

## **Working together in the fight against drugs in Southeast Asia**

Sanong Chinnanon  
 United Nations Drug Control Programme - UNDCP  
 Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific  
 UN Building, Radjamnern Nok Avenue  
 Bangkok 10200  
 Thailand  
 Sanong.chinnanon@undcp.un.or.th

*Illicit drugs are no longer a problem of one country. When drugs are produced in one country, they will affect other countries where drugs are destined and abused. It will not make the situation better if we only point the finger to blame the producing country without any concerted actions to stop the production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs.*

With the ban on opium production in Afghanistan in 2000-2001, the “Golden Triangle” in Southeast Asia has become the largest source of opium production in the world where almost 1,240 tons of raw opium are still produced. It is estimated that this amount of raw opium could supply over 120 tons of heroin to the world. The United Nations estimated that Myanmar, as the largest source of opium poppy cultivation, produced approximately 1,097 tons of opium while Laos produced over 130 tons and Thailand about 6 tons in 2001(UNDCP Global Illicit Drug Trends 2002, Pre-publication version).

Opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle covers most of the Shan State in Myanmar, northern and western parts of Laos and northern region of Thailand. The map shows the areas of opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle. Opium growers are mainly ethnic minority groups who live scattered in the remote and mountainous areas above 1,000 meters where climatic conditions are favorable for opium poppy cultivation. Most opium cultivation areas are very isolated and have minimum access to overall social and economic development.

The main part of opium is used to produce heroin at the clandestine refineries along the borders between Myanmar-China and Myanmar-Thailand. A large portion of heroin from the Golden Triangle is smuggled through China, Thailand and Laos to various destinations including North America, Europe, Australia and East Asian countries.

Part of the heroin is also consumed in the transiting countries. With increasing suppression along the borders and key transiting cities in China and Thailand, the region is experiencing new maritime trafficking routes along the Mekong River and through the Andaman Sea.

### **Future threats of illicit drugs**

Despite the declining trend in opium production during the past few years, Southeast Asia is still facing emerging challenges on drugs. With the pressures from the international community to maintain opium elimination in Afghanistan by the new government, the supply of opium to the world would be reduced significantly. It is anticipated that the prices of opium and heroin would rise sharply if the demand is still very high. If that is the case, there is a high risk that the farmers would return to opium poppy cultivation due to the very attractive prices and the high potential of the region for opium cultivation.

Apart from opium and heroin, Southeast Asia is also facing a very serious problem of synthetic drugs and psychotropic substances. For synthetic drugs, there has been in the past few years a drastic increase in the manufacture of, trafficking in and abuse of amphetamine type stimulants particularly methamphetamine. The drug is known by the local people as "Yaa Baa" meaning a crazy drug.

Clandestine laboratories operate along the borders between Myanmar and Thailand and Myanmar and China. In the production of methamphetamine,

essential precursor chemicals are smuggled from China, India and Thailand to the production sites. In Thailand alone, it was estimated that more than 700 million pills of methamphetamine had been smuggled into the country in 2001 (Bangkok Post, 20 January 2002). Over 80 million pills had been seized and the rest were consumed in the country and destined for the other countries in Asia. With increasing problems of synthetic drugs, China recorded a fast increase in seizures of methamphetamine and ecstasy. In 2001, 4.8 tons of methamphetamine and over 2 million pills of ecstasy were seized (China Country Report, March 2002). These ATS are abused among factory workers, taxi and truck drivers, laborers, students as well as commercial sex workers. The drug is also widely used in night clubs, discotheques and entertainment centres.

### **Alternative solutions to drug production**

The United Nations and international community have adopted the concept of alternative development as an approach to illicit crop elimination. The approach *"aims to provide a comprehensive and integrated rural development to transform the social and economic conditions of the communities and provide alternative livelihood for the farmers so they do not have to depend on opium cultivation for their living"* (Chinnanon, 2002). In Southeast Asia, alternative development efforts have been implemented in the opium growing areas in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam by national initiatives and with support of UN and the international community.

Thailand has implemented crop replacement and alternative development programmes in the highland areas for more than 30 years and has managed to sustain opium reduction since 1994. Laos has also launched a series of alternative development projects since 1989 when the UN and the international community began to provide assistance to

eradicate opium production in the country. New alternative development projects are being launched in the opium growing provinces. Myanmar began alternative development projects with the support of UNDCP in early 1990s in different areas of Shan State. The current Wa Alternative Development Project is being implemented in the Wa region where opium is grown intensively (UNDCP Regional Centre, Regional Profile 2002). In 1996, Vietnam had launched an alternative socio-economic development project in Ky Son in the northwestern part of the country where opium poppy was cultivated. The second phase of the Ky Son project together with a new alternative development project in Song Ma are starting in 2002 to sustain the opium elimination in Vietnam. These alternative development efforts and the increased drug control measures in the region have contributed to the overall opium reduction in Southeast Asia.

### **Working together in the fight against drugs in Southeast Asia**

The United Nations General Assembly Special Session in 1998 called for the establishment and strengthening of regional and sub-regional mechanisms to share experiences and conclusions resulting from the implementation of national strategies and to report on the implemented activities. Member States are also exhorted to agree on bilateral mechanisms for cooperation in order to establish and implement illicit crop eradication and alternative development in their frontier areas (UN, Resolutions of UNGASS 1998).

Attempts to establish cooperative mechanisms for overall drug control in Southeast Asia are actually dated back in 1993 when China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and UNDCP signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Drug Control and in 1995 Cambodia and Vietnam also became parties to the MOU. A Sub-regional Action Plan has been formulated and endorsed to carry out collaborative actions by all participating countries on alternative development, drug demand reduction and law enforcement (UNDCP Regional Centre, Subregional Action Plan 2001). In order to broaden the cooperation on drug control, an International Congress was organized in Bangkok in 2000 where the Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China endorsed the ACCORD (ASEAN and China Cooperative Operations in Response to Dangerous Drugs) Plan of Action "In pursuit of a drug-free ASEAN 2015". As part of the ACCORD, the participating countries will improve bilateral and regional cooperation among concerned institutions to reduce illicit crops cultivation through alternative development. Specific actions endorsed by the Congress include national capacity building and lessons sharing to strengthen knowledge and skills on alternative development of policy makers and practitioners in Southeast Asia. A comprehensive and accessible pool of knowledge on alternative development approaches, good practices and lessons learned will be created and concerned alternative development agencies and projects in the region will be networked (UNDCP Regional Centre, ACCORD, Plan of Action 2000).

### **Alternative development cooperation strategy**

As an integral part of the Sub-regional Action Plan and the ACCORD, the Project on Alternative Development Cooperation has been launched to promote regional cooperation on alternative development among national agencies, research institutions and alternative development projects. More specifically, the Alternative Development Cooperation Project emphasizes the following actions:

- Promoting cooperation and interaction among the national alternative development agencies and projects in the region in order to foster concerted efforts in the eradication of the illicit opium cultivation in Southeast Asia.
- Strengthening institutional capacities on alternative development through a series of technical training, seminars, workshops and personnel exchange/attachment programmes.
- Enhancing effective planning, management and evaluation of alternative development efforts.
- Promoting sharing of experience, good practices and lessons learned in alternative development.
- Promoting advocacy for alternative development.
- Facilitating national and regional agencies in monitoring and reporting their efforts on illicit crop eradication.

#### **Achievements of concerted efforts in alternative development in Southeast Asia**

**Opium production in the Golden Triangle.** The overall opium production has declined steadily from 1997. The table below shows that, based on the UN and country reports, opium production has declined from 1,829 tons in 1997 to 1,237 tons in 2002. The production in Myanmar has reduced from 1,676 tons to 1,097 tons and in Laos from 147 tons to 134 tons during the same period of time. The opium production in Thailand has remained between 4 to 8 tons while Vietnam reported no production of opium after eradication efforts (UNDCP Global Illicit Drug Trend, 2002 Pre-publication version). In the Golden Triangle area, only Myanmar and Laos remain major sources of opium production. Laos has set a target in their national plan to eradicate opium production by the year 2006 while Myanmar sets the target for the year 2014.

**Table 1: annual opium production in Southeast Asia (tons)**

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001*
<b>Lao PDR</b>	147	124	124	167	123
<b>Myanmar</b>	1,676	1,303	895	1,087	865
<b>Thailand</b>	4	8	8	6	4
<b>Vietnam</b>	2	2	2	0	0
<b>Subtotal</b>	1,829	1,437	1,029	1,260	992

Source: UNDCP Global Illicit Drug Trends 2001

\* Source: Unpublished Papers for Alternative Development Seminar, Lao PDR, March 2002.

**Building knowledge and sharing good practices on alternative development.** To further enhance the effectiveness of opium reduction through sharing of experiences and good practices on alternative development, an indepth study on “*Opium Reduction in Thailand 1970-2000: A Thirty Year Journey*” has been conducted and published to share the experiences on participatory approach to alternative development. The study carefully examines the emergence of alternative development in Thailand from the modest beginning of crop substitution projects towards the fully developed alternative development models based on stakeholder participation.

A study of the alternative development experiences generated by the *Wa Alternative Development Project* was conducted. The study investigates lessons learned and key factors affecting the implementation of alternative development and opium reduction in the Wa region in Myanmar and highlights a number of important recommendations. These focus on strategic considerations, which should be taken, when alternative development projects are formulated and implemented in difficult political and socio-economic environments.

A technical publication on “*Alternative Development: Sharing Good Practices, Facing Common Problems*” has been published. The publication is the first collection of alternative development experiences and lessons learned generated from various national, bilateral and multilateral projects in the region. In addition to the good practices and lessons learned on alternative development, the publication also presents the emerging key issues and recommendations for improvement of future alternative development efforts.

**Capacity building through mutual learning and sharing of experiences and good practices.** To promote mutual learning and sharing of experiences and good practices for alternative development, a series of regional seminars and training programmes on alternative development have been conducted to enhance national and project capacity to plan and implement alternative development and opium eradication efforts in the region. The regional seminar on Alternative Development for illicit Crop Eradication: Policies, Strategies and Actions was organized in Taunggyi, Southern Shan State, Myanmar in July 2001. Conclusions and recommendations for good practices have been published and shared with alternative development policy makers and practitioners in all concerned countries in the world. In March 2002, the second regional seminar on Alternative Development: Sharing Experiences and Good Practices on Micro Credits, Revolving Funds and Marketing was conducted in Luang Prabang, Laos. Practitioners on alternative development, project planners and managers in Laos received training on community participation to enhance their skills on participatory and community based approaches to alternative development.

**Developing alternative development data base and networking.** The first regional web site on Alternative Development has been created as part of the UNDCP Regional Centre web site (<http://undcp.un.or.th>) to provide a pool of information on alternative development. The web site includes Facts about the Region, Regional Policies on

Alternative Development, Reports and Research, Alternative Development Directory, International Commitments and Contacts/Links.

Data collection on the profiles of alternative development agencies and projects has been carried out and a directory of alternative development profiles is being published and posted on the web site to enhance information sharing and networking among the alternative development agencies and projects.

**Building trust and commitments.** The most important achievement of the regional cooperation is building *trust and commitment* among countries, agencies and people. It takes a lot of time and efforts to move from “blaming each other” to “working together” in drug control. In the past years, with continuing dialogues, consultation and collaborative actions through regional forums and mechanisms, policy makers, officials and personnel involved in alternative development and drug control have more confidence and trust to listen, share information and collaborate in drug control measures. This is even more prominent in the field of law enforcement. To further strengthen concerted efforts, countries in Southeast Asia also initiated bilateral and cross border cooperation. China and Thailand, for example, opened the door to lend their support to alternative development and opium eradication in Myanmar and Laos. This has been a very positive development as an achievement on building trust and commitment on drug control.

In conclusion, through the collaborative efforts in opium eradication and drug control, the countries in Southeast Asia have moved forward to the common target of opium free society. To achieve this common target, the countries have to continue working together in the fight against illicit drug problems. Concerted efforts and continued support for alternative development should continue to sustain the declining trend of opium production in the Golden Triangle. We hope that the achievement in opium eradication in this region will help reducing drug abuse problem in many countries in the world.