

Lessons To Learn

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Introduction

"A cleaner enters an empty hall at the United Nations building in New York to prepare the room for an important meeting. A voice-over explains: 'Here in this room, on the 8th, 9th and 10th of June, world leaders will join forces to confront the drugs problem'. As the cleaner sprays cleaning liquid onto a globe, the scene cuts to a roaring helicopter spraying herbicides. There follow images of burning drugs crops, heavily armed soldiers and a farmer processing coffee. At the end, the voice concludes: 'A drug free world - we can do it!'"

This is a commercial produced by the United Nations Drugs Control Programme (UNDCP) to rally support for the UN General Assembly Special Session to Counter the World Drug Problem Together (UNGASS). The UNDCP, as the organiser, hopes the meeting will raise the profile of drugs issues and place the agency at the centre of a revitalised global approach to drugs.

At the meeting, a series of declarations and action plans on a variety of issues will be tabled. Delegates to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs have worked an entire year on these documents with positive results: the first global action plan on reducing the demand for drugs has been drafted; important considerations such as human rights, environmental protection and gender have been incorporated into many of the texts; the necessity of finding a balance between supply and demand approaches to drugs control has also been recognised.

Tackling drugs problems, however, involves more than words. What matters most is how such ideas will be put into action. We can gain some insight from the commercial the UNDCP sponsored. Advertising agencies are experts in capturing the essence of a message and in 60 seconds, a 'balanced approach' to drugs control is turned into a 'War on Drugs'.

Pino Arlacchi, the UNDCP's Executive Director, has been busy trying to galvanise international political support for the agency's fight against drugs. Although the UNDCP usually avoids controversial military metaphors in articulating its anti-drugs strategies, Arlacchi invoked such images at a press conference in Vienna: 'The war on drugs has not been fought and lost,' he said, 'it has never started.'

At the heart of the UNDCP's strategy is a plan called SCOPE, Strategy for Coca and Opium Poppy Elimination. According to the UNDCP, SCOPE's innovative global approach will bring new confidence and resolve to rooting out the problem of drugs. Serious questions remain as to how this plan will be implemented and what effect it will have on its target countries.

Learning From the Past?

The original impetus for a Special Session on drugs came from the Mexican government in 1993 which proposed a summit to reflect on the effectiveness and viability of drugs-control strategies over the past decade. Since then, the focus has shifted away from critical evaluation to strengthening and expanding current strategies. One of the goals of UNGASS is to encourage the full ratification of UN drugs conventions (1961, 1971, 1988) by all member states, yet little attention is being paid to whether these conventions still serve their original purpose.

The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, for example, stipulated that coca chewing, a traditional practice with great cultural and spiritual value amongst indigenous peoples in the Andes, is illegal. It further set down guidelines in which both coca chewing and recreational cannabis use would be eliminated world-wide 25 years from the original ratification of the convention. Thirty seven years later, we have still not learned the lesson.

One of SCOPE's more controversial elements is the establishment of the year 2008 as a target date for the total elimination of illicit coca and opium poppy crops. Because of strong opposition from certain sectors, this target date was softened somewhat to include the possibility of achieving 'significant measurable results.' Nevertheless, the date will be an integral part of the declarations

signed in the UNGASS.

Setting unrealistic target dates is nothing new. In 1994, the Bolivian government created 'Option Zero', a plan for the total elimination of illicit coca. Four years later, a new government led by ex-dictator Hugo Banzer is still making promises through a new plan to eliminate coca in five years. At best such targets can be seen as political posturing, at worst they divert valuable attention and resources from longer-term solutions.

Persistent Crop

Experience in Latin America has shown that total crop eradication is an extremely difficult path to take. In the past ten years there has been no net eradication of coca. Many factors – such as the 'balloon effect' in which crop production is pushed from one area to another, much in the same way air in a balloon is displaced – have contributed to this.

Eradication efforts, led by considerable pressure and support from the United States, have also resulted in human rights abuses, the undermining of democratic processes and environmental damage. The pressures created by linking eradication to target dates are guaranteed to exacerbate these problems.

No formal recognition of the need to re-evaluate these, or any other, approaches has been included in the UNGASS. A committee was established to 'recommend how to strengthen future international cooperation against illicit drugs, and to identify measures aimed at reinforcing UNDCP's activities in the field of drug control.' With its mandate so clearly focused, however, the final conclusion is likely to be 'escalation', not re-evaluation.

III. Paying the Price

Under the SCOPE plan, eight countries have been identified as priority areas, most of whom are counted amongst the world's poorest. (1)Bolivia, Colombia and Peru in Latin America; the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Burma and Vietnam in South-East Asia; and Afghanistan and Pakistan in South-West Asia.

The financial cost for the programme has been calculated by the UNDCP at approximately US\$4 billion. Roughly one third of the costs will be carried by these eight countries. While the UNDCP has appealed to the international donor community to help finance this initiative, initial reactions from donors have been less than positive.

SCOPE suggests that loans from the World Bank and regional development banks could be granted to help cover target countries' costs. Repayment conditions, however, would be determined by 'performance criteria, the main and most obvious one being that illicit crop cultivation has stopped.' The governments of these countries already suffer under an excruciating debt burden. Creating more debt and conditioning repayment on drugs-control performance would be akin to blackmail.

Equally important, such an approach could have a severe impact on peasant farmers who grow the crops which are to be eradicated. The US policy of certification, which links financial assistance on drugs-control performance, has led to Latin American governments using repressive measures and committing human rights abuses to meet deadlines. SCOPE threatens to institutionalise this globally.

Alternative Development

The accepted wisdom in drugs control is that alternative development and eradication go hand-in-hand. Alternative development recognises that small-scale farmers who grow drugs-linked crops in developing countries typically do so out of economic necessity. These people aren't drugs barons or international mafiosi, but subsistence farmers who have turned to growing coca and opium poppy as a last resort.

Trying to address the socio-economic factors underlying drugs-linked crop cultivation is an enormously complex undertaking which requires long-term vision and investment. Current alternative development approaches are moving away from crop substitution to a more integrated rural development approach. This means that issues such as health and education must be addressed in addition to finding economic alternatives to illicit crops.

It is an uphill battle though. Local economies have become inextricably linked to global fluctuations in commodity prices. In 1985, the International Tin Council (ITC) disintegrated, leading to a virtual breakdown of the Bolivian economy. As a result, thousands of jobless tin-miners migrated to the sub-tropical Chapare and started growing coca to survive.

Similarly, many peasants turned from coffee to coca cultivation when coffee-prices plunged following

the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989. The fall in prices seriously disrupted alternative development projects aimed at persuading coca farmers to switch to coffee. (2)

More recently, coffee prices slumped from a high of US\$267 per quintal (100 kg) in 1997 to US\$187 per quintal today, and are expected to fall to US\$110 per quintal next year. This is a serious problem in Peru, where coffee is one of the crops chosen as a substitute for coca cultivation (3), as was highlighted by the UNDCP's commercial.

Yet while alternative development has not been successful in totally eliminating drugs-linked crops, neither has interdiction nor eradication. According to a World Bank report (4), former narcotics-producing countries such as Turkey and Thailand were only able to eliminate illicit opium production when socio-economic standards improved independently of drugs-control policies.

In the context of SCOPE, establishing 2008 as a target date for eliminating coca and opium crops has created the potential to fundamentally undermine development processes. It is not realistic to expect alternative development to come up with significant results by then. As a result, SCOPE could create a situation in which repression is the only solution.

Balancing Priorities

It is evident the UN is placing heavy emphasis on the Special Session and drugs issues, but how do they fit in with other UN policies? For several years the environment, human rights and the status of women have been given high priority in the UN system. Two strategies currently being pursued by the UNDCP may contravene these commitments.

In an effort to reduce the amount of opium being produced in Afghanistan, the UNDCP struck an unprecedented deal with one of the warring factions, the Taliban, which controls up to two thirds of the country and is responsible for a significant proportion of the drugs being produced. The UN does not recognise the Taliban as a legitimate authority in Afghan territory and the Afghan delegation to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs was understandably upset.

Through such actions, the UNDCP runs the risk of being used as a pawn by warring factions in the struggle for international recognition, and of jeopardising its own drugs-control efforts in the process.

Concerns have been expressed over the Taliban's poor track record on human rights and the treatment of women. A Political Declaration to be presented in the UNGASS is explicit in its commitment to gender equity and protecting the rights of women in drugs control: 'women and men [should] benefit equally, and without any discrimination, from strategies directed against the world drug problem.' It is not clear, however, how this is being implemented in Afghanistan. When asked about human rights abuses under Taliban rule, Pino Arlacchi responded: 'We also champion human rights, to save 8 million heroin addicts.' (5)

Spraying It

With respect to the environment, there is grave concern about the long-term environmental impact of aerial eradication – one of the activities highlighted in the UNDCP's promotional advertisement – on the vulnerable ecosystem of Colombia's Amazon rainforest where coca cultivation is concentrated. Such spraying is also contaminating food crops and causing health problems among peasants and their livestock.

The liquid herbicide currently used in spraying, glyphosate, is not considered to be effective, so a new, granular herbicide is under consideration: tebuthiuron – better known by its trade name, Spike 20P.

Colombia's Environment Minister Eduardo Verano de la Rosa advised against tebuthiuron in 1994, saying it might damage forests and contaminate ground water. 'If everything we've analysed so far is true, and this has to be proven scientifically, our forests, our massive Amazon forests, could basically be converted into prairies,' he said. Even tebuthiuron's manufacturer, Dow Agrosciences, is reluctant to see it used. Dow says it is 'very risky' to apply tebuthiuron 'where the terrain slopes, rainfall is significant ... and the application is made under less-than-ideal circumstances'. (6) This is an accurate description of the areas in Colombia where most of coca and poppy is grown.

Many heads of state and ministers will attend the Special Session and this will politicise the debate. Where drugs issues are concerned, this is generally a disadvantage. There is a growing gap between the drug experts, many of whom recognise the deficiencies of current drugs-control strategies, and politicians, whose fear of appearing 'soft on drugs' is paralysing genuine debate. Conventional wisdom amongst politicians seems to be that force and repression have not worked because not enough has been applied.

As we consider what a global drugs strategy for the 21st century might look like, we need to ask

ourselves: are we really moving forward? The potential existed to make UNGASS a significant opportunity for critical assessment before we launch into a new era.

The rallying cry of the Special Session – 'A Drugs-free World, We can do it!' – would have us believe this is not necessary. The solution, according to Pino Arlacchi, lies in creating sufficient political will to tackle the problem. Political will, however, is only as effective as the policies it is based on.

*This article is based on a longer publication by the Catholic Institute for International Relations and the Transnational Institute – **Caught in the Cross Fire: Developing Countries, the UNDCP, and the War on Drugs.***

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