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A viable alternative: Curbing illicit drugs through development

Four million peasant farmers are harnessed by poverty and drug lords to the cultivation of coca leaf and opium poppy. Most would rather be doing something else. The UN is showing them a way out.

The Story

The fight against illicit drugs hardly lacks media spotlight, especially when authorities intercept a large shipment or arrest a drug kingpin. Far less visible – but no less important – are efforts to nip the blight in its bud, so to speak, by curbing the cultivation of illicit drug crops such as coca leaf and opium poppy, which often remain the sole source of income for an estimated four million desperately poor farmers worldwide. Enter “alternative development” -- a process that offers legal options to communities dependent on income from illicit activities. This is “the only way ahead to combat illicit activities from inside, working on farmers’ well-being rather than on their fears,” says Antonio Maria Costa, the head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Turkey and Thailand were the first countries in the world to succeed in the sustainable elimination of illicit opium cultivation, thanks to Government will and the provision of alternative livelihoods. The Thai Government worked closely with the UN on projects in the nation's highlands that offered poor ethnic minority villagers and farmers economic alternatives to drug crops. In Colombia, the UN agency teamed up with the Government and the supermarket giant Carrefour to wean farmers from illicit crops by assuring them of income from legal activities. Carrefour gives free space in its supermarkets to the produce from such projects and even buys the products at a loss during market downturns. In Laos, UNODC is helping the Government to meet a pledge to end opium cultivation by the end of this year, removing some five tons of heroin from the international drug market. For the world's third highest illicit opium producing country, this is a steep challenge, but remarkable gains have already been made.

The Context

- There are an estimated 4 million growers of illicit crops, most living below the poverty line, with roughly 50 per cent of their income realized through drug-crop cultivation.
- Experience has shown that, given alternative income options, farmers and their families are quick to abandon drug cultivation and embrace legitimate opportunities to make a living.
- Since 1974, Turkey has been free of illicit opium cultivation. Licit poppy cultivation is continuing, without diversions, to serve medical needs.
- Thailand has been opium free since 1993. In less than a decade, Laos and Myanmar have reduced opium production by 78 per cent.
- Colombia is the world's leading supplier of coca/cocaine; in 2003, it produced 67 per cent of the global supply of cocaine. But it has decreased its coca cultivation by nearly 50 per cent, from 160,100 hectares to 86,000 hectares in 2003.
- Goods produced as part of UNODC's Colombian alternative development programme generated \$ 2 million in 2004, with Carrefour accounting for over half of those sales.

(more)

- In Afghanistan, an alternative development project includes promotion of opportunities for self-employment and small-scale commercial enterprises, introduction of a rural credit system, and training programmes for women in basic family health and livestock production, but faces daily the challenge presented by continued instability and insecurity in many areas.

Useful links

UN Office on Drugs and Crime: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/index.html>

Alternative Development: http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/alternative_development.html

For further information

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