



Research Paper

(Mis)understanding the intersection between development policies and data collection: Experiences in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

There is a misalignment between a development community focused on improving the welfare of vulnerable populations and the challenges of addressing widespread illicit drug crop production in drug producing countries. Drawing on the example of Afghanistan, this paper argues that the reasons for the development communities failure to engage is in large part a function of the way that illicit opium poppy and the illicit economy is currently perceived and understood by policy makers, practitioners and scholars. Much of the problem lies with the various statistics used to describe and quantify opium production in Afghanistan, many of them produced by UNODC and cited repeatedly in media coverage and the academic literature. These statistics shape how we have come to understand the scale and nature of the drugs problem, and thereby have informed policy responses. This paper argues that it is critical that policy makers and scholars fully understand the veracity of drug related statistics, including their methodological and conceptual limitations, before using them as the foundations for development programmes or policy responses. Indeed, this paper argues that many of these statistics have presented a simplified and ‘profit maximising’ model of the factors influencing farmers’ livelihoods choices, which has proven deeply misleading and further alienated the development community from engaging constructively with the challenges of illicit drug production in developing countries.

Introduction

Development organisations are often ill at ease when engaging with the challenges of illegal drug production in the global south. Even in countries like Afghanistan, Colombia and Burma where the illegal drugs economy has a significant impact on both the political economy and macro-economic indicators, development donors have been reluctant to integrate an analysis of the causes and effects of illegal drug production into their programmes and country level assessments (Alimi 2017: 16–17; East West Institute 30; SIGAR, 2018).

Their discomfort has multiple causes. For one, those working for development donors tied to the ‘Washington consensus’ and its emphasis on ‘market based solutions,’ express concerns about counter-narcotics efforts that seek to intervene and actively seek to undermine one of the few value chains that appear to work in the kind of conflict affected environments where illegal drug crops are concentrated. Rather, donors like USAID and DFID look to work with markets, intervening in order to make them ‘work for the poor.’ They do not look to destroy a market entirely as is the intent of the current international control system and would no doubt question whether such an aim is achievable.

A second cause of discomfort has been the problem of identifying an

appropriate development response to illegal drugs production, particularly given the benefits opium and coca cultivation have delivered to the rural households and communities that produce them. For example, in Afghanistan illegal opium is the largest export in terms of value; it created an estimated 590,000 direct jobs (Full Time Equivalent) in 2017; boosted the legal economy, providing livelihoods for farmers and those providing agricultural inputs and consumer goods; and helped bring 329,000 ha of former desert land under agriculture (Byrd, 2017, 1; Mansfield, 2018; SIGAR, 2014, 82). Policy makers and practitioners are hard pressed to offer examples of development assistance that has delivered such dramatic outcomes.

Yet, at the same time, in Afghanistan the illegal opium economy has led to growing levels of corruption; offered a revenue stream for private state actors and insurgent groups who seek to undermine the legitimacy of the central state; and ‘crowded out’ legal economic enterprise, a trend that is likely to increase in the wake of dwindling levels of aid. Furthermore, the concentration of opium poppy cultivation in the former desert areas of southern and south western Afghanistan has led to the intensification of agricultural production, including the use of harmful pesticides, increased salination, ultimately leading to the collapse of rural livelihoods for the land-poor, and increasing rates of outmigration (Mansfield, 2015a, 2015b).

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As a dual edged sword, generating both benefits and costs for producer countries, illegal drug production has typically left many development organisations unaware of how best to respond (Byrd, 2018). While in the past there was some sympathy for the argument that a possible development response to illegal drug production in a country like Afghanistan was to legalise or regulate drug crop production, there is now a recognition that this option leads to its own development challenges (Byrd & Mansfield, 2014). Not least the is the fact that the comparative advantage of a major drug producing country like Afghanistan lies with illegal, not legal, drug crop production, and therefore many of the economic benefits that opium production has brought would be lost to more efficient producers in the global north, such as Australia, France and Spain. These countries have not only made the necessary advances in agricultural inputs and techniques but also have the large farms necessary for the economies of scale required to sell opiates competitively on the international market, along with the institutional capacity and security regimes required for effective regulation. In the absence of the option of shifting to legal or regulated production, for both practical and legal reasons, many development organisations have been left not knowing which way to turn.

Those advocating for drug control, such as organisations like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), have offered a limited menu of responses for development donors, many of which run contrary to donors' current thinking and practice. For example, area based rural development programmes with the primary objective of reducing illegal drug crop production – so called 'Alternative Development' – have long been considered problematic by many development organisations (Kapila, Templar, & Winter, 1995: 52; SIGAR, 2018). Limited in geographic scope and often perceived as little more than crop-substitution, alternative development finds little financial support from the main development donors within the OECD (Alimi, 2017: 16, 28; Me and Kamminga, 2017: 5; UNODC, 2015: 84). In Afghanistan, there has been the added challenge that this kind of area based programme tasked with delivering a wide range of services, including physical and social infrastructure within a contained geographic territory, has been out of line with a development architecture and funding that is more sectoral-based and tied to national programmes (East West Institute, 2016: 20).

The change model that underpins alternative development is also far from clear with many development donors perceiving it as intimately tied to coercive measures such as eradication and efforts to make development assistance contingent on reductions in drug crop cultivation, so called 'conditionality.' In Afghanistan, many development donors, such as DFID, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) argued such an approach would be counterproductive; USAID, went as far as to say it would be "self defeating" (Deal 2001:1; European Commission, 2005: 10; SIGAR, 2018) There are many examples of alternative development, particularly in Afghanistan, where the strategic focus of the programme has been to provide largesse and political favour to elites so that they will in turn coerce the rural population to abandon or reduce opium poppy cultivation (SIGAR 2014: 13–14). The kind of pro-poor development outcomes that donors like DFID or the World Bank might support are lost, or merely an externality of a programme primarily designed to leverage reductions in levels of opium poppy cultivation, much of which is only short lived.

In the absence of a change model aligned with current development theory and practice, the most common response of the development community has been to ignore the illegal economy altogether and to carry on with its conventional development programmes (East West Institute 2016: 9; SIGAR, 2018). In Afghanistan it has not been unusual to hear the argument from development donors and practitioners, such as USAID and its contractors, that any support to legal on-farm, off-farm and non-farm income will lead to a contraction of the illegal economy, or at least provide an increased portfolio of legal options that farmers can pursue (East West Institute, 2016: 26; OIG; SIGAR, 2014: 14;

USAID, 2012:5; USAID, 2014: 24–25). In practice, both illegal drug crop cultivation and the legal economy can grow in parallel and it is not uncommon for investments in physical infrastructure such as irrigation, and agricultural inputs such as fertiliser to be used to increase the amount of land under opium poppy and its yields (Mansfield, 2015: 73–74; SIGAR, 2014;). Other interventions, some of them ostensibly designed to deliver development outcomes, such as the increased production of staples or high value horticulture, have marginalised the land-poor, leading to changes in land tenure arrangements, the migration of vulnerable groups and the concentration of drug production in more remote and insecure regions (Mansfield, 2016).

In this situation, development donors have often argued that it is the responsibility of law enforcement to respond to the diversion of development investments into illegal drugs production, or the relocation of cultivation, and that these kind of unintended consequences should not interfere with the business of delivering development assistance (USAID, 2014: 24–25). The high price of opium poppy and the alleged insurmountable profit of opium production is cited as justification for abrogating responsibility to eradication and interdiction teams even if ill-considered development interventions may have played a role in making matters worse (U.S. Embassy 2006: 2). The relatively high income of those farming opium poppies is also used to justify targeting development assistance in areas where drug crops are not grown; on the basis that those growing illegal drug crops are not the 'poorest of the poor,' and therefore not part of the mandate of the development donors (GTZ, 2006: 5–6).

It is the contention of this article that this fundamental misalignment between a development mandate focused on improving the welfare of the Afghan population and the challenges of addressing widespread illegal drug crop production is in large part a function of the way that opium poppy and the illegal economy is currently perceived and understood – not just by policy makers and practitioners but also by the literature on drugs and on Afghanistan that has often presented simplistic crop by crop comparisons rather than a deeper understanding of the multiple sources of income and welfare that rural households pursue – even those cultivating illicit drug crops (Caulkins, Kulick, & Kleiman, 2010: 9; Chandrasekaran, 2010: 100; Cawkwell 2015: 97; Coll, 2018: 266; Fairweather 2014: 77; Reuter 2010: 115).

It is my argument that much of the problem lies with the various statistics used to describe and quantify opium production in Afghanistan, many of them produced by UNODC and cited repeatedly in media coverage and the academic literature. These statistics, which largely focus on the profitability of the crop, shape how we have come to understand the scale and nature of the drugs problem, and thereby have informed the policy dialogue and operational responses. The high turnover of international staff in Kabul, both policy and technical, and a security situation that inhibits travel to rural areas has heightened the analytical void and in part led to interventions like the Helmand Food Zone that directly aimed at replacing opium poppy with wheat (Byrd, 2018; Mansfield, 2016; Partlow, 2016: 268; Pragma Corporation, 2016: 24). References to UNODC data on cultivation dominate the policy dialogue and would often be used to highlight the futility of the development effort and justify an emphasis on eradication. For example, at the height of its assistance to alternative development in Afghanistan USAID (2006: 2) stated that:

"USAID's assistance does not reach one fourth of what farmers are currently earning from poppy production. Similarly, one *jerib* (1/5 ha) of poppy will earn an estimated \$4000 (\$2000 after labour cost) whereas one *jerib* of wheat will only earn a farmer \$ 400. . . . [P]oppy will always be a more lucrative crop until farmers decide that the risk of growing poppy outweighs the financial benefit. . . . Alternative livelihoods cannot have a significant impact on poppy reduction as a standalone activity. Without sustained enforcement and eradication campaigns it is not likely that farmers will cease poppy cultivation and chose livelihoods in the licit economy."

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