This is over and above the criminalisation of hundreds of millions of consenting, non-violent adult drug users.

The trade is additionally undermining the international financial system through money laundering, and placing an intolerable burden on overstretched criminal justice systems and overflowing prisons across the world.

- The UK government has estimated that over 50% of property crime is committed by dependent heroin and cocaine users to fund their habits ⁽¹⁰⁾
- In 1989, Forbes magazine listed Colombian cocaine dealer Pablo Escobar as the seventh richest man on earth, with a personal fortune of over \$9 billion
- The UN estimates that there are currently over 200 million illegal drug users ⁽¹¹⁾, most criminalised purely because of their use

“The drug war has tried in vain to keep cocaine out of people’s noses, but could result instead in scorching the lungs of the earth.”

Sanho Tree
Director of the Institute for
Policy Studies, Drug Policy Project
2009



The war on drugs fuels violence and gun crime

“I don’t object to discussing any alternatives [to the war on drugs], but if we are going to discuss alternatives, let’s discuss every alternative... what is the cost, what is the benefit of each alternative?”

Juan Manuel Santos
President of Colombia
2011

6. Deforestation and pollution

One of the frequently overlooked costs of the war on drugs is its negative impact on the environment – mainly resulting from aerial spraying of drug crops in ecologically sensitive environments such as the Andes and Amazon basin. Chemical eradication efforts not only cause localised deforestation, but also have a devastating multiplier effect because drug producers simply deforest new areas for cultivation – the so-called ‘balloon effect’. This problem is made worse because protected areas in national parks where aerial spraying is banned are often targeted.

Illicit unregulated drug production is also associated with localised pollution, as toxic chemicals used in crude processing of coca and opium are disposed of in local environments and waterways.

“The first unintended consequence is a huge criminal black market that thrives in order to get prohibited substances from producers to consumers, whether driven by a ‘supply push’ or a ‘demand pull’, the financial incentives to enter this market are enormous. There is no shortage of criminals competing to claw out a share of a market in which hundred-fold increases in price from production to retail are not uncommon.”

Antonio Maria Costa
Executive Director of the UNODC
2008

- Despite millions of hectares of coca being eradicated since the 1980s, overall production has easily kept pace with rising demand – even if it has moved from one region to another
- “600 million litres of so-called precursor chemical are used annually in South America for cocaine production. To increase yields, coca growers use highly poisonous herbicides and pesticides, including paraquat. Processors also indiscriminately discard enormous amounts of gasoline, kerosene, sulphuric acid, ammonia, sodium bicarbonate, potassium carbonate, acetone, ether and lime onto the ground and into nearby waterways.” John Walters, US Drug Tsar, 2002 ⁽¹²⁾

7. Wasting billions on drug law enforcement

Whilst accurate figures are hard to come by, global spending on drug law enforcement certainly exceeds \$100 billion each year. Given current economic conditions it is more important than ever that spending is effective and not a waste of taxpayer money.

However, the huge investments in enforcement have consistently delivered the opposite of their stated goals – to reduce drug production, supply and use. Instead they have created a vast criminal market. This in turn has substantial social and economic costs, through crime and ill health, far exceeding even the billions in enforcement spending.

There are huge opportunity costs to wasteful expenditure on this scale. As drug enforcement budgets continue to grow, other areas are being starved of funds, and cuts in government budgets are hitting public services and support for the needy.

Despite the appalling track record of failure, the level of value-for-money scrutiny applied to drug enforcement spending has been almost zero, at both national and international levels. At a time of global economic crisis, after literally trillions wasted over the last half century, it is time to meaningfully count the real economic costs of the war on drugs.

- Over \$100 billion is spent globally each year on enforcing the war on drugs ⁽¹³⁾
- UNAIDS estimates that \$3.2 billion is needed to meet the need for harm reduction expenditure globally in 2010; current spending is one twentieth of this ⁽¹⁴⁾



Drug crop fumigation harms fragile ecosystems

Conclusion

The disastrous unintended consequences of the war on drugs are so obvious even the UN Office on Drugs and Crime – which oversees the current system – has been forced to acknowledge they exist. However, neither they, nor anyone else, has ever properly assessed them.

It is time all those who care about human rights, health, criminal justice, the environment, international development, security or effective expenditure called for governments and the United Nations to *Count the Costs of the War on Drugs, and explore the alternatives*. Only then will we be able to develop a new approach to drugs, built on evidence of what works, which delivers a better world for us all.

**To find out more about
The War on Drugs: Count the Costs
campaign, and how you can get
involved, visit:
www.countthecosts.org or email
info@countthecosts.org**

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