4.3 Promoting alternative livelihoods

The cultivation of crops destined for the illicit drug market is an essential part of shadow survival economies. Crop eradication in the absence of viable alternative licit livelihood options is a violation of human rights and a costly initiative that impacts negatively on marginalised and vulnerable farmers. An alternative livelihoods approach can more successfully reduce the cultivation of these crops.

Why is the promotion of alternative livelihoods important?

Reducing crops destined for the illicit drug market is a central component of supply-side drug control policies. The South American countries of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia are the primary source of coca, the raw material for cocaine. Cultivation of the opium poppy, the raw material for opium and heroin, has shifted over time. The Golden Triangle of Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Burma/Myanmar once produced more than 70% of the world’s opium, most of which was refined into heroin. Since 1998, dramatic decreases in opium cultivation have taken place in the Golden Triangle and it is now concentrated in what is known as the Golden Crescent, the poppy-growing areas in and around Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Myanmar remains the second largest opium poppy grower in the world after Afghanistan and still produces 23% of the global opium supply.

Supply reduction efforts have typically been measured according to the areas of crops cultivated, the amounts of cocaine and opium produced, and the number of hectares eradicated. However, determining how much coca and poppy is cultivated today remains elusive. Differences in the US government and UNODC statistical estimates provide ample evidence of the degree of uncertainty in the measurements. According to the US government, coca cultivation has remained relatively constant over the last two decades in the Andean region, at approximately 200,000 hectares, although as a result of the ‘balloon effect’ (see Box 1 in Section 2.2: Effective drug law enforcement), there have been significant shifts in the amount grown in each country. By contrast, UNODC reported a decrease in production.

The development of higher-yield crops that can be planted at greater density levels mainly explains this reduction, which means that more cocaine can be produced from smaller plots of coca. UNODC reports a similar trend with regard to poppy cultivation and opium production. Between 1994 and 2010, global poppy cultivation decreased from 272,479 to 195,700 hectares (but had increased from 150,000 to 195,700 hectares between 2005 and 2010). However, between 1994 and 2007, potential opium production increased from 5,620 to 8,890 tonnes, subsequently dropping to 4,860 tonnes in 2010. In Afghanistan, although poppy cultivation declined by 22% between 2007 and 2009, opium production decreased by only 10%. Similarly, the 7% increase in Afghan poppy cultivation between 2009 and 2010 resulted in a 52% increase in potential opium production.
Efforts to reduce the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit drug market have mainly consisted of forced crop-eradication campaigns – the physical destruction of the crop on the ground. Over time, crop-eradication campaigns have become associated with violence and conflict, and a number of health and socio-economic harms, in particular the destruction of the only means of subsistence of farmers involved in the cultivation of these crops, therefore exacerbating their vulnerability to poverty, conflict and forced migration.

The idea of ‘alternative development’ – i.e. rural development programmes in areas where drug-linked crops are grown – was developed in the late 1960s as an integrated approach to improving community livelihood options to address the underlying factors that drive farmers to grow opium poppy and coca. The concept subsequently evolved towards the principle of ‘alternative livelihoods’, moving from isolated, project-specific interventions to broader, multi-sectorial development-oriented policies aimed at reducing farmers’ reliance on the cultivation of opium poppy and coca, by addressing the structural and institutional factors that shape their decisions to grow these crops.\(^5\)

In most recent cases, crop eradication and development of alternative livelihoods have been carried out simultaneously. However, a growing number of experts have demonstrated that forced eradication can result in more harm than good, especially if alternative livelihoods programmes have not been properly sequenced – for crop reductions to be maintained, alternative sources of income must be put in place before the farmers’ primary source of income is eliminated. Additional reasons for rethinking crop-eradication policies will be explained below.

Farmers will only be able to reduce their dependence on income from coca and poppy crops if they are provided with alternative livelihoods through long-term multi-sectorial development programmes.

**Forced crop eradication – a counter-productive approach**

Crop eradication consists of manual eradication, the use of aerial fumigation of chemical agents on coca fields, and biological methods. Crop-eradication campaigns are conducted without the consent of coca and opium poppy farmers, although they are sometimes encouraged to participate in the campaigns in return for compensation or development assistance.

Over the years, forced crop eradication has been associated with a number of negative consequences.

- It is a very expensive approach, which has not led to desired result of reducing the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit market. For example, manual fumigation requires approximately 20 days of work per hectare for coca and 3 days of work per hectare for opium poppy.\(^6\) In the case of aerial fumigation, coca farmers tend to wash the chemical off their crops or immediately replant new crops to replace those that have been damaged.

- Small farmers involved in coca and poppy production usually do so for lack of viable economic alternatives. It is estimated that farmers earn only 1% of the overall global illicit drug income – most of the remaining revenue being earned by traffickers within developed countries.\(^7\) As farmers involved in coca and poppy cultivation often tend to be marginalised and vulnerable, implementing forced eradication programmes before providing them with alternative sustainable livelihoods...
pushes them deeper into poverty. The abrupt cut-off in income can impact negatively on the health and nutrition of those affected. Families may be forced to migrate to more remote areas and children may be taken out of school in order to supplement the household income, creating greater difficulties for escaping poverty in the future.

- In some parts of the world, such as Colombia, aerial fumigation campaigns have led to health problems among farmers, sometimes forcing them to migrate to other parts of the country. Aerial fumigation techniques can be devastating for the environment, including those lands used to grow licit food crops.

- Price incentives sometimes counter the impact of a ‘successful’ eradication campaign. If successful in the short term, eradication drives up farm-gate prices, making it more lucrative for farmers to continue cultivation, and encouraging newcomers to the market.

- Eradication tends to move the cultivation of illicit crops to new and more inaccessible areas. In the Andean countries, forced manual and aerial eradication programmes spread coca and poppy production to new regions, including national parks, resulting in even greater damage to fragile local ecosystems. This makes cultivation more difficult to detect and eliminate, and spreads the problems associated with these crops to new areas.

- Forced eradication increases opportunities for corruption and organised criminal networks. It enhances the revenue base of irregular forces that take advantage of, or depend on, the income generated by the illicit drug trade. In Afghanistan, crop-eradication efforts and strict implementation of opium bans have contributed to an increase in poppy production in provinces with high levels of conflict and a significant Taliban presence. This has bolstered, rather than depleted, their funding base. It also stimulates corruption and undermines the rule of law, as government forces in these areas tend to profit from the illicit trade.

- More generally, forced eradication fuels conflict. Security forces carrying out crop eradication or combating insurgents are often the only state presence in these areas, where public services and infrastructure are non-existent or woefully inadequate. These conditions, together with the violence and human rights abuses that often accompany eradication campaigns, alienate the local population and further undermine the legitimacy of the state. In turn, this can boost political support for the insurgents.

- Even when conducted hand-in-hand with alternative development programmes, eradication campaigns undermine co-operation with the local community, which is needed to carry out effective development programmes. It causes distrust between donors, state agencies and recipient communities, and undermines the very development efforts needed to wean subsistence farmers off the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit drug market (see Box 1).

**Box 1. Forced crop eradication in Bolivia and its consequences on alternative development assistance**

Prior to the signature of an agreement between the Bolivian government and coca growers in 2004, forced eradication in Bolivia led to protests, violent confrontations and attacks on alternative development installations. This occurred in part because alternative development assistance was conditioned on the eradication of all coca, which left families with no income. In 2008, Chapare coca growers announced that they would not sign any further agreements with the US Agency for International Development for alternative development projects. In all three coca-producing Andean countries, the US subcontractors that carry out alternative development projects are viewed with suspicion and distrust by the local community.
Finally, it is necessary to remember that not all cultivation is destined for the illicit market, and therefore not all coca and opium poppy should be eradicated.

First, indigenous people in the Andean region have consumed the coca leaf for centuries, and coca chewing is an integral part of religious and other ceremonies. Similarly, opium has long been used in Asia for medical, social and recreational purposes. Chewing or drinking coca tea has beneficial attributes, such as helping to alleviate the symptoms of high altitudes, cold and hunger. Coca consumption is spreading to new geographic areas and among the middle classes. Opium is used in some traditional Asian societies to ward off the symptoms of gastrointestinal illness, and in this context can be a life-saver in infants. Such cultures are often among those most acutely lacking essential medicines such as morphine. However, national and international drug control systems prohibit traditional uses of these plants, leading to violation of the social, economic and cultural rights of indigenous communities (see Section 4.4: Protecting the rights of indigenous people).

Second, the licit cultivation of coca and opium poppy continues to take place in countries such as Australia, India, Turkey and France, for medical and culinary purposes, especially for the pharmaceutical production of morphine, codeine and thebaine (paramorphine). An increase in licit uses of these substances should be considered, in order to decrease the share of cultivation currently destined for the illicit market and respond to the needs of millions of people living in moderate or severe pain because of lack of essential medicines.

**Promoting development in a drugs environment**

Programmes for alternative livelihoods, or programmes aimed at promoting ‘development in a drugs environment’ are intended to address the underlying structural conditions faced by coca and opium poppy farmers and provide them with legal and economic opportunities in order to reduce their dependence on the cash income these generate. This approach is also designed to improve the overall quality of life of farmers, including: improved access to health care, education (see Box 3) and housing; the development of infrastructure and other public services; and income generation, such as the industrialisation of agricultural produce and off-farm employment opportunities.

**Box 2. Abstract from Inputs for the draft – International Guiding Principles on Alternative Development**

‘Alternative development should be mainstreamed into a larger socio-cultural-economic development context with emphasis on the need to address poverty, inadequate enforcement of the rule of law in some areas, and other related social injustices reflecting also the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and as part of sustainable strategies for the control of illicit crops.’

Alternative livelihoods programmes are no longer purely focused on reducing the production of crops destined for the illicit drug market, but are incorporated, or mainstreamed, into comprehensive strategies for rural development and economic growth. Specifically, they call for embedding strategies for reducing coca and poppy crops in local, regional and national development initiatives.

**The importance of sequencing**

Forced eradication, or demanding the elimination of crops before providing economic assistance, may be successful in the short term. However, over the medium to long term, as long as alternative livelihood options are not sufficiently in place, farmers replant to secure income or move into new areas where it is easier to avoid detection. It will only be possible to successfully reduce or eliminate the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit market once the overall quality of life and income of the local population
has been improved. In areas where poppy farmers receive advances from traffickers to buy poppy seeds and fertiliser, or to bridge family income gaps until harvest time, farmers need to be offered micro-credit schemes to enable them to switch from illicit to licit sources of income. At that point, crop reduction should be voluntary and conducted in collaboration with the local community. It is therefore crucial that alternative livelihoods programmes are properly sequenced (see Box 3).

Box 3. The Thai alternative livelihoods model
Beginning in 1969, the Thai government sought to integrate highland communities into national life and therefore carried out sustained economic development activities over a 30-year period. Over time, it became clear that agricultural alternatives alone were insufficient. As a result, increasing emphasis was placed on providing social services such as healthcare services and schools, as well as infrastructure development such as roads, electricity and water supplies. Alternative livelihoods programmes were integrated into local, regional and national development plans. This led to steady improvement in farmers’ quality of life, and increased opportunities for off-farm employment. The Thai approach evolved over time. Initially, international donors defined the strategy with little participation from the local communities or even the local government. The second phase fully involved the local government (with the King’s public backing, which was politically significant). Eventually, a focus on local community participation emerged.

The Thai experience underscores the importance of local institution building and community involvement in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development efforts. Community-based organisations, such as women’s and youth groups and rice banks, were important in ensuring a successful outcome. Local know-how became the basis for problem solving, and local leadership was fully integrated into project implementation.

The Thai experience also points to the importance of proper sequencing. Efforts at crop reduction only started in 1984, after about 15 years of sustained economic development. While some forced eradication did take place initially, proper sequencing allowed farmers to reduce poppy production gradually, as other sources of income developed, avoiding the problem of re-planting that inevitably frustrates crop-eradication efforts. Although the entire process took about 30 years, the results of the Thai strategy have proved sustainable, as only very small pockets of poppy cultivation now persist. However, on the negative side, there has been an increase in methamphetamine use and production in the region since the 1990s.

Some caution is advised about how far this model can be replicated elsewhere. First, in Thailand farmers grew poppy in fertile areas where other crops could easily be produced, which is not necessarily the case in other parts of the world. Second, steady economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s allowed for government investments in infrastructure and other programmes. Third, there was a strong relationship between local demand and production. Much of the opium produced was consumed locally, so demand reduction programmes could work in tandem with alternative livelihoods efforts, meaning that both demand and production declined together. Finally, global market dynamics were not much affected, since the relatively insignificant exports of Thai opium and heroin could easily be replaced from other sources. Although these particular factors may make it difficult to replicate this experience in other regions, this experience does provide useful guidelines for designing alternative livelihoods strategies elsewhere.

It is only possible to successfully reduce or eliminate the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit market once the overall quality of life and income of the local population has been improved.
Promoting good governance and the rule of law

Nation building and promoting good governance and the rule of law are also essential components of an alternative livelihoods approach. These are particularly necessary to foster the legitimacy and credibility of the government in areas where state presence is often limited to security and/or eradication forces. A growing body of academic literature now points to the absence of violent conflict as a pre-condition for sustainable development and drug control efforts.\(^\text{15}\)

Linking alternative livelihoods to the protection of the environment

The lack of accessible natural resources can be one of the driving factors leading to the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit drug market. The use of natural resources must be recognised as a means for subsistence for communities that are dependent on them to meet their livelihood needs. A multi-sector approach towards alternative livelihoods requires the adoption of measures that create incentives for rural communities to refrain from engaging in other illicit activities that would harm natural resources. This should not simply consist of incentives to stop growing crops used in the illicit drug market, but should also include incentives for conservation of the environment, allowing communities to improve their livelihoods while caring for their environment. For example, reforestation programmes that allocate land as a mix of conservation forest, economic forest and sustenance forest can assist in balancing the community’s survival with environmental protection (see, for example, Box 4 in Section 4.1: Controlled drugs and development).\(^\text{16}\)

Including coca and opium farmers as key partners in alternative livelihoods programmes

Alternative livelihoods programmes require that coca or poppy farmers should no longer be considered as criminals but should instead be viewed as key stakeholders in the design and implementation of the development programmes that affect them.\(^\text{17}\) The involvement of farmers is necessary, both because local farmers have a better knowledge and understanding of the local geographical conditions, and in order to protect the rights and cultural traditions of local communities (see Section 4.4: Protecting the rights of indigenous communities). This principle was included in the draft version of International Guiding Principles on Alternative Development recently drawn up by a group of experts and government officials during a workshop in Thailand.\(^\text{18}\) Additional UN reports have also underscored the importance of community involvement in such efforts.

Moving from indicators of crops eradicated to broader indicators of human development

So far, most crop-eradication and alternative development projects have primarily evaluated their success by reductions in the cultivation of drug-linked crops. However, in an evaluation report to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2008, UNODC stated that, ‘there is little proof that the eradications reduce illicit cultivation in the long term as the crops move somewhere else’, adding that, ‘alternative development must be evaluated through indicators of development and not technically as a function of illicit production statistics’.\(^\text{19}\) While reductions in cultivation are not an adequate measure of progress or impact in drug control strategies, there is a direct relationship between improved social and economic conditions of an area and the sustained reduction of illicit cultivation (see Box 4).
**Box 4. The promotion of alternative livelihoods in Lao People's Democratic Republic**

The Alternative livelihoods project in Lao People's Democratic Republic targets village communities that are dependent on opium poppy cultivation because of high levels of poverty. The project resulted in the expansion of road networks, improved farming technologies, the generation of alternative sources of income, and social leadership and empowerment of villagers to help them respond to changing socio-economic conditions and benefit from emerging improvements in government services and economic opportunities. Significant improvements in economic opportunities and the provision of social services to these communities, along with greater security, improved infrastructure and increased access to markets have correlated with reductions of opium poppy production from 26,000 hectares in 1998 to 2,000 hectares in 2009.

Experience has demonstrated that successful alternative livelihoods programmes have a limited effect on the global illicit drug market, as production tends to shift elsewhere to meet global demand, but they have, nevertheless, proved to be successful at the local and national level. Expectations about what alternative development programmes can achieve concerning reducing illicit supply to the global drug market should be modest and realistic, as the effectiveness of any strategy for supply reduction depends on the market dynamics of supply and demand. This demonstrates the need to adopt a balanced approach towards the global drug problem, tackling both supply and demand at the same time, with evidence-based policies and programmes. A successful policy also needs to include the recognition that poverty is a multidimensional problem that requires a multidimensional approach. It further needs to acknowledge the important role of sustainable resource use and management and the provision of social services, and address issues of conflict, crises, lack of good governance, violence, the rule of law and security – all elements that characterise most areas where opium poppy and coca are cultivated.

**Promoting preventive alternative development**

Some countries, in particular Ecuador, have promoted the concept of ‘preventive alternative development’ in areas where cultivation of crops destined for the illicit drug market could start, or in areas that offer a pool of available workers for harvest. Although such programmes have so far failed to attract sufficient international donor interest, especially in current times of budget restrictions, this concept should be kept in mind and experimented by governments whenever possible.

**Recommendations**

1) Decades of experience in promoting alternative development show that reducing the cultivation of coca and poppy crops is a long-term problem that needs a long-term solution, involving broader nation-building and development goals. Government strategies need to be based on promoting economic growth and providing basic services; democratic institution building and the rule of law; respect for human rights; and improved security in the impoverished rural areas where coca and poppy cultivation flourishes.

2) The potential impact of development policies and programmes on the cultivation of coca and poppy crops should be taken into account, and steps taken to maximise positive impacts and minimise negative ones. A range of ministries and agencies, as well as civil society groups, and representatives of coca and opium poppy farmers, should be involved in the decision-making process.
3) Proper sequencing is essential. Alternative livelihoods and improved quality of life must be achieved before crop reductions.\textsuperscript{23} An alternative livelihoods approach should also incorporate the concept of ‘preventive alternative development’\textsuperscript{24} in areas that could be conducive to producing crops for the illicit market.

4) Development assistance should not be conditional on meeting prior targets for crop reduction. With proper sequencing, farmers are more likely to collaborate with efforts to reduce the cultivation of coca and poppy. Once economic development efforts are well under way and bearing fruit, governments can work with local communities to encourage reduction, and in some cases elimination, of crops destined for the illicit market.

5) Local communities must be involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development efforts. This includes community leadership, and the involvement of local organisations such as producer groups and the farmers themselves. Government officials can play a key role in mobilising, co-ordinating and supporting community participation.

6) Results should not be measured in terms of hectares of crops eradicated. Rather, alternative livelihoods programmes should be evaluated using human development and socio-economic indicators – indicators that measure the well-being of society.\textsuperscript{25}

**Key resources**


Endnotes


17. EU Presidency Paper (2008), *Key points identified by EU experts to be included in the conclusion of the open-ended intergovernmental expert working group on international cooperation on the eradication of illicit drug and on alternative development*, presented to the open-ended intergovernmental working group on international cooperation on the eradication of illicit drug crops and on alternative development (2-4 July 2008).


