



Modernising drug law enforcement project

The 'Modernising Drug Law Enforcement Project' is an initiative of the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), in partnership with the International Security Research Department at Chatham House and the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). This concept note explains the reasons behind the initiative and the key activities planned. If you want to find out more about the project, please [visit](#) or email contact@idpc.net.

For decades, drug law enforcement has been focused on the ultimate goal of reducing the size of the illicit drug market; eradicating drug production, distribution and retail supply, or at least the stifling of these activities to an extent that potential consumers are unable to get access to particular drugs. The strategies and tactics of law enforcement agencies have therefore been designed to maximise the destruction of drug crops and the seizure of drugs, disrupt trafficking and dealing groups, and through the threat and application of arrest and punishment, deter current and potential drug users.

It has become increasingly clear in recent years that these strategies have been unable to significantly or permanently reduce the supply of, or demand for, the main drugs of choice in consumer markets. Given this reality, and a wider policy context where some authorities are moving away from a 'war on drugs' approach more towards the management of markets, drug law enforcement strategies need to be adjusted to fit the new challenge – to manage drug markets in a way that minimizes the range of harmful impacts on communities, including in relation to corruption and financial crimes such as money laundering.

This is particularly the case, however, where drug related violence is concerned. Evidence suggests that this is associated with a complex mix of socio-economic factors. And although difficult to define, violence, in the form of threats, assaults, sexual violations and other forms of interpersonal conflict as well as murder, is also not an inevitable aspect of illicit markets. The type and levels of drug market related violence depends largely on the nature of the drug market and this is often shaped by the law enforcement response to it. Indeed, research has shown that the action of governing authorities can be a major contributor to or cause of systemic violence in production, transit and retail markets.

A recognition that law enforcement powers can be used to beneficially shape, rather than eradicate, any given drug market, is being increasingly discussed in academic circles and is present in many internal strategy discussions. It has been implemented as an explicit strategy in a few specific instances, but has not been widely analysed and debated across the law enforcement field.

Key concepts of this new approach to drug law enforcement include:

- A change of objectives and indicators. This involves moving away from simplistic metrics concerned with numbers of drug related arrests, drug seizures and hectares of drug crops eradicated, towards indicators of community health and wellbeing – such as reductions in market related violence and corruption, improvements in public health and economic development, and strengthening of community institutions.
- A focus on gathering intelligence and analysis on the nature of the drug market, and the problems it causes to the law abiding community. Law enforcement actions are then

specifically designed to reduce the identified problems – what can be called a harm reduction approach to law enforcement.

- Law enforcement actions, resources and tactics that are therefore carefully targeted on the aspects of production, trafficking and drug dealing where most impact on the identified harms can be achieved, while relatively harmless forms of the market are tolerated. In some cases, this takes on the form of targeted deterrence where the tactic is openly publicized in an attempt to encourage traffickers and dealers to self-regulate their behaviour towards less harmful activities.
- A careful concentration of enforcement action on the basis of the harm caused by those individuals or groups engaged in various ways in the illicit market, rather than a focus on the easiest to catch – removing the discrimination and injustice often caused by the application of tough penalties to the ‘little fish’ in the market.

While none of these concepts are entirely new, they have yet to be widely understood by law enforcement leaders, or embedded into drug law enforcement strategies.

The Modernising Drug Law Enforcement project therefore has two parallel aims – **to collate and refine theoretical material and practical examples of these new approaches, and to promote debate amongst law enforcement leaders on the implications for future strategies.** Running from August 2012 to November 2013, it comprises three complementary work streams:

- 1. Publication Series:** Targeted at senior members of the law enforcement community, the project will involve the production of six reports describing the theoretical concepts underpinning a shift in drug law enforcement approaches, and specific examples of its implementation. These will focus on the following areas:
 - How police forces can support health oriented harm reduction strategies
 - Targeted deterrence, drug trafficking and organized crime: concepts and practicalities
 - Applying harm reduction principles to local drug markets
 - Practical implications of tolerated cannabis markets
 - Drug law enforcement, corruption and financial crime
 - Drug markets, security and foreign aid
- 2. Network Development:** The Project will develop mechanisms to communicate and distribute the reports to a wide audience of law enforcement leaders and policy makers, both in the UK and internationally. This will include the development of a specific section of the IDPC website for this purpose.
- 3. Seminar Series:** The Project will involve a number of seminars that, co-hosted with Chatham House and the International Institute of Strategic Studies, will bring together senior members of the law enforcement community and UK and international experts to discuss the contents of the publication series, and the implications for future strategies.