

Policy principle 4:

Drug policies should promote the social inclusion of marginalised groups, and not focus on punitive measures towards them

The prevalence of drug use among different social groups varies from country to country. Nonetheless, a trend seems to persist in all societies – drug-related harms remain strongly concentrated among the most marginalised groups. This is unsurprising, as evidence shows that harsh living conditions and the associated trauma are major factors contributing to drug dependence.⁵¹ Similarly, the cultivation of crops destined for the illicit drug market is concentrated in the poorest areas of the world,⁵² while people engaging in micro-trafficking are also generally from poor and socially marginalised backgrounds.⁵³ Large-scale drug trafficking operations are also more likely to target underdeveloped nations and regions with weaker governance and capacity.⁵⁴

While governments and the international community may be focused on improving the living conditions of marginalised groups and integrating them more strongly into the social and economic mainstream, many aspects of national drug control policies have the opposite effect:

- The widespread stigmatisation of drug use (and, by extension, people who use drugs) marginalises individuals and entire communities
- The widespread criminalisation of drug use means that people (especially young people) caught using, or in possession of, drugs are often left with criminal records which can lead to their exclusion from education or employment – increasing their vulnerability to health, social and economic problems
- Programmes that focus on arrests and harsh criminal sanctions for people who use drugs and subsistence farmers have little deterrent effect, and only serve to increase exposure to health risks, criminality and violence
- Drug law enforcement activities and abuses can deter people who use drugs from accessing the health and social programmes that have been designed to help them
- Forced crop eradication programmes undermine

the basic livelihoods of subsistence farmers who grow crops destined for the illicit market, and drives them deeper into poverty

- Harsh criminal sanctions imposed on drug mules and micro-traffickers – in particular women – have exacerbated their poverty and vulnerability, hindering their access to licit employment and social services.

Social marginalisation can be minimised by reducing the reliance on widespread arrest and harsh punishments for people involved in low-level drug offences, and adopting policies and programmes that challenge the marginalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable groups. In order to address these issues, many countries are now leaning towards less punitive drug policies such as: **decriminalisation** (the offence is no longer punished by a criminal sanction); **depenalisation** (criminal penalties for drug offences are reduced); **alternatives to incarceration**; and reviews of laws and sentencing guidelines to ensure **more proportionate penalties**. Others are considering **regulated markets** for some substances. More information on these policy options can be found in Chapter 3. The objective is to reduce the securitisation of drug control to move towards policies based on health, human rights and development (see Chapters 2 and 4 for more details). For example:

- Drug laws and enforcement strategies should avoid measures that worsen the social marginalisation of people engaged at the lower levels of the drug trade – including people who use drugs, subsistence farmers involved in the production of crops destined for the illicit drug market, and micro-traffickers
- Drug dependence treatment programmes should be evidence-based and focused on facilitating an individual's self-determined goals for recovery, and on supporting their social inclusion within their communities
- Harm reduction programmes should be adopted, supported, adequately funded and scaled-up –

and should be enshrined in an enabling policy environment

- Law enforcement measures against low-level offenders should rely on alternatives to incarceration and the provision of services to address the root causes of involvement in the drug trade. This is particularly important for offenders with children and other dependents
- Drug strategies in drug cultivation areas should focus on properly sequenced rural development approaches

- Representatives of the groups most affected by drug policies have a right to be involved in the design and implementation of drug policies and programmes that concern them. This is to ensure that these policies are informed, effective and do not lead to unintended negative consequences (see Chapter 1.5).⁵⁵

Credit: UNODC



Alternative livelihoods in Lao People's Democratic Republic