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Briefing Paper

Lessons Learned from Alternative Development in South-East Asia

This paper aims at providing an overview of experiences and lessons learnt with Alternative Development (AD) in Myanmar (Burma), the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Thailand. It is not a comprehensive analysis, but does raise certain key issues for South-East Asia drawn from the existing literature, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Thematic Evaluation (2005), GTZ publications and others.

AD projects often fail to take sufficient account of the social, political, economic and cultural milieu and conditions in the country in question. Integrated solutions are needed to address the structural problems underlying the menace of drugs. Drug crop cultivation both in Latin America and in Asia usually takes place in regions that suffer from widespread poverty, poor accessibility and infrastructure, fragile ecological conditions, limited state presence and often violent conflict. In Latin America, the poor strata of society are involved in drug crop cultivation, and counter-strategies therefore need to focus on reducing poverty and increasing access to markets; in South-East Asia, ethnic and cultural minorities are the primary target group and AD therefore needs to focus not only on economic alternatives but also on improving the relationship between the target group on the one hand and the state and mainstream society on the other.

I. The Role of States

- *Fostering state stability and good governance need to be integral elements in the effort to curb illicit drug crop cultivation.*

With the possible exception of Thailand, none of the opium-producing countries in Asia can at present be described as a functioning and stable democracy. Autocratic modes of governance and centralised states often fail to respond adequately to local and regional needs. Furthermore, the participatory approach of AD projects might lead to irritation and mistrust on the side of regional and national powerbrokers. Besides more general efforts to promote good governance and decentralisation, it is essential to build trust between project personnel, local communities and the political leadership.

Drug economies flourish where the state is weak, as conditions in both Afghanistan andMyanmar clearly illustrate. Strengthening state capacity is vital for the success of AD, as the nation state must provide incentives and disincentives for the poppy economy. The case of Thailand shows how extending statehood into drug producing areas successfully contributes to the elimination of drug crops. This refers to providing access to political decision-making and to social as well as physical infrastructure. AD needs to pay particular attention to other structures, institutions and power holders, both informal and/or traditional, particularly in areas where the state is not the main source of authority and social organisation, or at least not the only one.

Both in Afghanistan and in Myanmar, the drug economy is closely linked to violent conflict. Conflict disrupts social and economic stability and often leaves farmers with no other choice than opium poppy cultivation. In addition, opium is a high-value crop and thus very well-suited for financing insurgencies. This means that AD needs to be closely coordinated with efforts to re-establish security and stability, and needs to include the promotion of good governance as an integral programme component.

II. Political and Financial Commitment

- *Long-term commitment is needed for a successful intervention.*

Experiences show that besides political commitment on the side of the government, the availability of financial resources within the country plays an important role as well. In Thailand, the largest share of money for AD programmes came from the government. This greatly contributed to the sustainability of AD in Thailand; however, it is fairly improbable that governments in other countries will be able to replicate this strategy. In order to secure success, long-term and large-scale commitment on the part of international donors will be necessary.

Despite the perceived need to produce quick results in terms of drug crop reduction, AD programmes should be planned for longer periods of time (eight to ten years at a minimum), and should operate with flexibility. Long-term commitment is necessary, especially when it comes to facilitating changes in national policies,

building government capacity and promoting good governance. Furthermore, AD practitioners need to acknowledge that what they aim for is a fundamental change to an entire regional economic system. Such an undertaking needs time and commitment if it is to prove sustainable.

Sustainable AD also means being aware of what happens after drug crop cultivation has successfully been eliminated. The Lao PDR has just recently been declared drug-free. However, if former opium farmers are to leave the drug economy for good, continuous rural development efforts are required, keeping the issue of drugs in mind.

III. Community Participation

- *Project planning and implementation need to take the specific features of local contexts, local knowledge, skills and culture into account and need to encourage active community participation.*

Opium poppy farmers in South-East Asia typically belonging to ethnic minority groups which are cut off both from mainstream society and from the state infrastructure. With that, "participation" in the South-East Asian context does not only also refer to a participatory approach in project planning, but to more general participation in state and society as well. In Thailand, for example, one of the major issues raised by the farmers themselves was the right to obtain Thai citizenship. As in other contexts and regions, it was and still is difficult to ensure that the most vulnerable groups participate in the decision-making process. If AD is to be successful, indigenous knowledge must be incorporated into AD in terms of project design and implementation. In the early stages of AD in Thailand, the efforts by the Thai authorities at nation building and integrating the hill tribes undermined their cultural identity, led to a loss of indigenous knowledge and triggered new conflicts. When it comes to relevant stakeholders to be included in the process of project planning and implementation, traditional authorities in South-East Asia – equivalent to farmer organisations in Latin America – play an important role.

IV. Integration

- *Drug control objectives need to be integrated into national development plans and international development cooperation.*

Another important lesson learned in Thailand is that AD should not be treated as an issue exclusively dealt with by a specialist agency, but should rather be viewed a matter that all relevant line ministries need to have on the agenda. AD needs to be integrated into national development plans that aim at rural and highland development in general. Yet at the same time, development in a drugs environment needs to acknowledge and target explicitly the drugs issue. In Lao PDR, for example, a project aiming at food security situated in a drug producing area proved unsuccessful for as long as drugs issues were not incorporated into project planning and implementation. Issues that need to receive more attention in AD projects in the Asian context are issues of land-use rights, debt and education. In South-East Asia, drug abuse prevention and drug treatment are crucial as well as securing the sustainability of AD, as drug-addicted opium farmers will not cease cultivating opium even with economically viable alternatives. Coordination needs to be improved among international as well as national actors, and the drugs issue needs to be mainstreamed with respect to all relevant line ministries and international donor organisations.

V. AD in Relation to Law Enforcement

- *AD needs to be closely coordinated with law enforcement measures.*

Eradication should start only once viable alternatives are available. At the same time, AD can lead to counterproductive results if law enforcement is absent. Law enforcement should be aimed at supply lines, traffickers, laboratories and markets rather than opium farmers in order to target those who profit from the traffic of illicit drugs. Besides legal measures directly targeted at the drug economy, it is also important to ensure legal security and the rule of law in general. One of the preconditions for legal livelihoods is the reliability of the legal system, especially with regard to laws regulating business relations. Law enforcement needs to be coordinated at the national, regional and international levels.

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