

Forum: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Issue: Drug Policy Reform and Alternatives to Incarceration in the Golden Triangle

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Introduction

The global war on drugs has been a decades-long, costly, and largely ineffective endeavor. In the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia, which encompasses Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, the production and trafficking of illicit narcotics like heroin, opium, and methamphetamine has remained a challenge for decades. Traditional punitive approaches focused on criminalization and incarceration have done little to curb the drug trade, while also contributing to human rights abuses, overcrowded prisons, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations.

The urgency for reform is underscored by recent developments in the region. In 2022, Myanmar saw a 33% increase in opium cultivation compared to the previous year, reaching over 40,000 hectares. This comes amid a political crisis and power vacuum that has empowered ethnic armed groups and criminal syndicates involved in the drug trade. Thailand, meanwhile, has taken steps to decriminalize cannabis, signaling a shift away from hardline policies.

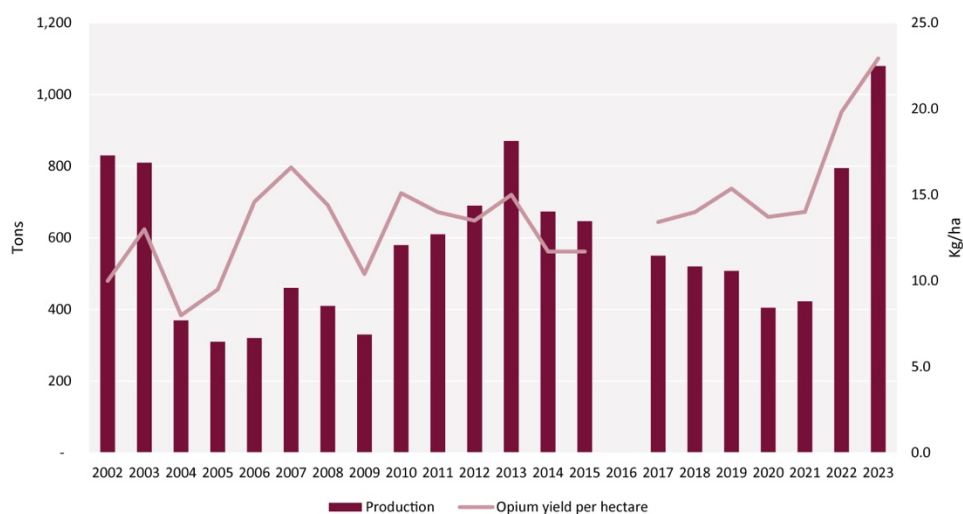


Figure #1: Production of Opium from 2002 to 2023

The Golden Triangle drug traffic has continued, and recent changes in the area emphasize the urgent need for a new strategy to handle the difficult problem of drug control. With political unrest and a lack of authority, the 33% increase in opium production that was seen in Myanmar in 2022 has increased the influence of crime syndicates and ethnic armed groups that are involved in the drug trade. On the other hand, Thailand's decision to decriminalize marijuana is indicative of an increasing understanding of the limitations of punitive measures. These changing global trends and regional dynamics highlight how urgently we need a comprehensive and creative strategy that goes beyond typical punitive measures. Evolving regional dynamics and global trends make it clear that a new approach is needed to tackle the complex challenge of drug control in the Golden Triangle.

Key Terminology

The Golden Triangle

The "Golden Triangle" is the geographic area in Southeast Asia where the national borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar (formerly Burma) converge. This region is a major hub for drug trafficking and the growing of opium. The illicit drug trade in the Golden Triangle has long enabled organized crime, political instability, and human rights abuses. The Golden Triangle remains one of the world's foremost sources of illicit opioid substances.

Drugs

Substances that can alter the functioning of the body, mind, or both when consumed or administered. Drugs include both legal and illegal substances. Legal drugs are substances that are regulated and can be legally used for medical purposes or other approved purposes. Examples include prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, and recreational substances like alcohol and tobacco. Illegal drugs are prohibited by law and their possession, use, or distribution is illegal. Examples include illicit drugs such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, LSD, MDMA (ecstasy), marijuana (in some jurisdictions), and others.

Narcotics Trafficking

Any illegal activity to cultivate, produce, manufacture, distribute, sell, finance, or transport narcotic drugs, controlled substances, or listed chemicals, or otherwise endeavor or attempt to do so, or to assist, abet, conspire, or collude with others to do so.

Southeast Asia

A subregion of Asia comprised of 11 countries including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste (East Timor), and Vietnam. While the region is known for its vibrant cultures, historical sites, and economic growth, Southeast Asia also faces issues such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and environmental concerns.

Smuggling

Illegal transportation of illicit substances, such as opium, heroin, or cocaine across borders through covert methods. This includes evading customs, law enforcement agencies, and border control measures to transport drugs from one location to another.

Drug Cartels

Organized criminal groups involved in the production, distribution, and sale of illicit drugs, particularly opium, heroin, and other narcotics. These cartels operate in the Golden Triangle region, taking advantage of the area's geography and borders.

Interdiction

Efforts and actions taken to disrupt or prevent the production, distribution, and trafficking of illicit substances. It involves targeted operations by law enforcement authorities to identify, intercept, and seize drugs.

Opium

A highly addictive, bitter brownish narcotic drug derived from the opium poppy plant and is known for its analgesic and euphoric properties. When consumed, it acts as a central nervous system depressant, producing pain relief, sedation, and a sense of euphoria. It can be smoked, ingested orally, or dissolved in water and injected.

Cocaine

A stimulant drug produced from the coca plant. While the Golden Triangle is primarily known for opium and heroin production, there have been reports of cocaine production in the region in recent years.

Heroin

Highly addictive and illegal opioid drug obtained from morphine, which is extracted from the opium poppy plant. It typically appears as a white or brown powder or as a sticky black substance known as “black tar heroin.” Heroin is commonly consumed by injecting, smoking, or snorting, and can lead to dependence, overdose, and other serious consequences.

Background

Over the decades, this region has been at the heart of global narcotics issues, prompting numerous policy reforms and the exploration of alternatives to incarceration, aiming to address the socio-economic factors driving the drug trade.

The Cold War and Colonial Influence

During the Cold War era, the Golden Triangle region saw a significant escalation in the production of opium, primarily attributed to the involvement of armed groups and warlords who utilized drug proceeds to finance their operations. This phenomenon was further bolstered by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Though the intended objective was to disrupt communist supply lines, the Agency’s activities in Laos and the support they provided for anti-communist forces led to an inadvertent facilitation of the opium trade. The armed functions became increasingly reliant on funds generated drug trades. Consequently, the Golden Triangle region garnered an international notoriety as a central nexus for the global narcotics trade. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime World Drug Report in 2020, during the 1970s and 1980s, the region alone accounted for an estimated 70-80% of illicit opium supply worldwide.

In the early 20th century, colonial powers made an influence on the opium economy within the Golden Triangle region. The presence of British colonial forces in Burma (present-day Myanmar) and French colonial authorities in Indochina (including Laos) shaped and promoted opium cultivation. The colonial administrations encouraged opium production to generate revenue through taxation and control. This period laid the groundwork for the establishment of an entrenched drug economy that continued for several decades. With the British and French colonies actively fostering and benefiting from the opium industry, the production and trade of this highly addictive drug became integral components of the economic landscape in the Golden Triangle region. These influences provided the impetus for the Golden Triangle to become a major opium-producing region, which left enduring socio-economic ramifications for the future.

International Attention in the 1970s

The international community began to seriously address the increasing drug problem in the 1970s, emerging from the Golden Triangle. The United Nations, recognizing the global implications of unchecked opium production, initiated a series of measures aimed at controlling the production and trafficking of narcotics. The UN Single Convention on Narcotics Drugs of 1961, consolidated previous treaties and imposed stricter controls on narcotics, began to gain traction in this decade. In addition, the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC) was established in 1971 to provide countries with financial and technical assistance to combat the surging issue of drug production. These actions led to eradication campaigns and an introduction of alternative development programs. However, these early efforts were primarily made to reduce opium supply through direct intervention in poppy-growing regions.



Figure #2: Activists Fighting the Heroin Epidemic in the 1970s

Parallel to these international initiatives, the United States saw the rapid increase of addiction rates for heroin- particularly among returning Vietnam War veterans- exerted significant pressure on regional governments in Southeast Asia to take stronger actions against drug production and trafficking. In response, countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos began implementing rigorous drug control policies that emphasized eradication and law enforcement. In the early 1970s, Thailand initiated a series of opium poppy eradication campaigns, which reduced the production and use of opium from approximately 12,000 hectares in 1970 to an estimated 1,800 hectares by the end of the decade. Despite these efforts, the persisted high global demand for heroin meant that the overall impact on the global drug trade was limited. Moreover, the rigid measures impacted the economic activity that was created by opium cultivation. This forced impoverished farmers who depended on the crop to not be able to earn enough money to sustain their everyday life. The limitations indicate that there is a need for more comprehensive strategies.

Thai Narcotic Control Act

The Thai Narcotic Control Act in 1985 was a milestone that marked a critical shift in the Golden Triangle region's approach to drug trafficking and addiction. By the 1980s, it has been the central hub in the global heroin trade and a major opium-producing area. Recognizing the increasing crisis, the Thai government, under pressure from both local concerns and international bodies, introduced the Narcotic Control Act. The act emphasized a balance between enforcement and social rehabilitation and established narcotics control units specialized to fight against illicit drug trafficking. The Act also addressed drug addiction by incorporating the treatment and medical care perspective rather than solely focusing on punitive measures.

War on Drugs

The Thailand Drug War, also known as the "War on Drugs," in 2003 was a campaign initiated by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The campaign's aim was to combat the ongoing methamphetamine crisis in Thailand. The war on drugs sought to curb the supply and demand for these illicit substances thorough aggressive law enforcement and policy measures. One of the key aspects of the campaign was the zero-tolerance policy towards drug-related

WLMUN XVIII: One Step Back, Two Steps Forward

crimes. The government used severe penalties including drug arrests and death sentences. However, the campaign received criticism due to the exceptional high number of extrajudicial killings that occurred because of the campaign. Reports indicated that thousands of people were killed during this period. The Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, both of which are human rights organizations condemned the campaign for its ignorance of legal procedures and abuse of power. Many experts argued that the harsh policies made little to no impact to address the root causes of drug consumption and led to a worsening of the crises. By the end of 2003, the campaign has killed over 2,000 lives because it lacked thinking on the primary objective of the campaign.

United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS)

The United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the World Drug Problem was held in 2016. It was the first session in nearly 20 years that the UN General Assembly convened to address global drug issues comprehensively. The conference gathered 193 member states in New York City, where they discussed global drug policies. The key outcome of UNGASS 2016 was the adoption of the “Outcome Document.” It emphasized a more balanced approach to drug policy. The document recognized the need to address drug use as a public health issue, rather than only through harsh laws. It also called for support for drug prevention, treatment, and harm reduction services while emphasizing the importance to address the social and economic factors behind drug production and trafficking. The UNGASS 2016 session was a step towards a more comprehensive and considerate approach to combat illicit drug production.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a key entity under the Economic and Social Council. The committee focuses on making the world safer from drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism. The UNODC has been actively addressing policies to respond to the surging production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, particularly

methamphetamine, opium, and heroin. Specifically, they have been working closely with regional governments, enhancing cross-border cooperation through Border Liaison Offices, forming new laws and policies for enforcement, and supporting alternative livelihoods to reduce the dependence on illicit drug trade. At the 67th Commission on Narcotic Drugs held in March 2022, the UNODC emphasized the need for better management of precursor chemicals used in drug production and discussed multilateral cooperation under frameworks like the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control. ²

The Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle, encompassing parts of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, has historically been a significant hub for opium and heroin production. Thailand has implemented harm reduction strategies which focuses on rehabilitation and treatment rather than imprisonment. Despite political and economic challenges in Laos and Myanmar, these countries are also finding similar approaches.

World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Southeast Asia

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Southeast Asia is one of the six regional WHO offices. It mainly works with countries in Southeast Asia including Thailand, Indonesia, India, and more. The office has been working with local NGOs and governments to enhance access to treatment services for disorders caused by the consumption of drugs. The WHO also supports the development of frameworks that align with human rights and public health and emphasize the need for prevention and treatment related to illicit drugs.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, founded in 1971 is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). The organization provides access to medical care to people affected by crises, support for drug users, and advocates to improve medical care in crises situations. MSF provides treatment for individuals with substance use disorders, including opium dependency. They offer services such as needle exchange programs and opium substitution therapy. The MSF also aims to raise awareness about the impacts of drug usage.

International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) is a UN body responsible for monitoring international drug control treaties. The INCB provides recommendations to improve national drug control strategies. The board also issues reports, specifically focused on illicit narcotics trafficking in the Golden Triangle, supports development programs to reduce illegal opium production, and collaborates with the UNODC.

Norway

Norway support harm reduction and drug treatment programs in Southeast Asia through its international development aid. Norway has been funding projects that focus on providing medical and psychological support for drug users and the country has also contributed to initiatives aimed at reducing the harm caused by drug trafficking.

China

China has been focusing on cross-border collaboration to combat illicit narcotics trafficking. The country has strengthened its borders to prevent drug influx. China also provides economic aid and has funded development projects that offer alternative livelihoods to impoverished communities that depend on drug production.

United States of America

The United States of America have been promoting developmental programs that offer alternative livelihoods such as crop substitution. The United States have also been assisting the Golden Triangle region by providing surveillance tools, drug detection technologies, and forensic analysis equipment.

Timeline of Events

The following timeline includes a brief description of major events that happened between 1946-2024 that is related to drug policy reform and alternatives to incarceration in the Golden Triangle.

Date	Description/Note
1946	The UN establishes the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND). The CND was formed to oversee global drug policy and implement international drug control measures.

1961	The UN adopted the Single Convention Treaty on Narcotic Drugs to consolidate earlier drug control agreements and set a framework for international drug policy.
1972	The United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances treaty was formed to extend control to psychotropic substances, aiming to reduce the abuse and trafficking of these drugs.
1980s	Countries in the Golden Triangle, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar intensified anti-drug campaigns due to increased drug production and trafficking.
2003	Thailand launched a controversial anti-drug campaign that led to widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings.
2008-2012	The UNODC highlighted the increasing production of opium in the Golden Triangle and its impact on regional stability. The UNODC emphasized the need for alternative development programs in the Golden Triangle to reduce opium cultivation and improve livelihoods.
2016	Thailand initiated discussions on drug policy reform, including considering alternatives to incarceration for drug offenders.
2018	Myanmar's drug policy shifts. Myanmar started to experiment with new drug policies, including harm reduction approaches and alternative development projects.
2020	Thailand decriminalize cannabis. Thailand became the first Southeast Asian country to legalize medical cannabis, marking a significant shift in drug policy.
2023	Laos and Thailand increased cooperation on cross-border drug control efforts and Myanmar introduced new measures aimed at reducing drug-related harm and improving rehabilitation services.

Previous Attempts/Solutions

1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

A landmark treaty, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was designed in 1961 to consolidate previous agreements and enhance global control over narcotics. The aim of the treaty was to limit the production, distribution, and use of narcotic drugs to medical and

scientific purposes only. The convention wanted to coordinate member states and curb the global drug trade as a whole. Specifically, the treaty introduced mechanisms to regulate illicit drug production and trade and required nations to implement control measures. Despite its ambitious goals, the convention faced socio-economic challenges including poverty and political instability, which affected the effectiveness of the treaty. Due to these challenges, the production and trafficking of drugs in the Golden Triangle region continued and the treaty's framework struggled to address fully. Therefore, the 1961 Single Convention has made limited contributions to global drug control and has indicated the need for more localized approaches to combat drug production and trafficking in the Golden Triangle.

1998 ASEAN Drug Free Zone Initiative

The ASEAN Drug-Free Zone Initiative was launched in 1998 aimed to eliminate drug abuse and trafficking across Southeast Asia. The initiative enhanced cooperation among the ASEAN member states- Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and others- through information sharing, joint strategies, and capacity building. The initiative promoted a collaborative approach to address the drug trade's cross-border nature and reduce the demand and supply of illicit drugs. The initiative has led to increased collaboration between member states and information exchange. However, the Golden Triangle remains a major drug production hub, and has faced challenges due to the ongoing political instability. Like the 1961 Single Convention, the ASEAN Initiative also reflects the need for a more context-specific strategy to control the illicit use of drugs.

UNODC Alternative Development Program

The UNODC's Alternative Development Program was aimed to address the root causes of illicit drug cultivation by providing sustainable economic alternatives to communities involved in the production of narcotic plants- especially in the Golden Triangle, where the cultivation of opium poppy has been a traditional economic activity. The program focuses on improving local infrastructure and building capacity within communities to transition from illicit drug production to legal, income-generating activities. The program has led to some notable successes where they integrated rural development projects have reduced opium poppy cultivation in Thailand. According to UNODC reports, opium poppy cultivation in Thailand was

decreased from 12,000 hectares in the 1960s to less than 300 hectares by 2020, mainly because of the UNODC alternative development initiatives. These projects included the introduction of high-value crops such as coffee and tea, as well as improved access to markets for local farmers. In Laos and Myanmar, the program faced greater challenges while trying to make an impact. For instance, in Laos, the UNODC reported a decrease in opium poppy cultivation from 6,200 hectares in 2015 to 4,000 hectares in 2019. Although the decrease was not as significant compared to Thailand, the development program has also been successful in Laos.

Beyond just reducing drug cultivation, it also contributes to broader development by enhancing food security, improving health and education services, and promotes environmental sustainability. The program's success addresses not only the economic aspects but also the social and environmental factors of drug cultivation. Despite these successes, insufficient local government support, the need for long-term commitment, and inadequate funding are all challenges the program faces. Nonetheless, compared to the two previous initiatives, there has been a significant impact made to combat drug production and trafficking in the Golden Triangle.

Potential Solutions

One potential solution is to focus on harm reduction strategies rather than solely on criminalization. This includes expanding access to treatments like medication-assisted therapies, providing safe consumption sites, and decriminalize the possession of small amounts of drugs. By treating drug use as a public health issue rather than only a criminal one, policymakers will be able to reduce some stigma around addiction and make sure people who use drugs can access the resources and receive the support they need.

There can also be investments in development programs that provide farmers in the Golden Triangle. This can involve supporting the growth of legal crops, providing access to technology, and combatting the root causes of drug production such as poverty and lack of opportunities.

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