

Working Paper

Drugs & (dis)order Policy Lab

An experiment in sustained critical engagement between
researchers and policy stakeholders

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(dis)order



About Drugs & (dis)order

'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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1. About this paper

Drugs & (dis)order is a four-year research programme (2017-21) which has carried out research on the role of illicit drug economies in war-to-peace transitions in nine conflict-affected borderlands in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. The programme brought together a consortium of 60 researchers from 12 institutions in Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar and the UK, led by SOAS University of London. The consortium includes several partners with a responsibility for policy engagement, including SOAS, Christian Aid, the Centre for the Study of Security and Drugs at Los Andes University Colombia, and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

Drugs & (dis)order is funded by UK overseas development aid and as such there is an expectation that its research activities be intertwined with both policy engagement and capacity building. These three interwoven streams of work are all fundamental to the programme's aim of transforming debates, practices and policies relating to drugs, development and peacebuilding in conflict-affected borderlands. This report focuses on the programme's policy lab, one element in a wider ensemble of policy engagement activities undertaken across the consortium, describing its rationale and sharing some of the debates and deliberations that happened in the space it provided.

The Drugs & (dis)order research has generated a robust evidence base on illicit drug economies and their relationship with development and war-to-peace transitions in nine borderland regions. The ambition of its policy engagement activities has been to encourage and support policies for war-to-peace transitions that address the specific challenges of countries and borderlands with illicit drug economies, as well as to showcase and share the evidence generated by the project's research with those involved in making and implementing policy.

The idea of a 'policy lab' was articulated in the initial design of the project as an ongoing conversation between programme researchers and invited policy stakeholders, taking place periodically through the lifetime of the programme, devoted to policy and programme design and experimentation. It envisaged a series of residential, face-to-face, closed-door meetings or workshops, involving the sustained participation of a stable group. The aim was to generate ideas for developing innovative and human-centred approaches to both addressing illicit economies and contributing to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It should be noted that these ideas were developed long before the Covid-19 pandemic and the changes of government in Myanmar and Afghanistan in February and August 2021 respectively.

This paper outlines how we adapted, iterated and implemented the original idea in two cycles of the policy lab in February and October 2021. It also tries to give an overview and flavour of the conversations about drugs, development and peacebuilding policy that took

place, constructed from recordings of open sessions, and notes from closed sessions. It concludes with some reflections and lessons from the process.¹

2. Policy lab: what did we do, and who participated?

Adapting the plan

The principal adaptation of the original policy lab concept was to move the policy lab online because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The lab comprised two cycles, each consisting of three, two-hour meetings over the course of a week. Given our aim for in-depth, closed-door conversations, there was a need to limit the number of participants involved and to think carefully about the design and facilitation of the sessions.

There were two forms of participation in the policy lab: as member of a core group of researchers and policy stakeholders, and as an invited researcher or expert, asked to prepare a presentation around the framing questions of each session.

Identifying and selecting the core group of participants was crucial. We aimed to include a mix of researchers and policy stakeholders active in our three countries, as well in the UK and internationally. We also considered gender balance, the mix of researchers and policy stakeholders, and the possibility and likelihood of sustained commitment and participation.

Selecting members of the research team was relatively straightforward, as within the Drugs & (dis)order consortium several research partners had clear remits for policy engagement. In addition to these team members, and the programme's principal investigator, we also invited a member of the Drugs & (dis)order Advisory Group and our engagement advisor, a former Christian Aid policy and advocacy researcher, both of whom had been involved with the programme since the outset.

Selecting policy stakeholders was more complex. As well as considering country and gender representation, we wanted to attract stakeholders from three distinct policy fields: drugs, development and peacebuilding. In accordance with Drugs & (dis)order's theory of change, we wanted to "identify and support influential and supportive policy makers who are committed to policy change".

We drew on our own networks, those of Christian Aid – a project partner with a long history of rights-based advocacy in the peace and development fields – and those of our research partners in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. The core group we recruited comprised: an elected representative from Colombia and the head of Afghanistan's national anti-corruption agency, and staff from an international NGO working on drugs in Myanmar

¹ We have also reflected on the process in two blogs, '[Taking a political slogan seriously: reflections on a policy lab](#)' and '[Naming the elephant in the room to imagine better policy](#)'.

(Transnational Institute), a bilateral donor (UK FCDO), a multilateral donor (EU), the UN (UNODC), a US-based think tank (Brookings Institution) and a consortium of UN member states working towards the implementation of SDG 16 (Pathfinders Group). This mix of identities and positionalities, encompassing a wide range of experience in the three countries where Drugs & (dis)order works, meant that the core group was well-placed to co-create new ideas for better models and innovative responses to illicit drug economies.

The core group participated in two cycles of the policy lab, the first focusing on illicit drug economies and peace processes, and the second on developmental approaches to drugs. For part of each cycle, the core group were joined by a smaller group thematic experts on peacebuilding and alternative development respectively. For each cycle, a set of reading material was provided in advance, and a full set of notes was provided at the end of each session. The sessions were designed and implemented by two facilitators, the author and two colleagues from Christian Aid, one for each lab. Throughout the lab, the facilitators framed questions to structure the discussions; in this paper, the framing questions are highlighted in green.

Inception meeting: principles, ways of working and introducing the policy trilemma

In designing the inception meeting for the lab, at the start of the first cycle, the facilitators focused on:

- creating space for co-learning between researchers and policy stakeholders
- an emphasis on moving from what doesn't 'work', to what might work better, and why
- supporting an open and honest environment for critical reflection about difficult trade-offs in real policy processes, to seed new ideas and thinking.

During the inception meeting of the first cycle, the facilitators shared with the core group a set of key assumptions in the design of the lab:

- There are trade-offs and dilemmas in making policy around war-to-peace transitions in countries with substantial illicit drug economies.
- To different degrees, everyone in this group is in some way involved in those dilemmas and trade-offs – either through making or implementing policy, or through research.
- Creating practical alternatives to entrenched policy narratives around drugs, development and peacebuilding will be enabled by frank and open exchanges between policymakers and researchers from different fields.
- Policymakers and researchers from different fields, like those in this group, have much to learn from each other, and their conversations can give rise to new ideas.

They also framed some of the basic principles for the policy lab:

- Frank and open exchanges. Sessions were held under Chatham House rules, to enable frank discussion without reputational risk.
- Iterative, rather than fixed, session design. Due to the diversity of the core group and the emergence of different questions for discussion, each session was structured according to what had been discussed at previous sessions.
- Focus on learning. This was supported by active listening and effective documentation of the process.
- Emphasis on applying learning to practice. This was supported by encouraging core group participants to identify an individual learning question or ambition at the start of each cycle, and to return to it at the end.

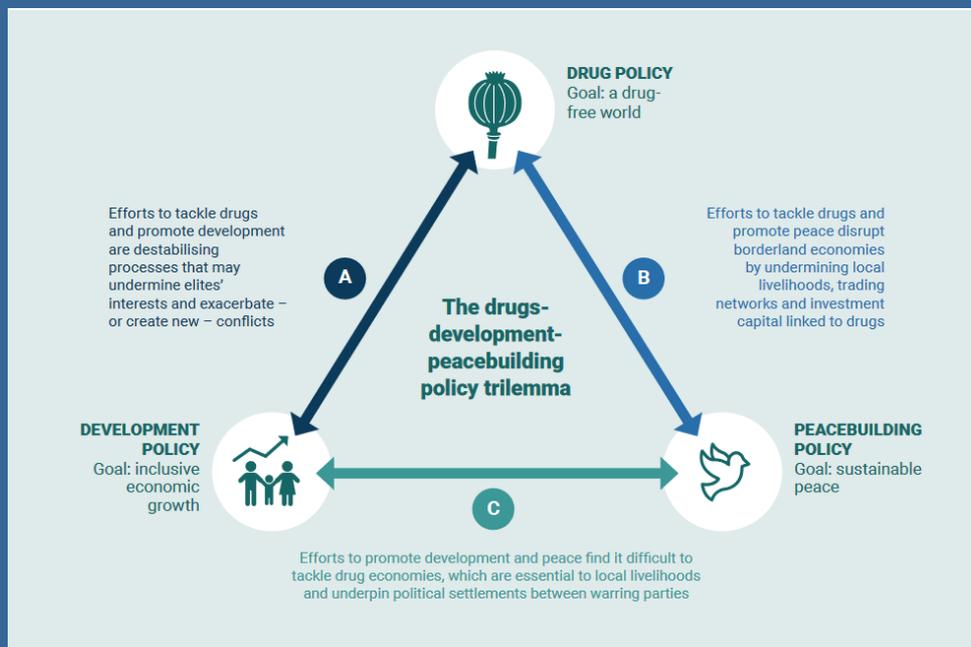
During the inception meeting, core group members discussed their hopes to learn from each other – with an emphasis on hearing different views and ideas. Many also mentioned that they wanted to learn from different experiences in other places. They also hoped to find something new: different recommendations on the links between drugs and conflict, political reform and peace; alternative ways of looking at illicit drugs from how they have conventionally been understood in policy; new ways to build better bridges between research and policy; and ways to learn from difference to help conceptualise the rethinking of drugs policies.

As a starting point for substantive conversations on drugs, development and peacebuilding, project researchers introduced the idea of the policy trilemma (Box 1), a framework for highlighting the tensions and trade-offs between the three different fields.

Box 1. The drugs-development-peacebuilding policy trilemma

The notion of a trilemma suggests that the overarching goals of drugs, development and peacebuilding policy cannot be pursued simultaneously, without compromises; but that it may be possible to move towards these goals by approaching them in a more contextualized, sequenced and gradual way over a long period of time.

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. Read more in our brief '[Policy frontiers: the drugs-development-peacebuilding trilemma.](#)'



After reading about the policy trilemma, and hearing a short presentation about trade-offs along each of its three interfaces, the core group suggested ways in which it could be deepened or challenged, and reflected on what questions it provoked:

- The security approach, which has often defined drugs and illicit economies policy, needs to be featured somewhere in the framework.
- The goals of development, peacebuilding and drugs policy are open to very different interpretations: Development for who? What kind of peace? There needs to be a conversation about what 'success' looks like.
- Why is it limited to drugs policy, when drugs are part of much wider illicit economies?
- Should forms of governance (by state or armed groups) and democratisation be in the triangle, as major push factors for tensions and conflict levels?
- Historical context matters a lot in the way the triangular relationship works, which makes it difficult to apply lessons from one context to another.
- We need to acknowledge that the trilemma is there, rather than pretending that it isn't. And then understand what that means for adapting policies so that the costs of the trilemma don't fall heaviest on the vulnerable and marginalised.

3. Cycle 1: Peace processes and illicit drug economies

Peace processes and illicit drug economies: session overview

Following the inception meeting session, the remaining sessions of Cycle 1 focused in on how illicit economies have been addressed – or not – in the Afghan, Colombian and Myanmar peace processes – a focus on axis B of the trilemma. Presenters were asked to reflect on **how might the designers and implementers of peace processes might become more aware of the challenges and trade-offs around drugs in conflict-affected borderlands, both during negotiation and agreement, and in implementation?**

Background reading for this session was a brief on '[Addressing illicit economies in peace processes](#)'.

Project researchers shared an overview of how peace processes have dealt with illicit drugs, followed by perspectives from the borderlands of each country, while invited experts with direct experiences of peace processes shared their perspectives on the framing question. View the session [here](#).

The presentations were framed by Astrid Jamar's brief **overview of drugs provisions in peace agreements** from the last 30 years, which noted that:

- out of 1,868 peace agreements, 78 contain provisions that relate to drugs
- there is diversity in how the agreements deal with drugs. More than half make a very general reference to drugs; 28 make reference to mechanisms to deal with drugs issues; and only 6 have strong commitments, with enforceable mechanisms
- the agreements touch on a range of drug issues: narcotrafficking, drug consumption, and raising funds through the drugs trade. The majority of the references are to drugs as a development issue – relative to agriculture or a threat to the economy; fewer discuss drugs as a security threat, or an issue of corruption or health
- the agreements present several different ways of dealing with drugs: international cooperation, alternative agriculture and collaboration with law enforcement and police forces.

Jamar noted that of all agreements, the 2016 Peace Agreement in **Colombia** represents the most comprehensive approach to drugs – covering rural reform, democracy and participation, as well as an illicit crop substitution programme, the PNIS.

Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín's discussion of the challenges and trade-offs around drugs in the implementation of the PNIS noted first that the question of unequal development, especially in the borderlands, was at the centre of the concept of territorial peace in the Agreement,

and very important in the public discourse around peace. The implementation of the PNIS began in 2017, amidst multiple problems. Despite publicly stating continued commitment to implementation, the government has gone back on many aspects of the agreement, including repeatedly threatening to re-start aerial fumigation of coca crops.

Gutiérrez argued that the PNIS was built on four correct assumptions: that narco-trafficking is a huge problem for the country; that coca growers are an important constituency; that there is a connection between illicit crops and access to land; and that there is a key territorial dimension, in terms of a regional inequality of infrastructure. Although the PNIS was well-designed, it suffered severe problems in implementation from the beginning. These offer several pointers for future peace agreements which might contain an element of illicit crop substitution:

- Technical and political issues are both really important – but crop substitution will trigger political push-backs. This means that policymakers would do well to ask themselves from the beginning: how can I buy political time for this programme?
- The coordination of the PNIS programme was problematic from the very beginning. If crop substitution is to be linked to rural transformation, it should be concentrated on a single agency with broad powers, bureaucratic muscle, and the ability to incorporate local authorities.
- In implementing a crop substitution programme within a peace agreement, the state will have to overcome deep distrust. There was no security or protection for those participating in the PNIS, and many leaders have been murdered. There should be the provision of security for leaders – policymakers might imagine insurance for peasants.
- Voices of peasants have to be fully incorporated into the discussion; implementation of the PNIS has been massively exclusionary. If the Colombian government can't do this, perhaps US or European governments or international agencies could play a role in encouraging or opening up spaces for greater dialogue with farmers.
- Any overlap between voluntary substitution and violent, forced eradication will be very destructive of any substitution programme linked to peace.

Turning to **Afghanistan**, Dipali Mukhopadhyay reflected on the Doha peace talks, ostensibly aimed at finding a political settlement between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban, that were at the time still taking place, though stalled. She noted that there was little or no discussion of counter-narcotics in US government circles, or in the peace talks, in stark contrast to a decade ago when it was seen as an essential theme in the state-building agenda, a cross-cutting topic regardless of sector. She asked whether – given the limited dividend yielded from counternarcotics in the preceding two decades – this was perhaps for the best. In the past, counter-narcotics provided government elites a means to demonstrate control, capacity and commitment in easily quantifiable terms; for sub-national actors, a means of performing loyalty to Kabul, but also of earning goodwill and material benefit from the international community; and for many actors, a source of rent and patronage, like other forms of aid and income. She speculated about whether the Taliban would re-visit their own approach to counter-narcotics, perhaps trying to create an opportunity for cooperation with western donors; and if a political settlement were reached, donors might take it as an opportunity to shift their mindset about counter-narcotics, seeing it as a much longer process linked to improved security, regional economic integration and better infrastructure.

Jasmine Bhatia also saw no space in the stalled peace process for tackling the reduction of illicit economies. She discussed borderland perceptions of the peace process as something elite-driven and detached from everyday concerns about high and rising levels of violence and uncertainty. The Drugs & (dis)order research in the borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz has shown that the relationship between illicit economies and violence is not as clear as it seems; it is not as simple as ‘drugs and violence go hand in hand’.

Bhatia noted that there were complex and sometimes contradictory perceptions of drugs amongst different policy actors. On the one hand, this included a widespread perception in the international community that illicit drugs were a major source of funding for the Taliban – one reason that they can recruit, fight, replenish themselves so effectively. This led to a belief in security circles, that if this funding was cut off the Taliban would be more likely to negotiate in good faith, and compromise. On the other hand, this perception contrasted with the reality in borderland areas that drugs are embedded in local economies, providing jobs and incomes – so it has been difficult to implement counter-narcotic initiatives without threatening livelihoods.

Bhatia discussed how the consensus in government had changed, with counternarcotic policies coming to be seen as counterproductive, weakening the government’s position; but that ‘softer’ policies had also been ineffective in reducing Taliban access to illicit funds. Noting that many in the government felt paralysed in terms of what they could achieve, she also observed that many in government have their own connections with illicit economies.

Against the backdrop of illicit economies having become a low priority for both the international community and Afghan government, she sketched three potential policy options open to the government around illicit drugs in the peace process:

- an explicit policy of financial incentives for counternarcotics
- softer measures like educational campaigns or livelihood support
- the deliberate exclusion of illicit drugs from the peace talks.

She concluded, however, that none of these options was likely to be taken.

Finally, in discussing **Myanmar**, Charles Petrie reflected on his involvement in negotiations between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organisations between 2012 and 2015. International actors involved in brokering the negotiations were aware that production and distribution of methamphetamines was part of a military strategy of subjugating the population, but the whole issue of illicit economic activity was a blind spot in the process. For those involved in trying to implement ceasefires, it was “the monster that had yet to be disturbed”.

Similarly, Patrick Meehan observed that there has been very limited policy space to address drug issues in Myanmar’s peace process since 2011, despite drugs being a huge concern for borderland populations. One reason for this is that the drug trade is deeply embedded in unresolved contests surrounding systems of political authority in borderland regions. Revenue from drugs is an essential part of how parties on all sides of the conflict

seek to navigate a political environment characterised by huge distrust of negotiations and formal discussion, in which military might is the key to politics. Tackling the drug trade has been a secondary priority. This has created a highly permissive environment surrounding drugs in which Myanmar's military state has sought to co-opt the drug trade to fulfil wider state-building and counter-insurgency agendas, rather than attempt to dismantle it in areas that have come under firmer state consolidation.

From the perspective of the Myanmar army, the peace process was understood as a means to enforce compliance, not to enter into genuine political dialogue. The army controlled which issues were on or off the table for discussion, and drugs were a highly sensitive issue for them. This epitomised the disconnect between the formal peace process and realities on the ground.

The drug trade remained key to how armed actors navigated ongoing armed conflict amidst the peace process, in which there has been very little trust – characterised by worsening armed conflict in Kachin state and northern Shan State. Armed actors on all sides understood the limitations of the peace process. Even groups with ceasefires viewed this as an opportunity to strengthen themselves ahead of future confrontation. The need to generate revenue, build forces, control territory, and purchase arms remained as strong as ever.

In reflecting on what could have been done differently to design a peace process that was more sensitive to the challenges and trade-offs around drugs in conflict-affected borderlands, Meehan discussed the need for:

- A stronger borderland perspective, so that any peace process must be founded on an understanding that the conflict is inseparable from contested and unresolved processes of state-building and conflictual centre-borderland relations.
- An understanding of how drugs have become part of the DNA of the Myanmar state. Although transnational organised crime is the key driving force of the drug economy, drugs are embedded in the processes of counter-insurgency, state consolidation and economic development — the same processes that are commonly assumed to be the mechanisms through which Myanmar's illegal economies can be dismantled.
- Engagement with the role of army-backed militias. Militias have been almost completely absent from the peace process, despite their central role in both conflict and illicit economies.
- A focus on understanding pathways into drug use. This may have offered a more practical starting point for seeking solutions to address drug-related harms than narratives that emphasize the need for an end to armed conflict, but which offer little scope for positive action. This could have been part of the interim arrangements contained in Myanmar's national ceasefire agreement.

Discussions and deliberations

Following the presentations, a plenary discussion was framed around two questions: **what hasn't worked well around illicit drugs in peace processes, and what might work better**; and **what were the commonalities and differences between the countries we heard about**. The discussion that ensued focused almost exclusively on the second question:

- Any policy related to the drug economy or illicit crops – within a peace process or otherwise – has to take into account long-standing coalitions and interests, and interconnected political and economic incentives
- Although we talk about borderlands, and centre-periphery relations, it is crucial also to consider the relationship of borderlands with neighbouring countries; peace processes in the three countries have been shaped by transnational political economy dynamics.
- A contrast between the three countries is the very different levels of financial dependence on and influence of external actors, with the Afghan economy heavily aid-dependent and the Colombian economy far less so.

Summarising the feelings of many in the room, one member of the core group commented “the discussion forced me to confront the difficult task of bringing out the general, universal learning from the complexity of the national, region and microsocial in a way that offers clear policy paths.” With the intention of moving forward on this difficult task, before the final session, the facilitators formulated a set of questions for small group discussions:

- **What did you hear about good and bad practice on illicit economies in war-to-peace transitions?**
- **What ideas does this give you about how institutions that engage on issues of violence reduction/stabilisation or development/peacebuilding could shift their practice around the illicit drugs economy or borderlands?**
- **What are the practical applications of what you've learned so far for your own sphere of influence as someone who is making, developing or implementing policy?**

Much of the discussion of practical applications pertained to specific organisations and thus cannot be reported here. Further, there was a strong feeling that it was too soon to be looking at practicalities: as one core group member noted, “we are still grappling with frameworks and vocabulary and we need to do this before we can address practicalities and look at individual cases. We are not at the stage where we can say what should be done.”

Despite these words of caution, a synthesis of the brainstorming and conversations around shifting practice covers five thematic areas:

1. Measuring progress

There needs to be a more specific conversation on indicators, and how we measure success or otherwise of integrated approaches as exemplified in the Colombia peace agreement. There is conflict and lack of coordination around implementation and indicators. Measuring progress needs to take distributional issues into account – distributive impacts, between and within groups, are rarely included in systems of measurement and tracking progress.

When we talk about measuring progress, temporalities become very important. One aspect of this is a tension between the need for indicators of longer-term change, and institutions and governments that are often focused on shorter time horizons and programme cycles.

2. How to enable the voices of those ‘on the ground’ who seek something other than permanent insecurity, illegality and precariousness?

To do this we must try to understand dynamics of local authorities in these communities. How do you take power and legitimacy away from armed actors? One way is to think about how to empower alternative, more representative voices at the local level - involving the ideas of communities.

Can we look at coalitions to address illicit economies? We can apply our political economy analysis to the political actors in those coalitions, asking how to shape interests and agendas in a progressive way.

A reflection on many years of working with CSOs to ‘build the muscles’ of people to address these issues of development, of peace – it is an exercise of patience. The distribution of resources is still important: even when working with CSOs relevant for illicit economies, people were focused not only on how much they get, but also on how much the others get.

Security is crucial: supporting CSOs to create change can equate to putting people on the frontline to be murdered. If we have a strategy to support those who want alternatives, how do we protect those possibilities and opportunities for people on the ground to present alternatives?

3. Institutional change is central to different approaches

A gradualist approach is required to changing illicit drug economies, but institutions are geared to delivery; we need to think more about temporality. How do you get institutions to re-think how they work on drugs issues and change their time frames?

Governments and donors prefer infrastructure – something you can build, something tangible – over building institutions, that we know less about. The development of institutions takes a long time – generations. Building local institutions is critical – it’s a prerequisite to doing anything on illicit trades. Public institutions and local authorities are

key and need to be empowered. This requires security.

Coordination between different branches of government is needed to make eradication of illicit crops work; this needs to be combined with communication between actors who do eradication and actors who do development, and closer attention to sequencing activities and interventions.

4. Our understanding of illicit economies and war-to-peace transitions needs to be situated in an analysis of the global political economy

Who are the key players and interests in the global processes that our three countries are embedded in: commodity chains, regional and global political relationships?

How can we account for the complex and fast-changing nature of drugs markets?

If we are looking at ways for thinking differently about the global economy and the global South, where are these ideas being debated today? Where are the policy spaces for alternative narratives?

5. Impossible trade-offs and enabling policymakers to ask the right questions

We need to be realistic about what governments can do. Trade-offs cannot be resolved – these are wicked problems with no easy or universal solutions - but they can't be ignored. Among policymakers there's often a desperate search for what works. But as a policymaker, you're often faced with a variety of awful options; you try to find the least awful. There's no linear route, and there's as many reverses as steps forward. Caution, or even not doing anything at all, might be better approaches than doing something that makes things worse – but they are difficult arguments to make with government ministers, who want and need to *do* things.

Perhaps we should avoid the tendency to look at 'what works' – the need to get policy makers to ask the right questions is a more realistic step. Not seeking answers, but getting others to ask the right questions, to think carefully about the risks and harms of interventions and the complexities of the contexts we are engaging in.

4. Cycle 2: Developmental approaches to drugs

Adapting the plan

Eight months passed between the first and second cycles of the policy lab, longer than initially envisaged. The causes of delay lay partly with the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Political events also shaped the trajectory of the lab: in addition to the coup in Myanmar, which took place just a week before the first cycle, Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban eight weeks before the second cycle. Throughout the year, political violence in Colombia had steadily ramped up and fierce political debate raged around the government's proposed return to aerial fumigation.

At times in those months of turbulence, it felt as if the goals of the policy lab – to have new ideas about policy and practice around illicit drugs in war-to-peace transitions – belonged to another world entirely. As we began to plan the second cycle, we grappled with how best to frame our research about different developmental approaches to drugs, and relate it to the changes that were unfolding in the present, and to radically uncertain futures.

Inevitably, not all members of the core group were able to sustain their participation in the policy labs. Three of the original core group did not attend the second cycle. By the close of the process, five people had attended all six sessions of both cycles – three researchers and two policy stakeholders, all based in the global North. There were a range of reasons for this, including the political situation in Afghanistan and Myanmar, illness, competing commitments and webinar fatigue. Most core group members attended at least 66% of sessions.

We anticipated some drop-off, but were reluctant to invite new members to join the core group for the second cycle, which focused on axis A of the trilemma, the interface between drugs and development policy. So, in addition to three project researchers, we invited guests from two more policy and practice organisations – GPDPD and Open Society Foundations – both prominent progressive advocates for 'alternative development' approaches to illicit drug economies, to join part of the conversation. We also called on members of the core group to share their experiences with alternative development approaches.

Responding to feedback from the core group at the end of the first policy lab cycle, which had asked for more detail and case studies, we also changed the structure of sessions in Cycle 2. Following a 30-minute space to bring the core group back together, the remaining sessions of Cycle 1 focused in on three cases of very different interventions framed as 'developmental' approaches to illicit economies: the PNIS in Colombia, the CARD-F programme in Afghanistan, and the Chinese Opium Replacement Programme in Myanmar.

Background reading was provided in each case, with authors describing each intervention, providing analysis of the assumptions behind it, and asking what happened in implementation. The authors were also asked to reflect on what could be done now on 'alternative development' in each country.

Three cases of alternative development: session overview

Opening the session, Jonathan Goodhand hoped that looking at cases in detail would give a chance to reflect on what works, what doesn't work, and why in different approaches to alternative development, and to draw out broader lessons. He noted that the Drugs & (dis)order project has been challenged to go beyond a critique of what doesn't work, to think more about how to improve policies and practices in concrete ways.

He also drew a distinction between two different ways of talking about development: 'Development', a planned project of conscious design; and 'development', an immanent historical process associated with the growth and expansion of capitalism – something that is often violent and contested, and which creates winners and losers. We need to keep these two understandings of development in mind when we are looking at 'alternative development'. Our research is showing that the drug economies themselves may be the alternative development for communities living on the margins.

He discussed a need to 'turn the mirror inwards' – to think about who the intervenors are in these processes. Trying to understand what works and what doesn't in policy and practice needs to be linked to an understanding of the sets of interests involved in alternative development interventions, how official agendas often camouflage other sets of interests, and how evidence is used selectively to further them.

Adam Pain introduced ongoing research on CARD-F, a programme intended to reduce opium production and generate legal rural incomes in **Afghanistan**, funded by the UK Department of International Development (DFID) over two phases between 2009 and 2018. Pain observed that the 'development' questions emerging from the CARD-F case study are about how we understand farmers' access to agricultural commodity markets, and the way that those markets actually work. The 'Development' questions are around how we think about agrarian change, agrarian transitions and the politics of growth.

The CARD-F case study examines the intervention logic of the programme and its underlying assumptions, both explicit and implicit. In some respects, CARD-F was 'dressed-up' as alternative development; it may have started off with a counternarcotics objective, but it became a much more conventional agribusiness project. It emerged out of a particular policy moment of contention about counternarcotics models – between eradication and developmental approaches. The World Bank and DFID were minority voices in advocating for the mainstreaming of illicit drugs as a development challenge, and the original design of CARD-F was DFID's response to this position. In implementation, however, the programme gradually – implicitly, then explicitly - turned into an agribusiness project driven by a value

chain model. CARD-F's governance structure was extremely complex, and much thought was given about how to implement it, but less to its consequences, particularly in providing a developmental alternative to illicit drugs.

The logic of the programme assumed a development trajectory for market-led licit agricultural growth. But this paid little attention to the specificities of commodities, particularly the relatively low risks of opium poppy cultivation under conditions of radical uncertainty. It also overlooked the critical role of the state in successful examples of agricultural transformation such as the Green Revolution – in such cases it played a foundational role in taking risk out of markets, especially by providing credit. But CARD-F was a programme with no credit, which in practice tied beneficiaries into informal credit provided by the same traders to whom they were selling commodities. In this way, market access was heavily constrained by social relationships, as powerful individual traders acted to regulate and control production and trade.

In selecting beneficiaries, the programme theory assumed an impartial and transparent selection processes. In practice, selection was highly discretionary, reflecting the ability of key players at the district and provincial levels to capture the benefits of CARD-F – especially the higher-value projects - for themselves.

In drawing early lessons from the ongoing study of CARD-F, Pain suggested that for counternarcotics programmes using market-led approaches, it is important to understand well the social relationships around how markets are structured and how people access them. Similarly, if programmes rely on an assumption of growth, it is important to understand the political conditions of growth, who benefits from these processes and how to place limits on rent-seeking practice.

He also posed a more fundamental question: whether agriculture in Afghanistan is actually a route to alternative development, and whether agricultural growth or agrarian transformation are possible under the current conditions of extreme marginality, conflict and climate-changed induced drought.

Asked to reflect on what the prospects are for alternative development in late 2021, Pain recalled a comment made in 2003/4, that opium poppy was one of the best cash transfer programmes going; in many of Afghanistan's more marginal regions, that is exactly the role that it is now playing. And this is unlikely to change with the Taliban now in power.

Turning to **Colombia**, Diana Machuca reflected on some of logic and assumptions that underpinned the PNIS. She introduced the six main components of the PNIS – security conditions, community agreements, individual assistance plans, community assistance plans, structural reforms in the form of regional substitution and alternative development plans, and differential criminal treatment for small-scale illicit crop growers. She focused in on the different levels of participatory structures established by the PNIS and the intended sequence of implementation.

What, then, did the PNIS try to change? Here there is a tension between development and counternarcotic purposes. On one hand, the PNIS maintained a prohibitionist approach,

where the basic objective was to reduce illicit crops and eliminate all activities related to drug trafficking. But it also tried to overcome conditions of poverty and social exclusion related to the production of illicit crops. As with previous AD efforts in Colombia, these two objectives were mixed.

She described four assumptions underpinning the PNIS that were different from previous AD efforts: a new hierarchy of strategies in the fight against illicit crops, with substitution the primary measure and forced eradication as a secondary option only; the FARC as an ally rather than an enemy; the principle of participatory planning, including social leaders and promoting bottom-up implementation; and the idea that crop substitution would be part of a wider territorial transformation, including land access and titling and the development of infrastructure, roads and markets.

In implementation, however, some of these elements became distorted. Under great international and national pressure as coca production continued to rise, the progressive elements the PNIS suffered. The army and police resumed manual forced eradication; the structural elements of regional transformation were put aside. 'Hectares eradicated' was consolidated as the only measure of 'success', distorting the logic of the territorial peace that the PNIS was intended to be part of.

Farmers participating in the PNIS were surveyed by the project for the second time in May 2021. Findings show both delayed receipt and non-receipt of PNIS payments to farmers who had destroyed their crops; and none of the productive projects materializing after five years of implementation.

Survey results also showed that by 2021, many felt that President Duque and his administration had undermined the PNIS. The administration resumed aerial spraying and undermined the participation of farmers, social leaders and former FARC members in the structures established for them to have a role in implementation.

Machuca asked whether it was possible to overcome the tension between development and counternarcotic purposes? Could there be a different sequence that doesn't start with a zero-coca goal? Is it possible or realistic to suspend counternarcotic objectives for a time? She also argued that despite the difficulties of PNIS implementation, there is still time for coca growers to demand substitution and alternative development – even though it has failed so far. Aerial spraying is still suspended and forced eradication is now being questioned, because of its impact and its violence. As such, she argued that there is still value in insisting that the state continues to make efforts to implement the PNIS.

Patrick Meehan discussed a different developmental approach to drugs in **Myanmar**: China's Opium Substitution Programme (OSP), launched in the early 2000s and expanded after 2006. A large-scale market-oriented approach to the question of opium substitution, the OSP supports businesses rather than poppy farmers, offering large-scale Chinese agribusiness ventures import licenses and tax waivers to encourage investment in northern Laos and Myanmar. It is funded by the Chinese government and the Yunnan Province Department of Commerce.

Discussing the key actors, interests, narratives and frameworks of the OSP, Meehan noted that the main narratives of the OSP in Myanmar were to link drugs with insurgency, and to argue that peace would only come through development. In implementation, this type of development entailed deals for land concessions between Yunnan agribusinesses and local authorities (primarily army, but also including army-backed militias and ethnic armed organisations); local authorities managing relationships with communities around land dispossession and payments; land being used for rubber, banana and other plantation food crops such as rice and tea; and workforces mainly comprised of landless migrants.

Meehan described three areas on which the OSP has had an impact: the opium poppy economy, the political economy of the borderlands, and society and the environment. The dispossession of lowland farmland resulted in the erosion of coping mechanisms, and exacerbated the livelihood insecurities and poverty traps that push farmers into growing opium in the first place. At the same time the injection of capital into the existing systems of armed authorities entrenched militarised rule. Where the OSP integrated Myanmar's borderlands into wider development processes, it was on highly unequal terms. Finally, the OSP resulted in anti-Chinese sentiment, tensions with migrant labourers, and detrimental environmental and health impacts from unregulated fertiliser and pesticide use.

He concluded with four key points from the case study:

- Diverse sets of interests coalesce around alternative development projects, and these interests often have little to do with opium substitution or supporting rural livelihoods. The more funding that is injected into these schemes, the greater these competing sets of interests become.
- Alternative development policies that may ostensibly be failing in terms of stated goals of opium reduction and sustainable development may be succeeding in achieving a different set of unstated goals.
- How success is measured and narrated is important and highly politicised. Where powerful stakeholders are able to shape policy narratives and determine the indicators used to measure success, other important indicators against which programmes need to be evaluated are likely to be obscured.
- Strong regulatory frameworks are vital if market-oriented alternative development strategies are to work in a way that is pro-poor. However, such regulatory frameworks are extremely difficult to implement in environments of long-standing armed conflict.

Reflecting on the prospects for alternative development in Myanmar now, Meehan noted that the context is much more difficult since the coup, and that many factors underpinning the opium economy are likely to become more entrenched in years to come – poverty, and increasing levels of armed conflict and insecurity. Illicit economies will therefore continue to generate revenue for survival and for sustaining armed groups. It will be increasingly difficult for Western actors to make interventions. The impetus for the Chinese model will continue; local authorities in Myanmar embrace the idea of 'bigger is better'. This raises the question of how very marginalised voices can be heard. It is clear that in the OSP there is no consultation with vulnerable communities, or concern about the impact on them. He concluded that it is difficult to see the entry points for this in the future.

Discussions and deliberations

During the case study presentations, an active listening exercise was framed around two guiding questions: **What do these cases tell us about the trade-offs within and between different developmental approaches to drugs?** and **What insights do these case studies offer those involved in projects and policies for alternative development?**

Discussion of these questions, and the case studies, continued over two sessions. Comments and questions raised by the core group covered a wide range of subjects and positions. In common with the first policy lab cycle, the discussion raised more questions than answers, broadening the discussion with a range of both practical and philosophical points:

- Would organising the farmers into broader collective groups have made a difference in the success of programmes? It seems that the farmers are individually powerless in this broader setting whilst mobilizing broader coalitions could possibly have made a difference.
- The Myanmar and Afghanistan case studies point to the limitations of market-based approaches where there is conflict and chronic poverty. State redistributive action may be needed, but in both cases the state is weak or biased, and there are many competing actors in the political marketplace.
- What kind of development are we talking about, and for whom? Can a market-based approach actually work in these complex areas?
- To what extent is public awareness of the negative consequences of these programmes forcing states to implement changes? Are pressures from civil society helping?
- Approaches to alternative development should be framed within development challenges and approaches, not in isolation. Market-oriented solutions should be weighed against sustainable livelihoods and food security – and conflict-sensitive approaches to the creation of new 'value chains', as well as the protection of the environment and biodiversity.
- The role of armed organizations as intermediaries between the community and external actors is a key issue. This gives these groups a crucial source of power, authority and legitimacy over local populations. When armed groups are not included, they can threaten and victimise civic leaders who are working with development projects. Have alternative development projects implemented processes to avoid this?
- We need more realistic policy aims, but also to decide what the ultimate aims are. Should alternative development contribute to long-term or short-term poppy reduction, or reduce the insecurity of communities who rely on poppy for their livelihoods?

Building from these different parts of the discussion, participants were divided into small groups.

The first group discussed **how we might improve the way we define and measure the success of development-led approaches to drugs and what would indicators for development-led approaches to drugs look like.** Part of the discussion focused on the challenges of evaluating 'success' in long-term, complex change processes, especially

when donors fund over short time horizons. There is a tension between long-term outcomes and the intermediate steps and directions of change. A perennial challenge is who defines what success looks like, who indicators are for, and who has ownership over the process of creating and using indicators. Several members of the group argued for including indicators about land access, land tenure and access to credit in evaluating developmental approaches to drugs, and there was also an argument for making 'hectares eradicated' a more subtle indicator by differentiating the method of eradication, forced or voluntary.

The second group discussed whether a **market-based approach to alternative development can work, and if not, whether there are other approaches that might**. It was noted that both the illicit economy and the alternatives are market based, and that perhaps the question should be how do we create something new to replace the market-based illicit economy. All the systems tried in the three countries have in common lack of consultation with drug producers, lack of capacity building and collective thinking on how small-scale producers of illicit crops can support each other. Given the nature of the state in the countries we are focusing on, any support to bottom-up organising would have to be supported by an international framework, that learns lessons from what has not worked. Several group members discussed food shortages, and the need to support local food markets, positing that perhaps there is a food security or food sovereignty approach that would work.

The final session of the second cycle re-convened the core group to ask **how can we re-set the conversation around developmental approaches to drugs in a practical way?** Jenny Pearce, from the Drugs & (dis)order advisory group, was invited to sum up some key points from her participation across the two labs, and she focused on five areas:

1. **Policy temporality** – there is no quick fix. Policies seeking quick fixes for drug production, which clash with contextual complexity, are not sustainable. We need a policy temporality that takes into account the political imperatives.
2. **Drugs cannot be addressed without a new look at agriculture**. A strong message emerging from this project is that drugs markets can be successful for smallholder farmers. All the cases show how drugs are a way out of poverty and access to services. Alternative development without a shift in development cannot easily compete; and market-driven processes force peasants into new forms of dependency. There is a need to consider what other forms of agriculture can take into account wider imperatives such as climate change and food security. Resetting the conversation means addressing the perverse market incentives around drugs.
3. **Voices of growers must be involved in the conversation**. This would be a practical step, but how do we get politicians to hear from these groups?
4. **Territory, sub-region, state**. National states tend to focus on counternarcotics, but the subnational and regional experiences also need to be taken into account. The challenge here is to see how global initiatives and interventions incentivise national governments to integrate subnational priorities and realities.
5. **Violence and drugs**. Violence might be a useful lens through which to assess and frame a conversational reset. This requires more investigation of the links between violence and development and drug production processes. The project highlights what happens at the start of the road – but we need to look at the way violence links

the whole drugs value chain. Violence is the opposite of peace, and we need to recognise all the violences that take place in relation to drugs.

The remainder of the substantive discussion centred around the question of violence. Although there was broad agreement that a discourse around violence reduction would gain traction, it was also clear that the Drugs & (dis)order research shows that violence is not exclusive to illicit economies, that illicit economies are not inherently violent, and that much of the violence associated with illicit economies is to do with regimes of prohibition and control. Nonetheless, if we are to involve the voices of growers from conflict-affected borderlands in policy and practice around illicit economies, it is important to recognise the strong link between participation, violence and social change.

5. The policy lab in perspective: reflections on participation

The policy lab aimed to develop the sustained participation of a small group of researchers and policy stakeholders, and a learning approach to generate new and innovative ideas for policy and practice around drugs, development and peacebuilding. It attempted to look at familiar problems from different angles. It was, in the words of one of the core group members at the end of the second cycle, “an unusual journey”.

This section revisits some of the assumptions underpinning the policy lab in the light of the outcomes of the two cycles, and the lab’s ambitions to generate critical conversations and innovative thinking. It draws on participants’ own reflections not only on the policy lab, but on the nature of the relationship between research and policy.

Some of the assumptions underpinning the policy lab were articulated in the inception meeting; others were implied rather than clearly articulated. Perhaps the most important of the latter was the hope that sustained participation of the core group and the structure of the meetings would allow trust to be built, creating a space for critical conversations, to contribute in turn to new ideas and practical applications.

As discussed, success in sustaining participation was partial. Among many reasons, the governmental ruptures experienced in Myanmar and Afghanistan had a huge effect on this. Participation from those based in, from, or working on either of those countries dropped off dramatically, for reasons ranging from safety to lack of time. The core group of participants most able to sustain participation were those from the global North, and members of the Drugs & (dis)order consortium. This diminished the diversity of the group – both in terms of origin, but also in terms of identity as a researcher or a policy stakeholder – and shaped the nature of the ensuing conversation. It also reduced possibilities for meeting the ambition of ‘learning from different experience in other places’ which many core group members identified at the outset.

The assumption that sustained participation would contribute to establishing trust and allowing critical conversations did, however, hold. The analysis and judgement involved in critical conversation was present in all sessions, and many participants were confident enough to reflect honestly on their own organisations, and their understandings of policy processes and the stakeholders involved in them. These critical conversations generated some key areas that need consideration when making policy on illicit drug economies and war-to-peace transitions and developmental approaches to drugs. They also identified some areas that merit attention at the interface of research and policy, discussed below.

The assumption that frank and open exchanges between policymakers and researchers from different fields might enable the generation of new ideas and the creation of practical alternatives to entrenched policy narratives was far weaker in practice. As one core group member observed at the end of the first cycle, “For me, these discussions were more about some of the small details we need to be reminded of, rather than something new; these issues have been discussed for a long time.” Throughout, attempts to guide discussions towards practical applications through the framing questions (shown in green in this paper) were less successful. Conversations focused much more on either scrutinising detail from the expert inputs, or heading towards more conceptual and abstract terrain, rather than moving towards the creation of practical new ideas that the policy lab sought to nurture. Here, there is a tension between an ambition to find practical applications, and a commitment to an iterative process driven in part by the priorities of the participants.

In understanding this limitation, it is useful to draw on a typology of different kinds of conversation between researchers and stakeholders.² Bammer suggests a useful progression of conversational types that characterise greater engagement:

- serial monologue (taking turns to present one’s own perspective);
- engaged monologue (the exchange of perspectives);
- reflective dialogue (seeking to learn about the perspectives of others); and
- generative dialogue (building on common ground to tackle persistent disagreement, opening potential for creating new ideas).

From a facilitators’ perspective, most of the conversations in the policy lab – especially the sessions featuring contributions from the research – fell into the serial and engaged monologue categories. Some – especially in the first and last meetings in the two cycles – might be viewed as reflective. Little, however, could be defined as the type of generative conversation that typifies the development of innovative ideas, and often relies heavily on long-term, in-depth collaborations. Despite efforts to sustain participation over two cycles, the ambition to come up with new approaches may have been too high for the time and structure available. It may also have been too much to ask from such a diverse group of stakeholders, working for very different organisations, and with very different experiences of and perspectives on illicit economies, and different problems to solve.

² Gabrielle Bammer (2021) ‘Stakeholder engagement primer 7: Listening and dialogue’, Integration and insights blog, 21 November, <https://i2insights.org/2021/11/25/listening-and-dialogue/>

If the ambition to generate new approaches was perhaps unrealistic, what did core group members appreciate and gain from their participation in the policy labs?

- **Grounded, detailed research.** Several participants acknowledged the importance of a multitude of descriptive inputs and knowledge from the ground, developing understanding that they could apply to their own areas of work. As one of the researchers observed, “when we talk to the communities, we may be in a unique position to have a picture of the realities; when we talk about illicit economies in post-conflict contexts, we can really show how all these things intersect, all these topics are connected, and they matter. The data we collect, we have all this information about these communities, households, their histories, how policies have impacted in positive and negative ways. We are in a unique position to illustrate why narratives on drugs, development and peace need re-framing, and initiate different conversations”.
- **Alternative ways of looking at illicit drugs.** A participant from an organisation where conversations about drugs are dominated by security approaches valued hearing about them from a livelihood and rights perspective, and a participant from an organisation focused on violence appreciated hearing about illicit drug markets and economies. A participant with a research background reflected on the importance of links – between drugs and land-grabs, drugs and credit, human rights frameworks and drugs frameworks, drugs and financial systems. In each case, participating in the policy lab gave a chance to view things from a different perspective.
- **Deepening analysis to ask the right questions.** Throughout the labs, there was a tension between two caricatures of ‘researchers’ and ‘policymakers’: a tendency of researchers to be critical and deconstruct and problematise policy, and a tendency of policymakers to require simple frameworks and recommendations from researchers. One suggestion that resonated with many was that a function of research may be to support policy stakeholders ask the right questions, rather than telling them what they should be doing.
- **Getting out of silos.** The problem of illicit drugs cutting across many fields and sectors where people work in silos was commented on periodically throughout both cycles of the policy lab. One participant saw the kind of conversation offered by the policy lab as a step towards change: “In the UN, for example, so many groups focused on different areas and not talking to each other. Yes, this has changed, but not enough. Programmes that can break the silos – in this case by getting academics and policy practitioners talking to each other – are important.”

At the outset of the first policy lab, one participant expressed the desire to find ways to build better bridges between research and policy. The achievements of the lab suggest that there is value in nurturing sustained engagement between researchers and policy stakeholders, but that there are dangers in generating more questions than answers which mean that more work needs to be done to build on this foundation.

Annex 1. Participants and their institutional affiliation at the time of the policy lab

Facilitators

Karol Balfe	Christian Aid
Karen Brock	SOAS University of London
Hannah Grene	Barncat Consulting

Core group

Ana Arjona	Centre for the Study of Security and Drugs, Los Andes University, Colombia
Juanita Goebertus Estrada	Congresswoman, Colombia Congress
Jonathan Goodhand	SOAS University of London
Eric Gutierrez	Independent consultant
Ed Hadley	Stabilisation Unit, UK government
Ghizaal Haress	Office of the Ombudsperson, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Tom Kramer	Transnational Institute
Jean-Luc Lemahieu	UN Office on Drugs and Crime
Alexandre Marc	Brookings Institution
Stefania Minervino	International Aid and Cooperation, European Commission
Orzala Nemat	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
Jenny Pearce	London School of Economics
Liv Tørres	Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

Panellists and discussants Cycle 1

Jasmine Bhatia	European Institute of Peace
Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín	National University of Colombia
Astrid Jamar	SOAS University of London
Patrick Meehan	SOAS University of London
Dipali Mukhopadhyay	US Institute of Peace
Charles Petrie	Senior consultant

Panellists and discussants Cycle 2

Daniel Brombacher	Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development
Diana Machuca	National University of Colombia
Patrick Meehan	SOAS University of London
Adam Pain	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Fabio Santos Duarte	Global Partnership on Drug Policies and Development
Matthew Wilson	Open Society Foundations



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'Drugs & (dis)order: building sustainable peacetime economies in the aftermath of war' is a Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of GCRF, the UK Government or partner organisations.

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