Voices from the borderlands 2020

Illicit drugs, development and peacebuilding

drugs
&
(dis)order

About *Voices from the borderlands 2020*

Voices from the borderlands 2020 is the flagship publication of Drugs & (dis)order, a four-year research project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies. It aims to bring to light some of the experiences and perspectives we have been hearing in our fieldwork across seven drug- and conflict-affected borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. It is intended for a broad audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers working on issues related to drugs, development and peacebuilding. The testimonies in this report offer valuable insights into how illicit drugs – and drug policies – impact the dynamics of violence and peace, poverty and development, and insecurity and resilience.

Acknowledgements

Cover images from the top: 1. Transportation of transit goods to Pakistan by mules, Afghanistan, 2. Poppy farm in Chipwi Township, northern Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC, 3. Coca harvest, Puerto Asis, Colombia. Photo by Frances Thomson Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Back cover image: Poppy fields along the China border, northern Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.

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About Drugs & (dis)order

Drugs & (dis)order is a four-year research project, seeking to address the question, 'How can war economies be transformed into peace economies?', working in nine drug- and conflict-affected borderland regions of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

A borderland perspective

The project focuses on illicit drugs, because they are one of the main commodities fuelling war economies. We focus on borderland regions because they have become major hubs in transnational drug economies and often remain conflict hotspots, even after national peace agreements. We thus believe that borderlands are central to the challenge of transforming drug-fuelled war economies into sustainable peacetime economies.

Generating a new evidence base

There is growing recognition that drugs policies should be more pro-poor and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But the evidence base to support any such reform is patchy, politicised and contested. Drugs & (dis)order thus seeks to generate robust empirical data to help build a new evidence base.

Engaging with the political economy of policymaking

We do not assume that better evidence alone will transform policies. Our research also places policymaking under the spotlight to understand the agendas, interests and power struggles that shape the dynamics and outcomes of drugs, development and peacebuilding policymaking.

An interdisciplinary approach

Our research brings together insights from anthropology, sociology, geography, political economy, political science, history and public health to build a comprehensive picture of the ways that drug economies shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they are embedded. And we incorporate innovative research methods and analytical tools such as Geographic Information System (GIS) imagery to map physical changes in borderlands, complementing surveys, and ethnographic and life history interviews.

Building a global network of researchers

Drugs & (dis)order is led by SOAS University of London, with a team comprising 11 partner institutions from Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar and the UK. Our aim is to build a global network of researchers and institutions to continue this work beyond the lifetime of the project.

www.drugs-and-disorder.org

Introduction

Coca harvest, Puerto Asís, Colombia. Photo by Frances Thomson/ Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

There is a growing call for drugs, development and peacebuilding policies to be better integrated – to prioritise pro-poor development and align drug policy with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But much work remains to be done.[1]

Drugs issues continue to be viewed primarily through a criminality and security lens, and development and peacebuilding agencies have proved reluctant to engage with the 'taboo' of drugs.[2] And while those involved in illicit economies are among those most impacted by these policies, they remain poorly – if at all – represented in policy debates.

Voices from the borderlands 2020 seeks to bring to light some of these voices coming out of our fieldwork in seven borderland regions of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. Together, these three countries account for more than 80% of global illicit opium production and about 70% of global cocaine production.[3] All have experienced years of violent conflict and are in the midst of some form of peace process.

The testimonies in this report offer valuable insights into how illicit drugs – and drug policies – shape the dynamics of violence and peace, poverty and development, and insecurity and resilience. By listening to marginalised voices, we believe that drug policy and development specialists can become more attuned to the ways that illicit drug economies have an impact on poverty alleviation, access to services, economic development and strategies to fight inequality and human insecurity, and reduce violence and harm.

Voices from the borderlands 2020 does not seek to provide policy recommendations, nor, at this stage

of the project, to identify 'what works'. Rather, we aim to show how the voices and findings presented here reveal important insights and policy implications for those seeking to better understand and support peace processes, poverty alleviation and development in fragile and drugs-affected contexts.

The testimonies in this report offer valuable insights into how illicit drugs – and drug policies – shape the dynamics of violence and peace, poverty and development, and insecurity and resilience.

In the introductory chapter, we discuss what we perceive to be the current 'policy impasse' between counter-narcotics policies, peacebuilding efforts and development approaches. We then outline some departure points as a way of moving beyond this impasse.

The following chapters present three key messages that have emerged from our research with borderland communities in each of the three countries of study. Together, the voices captured in these key messages have enabled us to explore intersections between drugs, livelihoods and experiences of violence along the drugs value chain, ranging from drug production in Colombia, trade and transport in Afghanistan, to drug consumption in Myanmar.

In **Colombia**, testimonies from coca growers and pickers across three borderland regions have given us a clear message:

1. **Coca growers are peasant farmers, not wealthy narco criminals,** as is often presented in national and international narratives used to justify militarised counter-narcotic strategies.

2. **Many people in Colombia's borderlands are economically better-off because of coca, but this comes at a high cost:** coca farmers face tough trade-offs between the modest increase in earnings that enables them to invest in things like education, healthcare and land, and the increased violence and insecurity coca brings.

3. **Despite facing social, economic and political exclusion, Colombia's producing communities are organised and active citizens.** The people who give testimonies in this report speak proudly about constructing their own schools and roads, and organising protests or strikes.

In **Afghanistan**, testimonies show how:

1. **Illicit trading networks are central to households' income and survival in the borderlands.** At the same time, licit and illicit trading networks are intimately connected and traders and transporters often deal in multiple licit and illicit commodities.

2. **Legal and illegal trading networks and routes are extremely adaptive, responding to shifts in conflict dynamics and forms of regulation.** Tightening border regulation and management has impacts on markets and trading relationships, which adversely affects the economic and social wellbeing of borderland communities.

3. **Increased trade flows have fuelled the emergence of frontier boom towns, which have created both economic opportunities and insecurity and growing inequality in borderland communities.** This again shows how illicit economies generate complex costs and trade-offs for people, households and communities.

In **Myanmar**, testimonies reveal how:

1. **Rising levels of drug harm have been a defining feature of how borderland populations have experienced ceasefires and economic development in Kachin State and Shan State.** Illicit drug economies have become embedded in – rather than displaced by – emerging forms of borderland governance and the expansion of extractive industries and agricultural plantations.

2. **Opium production is essential to the livelihoods of many poor households, but changing patterns of drug use are creating new forms of vulnerability and poverty.** This emphasises the difficult trade-offs surrounding drug issues and the need for nuanced responses.

3. **Young people have become particularly vulnerable to drug-related harms in Myanmar's borderlands.** Together, these insights caution against assumptions that reducing levels of armed conflict, while increasing state presence and economic integration of marginalised regions, will necessarily reduce illicit drug economies in Myanmar's borderlands.

In the final chapter we look across all these cases to reflect on the wider policy implications for actors working in drug policy, development and peacebuilding.

Transportation of transit goods to Pakistan by mules, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

A closer look at the borderlands

Voices from the borderlands presents voices and perspectives from seven borderland regions in Colombia, Afghanistan and Myanmar. Together, these are three of the world's largest illicit drug producers; all have experienced years of violent conflict and are in the midst of some form of peace process.

In Afghanistan we look at **trafficking,** talking to opium traders and transporters.

Nangarhar

Nimroz

La Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta

Tumaco

Puerto Asís

In Colombia we look at **production,** talking to coca growers and pickers.

Afghanistan

Myanmar

Colombia

Kachin

Shan
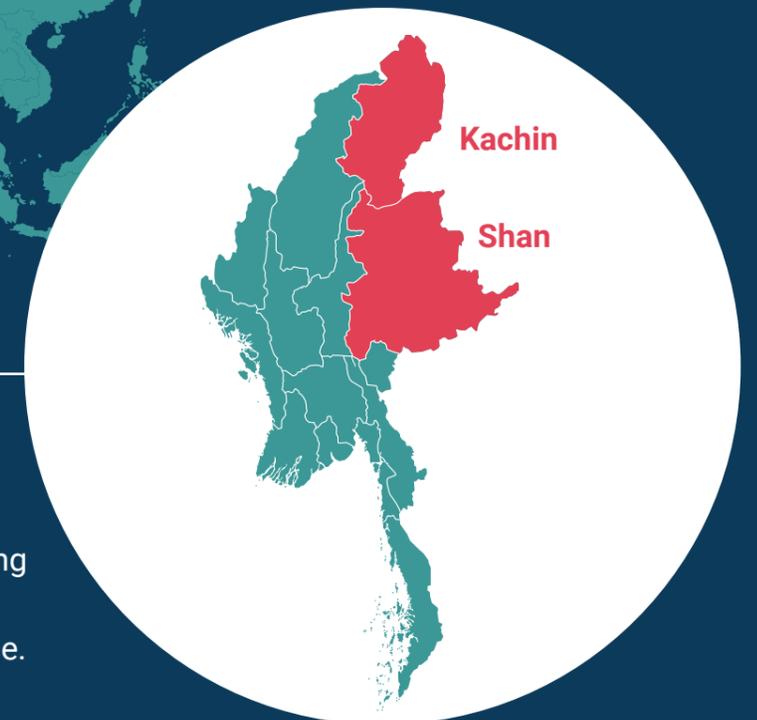
In Myanmar we look at drug **consumption,** talking to communities affected by rising levels of drug use.

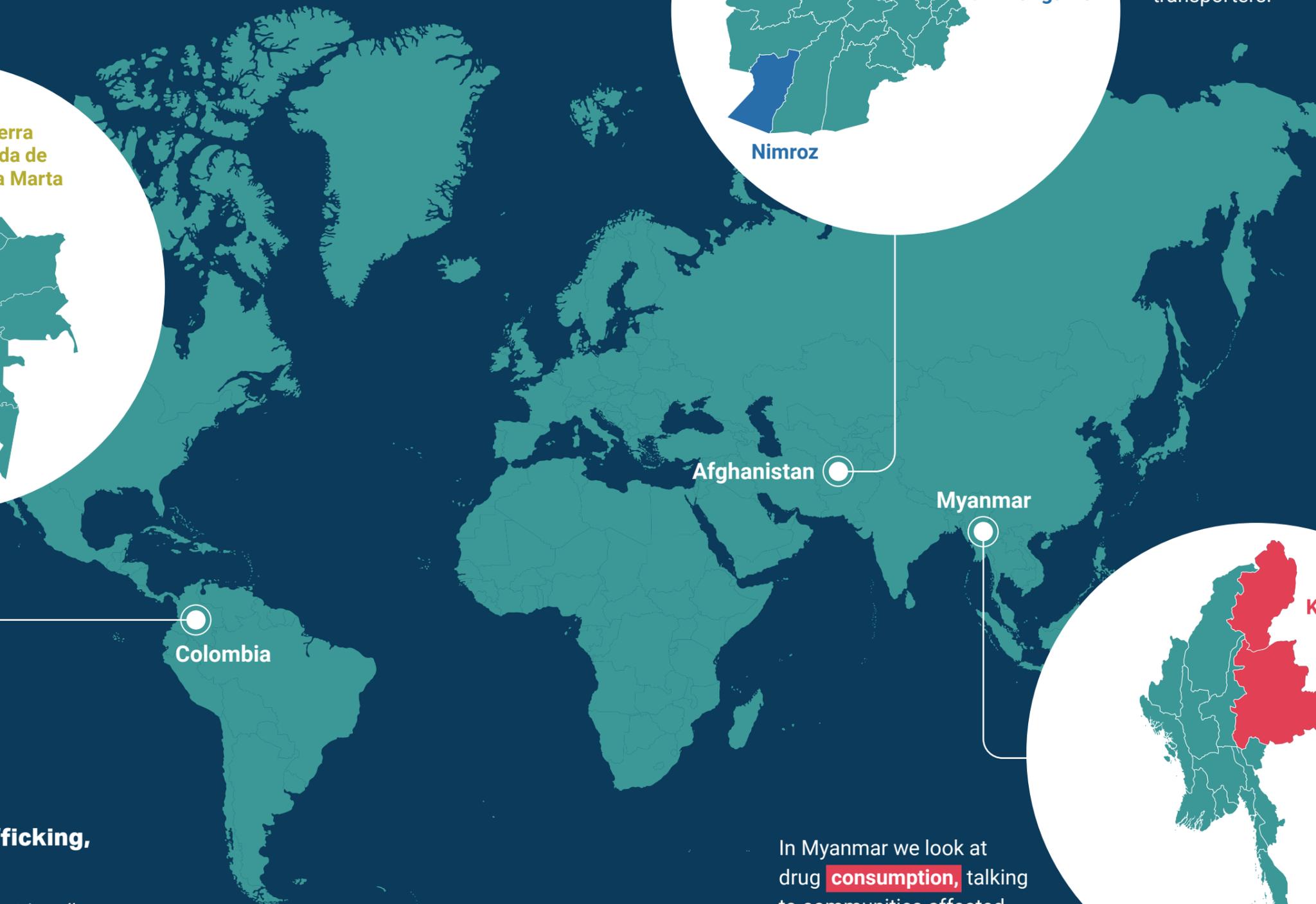## From production, to trafficking, to consumption

Our research across the three countries allows us to explore the intersections between drugs, livelihoods and violence along the whole drugs value chain.

A policy impasse

The global war on drugs has not achieved its stated goal of a 'drug-free world.' In fact, there has been an increase in worldwide production and consumption of illegal drugs.[4] Furthermore, the negative impacts of militarised counter-narcotics policies and programmes focusing on supply reduction in the global South, is widely documented.[5]

It is difficult to credibly argue that the war on drugs has been a success, although some note that the 'war' has goals which have very little to do with drugs – such as winning votes, stigmatising marginal communities, accessing resources or strengthening the power of dominant groups.[6] More than ever, it seems the war on drugs is in fact a war on people and, in particular, those who are on the margins.[7]

In light of these widely acknowledged shortcomings and social costs, there have been increasing calls for more human-centred drug policies aligned with broader efforts to promote wellbeing – such as the SDGs.

There is growing recognition of the need to frame drugs as a development and peacebuilding issue,[8] and as a phenomenon inherent to human life, rather than as a security or criminal issue linked to a powerful moralising discourse.

Yet there remain major barriers to more integrated, conflict-sensitive and development-oriented drug policies. First, the policy fields of drugs control and development are divided by different – if not opposing – goals, metrics of success and policy instruments.

Within the drugs control community, drugs continue to be treated primarily as a supply-side problem, pertaining to law enforcement agencies. At the same time, many development and peacebuilding agencies are reluctant to engage directly with the issue of drugs.[9]

More than ever, it seems the war on drugs is in fact a war on people and, in particular, those who are on the margins.

Competing mandates and funding streams perpetuate knowledge silos and fragmented policies. These divisions are amplified by the different organisational cultures and approaches of drug and development agencies. The former tend to work through state-to-state partnerships and top-down modalities and programmes. The latter, at least rhetorically, stress more bottom-up, participatory methodologies involving civil society and the private sector, as well as the state.

On the ground, in countries affected by illicit economies struggling to transition from war to peace, there is often a fundamental disconnect between agencies working on/against drugs, and those working on development and peacebuilding (or for that matter human security and welfare).

Whilst these labels and mandates carry significance for the agencies themselves, they make no sense for the local communities and public officials attempting to grapple with the deeply interconnected challenges of violence, illicit economies, chronic poverty and community welfare on the ground.

Second, there is major lacuna in understanding about how to reconcile drugs, peacebuilding and development policies in practice. There is very little systematic evidence about 'what works' – though there is a great deal of evidence about what does not work in relation to the war on drugs.

This is not only an issue of breaking down knowledge silos and disconnects between drug agencies and peacebuilding and development agencies. It is also about asking 'difficult questions' about the impacts of drugs and counter-narcotics policies on processes of development and war-to-peace transitions. At the same time, it means confronting the tough trade-offs that often exist between drug policy goals, poverty alleviation, and efforts to reduce levels of large-scale armed violence.

On the ground there is often a fundamental disconnect between agencies working on/against drugs, and those working on development and peacebuilding (or for that matter human security and welfare).

Indeed, the tensions and trade-offs between conventional counter-narcotics and the mounting push for conflict-sensitive and development-oriented approaches manifest themselves in several ways. For example, the criminalisation of farmers who grow coca or poppy clashes with the widely proclaimed alternative development principle of participatory engagement with those involved in illicit crop production.

The push for rapid results based on number of hectares eradicated undermines longer-term efforts to support alternative livelihoods. Counter-narcotics policies linked to counterinsurgency

objectives may undermine government legitimacy in borderland regions as well as destroy farmers' livelihoods.

Moreover, attacks on specific drug 'kingpins' can destabilise political settlements and make life less secure by generating new forms of contestation, or by splintering more or less coherent organisation of criminal activities into a chaotic competition around drug turfs.

Research from Afghanistan and Myanmar shows that informal political arrangements can be particularly important to stabilising violent conflict, and statebuilding in areas with long-standing drug economies and where the central government seeks to govern through – potentially uncooperative – regional elites.[10] Yet these arrangements may be at odds with drug control objectives.

These examples show that the relationship between counter-narcotics, pro-poor development, peace and statebuilding objectives is neither straightforward, nor necessarily complementary.[11]

The push for rapid results based on number of hectares eradicated, undermines longer-term efforts to support alternative livelihoods.

This report does not seek to offer systematic evidence for how to address these tensions. However, we do provide some signposting to steer policymakers and practitioners towards the kinds of issues and approaches that are important for addressing trade-offs and for developing a clearer understanding of the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of interventions.

The Road to Muse, Shan State, Myanmar. Photo by SHAN.

A way forward

In light of the aforementioned 'policy impasse,' new approaches are required to better understand and tackle illicit drug economies, especially in the contexts of armed conflict and peacebuilding. Here we outline what we believe to be a way forward, and give a set of departure points for the Drugs & (dis)order project that aim to address and help move beyond this policy impasse.

Engaging marginalised voices

Drugs are the subject of multiple and contested narratives. But certain narratives, mainly those of the powerful associated with national elites and international donors, tend to dominate and drown out other more 'marginal' perspectives and voices.

Participants in illicit drug economies (producers, transporters or consumers) across the global South tend to be poorly represented – or not represented at all – in global and national policy debates on drugs, development and peacebuilding. And yet, they are amongst those most affected by the global war on drugs.

Policies that purport to address drugs, support development and build peace can only do so if they are more attuned to how drugs shape livelihoods and power structures in borderland regions, and the uneven distribution of risks and opportunities for those that engage in illegal drug economies.

Hence, we believe there is a need to listen and learn from, in a much more serious, sustained and meaningful way, the voices and experiences of individuals and communities living in drugs-affected borderland regions.

A borderlands lens

Illicit drug economies typically flourish in borderlands. These transnational regions are zones where drugs and armed conflict commonly intertwine and where the legitimacy of central governments is often heavily contested. As a result, they are politically sensitive spaces frequently seen as a law and order problem by national elites.

We are critical of the tendency amongst policymakers to view borderlands as marginal, disconnected and ungoverned zones that need to be pacified, incorporated and developed. This state-centric perspective, which views borderlands as passive receptors of state policies and initiatives, misses the role that the margins play in constituting power at the centre. Indeed, far from being left behind or disconnected, we see borderlands as being places of ingenuity, innovation and transformation.

The Drugs & (dis)order project considers borderlands as a critical (and often overlooked) vantage point to better understand processes of state formation and development. Our approach explores how borderland regions can play an important role in shaping what happens in national and global centres.

We aim to show how the dynamics of borderland regions – including illicit drug production – are less a consequence of their lack of political and economic integration, and more a function of the way these integrative processes are imposed, resisted and brokered by multiple sets of actors, interests and relations operating across local, national, cross-border and global scales.

Challenging the exceptionality of drugs

There is a tendency amongst drug agencies to treat illicit drugs as though they are exceptional. This drugs 'fetishism' imbues drugs with inherent attributes that automatically engender crime, violent conflict and state fragility.

The fetishism surrounding drugs is also reflected in the tendency to analyse drug-producing regions only through the lens of drugs. And to narrowly fixate on drug metrics, overlooking the broader socio-economic and political dynamics of which the drugs trade is only one part.

In terms of research methods, this has often meant asking narrow and direct questions on drugs, rather than exploring local livelihoods and power structures, and how drugs interact with them.

In terms of analysis, it has meant that the reasons for people's engagement in the drug economy are often reduced to simplistic profit motives. Meanwhile, shifts in drug economies (such as changing levels of production) are frequently directly attributed to drug policy interventions, rather than to broader political and economic shifts.[12]

The fetishism surrounding drugs is also reflected in the tendency to analyse drug-producing regions only through the lens of drugs.

Rice plantation in Tangyan township, nothern Shan State, Myanmar. Photo by SHAN.

The Drugs & (dis)order project seeks to challenge such fetishism and the idea of a fixed relationship between drugs, armed conflict and state fragility. For example, we ask what makes illicit drug economies violent (or not)? And we question the assumption that eradicating drugs will necessarily end violence in the borderland regions we study.

Rethinking the relationship between drugs, development and violence

This fetishisation of drugs leads to drug economies being viewed as operating outside of conventional development processes. These are usually defined in terms of statebuilding, economic growth, poverty reduction, and reducing levels of armed violence.

The framing of drugs as residual to, or undermining of, development processes has encouraged a distinct set of policy narratives. These assume greater state presence and economic development – and that the subsequent integration of drug-producing regions into national political structures and global markets will automatically work to dismantle illegal drug economies and enable transition to peace.

The Drugs & (dis)order project challenges these assumptions. We draw upon an emerging body of research that reveals how drug production has at times been linked to periods of state expansion, as well as state breakdown; to efforts to stabilise armed conflict, as well as financing war economies; and

has contributed to forms of welfare provision and economic growth, as well as being a function of economic marginalisation. [13]

Through integrating research on drugs, development and war-to-peace transitions, we aim to better understand how drug economies shape – and are shaped by – wider processes of political and economic change, assuming that drugs will be displaced by these processes.

Recognising dilemmas and trade-offs

New approaches must begin by recognising that policymakers and individuals in drug-affected environments face tough trade-offs.

Households face trade-offs when deciding whether to engage in illicit economies. As illustrated in this report, coca-producing communities in Colombia have made significant socio-economic advances, but at the cost of enduring endemic violence. In Myanmar, opium cultivation has long been an essential component in the livelihoods of some of the country's poorest communities. Yet, rising levels of harmful drug use are now generating new challenges for families and communities.

Governments too confront complex dilemmas when choosing between what are often contradictory policy goals in the areas of counter-narcotics, pro-poor development, peacebuilding and statebuilding.

For example, a government may satisfy demands for tangible short-term counter-narcotics 'achievements', but in so doing its actions may disrupt local economies, destabilise local power structures or renew competition between armed organisations involved in the drug trade.

Conversely, informal arrangements surrounding the drug trade (such as protection, impunity or access to the legal economy) may be an important foundation for ceasefires and political settlements between governments and opposition groups. This in turn allows for a reduction in violent conflict and enables the state to establish a stronger presence in contested areas.

Hence, the narrative of 'win-win' solutions is frequently disingenuous, dishonest and even counter-productive. Serious research and honest policy dialogues have to start with recognition of these dilemmas and trade-offs, as well as an understanding of the context that determines or influences them and their distributional consequences.

About *Voices from the borderlands 2020*

Voices from the borderlands 2020 is one of several Drugs & (dis)order outputs that aim to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of people involved in illicit drugs in seven borderland regions of Colombia, Afghanistan and Myanmar.

It is intended for a broad audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers working on issues related to drugs, development and peacebuilding.

Our research has revealed a cacophony of often discordant voices that vary across a range of markers of identity, activities, location, and so forth.

Of course, the 'voices' from the borderlands are neither homogenous nor harmonious. Rather, our research has revealed a cacophony of often discordant voices that vary across a range of markers of identity (age, ethnicity, gender, religion etc.); activities (licit and illicit, drug producers, consumers, traffickers, elite or subaltern); location (provincial capital, border districts, poor hinterlands, trafficking hubs), and so forth.

Clearly this leads to questions about which voices to prioritise. Producing this publication has involved the curation of a vast and complex range of material. More broadly, the 'production' of 'evidence' is an imperfect and politicised process – from decisions about what 'data' to collect, to how it is analysed, written about and shared.

We believe it is important to be transparent and open about the nature of this process. We do not pretend to be totally impartial, nor do we claim to represent all voices. Our research does not capture the perspectives and experiences of people from all ethnicities, for example. We have struggled, particularly in Afghanistan, to ensure equal access to women's and men's voices.

Nevertheless, we have made a conscious effort to highlight the narratives of 'ordinary' people such as coca farmers and pickers, cross-border transporters and traders, people who use drugs and their family members – rather than political and economic elites.

In so doing, we aim to share locally grounded insights into the kinds of 'peace' and 'development' that are being produced or resisted at the margins of the state in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, and the ways illicit drug economies become entangled with people's everyday lives.

Our research teams in each country selected key messages using three main criteria. First, the key messages are drawn directly from the Drugs & (dis)order research. This involved hundreds of interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019.

We aim to share locally grounded insights into the kinds of 'peace' and 'development' that are being produced or resisted at the margins.

Second, they represent recurring issues emphasised by people from the borderland research sites. Third, these recurring issues offer, in our view, some surprising, counter-intuitive and/or policy-relevant content. Each country section contains further details about the key message selection process and the research on which the key messages are based.

We hope that this publication provides an accurate, honest and qualitatively different representation of people's lives of struggle, adversity and, occasionally, triumph in the borderlands.

Colombia

" The coca plant has been the economy [where I live] for a long time. There is no other plant that could replace it.**"**

Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, October 2018

Many farms and villages can only be accessed by boat. Puerto Asis, Colombia. Photo by Frances Thomson/Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

About the borderlands

Colombia is a regionally, environmentally and ethnically diverse country with a population of about 48 million people.[14] It is ranked 79 out of 189 countries on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Index (HDI),[15] and is classified by the World Bank as belonging to the 'upper middle income' group.[16] However, Colombia is also one of the most unequal countries in the world.[17] Ostentatious wealth in some of the country's main cities contrasts sharply, for example, with the living conditions of many rural families who lack access to electricity, sanitation and running water.

Colombia has endured numerous periods of armed conflict. The most recent is often said to have begun in the 1960s, when various armed insurgent groups were formed. These include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). Nevertheless, the origins of these groups can be traced back even further to an era of civil war during the 1940s and 1950 roughly (it is debated when exactly it started and ended) known as *La Violencia* and the state-led 'anti-communist' military offensive that ensued.

Ostentatious wealth in some of the country's main cities contrasts sharply with the living conditions of many rural families who lack access to electricity, sanitation and running water.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Colombian intermediaries started to build an illicit drug economy centred on cocaine exports. Around the same time, anti-subversive paramilitaries were proliferating across the country. Multiple factors led prominent narco-traffickers to join the war against the guerrillas, while many paramilitary groups, formed independently of the established 'narcos', also got involved in the drug trade.

Coca cultivation expanded across Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, especially (but not only) in southern 'colonisation zones', where people had settled after being pushed out of other areas by violence and/or land concentration. Coca cultivation offered settlers a source of income in areas where there was little infrastructure or state support for farmers, and transport costs to markets were prohibitively high.

At the same time, it also helped sustain the armed conflict in which civilians, especially in coca-growing regions, have been the primary victims. In addition to financing illegal armed groups, the coca economy provoked and provided a pretext for repressive militarised responses, including aerial fumigations, with devastating consequences for local inhabitants.

The 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC was the beginning of a new chapter in the country's history. What this will entail remains uncertain. The picture is complex: hundreds of social leaders and community activists have been killed since the signing of the agreement;

the illicit crop substitution programme is faltering, and the ELN, paramilitary successor groups and criminal gangs involved in the illicit drugs trade have imposed themselves in many territories vacated by the FARC.

Meanwhile, FARC dissidents (those not participating in the peace process) are undergoing a reorganisation. Whatever the uncertainties, the illicit drug economy and the policies aimed at addressing it, will be key in shaping this new phase.

Our Drugs & (dis)order team is working in various borderlands in Colombia, affected by the armed conflict and illicit drug economies. Nevertheless, for this year's *Voices from the borderlands 2020* publication, we focus on three municipalities: Puerto Asís, Santa Marta and Tumaco, where we concentrated our efforts during the first phases of our research.

Puerto Asís, Putumayo

Puerto Asís is a municipality in Colombia's southern frontier department (akin to a province or state) of Putumayo. It borders with six of Putumayo's 12 other municipalities, and with Ecuador in the south. The latter border is partially defined by the Putumayo River – a tributary of the Amazon and the fluvial highway of the region. This and other rivers are central to daily life in rural areas of Puerto Asís, which are comprised of thousands of family farms interspersed with tropical rainforest, many of them inaccessible by road.

Puerto Asís is home to an estimated 63,067 people, circa 56% of whom live in the municipal capital of the same name. Nearly 12% of the population self-identify as indigenous, and another 7% as Afro-Colombian, black or mulatto.[18] There are at least six *resguardos* in the municipality, as well as a Peasant Reserve Zone. The former are indigenous territories, governed by indigenous *cabildos* under special jurisdiction, protected by collective and inalienable property titles. The latter are specially designated areas that include private land titles but are subject to specific rules and regulations, intended to promote and support the peasant economy.

For decades, coca cultivation has offered peasant farmers a way into the market (in some areas, it is the only viable commercial crop).

The mestizo population of the lower Putumayo sub-region, in which Puerto Asís is situated, was only negligible until the mid-20th century. A number of factors stimulated accelerated settlement during this period. This included rural property concentration in

nearby departments which forced many families to migrate in search of land. The displacement of masses of people during the aforementioned period of civil war known as *La Violencia*; and the wage-labour and commercial opportunities associated with region's first oil boom were other factors.[19]

The oil sector accounts for 63% of Putumayo's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).[20] Given that Puerto Asís is one of the main oil-producing municipalities in the department of Putumayo, oil is likely to account for a significant proportion of the municipal GDP also.

But the coca/cocaine industry is equally important. For example, some 4,506 families from the municipality signed up to participate in the National Illicit Crop Substitution Programme (PNIS), born of the recent peace accords. For decades, coca cultivation has offered peasant farmers a way into the market (in some areas, it is the only viable commercial crop).

It has generated comparatively well-paid rural employment and, as a result of the incomes it has created, stimulated demand for goods and services, thus bolstering local commerce. Nevertheless, these benefits have come at a huge cost.

The expansion of coca cultivations across lower Putumayo in the 1980s was associated with the first wave of narco-paramilitary violence in the region. The Medellín Cartel, under the leadership of Rodríguez Gacha, began to collaborate with state forces to combat insurgent groups and assassinate civilians accused of supporting them.

Civilian action and battles with the guerrillas eventually led to the expulsion of these early narco-paramilitary groups. This, combined with the demobilisation of the EPL in 1991, allowed the FARC to consolidate power in lower Putumayo, including over the coca economy.[21] However, successor groups quickly emerged to take its place.

Military/paramilitary offensives in the late-1990s and early- to mid-2000s destabilised the FARC's 'hegemony' in the region. The Putumayo South Block of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) officially demobilised in March 2006. The AUC was an umbrella organisation formed in 1997 that united disparate paramilitary groups.

Meanwhile, until the recent disarmament of the FARC-EP, state forces continued to battle with the FARC.[22] The configuration of the armed conflict and coca economy in Puerto Asís has thus been changing since the 2016 peace accords (as has already been noted for the whole country); and the nature of this new scenario also remains unclear.

Playa 'Bocagrande' in Tumaco, Colombia. Photo by Diana Machuca/Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Tumaco, Nariño

Tumaco is located in the department of Nariño, to the southwest of Colombia. The municipality, and its capital of the same name, is home to Colombia's second most important port on the Pacific coast. It borders with Ecuador to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the west/northwest, and other municipalities of Nariño to the north and east.

As of 2019, an estimated 217,079 people resided in the municipality, just over half (est. 57%) in urban areas. The majority of Tumaco's population is afro-descendent (80% of residents self-identify as black, mulatto or Afro-Colombian) and 55% of the municipal land area belongs to various 'black community collective territories'.

These territories are governed by Community Councils (there are 16 in Tumaco), protected by special collective property titles, and subject to distinct rules and regulations under Colombian law. Another 4.6% of the population self-identify as indigenous and there are also 15 *resguardos* (defined above) in the municipality.[23]

Jesuit missionaries established in the area now known as Tumaco in the early to mid-1600s, with the aim of evangelising and controlling the local indigenous population. During the colonial era, Tumaco's coastline served as a key point of exit for the gold extracted from the mines of neighbouring Barbacoas, and a key point of arrival for many of the enslaved people brought from Africa to work these mines. The small colonial

port town grew significantly between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries, becoming one of the main cities on Colombia's Pacific coast.[24]

By 2016, Tumaco had more hectares of coca than any other municipality in the country.

Migration to the area was driven by a number of factors. These included the abolition of slavery in 1851 (many freed families relocated to the coastal zone); the emergence of two key export-oriented economies in the mid- to late-1800s (these were namely latex rubber extraction, tapped from both the region's natural forests and emerging plantations, and the gathering of wild tagua nuts for the production of 'vegetable ivory' buttons and other products); the construction of a railway line connecting Tumaco to Pasto in the late 1920s; and finally, the arrival of numerous multinational timber export businesses and the associated logging boom between the 1940s and 1970s.[25]

Diverse armed actors (ELN, FARC, groups linked to the Cali Cartel) had moved in and out of Tumaco since the 1970s and 1980s. But it was not until the late-1990s that the municipality became a focal point of armed conflict.

Around this time, the FARC established itself more permanently in the area, apparently with the intention of expanding the coca economy under its control. AUC

paramilitary groups, specifically the newly created 'Liberators of the South' Front, also took a hold in the area at the end of the 1990s, with the aim of combatting guerrillas and their alleged supporters, as well as controlling transit zones and the transport rung of the cocaine trade, in particular.[26]

In the years that followed, coca cultivation increased across the municipality. Military (counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics) operations in the early- and mid-2000s contributed to the expansion of coca cultivation (and FARC presence) in the region. This affected the nearby departments of Putumayo, Meta and Caquetá. Coca crops, cultivators/pickers, and associated armed activity are said to have been 'displaced' from other parts of the country to Tumaco and Nariño, more broadly.[27]

By 2016, Tumaco had more hectares of coca than any other municipality in the country. Some 16,658 families from the municipality signed up to participate in the aforementioned PNIS in the context of the ongoing peace process. However, as in Puerto Asís, the future of Tumaco – particularly in terms of the coca economy and dynamics of armed conflict in the region – is still uncertain.

Santa Marta, Magdalena

The city of Santa Marta is located on the shores of the Caribbean Sea, in northern Colombia. It is the oldest city in the country (founded in 1525) and the capital of the department of Magdalena. The broader municipality, of which the city is a part, is defined by the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, a pyramidal mountain system. This covers most of the municipal territory and extends into the neighboring departments of La Guajira and Cesar.

As of 2019, the municipality of Santa Marta had an estimated 515,717 inhabitants, of whom 7.47% self-identify as Afro-Colombian, black or mulatto, and 0.98% self-identify as indigenous. The vast majority of Santa Marta's population is urban; only 3.2% reside in rural zones, but the latter still account for more than 90% of the municipal land area.[28]

Santa Marta has important natural resources and a vast cultural, archaeological and historical heritage; one of the area's tourist slogans boasts 'the magic of having everything'. Indeed, tourism is central to the municipality's economy, alongside commerce

'Casa de cafetero'. Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. Photo by Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

and other activities surrounding the city's port and, to a lesser extent, fishing and agriculture. The municipality as a whole is wealthier and has a more robust economy than Puerto Asís and Tumaco; nevertheless, there is a large disparity between the urban and rural areas.

In the mid-1970s, the Sierra became an epicentre for marijuana production. The marijuana boom or *bonanza marimbera* had significant impacts on the agrarian, economic and political structures in the region.

Our research mostly focuses on the rural areas of the Sierra Nevada, where multiple jurisdictions overlap. These include various municipalities of the three departments with territory in this mountain range, three regional environmental agencies, two natural parks, a forest reserve and nine indigenous *resguardos* (defined above).

A significant number of peasants settled in the Sierra Nevada at the end of the 19th century. This was in the context of a coffee boom centred in the region of Santa Marta and driven mostly by foreign businessmen who established large estates. In the mid-20th century, migration to the Sierra Nevada intensified. Many fled to the region to escape the aforementioned civil war (*La Violencia*) that devastated the Andean interior of the country. Further waves of migrants arrived following the opening in 1971 of the Troncal del Caribe – the most important road of the Caribbean region.

Around this time, in the mid-1970s, the Sierra became an epicentre for marijuana production. The marijuana boom or *bonanza marimbera* had significant impacts on the agrarian, economic and political structures in the region. The boom fizzled out in the following decade, amidst repressive state-led counter-narcotics campaigns and extremely aggressive aerial fumigation. Nonetheless, by then the northern and coastal slopes of the Sierra (where Santa Marta is located) had been consolidated both as a place of drug trafficking and coca production.

Different forms of organised violence – and in particular, paramilitary legacies – persist, and the region remains one of the country's major drug trafficking routes.

Although paramilitary groups and diverse guerrillas had been competing in the 1980s, in the 1990s, local paramilitary groups consolidated and expanded their territorial control. The armed conflict intensified in the early-2000s with the arrival of the aforementioned AUC – the national paramilitary federation. After defeating and absorbing the local paramilitaries, the AUC gained significant influence over political and economic activities (both legal and illegal) in the Sierra Nevada and surrounding areas.

When we asked interviewees about the impacts of the recent peace process, they consistently said that armed conflict ended in the region more than ten years ago. The paramilitaries that operated in Santa Marta, and the Sierra more broadly, demobilised alongside other AUC forces in 2006.

By this time, the government had begun implementing its alternative development policy in the area. This included the Familias Guardabosques or Forest Ranger Families Program, initiated in 2004, which reached circa 1,600 families in Santa Marta.

Henceforth, both coca cultivation and levels of violence in the region declined. However, different forms of organised violence – and in particular, paramilitary legacies – persist, and the region remains one of the country's major drug trafficking routes.

A note on methodology

Our key messages are drawn from three main sources. First, we have throughout this research project been in permanent dialogue with leaders of organisations that unite farmers from across the country cultivating crops used in illicit drugs. During these conversations, we identified a number of recurring themes reflected in the views of these leaders about the world of coca production, in particular.

Second, the key messages are based on over 150 semi-structured and unstructured interviews with coca farmers and pickers from the three different borderlands in Colombia (Puerto Asís, Tumaco and Santa Marta). These were conducted by our research team during various fieldwork trips made between 2018 and 2019.

Third and finally, the messages reflect opinions and experiences expressed in a survey (applied June 2019) of peasants who are registered in the national illicit crop substitution programme in two of the country's most important coca-producing municipalities: Tumaco and Puerto Asís.

Key messages

1. Many people in Colombia's borderlands are economically better-off because of coca but this comes at a high cost

> The coca plant has been the economy [where I live] for a long time. There is no other plant that could replace it. Even when prices are low, 200 grams [of coca base or paste] means 300,000 pesos. It provides a livelihood. To make that amount with licit produce is very difficult. Why is it difficult? In my case, I would have to move plantain or yucca from my farm by horse and by the time I arrive at the roadside, with sunshine like today, they would be black. And then to get them from there to the plaza… And who would buy them? Nobody. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, October 2018)*

Coca production offers farmers a reliable income, creates jobs and boosts local economy

Coca cultivation offers farmers guaranteed market access. This is in contexts of high transport costs, unreliable demand for legal produce and significant price fluctuations. It enables them to earn regular incomes that are slightly higher than those in other agrarian economies. Thus, many peasants in Colombia's borderlands perceive(d) coca production as the only economic option (see Graph 1).

Coca also generates substantial and comparatively well-paid wage employment opportunities, especially but not only during harvest periods. These coca incomes in turn bolster other sectors by increasing local demand for goods and services. As a result, the coca economy has contributed to significant socio-economic advances.

Graph 1 – Response to survey question: Was the cultivation of illicit crops the only economic option for your family?

- 33% Not given
- 50% Yes
- 17% No

Yes
No
Not given
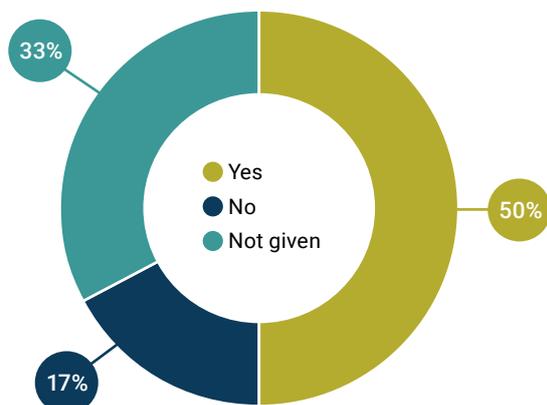
Coca farmers invest their incomes in things like education, healthcare and land

Farmers and pickers have used their coca incomes to improve their homes, pay for their children's education and family members' medical treatment, and acquire land and other assets, such as motorbikes and solar panels. Many would simply not have been able to access these services or assets were it not for the coca economy. In some communities, people also pooled their coca incomes to pay for the construction of schools, footpaths and roads, and even for teachers' salaries.

> During the coca [boom], the first thing I did with the first payment was to put up a roof – over half the house. Afterwards, we started to buy bricks and also, we had to buy inputs for the farm because that [crop] doesn't grow alone. So, like that, I put up the roof on my house – half of it; afterwards I got the bricks, and then the things for the farm, and then the boys were asking to buy a television. *(Female former coca farmer, Tumaco, February 2019)*

> After I had my first child, I remember we had coca and it was profitable. With just one harvest there was enough money to pay for electricity and a television. The television was the first thing one would buy, to watch the soap opera 'Marimar'; then after that a little motorboat to move up and down the river. *(Female former coca farmer, Tumaco, May 2018)*

> With money from coca, one has economy: you can buy a horse, improve your house – invest in it, like the roofing and wire fencing. […] Everything we have done [in this village] was with money from coca, between all of us, our sweat and coca money. When we arrived, we paid the schoolteacher for around two years [with our money earned with coca cultivation]. She was a neighbour who said she had studied. Later, we got a public teacher [i.e. designated and paid for by the state]. *(Male former coca grower and picker, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

> In my case, I am not ungrateful with coca. I have been in difficult situations. I have a handicapped brother, my mother and my little siblings [to look after]. When mum got sick, I had the money to buy a house, [but] I let the doctors take a lot of money

off me. [… Interviewer: and the money you paid them came from cultivating coca?] Yes. Why would one deny it? *(Female former coca farmer, Puerto Asís, October 2018)*

 [Because of the income from coca] we could watch television, buy gasoline, go into town, buy clothes. Our children had new clothes to wear whenever possible – every harvest, they got a new pair of shoes, a new pair of everything. Now [after leaving the coca economy], if you look at my children, they have repaired, patched-up shoes. Because the salary they pay my husband isn't enough to buy shoes – if anything, maybe in December [with the Christmas bonus]. [… with the money from coca] we also bought that fridge there second-hand, the washing machine, the stove. *(Female former coca grower and picker, Puerto Asís, September 2018)*

Women who work in the coca economy earn more than in other sectors

These socio-economic advances have benefitted both men and women. Women who participate in the coca economy earn considerably more than those who do not and roughly the same amount as their male counterparts – a relative equality not found in many other rural economies.

Here, the men don't look down on the women as less, nor do us women feel we are less than the men. We [coca] pickers are equal. *(Female coca picker, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

[During the coca boom] I would sell lots of beer, aguardiente [a type of alcohol made from sugar cane], and those chickens for fattening – I would sell those. There was always money. […] I can say that if the economy was still like that now, I would never want to have a husband because I knew that every single weekend I would sell [a lot] and I would have money in my pocket for necessities, for food. *(Female leader of a Community Council, Tumaco, February 2019)*

The risk of violence

Tragically, coca growers and pickers (and the wider regions where they work) have paid dearly for these modest socio-economic advances. Because coca production is illicit, producers are vulnerable to assaults by illegal armed groups and by the state itself and have little or no access to institutional recourse. Graph 2 shows how the vast majority of survey respondents associate coca production in their regions with increases in violence. Nevertheless, nearly half of people surveyed evaluate their experience of participating in the coca economy as having both positive and negative sides (see Graph 3).

Graph 2 – Response to survey question: Has coca production in the region increased violence, reduced violence or not had any effect on levels of violence?

- Increased
- No effect
- Decreased

9%
14%
77%
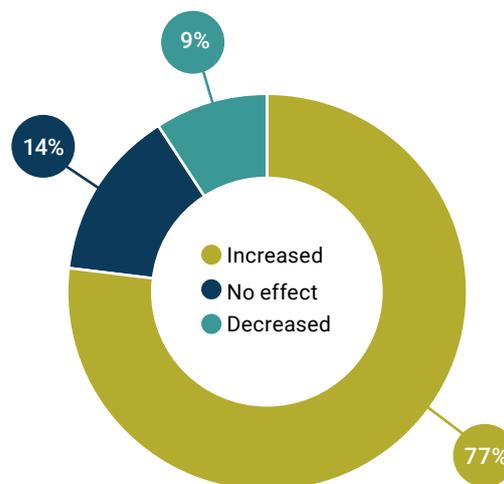
It was in 1998 that coca started to arrive, when they [the government] removed the coca growers from Caquetá, they all came directly here […] But it was also a strategy of the FARC, they brought some people and they started to plant coca. We had in that territory of Zone 3, more or less 9,000 hectares to leave as reserve, as forest. And so, the colonisation of our territory, controlled by the FARC, began…

The FARC told our peasants, people from the Community Council: 'Plant or leave because you are narks'. […] Those plots [of land] were collective. That's when the disaster began and not just in our Community Council, it extended across the municipality of Tumaco. *(Male leader of a Community Council, Tumaco, September 2019)*

The news of deaths, [at the hands of those] groups, we used to see that on television. When narco-trafficking coca started to arrive here in Tumaco, then we started to see this personally, this death, that disappearance – all of that which was once so far away. *(Leader of a Community Council, Tumaco, February 2019)*

Working with coca brings problems. […] There's been a lot of death here because of the coca cultivations. […] There are young lads who start to work for the narco-traffickers, and they kill them over any old slip-up. *(Female coca farmer, Puerto Asís, June 2019)*

The state has abandoned us and we survive with the coca bush because we have to. Many of us have become more aware, with so many deaths [of the problems coca brings …] If there were [other] opportunities, no one would work with coca because it's enslaving. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*
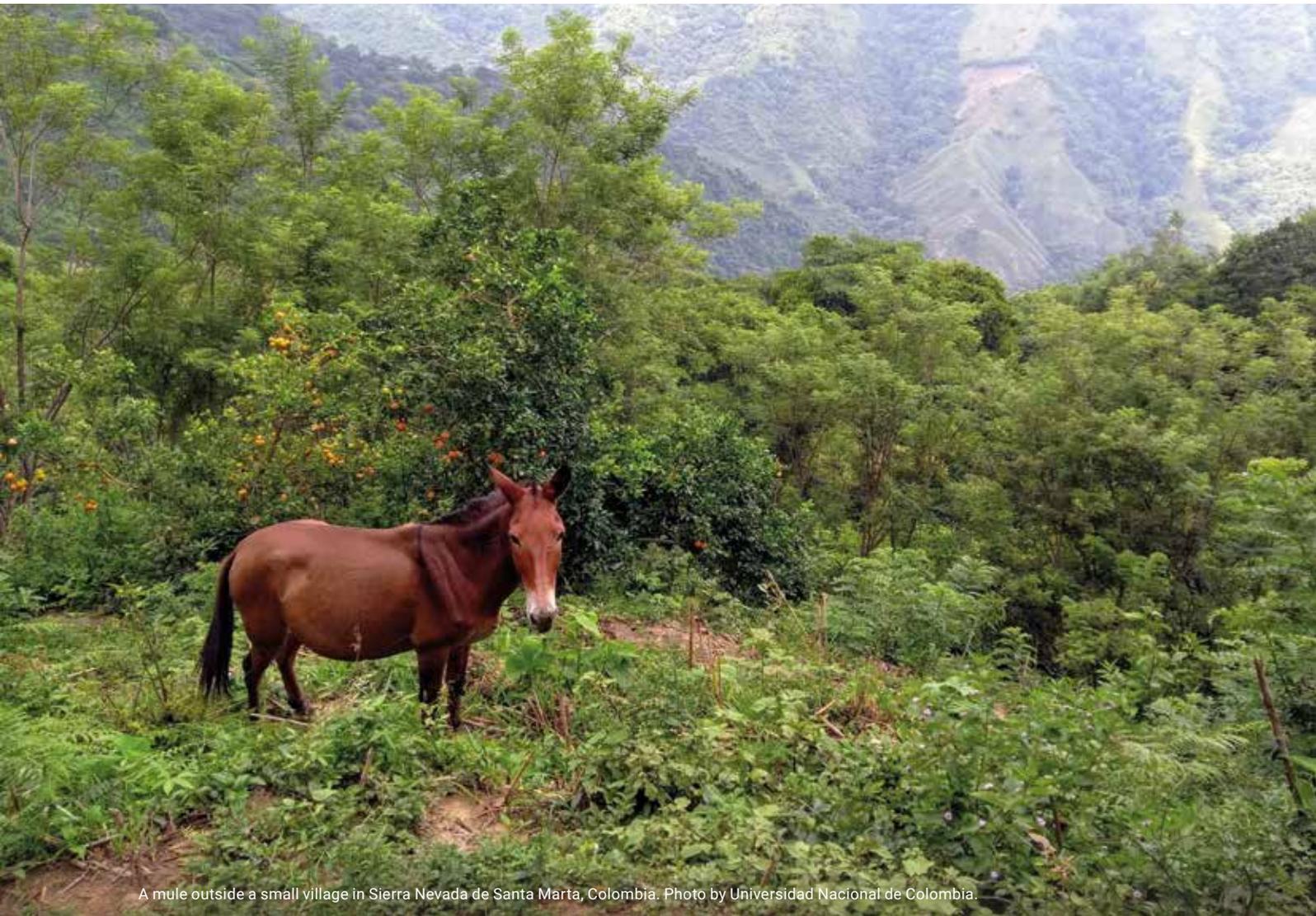
A mule outside a small village in Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. Photo by Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Graph 3 – Response to survey question: Was your experience with coca mainly negative, positive or both negative and positive in equal measure?

19%

46%

35%

- Mostly positive
- Mostly negative
- Negative and positive alike
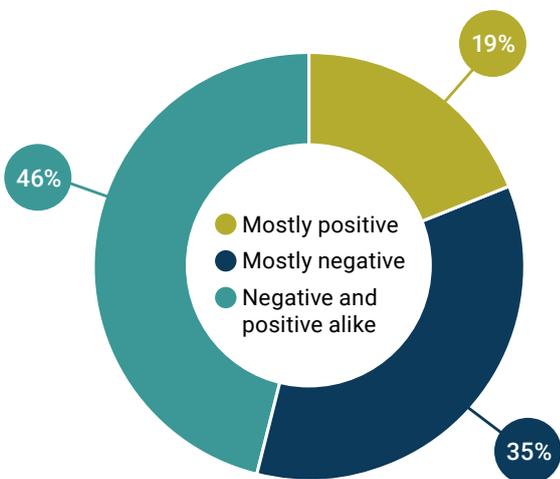
[During the coca boom] [...] that was another thing, because money kept coming in and when, well there were so many hectares, so when you finished picking in one [farm] you would return to another that was ready for picking again. So, there was never a moment that the picking stopped and that brought a lot of money, that stimulated the economy in the area a lot. But it was also too much violence and [brought a] lack of respect. *(Female former coca farmer and picker, Santa Marta, March 2019)*

The need for viable alternatives that safeguard socio-economic advances

Living daily life in a context of illegality is not easy and, for that reason, most coca producers would prefer to work in viable legal economies. The biggest challenge, then, is to design and implement policies that enable peasants to work in sustainable and licit agricultural economies, which safeguard the socio-economic advances brought by coca production but without all the associated risks and costs.

2. Colombia's coca growers are peasant farmers and do not lead the lives of narco criminals

A peasant coca farmer, a normal farm owner, just like with any other crop, gets up, [makes sure] everyone has breakfast, organises the pickers: 'From this side to this plant, you pick; from this plant to over there, you …', and so on and so forth. The pickers collect [the leaves], harvest. The leaves are weighed – the pickers work until four or five [o'clock] in the afternoon – because the payment is by kilo. *(Female former coca farmer, Santa Marta, March 2019)*

Coca growers in Colombia are predominantly peasant farmers who depend on working the land for their livelihoods. Indeed, the vast majority of participants in the PNIS self-identify as *campesinos* (see Graph 4).

Coca growing is not a particularly fast and easy way to make money

The coca production process involves preparing the land, planting, weeding, fertilising and harvesting with family and hired labour – just like with any other crop. In this sense, coca production is not an especially fast and easy way of making money (as is sometimes suggested) and families who cultivate coca are no different from other peasant families. The major difference between the cultivation of coca and other crops is that the former offers higher earnings than the latter.

I established a [coca] farm in alliance with a family member and that's how I looked after my partner before the birth [of our child]. With an uncle, we went into sharecropping together; he had the land and we planted half each. But I was very attached to [coca] picking. It was hard for me to establish a coca farm because, well, it is hard work. You have to plant the coca, remove all the weeds around the bush by hand – but then you see the plant all leafy and lush, well looked-after, properly fumigated, and you feel proud. *(Male coca farmer and picker, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

Many coca farmers also cultivate other crops

Furthermore, many coca growers also cultivate other crops and keep animals (such as pigs, chickens and cows), specifically for household consumption and sometimes for sale on local markets, when/where possible. Indeed, farmers often invest their coca incomes in other agricultural activities. This is part of a diversification strategy that helps them to reduce the risks associated with monocropping.

Those who cultivated coca also had plantain, yucca, ñame – all those things for subsistence. *(Female former coca grower, Santa Marta, March 2019)*

Graph 4 – Response to survey question: Do you consider yourself a peasant (*campesino*)?

409	3
Yes	No
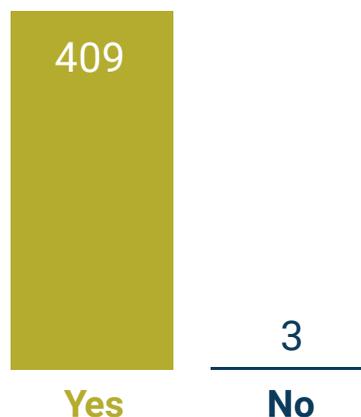
[My farm] is about five hectares. [I have cacao], peach palm, coca, a bit of everything, chiro, plantain – everything the land can produce. Fruit trees. All these things. [Interviewer: how much of your land is planted in coca?] Very little. [Interviewer: half a hectare?] Or even less. Just with that, we have enough to maintain the other plants. *(Female coca grower, Tumaco, April 2019)*

[In addition to coca] we also have plantain, yucca, maize, chickens, pigs – just for our subsistence though, not for commerce. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, May 2018)*

The coca economy allows for modest social advancements

While coca growers typically earn more than other peasant farmers that do not cultivate coca, their consumption patterns are essentially similar to those of other rural middle-class families. Contrary to popular images of ostentatious 'narcos', coca farmers spend most of their earnings on their children's education, land, cars/motorbikes and homes (see Graph 5).

The coca economy allows peasant families to access services and acquire assets that might otherwise be out of reach but it in no way makes them rich. The wealth generated by the cocaine industry is accumulated by traffickers, not coca farmers.

I haven't seen people making these [huge] profits [from coca] because they have stuck with, as they say, the dynamic of planting just a little, just the essential. […] There wasn't this mentality of becoming rich, simply of living comfortably. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, May 2018)*

There are a lot of people [who grow coca] here, but I haven't met anyone who's got money, who's got wealth. It's the traders who get rich, not those who cultivate. With coca, you plant a few bushes, fertilise twice or three times, and then harvest – and you end up with 200 or 300 grams, which is enough to buy some rice. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, October 2018)*

Coca provides enough just for food and education […] It's not like the government says, that we get rich with coca. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

Photo below: A typical rural farmhouse in Putumayo, Puerto Asis, Colombia. Photo by Frances Thomson/ Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Graph 5 – Response to survey question: What did you spend the income you earned from coca production on?

| Children's education (95) | Living costs (e.g. food, bills, transport) (78) | Land purchase (75) | None (44) | | | | | |

Appliances (e.g. fridge, washing machine, television) (44)

Other (15)

Vehicle (14)

Savings (12)

Community infrastructure (e.g. paths, roads, school) (8)

The Colombian state treats coca peasant farmers as criminals

Nevertheless, despite the fact that coca growers are simply peasant family farmers, the Colombian state treats them like criminals. Counter-narcotics policy in Colombia is still tied to war on drugs narratives. These are used to justify a war on the peasantry that cultivate coca.

Over the decades, this war has involved aerial spraying of coca crops with a chemical cocktail (including but not limited to glyphosate) and militarised manual forced eradication. This has had devastating consequences for the health (in the case of the former) and livelihoods of coca-growing families and surrounding communities. So far, the Colombian government has not offered these peasant families viable economic alternatives to coca cultivation.

> They didn't just pursue big narco-traffickers. There was a time they would take everyone they found working. The got me once, as I was leaving. […] They stopped me, caught me with [coca] paste and gave me home-jail time. *(Female coca farmer, Puerto Asís, June 2019)*

> When the forced eradication came, we said, 'Let's plant chocolate'. Some associations, entities, arrived to collaborate and we planted with technical assistance. But as time passed, [the cacao crops], they didn't work, they didn't provide enough for a person, for the family, to subsist. […] A lot of people ended up in debt […] It's not like the government says – sometimes they speak badly of the peasant, say that we are the creators of the war, [but] we are obligated to plant [coca] because there is no other option, we don't have support. *(Female coca farmer, Tumaco, April 2019)*

> They would fumigate sometimes every 15 days in our village. […] We had a hectare and a half of plantain and chiro – or as it's sometimes called, 'bocadillo'. But the fumigations finished off our food – the maize, the yucca, everything! There was nothing left. We were left without food and the only thing we had left were a few corners of coca. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, May 2018)*

> What else can a peasant farmer do? The fear is that we will be prosecuted again. We are peasants and we are coca growers. […] On TV everything looks great, but in reality we can't even support our children. We are not knee-deep in money, but coca has maintained us. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

3. Despite facing social, economic and political exclusion, Colombia's coca producers are organised and active citizens

> We organise 'mingas' [or collective labour initiatives, through the Community Action Committee] at the end of every month. Here we still lay logs of wood down to prevent them from getting too muddy. Participation is good. We built the school with a minga. […] Since we only have the river [for transport], coca is the only option; if the government keeps its promises and builds roads then there could be change [away] from coca…

> Here there are solar power systems that people purchased with whatever little bit of money they had left over. The oil company arrived in other communities and gave away solar panels, which they [the beneficiaries] sold cheaply […Otherwise,] there is no electricity; there are no public services. We wash with water that we get from wells using motorised pumps [we also purchased ourselves]. We use well water because the river is polluted due to the [oil] company and it's more practical than going to the river. *(Male coca grower, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

Social, economic and political exclusion

Colombia's coca growers and pickers face multiple forms of exclusion. One of the clearest manifestations of this exclusion – that also affects rural communities in the borderlands more generally – is lack of access to basic public services. Most families who work in the coca economy do not have running water, a sanitation/sewerage system, natural gas or internet in their homes (see Graph 6). And while the graph below indicates that most do have electricity, the figures include that which is self-provisioned via diesel generators and solar panels.

Other manifestations of exclusion include the high levels of informal land tenure and the deficiency of transport infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, in coca-producing areas. This makes it very difficult for peasant families in Colombia's borderlands to participate in licit agricultural markets.

Graph 6 – Response to survey question: Which of the following services do you have in your home?

Service	Percentage
Electricity	78%
Aquaduct	2%
Drinking water	1%
Sewerage	1%
Natural gas	0%
Internet	0%
None	22%
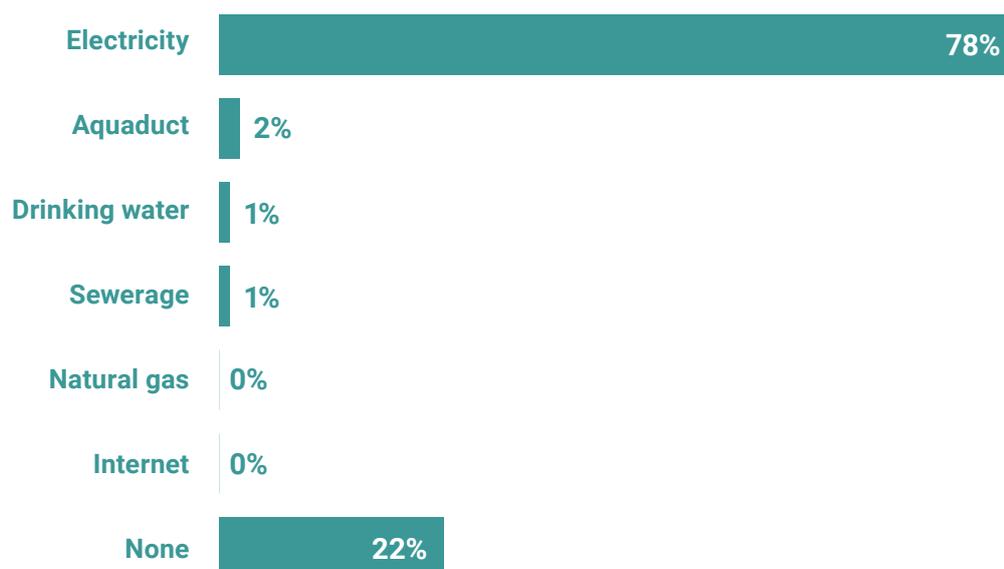
There are no roads [in my area], nothing has changed since the 1970s or 1950s, since we started saying [we need roads … We have to travel by boat], an hour and a half to get to La Libertad. We don't have to go the long way around anymore, like we used to, that would take about three days; now we go through La Libertad [… from there its] another hour and a half [to Puerto Asís…] by motorbike or car, mostly we use motorbikes [but if you] bring things with you, then you have to travel by 'chiva' [a type of rural bus… And within our sub-district] we have paths for [… moving about] on horse and by foot. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, May 2018)*

In many cases, it's possession [people have possession rather than full property rights over their land]. In fact, even today most peasants suffer [because of this]. We go to present a project and they won't recognise our use of the soil because we don't have legal documents for the land, but instead deeds or [certificates] of possession or tradition – these are useless…

So, people live between legality and illegality. And they don't pay taxes, they don't pay anything because there is no legal document. And if you want to go get your papers, well they ask you for this life and the next. You have to bring a surveyor, someone from the IGAC [the Augustin Codazzi Geographical Institute, which is in charge of the cadastre], you have to do this, that and the other. And not everyone has the money to go and do all those things. So, very few peasants in the Sierra have legal land titles. *(Female former coca farmer, Santa Marta, March 2019)*

Coca farmers and pickers have also been excluded from public debates (including on counter-narcotics policies), as many government functionaries and sectors of civil society do not recognise them as valid interlocutors.

Strong agency

Nevertheless, peasant families involved in the coca economy have demonstrated significant agency, in particular through local organisations such as the Community Action Committees (which have high levels of membership, as indicated in Graph 7) and Afro Community Councils.

We have proposed alternatives, projects for food security, health, income. We are tired of knocking on doors, to ask for loans, because they ignore us. We are conscious of the social problems caused by drugs. It's possible and we want to put our efforts into organic production, reforestation, 'clean' [or green] food. The forest is a rough diamond that can provide without the need to destroy it. We got disillusioned with [the idea of] carbon credits…

They say it's prohibited to cut down the forest, they impose repressive laws but they don't give any incentives. Conserving the native forest is a [potential] alternative, but where are the funds? […] I have always been committed to the organisation of the community. The JAC [Community Action Committee] was formally established on the 7th of May 1997. We've done everything 'with our own hands', without any help, 'working with our backs and our beasts'. *(Male coca grower and community leader, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

At the moment, we have a Whatsapp group, just in case there is a project or something, and to organise meetings and all that. The 32 rural sub-districts are communicating constantly – daily it's 'this happened', 'there is this meeting or that meeting'…

We are just now amidst dialogues with the Mayor's Office because they have us stigmatised too – they said we were paramilitaries, they never stopped saying that […] just because we lived here – they always said this was a paramilitary zone, and they categorised us as paramilitaries. *(Inhabitant of a former coca-producing area, Santa Marta, May 2019)*

Graph 7 – Response to survey question: Do you belong to a Community Action Committee?

94% Yes

6% No
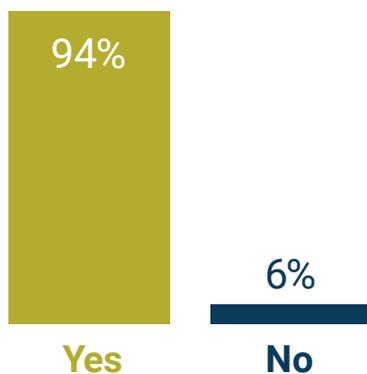
Many community members speak proudly about constructing their own schools and roads via collective labour initiatives (often called *mingas*) and using their own funds, as well as the protests and strikes they have organised that forced government functionaries to take note and sit down at the negotiating table.

With coca we have done everything, with coca we have guaranteed for ourselves, as best we can, the fundamental rights that the state hasn't given us. [… For example,] the issue of roads, we built our own roads. […] In 1997, after the strike in 1996, we extended the road to our sub-district […] all the peasants in our sub-district started to contribute. We always had to organise 'mingas' to go out and work…

And that's how it was, all the roads have been constructed in this way, with the support of [our] coca [incomes] – we all chipped in. For example, in our sub-district, my dad contributed 800,000 pesos at that time, plus the work we did on the road – every peasant had to give an amount of money […] We asked the Mayor's Office to help us but most of all it has been through our own efforts, more than through what we got from [the] Mayor's Office. *(Male community leader, Puerto Asís, September 2018)*

Presenting survey results back to coca farming communities in Tumaco, Colombia.
Photo by Sebastián Cristancho/ Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

The state is not delivering many promised reforms and programmes aimed at addressing exclusion

The National Illicit Crop Substitution Programme (PNIS), and the 2016 peace agreement of which it is part, were designed to counter the (social, economic and political) exclusion of peasant families, and of coca cultivators and pickers in particular. For example, the PNIS includes various spaces for participation that have permitted direct interaction between government functionaries and delegates of coca-producing rural sub-districts during the planning and implementation phases of the programme.

The PNIS is also supposed to be tied to local and regional development plans aimed at improving rural infrastructure and ensuring access to public services in the targeted areas. However, so far the government has done little to advance these aspects of the PNIS. The government has also stalled promised legal reforms, which were supposed to temporarily exempt small-scale coca farmers from criminal prosecution.

Participants in the programme have expressed frustration with the government, which they claim has not kept its end of the agreements, despite coca growers and pickers keeping theirs (see Graph 8). These very agreements are yet another manifestation of the exclusion that coca growers and pickers have been subjected to: in open violation of the basic principles of citizenship, the vast majority of families who are participating in the crop substitution programme have not been given a copy of the contract they signed with the state (see Graph 9).

Graph 8 – Response to survey question: Do you think the people who signed up to the PNIS will comply with the commitments they acquired?
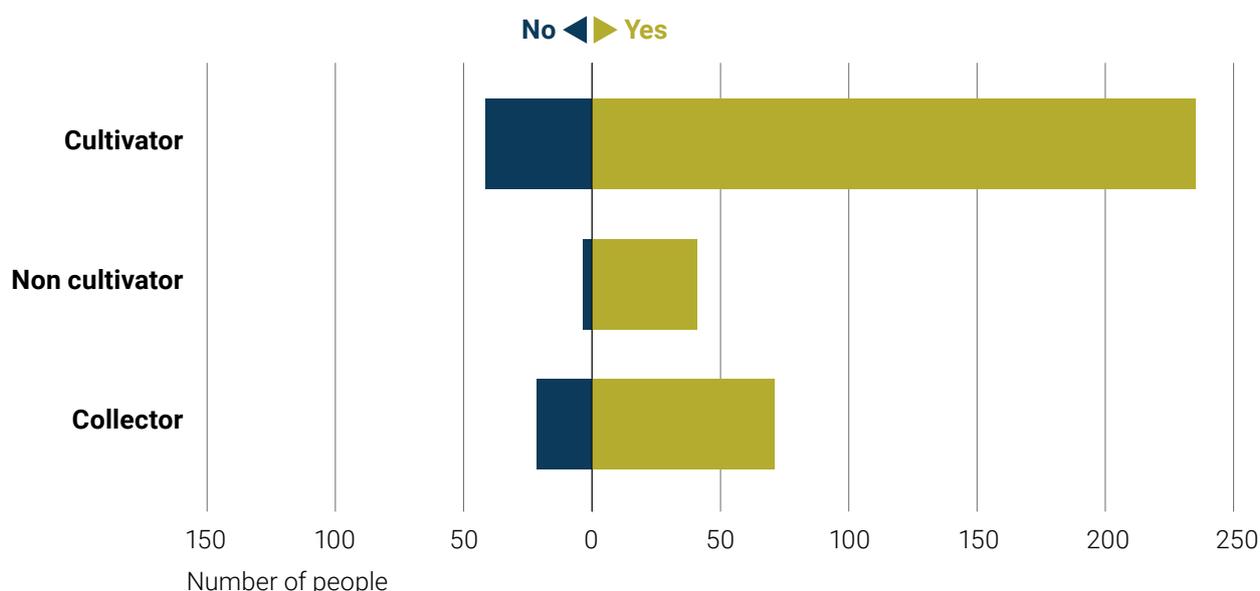
When they came here, [they said] we have to eradicate the coca. What did we do? We eradicated and that was it, because to this day, they haven't given me one single [support] payment. We finished off with coca and we planted chocolate, but that chocolate isn't generating any income yet. Sometimes we eat two meals [a day], sometimes one. *(Female former coca farmer, Tumaco, February 2019)*

The government says it is keeping its promises but that's a lie. [...] Both sides signed an agreement, but the government sent eradicators – they want us to live from nothing. [...] It's not that people are happy with coca, but we are humans [with basic needs], and we haven't seen change. *(Male coca farmer, Puerto Asís, September 2019)*

Graph 9 – Response to survey question: Do you have a copy of the individual contract that you signed as part of the PNIS?
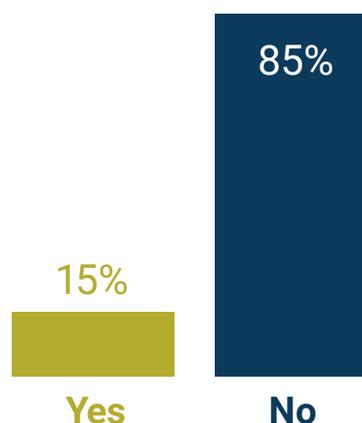
Afghanistan

"They risk their lives to provide for their families and smuggle drugs in the night, which is their only source of income.**"**

Ex-militia commander, Zaranj City, Nimroz, 2019

Nangarhar

Nimroz
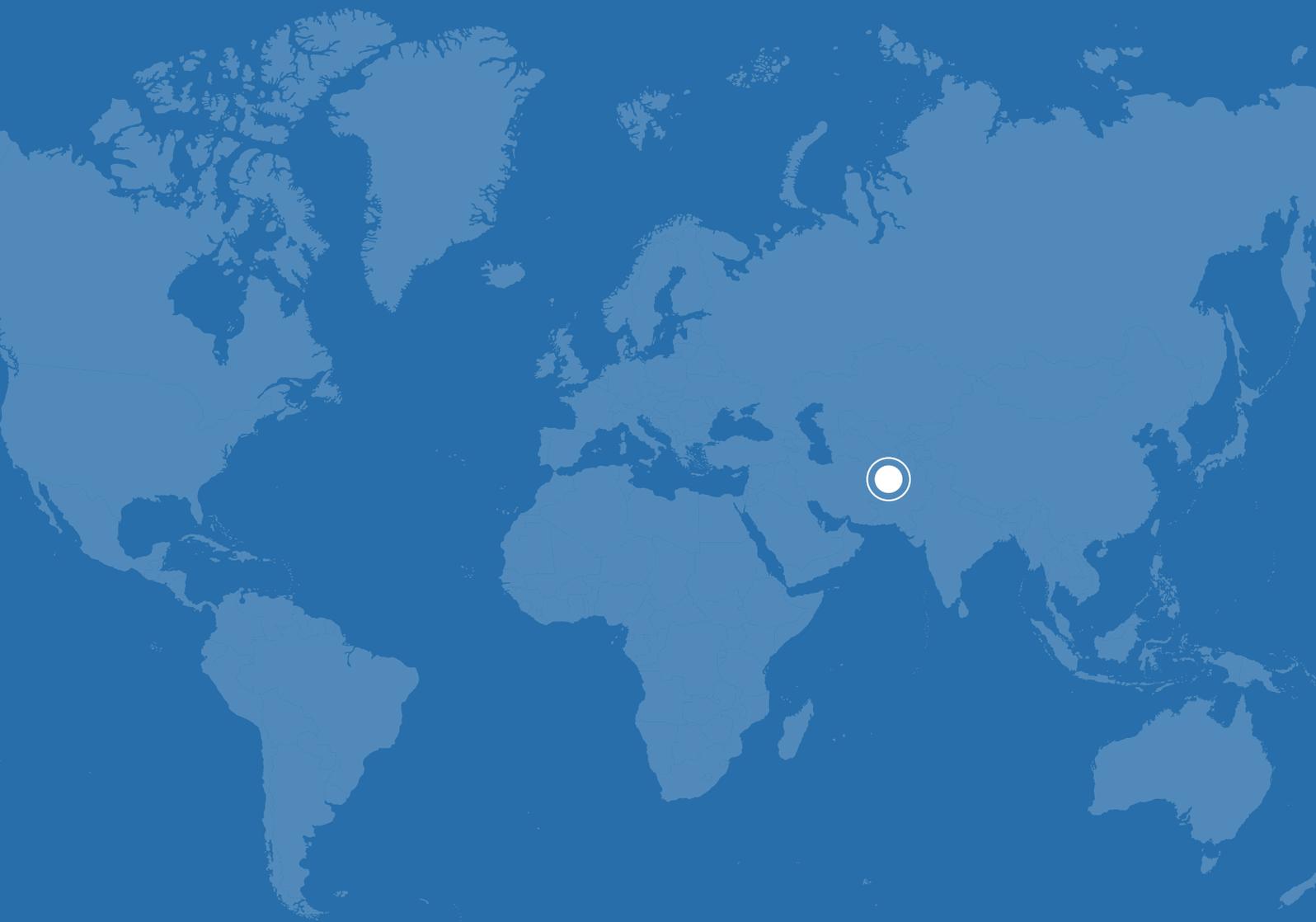
About the borderlands

Afghanistan is a land-locked mountainous country with a population of some 38 million.[29] It is classified as 'low income' and ranks 168 out of 188 according to the HDI.[30] As of 2016, an estimated 54.5% of Afghanistan's population lived below the poverty line.[31]

Located along the historic Silk Road, Afghanistan has long been integrated into trans-regional networks and different forms of economic, religious and cultural exchange. Its strategic location has exposed the country to many military campaigns throughout its history, from Alexander the Great, to Persian and Mongol invasions, to incursions by European colonial powers, all of which produced lasting cultural and demographic footprints. Established as a buffer state separating the Russian and British Empires in the 19th century, Afghanistan gained independence in 1919, under King Amanullah Khan.

The country entered a period of relative peace and stability from the 1930s, until the outbreak of war in 1978. During the Cold War period, Afghan rulers pursued a programme of gradual modernization and political neutrality, securing foreign aid from both superpowers. This strategy reinforced the country's long-standing dependence on external funding, and also reduced the incentive for Afghan rulers to build a fiscal and social contract with their population.

State penetration and service provision were limited in rural areas and a growing contradiction emerged between a foreign-funded enclave state and a rural population that received few of the benefits of this funding. Ultimately these contradictions exploded in the Saur Revolution of 1978 leading to a communist government, wide-spread civil unrest, then the Soviet Union invasion in 1979 to prop up the regime. This led to the decade-long Soviet-Afghan War that killed and displaced millions of Afghans.

The emergence of the Taliban from the mid-1990s brought a measure of stability but reinforced the country's international isolation. This was to change radically with the US-led intervention of 2001, which removed the Taliban regime.

Since then, Afghanistan has experienced different phases of armed conflict, interspersed with phases of relative stability. After the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989, a regionalised civil war soon followed which involved the collapse of the state, the destruction of much of the remaining infrastructure and the integration of the country into an extremely volatile regional war economy and conflict system.

The emergence of the Taliban from the mid-1990s brought a measure of stability but reinforced the country's international isolation. This was to change radically with the US-led intervention of 2001, which removed the Taliban regime.

The government that emerged following the Bonn Agreement, headed by President Karzai, brought initial hopes of a sustainable transition to peace. But instead, it marked a new phase of armed conflict that has intensified and spread over time, displacing some 3.5 million Afghans.[32] The country has been in the 'high alert' category of the Fragile States Index throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

Although there is a long history of poppy cultivation and opium use in Afghanistan, it was only during the war years that there was a major increase in the production and trafficking of opiates, and Afghanistan took over from Burma as the global leader in illicit opium production.

The geographical distribution and aggregate production of opium grew steadily during the 1980s and 1990s.[33] A ban imposed by the Taliban in 2000–2001 led to a dramatic short-term drop in poppy cultivation. However, following the United States (US)-led military intervention and especially since the late 2000s, poppy production rebounded.

Although there is a long history of poppy cultivation and opium use in Afghanistan, it was only during the war years that there was a major increase in the production and trafficking of opiates.

By 2017, opium poppy crops extended over a record 328,000 acres or 132,737 hectares.[34] And, as of 2017, the illicit opium economy accounted for an estimated 20%–32% of Afghanistan's GDP – more than all of the country's licit exports of goods and services combined.[35] In 2018, following a massive drought that resulted in a fall in production, the estimates for the illicit opium economy fell, and accounted for 6%–11% of GDP.[36]

Following several months of negotiations and a short-term reduction in violence, the US government signed a peace agreement with the Taliban on 29 February 2020, with the aim of bringing about a US withdrawal and an end to the conflict. The agreement includes a commitment to withdraw all US and coalition forces from the country by spring 2021, in exchange for assurances from the Taliban not to provide protection or material support to terrorist groups posing a threat to the US or its allies.

Our research team is conducting research in two borderland areas of Afghanistan that were selected because of their contrasting historical and contemporary relationships with central state institutions and their differing experiences of conflict and illicit drug economies.

The province of Nangarhar has long been a politically influential economic and trade hub on Afghanistan's eastern border. While the remote province of Nimroz has had little economic and political salience in Afghanistan for most of its history, it is currently in the process of transforming into an important trade zone on Afghanistan's western border.

All two borderlands are impacted by the illicit drug economy and the ongoing Taliban insurgency to varying degrees. Our research in these three provinces aims to shed greater light on the relationships between drugs, development and violence in these borderlands, and how interventions by the central government and/or regional and international powers have impacted these relationships.

Diesel smuggling from Iran to Zaranj, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

Nangarhar

Nangarhar is demarcated by the Spin Ghar mountain range to the south, which descend into arable lowlands to the north. This topography is broken in the northern-most tip of the province by the peaks of the Hindu Kush. An estimated 1.5 million people live in Nangarhar;[37] the majority are Pashtun but there are also small numbers of other ethnic groups such as Pashai, Arabs and Tajiks. The Pashtun people are themselves divided between lowland and highland tribes.

A historic resort for the Afghan monarchy and other aristocratic elites during the winter months, the province has long held importance for Afghan rulers

and neighbouring powers. Today, the provincial capital of Jalalabad remains a key commercial, cultural and political hub of eastern Afghanistan.

As a key centre of resistance against the communist regime, Nangarhar was severely affected by the (1979–1989) Soviet-Afghan War. Violent struggles intensified again in the wake of the US-led offensive from 2001 onwards against the Taliban, which had controlled the province since 1994. As of 2019, the Taliban still has considerable influence in Nangarhar despite a significant number of interventions by North American Treaty Alliance (NATO)/US troops. The conflict scenario has been further complicated by the appearance of Islamic State (IS) or *Daesh* militant groups in the province since 2015.[38]

Nangarhar shares a border with Pakistan to the south and east and has had a thriving transit trade and arbitrage economy since the 1970s, built upon strong cross-border tribal networks. Mining (marble, talc and gems) and illicit logging have also been a key source of income and rents for provincial business elites and political-military groups.

Nangarhar has a strong agricultural economy: its farmers grow a significant proportion of Afghanistan's agricultural produce, including rice, wheat, various fruits and opium poppy. The province has been a major opium producer since the late 1980s; at certain points in time, it produced up to a quarter of Afghanistan's opiates, with significant increases since 2010. The province has experienced intermittent bans on cultivation including prior to, during and after the Taliban regime – the most recent of which was implemented in territories controlled by the IS.

The Durrand line dividing Afghanistan from Pakistan has been disputed since the colonial period. On the one hand, the borderland it is a 'sensitive space' geopolitically, on the other there have always been close economic and social connections across the border, involving the movement of people and commodities across the formal and multiple informal crossing points.

As of 2019, the Taliban still has considerable influence in Nangarhar despite a significant number of interventions by North American Treaty Alliance (NATO)/US troops.

However, post-2001, there has been a growing imperative from both sides of the border to regulate, manage and filter flows across the Durrand line, linked to concerns about security, terrorism, taxation and citizenship. Pakistan has been erecting a fence along the border to discourage unauthorized cross-border movement. As a result, several of the informal crossing points along the eastern Afghan-Pakistan border have closed in recent years, which has had significant impacts on the livelihoods of borderland communities.

Talc factory in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

Car station preparing for transportation by camel and mule in Sasobai, Nimroz, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

Nimroz

Nimroz is largely comprised of flat desert terrain. It is the province with the lowest population density (approximately 2.8 people per km) in Afghanistan. As of 2015, an estimated 164,978 people lived in Nimroz – around a third of them in the provincial capital Zaranj.[39] The population includes a mix of ethnic groups, including Baluch, Pashtun, Tajik, Barahawi, Uzbeks, and Hazaras.

Although Nimroz has never been a stronghold for armed insurgents and has been comparatively less affected by the broader Taliban insurgency, a number of criminal networks and local strongmen wield a great deal of influence in the area.

Many of the province's inhabitants have resided elsewhere at some point in their lives; a significant number are returnees from Iran, while others (especially Baluch nationalists) took refuge in Nimroz after being forced to leave Pakistan due to their political activism. A growing number of Afghans from other provinces have migrated to Zaranj in recent years, attracted by its relative security and burgeoning economic opportunities.

Although Nimroz has never been a stronghold for armed insurgents and has been comparatively less affected by the broader Taliban insurgency, a number of criminal networks and local strongmen wield a great deal of influence in the area. For centuries,

disputes over access to water have periodically flared up between Nimroz and neighbouring Iran, and there are some reports that Iran is supporting Taliban forces in the province.[40] While the capital of Zaranj remains under government control, remote districts such as Dularam and Chakansur are increasingly contested by the Taliban.[41]

State presence in the region has historically been very limited, as indicated by the paucity of public services in the province, which has always been one of the poorest in Afghanistan. The province borders Iran and Pakistan and the region's inhabitants have long engaged in cross-border trade, facilitated through Baluch networks that straddle the border in all three countries.

The importance of the Nimroz Afghan-Iran border was accentuated following the construction of the Delaram-Zaranj highway in 2009 and the signing of a 2016 trilateral transit agreement between Iran, India and Afghanistan. This highway is now one of Afghanistan's busiest roads and a crucial trading route for licit and illicit commodities.

This includes drugs produced in neighbouring Helmand province, which accounts for about half of Afghanistan's opium production. Nimroz itself cultivated about 6,200 hectares of opium poppy as of 2017,[42] much of which was planted in the last decade following the introduction of solar-powered deep well technology. In recent years, Nimroz has also become a people-smuggling hub for Afghans migrating to Iran, Turkey and Europe.

Catapult using for smuggling of Opium, Nimroz, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

A note on methodology

The key messages for Afghanistan were drawn primarily from fieldwork conducted in seven districts of Nangarhar in autumn 2018 and in three districts of Nimroz in spring 2019.[43]

In total, over 600 interviews with traders, transporters, customs officials and other key officials were collected in the two provinces. Fieldworkers interviewed traders and transporters associated with a wide variety of licit and illicit commodities, including opium, hashish, talc, fuel, fertilizer, cement, spare parts and transit goods. The team also interviewed members of people-smuggling networks in Nimroz.

In addition to the interviews, ten life histories per province were conducted with individuals over 50 years old who could recall long-term changes in security, development and economic conditions of their respective borderlands. The field teams also made use of GIS imagery to identify research sites near the border prior to starting the fieldwork, and again during guided debriefing sessions after each round of fieldwork was completed.

Read Jangul's story

This comic tells the story of Jangul, a man from the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. From helping his father in the poppy fields as a child, to smuggling heroin all the way to Moscow as an adult, opium has been a part of his life through conflict and desperation, and relative peace and prosperity.

https://bit.ly/3dsBwcl

Key messages

1. Illicit trading networks are central to household incomes and survival in Afghanistan's borderlands

Afghanistan is not only a major producer of opium and heroin; it is also an important regional trading hub and corridor for both licit and illicit commodities. Just as there are many farmers that depend on growing opium poppy to survive, many transporters and traders also rely on incomes from illicit drugs for financial security. Such incomes help safeguard families and communities against economic hardship in a country that is affected by protracted armed conflict.

Illicit trading has helped many families survive protracted crises

Our research in Nangarhar and Nimroz – on the east and west borderlands of Afghanistan respectively – points to the centrality of illicit trade in securing incomes of families living in extremely violent and risky environments.

One farmer from Nangarhar recalled how money from the opium trade provided his family with a lifeline after being bombed during the Soviet-Afghan war:

> During the communist regime, our village was bombed killing nine people; one of my cousins was also wounded. During that bombardment, our house was destroyed and 15 of our cattle were killed. All the pots, rugs and other items were destroyed. When the planes finished their bombardment and left the area, every person was looking for their belongings, which were buried under the soil…
>
> My father had saved 54 seers of opium along with 80,000 Afghanis, which also went under the debris. While looking for our household goods, my mother found the box with 54 seers of opium and the cash. Our house was destroyed, but with this money we built a new house for ourselves.
> *(Farmer, Khugyani District, Nangarhar, 2018)*

As this experience shows, not everyone who participates in the drugs business is a wealthy narco-trafficker. People often become involved as small-scale transporters because they have few other choices. In Nangarhar, following the Soviet withdrawal and descent into civil war, transporting illicit drugs across international borders provided vital income for poor families living in dire economic circumstances.

In 1993, one of my friends from Achin […] used to be a lieutenant in the Ministry of Defense but was also jobless at the time. This lieutenant had a cousin who was trading heroin in Abdulkhel, and [my friend] was taking the heroin to [northern city] Mazar-e-Sharif through one trader, and another trader helped transfer him to Moscow through Uzbekistan…

The lieutenant came to me and offered me a job helping him transport the heroin from Mazar-e-Sharif to Moscow […] As I was living in very tough circumstances I didn't have any other option. To make matters worse, my widowed sister and her children were also living with me and I already faced losses in my shop and I didn't have any means to provide for my family. When the lieutenant offered me [the job], I agreed. *(Former shopkeeper and drug transporter, Ghani Khel, Nangarhar, 2018)*

The risks and benefits of participation in the drug trade are distributed unevenly

The distribution of risks and benefits for those involved in the drug trade is strongly linked to their economic and social status. Transporters who are hired to move the drugs (as opposed to traders who buy and sell them) face particularly serious risks – something that is not always reflected in their pay.

For example, the above informant crossed multiple borders before arriving in Moscow and received a relatively small sum of money in return. Still, some transporters may accumulate enough to modestly improve their economic situation, as in the case of the following transporter interviewed on the Iranian side of the Nimroz borderlands.

> With the first car that I rented I quickly wanted to make money. The first opportunity that I had I trafficked 3kg between Chabahar and Sarbaz. I was paid 6,000 tomans per month to do the legal transportation work, bringing freight from Sistan and Baluchistan here…
>
> The owner did not know I was also trafficking opium on the side. These 3kg became my wealth. I came home, delivered the drugs, and went back as quickly as I could. This time I went for 6kg, then 12kg, then 24kg etc. My wealth continued accumulating. I built a house, I bought land. My economy started getting

better. I bought a car – I bought a truck and trailer after three years. *(Drug trafficker, Sistan-Baluchestan, Iran, 2019)*

In contrast to transporters, large-scale traders with access to more capital and political networks can, to an extent, insulate themselves from enforcement risks through layers of brokerage relations and pay-offs to top officials. These actors often use profits from drugs to invest in new enterprises or housing and trading portfolios in Jalalabad, Kabul, Tehran or Dubai.

> There are these powerful mafia families in some of the cities around Tehran. For example, in [village X], they import large quantities of opium and heroin, up to one tonne at a time. You can easily conceal this on the lorries or pick-up trucks that come from Sistan and Baluchistan. Once it arrives there, they distribute to smaller dealers, a couple of kg here and there...
>
> Meanwhile, they sit safe at home and take none of the risk – the risk is instead spread to the traffickers and to those who distribute on a smaller scale. They buy it from Baluchis often. They drop off the goods, and collect payment at a later date. This is how it usually works. *(Drug trader, Tehran, Iran, 2019)*

Illicit and licit trading networks are connected

Many traders and transporters mix and alternate between a variety of licit and illicit goods. In Nangarhar, for instance, tea, cement and fertiliser can be transported along the same trading corridors and through the same networks as hashish and opium. Traders build up diverse portfolios to manage risks and seize new opportunities as prices, regulatory systems and conflict dynamics shift.

Downturns in licit activities may spur greater participation in drug economies. For example, in Nimroz individuals turned to drug trafficking during periods of severe drought, which affected agricultural production.

Conversely, restrictions on talc extraction and trading in the Asadkhel region of Nangarhar had unforeseen knock-on effects, including an uptick in cannabis cultivation. Reports that insurgent forces were benefiting from the talc industry led to the government crackdown, which negatively impacted many others, as described in this next testimony from a man from Achin district.

> Currently, the business of talc at Asadkhel is stopped, and the reason is that contracts have not been made with the traders [...] people of Asadkhel say that special force officials do not allow talc to be transported to Shadal bazaar. They asked for a contract with the Ministry of Mines, but the contracts have been stopped by the government...
>
> This autumn, 80% of harvesting plants [in Asadkhel] were cannabis. People also cultivated it in their houses. Most of the youth are unemployed. Some among them have joined the national army or left for Pakistan in search of work because the talc business, which provided employment opportunities to people, has stopped. *(Key informant, Achin district, Nangarhar, 2018)*

Smuggling of goods from Iran in Millak Boarder area, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

2. Licit and illicit trade routes continually shift in response to changes in regulation

The borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz have always been 'outward-facing', with deep historical, social and economic ties to neighbouring countries and regions. However, the hardness and porosity of borders have constantly changed due to conflict dynamics, the regulatory power of state and non-state authorities, and the construction of infrastructure, including fences, customs posts and border markets.

These changes have had significant impacts on illicit flows of legal and illegal goods, with knock-on effects on the economic and social wellbeing of borderland communities. For example, hardening the border may increase price differences and the security premium on goods crossing the border, boosting incentives for smuggling. Changing border controls also creates more opportunities for powerful elites to profit by imposing informal taxes on illicit flows.

Border regulation, security and livelihoods

There are significant trade-offs between border security and borderland livelihoods. Iran and Pakistan have tightened their respective borders with Afghanistan, with Pakistan building a fence along its border with Nangarhar and Iran building a wall and ditch across the Iranian-Nimroz border. This has had significant consequences for local economies based on cross-border trade and connections. One ex-militia commander from Nimroz who had lived on both sides of the border described the negative impact of the wall on the livelihoods of young people in Nimroz, prompting many to turn to drug trafficking.

> It has been eight years since the Iranians built a wall along the border and closed it. When this border was open, young people were busy trading and transporting business goods, but currently there are no work opportunities and youths can't go for work to Iran as the Iranian government demands a passport and a valid visa to enter their country. So, they risk their lives to provide for their families and smuggle drugs in the night, which is their only source of income. The border police force young people to pay them money and the police search their houses and arrest them if they refuse to pay. *(Ex-militia commander, Zaranj City, Nimroz, 2019)*

In Nangarhar, a former customs officer talked about the changing regulatory arrangements at the Torkham border crossing and the different kinds of trade going on, captured in the next testimony.

> In the past, the Torkham gate was sometimes open and sometimes closed for trade goods to be transferred across the border on both sides […] Currently it is closed for all of the tax-exempted goods that were traded over it in the past. Some of the transporters carry small bags of trade goods in their hands or on their backs to transfer them over the Torkham border…There are some children who used to carry these goods in their hands to Pakistan. *(Former customs official, Torkham, Nangarhar, 2018)*

Traders and transporters often adapt to border closures in creative and dynamic ways. Restrictions in formal crossings and the establishment of walls and fences have prompted the development of informal crossings in remote areas in both Nangarhar and Nimroz.

The Sasobi border crossing in Dur Baba district of Nangarhar is a prime example of a small-scale route that has grown more prominent as other major crossing points have become more restricted. Difficult to traverse by car, most goods are carried by mules or camels, which transport tax-exempted goods, narcotics, and other items over the border into Pakistan. In Nimroz, some small-scale drug traffickers have opted for a rather different method to export their product: catapulting it over the Iranian border wall.

> I have an Iranian business partner and my cousins and other relatives are living in [X] village located on the other side of the border. It is so hard to do this business unless you have a business partner in Iran as I can't go to Iran myself. We have contact numbers of the Iranian police who are guarding in the border and my business partner in Iran contacts the border police guarding in the check posts and border on the Iran side to set the perfect time with them for smuggling out opium…
>
> The police call my partner to tell him the time, my partner calls me and I take the opium to the border where the Iranian border police open the gates built in the wall and I cross the border wall to hand over the opium to my business partner on the other side of the wall/border. Sometimes, we use a ladder to climb the wall and hand over the opium to my partner on the other side of the wall without letting the Iranian border police know about it…
>
> The youths from our villages are cooperating with me while I am transporting the opium from the village to the border point. Smugglers also cooperate with each other and don't take money for it. *(Transporter, Zaranj City, Nimroz 2019)*

Trust, brokerage and violence

Borderlands are 'trading spaces' in which social relations, local institutions and regulatory arrangements have adapted to the management and movement of flows. This has involved developing a complex infrastructure of logistics, transportation and warehousing; sophisticated systems for monitoring and responding to market information; organisations for managing and regulating labour; and financial systems that enable the flows of credit and capital.

All of these arrangements have been 'stress tested' and adapted to operating in a high-risk (and high opportunity) environment in which there are multiple sources of 'friction' linked to a fragmented geographical, political and social landscape.

In order for Afghanistan's borderland trading systems to function, three things are key – trust, brokerage and violence. Trust underpins and ties together the networks that are necessary to move commodities through space and across borders.

Brokers are required to straddle the synapses and boundaries that divide social, political and economic systems and that create friction impeding the free flow of trade. These figures may mediate between government officials and the Taliban, or between Iranian and Afghan customs officers, or between human trafficking networks in Kabul and the provinces. They are both the connective tissue and the point of friction in trading systems.

> During the last years of communist regime, my uncle with whom I was doing opium trade got killed in a mine explosion in Bahar village along with 12 other men when he was travelling to Pakistan to participate in a Jirga [...] My uncle had a lot of experience in opium trade and he had lots of contacts with people but I had not enough assets myself. Moreover, I could not continue in the opium trade without the reference of my uncle, therefore, I left the opium trade. *(Trader, Nangarhar, 2018)*

Violence is central to the regulation of both licit and illicit trade, given the absence of credible legal mechanisms to enforce contracts and mediate disputes. Endemic and unpredictable violence shifts incentives towards high-value, easily transportable and concealed commodities such as drugs. Geographically concentrated violence leads to a shift in the direction of trade flows.

Violence may be linked to the control of trade routes and the renegotiation of political settlements among local elites around the distribution of the proceeds of trade. Voices from Afghanistan's borderlands challenge the commonly held idea that the drugs trade

is exceptionally violent – they indicate that all trading networks function in the shadow of violence; coercion or the threat of coercion are central to the functioning and regulation of trade.

> Vehicles which carry goods belonging to warlords cannot be stopped by anyone at any point. Whatever goods they carry, whether illegal or legal, no one can stop them. Also no one can search them as all of the security forces know about it in advance. Most often, such vehicles carry illegal goods or banned goods to transfer across the border to Pakistan. The anti-narcotics officers in the district don't have the ability to stop it. *(Civil servant, Nangarhar, 2018)*

Trading networks are subject to informal revenue collection at 'choke points', often dominated by state and/or non-state elites and violent armed groups. Evidence from Nangarhar and Nimroz suggests that these choke points exist along international border crossings, as well as along informal borders that exist between government and opposition-controlled territories. Local government employees, particularly army officers and customs officials, were frequently identified as key brokers in illicit trading networks, imposing informal taxes on the trading of illicit goods in exchange for facilitating trade.

Small-scale traders and transporters are vulnerable to exploitation and violence at the hands of government and opposition forces alike. This was particularly the case for transporters moving goods between Nangarhar and Pakistan, where traders reported being threatened and abused by local authorities, and even being coerced into transporting illicit goods.

> Two years ago I unloaded the truck in the Ring Road area of Peshawar and then parked the truck to get loaded with cement. Two Pakistani police came to me and told me that their boss wanted to talk to me. They took me to their boss and made me sit on a chair. Their boss asked me why I was doing hashish business...
>
> I said that I don't know anything about hashish. They imprisoned me and made a case against me that I had 6kg of hashish. I spent four months in the prison and then I paid Rs. 50,000 to get released. I lost Rs. 200,000 during these four months and I still owe people Rs. 150,000. The Pakistani government was very cruel. *(Cement transporter, Sherzad district, Nangarhar, 2018)*

Opposition forces also act as important trade brokers in both provinces. Although the Taliban taxes traders and transporters informally, they often play a helpful role in providing additional security for transporters operating in remote areas.

> I drive to Dak once or twice a week and I see Taliban there, but they don't cause trouble to ordinary people and they help the public by preventing thieves and providing security. *(Transporter and people smuggler, Zaranj City, Nimroz, 2019)*

However, many traders in Nangarhar described a culture of fear precipitated by the Taliban and other non-government armed groups operating in their areas. In Ghani Khel district of Nangahar, traders reported being harassed by three different armed groups operating in the area, often threatening them with murder and kidnapping if they refused payment:

> I receive calls from different phone numbers asking me for money, but I don't know if they are Taliban or thieves. I haven't paid them any money yet, but I am scared to get killed by the Taliban…local police are sometimes coming to my shop as well and they are asking for food and money, and I give them Rs. 3,000-4,000. I don't know whom to complain to as government employees and Taliban are both thieves […] security is at its worst, every trader has armed guards for keeping himself and his property safe. *(Trader, Ghani Khel, Nangarhar, 2018)*

> We don't know what party to pay money to. It is a bad situation and we don't know enemy from friend. We go home early in the evening, we are not even safe in our houses and we guard our homes during the night. *(Trader, Ghani Khel, Nangarhar, 2018)*

Store or BATAY for transit goods, Nangahar, Afghanistan. Photo by OSDR.

3. Increased trade flows have had positive and negative impacts for people living in frontier boom towns

Frontier boom towns emerge in border regions where trade flows converge. These places become magnets for traders, migrants, state officials and speculators, with the promise of new opportunities, windfall profits and tax revenues.

The fortunes of these towns wax and wane according to a number of factors, including shifts in regional geopolitical contexts, changes in the prices and availability of commodities, attempts to regulate trade, and conflict.

Boom towns are often linked with a 'twin' settlement across the border, which develop a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship: for example,

Jalalabad-Peshawar on the Afghan-Pakistan border in Nangarhar, and Zaranj-Charbarhar straddling the Iranian-Afghan border in Nimroz.

Boom towns are places of opportunity, investment and rapid growth

Ziranj, the capital of Nimroz province, emerged as one such boom town following the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Over the past two decades, processes of rapid accumulation linked to licit and illicit trade have been accompanied by significant investments in housing and public services in the city.

The wider province has also benefited from increased trade links among India, Iran and Afghanistan, which has led to more domestic and international investment in roads and other infrastructure in the region.

> Many positive changes have been made to the lives of people and they have become more educated [since 2001]. My life has also changed, my daughter is a teacher and she is getting paid, I have a salary as well […] We currently have access to facilities such as telephone, internet and televisions, we always use them and update ourselves about what is happening in the world and it is a positive change in our lives. *(Education manager, Kang District, Nimroz, 2019)*

As regional trade links in Nimroz have deepened, revenues from illicit drugs in the post-2001 era have also contributed to private investment, resulting in the expansion of economic and social opportunities.

> The residents of Zaranj city have become wealthier as some are involved in narcotics, some have opened shops in the city, and some have jobs in government […] During the Karzai regime, my sales went higher as there were more development programmes, construction, and people were buying more electrical materials from my shop. I was making a good profit that made my life better and I extended my business and investment. *(Electrician and trader, Kang District, Nimroz, 2019)*

The growth of frontier boom towns comes with costs and trade-offs

The rapid expansion of these towns has been accompanied by considerable trade-offs for people living in the area and for the wider economy. Boom towns may be unruly and insecure places, where control of trade depends on access to the means of violence. In Nimroz, a new class of elites profiting from trade flows have gradually grown in power, associated with large-scale corruption, land seizures and rising inequality.

> The wealthy people in Nimroz province are living in Zaranj city and the majority of these people are Jihadi commanders, government officials, landlords and drug traders. *(Education manager, Kang District, Nimroz, 2019)*

> The value of land in Zaranj city has risen as the city has been mapped and government officials who usurped land have sold it at high costs […] Drug traders and government officials involved in this business have also become wealthy but the poor people are getting poorer by the day. *(Ex-militia commander, Zaranj City, Nimroz, 2019)*

While Nimroz has been a hub for the trafficking of drugs (into neighbouring Iran) cultivated in other southern Afghanistan provinces for decades, people-smuggling has grown in prominence over the last decade, attracting new types of smuggling networks from outside of the province.

In Nangarhar, Torkham has been a significant frontier town for decades, with its fortunes closely tied to the economy of neighbouring Peshawar. Trade has been the lifeblood of the local economy – boosting government revenues, providing a source of investment and supporting the livelihoods and welfare of the borderland population.

But the benefits are not equally distributed. Just as a small elite have gained from the trading boom in Nimroz, in Nangarhar a handful of well-positioned political players have profited from contracts linked to the military logistic pipeline supplying NATO forces that crosses through Torkham. Furthermore, small-scale licit and illicit trades are associated with high levels of violence, poor working conditions and exploitative working practices.

While the emergence of frontier boom towns may provide economic benefits to inhabitants, the wealth accumulated through trade is often transitory and ephemeral, with many elites investing profits in capital cities or outside of the country.

Additionally, the trade-offs associated with life in frontier boom towns may prove costly in the long run by damaging public legitimacy, prompting greater support for opposition forces. In Nimroz, borderland communities tended to be satisfied with the increase in investment and infrastructure from the central government. However, they had little to say that was positive about what they perceived to be corrupt elites, as well as rapidly growing inequality at the provincial level.

> Our expectations from the central government have changed…Since he [Pres. Ghani] planned to build Kamal Khan Dam, the residents of Nimroz are very happy […]We don't expect much from the provincial government as they are all corrupted and their priority is their own benefit. *(Trader, Zaranj City, Nimroz, 2019)*

> One reason for the growing Taliban insurgency is corruption in the government […] they are involved in bribery and they interfere in everything […] that dissatisfies the poor people and caused the Taliban insurgency to grow. *(Transporter and people smuggler, Zaranj City, Nimroz, 2019)*

Myanmar

" After the ceasefire [...] road construction started, then the logging started. The heroin started coming in when the area became more populated. [...] Many young people passed away because of drugs. **"**

Elderly resident, Chipwi, northeast Kachin State, 2018
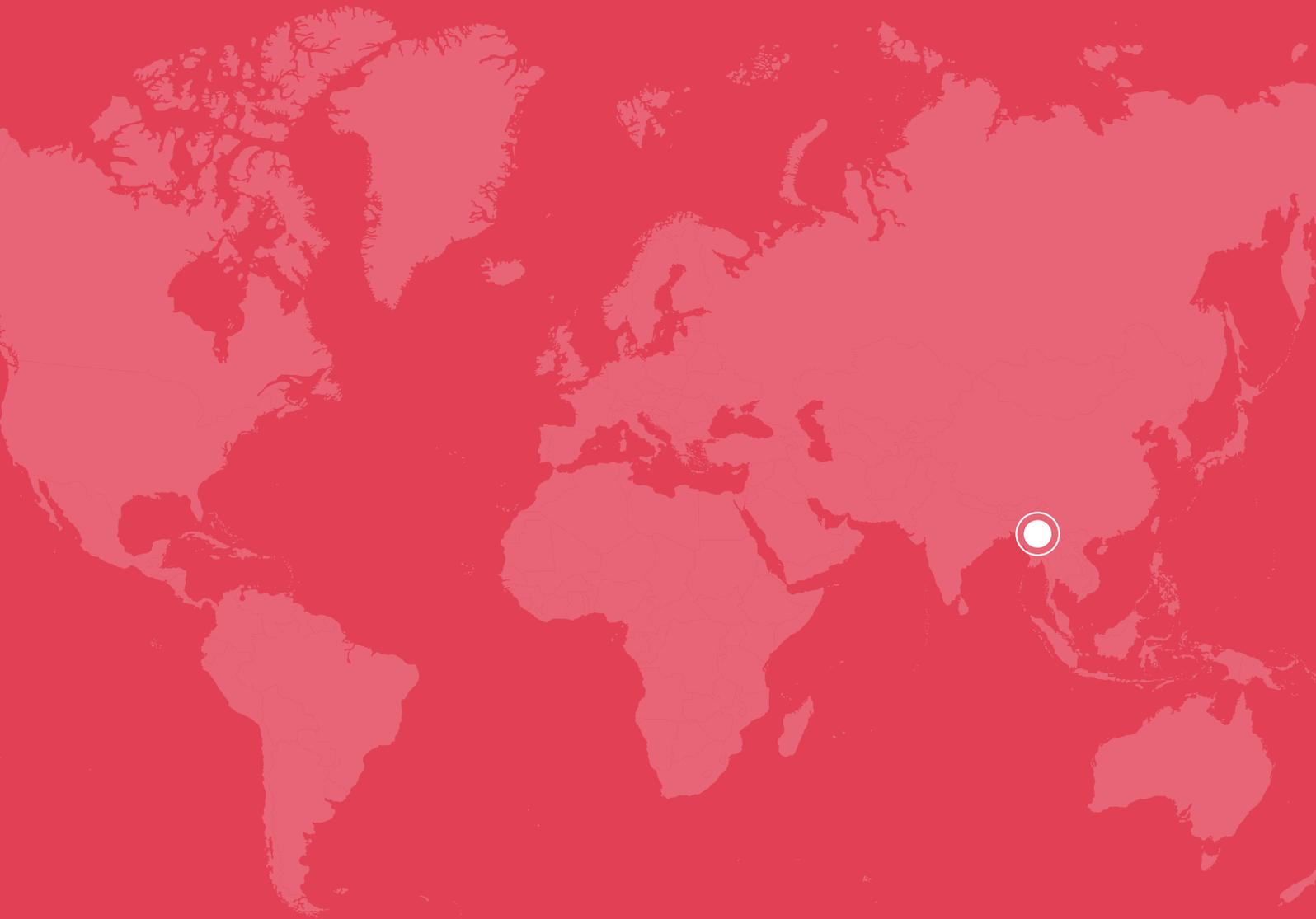
Opium Farm in Tamu Khong village, Chipwi Township, Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.

About the borderlands

Myanmar is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia with a population of about 53 million people.[44] It shares extensive borders with Bangladesh, India, the Peoples Republic of China (incorporating Tibet), Laos and Thailand. Although the country has vast natural resources, most of the population is extremely poor. The country is ranked 145 out of 188 in the HDI – but there is considerable variation in living standards between affluent modern urban centres and the most impoverished rural areas.[45]

Myanmar – formerly Burma[46] – is defined by its ethnic diversity, although the Bamar, the country's largest population group, dominates.[47] Ever since independence from British colonial rule in 1948, successive regimes have attempted to obtain more unified control over the country. Battles over ethnic identity, as well as political ideology, have been central features of Myanmar's post-colonial history.

Violent conflicts have persisted to this day, despite various attempts at peace negotiations, including current efforts to secure a nationwide ceasefire agreement.

This project focuses on Kachin State and Shan State in the north and northeast of the country. Elites from both states were signatories to a pre-independence document called the Panglong Agreement.[48] This expressed aspirations for a federal political system with significant local autonomy. These aspirations

unravelled after independence and both regions descended into armed conflict between various ethnic armed organisations and the national government.

Violent conflicts have persisted to this day, despite various attempts at peace negotiations, including current efforts to secure a nationwide ceasefire agreement. However, underlying political grievances have remained largely unaddressed and periods of fragile stability have often given way to new cycles of violence and mistrust.

Myanmar's current peace process aims to build upon ceasefire arrangements that were agreed with various ethnic armed organisations in the late-1980s and 1990s. These ceasefires were designed partly to enable the country's borderlands – particularly regions bordering China and Thailand – to become more firmly integrated into the national economy.

Political and business elites within Myanmar and across Southeast Asia re-imagined these conflict-affected borderlands as resource-rich, untapped 'wastelands' targeted for large-scale resource extraction, trade, and infrastructure corridors. National development discourses blame armed conflict on underdevelopment, and claim that development will bring peace.

However, the top-down approach to borderland development has resulted in predatory business investments, environmentally and socially destructive

practices, and new rounds of militarisation that have concentrated wealth and power in the hands of a narrow clique of military and business elites.

The upland areas of Kachin and Shan are perfectly suited to the cultivation of opium poppy, which has provided livelihood security in impoverished rural areas but also became a financial pillar to sustain armed conflict.

To date, there remains a still poorly formulated future vision of what 'development' might look like in these areas, and in many ways this time of 'transition' has also seen considerable reversals and retrenchments. This is despite the emergence of a post-2010 quasi-democratic political system, the launching of a formal peace process in 2011, and Aung San Suu Kyi's 2015 election victory.

Numerous factors have favoured the persistence of violent conflict in Myanmar. In Kachin and Shan states, armed organisations can find recruits in most villages – sometimes by force but often due to a sense of obligation towards a shared ethno-nationalist struggle. These groups also benefit from the relative lack of 'distance destroying' infrastructure that might enable the national military to gain control (roads, railways and so on), as well as proximity to borders and cross-border economic and political networks.

Local communities are some of those must vulnerable to the harms related to changing patterns of drug use, including increasing levels of heroin injecting and methamphetamine use.

Furthermore, the upland areas of Kachin and Shan are perfectly suited to the cultivation of opium poppy, which has provided livelihood security in impoverished rural areas but also became a financial pillar to sustain armed conflict.

In recent decades, the relationship between drugs and conflict has become more complex. The issue has extended beyond opium cultivation to the manufacture and supply of other drugs, such as methamphetamines. Local communities are some of those must vulnerable to the harms related to changing patterns of drug use, including increasing levels of heroin – injecting and methamphetamine use.

Paradoxically and importantly, many believe drug-related harms to be the outcome of failed and politically insincere ceasefire agreements and increasing state

presence, rather than rooted in armed conflict. National political and economic policies, they say, have focused on pacifying recalcitrant local populations instead of ensuring inclusive and sustainable development. Of course, many at the national level would question this.

Regardless of whether these views are 'right' or 'wrong', they have become strong explanatory narratives, which deserve exploration and understanding. This is one of the purposes of our research and of the *Voices from the borderlands* publication(s).

Used syringe in northern Shan State, Myanmar.
Photo by SHAN.*

Shan State

Shan State is the largest of Myanmar's 14 administrative divisions, covering almost a quarter of the country. Much of its 60,000 square miles comprise steep forest-covered hills and deep valleys with a few elevated plains known as the Shan Plateau. Shan State shares long international borders with China and Thailand and a short border with Laos. Its estimated population of six million inhabitants are of many different ethnicities and languages.

This diverse population is spread across 55 townships, almost 16,000 villages and a number of small cities – Taunggyi in the south, Lashio in the north and Kengtung in the east. However, the vast majority of people live in rural areas and agriculture is the main livelihood. Following decades of armed conflict and underinvestment in basic services and infrastructure, Shan State remains poor with many rural households suffering food insecurity.

Myanmar-China border crossing, Shan State, Myanmar. Photo by SHAN.

During pre-colonial times, the region was made up of multiple self-governing principalities, which endured under the colonial system of indirect rule through which the British governed the region.

Through the 1950s, the newly independent Myanmar state dismantled these long-standing local power structures as part of its efforts to consolidate and centralise control but was unable to establish functioning institutions to replace the systems it removed. Social, political and economic grievances were aggravated by a shift to assertive Bamar militarism, further eroding the legitimacy of the central government.

Armed resistance, which began in the late 1950s, grew rapidly after General Ne Win's 1962 military coup established an authoritarian state. Armed conflict across Shan State has been highly fragmented with multiple different armed groups and conflict fault-lines. The region's opium economy became an important source of finance for many armed groups.[49]

During the 1990s and 2000s, a series of ceasefire agreements, which often included informal arrangements around the drug trade, created a fragile stability throughout much of northern and eastern Shan State. In contrast, large areas of southern and central Shan State experienced violent counter-insurgency campaigns.[50]

In recent years, these dynamics have been reversed: northern Shan State has experienced renewed outbreaks of violence, while the largest armed group

in southern Shan State has signed the government's nationwide ceasefire agreement. Yet even during periods of 'ceasefire', borderland populations have continued to endure multiple forms of violence linked to continued localised conflicts, militarisation and dispossession.

Since the 1990s, northern Shan State has become Myanmar's most important overland trade corridor, linking Mandalay to the China border.

The central government has asserted militarised and direct forms of control over certain areas of Shan State with strategic and economic importance, notably major border crossings and sites of large-scale development projects. In other areas, it has resorted to a more indirect approach to borderland governance, including the negotiation of ceasefires and the creation of army-backed militias.[51] This has created mosaics of power, shaped by diverse sets of actors, interests and political and economic networks – local, national and international.

Since the 1990s, northern Shan State has become Myanmar's most important overland trade corridor, linking Mandalay to the China border.[52] Vast revenues have also been generated through logging, mining, agribusiness (large-scale land concessions are primarily for corn, rubber and fruit plantations), hydropower dams and other infrastructural projects, such as the oil and gas pipelines linking Yunnan in China with deep-sea ports on Myanmar's western seaboard.

Many of these ventures are part of broader initiatives to deepen economic integration between China and Southeast Asia.[53] The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which forms an important part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, will follow a similar route to the afore mentioned pipelines. These ambitious development plans are being mapped onto areas of unresolved armed conflict.

Vast revenues also continue to be generated from the drug trade. Shan State produces more than 90% of Myanmar's opium, which is mainly cultivated in steep upland areas and has provided an important livelihood for an estimated 200,000–300,000 households. Much of this opium is converted to morphine base or heroin within Myanmar's borders and then sent to China. China became the main market for Myanmar's opium following rising heroin use in the 1990s and 2000s.[54]

Over the last couple of decades, Shan State has also become one of the world's largest producers of methamphetamine pills, known colloquially as 'yama' or 'yaba',[55] and more recently crystal meth or 'ice'.[56] The growth of methamphetamine production in Myanmar is closely linked to a rise in production and consumption of the drug in neighbouring Thailand. In 2003, the Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra proclaimed a war on drugs, which provided further incentive to move production across the border into Myanmar.

As echoed in the testimonies presented below, many inhabitants of Shan State indicate that harmful drug use and associated social problems are growing in their communities and see the current peace process as an opportunity to begin addressing these issues. However, the embeddedness of drugs in Shan State's economy and its power structures make this far from straightforward.

Kachin State

Kachin State is Myanmar's most northerly state and shares borders Yunnan and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, as well as India's north east states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. According to 2014 census data, Kachin State has a population of circa 1.7 million people.

However, the census was a controversial exercise and large areas of the state, which are still not under Myanmar government control, were excluded from the enumeration. Not all of those who live in Kachin State identify as Kachin and the region has experienced extensive in-migration from other parts of Myanmar in recent years. It is an ethnically, linguistically and culturally very diverse state, although the collective of communities who identify as Kachin lay claim to this region as their ancestral homeland.

According to the World Bank's multi-dimensional poverty index, Kachin State's capital, Myitkyina, is relatively prosperous even when compared to other major urban centres around the country. Meanwhile, rural areas, especially in the far north of the country, remain extremely impoverished. Myitkyina's relative prosperity is partially a result of its strategic location at the northern-most point of the Irrawaddy River and its connections to historical trans-regional trading routes – from China and Thailand to the east and India to the west – and an associated in-migration of businesses from lower Burma, China and elsewhere.

The underdevelopment of the region is related to its marginalisation from the political centre.

However, the band of economic growth around Myitkyina is very narrow: the railway infrastructure stops at Myitkyina and the roads beyond to the north and west become poor or non-existent a few miles outside the city. Most importantly, locally owned small and medium industries are almost entirely absent. This is despite the natural wealth of the region, including extensive forest exploited for timber, jadeite, gold and other precious metals.

The underdevelopment of the region is related to its marginalisation from the political centre. Armed conflicts have been both a cause and an effect of this marginalisation. Significant challenges to the legitimacy of the Myanmar government commenced with the founding of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in 1961. By 1963, the region was in widespread revolt. Conflict was almost continuous for the next 30 years, with occasional hiatus when political settlements were sought and failed.

Until the 1980s, the most significant confrontations were linked to the triangular conflict between the Myanmar army, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which was backed extensively by China, and the KIA. In areas at the edges of KIA authority, other ethnic armed organisations also emerged, as well as smaller militia groups such as the New Democratic Army – Kachin (NDA-K). Many of these armed organisations have been implicated in the region's opium economy, although the KIA later shifted to suppression of opium poppy cultivation as it sought international support.

In 1994, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) (of which the KIA is the military wing) and the Myanmar army signed a ceasefire agreement. This led to 17 years of armed peace and widespread hope for a better future. It also facilitated a dramatic increase in logging and mining, which caused considerable environmental desecration,[57] and large agri-business

Jade miners injecting heroin in Phakant, Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.

developments (especially rubber and banana plantations), which relied on dispossessing local villagers of their land.

In addition, many inhabitants believe the ceasefire led to an upsurge in harms caused by drug use. These issues help explain the KIO's return to conflict against an increasingly assertive Myanmar army in 2011.[58] This was a time when inhabitants elsewhere in the country were building hopes around a national political transition. Kachin State was largely excluded from related opportunities, such as the surge in aid flows to the country from 2015 onwards, since international actors would mostly only work with and through Myanmar government agencies.

This context has made it very difficult for Kachin people to make their voices heard, nationally and internationally, especially in relation to their experiences of drug harms. This is something we hope to address through this report.

A note on methodology

The key messages presented below draw upon the findings from more than 600 interviews conducted by the research team across Kachin State and Shan State in 2018 and 2019.

Both Shan State and Kachin State are regions of significant ethnic and linguistic diversity. Beyond this territorial definition of 'Kachin' and 'Shan', however, this project works with organisations who self-identify as being of Kachin and Shan ethnicity (which are themselves complex identity labels). This necessarily creates opportunities, as well as constraints, in relation to how much the research team can carry out research that cuts across the multiple linguistic and ethnic dynamics of these two quite vast areas.

The majority of research conducted by the team has been with Shan-identifying and Kachin-identifying populations. Although some interviews have also been conducted with non-Shan/Kachin and non-Shan/Kachin-speaking populations, it is important to emphasise that the research presented here primarily focuses on revealing the perspectives held by Shan and Kachin-identifying populations within these broad territorial units. In light of how little research has been conducted on these issues from these perspectives, this does, however, represent a significant contribution to knowledge.

The field research has primarily focused on interviewing people who do not self-identify, and who are not identified by others as being political elites, either civil or military. Some respondents may have roles that are clearly politicised or where limited local political authority may be attached to their role. But the research offers in every case a more locally grounded set of critical insights into the kinds of 'peace' and 'development' that are actually materialising in the country's borderlands and the ways in which drugs have become entangled in people's everyday lives.

There is a wide array of important insights emerging from this research which we cannot cover in the space available in this report. Instead, we have focused on highlighting insights that recurred frequently in the interviews, resonated strongly in follow-up workshops with research participants and local audiences, and which the research team view as important in engaging with wider audiences on drug issues in Myanmar.

Key messages

1. Rising levels of drug harm is a defining feature of how people have experienced ceasefires and economic development in Kachin State and Shan State

Policymakers often suggest that the key to addressing illicit drug economies lies in reducing levels of armed conflict, strengthening the state and integrating economically and politically 'marginalised' regions. This policy narrative is based on the idea that peacebuilding, statebuilding, economic development and counter-narcotics strategies are mutually reinforcing. However, the perspectives of borderland populations in Myanmar frequently challenge these assumptions.

Although ceasefire agreements helped to reduce levels of outright armed conflict in many areas, they left populations vulnerable to the 'slow violence' of drug misuse. Indeed, people from across Kachin and Shan express concern that drug-related harms have grown in the wake of the ceasefires and associated economic development. This is echoed in the reflections of two elderly men on how their hometown of Chipwi, in northeast Kachin State, changed after the signing of the KIA ceasefire in 1994.

> When I settled down in Chipwi in 1973, I heard that there was opium available but I had never seen it with my own eyes. That time, I did not come across drug addicts. I had not heard about heroin and yaba in the area. After the ceasefire, the Asia World Company came into the area, then road construction started, then the logging started in the area. The heroin started coming in when the area became more populated. Then the local youth started using different kinds of drugs. Many young people started shooting heroin. Many young people passed away because of drugs. *(Elderly resident, Chipwi, northeast Kachin State, 2018)*

> Since the ceasefire period the Chinese came in, people could move around more easily, and drugs started flooding in. Yes, the ceasefire was a good thing but since the ceasefire, drugs became more available. I see it that way. In the past, opium was meant only for elderly people. My uncle on my father's side used opium for 50 years [...] Now young people use drugs in different ways – injecting, inhaling. Just last night a young man died of his drug addiction in this village. I am planning to go to the funeral. He was just 30 years old. *(Elderly resident, Chipwi, northeast Kachin State, 2018)*

People across Shan State also made associations between the ceasefires and an apparent growth in illicit drug production and consumption in their area. This is reflected in the account that follows of how the situation changed under the Pa-O ceasefire in southern Shan State.

> In the past, there were a few poppy plantations in some of the villages around Taunggyi, in Pinlaung and Hsihseng. However, the ceasefire deals allowed the ceasefire and militia groups to control certain territories [...] Since these regions are under their control, poppy plantations and drugs were allowed without any restrictions. Since taxes are imposed on the local farmers for their crops and land, people would grow poppies since they can earn more money more quickly compared to other regular crops. Then the spread of drugs also increased. *(Local politician, Taunggyi, Shan State, 2019)*

Mining (for gold, amber, rare earths and other minerals), logging, and large-scale agribusiness operations expanded across northern Myanmar from the 1990s onwards. The association between these forms of economic development and worsening drug harms was a common theme in many interviews. The reflections of a young man working in the amber mines in Danai – a resource-rich and conflict-affected town in the western part of Kachin State – capture this clearly.

> In the amber mines, many miners used drugs. I started using drug since the nature of work in the mine was so tiresome. When I inhaled the drug I became so energetic. I used heroin, yaba and the like. It depended on how much money I made. Over time I saw more and more amber miners become drug addicts. Here many people perished due to drug use. Here it is difficult to get opium. But heroin and yaba can be found easily. Many miners ruined their lives due to the nature of the mining work. *(Miner, Danai Township, Kachin State, 2018)*

The link between drugs and extractive industries is not new: problematic drug use had long existed in the infamous Hpakant jade mines in Kachin State. However, extractive industries expanded significantly in Kachin State over the last few decades due to the stability created by the ceasefires and the country opening up for trade and investment.

Drug rehabilitation centre, Phakant, Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.

This led to improved road connections, the emergence of various boom towns and a surge in cash circulation, which in turn facilitated and contributed to more widespread drug use. A resident of a village along the Irrawaddy River in Myitkyina Township offered his observations on the links between drugs and development.

> In the past there were some drug users in the village. But it became worse when government allowed Chinese businessmen to do gold mining along the riverbank. They spread drugs as they wished to. They employed villagers as daily labourers. At that time, the pay was just 500 kyats per day. Only after working for ten days we could earn 5,000 kyats. It wasn't much…
>
> But the new gold businesses gave per month 60,000 kyats […] They worked along the riverbank with machines. If they did not use big machines we could still do small-scale gold sluicing. But they just took away whatever they could manage to with their machines. They worked here until 2006 and destroyed everything. They did destroy not just the environment and land; they also destroyed the village community […] So many young people started working, and opium was offered for free. *(Local resident, Myitkyina Township, 2018)*

Whereas people in Kachin State see heroin use as the primary cause of concern, the majority of people interviewed throughout Shan State saw methamphetamines ('yaba') as the most pressing drug issue in their communities. People say that yaba gives users more energy and resilience to work long hours in exhausting jobs. Methamphetamine use has consequently become deeply embedded in working culture in manual and low-skilled sectors, as shown by the reflections of one lady interviewed in Hsipaw, northern Shan State.

> My husband always uses drugs when he goes to work. The boss said if they [the workers] use drugs they can work really hard. When I've gone to sell the oranges, the dealers sell pills like it's a normal market. Everybody can buy them easily. *(Farmer, Hsipaw Township, northern Shan State, 2018)*

People who sell drugs target wage labourers because they have expendable income. A number of interviewees also stated that business owners in the mining, logging and agricultural plantation sectors encourage and facilitate drug use amongst their employees so that they can work harder and for longer. This is shown by a Christian pastor's comments that follow about drug use in Kengtung Township, eastern Shan State.

> The owners of the plantations hire workers to tend their crops by paying both money and yaba. If this wasn't happening, there would only be a few workers who would want to work for them, and the workload of tending the crops would not be finished on time. So, what the employers do is they put yaba in the cans of soft drinks and treat their workers with those soft drinks. Now, the workers do not dare take the soft drinks and water from the plantation's owner, they bring their own water. *(Christian pastor, Kengtung Township, eastern Shan State, 2019)*

Many other testimonies highlight how business owners provide drugs as a way to attract and retain workers in light of growing levels of drug dependency. One worker in Loilem Township, southern Shan State offered his reflections on this practice and its impact on workers' families in the testimony that follows.

> The owner of the mining business gave yaba pills to the stone workers, saying the drugs can make them stronger and healthier. In this way, those workers became addicted to drugs. This is the beginning of drug-related problems amongst the families of those workers. Sometimes they cannot even hire workers if they cannot provide them with drugs…
>
> In the beginning, the workers are provided with one or two pills, but later when they become addicted, they buy the drugs with all the money they make each day, leaving their families unprovided for. *(Miner, Loilem Township, southern Shan State, 2018)*

The link between drugs and the security and authority structures that have accompanied wider economic changes and growing state presence in borderland regions under the ceasefires is also important. This will be dealt with more fully in later outputs from our project.

Army-backed militias (typically called *pyithusit* which translates as 'people's militias') have been deployed as counter-insurgency forces to police local populations and secure sites for economic development. In return, these militias have unofficial permission to run legal and illegal enterprises. This link between drugs and militias is captured in the following testimony of a man in his sixties reflecting on the changes he witnessed in eastern Shan State over the past 20 years.

> Businessmen could produce drugs freely because of 'pyithusit' [people's militias]. They produce in areas under control of 'pyithusit', but 'pyithusit' is backed by the army […] The militia has its people and their families and they want to develop their area, so they have to earn money. That's why they cooperated with businessmen. We say that drug traffickers can 'pass through' militia. They pay taxes to militia so the militia protects them […] From my

point of view, as long as there are militia groups, drugs cannot disappear. *(Resident of Tachiliek, eastern Shan State, 2019)*

A 48-year-old mother also reflected on how drug use has impacted her village in Lashio Township, a militia-controlled area of northern Shan State.

> The militia group holds everything in our village. There are plenty of people who become rich because of selling drugs. Some sell amphetamine and construct a big house. I have five sons. Most of them went to China. The one who has bad legs is left at home. Because we fear they will become addicts, my sons and many villagers go to work in China. They will become drug users if they stay in the village. The government never comes to arrest the people who use drugs and the sellers. *(Farmer, Lashio Township, northern Shan State, 2018)*

Used syringe collection point at a harm reduction site in Phakant, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.

These brief testimonies provide important insights into people's everyday experiences of economic 'development' and political authority in the 1990s and 2000s under the ceasefires. They demonstrate the need for sensitivity in our understanding of the ways in which ceasefires are perceived at a popular level across Kachin State and Shan State, and how these perceptions shape civil society discussions about potential solutions to the harms caused by drugs and the perceived barriers to realising those changes.

2. Opium production is essential to the livelihoods of many poor households. But changing patterns of drug use are creating new forms of vulnerability and poverty

Much of the focus of the international community working on drug issues in Myanmar continues to be on stemming opiate production and trafficking to foreign markets. However, many communities throughout Myanmar's borderlands view rising rates of harmful heroin and methamphetamine use as a more pressing issue than levels of opium cultivation.

Populations in poppy-growing areas often associate opium with various positive impacts. Opium poppy cultivation provides a reliable source of income and thus improved food security. It also generates cash to pay for services such as education and health. And opium itself is used for the treatment of various ailments. In contrast, populations throughout Kachin State and Shan State view rising heroin and methamphetamine use as having a more dramatic and unmanageable impact on society than opium. This is captured clearly in the reflections of a local administrator from Lashio about how the drug situation has changed from the time of his youth in the 1960s to the present day.

When we were young, opium was very important. The one who used opium was rich at that time. Relatives and friends always asked how much opium do you have? If we had a lot, it meant we were rich. In the past, people who used drugs went to bed late but got up early to get to work and did well […] They could work in the field the whole day without resting, if they got enough opium. To use WY [methamphetamine] is easier than opium…

People used to pay 5,000 kyats for a pill. Only some people used it. But now, 500 kyats gets three pills, so everyone can afford to buy it. There are more drug addicts now. Some drug addicts were sent away to escape from this kind of environment. Some were sent away for more than 10 years but when they got back home, they used it again. Before, drugs were only in downtown but now you can find them in every village and town. *(Local administrator, Lashio, northern Shan State, 2018)*
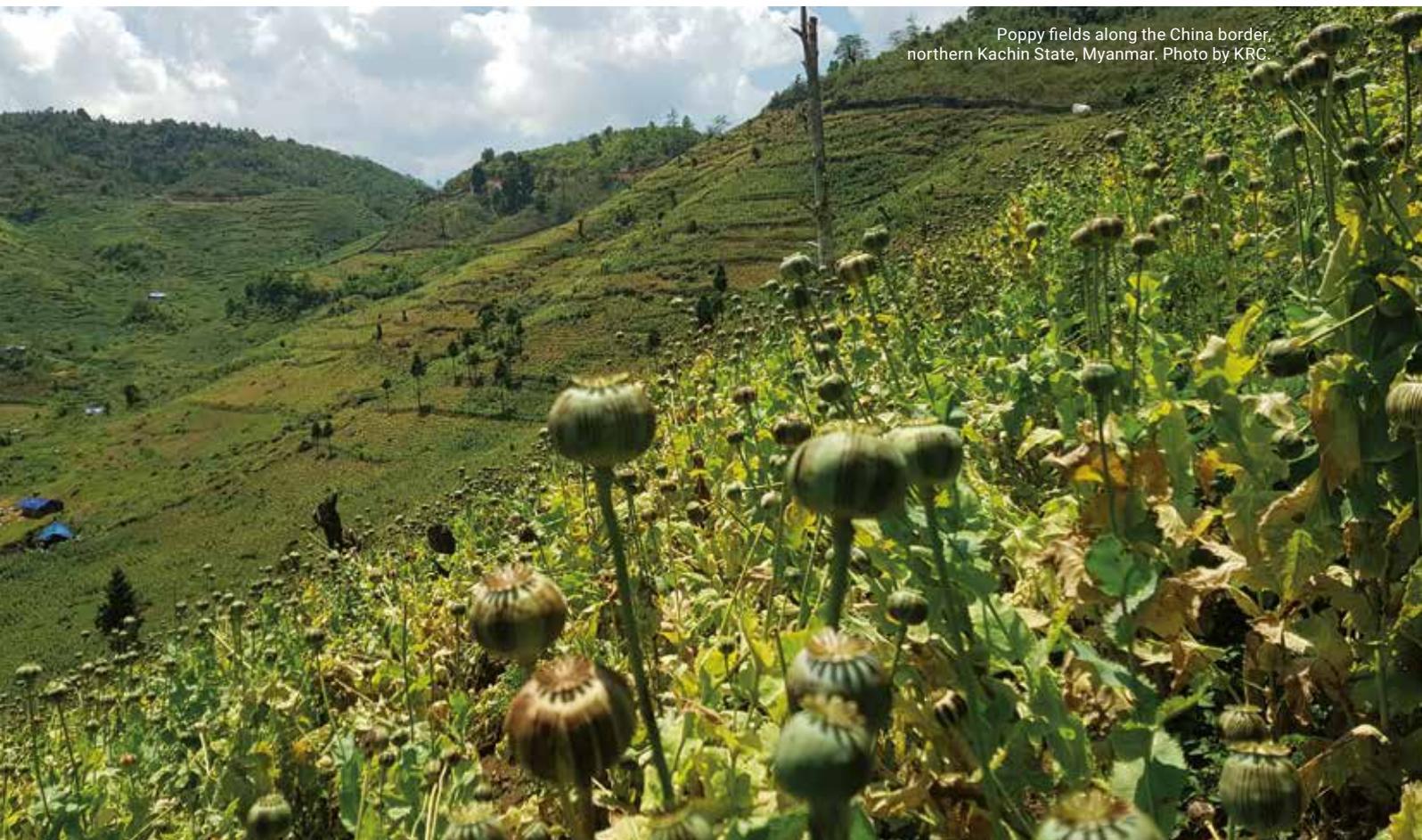
Poppy fields along the China border, northern Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.

These sentiments were also common throughout Kachin State, shown in the following testimony from an elderly man in Chipwi.

> In the past, though the opium users used opium they still worked, the opium use even helped them to do more work. But now we see drug users injecting drugs. Since needles and syringes are easily available, kids start using drugs […] Different types of drug are flooding into Chipwi area, and in the future, I foresee that the drug addiction problem will be even worse. *(Elderly resident, Chipwi, northeast Kachin State, 2018)*

These changing patterns of drug use have become an important, albeit often overlooked, dimension of the poverty and vulnerability experienced by many households across Kachin State and Shan State. Approximately one in three people in these states live below the national poverty line.[59] The material, physical and emotional impacts of harmful drug use have been significant for many families already struggling with poverty, and in ways that often have specific gendered dimensions. These include the extra costs that families incur because of drug use, as discussed by a woman in her thirties from Kengtung in eastern Shan State.

> I'm the first of five siblings and the only woman. The rest are men. The brother after me took many drugs. My second brother injected heroin and became addicted. I asked my friend to send him to Loi Tai Leng [The headquarters of the Shan State Army/Restoration Council of Shan State]. We found out he has HIV and needs to take medicine…
>
> While my brothers were using drugs, my father and I were the only breadwinners. My two younger brothers were still in school. At that time, my two brothers who used drugs often stole property such as motorbikes. I had to pay compensation whenever my brothers stole from others. I only had a small salary. After I paid the compensation sometimes there was nothing to eat at my house. *(Civil society organisation worker, Kengtung, eastern Shan State, 2019)*

Drug use can also cause loss of income as family members become too incapacitated to work, wages are spent on drugs and/or because assets are sold to buy drugs. These issues are clearly illustrated in the following testimony from a woman in Namtu Township in northern Shan State.

> Drugs destroyed our family, I really don't like it, we will never be successful. Even if we have a car or valuable things, there will be nothing left. Even if we have just 1kg or 2kg of rice, he [my husband]

exchanges it for drugs. He started [taking drugs] when our first son had just passed away, he was sad. His friends gave him drugs. He told me that if he used it, it could make him better. I told him not to use because we didn't have money like other people. We have now been married for 14 or 15 years but our lives haven't improved…

He went to the Loi army [Ta'ang National Liberation Army] to quit for one year. When he came back home, he was heavier and more handsome but after he went out with his friends, he used it again. When he tried to work, he got pains in his stomach, so he came back home and asked me for money for drugs and rested. He even pledged the title deed [for the house] for 60,000 kyats. He did work at the farm for 15 days but only gave 300 kyats [US$ 0.20] for his daughter. I want him to be a good person and work like other people and improve our family, but he doesn't. *(Farmer, Namtu Township, northern Shan State, 2018)*

A Kachin farmer from Mogaung Township also discussed how drug use can erode family relationships and undermine the support networks that are important for households going through tough times, in the following testimony.

> It has been 20 years I have been using opium. I was 18 years old that time. I started using heroin four or five years ago. I got married when I was 36 years old. My wife put up with me for some time when she knew that I was a drug addict. I had two children with her. When we were newly married I stopped using for a while. But the situation got worse. I have been to rehab centres in Yangon. I also went to rehab centres in the KIO-controlled area. But my family just splintered…
>
> Since I became a drug addict my wife left for a foreign country. My children are now living with my paternal aunt…So my life became meaningless. After that I started using heroin again. I leased our cow and with the money I used drugs. My siblings also said that as long as I am a drug addict they will no longer accept me. I only have my aunt caring for me. She is the one looking after my children. She is living on government pension. In the past I was quite depressed and would even think of committing suicide. *(Farmer, Mogaung Township, Kachin State, 2018)*

Worsening levels of drug use are also perceived to have undermined community solidarity and mutual support mechanisms that in the past assisted households during times of need or in managing the costs of certain events such as weddings and funerals. A Pa-O civil society organisation leader described this situation in the interview that follows.

> All villages have their own rules, you know, rules to follow. In my village all young people must do social service in the community. If you are 16 or finished school you have to automatically become a member of the village social work group. So in that group we have rules, and if you do not follow the rules we won't help you…
>
> If you get married we are not going to help you, for your wedding, something like that. These rules also try to stop young people using drugs. According to that rule, if you use drugs you have to leave the village [...] They try to control the situation like this. But now the situation is very difficult to control. In some villages most of the young people use drugs. We have the rule but the rule is broken. *(Civil society organisation leader, Taunggyi Township, southern Shan State, 2018)*

Harmful drug use had been seen as an issue confined to sectors of the population in certain risk areas, for example, male labourers in mining areas. But people now perceive it as a part of everyday life affecting a wide cross-section of society, including women and children. This was a common narrative in countless interviews. The comments made by a community leader from Mong Pan in southern Shan State illustrate this.

> Nowadays, yaba can be found everywhere. Before the price of a pill of yaba here was 1,800 kyats. Now, three or four pills can be bought with 1,000 kyats. Normally, a poor student would have pocket money of between 200 and 500 kyats while those from a wealthy family may have something between 500 and 1,000 kyats. The son of a teacher from 8th grade became addicted and his parents have been so heartbroken because of it. That boy explained that he became a drug addict because he could buy a pill of yaba with just 200 kyats. *(Community leader, Mong Pan Township, southern Shan State, 2018)*

These testimonies offer insights into how drug use has become an important dimension of poverty and vulnerability across Kachin and Shan State. Thus, interventions aimed at alleviating poverty and livelihood insecurity need to pay greater attention to the impact of drug use. This creates challenges and the need for nuanced responses. In many upland regions, opium cultivation remains essential to the livelihood strategies of many poor households. At the same time, rising levels of drug use, especially heroin and methamphetamines, have placed severe pressures on families and communities.

3. Young people have become particularly vulnerable to drug-related harms in Myanmar's borderlands

The impact of drug use on young people[60] is a particular concern throughout Shan and Kachin State. Although hard to quantify, there is a strong sense that young people are disproportionately impacted by drugs and that this will have a significant and damaging impact on society for years to come. Drug use amongst children (sometimes as young as eleven or twelve) and young adults is commonly attributed to a combination of naivety, low levels of education and a lack of knowledge about drugs, and absence of family oversight.

This is especially true if children have to travel to school, are studying at university, or if their parents have migrated to work. Moreover, peer pressure (mostly amongst young men) and 'youth's nature' of wanting to explore and try new things plays a big role. All of these factors are present in an environment where drugs are cheap and easy to access. A Burmese man in his twenties from Taunggyi captured some of these issues, echoing the experiences of many other young people we interviewed.

Poppy farm in Chipwi Township, Kachin State (KRC).

I was 20, and a tenth standard student, when I started using opium. It is youth's nature to want to try anything. And like cigarettes and alcohol, it was within reach. It has lasted now for eight years. I drank it mixed with cough syrup. It was known as 'Formula'. At first, it was only once in a while. Later I began to use it every day…

The feeling was strong and made me feel dizzy at first. But it was still pleasant, unlike getting drunk with alcohol. As it went on, it became a burden economically and socially. So I decided to quit. For the first week, I was delirious. When I went to the private clinic the detox medication there wasn't strong enough. So I went back using. Then I went to a different clinic. Still, I went back to using drugs again. *(Resident of Taunggyi Township, southern Shan State, 2018)*

Many interviews draw attention to the ease with which young people can access drugs, compared to the difficulty of accessing support. This is especially true outside of major cities like Taunggyi, where access to treatment is very limited. Families' desperation, coupled with the lack of education and services, has exposed young people to further harms. A worker at a drug treatment centre in Tachilek described the situation of some patients arriving from rural areas in the following interview.

Their addiction was so serious that in some of the cases, their parents would tie them up before they could seek […] help from the authorities, whom they have no idea where and how to approach. Finally, they found their way to us and got the patient admitted to our rehabilitation centre. Once they get here, you could even see the infections from the wounds that they got from being tied around wrists and hands. *(Drug treatment centre worker, Tachiliek, eastern Shan State, 2019)*

Schools and universities have become common sites for drug use, which has magnified associated harms among young people in particular. In the following testimony, a man who started using heroin whilst studying at Monyin University described the drug situation on campus.

Drug use in the university campus became so serious around 2005. You would find used syringes and needles scattered around toilets and bushes at the back of the university campus. You see the rear side of the campus…

Heroin is freely available, but not always. Some days you will find a crowd assembled there. The campus has become a favourite spot for drug dealers as well. Some dealers came to sell by motorbike from a far place. They put heroin in a plastic straw. You can get it for 1,000 or 2,000 kyats. *(Monyin University alumni, Kachin State, 2018.)*

Young people from rural areas often travel long distances each day to attend school and university or live in boarding houses during term time. This has become increasingly common since the ceasefires, as declining levels of armed conflict improved mobility. As a result, more young people were able to access education, but also experienced greater exposure to illicit drugs. This is just one of a number of reasons why people express frustration and resentment about the legacy of the ceasefires.

Drug use amongst young people is often attributed to their inability to control themselves, to overcome temptation, or to act responsibly. These narratives commonly have strong religious connotations, and are also often internalised by those who use drugs and blame their addiction on their own perceived weaknesses, or a weakness they believe they have inherited. A Shan man in his twenties offered insights into attitudes surrounding drugs.

I started using 'Formula' in 2010. I wasn't successful in my work, I despaired and wanted to forget everything. Alcohol failed to help me. Then a new friend said, 'Try this', and I did. My parents brought a doctor to do a check-up. And he informed them that I had become a 'junkie'…

So I tried to quit by locking and tying myself up in my room. How many times have I tried to quit, but every time I return to 'Formula'. You may hate her but you never forget her […] My present work is indoor electric wiring…

When working, I only use a small amount. My employer, looking at my complexion, knows what I am and pays me less than normal. I don't like it, but I can't complain. I know I can quit, if I only have the strength. I read a lot of religious books. Still I can't make myself quit. *(Resident of Taunggyi, southern Shan State, 2018)*

However, people's testimonies also emphasise the need to understand the wider social, political and economic factors that have created an environment in which young people are particularly vulnerable to drug-related harms. They draw attention, for example, to how young people use drugs – and alcohol – as a coping mechanism, in response to the pressures they face. This is particularly true in a society where opportunities do not match aspirations and expectations. The reflections of a youth worker in Taunggyi are instructive in this regard.

Most of the young people who graduated from university don't have job opportunities. They just go back home. In my community if you already graduated parents believe that you can get a job with the government, a company or with an NGO.

If you continue your education in university the cost is very high. But if you go back and do nothing after you graduated people will pressure you…

They say: 'You already graduated so why don't you do something like other people?' 'Why did we educate them because after they graduated, they are going to work like us?' It's a lot of pressure for young people. And also even if you finished university we don't have any skill for our lives. Education is not very good [...] This is a lot of pressure for young people. So some, they use drugs, some also alcohol. *(Youth worker, Taunggyi, southern Shan State, 2019)*

This view was also echoed in the following testimony of a Kachin pastor from Monyin.

Young people do not have job opportunities. They have fewer opportunities to work outside the Church and even the Church can't offer many job opportunities. Look at Monyin, there is only one bank. You cannot find Kachin staff working there. And there are no job opportunities for Kachin youth in the government sector…

Therefore, many young Kachin people turn to drugs. Drug use became more serious here after 2013 when the jade mining was accessible for a short period for the general public, and Monyin became a busy town. Young people could work in the mining sector for a short period and with it many young people turned to drugs. *(Kachin pastor, Monyin, Kachin State, 2018)*

The testimonies collected during our research demonstrate that young people face a double

vulnerability: they are vulnerable both to the physical and social harms caused by drug use; and they are vulnerable to the harms caused by some of the responses to drugs. These include punishment-based responses and the stigma associated with drug use, both of which often prevent people from seeking help.

This presents a particular challenge for female drug users who remain a largely 'hidden population'. This is due to the lack of services for women and the greater stigma attached to female drug use. A woman in her early twenties, interviewed in Taunggyi, offered her reflections on how drug use has impacted her life in the following testimony.

I started using 'Formula' when I was 19, in second year of university. My mother died and my father remarried. My stepmother and I were not so much different in age. I quarrelled with [my father] and refused to return home even on the holidays. Then my boyfriend said, 'Here's the cure for your blues. Drink it!', and I did. I became hooked. He was caught one and a half years ago and is in jail…

Then I had to start buying the drug myself. I thought about quitting. But, as a woman, it's difficult to get treatment at a hospital. And I don't trust the hospital. One of my friends got treatment and when he went back home was arrested. I tried quitting by myself. I suffered so much I felt like dying, getting almost crazy. People are also avoiding me, especially after the arrest of my boyfriend. Eight months after, I visited my boyfriend. He was sentenced to 15 years. He wept and I wept. His family wasn't happy with me; they blamed me for their son's plight. *(Taunggyi resident, southern Shan State, 2018)*

Drug use site in a graveyard in Tachileik, Shan State, Myanmar. Photo by SHAN.

Reflections

On guard after burning a coca laboratory near Tumaco, Colombia. Photo by AP Photo/William Fernando Martinez.

This report has sought to provide a fine-grained understanding of illicit drug economies by engaging with the everyday lives and local perspectives of borderland communities in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

While each country, and each borderland, has a unique history and experience of illicit drug economies, violence and development, to the extent possible, we have drawn out some of the differences and

similarities across the cases. Future work will seek to develop a more systematic set of comparative insights.

Below we reflect on some of the key messages that emerge from this engagement with the borderlands and their implications in relation to war-to-peace transitions, illicit economies and processes of development, and the role of drugs in the everyday lives of borderland communities.

War-to-peace transitions

There are deeply contextualised relationship between drugs, war, violence and peace. These relationships often manifest themselves very differently in the borderlands than at the national level. But a very strong message coming from the borderlands is that chronic and deadly violence is a daily reality and a huge obstacle to human flourishing. For policymakers, targeting these different forms of violence must be an urgent priority. Otherwise the escape routes out of a reliance on illicit economies will remain blocked for borderland communities.

The violence of peace

The voices from the borderlands raise troubling questions about what kind of peace is brought about through negotiated settlements and who is peace for? Peace agreements and ceasefires may address one form of violence, but unleash others – especially in borderland regions.

A recurring narrative from all our borderland research sites is the failure of peace processes to address the needs and aspirations of borderland communities. The everyday realities of 'peace' in the borderlands are often chronic insecurity, precarious livelihoods and a distant and often arbitrary state – conditions that push communities into a closer relationship with illicit economies.

Far from experiencing a smooth transition from 'war' to 'peace', in many places violence and instability increased and illicit activities expanded following ceasefires and/or peace agreements.

New forms of violence

Borderland communities referred to, and experienced, a wide range of forms of individual and collective violence.

These include continued large-scale violence involving government forces and armed rebels in northern Myanmar and Nangarhar province in Afghanistan; the violence associated with counter-narcotics policies and interventions, including the spraying and forced eradication of coca in Colombia; the bombing of drugs labs in Afghanistan, and interdiction efforts on the Nimroz border so that smuggling networks become increasingly militarised; the 'slow violence' linked to exploitative labour practices and extensive drug (ab)use in Shan and Kachin States; or the use or threat of coercion in order to close, police and manage borders.

In many cases, these heterogeneous but intermingled forms of violence are occurring simultaneously, creating forms of insecurity that are unpredictable and make it difficult for borderland communities to plan and invest in their futures. At the same time, those living in the borderlands are 'agents' as well as 'victims' of violence, taking up arms on behalf of, or to resist the state, to gain a livelihood, to enrich themselves, to seek revenge or to protect their family and community.

Which violence counts

Interviews frequently reveal a disjuncture between international/national and borderland narratives about violence. For example, the former typically focus on anti-state violence as the most salient and existential threat, while the latter often highlight violence linked to counter-narcotics policies meted out by state or para-state forces, or the slow violence linked to drug use.

Although violence is an everyday reality in the borderlands, and violent events are the defining moments and reference points in people's lives, these do not map neatly onto external or national accounts of the conflict.

Perhaps surprisingly, some borderland inhabitants in Putumayo and Nangarhar talked about life being more secure during 'wartime' when the FARC and the Taliban (respectively) were in control of their borderlands. And subsequently, they reflected on how life had become less secure because there were now more wielders of violence and the rules of the game were far more uncertain. This is a sharp reminder that some forms of violence are more visible than others, and count as being more important because of who or what they threaten.

Mutating violence

Thus, peace processes and post-war transitions may mutate or displace violence out into the state margins. National-level stability, increasing economic integration and state presence can bring new forms of violence and exploitation and dismantle some of the coping mechanisms established during wartime.

Meanwhile, licit economies may be no less violent than illicit activities. For example, jade mining in Kachin state and the oil industry in Putumayo have been associated with very high levels of physical and structural violence.

Puerto Asís, Colombia. Photo by Frances Thomson/Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Borderland development

The relationship between illicit drugs and development processes is neither fixed nor straightforward. It varies at different points in the value chain, as shown by the experiences of those involved in production, trading and consumption. It also shifts over time, as drug economies themselves change and mutate, altering the distribution of costs and benefits for borderland communities.

There is a need to think more carefully about how to mitigate the harms caused by external interventions and to ensure these harms are not borne by the most vulnerable.

Notwithstanding the complexities of the drugs-development nexus, the fact that drugs can contribute to processes of development, raises significant questions for development actors who see poverty alleviation and reducing illegal drug production as mutually reinforcing policy goals. Counter-narcotic programmes may perversely lead to 'policy-induced poverty'. Therefore, there is a need to think more carefully about how to mitigate the harms caused by external interventions and to ensure these harms are not borne by the most vulnerable.

Drugs driving development

While drugs are typically framed as a development 'problem' driving armed conflict, the voices in this report present a more complex picture.

In frontier boom towns in Afghanistan and Myanmar, drugs have provided the start-up capital for investment in other enterprises, which in turn act as a magnet for inward investment.

We have seen how in Colombia, coca growing, picking and processing have allowed marginalised populations to secure livelihoods and send children to school or university, or to access healthcare. The coca economy has also enabled communities to invest in basic infrastructure, such as roads or schools. that the state is not providing. In frontier boom towns in Afghanistan and Myanmar, drugs have provided the start-up capital for investment in other enterprises, which in turn act as a magnet for inward investment.

Conversely, the revenue from drugs may flow in the opposite direction, acting as an engine of growth at the centre, fuelling property market booms in capital cities and getting laundered into the banking sector and/or licit businesses.

Rather than being a source of poverty and insecurity, drug economies can often become an important lifeline and safety net for marginalised populations. In effect they *are* the alternative development.

Development driving drug production and use

This relationship works both ways. Drug economies may stimulate development, as shown above, but they can also be a response to processes of development. Economic development does not always dismantle illicit drug economies; for example, it can generate forms of marginality that push excluded groups into the production, trafficking or consumption of drugs.

We saw this through the voices in northern Myanmar, where increased mobility and connectivity, expanding cross-border trade and improved security all served to enable the extension of drug networks into new areas.

Drug use may often be a coping mechanism for dealing with the rapid political, economic and social change brought about by development. In the Myanmar-China borderlands massive inflows of capital have resulted in the emergence of frontier boom towns. These have been associated with processes of dispossession and displacement; the replacement of subsistence farming with large-scale agro-industry, and the emergence of new forms of employment.

The latter are often arduous jobs such as in mining and logging in remote places away from families. These developments have all been associated with rises in drug consumption.

The distributive impacts of drug economies

This complex relationship between drugs and development caution against simplistic narratives of drugs as 'good' or 'bad' for development and poverty alleviation. Instead, we need to focus our analysis on the distributive impacts of drug economies, asking: Who benefits and who loses? Of course, the answer to this question is highly context- and time-specific.

Drugs and everyday lives

Drug economies are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of the people in borderland regions. Rather than being helpless victims, in many cases, drugs give borderlanders agency and are an important social safety net. Nevertheless, this does have serious trade-offs, increased risk and violence being the most pervasive.

For policymakers this implies bringing a borderland perspective into thinking and practice, and developing approaches that are more granular and work with the grain of local institutions and social structures.

It also means taking seriously the agency and voice of borderland communities; building alliances with groups that represent marginal actors, and supporting participatory processes. And, as a minimum, policymakers need to be aware of the difficult trade-offs that people face and ensure their policies and programmes do not make them even tougher or impossible for borderland communities to manage.

Contextualising drug economies

In the borderlands we study, licit and illicit commodities and substances are entangled with one another and local notions of licit and illicit may differ from state-based definitions. In Colombia for example, *cocaleros* ('coca growers') are adamant about calling themselves *campesinos* ('peasant farmers'). This challenges perceptions that they are rich narco criminals. In fact, many are farmers who cultivate several crops, of which coca plants, albeit slightly more profitable are just one.

Similarly, Afghan traders smuggle opium and heroin alongside cigarettes, fuel and other goods across the Afghan-Iran border.

This intermingling of licit and illicit commodities does not involve sharp normative or legal distinctions from the trader's point of view. This is not to deny that illegality brings specific risks (as well as opportunities). These include for example the potential for violence, sudden loss of income due to crop eradication for the farmer, or the risk of imprisonment or the need to pay large bribes faced by the smuggler.

Drug economies in these regions also have long histories, involving repeated cycles of 'war' and 'peace', shifts in the distribution of drug cultivation, trafficking and use within the borderlands, and new innovations and technological change related to drug production and new substances.

Given the extended timeframes of armed conflict and drug production (in all three countries, at least three to four decades), we can see significant inter-generational shifts in perceptions around, and engagement with, drug economies.

For example, in Colombia, interviews revealed inter-generational learning in terms of changing patterns of investment of the proceeds of drug economies. Current coca growers talked about how they no longer engaged in conspicuous consumption, as the previous generation had, but instead invested their income carefully in their children's education, healthcare and household necessities.

In Myanmar, older generations reflect on the importance of poppy cultivation as a livelihood strategy, and opium use as social and recreational activity. In contrast, younger generations emphasise the destructive force of rising drug use, undermining the human and social capital of the borderlands.

Therefore, understanding today's drug economies requires being attuned to how they are imbued with different meanings and practices according to the experiences of successive generations of people in the borderlands.

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Agency and social mobilisation

Communities involved in drug economies are frequently represented as victims who are forced, through necessity or outright coercion, to participate. Yet our fieldwork shows that farmers, traders and consumers all assert, and in many cases, enhance their agency through their engagement in drug economies.

In Colombia, profits from the coca plant have led to the construction of public goods and communal infrastructure through shared labour. In Afghanistan, traders based in Nimroz, bordering Iran, organised to negotiate tax concessions and security with the Taliban, to ensure trading routes remained open.

Other forms of social mobilisation have taken the form of resistance to drugs bans. For example, tribal networks in Afghanistan's Nangahar province repeatedly mobilised against international, government and Taliban drug bans. Similarly, *cocaleros* unions in Colombia's northern region led collective resistance against bans on drug production. These forms of resistance of otherwise marginal communities is emblematic of the agency of borderland communities who often see drug economies as a way of renegotiating and challenging their marginality.

Yet, local communities, as well as exercising agency in defence of their right to cultivate drug crops, also mobilise in response to drug consumption and the so-called 'evil of addiction'. Pat Jasan, Myanmar's best-known anti-drug organisation, is an example of how grassroots mobilisation against drugs can become entangled in broader ethno-nationalist anxieties about the 'corrupting' influence of the central state.[61]

Trade-offs and ambiguities

The war on drugs and its operationalisation through counter-narcotics policies and programmes attempts to draw clear 'battle lines' and sharp distinctions between the legal and illegal, state and non-state, 'narcos' and citizens. Yet the voices from the borderlands reveal the ambiguities, fuzzy boundaries and trade-offs surrounding people's everyday involvement in illicit drug economies.

There are many disjunctures between the external, official narratives and the daily lived experiences of borderlanders. Presented from the outside as a war against drugs, for those on the receiving end it is often seen as a 'war against people'. Drug policies and legal frameworks prioritise punishment and confrontation. But at the same time, drug economies perform the role of a 'safety net', substituting for many of the developmental and welfare provision roles that the states are unable or unwilling to perform in borderland regions.

Moral condemnation of drugs as 'evil' and the stigmatisation of those involved, sits alongside the reality of drugs as the only mechanism for (modest) empowerment in environments where legal markets can deliver few benefits to those on the margins.

Notwithstanding the numerous welfare and developmental roles that illicit drug economies have come to perform for borderland communities, this does not mean they necessarily provide an escape route from, or antidote to the 'pathologies of the margins'.

Engagement with drug economies comes with major risks and trade-offs. Small-scale farmers and traders particularly, are locked in a Faustian pact. Drugs cultivation and trading can smooth over subsistence crises and provide short-term incomes. But this comes with major risks linked to violence, eradication or interdiction. Those involved lack any legal mechanisms to mediate disputes, make claims on the state or to protect themselves from predatory behaviour. In many respects drug economies enable borderland communities to cope and survive, but not to transform the structures that keep them marginal.

Moral condemnation of drugs as 'evil' and the stigmatisation of those involved, sits alongside the reality of drugs as the only mechanism for (modest) empowerment in environments where legal markets can deliver few benefits to those on the margins.

In moving forward on this project, a key challenge will be to identify and find ways of addressing these 'drivers of marginality' that prevent borderland communities from flourishing and force them into a closer embrace with illicit drug economies.

Policy implications

Rethink the drugs-development nexus

- Drug economies cannot be tackled primarily as a crime and security issue. They must be treated as a long-term development issue.

- Illicit drug economies challenge conventional ways of thinking about development and state fragility.

- There is no stable, fixed relationship between drugs and development; it is two-way, contextual and often counter-intuitive. Illicit economies may contribute to development, and development may push people into illicit economies.

- Efforts to counter drugs may undermine progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Develop drug-sensitive policies for conflict management and peacebuilding

- Ceasefires and peace agreements can expose borderland populations to new and different forms of violence. These need to be better understood.

- Drugs revenues can fund the pursuit of 'war' and 'peace', order and disorder.

- Counter-narcotic interventions can exacerbate and escalate violent conflict. This is often worst in borderland regions.

- Sustainable post-war transitions that address illicit economies require priority to be given to reducing violence and building peace in borderland regions.

- In order to bring about sustainable post-war transitions in drug-affected borderlands, there is a need to prioritise violence reduction and peacebuilding.

- To be effective, peace processes need to incorporate analysis of illicit economies, and make provisions for addressing them.

Recognise and manage trade-offs

- Getting beyond the drugs, development and peacebuilding impasse means recognising the tensions in pursuing these different goals; trade-offs are unavoidable.

- All policies create winners and losers. Being conscious of who the losers are is crucial in ensuring that the most vulnerable do not bear the primary costs of policies.

- People involved in illicit economies have to make day-to-day trade-offs to survive. Avoid policies and programmes that make these trade-offs impossible to manage.

Mitigate harms

- It may not be possible to design interventions that 'do no harm'. A more realistic approach involves mitigating harms and avoiding policy-induced violence and poverty.

- Focus less on eradicating drug economies, and more on mitigating the harms experienced by the most vulnerable.

- Mitigate the harms caused by drugs, development and stabilisation efforts in borderland regions by explicitly monitoring their effects on security, livelihoods and health.

Incorporate borderland perspectives

- Actively engage with borderland perspectives, to better understand and address the factors that generate engagement in illicit economies.

- Use participatory approaches and political economy frameworks to develop strategies to promote the interests of marginal groups and overcome the silences.

- Build alliances and partnerships with social and political groupings that represent or are composed of marginal groups, including those engaged in illicit economies.

- Question and counter the stigmatisation and stereotypes surrounding borderland communities involved in illicit economies.

- Integrate regional perspectives and ways of working into analysis and programming.

Promote drug- and conflict-sensitive development in borderland regions

- Think and act with a long term, inter-generational perspective, recognising how drug economies shift over time and have different effects on people of different ages.

- Build inclusion into all dimensions of borderland programming; explicitly address factors leading to marginalisation, exclusion and stigmatisation.

Endnotes

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4   See, for example: IDPC (2018). *Taking stock: A decade of drug policy*. A civil society shadow report. IDPC - International Drug Policy Consortium.

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47   Bamar is an ethnic identifier for people who often simply call themselves 'Burmese'. However, Burmese/Myanmar is also the national identifier that can incorporate communities who are not Bamar. To clarify: the Shan and Kachin communities with whom this project works may be identified as Burmese, but they would not be called Bamar.

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