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‘Alternative Development’ as a Policy to Combat Illegal Drug Production

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Evaluate the role of ‘alternative development’ as a policy to combat illegal drug production

“Alternative development is at best ‘a more humane way to not solve a problem’” (Jelsma, 2002). The problem Martin Jelsma is referring to here is the production of illegal drugs, and this essay will argue that alternative development plays an insignificant role in combating illegal drug production anywhere other than at the local level. This conclusion will be reached by analysing various aspects of alternative development projects that contribute to its relative failure in combating illegal drug production, which include the structural problems of widespread poverty in drug-crop producing areas, the recurring failures and mistakes that policymakers continue to make, as well as the inevitable occurrence of the ‘balloon effect’ into areas where alternative development projects have not been implemented. Central to all of these factors is the overarching existence of a lack of comprehensive ownership of the problem by either the development or drug control communities, the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind household-level drug production and the lack of a unified direction that the various alternative development initiatives take. These will be analysed in conjunction, reaching the conclusion that alternative development is only effective at combating illegal drug production at the local level. Moreover, critical analysis will be made of examples where it is purported that alternative development efforts have had a significant impact in the reduction of illegal drug production—most notably in Thailand and Pakistan—maintaining the conclusion that this essay seeks to prove.

Before examining the failure of alternative development in significantly combating illegal drug production higher than the local level, it is necessary to define ‘alternative development’ and the context in which it is being analysed. Alternative development is a process to “prevent and eliminate the illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances through specifically designed rural development measures” (Ghodse, 2008: 203). These rural development measures include addressing the income, education, health, infrastructure and social service provisions of the target population (UNODC, 1998: 1) through crop substitution programmes and financial subsidies, creating peace and rule of law and improving the capabilities of provincial governance and their municipalities. Alternative development programmes are usually implemented alongside eradication efforts, either forceful or voluntary, often as a precursor for receiving assistance. However, it is important to note that there is no one comprehensive alternative development plan, as programmes are implemented under the auspices of various international organisations, state-sponsored initiatives and local or regional institutions. In the context of this essay, analysis of alternative development will be made to its effect on the levels of coca and opium production, due to their high concentration of production in certain areas of Latin America and South and Southeast Asia, as well as their “detrimental effects on the social, political and economic well-being of nations” (UNDCP, 1998).

It is widely acknowledged that the elimination of illicit drug production is dependent on the achievement of broader development goals (UNODC, 1998: 3; Mansfield, 1998: 161), such as establishing the institutions required for formal governance and promoting civil society, strengthening social protection mechanisms and facilitating economic investment into these marginalized drug producing territories (DDC, 2006: 1). There is plenty of evidence demonstrating this link between poverty and illegal drug production (Hurd and Mast, 1990; WHO, 1992) and it is becoming increasingly clear that coca and opium production are a function of marginal socio-economic and

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ecological conditions in areas with high levels of rural deprivation. Hurd and Masty’s study of the Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan indicated that opium production was concentrated in the poorest areas, with size of landholding, access to irrigation and population density being important determinants in the extent of drug production. This is consistent in coca production in Latin America, where 85% of the Bolivia’s Chapare Valley population live in poverty (UNODC, 2005), which is an area that produces the majority of the cocaine coming out of the country (Grisaff, 2014: 1). In these conditions, coca and opium represent efficient cash crops well suited for these difficult agricultural localities. Opium can be cultivated on both irrigated and unirrigated land up to 3000 meters, and coca also shows resilience in marginal environments and allows harvest up to six times a year (Mansfield, 1998: 163). Equally as significant of a factor motivating households to produce illegal drugs is the intrinsic link between informal credit and drug crop cultivation. This is particularly prevalent given the lack of formal banking or lending services in these rural impoverished areas, and it is evident that in order for alternative development initiatives to combat illegal drug production it requires not only encouraging licit on and off-farm income opportunities for farmers, but a complete overhaul of state provisions and services, something which the vast majority of alternative development programmes fail to provide.

This failure stems from the overarching lack of ownership of the problem of illegal drug production between either the development community, or those with a drug control remit. The multi-sectoral nature of the problem of drug production, which clearly requires nation-building efforts alongside providing for alternative livelihoods and promoting licit opportunities on the macro scale (DDC, 2006: 1) requires greater ownership of the problem by a range of development actors. However, those within the development community have avoided incorporating drug production controls into their own initiatives, as “illicit drug crop cultivation remains a difficult issue for many in the development community to come to terms with” (ibid, 2). This is in part because much of the development community still view drug producers as profit-maximising farmers, thus are unwilling to adopt drug production reducing initiatives into their own rural development schemes. Moreover, many development organisations and institutions such as the World Bank have refused to contribute towards alternative development initiatives in large part because they are perceived as being “economically unviable” (Youngers, 2012) due to the existing international division of labour and inferior market access (Mansfield, 1998: 167). This inherent existence of a lack of shared ownership of the problem of illicit drug production restricts alternative development initiatives from gaining momentum and having any significant impact on levels of drug production anywhere other than the local level, due to its “confinement to the margins in terms of funding and policy influence” (DDC, 2006: 14) and inability to provide robust long-term poverty reduction implementations because of their short time spans and funding issues.

There are a number of weaknesses that are consistently present in alternative development programmes that further limit its potential to combat illegal drug production at anywhere other than the local level. Central to this is the fact that in many alternative development initiatives, there is not enough understanding of the household-level motivations for illegal drug production (DDC, 2006: 13), which remains “largely unexplored” (Mansfield, 1999: 1). Producers are often treated as a homogenous group, with the specific socio-economic, cultural and environmental circumstances that influence household production being overlooked in favour of a simplified model of human behaviour that emphasises economic rationality (ibid, 17). As a result, many of the crop substitution measures implemented under alternative development programmes fail to address the multifaceted roles that illegal drug production plays in these communities, and often serves to benefit only the wealthier households that produce illegal drug crops for extra income (DDC, 2006: 12; TNI, 2010). This results in short term reductions of drug crop production in localised areas, coming largely from the wealthier households of the community, whilst failing to address the multifaceted motivations behind illegal drug production. As a result, alternative development programmes in large part fail to combat illegal drug production at the national or regional level.

This lack of understanding of the motivational factors behind illegal drug crop production has led to projects being implemented with poor design and an absence of strategic direction, both internally and alongside other intervention efforts – most notably eradication (DDC, 2006: 13). Without a clear strategy and understanding of the complex factors behind illegal drug crop production, alternative development programmes have often pursued short-term strategies that deliver an immediate reduction in the levels of production via eradication policies, either as a precondition for receiving assistance or through involuntary enforcement. Not only do these short-term strategies do little to affect the long-term levels of drug production, but they often act as counterproductive measures which

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increase illegal drug crop production. This is prevalent in both precondition and enforcement scenarios. In cases where eradication is used as a precondition for alternative development assistance, it has led to incidences of 'reverse conditionality', where communities threaten or begin to cultivate illegal drug crops as a means to access alternative development assistance. This was particularly prevalent in Usheraï, Pakistan where there was a 90 per cent increase in poppy cultivation in 1996 in the sub valley of Ali Gha Sar, in order to be included into the wider programme (Mansfield, 1999: 14). Similarly, in instances where eradication has been enforced alongside alternative development programmes, the result has often been dire for the local populations. Attempting to replace the income derived from illicit crops with revenue from substitute crops is a "necessary, but insufficient condition for achieving reductions in levels of cultivation" (Mansfield, 1998: 170) given the short-term nature of many alternative development initiatives. Often, eradication that is enforced over a particular territory alongside alternative development can endanger the only buffer that many of the poorer and more vulnerable households have against food shortages and basic provisions. As a result, this short-term strategy does little to address the factors motivating households to produce illegal drug crops, and instead acts as a counter-development initiative that encourages households to move into neighbouring territories free from alternative development and eradication programmes.

It has been argued that alternative development projects have failed to acknowledge the mobility of the rural communities in drug crop producing areas (Mansfield, 1999: 15; Whittington, 2013) where migration is a standard response to many supply side interventions, including the combination of alternative development and eradication. This is known as the 'balloon effect', where reductions of drug crop production in one area are often matched with increases in nearby regions or countries. In the Chapare Valley of Bolivia, it is estimated that a third of the population is transient, and up to 22,000 families are thought to have migrated out of the region following intervention (Mansfield, 1999: 14). This significantly contributes to the failure of alternative development in combating illegal drug production at any level higher than the local level, as "reductions in illicit drug cultivation in one area [are] accompanied by increases in opium poppy and coca cultivation in neighbouring areas" (DDC, 2006: 13), resulting in marginal change in levels of illegal drug production at the national or regional level.

Alternative development programmes have often been credited with having a significant impact on the reduction of illegal drug production in countries such as Pakistan and Thailand (Ghodse, 2008). Indeed, there have been significant reductions in the levels of drug production in these two countries, with Thailand successfully eliminating opium production and Pakistan reducing its output from 800 metric tonnes in 1979 to almost zero in 2000 (Youngers, 2012). However, there are several factors that have to be critically assessed in the context of these drug crop reductions. The effective long-term initiatives that took place in these two countries, coupled with the relative economic prosperity and establishment of effective governing institutions in the area raises questions over the "specific role alternative development has played in these successes" (Mansfield, 1999: 14). As previously described, the elimination of illegal drug production at the national or regional scale is contingent on the achievement of broader development goals and poverty reduction. Only when this is achieved will drug production levels decrease, which is evident in the fact that in Thailand, "the most substantial decrease [in opium production] took place without any crop substitution or eradication interventions" (Jelsma, 2002). Secondly, there is evidence suggesting that the reductions in illegal drug production in these two countries were matched by increases in Myanmar (Burma) and Afghanistan (Mansfield, 1999: 3), which again reinforces the notion of the balloon effect and ineffectiveness of supply-side policies, including alternative development, in having a significant impact on the levels of large-scale drug production.

This essay has demonstrated that alternative development programmes have been ineffective in combating illegal drug production at the national and regional level. The lack of ownership of the problem by the development community has contributed to this failure, resulting in alternative development projects being characterised by limited territorial coverage, funding issues and short intervention periods, often a maximum of three years (Ojeda, 2011: 8). The lack of comprehensive strategic direction in alternative development initiatives, which is defined differently by different agencies and organisations (DDC, 2006: iii) has resulted in consistent failures by policymakers, most notably those with a drug control remit, and the implementation of eradication alongside alternative development projects. Moreover, evidence has shown that even in extreme reductions of illegal drug production, such as in Thailand and Pakistan, this is closely matched with increases in nearby territories. Thus, it can be concluded that alternative development, and supply-side policies in general, are ineffective at combating global illegal drug

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production, suggesting that: "sustainable reductions will continue to be localised unless the demand for their derivatives is reduced" (Mansfield, 1998: 176).

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