

Policy frontiers: the drugs-development- peacebuilding trilemma

Viewed from the vantage point of drug-affected borderlands in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar, are the policy goals of ‘a drug-free world’, ‘the promotion of peace’ and ‘sustainable development’ compatible? In these areas of long-term conflict, it may be difficult – if not impossible – to pursue all three goals at the same time. Policymakers need to explicitly recognise the trade-offs involved in pursuing all three policies, and to make compromises that are guided by the priorities of borderland populations.



A policy consensus has emerged around the need for fundamental reforms of global drug policies. This is reflected in calls to align and integrate drug policies with development and peacebuilding objectives, as captured in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

But how far are the goals of a drugs-free world, sustainable development and the promotion of peace commensurate with one another? What happens when these three fields of policy become entangled with one another in the drugs-affected borderland

regions of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar? Our research shows that there are many tensions and trade-offs between these policy fields, and that not all good things come together.

If the policy goal is a sustainable war-to-peace transition, both in the borderlands and at the national level, then a more explicit and deliberative weighing up of the trade-offs and distributive impacts of policies related to drugs, development and peacebuilding, is required. This brief offers one useful approach for identifying and analysing such trade-offs.

A view of policy that makes borderlands visible

A positivist mindset that views policy as linear, technical, decontextualised and oriented towards the national state, still retains a strong foothold in the policy fields of drugs, development and peacebuilding.

This leads to a tendency towards ahistorical thinking, in which drugs-affected borderlands are treated as blank slates on which to enact a package of transformative policy measures.

A more grounded view sees policymaking through the lenses of power, time and space. Policymaking is shaped by and shapes power relations, historical processes and the specific contexts in which it is enacted.

In this view, policymaking is a governmental practice operating at the frontiers of the formal and the informal, of institutions and of society.

Policymaking covers a wide range of activities across many levels, from the global, to the spaces of projects and programmes.

The policy 'fields' of drugs, development and peacebuilding have competing mandates and funding streams, and different organisational cultures, approaches and partnerships. These form and reinforce the boundaries between them.

But policymaking is not only the preserve of formal actors; it also involves non-formal actors, and informal processes. For example, in conflict-affected borderlands in Myanmar where the state is seen as weak or ineffectual, policymaking also happens in spaces occupied by local social movements, who have developed their own policies and practices around drugs cultivation and use.

Neither does policymaking flow downwards and outwards in a top-down, centre-periphery way. Policy processes are de-centred, complex and shifting. As policies travel, they get 'translated' and transformed as they move across spaces or between scales.

From this grounded view of policy, our research elaborates how borderlands are not just passive receptors of external policies, but laboratories of policy experimentation – places with agentic potential. For example, the frontier spaces of Colombia became zones of experimentation for counter insurgency, counter narcotics and development in the form of Plan Colombia, and parts of this package were then transferred to the borderlands of Afghanistan.

This view also reveals the tensions and trade-offs that are skirted over in the prevailing narrative that a drug-free world, inclusive economic growth and sustainable peace are mutually reinforcing and come together.



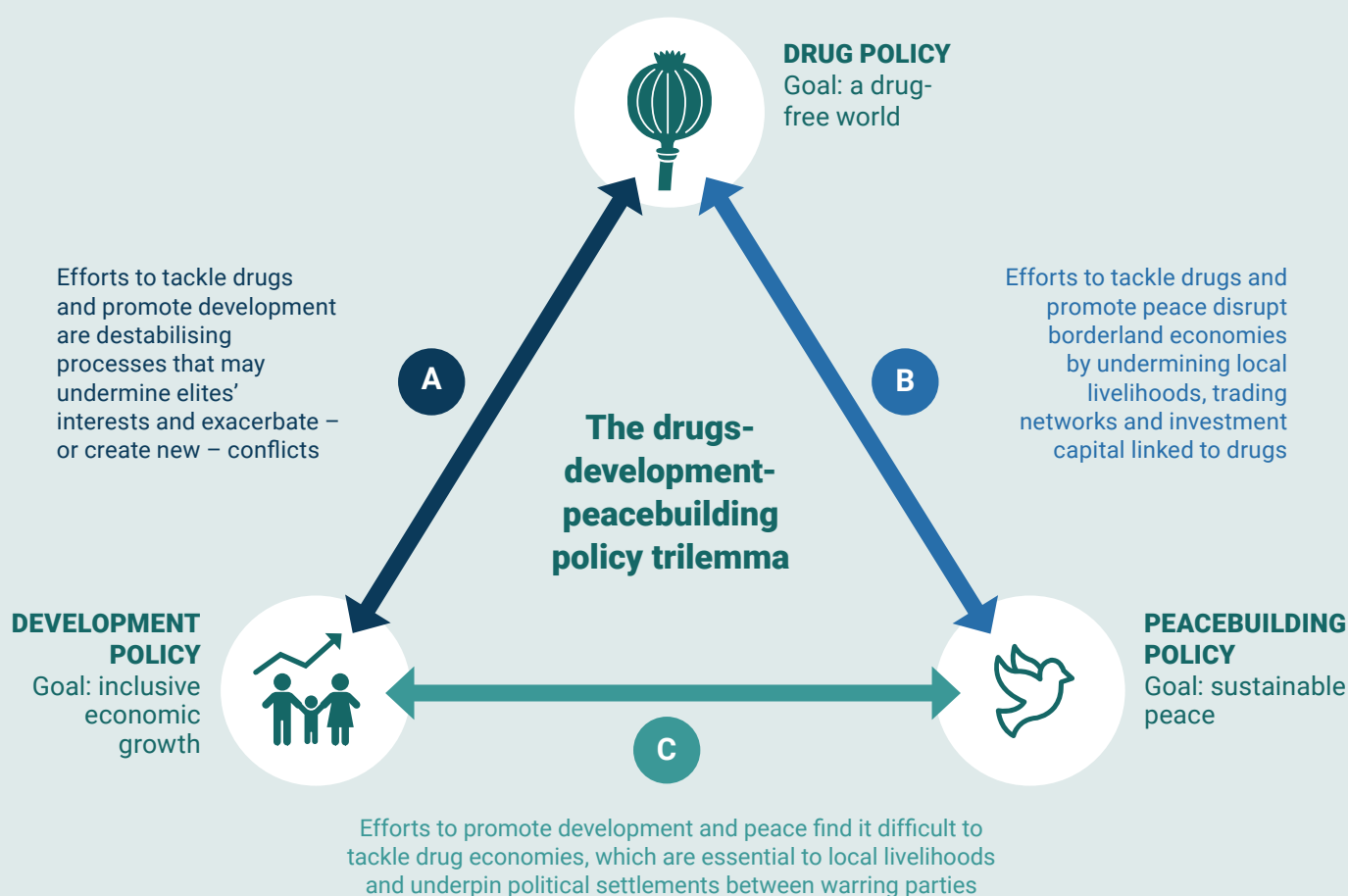
Drugs-development-peacebuilding: a policy trilemma

The idea of a 'policy trilemma' is a useful framework and tool for highlighting tensions and trade-offs between the three policy fields.

We have adopted the notion of a policy trilemma from the work of Dani Rodrik,¹ whose analysis of three development policy goals – economic integration,

national sovereignty and democratisation – contends that countries can work towards two of the three goals, but not all three at once. The goals cannot be pursued simultaneously without compromises.

We suggest that there is a similar policy trilemma at play in relation to drugs, development and peacebuilding.



Efforts to tackle drugs and promote peace disrupt development by undermining local livelihoods in borderland economies, while efforts to tackle drugs and promote development can undermine elite interests and create new conflicts. Acknowledging these trade-offs may allow policymakers to be more explicit about the compromises entailed.

When the policy goals are pursued simultaneously in their 'hardest' and most dogmatic forms, the trilemma becomes much sharper. Changing the criteria of 'success' and changing the time frames

and sequencing are likely to make the trilemma easier to handle.

It may be possible to pursue all three goals – a drug-free world, inclusive economic growth and sustainable peace – if they are not approached simultaneously, but in a sequenced and gradual way over a long time period.

Thus, the trilemma is less about policy actors making mutually exclusive choices, than it is about calibrating different sets of policies so that they are more attuned to local contexts, needs and priorities.

Making trade-offs explicit

The current policy consensus and the integrationist agenda around drugs, development and peacebuilding do not sufficiently take into account local contexts or the fundamental trade-offs of the policy trilemma.

Taking the policy trilemma as a starting point, our research suggests five things to take into account when making explicit and managing trade-offs.

- **Trade-offs within as well as between policy goals.**

The tensions and trade-offs of the trilemma exist not only between each of these policy fields, but also within them. For example, between eradication and harm reduction, between growth and equity, and between stability and inclusive peace. This means that the meanings and goals associated with drugs, development and peace are always fluid and unstable, and shift as they travel and 'hit the ground'.

- **Trade-offs shaped by place.** The trilemma has a strong spatial dimension – the trade-offs have implications beyond the national. Policies that appear to generate aggregate benefits at the national level may produce 'negative externalities' for borderland populations. Ostensibly successful efforts at drug reduction may simply push the problem over borders – so the policy trilemma may become more manageable on one side of the border and more acute and stark on the other side, risking displacing the problem rather than resolving it.

- **Trade-offs shaped by time.** The order in which policies are made and implemented shapes what is possible for different actors, and overall outcomes. For example, in Colombia, our research suggests that if coca farmers had access to licit markets, and public goods including services and security, they would no longer cultivate coca. But the key point is

that their version of 'development' and 'peace' would need to come before drug eradication. The trilemma is perhaps starkest and least manageable during moments of change, when pushing hard on drug issues may push countries into new rounds of conflict and undermine fragile safety nets. This does not necessarily mean 'forgetting about drugs', but that the trilemma can be softened by focusing on harm reduction and violence reduction, rather than forced eradication during these periods of transition.

- **Keep the role of policy in perspective.** Drug economies, processes of development and conflict, and peacebuilding dynamics are structural features of borderland contexts that shift in ways that are often independent of policy interventions. For example, increased investments in counter-narcotics efforts may occur alongside significant increases in drug production, as has been the case in Afghanistan. Therefore, the trilemma framework needs to incorporate a 'double vision', assessing tensions between drugs, development and peacebuilding in both the policy realm, and in the everyday realities of borderland regions. This draws attention to how policy interventions and everyday realities shape each other.

- **Turn the mirror inwards.** The policy trilemma is not about the technical issues related to 'best practice', sequencing and efficiency. Understanding policymaking processes and outcomes requires being conscious of who decides on the trade-offs and who benefits and loses out as a result of these decisions; this includes policy actors acknowledging their own roles. Interventions are likely to fail or generate further adverse impacts where there is significant misalignment between externally-driven responses (whether by international or national actors) and local responses and priorities.

Advancing discussion and debate

This brief has set out an analytical framework founded upon questions of power, space and time as a way to address the policy trilemma created by efforts to integrate drugs, development and peacebuilding.

In doing so, it aims to advance discussion and debate on how to engage with the tensions and trade-offs that the integrationist agenda reveals.

It forms part of a series of critical conversations between researchers and policymakers who are learning together to seek innovative approaches to illicit economies, development and peacebuilding in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

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'Drugs & (dis)order: building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war' is a four-year research project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. It is an international consortium of internationally recognised organisations with unrivalled expertise in drugs, conflict, health and development. Led by SOAS, University of London, project partners are: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Alcis, Christian Aid, Kachinland Research Centre (KRC), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), Organization for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR), Oxford School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), PositiveNegatives, Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), Universidad de los Andes, and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

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Front cover photo: burning of a coca laboratory near Tumaco, Colombia. Photo by AP Photo/William Fernando Martinez. Below: Poppy fields along the China border, northern Kachin State, Myanmar. Photo by KRC.



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