

RESEARCH

From Illicit to Value Added: The Lessons of Community and Institutional Change in Northern Thailand's Opium Growing Regions

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International drug control remains a polarised and complex sphere of policy debate. Until relatively recently the predominant global response was one of repression and strict prohibition. Within this paradigm, small scale producers have been caught up in a war, with harsh choices between subsistence and heavy criminalisation by the state. This paper examines the complex issue of transition from illicit to licit in areas dominated by illicit drug economies. It begins by examining the international paradigm for drug control and how this is evolving to take greater account of sustainable development. In doing so, it looks to the 'New Drugs and Development School' as a paradigm for understanding these changes. It continues on to highlight the role of concepts such as economic thriving and the utilisation of a nudge strategy to explain the needs of communities seeking to move beyond illicit crop cultivation. It concludes with an in-depth look at the development interventions in Northern Thailand, which succeeded in transitioning communities to sustainable licit livelihoods, and thereby seeks to draw some lessons from these.

Keywords: drug policy; sustainable development; alternative development; illicit economies; opium

Introduction

People are often a product of their social conditions, with behaviour the result of both individual choice and the socio-economic structures surrounding the decision-maker. In the words of Princess Srinagarindra, late mother of King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, "no one wants to be a bad person, but they do not have the opportunity to be good". Poverty and lack of opportunity limit people's choices, leading to them turning their focus onto short-term survival.

When considering the issue of illicit economy through this lens, the reasons why illicit livelihoods prosper in poverty-stricken communities become apparent. Such pursuits offer the underprivileged a way of surviving with little investment and with the promise of immediate returns, even if at the cost of their security and thriving. In such cases, the choice of illicit over licit activities is arguably more the result of coercing socio-economic factors than the individual's choice. Apart from the motivations on an individual level, it is also evident that illicit economy thrives when state presence is lacking. Organised crime groups feed on people's desperation to survive, thereby transforming illicit behaviours into common norms.

This article offers international policy lessons drawn from a close examination of development interventions in Northern Thailand. These help to highlight the economic and normative changes needed to enable transitions from illicit to licit economies. To achieve this, this article argues that law enforcement alone is insufficient and that development programmes play an important role in tackling the root causes of poverty and lack of opportunity that often drive illicit activities. By drawing on insights from behavioural economics, development programmes may provide the right motives and incentives for people to engage in licit livelihoods, changing their mindsets to prioritise long-term thriving. To achieve this outcome, the case study presented in this article suggests pursuing people-centred development programmes, aiming to address people's needs according to their stage of development, and aiming to foster behaviours that will sustain their licit livelihoods. In early stages of development, or the 'survival world', people's needs are often immediate and basic, including, for instance, food, security, and primary healthcare. Development programmes

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must first meet these demands; only then can they move on to the creation of medium- and long-term licit livelihoods. The development process also needs to include incentives that help inculcate certain values and behaviours, such as that local people are the main protagonists and drivers of their own development. Further, it argues that people must view themselves not as passive recipients of external assistance but rather as active agents who can and must invest efforts to uplift their own lives.

The article first outlines five main approaches to drug policy, particularly focusing on the issue of 'harm' and the principles underpinning the 'New Drugs and Development' (NDD) approach. The paper then explains the 'joint normative and economic approach', which is required to move beyond a reliance on illicit economies. It discusses the experience of the Doi Tung Development project in Thailand to show how these elements characterise a process of sustainable development that sees deep involvement of local communities moving from illicit to licit behaviours.

Defining 'Good' Drug Policy – Evaluating Policy Externalities and Burdens of 'Harm'

The issue of harm is a key and contentious point in drug policy debates. The initial global approach operated on the presumption that reducing the supply would reduce the demand and, thereby, reduce global harms [1]. Reality has belied this assumption, and the outcome has been a widespread failure in terms of marginal supply reduction policies, while the excesses of enforcement based 'drug war' policies have produced their own universe of well-documented harms [2]. While some scholars point to prohibition as reducing aggregate consumption through inflated prices [3], a broad consensus accepts that marginal policing interventions often have negligible impacts on illicit drug supply and demand [4]. Moreover, international comparisons suggest little, if any, correlation between the stringency of national drug policies and the consumption patterns within those nations' markets [2]. Put simply, stricter drug policies do not necessarily reduce drug supply or use. Despite this, the international drug control system unquestionably remains heavily geared towards supply-centric, prohibitionist policies. This is especially true for producer countries of plant-based drugs, while predominant consumer countries, especially within the EU, have a strong focus on public health oriented approaches, including 'harm reduction'. However, in recent years an overall shift in normative emphasis towards development oriented policies has occurred at the international level, with the spectrum of permissible policies broadening, as well as a recognition of overlaps with other international policy spheres, such as human rights and sustainable development.

Approaches to drug policy are broadly divided between five schools. The first is the paleo-'war on drugs' advocates, who focus on the traditional ambition of curtailing supply, pursuing an essentially absolutist vision of a 'drug-free world'. The second is the asymmetric enforcement advocates, who argue for more strategic use of policing, preferring for the police to focus on violence minimisation and community legitimacy rather than eradicating illicit drug markets [5]. The third is the regulation advocates, who favour legal regulation of recreational use of some or all scheduled (controlled) drugs as the most effective means of eradicating the illicit drug markets [6]. The fourth school, the harm reduction advocates, propose a strong focus on 'harm reduction' and grounding the drug policies in a public health and human rights approach to drug consumption and, increasingly, drug markets. Examples include the provision of needle and syringe exchange programmes as well as a general emphasis on low threshold public health services. This approach traditionally remains agnostic about drug use and seeks to focus on the wellbeing of the individual [7]. The fifth approach, the 'New Drugs and Development' advocates (NDD), seeks to place drug policy within a more comprehensive cross-sectoral and cross disciplinary perspective. This attempts to build on the inroads made by Alternative Development (AD) and development oriented drug control and to further the degree of overlap between drug policies and the Sustainable Development Goals [8, 9].

Analysts within the NDD School frequently discuss a paradox of illicit markets, whereby marginalised communities who suffer under prohibitionist policies are also those best enabled to earn an income from illegality given the often elevated market returns accruing to these crops and activities. The appeal of growing such prohibited crops increases when infrastructure, market access, and economic opportunities are weak, making it challenging to otherwise earn a subsistence income. Such circumstances enhance the appeal of illicit crops, with it enabling those in marginalised rural areas to survive [9, 10]. This is despite there being a constant risk of losing their livelihoods due to government repression, monoculture related loss of harvests, or exposure to organized crime and armed groups. Simply removing illicit opportunities in the absence of licit ones without any 'proper sequencing' is therefore not a viable long-term development strategy [11]. Finally, the NDD School advocates a holistic, problem-solving, development approach, recognising the centrality of identifying and addressing the root causes of the emergence and persistence of illicit drug economies, the complex structures created by prohibition, and the systemic barriers illicit drug economies pose to linear processes of development and peace building [8, 9, 12].

However, the international drug control system (IDCS) has, until recently, struggled to fundamentally consider drugs as a development issue. The system is built on three interlocking conventions: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (as amended by the 1972 Protocol), the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances [13]. Only the 1988 Convention endorses rural development interventions, and even then, only as a secondary means to 'increase the effectiveness of eradication efforts' [14 pArticle 14, 3a]. This approach evolved slowly over the 1990s and 2000s, being defined by the UN General Assembly in 1998 as

a process to prevent and eliminate the illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotics and psychotropic substances through specifically designed rural development measures in the context of sustained national growth and sustainable development...within the framework of a comprehensive and permanent solution to the problem of illicit drugs [15].

The UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs (UNGASS) in 2016 pursued a more open and wide-ranging discussion, which placed drug control in the context of too-often siloed issues, such as human rights, gender, development, and public health. UNGASS 2016 witnessed the idea of development, in particular, graduate from a subordinate role to a widely accepted and UN-endorsed pillar of global drug policy [16]. This progress, however, has occurred during a period of increased policy fragmentation globally, with different issue areas interacting, overlapping, contradicting, and at times even competing. Collins [17] has suggested this process resembles an emerging 'regime complex', with different responses battling for supremacy. Such fragmentation reflects the increasingly local approaches that are being adopted in drug policy, which is frequently now made up of small-scale, bottom-up policy experiments, with increased possibility for the replication of successful models. In fact, many highlight that national policy practice had in many areas begun to diverge long before these divergences gained international recognition [9]. The discussion below explores an example of nationally evolved drugs and development policies and the lessons that can be drawn from it.

Thrivability and Nudging in a Joint Normative and Economic Approach

This paper evaluates some of these nationally derived lessons in how state and private actors' behaviour can support transitions from economies based on illegality to economies based on 'thrivability' and sustainable livelihoods. To define the concept of thrivability:

When one "thrives", it means one is to grow vigorously (flourish), to gain in wealth or possessions (prosper), and to progress toward or realize a goal (succeed). It may be understood as a step beyond sustaining, which implies nourishment, support, preservation, and maintenance. Organizationally, thriving can mean expanding resources, expertise, productivity, and profitability [18].

NDD orientations follow a similar approach. Germany, a leading donor in the field of development-oriented drug policies, views AD as based on the premise 'of addressing the frameworks leading to the establishment of illicit drug economies: poverty, weak statehood, ongoing armed conflict, lack of infrastructure, lack of technical capacity for legal agriculture, and lack of access to productive means, such as land' [16 p91]. Further, it operates on the assumption that rural actors engaged in illicit drug crop cultivation do so out of necessity rather than greed [19]. Their vision of AD is based on the principle that broad change can be achieved through addressing the root causes of illicit economies and the reorientation of economic incentives towards licit economies. Its proponents further argue that,

the risk of drug crop eradication, exposure to criminal networks and non-state armed groups as well as criminalization by law enforcement agencies heavily diminishes the incentives of drug crop cultivation. Hence, the practice of AD shows that farmers usually display a strong self-interest in turning to alternative options of legal agricultural production [16 p91].

The success of this crucially depends on the scale of the economic opportunities available beyond the illicit frameworks. Too often policies adopted to tackle illicit economies, particularly hard-line criminalisation policies, instead reinforce the cycles of dependence by undermining livelihoods and community resilience without alternatives in place. The idea of development has remained a 'blind spot' in global drug control for too long [20]. For example, a reliance on strict drug control metrics, such as eradication, arrests, and incarceration, are widely viewed as counterproductive yet often remain the default policy paradigm. Policy makers frequently become fixated on whether communities are growing more or less coca or opium, rather than considering whether the lack of other sustainable opportunities pushes them towards illicit crops. In other words, the fixation on drug policy metrics ignores whether the communities are developing the tools to grow sustainably and to reach self-sustaining capital accumulation without relying on short-term illicit cash crops.

For communities and states to successfully move their economies beyond the production of illicit crops, more must be done than simply trying to stop the production of these crops. Instead, it is a process of economic development that must address multiple policy and personal strands that intersect in a reinforcing process. While this may seem obvious, it has been far from the case in the classical war on drugs. The success of drug control was too often measured in hectares destroyed or kilos seized, with little evaluation of the consequences on the livelihoods of the affected communities. Thus, drug policies could counter-productively reinforce the cycles of dependency, poverty, immiseration, and marginalisation that fostered the reliance on illicit economies in the first place. This has also, arguably, contributed to the mixed results of some AD programmes whereby in some cases ostensible development interventions are subsumed under short-term drug control goals, inevitably producing short-term and unexceptional development outcomes. It is

these latter failings that have led a number of scholars to critique AD as effectively sustaining a supply-centric drug control paradigm [21].

These critiques also highlight to international donor agencies that merely focussing on drug-crop growing communities, providing them with immediate sources of licit income, is not a sufficient nor sustainable approach on its own. German development cooperation adopts instead a twofold, development-led approach, which is likely to be more successful in the long term. They first seek to encourage national and international normative frameworks that define and inspire drug policies to shift towards a development-based approach. Second, they simultaneously implement pilot activities on the ground that identify and promote integrated pathways towards licit livelihoods. While income is a key element in the maths of addressing illicit drug economies, it is not the only element, despite what is suggested by reviews critical of the AD approach and the respective income-centric bias in some approaches [8]. Recent experience shows that the meaning of a secure livelihood for small-scale farmers goes beyond simple monetary consideration. They are also concerned with related issues, like freedom from interaction with armed groups and organized crime, access to state services, gender-sensitivity, and environmental factors, all of which play an equally important role in introducing and maintaining sustainable licit livelihoods [9, 19, 22, 23]. Overall, an exclusive focus on economic aspects of development is not sufficient. Empowering communities to make licit decisions, while providing the means to do so, is a key part of any long-term development intervention, as the Thai case study below demonstrates. It is an example of a 'beyond income' intervention for AD on the ground, and one of the keys to its success is the fact that the intervention is based on 'nudges' that encourage and support local behavioural changes.

Thailand Case Study

In one of Thailand's development projects in the far north, communities there have experienced the impact of both relying on illicit crop production and transitioning beyond such reliance. Initiated in 1988 by HRH Princess Srinagarindra, the Mae Fah Luang Foundation's (MFLF) Doi Tung Development Project (DTDP) has successfully transformed opium poppy cultivating communities into ones flourishing through new licit livelihoods. Located at the heart of the Golden Triangle, along the Thai-Myanmar border, ethnic minorities living in the Doi Tung area once suffered from extreme poverty and a lack of access to basic infrastructure and services. Unsurprisingly, armed groups and illegal trades therefore prospered in the area, with the locals having little choice but to take part in illicit crop cultivation, deforestation, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. Recognising that these problems were merely symptoms of underlying socio-economic issues, the DTDP took a long-term approach, focussing on improving people's well-being and providing socio-economic opportunities. It travelled with them on a 30-year journey of development to 'help the people to help themselves' [12 p84].

In alignment with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (SD), the project prioritised equality and inclusivity, creating the economics of equity where people received equal opportunities regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, and other characteristics through a comprehensive livelihood development programme, as discussed below, not just a crop substitution scheme [24]. Today, the Doi Tung communities are able to prosper in the licit economy through the sale of their products under the DoiTung brand—one of Thailand's earliest social enterprises. Their business venture provides a diverse range of livelihood opportunities, ranging from premium coffee, macadamia nut products, and horticulture to high fashion textiles, home décor, and tourism. Moreover, the DTDP did not only have a positive impact on the lives of the people, but also on the environment, which was previously severely degraded as a by-product of the communities' struggle to survive. It successfully transformed once denuded mountains into ever-green forest, enabling a far greater harmonisation of peoples and their surrounding natural environment.

The DTDP achieved its SD outcome through adhering to the following precepts. First, the project was carefully designed with community-based and people-centred principles. In the first phase, the DTDP focused on health promotion, educational improvement, and immediate daily subsistence needs. The local people were hired as daily wage labour to carry out reforestation work so that they had an alternative source of licit income. However, the project understood that such a short-term solution could not sustain a long-term viable economy.

Consequently, in the second phase, the focus expanded in order to offer diverse job opportunities and to generate greater licit incomes. This included introducing the economic forestry of high-value arabica coffee and macadamia. There is no greater incentive for forest conservation than turning the forest into a source of people's sustainable income, aligning the interests of the people and the environment. The introduction of these industries was done in concert with private sector partners and established a new long-term sustainable economy while providing people with solutions based on market-driven approaches and diversification and value-addition as well as new knowledge to leverage from existing capital.

The third phase sought to consolidate the socio-economic gains and render them irreversible. The project embedded good practices of licit behaviour every step of the way, including through 'nudging' tools to encourage people to shift from illicit natural resource exploitation to sustainable licit livelihoods. This led to the emergence of new socio-economic norms that empowered people to make decisions for the betterment of their lives. For instance, every year, the DTDP conducted a socio-economic survey of all households in the project area and shared the data with the communities [25]. The weight given to information depends greatly on how this is communicated. In this case, the survey produced salient, comprehensible information communicating how their desirable, licit behaviour was having positive

effects, which supported behavioural change by continuing to nudge people in the right direction. Furthermore, the project did not provide a pre-determined set of development interventions but engaged with the communities in planning appropriate activities and making informed choices. Extensive discussions with the communities were carried out, considering not only their immediate needs but also the impact of their decisions on the natural environment and its (and their) long-term sustainability. Participation of the local communities also creates a sense of ownership, which is another key success factor for sustainable development. By being invested in the development process designs, the local communities naturally moved away from illicit economy and fully transitioned to their new licit economy, where they were able to pursue good as well as earn a decent living. Moreover, often this sense of ownership emerges when people have to invest something. Thus, the assistance of the DTDP was rarely given for free. For instance, the project promoted coffee farming as an alternative livelihood; instead of giving the coffee trees for free, the project nudged farmers by renting them the coffee tree at 20 cents (USD) per tree per year [24 p56]. Even at such a negligible rental amount, the project observed a higher level of commitment by the farmers and increased productivity due to this heightened feeling of ownership. Overall, the people experienced how licit behaviours and a stable way of life could bring them peace of mind and a sense of dignity. In other words, their engagement with the DTDP was the process that shaped new behaviours and mindsets in the Doi Tung people. The people of Doi Tung do not only now have a viable licit livelihood to sustain themselves, but they are also at ease with new behaviours and mindsets that will enable them to thrive in the future.

Unsurprisingly given its long journey, the DTDP has never been complacent but is constantly evolving to meet new challenges. On the economic front, the DTDP is shifting the emphasis to smart farming, value addition, and local entrepreneurship in order to ensure high value-added processes as well as to capture the interest of new generations [26]. On the social front, the DTDP is expanding its work to ensure that Doi Tung youth benefit from both quality formal education as well as out-of-class learning. Since 2018, the DTDP has opened the 'Creative Learning Space', where Doi Tung youth engage in experiential learning to gain essential life skills and discover their passions. Designed with the participation of the local youth, the operations in this space not only enable them to explore and try out hard skills, but also foster understanding on how they can all thrive within the licit economy and give back to the community [26].

On the environmental front, the DTDPs initiatives have expanded far beyond its original reforestation efforts. Its business operations now aim to become a 'green business', where every step is environmentally friendly, with the project currently undertaking numerous initiatives in pursuit of a circular economy, alongside switching to renewable energy sources. Having achieved its 'zero-waste to landfill' target in 2018 (26 p17–18), the DTDP has started to replicate its waste management model in the communities and has set the goal of making all communities in the project area 'zero-waste to landfill' by 2025. In all its advances, the project adopts a participatory approach while nudging local people to engage with new practices aligned with the project. Having first-hand experiences in these processes is the best way to facilitate behavioural changes and to imprint the mindset of doing good.

Since the 2000s, the DTDP SD model has been globally recognised, with the Foundation having been requested to implement extension projects in other countries, such as Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Myanmar [27]. In 2013, MFLFs development principles were included within the United Nations Guiding Principles on Alternative Development and subsequently adopted by the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly [11]. The DTDP continues to innovate and forge multisectoral partnerships to scale up its impacts. Crucially, it does so while maintaining its core principles. It ensures that its development programmes understand the underlying socio-economic problems that create motives for illicit behaviours, provide the right incentives to make the illicit-licit shift, and sustain the change by nudging people to take and maintain the actions necessary for their thrivable future. The DTDP demonstrates an example not only of 'what' the project does, but also 'how' the project carries out their development interventions for specific outcomes. Finally, it also lays the foundation for the architecture of people-centred thrivability and so towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

With the UN definition of Alternative Development lagging behind the global debate on drugs and development, a broad range of approaches have emerged, all claiming to adopt an AD method. Even though UNGASS 2016 led to the 'political emancipation of the role of development within the international drug control system' [16 p95], the conceptual clarity of what is meant by the term AD has rather decreased. While some donor countries, such as Germany, implement AD within a clear development cooperation framework, applying development indicators to measure the success of those interventions, others apply a strict supply reduction metrical system to justify and measure AD interventions. While in the past only a few source and donor countries officially included AD in their national or international drug strategies, the number of countries who now seek to implement AD within their drug strategies has multiplied in recent years. This group does not only include the traditional source countries for coca and opium poppy, but also cannabis-growing countries or countries only affected by drug trafficking, without any relevant drug crop cultivation at all. In 2014, more than 20 UN Member States reported to the UN that they had implemented AD [28], including countries like Egypt, Pakistan, and Vietnam. More recently, Ghana has included AD in their new Narcotics Control Commission Act [29].

These developments show that there has been a quiet but consistent shift in normative orientations within the UN drug control systems towards the New Drugs and Development School. This approach moves beyond the bifurcated

approach that focused on either waging war on drugs or legalising and regulating them towards a more humane, balanced, and reconciliatory drug policy. The ambiguity of the term AD and the outdatedness of its definition has allowed for a conceptual diversification both in policy and in implementation. This ambiguity brings certain risks to the political standing of AD, because some governments may disguise forced eradication efforts as AD efforts, while others promote rural development in drug crop cultivating areas without a primary focus on drug metrics [19]. Overall, this paper suggests that a hybrid model, as per the Thai example, offers a combination of economic facilitators and normative nudges, altering the choice architecture of communities and thereby potentially enabling long-term, positive transitions beyond illicit economies.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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