

Voices from the borderlands 2022

Life stories from the
drug- and conflict-affected
borderlands of Afghanistan,
Colombia and Myanmar



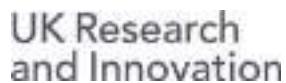
drugs & (dis)order

About 'Voices from the borderlands 2022'

'Voices from the borderlands 2022' is the second flagship publication of Drugs & (dis)order, a four-year research project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies. It is a collection of life stories from our fieldwork across seven drug- and conflict-affected borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. It is intended for a broad audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers working on issues related to drugs, development and peacebuilding. The stories offer valuable insights into how illicit drugs, violence and conflict, poverty and development, insecurity and resilience are entangled in the everyday lives of people in the borderlands. Our hope is that these stories challenge our readers to think about and engage more critically with how illicit drugs, development and peacebuilding interconnect in their work.

Acknowledgements

'Voices from the borderlands 2022' has been prepared by members of the Drugs & (dis)order team, led by Jonathan Goodhand, Frances Thomson, Patrick Meehan, Louise Ball (SOAS University of London) and Mandy Sadan (University of Warwick). We would like to acknowledge and thank all individuals who shared their story with Drugs & (dis)order researchers during our fieldwork. The nine stories included in 'Voices from the borderlands 2022' were adapted from life history interview transcripts. In Afghanistan, interviews were conducted by members of the OSDR research team with the support of Jan Koehler, and the stories were adapted by Sana Safi, a journalist and writer from Afghanistan who currently lives and works in the United Kingdom. In Colombia, interviews were conducted by Camilo Acero, Luis Castillo, Diana Machuca, Francisco Gutiérrez, Sebastián Cristancho and Howard Rojas from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Camilo, Luis and Diana adapted the stories with editorial support from Miriam Cotes. The stories from Shan State, Myanmar were adapted by Sai Aung Hla and Sai Kham Phu, of the Shan Herald News Agency, and are based on interviews conducted by the same researchers. The story from Kachin State is based on an interview conducted by the KRC research team and was adapted by Mandy Sadan. Jenny Pearce provided valuable feedback on parts of the report. The report was edited by Sophie Gillespie and designed by Lucy Peers, supported by Catherine Setchell and Karen Brock.



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 the work of 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, Alcís, Christian Aid, Kachinland Research Centre, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Organization for Sustainable Development and Research, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford, PositiveNegatives, Shan Herald Agency for News, Universidad de los Andes, and Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

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Cover images from left to right: 1. Jangul's story, Afghanistan, illustration by Kruttika Susarla, 2. Naw Hkam's story, Myanmar, illustration by Cecilia Ja Seng, 3. Jessica's story, Colombia, illustration by Jhonatan Acosta.
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About Drugs & (dis)order

Drugs & (dis)order is a four-year research project, seeking to address the question, 'How can war economies be transformed into peace economies?', working in nine drug- and conflict- affected borderland regions of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar.

A borderland perspective

The project focuses on illicit drugs, because they are one of the main commodities fuelling war economies. We focus on borderland regions because they have become major hubs in transnational drug economies and often remain conflict hotspots, even after national peace agreements. We thus believe that borderlands are central to the challenge of transforming drug-fuelled war economies into sustainable peacetime economies.

Generating a new evidence base

There is growing recognition that drugs policies should be more pro-poor and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But the evidence base to support any such reform is patchy, politicised and contested. Drugs & (dis)order thus seeks to generate robust empirical data to help build a new evidence base.

Engaging with the political economy of policymaking

We do not assume that better evidence alone will transform policies. Our research also places policymaking under the spotlight to understand the agendas, interests and power struggles that shape the dynamics and outcomes of drugs, development and peacebuilding policymaking.

An interdisciplinary approach

Our research brings together insights from anthropology, sociology, geography, political economy, political science, history and public health to build a comprehensive picture of the ways that drug economies shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they are embedded. We incorporate innovative research methods and analytical tools, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) imagery, to map physical changes in borderlands – complementing surveys, ethnographic and life history interviews.

Building a global network of researchers

Drugs & (dis)order is led by SOAS University of London, with a team comprising 11 partner institutions from Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar and the UK. One of the aims of the project was to build a global network of researchers and institutions to continue carrying out research beyond the end of the project. This has led to the formation of the Centre for the Study of Illicit Economies, Violence and Development (CIVAD). Visit the CIVAD webpage for more details: <https://drugs-and-disorder.org/future-research-centre-for-the-study-of-illicit-economies-violence-and-development/>

Introduction



How can war economies be transformed into peace economies?

Over the past four years, the Drugs & (dis)order consortium has been addressing the question: 'how can war economies be transformed into peace economies in regions experiencing or recovering from armed conflict?'

We have conducted research in nine drug- and-conflict affected borderland regions of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar – three of the world's biggest illicit drug producers – and all have been shaped by peace processes alongside escalating violence.

There has been growing recognition that drug policies should be more pro-poor and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. But the evidence base to support any such reform is patchy, politicised and contested.

We focus on illicit drugs because they are one of the main commodities fuelling war economies, and on borderland regions as they are major hubs in transnational drug economies. Even after the signing of national peace agreements, these regions often remain conflict hotspots, and are thus central to the challenge of transforming drug-fuelled war economies into sustainable peacetime economies.

There has been growing recognition that drug policies should be more pro-poor and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. But the evidence base to support any such reform is patchy, politicised and contested. Drugs & (dis)order sought to generate robust empirical data to help build a new evidence base.

Of course, better evidence alone will not transform policies. Our research has also placed the policy fields of drugs, development and peacebuilding under the spotlight to better understand the agendas, interests and power struggles that shape policy dynamics and outcomes.

Contested transitions in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar

A lot has happened in each of the three countries over the course of these four years. The events that have unfolded show that war-to-peace transitions are rarely linear and that illicit drug economies play a complex role in these processes.

Our research in **Afghanistan** started more than two years before the Doha talks initiated in September 2020

between the US government and the Taliban, which led to the Doha Agreement in which the US agreed to a staged withdrawal from the country, conditional on Taliban security assurances. This set in train a series of events that emboldened the Taliban and weakened the Afghan government, which ultimately led to the collapse of the regime and the Taliban taking over power in August 2021. By the winter of 2021–22, Afghanistan faced a humanitarian catastrophe triggered by financial sanctions, the loss of foreign aid, the effects of COVID-19, and the impact of repeated droughts. As the crisis in Afghanistan worsened, illicit economies became increasingly important; human and drug trafficking and opium poppy production were the only economic sectors still thriving in the country.¹ While illicit economies could not resolve the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, they provided a lifeline for many.

In **Colombia**, the Duque government, which was elected in 2018 on an anti-peace deal platform, reneged on many of the commitments written into the 2016 peace agreement; one of the key casualties was the illicit crop substitution programme. Violence involving both government forces and a range of armed groups was re-activated in many parts of the country. While war was being reconfigured in Colombia's rural areas and borderlands, social protests, which often turned into violent battles with the police, erupted across the country. Community organisers and social leaders have been among the main victims in this messy reconfiguration of armed conflict, targeted for different reasons, including their work on the illicit crop substitution programme.

At the start of our research, the early optimism about **Myanmar**'s democratic transition and peacebuilding efforts had faded. Hopes that Aung San Suu Kyi's re-election in November 2020 might offer scope to reinvigorate the peace process were destroyed by the military coup in February 2021, which resulted in a devastating and protracted political crisis across the country and a significant, sustained upsurge in violence. The military junta responded with extreme violence against protesters and opponents but struggled to consolidate control in the light of concerted and widespread resistance. Amid worsening armed conflict and the effects of COVID-19, the country's economy contracted by more than 20% in 2021. In this context, the drivers of drug production and drug harms in Myanmar – poverty, conflict, poor welfare provision and limited opportunities in the legal economy – remained deeply entrenched.

These trajectories remind us that war-to-peace transitions commonly involve instability and contestation; in retrospect, they may prove to have been only brief pauses in ongoing and mutating conflicts, rather than genuine transitions from war to peace.

Voices from the borderlands

The perspectives of people living in the drug- and conflict-affected borderlands of Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar have been at the heart of our research.

Participants in illicit drug economies (producers, transporters or consumers) across the global South tend to be poorly represented – or not represented at all – in global and national policy debates on drugs, development and peacebuilding. And yet, they are among those most affected by counter-narcotics policies.

Policies that purport to address drugs, support development and build peace can only do so if they are attuned to how drugs shape livelihoods and power structures in borderland regions, and the uneven distribution of risks and opportunities for those that engage in illegal drug economies.

Hence, there is a need to listen to and learn from, in a serious, sustained and meaningful way, the voices and experiences of individuals and communities living in drugs-affected borderland regions.

'Voices from the borderlands', intended for a broad audience of researchers, practitioners and policymakers working on issues related to drugs, development and peacebuilding, is one of several Drugs & (dis)order outputs that shed light on the experiences and perspectives of people involved in illicit drug economies.

Our 2020 'Voices from the borderlands' publication presented three key messages from each of the countries we work in. These messages were based on survey data, semi-structured and life-history interviews with those involved in the drug economy, as well as informal conversations and participant observation during ethnographic fieldwork.

We hope this collection of stories will challenge readers to think and engage more critically about how illicit drugs intersect with development and peacebuilding processes.

This 2022 edition of 'Voices from the borderlands' again focuses on marginalised voices, but this time through a collection of nine life stories from Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. Every life story is in some way unique. But we hope that these stories of the everyday lives of those engaged in drug production, trafficking/trade and use, can illuminate how drug economies and policies shape the dynamics of violence and peace, poverty and development, and insecurity and resilience in borderlands.

We hope this collection of stories will challenge readers to think and engage more critically about how illicit drugs intersect with development and peacebuilding processes.



Illustration by Kruttika Susarla

Why life stories?

The use of life stories in research and policy engagement is challenging but comes with a number of advantages that are difficult to replicate with other approaches. These are outlined below, after first explaining what life (hi)story research is.

There are different types of life-history or life-story research. As such, there is no standard definition of this methodology and what it entails, although our approach broadly subscribes to Watson and Watson-Franke's definition of a life history as 'any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person'.² Life stories are distinguishable from other forms of oral history and narrative research by their focus on individuals' experiences and emotions.³ For example, they may be contrasted to oral testimonies, which can be highly personal but are ultimately focused upon pre-identified issues or events.⁴ Life stories typically touch upon multiple 'bigger' issues and events but, unlike oral testimonies, centre upon the narrator and their life.

Moreover, most forms of life-(hi)story research share a 'common goal [...] to help overlooked or disenfranchised individuals make their stories known'.⁵ In doing so, life-history projects often challenge and destabilise hegemonic discourses.⁶

Thus, the tradition of life-story research aligns with the overall objective of our 'Voices from the borderlands' publications: to provide an opportunity to listen to and learn from the voices and experiences of individuals and communities living in drugs-affected borderland regions – voices and experiences that are too often unheard and unknown.

These stories provide a sense of the everyday lives of people affected by drug economies and the particular borderland environments of risk and opportunity that they navigate.

Interview fragments, narrative ethnographies and fieldwork photographs certainly help humanise and ground analysis, but life stories take this to another more profound level. Our brains process stories differently from 'facts'. Reading or listening to life stories can be deeply transformative. Particularly compelling stories can transport the reader/listener to other places and times and also help them identify with the narrator or main character(s) and to understand the places in which they live. They have the power to elicit empathy and a form of understanding based on human connection that other forms of engagement cannot.

Stories also reveal important contradictions, nuances and ambiguities. For example, a single narrator's experiences and perceptions of an insurgent armed group are sometimes extremely mixed, suggesting that they cannot be easily sorted into categories like 'sympathisers' or 'detractors'. The same can be said about illicit drug economies, which in the borderlands where we work permeate people's lives in positive, negative and ambivalent ways.



Illustration by Sébastien Narváez

These stories provide a sense of the everyday lives of people affected by drug economies and the particular borderland environments of risk and opportunity that they navigate. As such, they are both personal and spatial biographies; they unveil the complex interplay between structure and agency that shapes people's life trajectories and wider processes of change in borderland regions. Life stories remind us that 'it is ordinary people who make human society and that they are not merely passive subjects of abstract structures or powerful individuals'.⁷ They draw attention to the incredible resilience, adaptability and innovation of people living in challenging environments and the role that illegal drug economies play in empowering and eroding these forms of agency.

Life stories also offer insights into the role that people play in shaping the drug environments in which they live, and go beyond portrayals of marginalised communities as 'passive victims' of systemic forces that dominate their lives.⁸ They offer ways to better understand how people engage with drugs as part of their efforts to exercise agency in shaping their own social worlds, and to try to navigate the multiple risks they confront. Yet, at the same time, life stories also reveal how these everyday activities and survival

strategies – including engagement with drugs – often articulate and reinforce prevailing structures of power and inequality rather than empowering them or providing the impetus for change.⁹

Importantly, stories help us to think about the people who participate in drug economies as real people with names, with family members they love but also quarrel with, with stories of suffering but also of kindness and perseverance.

Working with life stories is not about separating out the study of 'little' politics from 'Big' politics, of people's history from elite history, or of the subjective, cultural and emotional realm from material, structural and institutional forces. Rather, it offers a way to explore the entanglements and relationships between structural forces and everyday practices and how these shape people and places.

Importantly, stories help us to think about the people who participate in drug economies as real people with names, with family members they love but also quarrel with, with stories of suffering but also of kindness and perseverance. The type of understanding that stories can provide is vital for developing truly 'people-centred' and 'context-sensitive' drug policies.

Finally, so far, we have focused on the importance of life stories for 'outsider' readers or listeners. But research participants can also find that narrating their own stories a powerful and meaningful experience, which helps clarify and create new understandings of events around their lives. The importance and power of constructing life stories is demonstrated by their use in settings of intense disruption and dislocation to recover lost or repressed community histories. Life histories can help people give meaning to difficult experiences or to gain a sense of control over them. The construction of meaning through personal narrative is what makes us human and represents a deep-seated need in developing individual and collective identities.

Life stories in Drugs & (dis)order

Life stories have been part of the Drugs & (dis)order methodological approach and engagement strategy from the beginning. Over the last four years, our researchers have conducted dozens of life-history interviews and PositiveNegatives has helped us bring some of these stories to life through comics and animations, working with local artists and storytellers. These stories have shaped many other outputs too.¹⁰ This edition of 'Voices from the borderlands' puts that element of our work centre stage.

As part of our commitment to life story research, members of the research team participated in training to help them to better understand the value of this method, reflect on ethical issues, improve life history interviewing techniques and explore ways of writing up these interviews for public engagement. It also better prepared them to face the challenges of life story research discussed below.¹¹

Notwithstanding this investment, we cannot claim to have achieved the depth and detail of those life history projects that involve years of engagement with the same participants,¹² or that draw on multiple sources for a single (auto)biography.¹³ Nor did we build different forms of storyteller participation into our research design.¹⁴ Most of our stories are drawn from multiple interviews, which generally took place over a two months to one year time span, though, in some cases, they stem from single interviews. In these cases, the people who agreed to share their life stories were known to the research team and had an established relationship of trust.

The nine life story interviews that form the basis of this report were conducted by researchers from our partner organisations. In some cases, researchers were from same region, ethnicity, gender or generation as the interviewee, but often this was not the case. In this sense, it is not possible to generalise about the 'standpoint' and positionality of the researchers and their relation to the interviewees and how this impacted the interview process; nevertheless, it is important to recognise that these standpoints influenced the interview process and, ultimately, the way the stories in this report were constructed.

Ideally, we would have liked all storytellers to participate in the adaptation or editing process in some form, such as by reviewing draft versions of the stories. Often, this was not possible because of security issues, the pandemic, the varied literacy levels of participants, and their access to technology. In any case, not all interviewees want to be involved in the adaptation/editing process; for example, all three storytellers from Colombia were given the opportunity to comment on draft versions of their stories, but only one did so.

We see life histories as portals in the sense that they help us 'learn about some reality external to the story, which the life history is presumed to mirror'.¹⁵ The selection of stories for this publication, explained below, reflects this approach as they powerfully show how personal life histories are entangled with and inseparable from the histories of the drugs-affected frontiers and borderlands in which they unfold.

Selecting and adapting stories for 'Voices from the borderlands 2022'

'Voices' from the borderlands are neither homogenous nor harmonious. Rather, our research has revealed a cacophony of often discordant voices that vary across age, ethnicity, gender and religion; activities (licit and illicit, drug producers, consumers, traffickers, elite or subaltern); and location (provincial capital, border districts, poor hinterlands, trafficking hubs).

Clearly this leads to questions about which voices to prioritise and it is important to be transparent about the process of selecting and retelling these stories. We do not pretend to be totally impartial, nor do we claim to represent all voices. We have struggled, for example, to ensure equal access to women's and men's voices, particularly in Afghanistan.

While life stories do not lend themselves to scalability and generalisation, they do shed light on broader contexts, processes and issues. Our teams deliberately chose stories for 'Voices from the borderlands 2022' with this in mind. We selected stories that resonate with and illustrate our broader research findings, which are based on a wide variety of methods and data including surveys and hundreds of semi-structured interviews.

While life stories do not lend themselves to scalability and generalisation, they do shed light on broader contexts, processes and issues.



The selection process was also shaped by ethical considerations. The publication of life stories requires an additional layer of consent. It is difficult to fully anonymise something so unique and even if one could guarantee complete anonymity not all interviewees would feel comfortable with their full personal stories being made public. The stories in this report are all testimonies from people who wanted to share their stories and have their voices heard and who gave their explicit consent for their life story to be published. In conflict- and drug-affected borderlands, requesting formal, written consent for interviews is often not appropriate for a range of reasons; it could put participants at risk; not all interviewees are literate; and in some contexts, asking for a signature is a sign of mistrust that may be considered rude or hurtful. Thus, verbal informed consent, given after researchers had explained the project and how interview notes or transcripts would be used, underlies the vast majority of the hundreds of interviews conducted by the Drugs & (dis)order team, including all of those used for this publication. Participants were informed that they would not be named, and that identifying information would be removed to ensure anonymity. Nevertheless, because it is difficult to guarantee complete anonymity when publishing life stories, especially if the narrator is well-known locally, we sought additional consent to publish the life stories in this report. One participant expressly requested that we use his real name.

In addition to these broad selection criteria, each country team had their own rationale for choosing the stories they did.

The Afghan team started by shortlisting a selection of life stories from Nangarhar and Nimruz about brokers and traders, that highlighted key themes from the overall research, including the interlinking of licit and illicit trade, and were also particularly compelling narratives. From this shortlist, they chose stories that showed how big political moments and ruptures shape 'ordinary' people's lives and the importance of borders to people's livelihoods. The team decided to include Jangul's story despite its previous publication in comic form, because it contained a lot of rich detail not captured there. They also chose to include a woman's story, which shows how drugs are part of the Afghan borderland 'habitus', even if one isn't directly involved in the trade.

The Colombia team at National University selected stories that shed light on the drugs, development and conflict histories of the borderlands where they have been working (the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, Tumaco and Puerto Asís), as well as more recent dynamics. They also chose stories that clearly highlight the role of collective and individual agency in those historical processes. Two of the three stories shared in this publication are part of a wider collection of social leaders' life stories the team has been working



Illustration by Sébastien Narváez

on. Carmen and Don Tito's stories were selected in particular because, apart from being told by fantastic narrators, they offer perspectives from female and Afro-Colombian social leaders, respectively.

The Myanmar research team conducted a large number of interviews in 2018 and 2019 throughout Kachin State and Shan State; one key theme that emerged was the level of concern regarding the impact of drug-related harms on individuals, families and communities and the challenges this has created in an environment where drug production remains crucial to the livelihoods of many poor households. The team chose the three stories presented here because they reveal the multi-faceted nature of drug 'harms', which encompass both the physiological impact and financial pressures created by sustained drug use, but also the damage caused by harsh responses to drugs, especially long prison sentences and stigmatisation. They also chose to include two stories narrated by women to offer some glimpses into these issues from different gendered perspectives.

Once selected, life story interview transcripts were edited for publication, and this involved creative curation, while remaining true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice.

The stories from Colombia and from Shan State, Myanmar were adapted or edited, first, in the original interview language – Spanish and Shan, respectively – and then translated into English. In the case of the stories from Afghanistan and Kachin State, Myanmar, the editors worked in English first, but used both

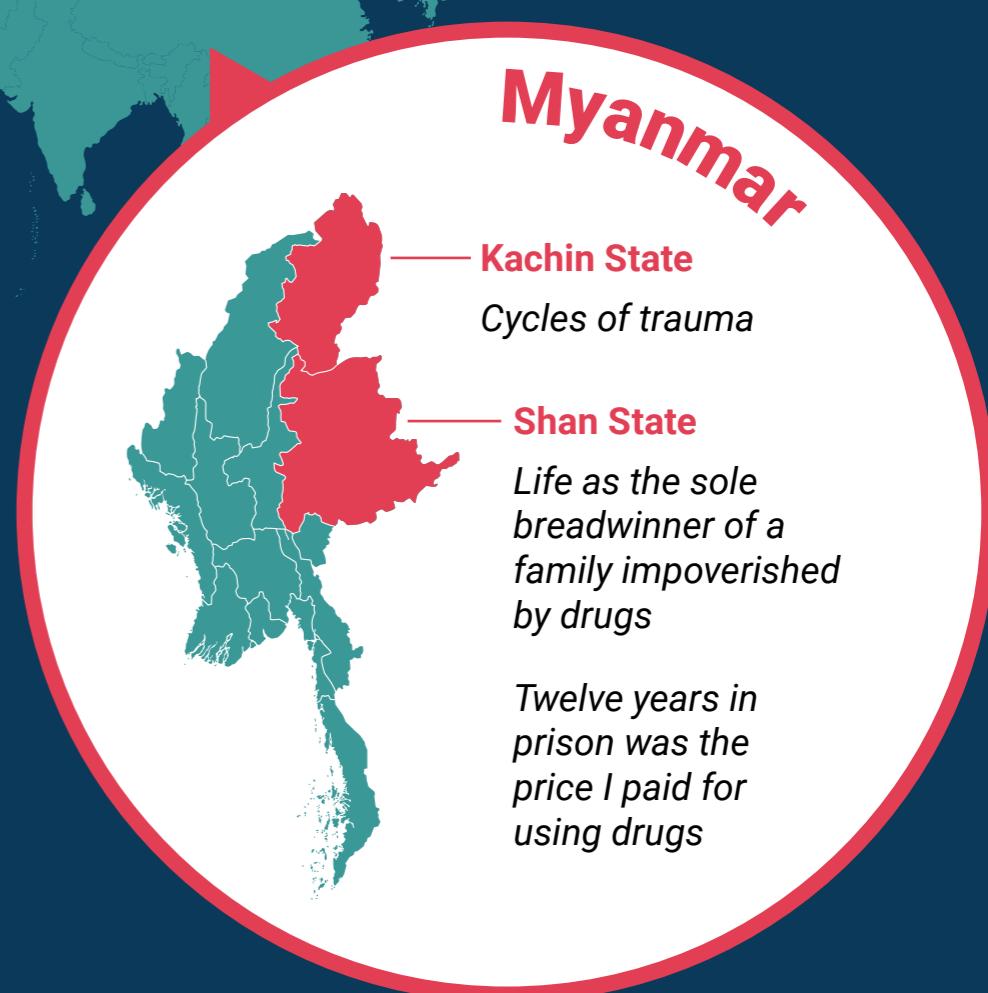
original transcripts in Dari, Pashto and Jinghpaw, and translated versions as source material.

The adapted contents are all drawn from the interviews; our team did not insert any events or opinions that were not present in the original, and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. At the same time, transforming interview transcripts into interesting and accessible stories for a broad audience necessitated selective inclusion of the interviewee's narration (like removing unfinished or unclear ideas/accounts), moving fragments around to create a more fluid and lucid narrative, and changing wording in places to make it clearer and more concise.

In some cases, especially with longer life-history interviews that took place over multiple sessions, the narration had to be shortened significantly, in ways that went beyond removing unclear fragments and repetition or making the wording more succinct. Some of our editors had to make difficult decisions about what elements of the story to include and exclude. While we understand the value of producing complete 'life records', which are often hundreds of pages long,¹⁶ we are also keenly aware of the trade-off between publishing full and detailed life histories and providing shorter stories with the potential to reach a larger audience.

In the next section, we turn to the life stories themselves, selected and adapted through the processes described above. They offer a rich opportunity to learn about the many ways that illicit drugs touch the daily lives of those living in conflict-affected borderlands.

Stories from the borderlands



Voices from the borderlands presents voices and perspectives from seven borderland regions in Colombia, Afghanistan and Myanmar. Together, these are three of the world's largest illicit drug producers; all have experienced years of violent conflict and are in the midst of some form of peace process.

Life stories from **Afghanistan's borderlands**





Transportation of transit goods by mules, Durbaba district, Nangarhar. Photo by OSDR

Kabul to Moscow with a suitcase full of heroin

A story told by Jangul¹⁷ and adapted by Sana Safi¹⁸



Nangarhar is a province in the east of Afghanistan, sharing a border with Pakistan. The provincial capital of Jalalabad is a key commercial, cultural and political hub. Mining of marble, talc and gems and illicit logging have been key sources of income and rents for business elites and political-military groups. It also has a strong agricultural economy and has been a major opium producer since the 1980s. Nangarhar was severely affected by the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) as a key centre of resistance against the communist regime. The US-led intervention in 2001, marked a shift in the conflict rather than its ending, and the province became a front line in the fighting between the internationally backed regime and the Taliban. The Durand line dividing Afghanistan from Pakistan has long been disputed, but the border has also been the site of a thriving transit trade across formal and informal crossing points, based on strong cross-border tribal networks. Post-2001, there has been a growing imperative from both sides to regulate flows across the Durand line – linked to concerns about security and taxation. Pakistan has been building a fence along the border to discourage unauthorised cross-border movement, and informal crossing points have closed. This has had a significant impact on the livelihoods of borderland communities.

I was born in 1963, in Achin district, in Nangarhar province. My father was married twice. My sister and I lived with our mother in our village, while my father and his second wife lived in Kabul. My father was a government employee. His salary was not enough to support two families, so I had to work to provide for the three of us, as well as going to school. It was very hard to do both, so I ended up dropping out of secondary school in grade 8.

Even though I was young, I remember it well. People were able to go wherever and whenever they wanted – they moved about freely. People were generally poor. Most families only had one room to share among three to six members and food was rationed. They cultivated wheat, maize and poppies on their land. Most

people had cows, goats and donkeys. Our milk, yogurt and cheese came from our own cows, goats and sheep.

People in the village voluntarily participated in social and community gatherings. They helped with building bridges, mosques and roads as well as cleaning the canals and streams. We also had elections for local councils, provincial councils and the parliament. I remember election campaign assemblies in our village.

When I turned 12 my mother died so my sister and I had to go and live with our grandmother. I spent my time farming to earn a living. I cultivated wheat and poppies on our land through which I was able to put food on the table.

The situation began to change in 1978, after the communist coup against the then president, Mohammed Daoud Khan. My father decided to arrange my marriage. I was married the same year. In 1979, when I turned 16, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.

Anti-Soviet mujahideen resistance

Soon after the Soviet-backed coup, we saw the first groups of the mujahideen arrive in Achin. They knocked on people's doors at night asking for money. They called it 'zakat'.¹⁹ They also warned the locals against working with the government. If people didn't obey, they threatened to fine each member of the household or set their homes on fire. The fine for each person in a family was 1000 Afghani [US\$25].

‘Soon after the Soviet-backed coup, we saw the first groups of the mujahideen arrive in Achin. They knocked on people’s doors at night asking for money. They called it ‘zakat’. They also warned the locals against working with the government.’

The armed resistance of the mujahideen felt like a full-scale war. The government carried out airstrikes regularly, which killed scores of people. Hundreds, even thousands, of others were displaced. Shops and homes were looted, lands were stolen and livestock were left abandoned. Communities were divided too – some were pro-government while others supported the mujahideen. Schools were bombed or left empty as no one dared to send their children to them. Trade stopped. Life came to a standstill.

As my father was working in Kabul and was known to have been employed by the government, the mujahideen warned me to either persuade him to leave his job and return to the village or risk our house being burned down. I decided to leave the village. I asked my wife, sister and grandmother to accompany me to Kabul and to go live with my father.

We arrived in Kabul after the Soviet invasion and settled in the Qala-e-Zaman Khan neighbourhood, which is in the south-eastern part of the city. I soon found out that life there was even harder because I literally couldn't leave the house as men aged over 18 were obliged to serve in the military for two years.

Military service

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't escape conscription, so I decided to go back to Achin to get my national identity card and submit my application to enrol at the National Military Academy. I was admitted to the

academy in 1980 and was sent to Kandahar province for one year's training. After completing my military training, I was assigned to a job at the airport in Mazar-i-Sharif, in northern Balkh province. As a private, my monthly salary was 6,000 Afghani [US\$76.63 in today's money].

After two years in the job, I asked my wife to join me in Mazar-i-Sharif because by then I had settled down, had enough income, and was accustomed to how things worked. On top of my salary, I received government coupons that allowed me to get necessities – such as tea, sugar, flour, soap, shampoo and cooking oil – free of charge.

I remained in that job for 12 years until the civil war ended in 1992. Military installations were heavily damaged during the mujahideen resistance and under their subsequent power sharing government. In the north, where I was based, militia forces loyal to Abdul Rashid Dostum were interfering in how the airport should be run. None of them respected military officers like me.

I was happy to have a job, but my salary remained very low and my family was growing. I couldn't live on it any longer. So, by the mid-1980s I sent my wife and children back to our village in Achin, in Nangarhar while I stayed working in Mazar-i-Sharif. In the initial years of my assignment, Mazar-i-Sharif and the surrounding areas felt safe but they slowly lost their peace.

Nineteen ninety was the worst year for the people of Afghanistan. One, there was intense fighting in the bigger cities like Jalalabad. Second, [as part of their campaign against the government of Mohammad Najibullah in Kabul] the mujahideen blocked all supply routes to the capital. I remember visiting my relatives who lived in the city of Jalalabad where I noticed that people were forced to cook the leaves of cauliflower to eat because nothing else was available or accessible. Food was scarce. I felt the situation was better in the districts (which by then were completely under the control of the mujahideen) because people could at least farm their own land for food and keep livestock. Some villagers had even opened shops in the districts.

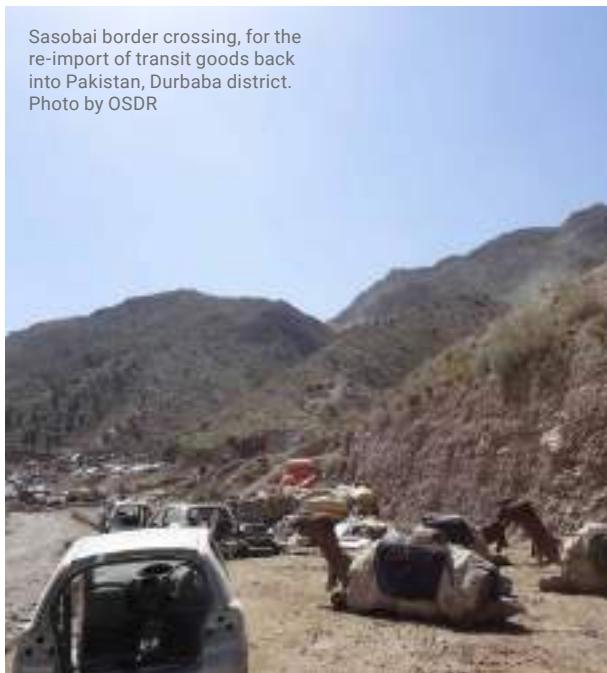
‘...people were forced to cook the leaves of cauliflower to eat because nothing else was available or accessible. Food was scarce.’

A sizable number of people were busy cultivating, buying and selling opium in the local bazaars of Ghani Khel, Khogyani, Chaparhar and Achin. Most of the mujahideen leaders were involved in the drug trade.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, fighting intensified and that meant there were constant, heavy bombardments in both rural and urban areas. After the formation

of a power sharing government in 1992, headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, security improved slightly but Afghanistan generally remained lawless.

‘Each area had its own warlord who established checkpoints to extort money from travellers and passers-by [...] Many people emigrated [...] to find safety, but this loosened social and communal bonds.’



Each area had its own warlord who established checkpoints to extort money from travellers and passers-by. Robberies increased. Many people emigrated to Pakistan, Iran or to other parts within Afghanistan to find safety, but this loosened social and communal bonds. We couldn't be part of each other's joys or sorrows. Even close family members didn't see each other for years.

In 1993, I left my job in Mazar-i-Sharif and went back to my village to join my wife and children. I had 300,000 Afghani with me [US\$3,831]. When I arrived in the village, I asked my sister who had recently become a widow to lend me another 50,000 Afghani [US\$639] with which I opened a shop in the bazaar. Another priority was to build a room in my old house, which had been burned down by the mujahideen in 1979 because of my father's association with the communist government. I built the room with timber I bought in the local bazaar.

First trip to Moscow smuggling heroin, 1993

The shop was a good investment but I was now providing for two families – my own and my sister's.

The Afghan currency had lost all of its value and most of us were using Pakistani rupees. I was going through a very tough time. All my friends and relatives were struggling too.

That same year, a friend (a communist lieutenant who I had met during my time in Mazar) visited me in Achin. His cousin had been involved in the drug business. He had a heroin factory in the Abdul Khel area of Achin. He transported the heroin to Mazar-i-Sharif where another dealer smuggled it into Russia via the crossing point with Uzbekistan. The person who smuggled the heroin to Moscow charged the Abdul Khel trader 17,000 US dollars for one kilogram. My friend – the lieutenant – had an idea. He said, what if he asked his cousin – the heroin trader in Abdul Khel – to suggest to the smuggler in Mazar-i-Sharif that he could do even better with the help of two human mules.

The Abdul Khel trader agreed, and the lieutenant and I were hired. We were offered 50,000 Pakistani rupees (US\$304) each to start, plus another 50,000 PKRs each – or 100,000 total – once the mission was complete.

I agreed but didn't inform my wife. Instead, I told her I was going to Mazar-i-Sharif to work as a labourer. When it was time to leave, I said my goodbyes and was met by the lieutenant at my doorstep. From there, we headed to Mazar-i-Sharif.

The Abdul Khel trader, the lieutenant and I arrived in Mazar-i-Sharif and went straight to the property hired for us by the Abdul Khel's dealer. The Mazar-i-Sharif dealer came to the house, and we all met. He was responsible for preparing passports and Uzbek visas. It took three months to get all our documents. The plan was that the lieutenant and I would take the heroin, by road, to Moscow using the border crossing between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. He would fly to Moscow and meet us there.

‘We drove towards Hairatan crossing point. The lieutenant carried a small empty bag, whereas I was carrying the suitcase that contained two and half kilograms of heroin.’

On the day of travel, early in the morning, the Mazari dealer handed me a professional looking ‘made in Pakistan’ suitcase in which I placed the drugs. Trusting my gut instinct, I bought two kilograms of almonds and two kilograms of raisins and sultanas and placed them, with my clothes, in the suitcase. We drove towards Hairatan crossing point. The lieutenant carried a small empty bag, whereas I was carrying the suitcase that contained two and half kilograms of heroin.

On arrival at the crossing point, there were two long queues of people. I stood in one while my friend and partner in crime queued in the other. Once the check on the Afghan side was done, we needed to go through the same process again on the Uzbek side. This time I saw two police officers – a male and a female – who were scanning everything. When it was my turn, my heart sank, and it was pounding very fast. The female police officer placed the suitcase in the scanner and opened it on the other side and commented ‘you’re carrying almonds?’ I said yes and immediately gave her some. She thanked me and started eating them. I left as fast as I could.

The lieutenant came out too and we met by the designated smoking area. That’s where our contacts in Tashkent were waiting for us. The four of us got in a taxi and headed towards Tashkent. There were two or three more checkpoints on the way to Tashkent, but they didn’t have scanning machines. Midway, we changed to another taxi that took us to the railway station where we got a ticket to Moscow. There were several more checks but luckily no one found the heroin.

After 48 hours on the train, we arrived in Moscow late at night. Since both of us had worked with the Soviet-backed communist regime in Afghanistan, we were fluent in Russian. As per our plan, we called the Mazari dealer to come and meet us, but he was nowhere to be found so we went to a five-star hotel and were about to pay 100 US dollars for a room. But as we were getting ready to enter the hotel, a woman ran towards us and said she would take us both to her home for that money. She took us to her apartment. We asked for food, so she went out and brought us some. She left us in the flat on our own.

The next morning, I called a friend of an uncle who was living in Moscow to inform him that I was there and had time to meet. He came to the apartment straight away. I asked him to find us somewhere to stay. He found us a house, belonging to a single mother, who charged us US\$40 per night. We called the trader again to come and collect his suitcase, but he was not interested. After a few days, my friend – the lieutenant – found him in a building. The dealer had allegedly told him he couldn’t collect the drugs because he had not yet found any buyers.

We ended up spending 20 nights in that house. After that we had enough, so we decided to go and find the dealer again. We started our search in the block of flats where the lieutenant said he had seen the dealer. We knocked on every door, but he seemed to have vanished. When we got to the 19th floor, and rang a doorbell, a young girl answered. We asked which floor the Afghans were living on. She said, ‘the people with dark skin tone?’ We said yes! She pointed up to the 20th floor. We ran upstairs and knocked on one of the doors hastily. Our man opened the door himself!

We rushed inside and left the suitcase with the heroin before leaving quickly.

A huge burden had been lifted from our shoulders. We returned to the house we had been renting and noticed that the landlady was drunk and incapable of having a conversation. So, we decided it was best to pack our things and leave for the railway station right away, to catch a train back to Tashkent.

The journey from Moscow to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Mazar-i-Sharif and finally to my village was hassle-free but when we arrived and my partner received our payment from the Abdul Khel trader, he didn’t give me my share. I asked but he just made excuses. He left Nangarhar to go back to Mazar-i-Sharif. He sat on that money for a whole year. I returned to my shop and continued farming.

Taliban rule

When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, security improved dramatically. People were free to travel without any fear of being stopped or robbed but poverty remained a problem. There was no governmental help and non-governmental organisations didn’t dare to enter Afghanistan so people did what they could to survive. It was legal to cultivate opium and trade drugs during the Taliban regime.²⁰ That’s why there were big open-air markets in places like Ghani Khel in Achin. All of us were struggling and that’s why we continued to buy and sell opium, albeit on a smaller scale. I was desperate for any work that was better paid.

‘It was legal to cultivate opium and trade drugs during the Taliban regime. [...] All of us were struggling and that’s why we continued to buy and sell opium.’

Second trip to Moscow smuggling heroin, 1997

My second trip to Moscow, smuggling heroin, was not with the lieutenant transporting the product of his cousin from Abdul Khel but for someone else. My new boss was a young man from Laghman province. This young man had an agent who found suppliers in Abdul Khel, in Achin. He had found out about my first trip to Moscow and reached out to me through his agent in Abdul Khel, asking if I would be willing to go a second time. He offered me 2,000 US dollars for this trip and said there would be another man – someone I didn’t know – accompanying me.

On the first day of the job, the agent came to collect me from my home before we both headed to Mazar-i-Sharif. The Taliban had captured Kabul but beyond the Salang



Torkham border crossing, Daka village, Mohmandara district. Photo by OSDR

Pass was the territory of the Northern Alliance. The two of us reached Mazar-i-Sharif and waited for a meeting with the Laghmani dealer. The young man's entire family was in Pakistan, but he had been living in Moscow for seven years, smuggling heroin out of Afghanistan. I found him to be a very humble person.

My trip happened at a time when the Taliban were planning to attack Mazar-i-Sharif, so most foreign consulates, including Uzbekistan's, had stopped issuing visas to Afghans. After meeting us, the Laghmani dealer flew to Moscow, while the agent applied for visas for Turkmenistan for the two of us. We stayed in Mazar waiting for these visas to be issued. I didn't expect a positive result, but we were lucky and received the visas, although they were only valid for 20 days.

When it was time to leave Mazar, we got on one of those Mercedes buses that were supposed to have been contracted by the government of Turkmenistan. The agent bought a suitcase, in which he placed two and half kilograms of heroin. We decided to use the Aqina crossing point because I knew, for a fact, that they didn't have scan machines. The journey to Aqina and the security checks at the crossing point there went smoothly. There were no scanners, so nothing was suspected or detected by anyone.

‘The agent bought a suitcase, in which he placed two and half kilograms of heroin. We decided to use the Aqina crossing point because I knew, for a fact, that they didn't have scan machines.’

We stayed on the bus as it continued to drive deep into Turkmenistan, but midway we were stopped for a random security check. This time the police found

a cigarette box with hashish inside it. This box was under the seat of a man who was sitting in front of my traveling partner. The police removed four people including my friend from the bus for further questioning. They were searched again but nothing was found. So the police prevented the bus from moving until the culprits were identified. We stayed there for 24 hours. Finally, the passengers gave up and pointed to two young men who were known to the driver as well. Once the police had their suspects, we were allowed to continue our journey.

After arriving at the bus station in Turkmenistan, the bus driver took our passports and told us to stay in the hotel otherwise the police would stop us. We did as we were told and stayed there for several hours. The next day, the driver refused to return our passports and ordered us to go back to Afghanistan. Then around lunch time, as we were going through our options, a young Afghan man approached us and said he was able to take us to Moscow. We told him the driver was refusing to hand over our passports. He said we didn't need to have passports. It was news to us, but we jumped at the opportunity. He charged us 100 US dollars each for the journey to Moscow.

The young man said that we would depart for Moscow the next morning but we had to leave the hotel to escape from the bus driver who was holding our passports. The young man said he would go and look for somewhere else for us to stay and store our luggage for the night, but we had to somehow leave the hotel without creating suspicion. We agreed and did as we were told. We handed over the luggage to the young man. When night came, we left the hotel quietly. The manager saw us leaving and asked us where we were going, we replied to 'the night club'. He let us go.

Of course, we were not going to the night club. We went directly to the house that the young man (who was taking us to Moscow the next day) had found. There were ten other people there. It was then clear to us that this young man was a professional people trafficker. The next morning, all of us got in a car and were driven towards Moscow in the rain and snow. When we were halfway there, we came across a checkpoint by a river where the police had a small hut for checking passengers. Other people were searched before me, and I had been told about this check by the trafficker but thank God there was no scanner.

‘The next morning, all of us got in a car and were driven towards Moscow in the rain and snow. When we were halfway there, we came across a checkpoint by a river where the police had a small hut for checking passengers.’

From there we headed for the railway station and took the night train to Moscow. There were even more checks en route, but the trafficker bribed the police each time they approached us. After a long journey, we arrived in Moscow, but to leave the station we needed to show our passports to the police officers who were standing by the exits.

We were busy working on a plan when we came across a family from Badakhshan, Afghanistan. Suddenly, the head of that family vanished leaving his wife and five children with us. In the middle of the panic, people started to notice and stare at this one Afghan woman who had so many children. People were surprised as women didn't have more than one or two children in Russia. Using the opportunity, we called the Laghmani trader to say we had arrived, but we didn't have our passports and couldn't leave the station. He advised us not to worry and that he would be with us shortly. It wasn't long before someone put his hand on my shoulder and whispered 'let's go'. The Laghmani had bribed the police, and we were out of the station.

He first took us to his home where we were offered food and tea. He said he was being watched and that we couldn't stay with him for long. So, he would take us to a safe location the next day. There, he prepared a feast for us. We were well looked after. He had given me 50,000 Pakistani rupees [US\$305] in advance and the reference number for the 2,000 dollars that he had transferred to a money exchange shop in Peshawar, Pakistan. Additionally, he gave me the 300 dollars that would be needed to withdraw my 2,000 dollars from the exchange place in Peshawar and a tip of 100 dollars. On top of that, he took us to the Afghan embassy in Moscow to get us a letter so that we could travel back to Afghanistan.

As we were leaving Moscow, the Laghmani trader asked us to take back the suitcase we had used for transporting the drugs and return it to the agent in Mazar-i-Sharif.

We missed our train back to Turkmenistan, so the Laghmani trader bought me and my smuggling partner train tickets for Kazakhstan. On the train to Kazakhstan, police asked to see our passports so we showed them the letter, but they refused to accept its validity and issued a fine of ten dollars to both of us. The journey to Kazakhstan was okay but we were stopped by the police a second time and had to pay another ten dollars in bribes. Then we had a change of heart halfway through, so rather than going on to Turkmenistan to cross into Afghanistan, we decided to go to Uzbekistan to cross over. In Uzbekistan we had to pay another ten dollars each for not having our passports with us. That was not the end of it.

On the way towards the Afghan border, some Uzbek police stopped us and accused us of being heroin smugglers. They said that was the reason we couldn't show our passports. They were very rude and were shouting for no reason. After a long discussion and argument, we managed to convince them to let us go in exchange for 20 dollars. It was there we found out that we couldn't cross the border into Afghanistan because we needed to have a letter from the Afghan embassy in Uzbekistan, like the one we had received from the Afghan embassy in Moscow. Once we had received that letter, we were then able to cross the border.

In Mazar-i-Sharif, I did two things: first, I handed over the suitcase to the agent and second, I went to find the lieutenant to get my money for the first trip. I had been informed that he didn't give me my money, after the first trip to Moscow, because he had bought drugs with it, and that he continued to trade with other people. I was also told that three of his partners were arrested at the border with Tajikistan very recently. All of their contraband had been confiscated by the police. The lieutenant himself had managed to escape.

‘Many agents visited me after my second trip to Moscow. They offered me lots of money, but I didn't accept their offers because I had made a promise to myself that I was never going to smuggle heroin to Russia again.’

I found out where the lieutenant lived, turned up at his door early one morning and knocked. He answered the door himself. We had a fight and I forced him to give me the money he owed me. After that I went back to Nangarhar and from there to Peshawar where I collected my 2,000 US dollars. I converted it to Pakistani rupees; it came to about 80,000 PKRs. With my

pockets full, I went home to the village. I invested my earnings in the shop. I used that shop to buy and sell opium on a smaller scale.

Many agents visited me after my second trip to Moscow. They offered me lots of money, but I didn't accept their offers because I had made a promise to myself that I was never going to smuggle heroin to Russia again, no matter how large the profit might be. I had enough money now. I bought 12 biswa of land [1,200 sq. metres] and, together with my widowed sister, we built a house on it to make a new home. All of us, including my sister's family, moved to that house. It was nice and close to the main bazaar in Ghani Khel where I worked in my shop.

Post-2001

Soon after the September 11 attacks and the US invasion of Afghanistan, local warlords looted the Ghani Khel opium market. Everyone's opium products, worth hundreds, even thousands of Pakistani rupees, were stolen from the shops and stores. Local small traders were badly hit by the incident. At the time of the plunder, I had about four ser [3.7 kg] of opium but luckily, I had taken it home the previous day. As a result of the robbery and subsequent shortage, the price of opium went up dramatically, so I sold mine for 120,000 Pakistani rupees [US\$731].

Then came Afghanistan's interim government. Hamid Karzai was appointed as the interim leader. Security started to improve. People began to embrace the new reality. Many young people went to join the army while others got jobs in the government and with non-governmental organisations.

I remained in my home in Ghani Khel and continued my small-scale business buying and selling opium. I knew someone in Kandahar who regularly needed my product, so I hired drivers to take it to him. That contract went on for 18 months. I noticed demand was high, which is why – together with four of my friends – we bought a Toyota HiAce Super Custom car to transport the product to Kandahar ourselves. On each trip we managed to take 30 ser [28 kg] of opium. On the rare occasions that we were stopped by the police we just bribed them, and they would let us go. We were in this partnership for 12 months, after which they sold me the car and I continued the business on my own.

I would make one trip to Kandahar every 15 days, and I made about 30,000 to 40,000 PKRs [US\$182–245]. After a while I felt that I needed a new partner, so I went to the village of Siya Chub in Ghani Khel and found someone. We agreed that we needed to replace the car we had because I suspected the police may have gathered some data on us and it was important to be cautious.

Ghani Khel bazaar, Nangarhar province. Photo by OSDR



I remained in my home in Ghani Khel and continued my small scale business buying and selling opium. I knew someone in Kandahar who regularly needed my product, so I hired drivers to take it to him[...] On the rare occasions that we were stopped by the police we just bribed them, and they would let us go.'

Later, another man joined our partnership, so we were three. He claimed he was the brother-in-law of Mullah Mohammed Omar's wife – the founder of the Taliban movement. He was from Kandahar. He said: 'bring me the product and don't worry about the cost of transportation and other expenses'. He was well connected. It was not long before he had found a new client who was seeking 'best' heroin [or sometimes spelled 'beest', a specific brand of heroin paste] in Afghanistan. He asked us to find it for him. He told us that we might be able to find it in Badakhshan province, in the north of the country. So, he sent us to the Darayim district in Badakhshan. He had already been in touch with a couple of suppliers there, whom he said would guarantee we get the best. And, to get the best of the best, the Kandahar client had paid the trader (Omar's alleged wife's brother-in-law) 100,000 US dollars in advance.

When we arrived in Badakhshan, we saw the production process with our own eyes, and it truly was a high-quality product because they processed seven kilograms of heroin to get the purest one kilogram. It was a time-consuming task but one that was worth it. My partner and I stayed in Badakhshan for three months for the sake of the heroin. During that time we managed to source 120 kilograms of 'best' heroin. Transporting that amount to Kandahar meant we needed to make two trips. Each one of us received 40,000 PKRs [US\$245] excluding expenses.

Our partner in Kandahar was a very good man. I was very fond of him. Sadly, he died in a suicide attack on a trip to Kunduz province. When I heard the news, I was devastated so I went to his home to pay my respects. It was there that I decided that I couldn't continue the trade in Kandahar any longer.

‘Our partner in Kandahar was a very good man. I was very fond of him. Sadly, he died in a suicide attack on a trip to Kunduz province. When I heard the news, I was devastated.’

I spent a couple of months in Ghani Khel, after the death of my Kandahari partner, before buying 15,000 US dollars' worth of heroin to take to the western province of Herat. I drove there and rented a place to stay so I could sell my product. When I bought the drugs, the prices were on the rise but when I arrived in Herat the prices went down causing me to extend my stay there. I was there for nine months. It was only after I returned home that I realised that I had made a loss. That's when I decided that it was no longer profitable to continue the trade, so I stopped.

From 2001 onwards, it was more difficult for people who worked in the drug trade, like me. But, overall, life improved after the US invasion. Security was better – at least, until 2013. Ordinary people went back to living, studying and working as new opportunities, wealth and technology came to Afghanistan.

Elections took place with men and women taking part in huge numbers. Developmental projects started. Schools, clinics and roads were built. Villages, districts

and provinces were connected by roads, the media and the internet. People's social and communal interactions increased, partly because of the advent of social media, and because people found the means to go and see each other.

Unlike the 1990s, when we could barely afford to travel to the district centres, in the last 20 years people's wealth increased to the point that trips to Kabul became an almost daily or weekly affair. This is because people who had jobs in Kabul moved some of their family members to the capital and they made regular trips back to the provinces to visit the remaining family members.

‘... as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan became a focal point of tensions and restrictions were increased, we lost the sort of connections that we previously had with our people on the other side of the Durand line.’

But the economic and security situation has deteriorated again since. With the passage of time, as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan became a focal point of tensions and restrictions were increased, we lost the sort of connections that we previously had with our people on the other side of the Durand line. Now, everything is official, and people are asked for passports, visas and other documentation, which we can't afford. I now head a family of 28 members, of whom only four are working. The rest are either women or young kids who go to school. All I can do is farm my land and take care of my loved ones. Thank God, I don't owe anyone any money.



Transit goods smuggled back into Pakistan via Sasobai, Durbaba district, Nangarhar. Photo by OSDR



Zaranj bazaar,
Zaranj district,
Nimruz province.
Photo by OSDR

Our lives depend on cross-border trade

A story told by Begum Jan²¹ and adapted by Sana Safi²²



Nimruz province is in the southwest of Afghanistan, sharing a border with Iran and Pakistan. The province, characterised by largely flat desert terrain, has one of the lowest population densities and is one of the poorest in Afghanistan. The population includes a mix of ethnic groups. Many of the people living in Nimruz have lived elsewhere at some point in their lives – many are returnees from Iran, while others took refuge there after being forced to leave Pakistan due to their political activism, and a growing number of Afghans from other provinces have migrated to the provincial capital of Zaranj, attracted by its relative security and burgeoning economic opportunities. Cross-border trade with Iran and Pakistan has been facilitated through Baluch networks that straddle the border in all three countries. Nimruz is not a big producer of opium, but because it is adjacent to large poppy-cultivating regions in Farah and Helmand, it has become a key trading hub. In recent years, it has also become a people-smuggling hub for Afghans migrating to Iran, Turkey and Europe.

Childhood and marriage

I was 13 years old when my father married me off to his nephew. At 40, I'm now mother to six children. A year before my engagement, my parents left their ancestral home in Chakhansur district to settle in the Kang district of Nimruz province. After moving neighbourhoods, my parents bought six jeribs of land [three acres] in a village on the border with Iran. We built a family home on some of it and used the rest of the land for agriculture purposes.

My late husband also had a small business on the border with Iran. He imported fuel to be sold in the bazaar in Kang. In return, he transported sewing machines, irons and other appliances to Iran. He combined that with farming our land. We were satisfied with life.

Life under the Taliban regime

I was too young to remember much about the communist regime and the civil war in Afghanistan but when the Taliban took over, I was in my early teens. As a newlywed, and because the Taliban didn't allow women to work outside the house or go to school, I had to stay at home.

Life under the Taliban regime was very tough. People didn't have jobs; women didn't have any freedom and poverty was everywhere. On top of that, we experienced severe drought, which was disastrous for farmers like us. I have the worst memories from when the Taliban were in power. Every time I remember how they treated my husband, my mother-in-law and other women from my close circle, I become terrified.

‘Life under the Taliban regime was very tough. People didn’t have jobs; women didn’t have any freedom and poverty was everywhere. On top of that, we experienced severe drought which was disastrous for farmers like us.’

I still remember a woman from our village who had fallen ill and had to be taken to Zaranj city to see a doctor. Back then, there were no proper roads and the ones that existed were not paved.

When you travelled, the roads were so dusty that it would leave a sand trail behind you. People had to travel in big, lorry type cars that always caused car sickness. I was told that upon arrival in the city, the woman was asked to wait for her turn outside the doctor’s office. As she sat there waiting, desperate for fresh air because she was too sick from the journey, she decided to lift her burka and show her face in public. A member of the Taliban’s ‘vice and virtue police’ spotted her. He grabbed her by the hair, beat her and threw her onto the ground. She died there and then.

On another occasion, a relative of mine was wrongly imprisoned by the Taliban. My husband tried to intervene in the case, appealing to the Taliban authorities but they refused to release him. One day my husband took some food and clothes to the man in jail unaware that he would escape that same night and cross the border to Iran.

At two in the morning, on a hot summer night, while all of us including my small children were sleeping in the courtyard, two armed men stormed our house and started attacking my husband. I was very frightened. My children were terrified. The men kept asking my husband where he had hidden the prisoner, but my husband didn’t know anything about the escape or where the man was now. The Taliban wouldn’t stop beating my husband, so I had to send word for my elderly mother-in-law to come and ask the Taliban to stop. She came at once, apologising to the men and begged them to stop. She promised them that my husband would present himself at the police station first thing in the morning, but the Taliban turned their sticks around and hit my mother-in-law several times.

There was also the time when girls and women of my extended family were refugees in the village of Dust Mohammad, [in Hirmand county of Iran’s Sistan and Baluchestan province], came to Afghanistan to attend a wedding party in our village. In those days, people could cross the border easily as there were no restrictions. As is the custom, the girls were playing our local instrument called dayereh. They were laughing and singing. An elderly Talib who had a grey beard saw the young women having fun. He came and took

the instrument from the girls and smashed it. He also hit the girls with the stick he was carrying. I asked the old man why would you destroy the dayereh and hit the girls? His answer was, ‘because I’m a member of the “virtue and vice” [Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice] police!’

‘It was precisely due to this oppression and tyranny by the Taliban that my family and I decided to leave Afghanistan. We crossed the border to Zabul province, in Iran, where we lived for two years but life for Afghan refugees was very hard.’

It was precisely due to this oppression and tyranny by the Taliban that my family and I decided to leave Afghanistan. We crossed the border to Zabul province, in Iran, where we lived for two years, but life for Afghan refugees was very hard. Every time we went out, the Iranian authorities asked us for identity cards and other government-issued documents that we didn’t have. People were constantly harassed.

Post-2001

[In 2002] When Afghanistan had a new government and President Hamid Karzai took over [as the interim leader] we decided to return to Afghanistan, to our home. The first noticeable change we saw was the construction of a road from the main city in Kang to our village. This led to many people commuting to and from the city every day.

Most of the people in my village, and those in need, received food aid. Wells were dug up for clean drinking water in our village. That was soon supported by major water mains and pipes delivering water to the properties. Then came a clinic. It was the first to be constructed in our district. In the wider Zaranj city, the number of hospitals, clinics, pharmacies and other similar facilities increased. There were far more nurses, doctors and midwives than we had ever seen.

‘Women started to go to work. They launched their own small businesses. People were free. It was the first time that women went out to vote, free of any fear. We even had women who nominated themselves in the elections.’

New schools for girls and boys were built. Dozens of female teachers were hired. In bigger cities across the country, universities opened their doors and women took the opportunity to finish their higher education. Women started to go to work. They launched their own small businesses. People were free. It was the first time that women went out to vote, free of any fear.



Poppy field, Ashkeen village, Charbrujak district. Photo by OSDR

We even had women who nominated themselves in the elections. Groups working on issues of women and children started spreading their awareness campaigns about women's rights, personal freedoms and [many other issues that were important to the local population] to far remote areas.

‘... I was now the head of my household and had to provide for my four girls and three boys. I needed to start earning a living. I learned about a number of women from my village who were involved in the trading of goods from Iran to Afghanistan.’²³

In 2005, when my husband was busy farming our land, he suffered an accident. He later died from his injuries. That meant I was now the head of my household and had to provide for my four girls and three boys. I needed to start earning a living. I learned about a number of women from my village who were involved in the trading of goods from Iran to Afghanistan.

In 2006, I had saved up ten thousand Afghani [US\$165] and borrowed an additional 10,000 Afghanis to start my small handicraft business. I bought embroidered clothes that were handmade by my fellow Baluch women on the Afghanistan side of the border. Then, I exported these and sold them on the Iranian side.

Within a few months of launching my business, I managed to find a great number of loyal customers who worked in Zabul province in Iran. It took me an hour and half by car to take my locally sourced goods to Zabul. On the way back, I brought eggs, beans, chicken and other food items to be sold in my village. The Afghan border police knew that I and my other female partners were poor women trying to make a

living, so they didn't ask us for a bribe, but the Iranian border police charged us 1,000 Toman/Iranian Rial [under 50 US cents].

By making five or six trips a month to Zabul, in Iran, and back, I earned between 100,000 and 150,000 Iranian toman [US\$10 to 15]. This was more than enough for my family's needs. All of my kids were enrolled at school and were busy studying very hard.

It was not all rosy though. I could never forget the day when I, along with seven of my fellow Baluch women, were stopped by members of the Afghan Security Forces. We were coming back from Zabul. Each one of us was carrying food items and other necessities: eggs, baked beans, bread and a gas cylinder. As soon as the soldiers saw us, they fired into the air. In a panic we stopped and dropped everything. We ran towards our homes. They took all of our goods. I cried all the way to my village. When I reached home my children were crying too.

‘By making five or six trips a month to Zabul, in Iran and back, I earned between 100,000 and 150,000 Iranian toman [US\$10 to 15]. This was more than enough for my family's needs.’

In 2011, the Iranian government constructed a wall along the border with Afghanistan. It had several crossing gates. The wall is very close to our village. This meant that with a little bribe to the Iranian border guards, we could continue our trade, crossing the border with no trouble. It wasn't just women like me whose lives depended on cross border trade but men too. As a Baluch woman, whose tribespeople live on both sides of the border, it was not just trade for me. It was also about community ties – attending each other's wedding parties and funerals.

Life was good and I was respected. I even managed to find a great suitor for my ten-year-old daughter. It was thanks to that business of mine that I was able to marry my eldest daughter in a dignified and honourable way.

In 2016, the Iranian authorities further tightened restrictions on the border, closing all the gates. People who needed to cross to Iran were asked to provide a visa, passport and other official documentation. We couldn't afford the cost of any of that so we didn't apply for any documents, which is why we couldn't continue our trade and small business.

Like me, other people in my village have relatives and family members across the border in Iran but because of these tough restrictions we can't see them anymore. We can't be part of each other's happiness and sorrows. Our only mode of communication is by telephone, with mobile phones.

‘These tougher border restrictions have pushed people out of work, which is why some men in my village have turned to drug smuggling.’

These tougher border restrictions have pushed people out of work, which is why some men in my village have turned to drug smuggling. Some of our male villagers are buying and transporting drugs to Iran. I'm not involved in this work myself because women can't transport drugs when the gates are shut, and I don't have older sons to do it for me. Keeping drugs at home

and transporting them across the border is a very dangerous business. There is always a risk of being raided and imprisoned so I personally stay away from it especially in the current circumstances as I still have very young children.

However, up until four to five years ago, I had been housing dozens of young men and women who were trying to leave Afghanistan. These people were paying human smugglers to take them to Iran, Turkey and beyond. Smugglers would bring people from all over Afghanistan to our village where they divided them into small groups. Agents asked us to let them lodge with us. I prepared them food and they paid me for it. That was a vital lifeline for many families here. Each day, from our village alone, between 300 and 400 people crossed the border to Iran. Now, not a soul can cross because a barbed-wire fence splits our village and Afghanistan from Iran and there are security cameras everywhere too.

‘Smugglers would bring people from all over Afghanistan to our village [...] Agents asked us to let them lodge with us. I prepared them food and they paid me for it. That was a vital lifeline for many families here.’

Currently, I sew traditional Baluch dresses and accessories for women. There are people in Zaranj city who send me orders with samples, and I sew it for them. I make between two to three million Iranian tomans [US\$50–70] a month. This is how life goes by.



Noozai village, Milak official border area, Nimruz-Iranian border. Photo by OSDR



Diesel and transit goods truck in Zaranj district, Nimruz province. Photo by OSDR

The risks and rewards of smuggling drugs

A story told by Aziz Khan²⁴ and adapted by Sana Safi²⁵



Nimruz province is in the southwest of Afghanistan, sharing a border with Iran and Pakistan. The province is largely flat desert terrain, has one of the lowest population densities and is one of the poorest in Afghanistan. The population includes a mix of ethnic groups. Many of the people living in Nimruz have lived elsewhere at some point in their lives – many are returnees from Iran, while others took refuge there after being forced to leave Pakistan due to their political activism, and a growing number of Afghans from other provinces have migrated to the provincial capital of Zaranj, attracted by its relative security and burgeoning economic opportunities. Cross-border trade with Iran and Pakistan have been facilitated through Baluch networks that straddle the border in all three countries. Nimruz is not a big producer of opium, but because it is adjacent to large poppy-cultivation regions in Farah and Helmand, it has become a key trading hub. In recent years, it has also become a people-smuggling hub for Afghans migrating to Iran, Turkey and Europe.

I was born in Ab Kamari district in the west of Badghis province. When I was ten years old there was a coup d'état that became known as the 'Saur Revolution' and my family was forced to leave Afghanistan. We crossed the border into Iran and settled in Zahedan province, living there for four years.

In the mid-1980s, when I was 14 years old, my family returned to Afghanistan. Instead of going back to our ancestral home in Badghis, they settled in the district of Lash Wa Juwayn in Farah province, because it's a border town and it was close to where we used to live. When we arrived my parents bought livestock and started farming other people's land.

Most of the residents of this district belonged to the Tajik ethnic group and there were only about 15 to 20 Pashtun families like ours. We were discriminated

against, and the Tajiks did not treat us well. Despite all of this, we lived there for 12 years.

Then one day, a member of my extended family invited me to visit him. He had just bought some land and built a home in the Kang district of Nimruz province. His newly built house was in a village located on the border with Iran. I stayed with him for one night, and I noticed that people could cross the border between Afghanistan and Iran freely. They brought fuel from Iran and sold it in Afghanistan.

I returned to Lash Wa Juwayn and convinced my brothers and other relatives that we too should move to Kang district. Fifteen households agreed and we all moved together. In the first few years in our new home, I rented a house and paid 2,000 Toman [50 US cents] per month. As soon as I arrived, I bought 100 sheep,

which I later sold at a profit. With that money, which came to about ten million Toman [US\$2,380] at the time, I started importing fuel. In return I took rice, glasses, sewing machines and irons to Iran.

My life was set. I earned a lot of money from the fuel trade. I bought myself two jeribs of land [one acre]. The price per jareb was five million Toman [US\$1,190]. I built a house on this land that cost me 100,000 Toman [US\$24].

Life under the mujahideen

In the 1980s, life under the communist regime and the mujahideen was not easy. The mujahideen [an alliance of more than seven Islamist political parties] were fighting against the central government in Kabul. We couldn't go to government-controlled areas because they were forcing young men to join the army. There were also restrictions on travel by the mujahideen. It was very difficult to transport commercial goods on the roads because there were so many checkpoints and all of them were asking for money. They called it 'tax.' No one helped our areas during the resistance. People were left to fend for themselves. That's why I had to join one of the mujahideen groups. I was a mujahid for eight years, working with the Hezb-i-Islami party.

‘People were left to fend for themselves. That’s why I had to join one of the mujahideen groups. I was a mujahid for eight years, working with the Hezb-i-Islami party.’

Taliban rule

When the Taliban came to power in 1996, I was in our village, in Kang district. All mujahideen commanders and foot soldiers escaped to Iran [or chose civilian lives] because the Taliban outlawed all political parties.

The Taliban did little to help ordinary people. Instead they were collecting money from locals in the name of 'Ushr' [a 10% tax on the harvests of irrigated and rain-watered land and 5% on land dependent on well water]. There were no non-governmental organisations for people to turn to for help, so we relied on each other [our extended families] for support. But, what the Taliban did do for us was provide security.

‘... the border between Afghanistan and Iran was open for everyone and drugs were freely traded in the bazaars in Afghanistan.’

Another noticeable change we saw was that the border between Afghanistan and Iran was open for everyone and drugs were freely traded in the bazaars in Afghanistan. It was very easy to take them to Iran

because there were no restrictions. Life for ordinary people that I knew in Kang district – including women – was good because they were all engaged in a business of some sort such as the import and export of machinery, textile, food supplies, fuel and much more.

We had choices. Some people chose to trade commercial goods across the border, some were busy harvesting their land and keeping livestock, while others started buying drugs in Afghanistan and selling them across the border in Iran. Smuggling drugs to Iran was the work of a very limited number of people.

For me personally, agricultural work was not lucrative. It did not make much profit. I didn't trade drugs either because I was actually earning more money from importing and distributing fuel.

‘... agricultural work was not lucrative. It did not make much profit. I didn't trade drugs either because I was actually earning more money from importing and distributing fuel.’

During the last years of the Taliban regime (1995–2001), the only people who were involved in the drug trade in Kang district were from Helmand. Those men rented some properties with big yards to store the drugs while waiting to make the journey across the border to Iran. They used donkeys to transport large quantities at night. In those days the Iranian border guards were not very strict – who would bother to search thousands of donkeys every night?

Post-2001

After the international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, our lives genuinely started to change. We felt secure. We saw significant improvements in health, education, reconstruction, freedoms, the lives of women and people's personal wealth.

‘After the international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, our lives genuinely started to change.’

Clinics were established. More doctors and nurses, both male and female, were recruited. People in rural areas started to have access to healthcare facilities.

Similarly, schools reopened for boys and girls. New schools were built. Female teachers were hired. Girls started to enrol at schools and literacy levels went up.

There were a lot of different development projects. For the first time, solar panels were installed to provide electricity. We began to have clean drinking

water through the pipe system [instead of rivers, streams, wells, boreholes and traditional ponds that we previously used]. There was a big push to clean the canals. Roads and streets in villages were covered with gravel. Livestock vaccination campaigns arrived to remote areas. Farmers were given improved seeds and fertilisers [that were adapted to Afghan conditions]. Village halls were constructed so that communities could gather for shuras [assemblies].

Zaranj city, Zaranj district, Nimruz province. Photo by OSDR



We witnessed positive change in local and national politics. Elections were held at the local and national levels. Both men and women nominated themselves for seats at the provincial councils and parliament. Everyone, including women, voted in the presidential elections.

The lives of women were transformed. They went back to school to finish their education. They started to have jobs as teachers, doctors, midwives and so on. People's incomes increased and so they moved from the villages and districts to the provincial capitals. There, they had better employment opportunities. Some worked as shopkeepers, others were traders, and some had jobs in the government.

'Iranian wall'

Our good days were short lived. In 2009, Iran confirmed that it would build a wall on the border with Afghanistan. As a result, by the last years of Hamid Karzai's administration, our lives had started to deteriorate.

¶ Our good days were short lived. In 2009, Iran confirmed that it would build a wall on the border with Afghanistan. [...] The people who were once busy in cross-border trade were now jobless.'

The people who were once busy in cross-border trade were now jobless. More than half of the people in my district, Kang, were forced to emigrate to Iran or had to move to the city of Zaranj. I would guess that 90% of those who stayed behind in the district and villages started trading drugs because all other work stopped and it was the only thing that people could still do.

Like many others, I was out of work. It was hard, as I'm the head of a family with 13 members. So, I began to smuggle opium. I had 500,000 Pakistani rupees [US\$3,000] saved up. I took that money and went to the Bakwa district in Farah province, where there were open opium bazaars/markets on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. On my first trip there, I bought ten kilograms of opium and asked a neighbour of mine to take it to my house.

¶ Like many others, I was out of work. It was hard, as I'm the head of a family with 13 members. So, I began to smuggle opium.'

When Iran built the border wall, it was not just us on the Afghan side who suffered the loss of income and livelihood. The people I previously traded with, in the fuel business, on the Iranian side were also out of work. So, I got in touch with a Baluch colleague from my previous work and asked him if he'd be willing to join me in the drug trade. He agreed. I would send him drugs four times a month and he would sell them.

I made 30–40,000 Iranian tomans a month [US\$7–10]. Over time I increased the amount of opium I was buying, going from 10 kilograms to 60 kilograms. The Iranian toman was valuable then so I was making a good profit. My capital reached 40 lakhs Pakistani rupees [US\$25,000]. I had a very happy life.

Because the border wall was still being constructed and there were intense controls, I didn't use people to transport my supplies to my partner in Iran. Instead, the wall had holes in various places and I would place the drugs in those holes at night and my partner on the other side would collect it. Then he would place

my share of the profit for collection the next evening. Only when the wall was fully built, did I hire people from the village whom I trusted to transport the drugs to my partner in Iran.

There are three ways to smuggle drugs to Iran. First, you find Iranian border guards and convince them to go into business with you – you pay them bribes and they turn a blind eye to your activities. Second, you and your partner agree to use the wall – you put up a ladder, place the drugs on the barbed wire on the wall and your partner, on the other side, collects it. Third, you use a catapult.

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This business is not as simple as it sounds, though. In 2015, one of my transporters was arrested by Iranian border police. The price of one kilogram of opium back then was 20,000 Pakistani rupees [US\$122], so when he was arrested with all the supplies, I suffered a huge loss.

A group of transporters, made up of two to five people, has to pay officials at the National Directorate of Security, the Ministry of Counter Narcotics, the district governor and security commander up to 80,000 toman [US\$20] per month each [Transporting drugs across the border is not possible without the cooperation of local officials]. If you use the catapult then you need to pay the person from whose yard you launch the drugs, the person who receives it and the person who stores it for you until it's reached its destination. The landowner's rate is between 2–3,000 tomans [US\$0.5–0.7] per kilogram and the person who stores it charges 5,000 toman [US\$1.25] per kilogram.

There is also the cost of transporters. The fare from Bakwa in Farah province to Kang district, in Nimruz province is 200 Pakistan rupees [US\$1.20]. To take opium from Kang in Afghanistan to Zahedan in Iran, transporters charge between 350,000 to 450,000 Iranian toman [US\$83–107]. The price for one kilogram of heroin and crystal meth is 1.5 million toman [US\$357].

Three years ago, an Iranian trader asked us for supplies. He said he needed to smuggle 2,000 kilograms of opium into Iran. He was able to smuggle this amount

through the gates – known as Burjaks – that were built 1 kilometre apart in the wall. He had an insider there. I gave him 30 kilograms of goods but the transporter was stopped at the gate and the Iranian border police confiscated it all. Luckily, all the men involved managed to escape. I believe the insider had played us. I suffered a huge loss.

After that incident, I was left with no capital. I asked my suppliers in Bakwa, Farah (the place with opium bazaars) to allow me to make payments by instalment so I could continue the trade. They agreed and I was able not only to keep myself afloat but make a profit too. Things were going so well that I built four rooms on my land and bought six cars. Three of those cars were for transporting passengers. One of the cars was mainly for my village and community. I was responsible for petrol and maintenance, but the villagers and the community used it whenever needed.

Betrayal

I had a happy life. Then one day, a contact of mine from the fuel trading days who was based in Iran called me. He said I should send drugs so his son could sell them in Iran because he needed to make a living. I accepted the request. We agreed that I would send his son opium six to seven times a month. We went into partnership. I supplied the drugs, his son sold it and sent me my share of the money.

Within a few months of our deal, I sent him 90 million tomans' [US\$18,000] worth of drugs. He sold it but didn't send me my share of the profit. I went to ask my friend about his son and my share of the profit, only to be told that he had left home and was nowhere to be found.

I invited elders for a gathering to convince his father to pay me back, but his son was unwilling to cooperate or appear before the elders and his father said he had nothing to give me. My problem was that I was dealing with him in a foreign country. I couldn't put in a formal complaint, with Iranian government officials, because then I would have been arrested too. So, the case is still not solved and I'm yet to recover my money.

Now, I have a debt of 5 lakhs [US\$3,000]. I owe this to the suppliers in Bakwa, Farah. When I didn't pay the money on time, they complained to the Taliban who called me to their court, in Bakwa district. They asked me why I wasn't paying my suppliers and when I explained the reason, they put me in jail for five days.

I stopped trading opium two years ago because I don't have any capital and there are restrictions on the border with Iran so it's difficult to transport it. The Afghan

Border wall at Kang district, and Iranian border police check point. Photo by OSDR



authorities too have stepped up their fight on drugs. In addition, the traders in Bakwa have become stricter about lending goods because they don't trust people anymore. The other issue is that I am afraid I may get further indebted and suffer further losses. Currency fluctuation was another major problem for many of us to continue the trade. We bought opium in Pakistani rupees, but we sold it in Iranian toman, which is losing its value by the day.

My family knew

My wife, brothers and father all knew that I was trading drugs. I didn't tell my daughters and sons, though.

‘My wife, brothers and father all knew that I was trading drugs. I didn't tell my daughters and sons, though.’

I started trading opium because there was nothing else to do. This became common employment for people in my district.

When the border with Iran was open, people rarely felt the need to smuggle drugs. It was only when they lost

their livelihoods and were pushed to poverty that more and more people started trading.

Since the wall was built, even the people-trafficking business has stopped. Some 300 to 400 young Afghans used to travel through our district every month. So, the end of the people trafficking trade had knock-on effects on other businesses.

People's lives and livelihoods have been affected by corruption, the stricter Iranian border controls, a growing lack of personal safety and security. Many locals started to turn to the Taliban for solutions.

‘My life and the lives of most of my fellow villagers depended on cross-border trade but everything came to an end when they built the wall.’

My life and the lives of most of my fellow villagers depended on cross-border trade but everything came to an end when they built the wall. At the age of 52, I'm a father to 11 children. I have to support them. Drug smuggling has many risks, such as imprisonment and death, but high rewards too.

Life stories from Colombia's borderlands





Restoration of vegetation in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta following the eradication of illicit crops. Photo by Lilo2111, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Life amidst coffee, coca, marijuana and war

A story told by César Mariño²⁶ and adapted by Luis Castillo²⁷



The **Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta** – on Colombia's Caribbean Coast – is the world's highest coastal mountain system. It spans the departments (akin to provinces) of Magdalena, Cesar and Guajira and is home to diverse indigenous and peasant communities. The 'colonisation' of the Sierra Nevada by non-indigenous peoples started at the end of the nineteenth century when families from other parts of Colombia established coffee plantations in the area. The settlement process consolidated towards the mid-twentieth century with the arrival of thousands of peasant families expelled from the country's Andean zone by bipartisan violence. These families expanded the coffee belt along the Sierra. Later, colonisation waves were primarily motivated by the expansion of illicit crops, first marijuana and then coca. For years, the region was the setting of confrontations between guerrilla and paramilitary groups.

I've always lived in the Sierra Nevada. My parents were settlers who arrived in the '50s at the time of bipartisan violence.²⁸ My dad came from Santander when he was 13 or 14 years old and got a job in Vista Nieve, one of the coffee haciendas boosting the economy in the Sierra at that time. He worked on that farm for several years until someone told him that they were giving away land in Ciénaga. It was far. It took 11 hours walking to get there. My dad went, and the locals told him: 'as far as the eye can see, that land is yours.' After walking along the edge of the mountain, my dad marked the land he wanted. It added up to around 150 hectares. The land was his because, at that time, people respected whatever piece of land you chose.

Towards this side of the Sierra, there was nothing. It was all virgin mountains. To clear the land and build his farm, my dad worked in the Vista Nieve hacienda for a

little longer. From there, they brought different kinds of banana shoots and coffee seeds to plant. Although the haciendas didn't want to give away their coffee seeds, the land was fertile and the coffee grains fell to the floor, so there was virtually a seedbed under the crop. My dad told us that he and his friends went to the hacienda at night and collected the coffee seeds to plant on their farms. They carried them home on their shoulders – there wasn't even a proper path back then, just a trail.

Around that time, my father met my mother, who was also the daughter of settlers. After a while, they decided to stay here and finish building the farm. First, they built a tiny house on the high ground, but it was too breezy, and the house fell apart. So, they decided to rebuild it on the lower part of the farm. My nine siblings and I were born there. Eventually, other families began to settle nearby too. We had more and more neighbours every day. They decided to call the hamlet *Canta Rana*

because there were many frogs in the area, and they didn't let us sleep at night with all their singing.

I spent the first years of my life surrounded by coffee bushes. That's why I say I'm a coffee grower from birth or, rather, from the cradle.'



A coffee bush. Photo by Catherine Setchell

I spent the first years of my life surrounded by coffee bushes. That's why I say I'm a coffee grower from birth or, rather, from the cradle. I remember that there was only one variety of coffee in the Sierra, arabica, which produced tall trees and large grain. It lasted for many years, but it wasn't that productive. And since there were good and not-so-good years, many people hesitated about whether to continue cultivating coffee. My dad never stopped: he continued to grow coffee year after year. But others stopped looking after their coffee crops when they started to grow marijuana.

At the beginning of the '70s, anyone caught with a marijuana plant was tied up and handed over to the police. But by the time I was aware of the issue, a few years later, we were in a *marimba* [marijuana] bonanza, and practically everyone was in the business. The most productive region at that point was La Reserva: there were marijuana plants wherever you looked. It was a sparsely populated area, and it was not easy to get there. It took four or five hours by foot from our

farm. Not even the mules could cross that trail. So the axes, the machetes, the food, everything had to be carried on people's shoulders. Only a few families lived there, growing coffee. Since they owned the land, they began leasing parcels to people who came to the Sierra to cultivate marijuana. They told them, 'I lend you the land, and you give me four hundred pounds of marijuana per hectare.'

At the beginning of the '70s, anyone caught with a marijuana plant was tied up and handed over to the police. But by the time I was aware of the issue, a few years later, we were in a marimba bonanza, and practically everyone was in the business.'

Four of my brothers had marijuana crops. They managed to plant almost seven hectares altogether. Most of the crops were like theirs, small. But my brothers were a little more independent. Unlike the settlers, who arrived with virtually nothing and had to find a 'sponsor' because maintaining a crop for several months was expensive, my brothers already knew the region and had tools and mules. In short, they already had what it takes to clear a few hectares and plant a crop. And since several of them were working on it, they didn't need to hire more hands.

It all started by clearing a bit of land. People had to do it with an axe because there were still no chainsaws in the area back then. At that time, the weather was orderly, not like now, and you knew that it rained in April. So, my brothers burnt the land and started sowing in early April. Since the soil was very fertile, maintaining the crop was easy. It didn't need fertilisers or anything, just cleaning from time to time. They would go up there for 10 or 15 days, and then they would come back to the farm. After a few months, the crop was ready to harvest. They cut all the bushes to collect the buds. Then, they stored everything near a creek in the forest where no one could see it. They piled the marijuana up in a shed they had built.

My brothers would wait for prices to go up, and when they had negotiated a reasonable amount, they transported the weed from their *caleta* [hiding place] to the mafia's collection centres. That's when I would help them. I was a boy, seven or eight years old, and I herded their mules. They paid me to look after them. I did many things like that.

Peasants would go to the collection centres where the marijuana would be weighed, and they were paid accordingly. The mafiosos paid everyone right away: the carrier, the worker, the cook. Then the bundles of marijuana that the peasants had brought were packed into fique sacks and converted into compact bales using a hydraulic press.

¶ At that time, money flowed freely. Marijuana was more profitable than coffee.'

The mafiosos kept the weed in the collection centre for a while until they decided it was a good time to move it. Since we had mules, we would go there and wait for work. Sometimes we took it down to the road to be loaded onto trucks. Other times, we took it directly to a beach or an airstrip. The trip could take up to three or four days. It was hard because the area is dry, and I felt thirsty all the time. When the buyers came, they paid everyone according to the number of mules they had: 'How many mules? Here's your money.'

At that time, money flowed freely. Marijuana was more profitable than coffee. And those who had no cash could quickly get someone to finance the planting of a marijuana crop. Some of my friends, who came to the region as coffee pickers, set up marijuana crops and made up to ten million pesos, which was a lot of money at the time. But they spent it all. Many peasants were not used to handling so much money, and since everyone believed that the bonanza would never end, they wasted it. Only a few decided to invest in their farms, buy a house or fix up their *beneficiadero* – the place for processing the coffee harvest. Of course, those wealthy families who got into the business already knew how to handle money. They invested in land, cattle and banana crops in the flatlands.

The bonanza didn't last long. My brothers only managed two harvests. In the early '80s, it all got complicated. There were years when nobody was buying weed at all. Many people sold their harvest on credit and ended up losing everything; the buyers never paid them. Then, the government decided to fumigate the crops with glyphosate. In addition, things became very violent. This was another reason some people stopped cultivating marijuana. Theft was common, so the mafia formed ' combos' or small groups of armed men, who they paid to guard the *caletas* and transport routes. But different combos ended up fighting each other, and anybody could be killed for their harvest, money, even their mules. There was violence all around. Everybody was armed. To be in the *marimba* business, you had to have a gun.

So, the bonanza ended, and we all had to go back to coffee. Few people had cut down their coffee crops to grow marijuana, but we had to build the farms again because they were neglected during the bonanza. And by then, conditions were even more difficult. The environmental damage caused by the crops and the fumigations was noticeable. Also, armed groups had established themselves in the area.

¶ So, the bonanza ended, and we all had to go back to coffee.'

The first time I saw the guerrillas, I was eight years old. Two armed guys and a young woman came to chat with my dad. My father sent me inside because children were not allowed to talk to adults in those days. Soon, local people were hanging around with them. With time, they were no longer four or ten rebels but a whole army. And, gradually, we got used to seeing them around. Many people my age got involved in that story. They invited me to join them, but, thank God, I never had that madness. Many of my friends and neighbours left to join the insurgency and died quickly.

When the guerrillas arrived, the first thing they did was to finish off the combos and ban marijuana crops in the region. I remember that, on the same day, they eliminated two combos, one in Nueva Granada and one in Parranda Seca. They also purchased guns from people; many peasants were armed. So they started to gain credibility because security improved in the area. They also spoke about social change in the country and encouraged us to form community action committees and organise ourselves – collectively – within the villages. Roads and other things in the region improved as a result. I remember that community leaders were encouraged and went to the city halls to demand resources. It wasn't as dangerous then as it became in the '90s.

¶ The guerrillas set their rules: you couldn't go out at night; roads had to be clean; you had to attend meetings they organised.'

The guerrillas set the rules: you couldn't go out at night; roads had to be clean; you had to attend meetings they organised. We had to obey their orders, but we could still work, and governmental entities could still visit the zone. For example, the Coffee Growers Committee was able to come to the region and support the community. It was like that until the guerrillas killed one of their workers who provided technical assistance to the coffee growers. After that, they stopped coming so often.

Over time, the guerrillas' authority became stronger. We had to do whatever they ordered. They became more and more powerful every day until they were the lords and owners of the whole territory. In the beginning, when you saw the guerrillas, you weren't afraid of them. They came to your house, and it was normal. If you had something to offer them, it would be welcome. If not, there wasn't a problem. Later, they began to turn against those who wanted to earn more from their farm work, forcing them to contribute money or leave. They began to ask for the so-called 'vaccines', that is, to charge a fee that you had to pay with cash, animals, or something else. So, on top of everything – poor harvests and low prices – coffee farming families had to give what little they earned to the guerrillas.

Later, other guerrillas arrived, and each group had its own rules. And of course, if you paid one group, you also had to pay the other!

In other areas, some combos grew stronger and became paramilitary groups. The division of the territory between different groups made life really difficult. Family and friendships were broken. Hatred grew among people from different regions of the Sierra. Those here said people from over there were paramilitaries, and those there said people from here were guerrillas. Before, we could visit our relatives in other towns, but when the conflict began, they forbade people from there to come here and those from here to go there. When we had to run an errand in the city, we had to go incognito without letting ourselves be seen.

Everything got even worse when the paramilitaries arrived in our area. That's when our ordeal truly began. One day they came to my farm and stayed overnight. They stole everything from us. They left us without anything to eat and without anything to

eat with – they even took our spoons! They said they would be back in a month, so we were practically waiting for them when they came again. The first ones arrived one day in the morning and locked us in the house. By noon, there were four or five hundred of them. We were kidnapped for almost a week, and we could only eat what they gave us.

¶ Everything got even worse when the paramilitaries arrived in our area. That's when our ordeal truly began.'

The paramilitaries and the guerrillas started fighting. We could hear gunfire every day. Then the army arrived, and we were trapped between the paramilitaries, the military and the guerrillas. We were terrified. You never knew when you, your relative, or your neighbour were going to be killed.

I thought about leaving many times. In 2002, I felt I couldn't take it anymore, but they wouldn't let us go. If I went down the mountain, then my wife and my children



A view of the low-lying banana zone from the Sierra Nevada mountains. Photo by Luis Castillo/Universidad Nacional de Colombia

had to stay. They had this rule that only one member of a family could go down the mountain. We couldn't work for almost a year. Nobody was allowed to come up. The coffee crops were nearly lost. And they ate or took away the few animals I had.

Eventually, the paramilitaries took control of the region and drove the guerrillas out. Overnight, we went from being a guerrilla zone to being a paramilitary zone. The paramilitaries came with their own rules, and you had to comply with them. Like the guerrillas, they also took money from us, but it was even worse because they charged per hectare. Also, since they came from a coca-growing area, they wanted to replicate that here.

People hadn't been involved in the drug business since the marijuana bonanza. Once, a group tried to grow poppy plants in the highlands, but four people were killed in a year, and the guerrillas imposed a ban, just like they had done with marijuana. But then the paramilitaries gained ground. They would approach people and say: 'Look, you have good land to grow coca, and we can finance you. Take this two or three million and start planting'. Because of the economic crisis, and under their command, many of us began to plant coca.

First, the paramilitaries brought seeds. But later, since they wanted the crop to grow faster, they brought shoots. And since coca is so resistant, we carried the little plants up the mountain on our shoulders – it took us three or even four days walking. We planted them in the shade, and they started growing quickly. When the leaves were ready to be harvested, the paramilitaries sent some expert guys to teach us because nobody from the area knew how to *raspar*.²⁹ They were like machines, very fast to collect the coca leaves. What we called 'cooking the leaves', that is, mixing the leaves with chemicals to make coca paste, came later. The paramilitaries sent an expert in chemistry, and he explained how to use the stuff.

‘Coca cultivation had just started to take off when the paramilitaries demobilised.’

The paramilitaries set up a collection centre in La Tagua. From there, they amassed all the coca paste produced in the region and supplied us, producers, with everything: food, tools, and chemicals. Of course, it was the only place where we were allowed to sell. The rule was that we could only sell to them. So we took the coca paste there, and the buyer

paid us, discounting what we had asked for in food, chemicals, and the like.

We didn't have experience with coca, so I decided to plant a hectare of it, but also one of coffee. I thought, 'well, if it doesn't work, then I will still have the coffee'. And so it was, because the coca boom was short-lived, around two years. I only managed to harvest twice. Coca cultivation had just started to take off when the paramilitaries demobilised. And since no illegal armed groups were left here, the authorities and the government army arrived, saying that whoever had coca crops had to destroy them immediately. Since most crops were still small, it was easy, and we put an end to that story.

By then, people in the region were enthusiastic about organic and special coffee. The idea emerged in the middle of the conflict, but it was stagnant for about seven years. We needed to associate with others for the plan to work, to form coffee growers' associations. But just when the project was taking shape, the paramilitaries started killing the association leaders. So we all got scared. We started over again when the demobilisation began. At that time, we only had the Ecolserra Network. Today there are more than 12 associations.

‘There is still a lot to do in the region. After the demobilisation, security did improve, but we have a development delay of about 15 years.’

There is still a lot to do in the region. After the demobilisation, security did improve, but we have a development delay of about 15 years. The associations have helped raise coffee growers' quality of life because the extra money from organic coffee can be invested in farms, housing and social programmes. But it isn't enough to cover the region's needs. Our roads should already be paved, but they are terrible, and we lose a lot during the harvests as a result. We need more support from the authorities. Before, the mayors and governors didn't come to the region, supposedly because there were guerrillas here, later because there were paramilitaries here. Now, none of these groups are around, but they still don't come. Coffee has great potential here, but the conflict slowed us down. Most of those who didn't die left the region. Those of us who stayed are still struggling.



A dock on the Putumayo river. Photo by Frances Thomson

Fighting for the welfare of others: Life as a social leader

A story told by Carmen³⁰ and adapted by Camilo Acero³¹



The department of **Putumayo**, in southern Colombia, on the border with Ecuador, stretches from the Andean ecosystem in the upper zone to the Amazonian rainforest in the lower areas. The area, long inhabited by several indigenous peoples, underwent an intense 'colonisation' process in the 20th century, as people from other departments in the country arrived in search of economic opportunities, especially those generated by the oil industry (from the 1960s onwards) and coca cultivations (from the 1980s onwards). In the decades that followed, the region was beset by violence, wrought by drug trafficking organisations, guerrilla groups, paramilitary groups and the Colombian army. At present, Putumayo is one of the prioritised regions for the implementation of the Peace Agreement with the FARC guerrillas, but the distress brought by war has not ceased.

I was born in Rio Blanco, Tolima. I arrived in Putumayo in 1986 with my family, looking for opportunities, like most people did back then. I moved around a lot during my childhood, following in my mother's footsteps. First, we arrived in Valle del Cauca, where my grandmother lived. She was born in Antioquia, a Catholic, a member of the Liberal Party, and had settled in Valle del Cauca with her children some decades before. The family grew corn and beans, hunted in the surrounding forests, and raised chickens. They also felled trees for wood, which they transported by mule to be sold in Sevilla or Tuluá. My grandma was the soul of the family. During elections, she would tell us, again and again, the story of how she had to hide my uncles from *Los Pájaros*, armed groups allied with the Conservative Party who were killing liberal peasants. While my mother went out to make a living on the nearby farms, my grandmother taught my sisters and me how to read

and carry out farm chores: taking care of the vegetable garden, tending the chickens and sweeping the patio.

'I arrived in Putumayo in 1986 with my family, looking for opportunities, like most people did back then.'

After a few years, my mother got married, and we moved to Pradera, another village in Valle del Cauca, to a cattle farm belonging to my stepfather's family. Those were tough years. My mum, my sisters and I were mistreated by my stepfather. He and his family were chauvinists. According to them, women are only useful for cooking and having children. They said horrible things to us, screamed at us, and made my mother cry. They would lock us up, often without any food. All this, just for being girls! I felt I had an obligation to defend my younger sisters and rebelled against

my stepfather's violence. This led me to leave home in my adolescence and to be separated from my sisters, one of who committed suicide soon after I left.

I ended up living with an aunt, in Palmira, a neighbouring city. I began to work as a babysitter during the day and to study primary school at night. Though it was hard, I managed to have a good living standard, and, most importantly, I grew confident in myself and was convinced that my stepfather was wrong and I could accomplish whatever I set out to do. This period, when I came of age, was crucial in my life. It forged my strong character and my rebellious personality in the face of those who mistreat others.

I finished primary school when I was 15 and was going to continue to high school, but I got my first boyfriend, and I got pregnant. The situation didn't affect me emotionally that much; I embraced motherhood with full responsibility. The birth of my daughter coincided with the suicide of my sister. The feeling of being a mother, but also the feelings of guilt I had for leaving my sister alone and then losing her – those feelings led me to return to my stepfather's, to be with my mother and my younger sisters. This helped my mother a little bit, to soothe the pain she felt after losing her daughter. I treated my stepfather with respect, but after everything that happened, we were never friends. He understood that he couldn't control me.

Just after I went back to my mother's place, confrontations began between the M-19 guerrillas and the government army. We were caught in the middle of a battle. We couldn't go anywhere for two days. That was the first time I saw with my own eyes that there was an armed conflict between the state and some revolutionary or illegal groups in Colombia. Sadly, it wouldn't be the last time. When the confrontation ended, we were forced to move to the village and had to stay there for several months. Although I could get a job in a restaurant there, neither my stepfather nor my mother had it easy. So, we got in touch with a relative who lived in Putumayo, who told us the situation was good there. He said there were opportunities to work, and it was a good place to live. My stepfather was the first one to travel to Putumayo to make sure the situation was OK. Two weeks later, he returned, and then my mother, my sisters, my daughter and I took the bus from Florida, Valle del Cauca, to Orito, Putumayo. We travelled through Cali, Popayán, and then on the road they call 'the trampoline of death' to Mocoa. It was more than 30 hours of travel.

‘We were caught in the middle of the fight. We couldn't go anywhere for two days.’

The trip to Putumayo – through beautiful wild landscapes – was exhausting. Happily, physical fatigue was quickly replaced by the satisfaction of having

found a fraternal environment there. Despite arriving with nothing and being strangers, many people helped us: they gave us groceries and mats to sleep on, and the mayor's office gave us a piece of land to build a house. It was our family's first home. I was in love with Putumayo! The region was populated by settlers, and those who were already established always lent a hand to newcomers. You could feel the warmth. Everyone was ready to help. That friendly welcoming made a lasting impression on me.

‘Those were the times of fat cows! My family was doing well economically. My stepfather worked on a coca crop, my mother enrolled my sisters in school and took care of my daughter, and I worked selling lottery tickets in the town.’

Orito was growing at the pace of the oil and coca economies. Engineers and skilled workers, in general, worked for the oil industry. They all lived in an urbanisation, built especially for the oil company's employees, made up of very well-made houses, with architectural design and everything. The peasants made a living from coca. The rest of the people, like me, made a living from commerce. The land behind the oil company's urbanisation belonged to the mayor's office and was assigned to displaced families like ours. There, we built our house with wood and other materials that people gave us. The town consisted only of the main street, the town hall, a market square, a church and the houses we were all rapidly building.

Those were the times of fat cows! My family was doing well economically. My stepfather worked on a coca crop, my mother enrolled my sisters in school and took care of my daughter, and I worked selling lottery tickets in the town. Little by little, we bought everything we lacked in the new house and settled down in our new life.

I spent that first year working, building the house and adapting to my new life. But before long, I was bitten by the political activity bug. Back in Valle del Cauca, I didn't know anything about politics. I spent all my time struggling to solve my own personal problems. I only started to learn about politics – what it is and how it's done – in Putumayo. I got in touch with the Liberal Party, and thanks to my relatives' credentials as long-time liberals, I started working with them. That's how I got the job at Orito's lottery house. Later, I founded our neighbourhood Community Action Board. I was very young, I was only 21 years old, and nobody knew me well, but still, the neighbours voted to appoint me as secretary of the board. At that time, very few women participated in the boards. Most of the members were men. And that's how my life in politics began.

The Community Action Board brought neighbours together to demand the paving of the roads, the construction of an aqueduct and access to other public services. One of my first tasks as secretary of the board was to conduct a census of the families participating in a government programme to build and improve homes. I remember going from house to house, talking with the neighbours. That's how people got to know me. I was not very good at writing and made many spelling mistakes. Luckily, that was not a problem because I have never liked working alone and have always got help from more experienced people. In this case, I formed a good team with some social leaders who advised me. They taught me how to use a typewriter and write documents and even corrected my spelling. Apart from teaching me many technical skills and how to interact with government functionaries, one of them also became my 'political father'.

‘Later, in Putumayo, I understood that poverty is a consequence of politics and economics.’

As I said before, when I lived in Valle del Cauca, I didn't even know what politics were. For example, in the restaurants where I worked, homeless people came to ask for food from time to time. Some people helped them, and others didn't. I didn't understand why there had to be people living in such miserable conditions. Later, in Putumayo, I understood that poverty is a consequence of politics and economics. I owe this understanding to someone I consider my first political guide: a member of the Communist Party who had arrived in the region years before me and who was assassinated by the paramilitaries in 2004. I owe him my taste for politics and the knowledge I have on the matter. I remember he lent me books and taught me about the political history of the country, ideologies in the world, and the differences between the traditional parties and the left-wing. I liked everything he taught me so much that I felt the need to go back to school and I began studying at night.

Later, I quit the Liberal Party because I didn't have time to work, study and care for my family. But, mostly, my resignation was a decision of conscience. Discussions with my friend, the communist leader, made me reflect on the shortcomings of the traditional parties. As a member of the Liberal Party, I fought for people's rights, but the party only helped those on its membership lists. Those who were not part of its networks were not even considered. When I realised the barriers traditional parties put up between people, I left the Liberal Party and began working in the Communist Party.

Rapidly, I went from being the secretary of our local Community Action Board to being the secretary of the association of all the Orito Boards. When they elected

me, I was the only woman in a directive position. I was the only one because, unlike the rest of the women living in the rural area, I knew how to read and write, a requisite for the position. The role of the secretary is fundamental because she or he has the responsibility of keeping up with correspondence, files and public relations. It's like a ministry. This new position suited my qualities very well because I've always been very organised, and in this kind of position you need to learn quickly and be eager to be taught.

I was the secretary of the Boards Association until 1996. In those years, I divided my time between my work as a community organiser and social leader, my job selling lottery tickets, and my family. I had no time for vacations or parties or anything like that. By then, I had a partner who, fortunately, was not a traditional male chauvinist who wanted his wife at home all the time. He always supported me. He was a radio host, and I fell in love with his social sensitivity and desire to help the needy. We had three children and built a house in the town. And it was then that the famous coca rallies began in the south of the country. Although I didn't know it at the time, they would end up changing my life.

‘The peasants' response was to organise rallies to demand an end to the fumigations and a dialogue to seek alternatives to illicit crops involving social investment.’



Harvest work in a coca crop in Puerto Asís, Putumayo. Photo by Frances Thomson/SOAS & Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

In the '90s, the state began to fumigate coca crops in Putumayo and other departments in southern Colombia. The peasants' response was to organise rallies to demand an end to the fumigations and a dialogue to seek alternatives to illicit crops involving social investment. These protests first took place in



A journey on the Putumayo river.
Photo by Frances Thomson

1992, but the coca growers' mobilisations became stronger in the years that followed. Community Action Boards were key protagonists, calling for and organising the demonstrations.

The big rallies started when I was pregnant with my third daughter. I didn't take on tasks that would be a risk to my health but rather dedicated myself to gathering support for those participating in the protest. The peasants left their hamlets and villages for the nearby towns. They set up tents in parks and on the streets to interrupt the traffic as a form of protest. The Community Action Boards and peasant organisations had already decided that it was essential to work on political, logistical, health and security matters and create a commission for each topic. The Political Commission had to negotiate with the government. The Health Commission was in charge of verifying everyone was in good health and of speaking with the hospital to take care of the sick. The Safety Commission was in charge of blocking the roads. And so on with each commission. I led a group for the Logistics Commission in town. We were in charge of going to the shops, the marketplace, and the neighbourhoods to collect food and other things people staying in the tents needed. We distributed everything with the help of friends in the transportation business. At that moment, I didn't realise the importance of the rallies. I just felt I was doing my bit.

When the government said that the guerrillas were behind the rally, my heart and soul were in pain. It had been a challenging process, with a lot of effort, and it was legitimate.'

When the government said that the guerrillas were behind the rally, my heart and soul were in pain. It had been a challenging process, with a lot of effort, and it

was legitimate. Maybe some protesters were members of the FARC. It wouldn't be unusual in Putumayo, where there have been guerrillas for years, and considering that it's a political and military organisation, but claiming that the guerrillas organised the mobilisations was outrageous. Peasants were completely aware of their struggles; they were not being manipulated. And the worst part was that stigmatisation came together with murder.

A month passed, and protesters hadn't been able to come to an agreement with the government when, one night, at around nine o'clock, we heard explosions. Usually, during the rally, there were cultural events at night. People played string music and told jokes and bedtime stories. That night, when people were leaving for their tents, some guys threw explosives into the crowd! Three people died, and more than 80 were wounded. The same happened in several towns in Putumayo. Back then, we thought it was a coordinated attack organised by the government army to spread fear and bring the protest to an end. It's still not clear what happened. We just don't know. Anyway, violence against coca growers and their leaders would get even worse in the years to come.

Protesters returned to their homes after agreeing on a work plan with the government to discuss social investment, access to services and infrastructure, and economic alternatives to coca. Mainly, the Community Action Boards participated in this negotiation process. Several social leaders realised that we also needed a regional peasant organisation to voice the needs of people in Putumayo. So we had the idea of creating a peasant union. Due to my experience in the Boards Association, and perhaps to the inexperience of our rural comrades in organising files, correspondence and the like, I was elected

secretary of the Putumayo Peasant Union. It was my leap from local social organisation to broader peasant organisation platforms.

That was a time of intense social activism. While we were negotiating with the government, we were building the union municipality by municipality. It was a very enriching experience because I got in touch with peasant leaders from different parts of the country. We realised that the problems we had in Putumayo were very similar to the issues elsewhere. Therefore, joining a broader platform to fight for land and peasants' social and political rights made sense. In April 1997, we created a local branch of the union in Orito, and we were doing the same in the rest of the towns when the paramilitaries came to Putumayo.

The violent operations of the paramilitaries had a clear objective: not to let the peasants' organisation advance. And, in that selective hunt, the first ones to fall were those who led the coca rallies. First, they killed a leader in the neighbouring town of San Miguel. Then, they attacked a leader from Puerto Caicedo, who was miraculously saved. Some colleagues travelled to Bogotá to file complaints, while others – myself included – stayed to participate in a forum with the Minister of the Interior to talk about human rights violations. We took a break to have lunch during that forum, and when we returned, we found threatening pamphlets on the chairs. It was a terrible period. Later, they killed the mayor of Puerto Asís, who had been elected with the support of the peasant organisation, and a leader from Orito, whose tongue was cut off. Those who weren't displaced had to stop all political activity, forced by the circumstances. Others joined the guerrillas to save their lives.

‘The violent operations of the paramilitaries had a clear objective: not to let the peasants' organisation process advance. And, in that selective hunt, the first ones to fall were those who led the coca rallies.’

I resisted a couple of years, but in 2000 we were displaced. We had to find a place to live elsewhere because I could no longer bear the permanent surveillance of the paramilitaries. By then, I had already left my partner, so, forced by necessity, I sold my house in the town for a low price and travelled with my four children to the rural area of Puerto Asís, on the border with Ecuador. There, another stage of my life began.

I planned to leave behind my social work to protect our lives. I wanted to go where I could be safe, and my children could study. It was painful for them because they had their friends in Orito, and the oldest one had a boyfriend. Still, fortunately, we were able to establish

in an area where the guerrillas were strong, so I was protected from the paramilitaries who were chasing me. There was a good school, and there were good conditions for commerce. With the money from the sale of our house and savings from my work, I bought a new home and set up a restaurant.

Our new home was in a hamlet by a large river and with stunning landscapes. There were many coca crops around, but also *chontaduro*, pineapple, sugarcane and subsistence crops. I estimate that 40% of farm production was coca, and the rest was other products. There were also many indigenous people with solid organisations. People in this area were organised in Community Action Boards, producer associations, and, in the case of the indigenous people, in Cabildos.³² As a result of their collective efforts and the agreements of the coca grower strikes of the '90s, they had managed to get the government to build a rural school, the only one in the surrounding area. My children went to primary and secondary school there. Even though my decision to move to the area was forced, I believe it was the best decision I made in my life. The territory welcomed me in a tough time, and my children grew up and happily came of age there.

‘At that time, we believed that we couldn't stand still in the face of violence because, if we did, the death of all our colleagues would have been in vain.’

However, not everything was a rose garden. I couldn't go to the town. I had to stay in the rural area because the paramilitaries controlled the urban area. To get to the town, you had to cross a river, and the paramilitaries would go to where peasants disembarked from the ferry, list in hand. Those on the list were killed right away and thrown in the river. Therefore, I had to buy groceries in Ecuador or send my oldest daughter to the town to get supplies for my restaurant.

In 2002, when I was working at my restaurant and focused on supporting my children, the paramilitaries, with the support of the government army, assassinated the Putumayo Peasant Union's president. Because I kept the organisation's archives, his relatives and the International Red Cross contacted me to help in the search for the body. We found him buried in a cemetery as an NN ('no-name') eight days later. I had distanced myself from everything related to social work until that moment, but I felt I had to return to it under the circumstances. When you are a leader and fight to achieve better conditions for people, you feel like a leaf flying in the wind, heading nowhere, if you are not doing something. It's impossible to sit still. I tried it for my children's safety, but after the murder of our colleague, I began thinking about their future and what could happen to them. These reflections, which I shared with

fellow peasant leaders, led us to reactivate our social work. At that time, we believed that we couldn't stand still in the face of violence because, if we did, the death of all our colleagues would have been in vain.

The first thing we did was reactivate the organisations in every municipality. The plan consisted of holding assemblies with Community Action Boards and Indigenous Councils to inquire about the communities' opinions. Although many were afraid, many others welcomed the idea of organising again. We created a new peasant organisation, and I was elected vice president. We discussed a Life Plan³³ for the area, defining the population's needs and priorities. A company had started to exploit the oil wells in the area, and so, our idea was to get them and the local and national authorities to support our Life Plan. The plan included, among other things, legal recognition of peasants' land rights and the protection of water sources, both of which were threatened by the oil company, and the maintenance of the roads we had built ourselves and which the oil company deteriorated without compensating us.

We spent a couple of years organising our Life Plan and then approached the oil company and the governor of Putumayo to help us implement it. However, the violence did not stop. In 2004, we met with the mayor, the governor and the company. We told them that they couldn't continue exploiting oil in the area if the national government didn't participate in the meetings and help us with the plan. The oil company wasn't interested in agreements and refused to invite the national government to have a dialogue. Instead, they complained about all the problems the guerrillas

caused to their operations. Anyway, we left the meeting feeling happy because, although we couldn't come to an agreement, we showed them our political strength and presented our proposals. But, five days later, the president of the newly created organisation was brutally assassinated with several shots in the back.

As I was the organisation's vice president, I was supposed to take over his post. However, the paramilitaries were still in town, so I couldn't go there to do everything that the leader of an organisation has to do. We had to temporarily suspend our Life Plan project and dedicate ourselves to denouncing human rights violations.

‘The partial demobilisation of the paramilitaries in 2006 gave a second wind to the social movement in Putumayo. That was the moment to reactivate our Life Plan project, protest against the environmental and social damage caused by the oil companies, denounce human rights violations and oppose aerial spraying.’

My financial situation was not good because I had left my restaurant unattended to devote myself to social work. Besides, one of my sons became seriously ill. Fortunately, by then, I already had the support of my current partner. He was the president of a Community Action Board and had come to Putumayo to work on coca farms until, with his savings, he was able to buy a piece of land. Being with him is a blessing because he's a hardworking man, humble, and patient. It's not easy to find a man who accepts his wife leaving home all the time, participating in meetings, and not being there for cooking or washing. He was always understanding of



A rural farmhouse in Putumayo. Photo by Frances Thomson/SOAS & Universidad Nacional

my leadership and took on those duties in the house. So, to solve our economic situation, I worked with him on the farm. I never worked in the coca crop itself, but I cooked for the workers, supervised them, and created and looked after coca seedbeds. The farm gave us enough to support my children.

The partial demobilisation of the paramilitaries in 2006 gave a second wind to the social movement in Putumayo. That was the moment to reactivate our Life Plan project, protest against the environmental and social damage caused by the oil companies, denounce human rights violations and oppose aerial spraying. At that point, the demands were very similar to those of coca growers in the '90s; for example, to stop the fumigations, but the social movement was stronger and better trained. By then, we had solid proposals to negotiate with the government, and there were new peasant organisations that we didn't have before.

Despite the demobilisation, paramilitary violence didn't stop, and in 2007 I suffered the misfortune of losing one of my children. He was 19 and worked as an assistant in the *chivas* [a particular type of bus that transports merchandise and passengers in rural areas]. One morning, he was on his way from the hamlet to Puerto Asís, and the paramilitaries took him off the bus, carried him away in a truck, and killed him. My son didn't mess with anybody. He wasn't involved in political activity either. His only 'crime' was to wear a black t-shirt and trousers and rubber boots [wellies]. That was enough for the paramilitaries to kill him. According to them, anyone dressing like that was a member of the guerrillas. That was the most brutal blow I've ever received. But instead of falling apart, which was what people might have expected of me, I decided to continue with my political activity.

Navigating between personal tragedies and the threat of violence, little by little, I approached peasant organisations at the national level. I left local leadership behind and became part of movements with broader – countrywide – aims. It was a beautiful experience that taught me other lessons in life.

Before then, I never had the opportunity to meet leaders from different parts of the country. I was always focused on Putumayo. I remember that a peasant leader I knew always told me that I should leave the region to work at the national and international levels because local problems result from policies formed at these levels. The first time I participated in a meeting with peasants from different parts of the country, I realised his message was true. Despite the differences between the regions, the problems were very similar.

Time passed, and not only did they invite me to the meetings, but they appointed me as the Women's Secretary of the peasant organisation where I was

working. I was in charge of all the participation and education policies for women within the organisation. An essential experience I had in that position was traveling to the south of Colombia to organise local leadership workshops with peasant women, later replicated at the national level. The idea was to place women in high positions to ensure they started taking on roles traditionally given to men. The process led me to participate in the *Vía Campesina* World Assembly in Africa. It was a very long journey, more than 24 hours! I met people with different cultures and languages for the first time, and I learned about the continent's history. I discovered that, despite being a region with a lot of inequality, its people have strong dignity because they have fought for their rights all their lives.

Later I became treasurer and general secretary of the organisation, among other posts. These responsibilities forced me to leave Putumayo and go to Bogotá, the organisation's headquarters. It was tough because it involved moving away from my family, leaving behind my work in the region, and coming to a big city. Although it was hard at first, and I even got sick, I managed to do the job entrusted to me.

‘Today, I feel very uncertain about what may happen with peace and the social movement in Colombia. We believed that peace would bring the changes we had fought for, for years, but that has not happened yet.’

I was fortunate to participate closely in some of the most important political events in recent years in Colombia. First, I helped with the 2013 National Agrarian Strike, which mobilised thousands of peasants throughout the country to demand better living conditions, access to services and rights, and a change in economic policies. This strike positioned agrarian problems back at the centre of the national debate. Additionally, I participated with my organisation in the peace process with the FARC guerrillas. We wanted to contribute to building peace in our country. As several points on the agrarian problem were included in the conversations with the guerrillas, we were committed to promoting compliance with the Peace Agreement. Today, I feel very uncertain about what may happen with peace and the social movement in Colombia. We believed that peace would bring the changes we had fought for, for years, but that has not happened yet.

If I look back at my life, I can say that I am proud of who I've been and what I've done, despite all the difficulties and suffering due to having lost my loved ones. I made the decision to follow the path of those who fight for the welfare of others. That took me away from the ordinary life of a family woman. It has been a good life!



Inhabitants of rural Tumaco. Photo by Diego Lagos/Universidad Nacional

In war and peace, we black people always lose

A story told by Don Tito³⁴ and adapted by Diana Machuca³⁵



Tumaco is a municipality in the department of Nariño, in southwestern Colombia. It shares a border with Ecuador and the Pacific Ocean. In the last couple decades, Tumaco has served as a hub for coca production and cocaine trafficking. This aggravated armed and social disputes in the municipality, which became a battle ground for the FARC guerrillas and different paramilitary groups. The signing of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016 generated high hopes. But some groups did not demobilise, and new illegal organisations emerged. Amidst the violence, people continue working to improve the situation of their communities and build peace. One of the most significant social struggles in Tumaco has been black communities' fight to remain in their collective territories and for recognition of their Community Councils' authority.

Most people who came to Tumaco came to grow coca. Those who arrived after 2000 cleared the forest to plant that bush. Bundles of people came from Putumayo and also from Samaniego and Caquetá. It's so funny! Before, it was the other way around: people from Tumaco moved to Putumayo to make a living from coca. They worked as *raspachines*.³⁶ That's how people from Putumayo and Tumaco became friends and even relatives.

Settlers came to Tumaco for many reasons. Some were displaced by the Plan Colombia fumigations.³⁷ Others arrived with the guerrillas: the FARC groups from different places in Putumayo came here and brought their people with them. And how did it work? People came, displaced by violence or following the guerrillas, and then would tell their family members or friends who were also starving in Putumayo because of the fumigations or the war. 'Come, there's enough land here ... There's land for coca, to cultivate,

land for this and for that.' Then the relative or friend would come with his son, sometimes with the oldest one, and even with his woman. Later, they would send for the niece, uncle, cousin. That's how these lands, even those of the Community Councils,³⁸ were populated. People came packed into trucks and crossed the river on a ferry.

Many of those who came to plant coca went missing. We don't know if they disappeared or were killed. I honestly don't believe they are still alive. Too many people are missing in Tumaco. Those people came here looking for opportunities, but they had no IDs and because of the difficult situation in the area, some suspected they were members of the guerrilla groups and others suspected they were paramilitaries. Coca generates fights and makes folks jealous. For many people, the river became their grave. For me, 2002 was the worst period. Rafts full of bodies came floating down the river frequently.

‘Coca is not only for peasants. Coca is a chain that ties everything together.’

Coca is not only for peasants. Coca is a chain that ties everything together. For example, I’m not a coca grower. I never grew coca, and not because I didn’t feel like it, but because of the problems it brought. Where there was coca, there were always armed groups. But, for example, my wife had a shop, and she sold things on credit to the *coqueros*.³⁹ Others sell gasoline to those who process the leaves or transport the coca. It’s a long, long chain!

Although I never grew coca, I know how the business works. Some people planted it next to my palm crop. There was a guy who had around five hectares; he was a small *coquero*. He worked hard to get the land to produce, but it seemed that the profit was never enough because, when he finally sold the coca, he already owed money to everybody, and he couldn’t pay. He harvested every three months. But between harvest and harvest, he had to work an awful lot. He had to add many chemicals to the soil, fertilise the crop and then fumigate it, and he had to do this almost every day. On top of everything, the guy went to sleep at ten or eleven because he had to go with a flashlight at dusk to check that the ants weren’t eating his crop. He was working all the time. So, if I were to put a price on all the hours he worked, I don’t think he was making a lot of money from coca. Coca isn’t such good business for small growers. The profit goes to those who buy it or grow more than ten hectares, those who make the base paste and crystallise it, to the large laboratories, the industrialists. The money ends up going to those who don’t even live here.

Some say there was a coca bonanza, in the same area where I had my palm crop. Growers say those times were good because they could buy three crates of beer, which they piled up in their homes. Their dining rooms were full of bottles. But the next day they ran out of money, and once again, they had to go and pick coca leaves. This has been a big issue: small *coqueros* spend all their money on booze. They don’t invest it or save it. Coca has only improved the lives of a few people, at least in the area where I live. I visited some villages on the border where people who grew the bush don’t even have a house and are just surviving. I’d love to ask them what they did with the coca money, if they ever had it, although I don’t believe they ever had it.

For us, black people, coca has brought more sorrows than joys. It broke down our culture. The hamlets in the Community Councils were filled with bars where all one could hear were forbidden *corridos*.⁴⁰ Coca and its armed groups and settlers displaced many native communities. At one point, so many people moved from Tumaco to San Lorenzo, an Ecuadorian municipality close to the border, that they formed

whole neighbourhoods over there. Settlers say they bought the land from the natives, but the land here cannot be sold! Our territories are collective property. Black people from these areas were very welcoming. There was always an extra dish for unexpected guests. But this custom is being lost, and one day it’ll disappear completely. Coca has caused enormous damage to our black culture!

‘For us, black people, coca has brought more sorrows than joys. It broke down our culture.’

Coca also brought fumigations to our territory. In 2003, the government began spraying in Tumaco. Everyone knew: whenever they shouted ‘the planes!', we started running like hell. One could always see a guy in the plane aiming a machine gun at the people. Once, a boy aimed his rifle at the plane to make a joke. It came down after him, almost to the ground. The boy ran fast and, luckily, he lost them. Those people sprayed everything, even the mangroves. Apparently, they were paid to dump tons of glyphosate. Later, the palm crops got a disease called bud rot. That was devastating; it killed thousands of hectares of palm. We were sure the fumigations made the palms sick because both things happened around the same time: first the spraying and then the bud rot disease.

They almost got tired of fumigating here; nothing could get rid of the coca crops. The peasants learned tricks to save their bushes. They used *panela*⁴¹ and some other stuff. They washed the plants that had just been fumigated. Others cut them near the base, before the poison went from the leaves, down the branches, and into the roots. They curbed the damage in this way. They would lose that harvest, but in three months they were harvesting again.

Coca is just one of the problems that torments us here in Tumaco. The dispute over the land is broader. It has been going on for years, for decades. And, to be fair, it didn’t start with the Putumayo settlers. Before the coca crops, other people from different parts of the country – *pastusos, rolos, caleños, and paisas* –⁴² took over our land to grow palm trees.

‘Coca is just one of the problems that torments us here in Tumaco. The dispute over the land is broader. It has been going on for years, for decades.’

In the ‘60s and ‘70s, businessmen from other parts of Colombia, even foreigners, came to Tumaco to set up plantations and palm oil refineries. Some of them were funded by the mafia. It was then that the exploitation began. Our concern was that we were going to be left with no land. In 1979, local people created some associations and they told the palm misters:



Muddy footpaths are part of everyday life in rural Tumaco. Photo by Diego Lagos (@dalagossph)/Universidad Nacional Photo by Diego Lagos/Universidad Nacional

'This cannot continue like this! Stop accumulating land, don't be greedy!'

‘The struggle to defend our lands has kept us in conflict with palm growers, settlers, coqueros and, as if this weren’t enough, with the FARC guerrillas.’

The rules of the game changed in 1993 with Law 70. This law recognised our territorial rights and created the Community Councils, the way we black communities organise to exercise authority and autonomy over our territories. Thanks to this law, black people began to come together and organise, to investigate what tasks we needed to complete to get legal rights over our lands. Most of these titles were granted in the 2000s. For us, the land is communal, and Law 70 states clearly that it's inalienable, unattachable and imprescriptible.⁴³ No one can take the land from us.

The struggle for our lands has cost us dearly. Many legal representatives of the Community Councils have been assassinated. One never knows who it was: the palm growers, the armed groups, or both. Collective titling didn't bring these conflicts to an end. Some palm companies still say that areas within the council's lands belong to them, and they continue invading our territories. The same happens with settlers and coqueros. They insist on having individual property titles in the council's areas. As soon as the issue is mentioned, an endless discussion begins. Our land cannot be sold! Instead of solving the situation, all the authorities do is let us negotiate by ourselves. Frankly, I wonder if the state wants us to continue fighting over

the land. We have tried to coexist peacefully, but for us the council's territory is not up for discussion.

The struggle to defend our lands has kept us in conflict with palm growers, settlers, coqueros, and as if this weren't enough, with the FARC guerrillas. Making them understand Law 70 was very complicated. It depended on the character of the commander. But since the FARC rotated or changed commanders frequently, just like what happens with the army, what the community explained to one commander was immediately lost, and they had to start from scratch with the new one. And, it's one thing to argue with the palm company people or with the settlers, but quite another thing to tell it straight to someone who's armed. When people didn't obey the FARC's instructions, complete an activity or whatever they said needed to be done, they were given three days to comply, or they had to leave, or they were killed. It's pretty traumatic for people who have lived through these situations. People in Bogotá, for example, have other kinds of problems. Maybe it's mobility, catching a bus, common crime or theft. For us, the main issue is securing peace in the territory, peace with the armed groups, with the FARC, the dissidents, with everyone. I insist that it's traumatic to live with an armed group, under their command – and in a country where legality supposedly prevails.

So we tried to explain the role of the councils and Law 70 to the FARC. Some commanders allowed us to remain in the territory. Others threatened us when they arrived. I remember once in a meeting, the commander had already spoken a lot, and I asked him, 'Comandante, may I speak?' He replied, 'What do you want? Shut up!' And he kept on talking. He talked about their military

strategy. He said they killed, that they did everything. And then he pointed at me and yelled, 'What were you going to say?' Then, our secretary, the council's secretary, a really calm boy – I don't know where he got the nerve from – took out a Law 70 brochure and handed it to the commander saying, 'Comandante, when you have time, read it!' The meeting was over, and we went home. In the next meeting, the man had a completely different attitude. He said: 'Who is going to explain this shit about Law 70 to me?' I even took it as a good joke. A knowledgeable young man told him, 'You see, Law 70 is about this and that. That's why we are telling you that these are collective territories.' And well, at least he listened to us.

To live through war is to feel death breathing down one's neck, especially for those of us defending the welfare of our communities and the land that we black people would like everybody to respect. Here in Tumaco, black people were not born with these clarities. So much work is needed for people to understand that we have to fight for what belongs to us, for our rights. Fortunately, there's been progress: Law 70, leaders emerging in the councils and in the hamlets.

‘To live through war is to feel death breathing down one’s neck, especially for those of us defending the welfare of our communities and the land ...’

Before, it was different. Black people believed that they had to be poor. When I was a boy, I saw people living in the mud, almost grateful for their misfortune. I like to believe that I helped raise consciousness among the black population of Tumaco. They started to understand that we could demand things from local authorities. I think that I inherited the desire to be free from my maternal grandparents. I never met them, but I learned that they came here searching for the sea or wanting to return to Africa. They escaped from the mines in Barbacoas, another municipality on the Pacific coast. I was told that they reached the sea and went up the river on a canoe – there were no roads back then. My grandparents examined the land to see if it was suitable for sowing, and eventually found somewhere to settle.

I owe my education to my father. He took me to the priest's school and then brought me to the urban area of Tumaco to finish high school. I had the best of relationships with the priests, even though I was a rebel – I've always been a rebel – and I didn't accept them imposing things on me. I liked to defend people who could not protect themselves, and I would fight for them. I went on strike over the food they gave us at the boarding school and, thanks to the protest, they didn't give us rotten fish ever again.

In 1975, they appointed me as a teacher at a small school in Tumaco. Beto Escrucería, Tumaco's great political chief, appointed me. Tumaco changed completely when the Escrucerías came to power. They are white, they have Spanish ancestry, but they also grew up here, in the territory, together with the black people. Beto was a committed politician, but with him and his people, politics were closed. They were the lords and masters of Tumaco. The municipality was like their hacienda, and they managed it as such. They helped their friends, everyone who was a Betista, but no one else. Beto was my father's preferred politician, but not mine.

In fact, I was almost his opponent. Anyway, he gave me the position at the school, and I spoke to him several times. I don't know if he realised the problems I was causing him. Once, when I was a juror at a voting table for mayoral elections, I didn't allow a Betista to vote because the photograph on his ID was not clear enough. It all became a huge thing, the police even came. I stood up and told everyone, 'Sorry, but he won't vote here, not at this table. As long as I'm here, he won't vote.' Nobody uttered a word, and the guy didn't vote. I was never a juror again.

Back in the '70s, we learned about what was going on in communist China. We studied booklets by Mao and Fidel – I have no idea where those booklets came from. We championed that cause. People from a party called MOIR, the Revolutionary Independent Workers Movement, came to visit. There was a lawyer named López, who had been to China and Russia. He was from the University of Nariño and came here to give us classes and lectures. Later on, they killed him.

In Tumaco, we started talking about social change. We compared Beto to Somoza – that dictator from Nicaragua. During political campaigns, they'd cover the walls of some houses with Beto's propaganda. At night we would tear down all his posters, even if we had to stay up until dawn. I never liked Beto's governing style, even though he appointed me as a teacher.

The fishermen's' children attended the school where I worked. At that time, Tumaco fishermen were considered evil, challenging to deal with. I remember I had a meeting with a father, a wicked guy, who was a fisherman. I asked him why he had sent his son to school, and he replied, 'so that he can learn, so that he doesn't grow up to be like me.' I said he was not helping him much and that if he wanted to help him, he should do this and that, and I gave him some tips. The man looked at me and asked: 'And what's your name?' I said, 'I'm so-and-so.' Then he said: 'This is the first time somebody tells me that, the very first time,' and he shook my hand. He said, 'Let's be friends.' The man considered me his friend until the day he died.



A rainy day in a rural hamlet of Tumaco. Photo by Diego Lagos (@dalagossph)/Universidad Nacional

I believe I fostered changes in the consciousness of the young people in that school. They still remember me. Sometimes I walk through the neighbourhood, and I meet the boys who studied with me. Some of them are already technicians and they call me 'teacher', and they even bow to me.

¶ Back in the '70s, we learned about what was going on in communist China. We studied booklets by Mao and Fidel ...'

I was a teacher until the '80s. Then I went back to my hamlet and saw that things weren't working. Many things were lacking. People were not living well. The first thing I did was to insist that we all needed to improve our houses. I started to build my house and then other people copied my idea. They became aware that houses are part of our environment and that we had to protect ourselves from the weather and the rain. You see, before, the houses were made of cardboard. In 1986, I did a census of the hamlet, which was already a large village, and everyone had houses with cardboard roofs. In other places, the roofs were made of straw, a local material. It was good because it absorbed heat, but rats destroyed those roofs in 15 days. I told everyone that houses should be comfortable and last for a lifetime.

After nagging people about their houses, I got into another struggle. The hamlet didn't have water or electricity. We bought a power plant – me and a *paisa* friend – for our houses, but people were suspicious

and jealous. So I said to my friend, 'let's do something so everyone can have electricity. Elections are coming, and you know who the candidate is? Beto Escrucería'. We brought together more than 180 families. We shared our idea with them. We said that we wanted a power plant for the hamlet and that we could ask Beto for it while we were in election season. As soon as Beto was aware of the possible revolt, he told us not to continue with it, that an oil palm company would give us the plant. That promise, unlike most politicians' promises, was kept. The community obtained the plant. It arrived from Bogotá before the elections. Then, we needed the power lines. I spoke to someone and asked him to donate the cables and transformers. The community made the poles. We cut the trees for them with a chainsaw and an axe. A technical guy from a company helped us with the installation. And so, lights came to my hamlet for the first time, with poles made from guayacán trees.

Fighting for black people's rights has never been easy. That's why I was excited about the Havana Peace Agreement. With peace, access to electricity, water, health and education would improve. Maybe we wouldn't get them for free, but at least projects could be requested and implemented, and the community would benefit from them. That's what makes the difference. But no, peace has been a scam. The council and its members joined the illicit crop substitution programme believing things were going to change. And things have indeed changed: the FARC guerrillas are gone, but now there are dissidents, those who did not lay down their arms or who rearmed. We are working towards

the substitution of illicit crops, on voluntary coca eradication, in exchange for an alternative, a feasible productive project, in exchange for roads, for help with marketing. But armed people are back in the territory willing to defend coca. It's so tricky!

‘Fighting for black people’s rights has never been easy. That’s why I was excited about the Havana Peace Agreement. With peace, access to electricity, water, health and education would improve.’

Substitution has been jeopardised. I believe the programme was poorly designed from the beginning. Say one used to live from coca, and six or eight months ago, uprooted their crop, but the state only comes up with two million pesos out of the twelve million they promised. That was what they gave them as payment for eradicating their crops: money! But money comes and goes. That’s not sustainable! I think about it and say, ‘Why don’t we sit down first and plan the programme together? You, Mr. Peasant, what do you want to grow, and how will we commercialise it? Let’s not provide more cocoa to Luker⁴⁴ for them to pay whatever they want for it.’ Suppose we produce a lot of cocoa, then they lower the price to 3,000 or 4,000 pesos per kilo. Someone must tie up this chain with a sustainable price! Let’s fix the price of cocoa at 10,000 pesos a kilo. If this were the price, everybody would hurry to plant cocoa, leaving coca behind, and the government wouldn’t have to pay them two million, that’s for sure! Because cocoa, when well taken care

of, can be profitable if prices are good. But none of this has been done. Nothing has happened. They took away coca from the people, and now they no longer have the means to live.

Substitution has been a hot potato for the council leaders who took the programme on their shoulders and believed in the government. We have been singled out and stigmatised in our territories. The programme has failed, and we’ve had to face the people who sacrificed their livelihood, their coca, to comply with the government’s demands. That’s why they’re killing leaders, because when things go wrong – and with substitution, everything is going terribly wrong – it is us who are blamed.

‘Peace is dying in Tumaco. New groups arrive every day. There are so many that one no longer know who’s who. Building peace in these territories, with no guarantees from the government, isn’t possible.’

Peace is dying in Tumaco. New groups arrive every day. There are so many that one no longer know who’s who. Building peace in these territories, with no guarantees from the government, isn’t possible. The state lost the opportunity to do things differently. Or maybe the state never loses, and it’s in their interest that things fail. Meanwhile, for us, the failure of this process is at another price: we pay with our lives. It seems black communities always lose, both in war and in peace.



Life stories from Myanmar's borderlands





Lashio city, northern Shan State. Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)

Life as the sole breadwinner of a family impoverished by drugs

A story told by Nang Khong⁴⁵ and adapted by Sai Aung Hla⁴⁶



This is the story of Nang Khong, a woman who had no choice but to become the sole breadwinner of a family hit hard by drugs. She is from northern **Shan State**, Myanmar. Shan State shares borders with China, Thailand and Laos. It has an estimated six million inhabitants, of many different ethnicities, the majority of whom live in rural areas. In the 1950s, the newly independent Myanmar government dismantled local power structures in Shan State as part of its efforts to centralise control, but was unable to establish functioning institutions to replace those it removed. This generated social, political and economic grievances, which grew after the 1962 military coup established an authoritarian state, and fuelled armed conflict involving multiple armed groups and fault-lines. From the 1990s onwards, the central government forged ceasefire arrangements with armed groups in northern and eastern Shan State, while intensifying counterinsurgency campaigns in central and southern Shan State against non-ceasefire groups. Even in places and times of 'effective' ceasefires, borderland populations continued to endure multiple forms of violence and worsening livelihood insecurities linked to localised conflicts, militarisation and land dispossession. The drug trade, which has been central to the war economy in Shan State since the 1950s, continued to thrive amidst the ceasefires. Shan State produces more than 90% of Myanmar's opium and over the last couple of decades has also become a major producer of methamphetamines. Although opium has long been used for medicinal, cultural and recreational purposes, local communities in Shan State have been deeply affected by changing patterns of drug use. Rising drug use – especially among young people – has placed severe pressures on families and communities and is perceived as an existential threat. There were hopes that the national peace process launched in 2011 would provide an opportunity for change. Instead, armed conflict and drug harms increased in many parts of Shan State over the past decade and are likely to worsen following the ongoing political crisis created by the February 2021 military coup.

I am so fed up with drugs. I don't even want to hear people speak about them. I say this because my family has been badly impacted by drug addiction.

I am the elder sister of four younger brothers. Three of my brothers have used drugs. Currently, we have no idea where my first younger brother is. He stole from people

and left because he had no way to pay back the debts. My second younger brother has contracted HIV. My third younger brother used drugs, but not in a serious way. So, I sent him and my youngest brother to live in Taunggyi. We were afraid that if they stayed in our community, they would become addicted to drugs too.

‘I am the elder sister of four younger brothers. Three of my brothers have used drugs.’

My family and I live in a remote village in Hsipaw, northern Shan State. We rely on seasonal farming, like everyone in our community. In the past, when our father was still strong and healthy, our family was doing fine. All our siblings could go to school. But three of my younger brothers gave up on school. They were never interested in studying. They said that even if they finished school, it wouldn't be any use. I was the only one who finished school. I struggled to support myself through university, and finally I graduated. Our youngest brother is still studying.



Discarded syringes in northern Shan state.
Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)

I went to university in Mandalay (in a different region). During that time, I didn't get much chance to go back home and I didn't know much about what was happening there. My younger brothers were living with our parents, doing seasonal work to get by.

After university I returned home. Two of my younger brothers took up a job transporting cattle into China. That was in 2012–2013 and cattle trading across the border was a really good business. Each trip lasted about 10–20 days, but sometimes up to two months. However, I never saw them bring home the money they earned. I guess they spent it all on drugs. They only came home once all the money was gone. Around that time, my first younger brother married a woman who is older than our mother! I was speechless.

In my village, almost every household has people living with drug addiction (there are only about five houses without anyone using drugs). In our community drugs are easily and cheaply available. Three tablets cost around 200 MMK [less than 50 US cents]. I learned just how serious my brothers' addictions were after I returned home from university. They would use all kinds of drugs, including heroin and amphetamines. My parents knew about it, but they couldn't intervene to stop it.

I feel so desperate for my brothers. I don't think they wanted to fall victim to drugs, but I guess they could not resist the peer-pressure. I think another reason why young people start using drugs is the bad influence of seeing their family members use them. They're everywhere in our society. I have seen parents or adults ask their underage family members to buy them cigarettes. This is giving young people a good impression of cigarettes and drugs. Traditionally we think that everything our parents, adults and older people say is true and good. We are taught to abide by and listen to older people, and especially our parents whom we regard as our first teachers. This way of thinking in our society might have contributed to my brothers becoming addicted to drugs.

Initially my brothers were able to sustain their drug use with their earnings. Later, they were no longer willing to work like before. At some point, they stopped working and started stealing to support their drug use.

‘Initially my brothers were able to sustain their drug use with their earnings. Later, they were no longer willing to work like before. At some point, they stopped working and started stealing to support their drug use.’

Our father was also getting old and no longer able to make large amounts of money. So, the responsibility to support our entire household fell on my shoulders. I was working with a local non-governmental organisation in my area, so my income was not that good. But anyway, I had to struggle on to support my family. There was no other choice.

My brothers' situation gradually got worse. They would steal anything – furniture, people's possessions, including motorbikes and cars. They would even steal motorbikes owned by the police and soldiers. My brothers didn't care how much the item was worth, they would exchange it for any amount of money to buy drugs. In many cases, the people they stole from would come to our house and ask us to compensate them for what they had stolen. When that happened, I would be the one who had to apologise, pay them and sometimes beg them not to escalate the issue to the police or local authorities.



Rural travel and transportation in Lashio Township, northern Shan State. Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)

I had to sell all my valuable items and belongings, including my smartphone, to pay people back for what my brother had stolen. I would find alternative ways to earn money, like selling groundnuts. Sometimes, I even had to sell my clothes. I borrowed money from friends. I had to beg and promise that I would pay them back when I received my salary at the end of the month. Some of my friends even made a remark that the only job I have not done is prostitution and how fortunate that I did not. They were right. I am lucky that I have managed to find better alternatives to earn the money. Otherwise, my life would be in ruin. Sometimes my brothers asked me for money and when I didn't have any they would become verbally abusive and violent. At times, the debts left our family with not even enough money to buy rice. Things were very difficult throughout 2013–2016. No matter how much I earned and how hard I worked, the money was never enough.

We felt so embarrassed and humiliated. People would talk badly about our family. They would not trust our family at all. For example, if one of our neighbours found something was missing, they would accuse my brother and come straight to our house to search for the item.

‘We felt so embarrassed and humiliated. People would talk badly about our family. They would not trust our family at all.’

We don't know where to seek help or who to rely on. We have to find the way out on our own. No government or organisation will come and help tackle this problem. We have village leaders and a village headman, but they can barely do anything to tackle the drug dealing and addiction issues. Even when the community has brought up specific cases of drug dealers or drug users, the village leaders could not take any action.

‘We don't know where to seek help or who to rely on. We have to find the way out on our own. No government or organisation will come and help tackle this problem.’

There have been some community efforts to help tackle and prevent the use of drugs. My friend used to carry out some community campaigning work, arresting drug users and asking the local authorities and the police to handle the case (for example by sending them to treatment centres). But the police and local authorities said there was nothing they could do, so my friend had to let them go.

The local authorities and the police are only interested in arresting young drug users from rich families; only wealthy parents are able to bribe the police to release their sons/daughters. We can never expect local authorities and police to proactively arrest drug users or dealers in the

community. Local authorities and politicians are not interested in finding a way to help tackle the problem and help us. So, who are we going to rely on? We have to rely on ourselves and find a way out on our own.

In 2017, I received news that there was one ethnic armed organisation helping with drug treatment. I heard about this because of my work engaging with different local organisations, most people would not have heard about it. They said that there was a drug treatment centre in Lashio. I had never heard of that place before. It was not a drug-rehabilitation centre, rather a drop-in centre for drug users to get medication. Most people don't know there is such a facility.

When he arrived, they tested him and found that he had HIV. He needed HIV treatment. We had the option to send him to Thailand for the treatment. But he didn't have an identification card and the medication was very expensive, so we couldn't.'

I contacted the centre to send my brother for treatment. When he arrived, they tested him and found that he had HIV. He needed HIV treatment. We had the option to send him to Thailand for the treatment. But he didn't have an identification card and the medication was very expensive, so we couldn't. We were so desperate. I had no choice but to seek help from one of the youth organisations in Southern Shan. I begged them to accommodate my brother and promised that I would try to pay for all the fees, including for the medication. The organisation was very understanding of my brother's situation and accepted him. He is still receiving treatment there today.

As for my first younger brother, in 2014 he was arrested and sent to Taung Lay Lone prison in Taunggyi. Since then, we haven't heard from him. We don't know if he is dead or alive.'

As for my first younger brother, in 2014 he was arrested and sent to Taung Lay Lone prison in Taunggyi. Since then, we haven't heard from him. We don't know if he is dead or alive. When he was in the prison, we couldn't visit him because the travel expenses were huge. We did not even have enough money to feed our family, so we could not afford to visit him. Anyway, he had to pay for his own misdeed.

I brought my other two brothers with me to Taunggyi, where I am working now. If I let my brothers stay behind in the village, they would become addicted to drugs. My third youngest brother is helping the organisation I work for. He doesn't use drugs anymore. As for my youngest brother, we let him stay in the dormitory and go to

school. Once, I asked my brother living with HIV if he would like to come back home, he replied, 'I am sick of seeing those people'. I teased him 'is it you who is sick of seeing them, or are they the ones who do not want to see you?'

I want to share the struggles of our family so that others might be able to avoid what we have had to go through. I pray and wish that I will not have had to go through those same struggles and misery again.'

Our house in the village is empty. Drugs tore my family apart. We are all in different locations. Our parents went to stay with our relatives in another area. Only once in a while our parents go back to the village.

The struggles and difficulties caused by drug addiction are still impacting us today. This is such a huge problem, and it is very challenging to tackle. So, for me there is nothing that can be done but to console myself with Dharma [a Buddhist teaching] and tell myself that I am not the only one who has gone through this struggle and these difficulties.

I want to share the struggles of our family so that others might be able to avoid what we have had to go through. I pray and wish that I will not have to go through those same struggles and misery again.



Syringe distribution by local civil society organisation in Hsenwi, northern Shan State. Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)



Muse Township entrance gate. Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)

Twelve years in prison was the price I paid for using drugs

A story told by Sai Sarm⁴⁷ and adapted by Sai Kham Phu⁴⁸



This is the story of a man whose drug use led him to 12 years in prison. He is from northern Shan State, Myanmar. **Shan State** shares borders with China, Thailand and Laos. It has an estimated six million inhabitants, of many different ethnicities, the majority of whom live in rural areas. In the 1950s, the newly independent Myanmar government dismantled local power structures in Shan State as part of its efforts to centralise control but was unable to establish functioning institutions to replace those it removed. This generated social, political and economic grievances, which grew after the 1962 military coup established an authoritarian state, and fuelled armed conflict involving multiple armed groups and fault-lines. From the 1990s onwards, the central government forged ceasefire arrangements with armed groups in northern and eastern Shan State, while intensifying counterinsurgency campaigns in central and southern Shan State against non-ceasefire groups. Even in places and times of 'effective' ceasefires, borderland populations continued to endure multiple forms of violence and worsening livelihood insecurities linked to localised conflicts, militarisation and land dispossession. The drug trade, which has been central to the war economy in Shan State since the 1950s, continued to thrive amidst the ceasefires. Shan State produces more than 90% of Myanmar's opium, and over the last couple of decades, has also become a major producer of methamphetamine and crystal meth. Although opium has long been used for medicinal, cultural and recreational purposes, local communities in Shan State have been deeply affected by changing patterns of drug use. Rising drug use – especially amongst young people – has placed severe pressures on families and communities and is perceived as an existential threat. There were hopes that the national peace process launched in 2011 would provide an opportunity for change. Instead, armed conflict and drug harms increased in many parts of Shan State over the past decade and are likely to worsen following ongoing political crisis created by the February 2021 military coup.

My name is Sai Sarm and I was sentenced to 12 years in the prison for the use and possession of illegal drugs. I have spent a quarter of my life in prison. Those 12 years were the lowest points of my life. I had to be apart from the ones I love, my daughter, my wife and my relatives.

Throughout my time in prison, I felt like I was living in the darkness and that I would not find my way back home. Sometimes thoughts of death occupied my mind, but I resisted, endured and survived. Whenever I got depressed and felt like I had lost all hope, I would look at a photo of my daughter and tell

myself that one day I will be out of prison and I will see her and my wife's faces again.

‘My name is Sai Sarm and I was sentenced to 12 years in the prison for the use and possession of illegal drugs. I have spent a quarter of my life in prison.’

My life as a young man

I am from Muse, so I grew up on the Myanmar–China border in northern Shan State. I got married when I was 21 and we had our daughter after two years of marriage. As I was the head of the household, I had to earn money and take care of my wife and daughter. It was not that easy to make money back then. So, in around 1994 or '95, I went to work for a man who owned a gambling business. My job was to help the boss look after the customers. Of course, where there is gambling there tends to be drugs. When people lost money, some resorted to selling drugs to get more money to gamble. Others would use drugs as a way out [mentally].

‘As I was the head of the household, I had to earn money and take care of my wife and daughter. It was not that easy to make money back then. So, in around 1994 or '95, I went to work for a man who owned a gambling business.’

Due to the nature of the work, all my time was spent there – even sleeping and eating. I had to go wherever they sent me and do whatever they asked me to do. Consequently, with more income, and having the nature of a man, I started to get involved in taking drugs and having lovers.

Later I got myself a mistress. Then my income reduced and what I earned was no longer enough to support my family. The government had started to crack down on gambling and was closing gambling sites. I became very distressed due to the reduced income and about my family affairs. I resorted to drugs to ease my troubled mind.

‘The government had started to crack down on gambling and was closing gambling sites. I became very distressed due to the reduced income and about my family affairs. I resorted to drugs to ease my troubled mind.’

But drugs could only temporarily reduce the stress. Gradually, I found myself becoming addicted. Although I really wanted to stop, I could not and there was no one that I could go to for advice. I was so lost. I was in the grips of a serious addiction on the one hand, and

had the responsibility of supporting my family on the other. I knew that there was no one to blame but myself. Nobody was pressuring me to earn a certain amount of money, not my parents, not even my wife. Still, I could not save myself from addiction. I could not work at all if I did not use drugs.

Later my family members and people around me started to notice that I was using drugs. They wanted me to recover from the addiction. Several times my older brother took me for treatment, but it never worked.

‘Later my family members and people around me started to notice that I was using drugs. They wanted me to recover from the addiction. Several times my older brother took me for treatment, but it never worked.’

At first, I was only taking khaku [black opium mixed with dry gotu-kola, a herbaceous plant used as a medicinal herb]. Later on, it was more difficult to get khaku, so I turned to heroin. In the beginning my friend would lace tobacco with heroin. I noticed that after smoking I would feel a calmness and an easing of the mind. Initially, I didn't think about the side effects and bad consequences. I learned about those gradually. After two months, I knew that I was seriously addicted. Khaku was 500 kyat a pack, while the same amount of heroin was worth only 200. So, instead of khaku I continued using heroin.

Although I was using drugs, I never asked my family or parents for money. I had also never stolen from anyone. I would find my own way to get drugs. After I quit my job working for the gambling business, to support my wife and children (and my addiction), I started to work for a businessman who was involved in drug trafficking. At first, the boss allowed me to take some of the drugs. However, I found myself using an increasing amount. In the beginning I would use about a teaspoon of heroin each time, but that increased to two teaspoons. Finally, my boss fired me.

My arrest and detention

In 2002, one late evening, I brought some drugs with me to smoke with my friend. I was so drunk and high that I couldn't return home on the same day (back then there was limited accessibility from one place to another by road). Unfortunately, we bumped into the anti-drug police. They searched me and found some heroin. They also tested me and found drugs in my urine.

I was charged for both use and possession of an illegal narcotic. I was sent to Muse court. I told the court that I only used drugs and that I was not involved in selling or

trafficking them. I had to seek a recommendation from my ward authority [the head of the local administration] who confirmed that I was not involving in dealing drugs. With the recommendation the court sentenced me to 12 years imprisonment.

After I was sent to prison, one of my older sisters came to visit me. I told her 'Do not worry about me and cry, I will come back and see you again'. I was right; I would get the chance to reunite with my relatives and see my sister once again.

‘As it was a long imprisonment, I was so depressed and felt like I had lost all hope. There was nothing I could do. I missed my family and home terribly. I was not sure when I would return home or if I would get out of the prison alive.’

As it was a long imprisonment, I was so depressed and felt like I had lost all hope. There was nothing I could do. I missed my family and home terribly. I was not sure when I would return home or if I would get out of the prison alive. I could not do anything but tell myself that Karma will decide.

My life in prison

During the 12 years, I got transferred to different prisons. First, I was in Muse, then I was sent to Lashio. After that I was transferred to Mandalay and finally to Taung Lay Lone Prison in Taunggyi (Shan State's capital) where I served over eight years.

When I was in Lashio prison, one of my inmate friends asked me to join him and some others in an escape attempt. Just before we made our attempt he said, 'you need to eat a lot of rice so that you will have the strength'. However, we failed. The prison guards made me kneel down and held my hand across my head, they beat us and interrogated us one by one. Back then I could not speak Burmese very well. So, they asked another inmate, who is a Shan guy from Lashio, to help with interpretation. They asked why I had tried to escape and where I was planning to go. I told them I didn't know why or where we were planning to go, that I was just following my friend. So, the prison authority did not punish me.

One day in Mandalay prison, the Myanmar army came to ask for 50 convicts, most of whom were serving long-term sentences of a minimum of 12 years. I was one of the 50 prisoners to be used by the military as porters on the frontline. We had to carry their ammunition and weapons all the way from Kholam to Keng Tawng and Keng Kham in southern Shan State, a journey that lasted about 20 days.

‘One day in Mandalay prison, the Myanmar army came to ask for 50 convicts, most of whom were serving long-term sentences... I was one of the 50 prisoners to be used by the military as porters on the frontline. We had to carry their ammunition and weapons.’

When we were on the frontline in Keng Tawng, one of my convict friends, who is a Burmese guy and only had a three-year sentence, asked me to escape with him. We had the chance to go when the two of us were tasked to collect water from the river in the valley and the soldier who guarded us was on the hill in the distance. My friend gave me a sign to escape with him, but I refused to join him. Even if I had managed to escape, I would not have been able to work and take care of my family freely. And if the attempt failed, I would have had to serve a longer prison term.

I met that same inmate again in the Taung Lay Lone prison [in Taunggyi]. He told me that he should have listened to me. He would have been a free man by then, but they added more years to his sentence for trying to escape.

Release from prison

Most of the convicts I met in Taung Lay Lone were Shan. There were also prisoners of other nationalities and ethnicities, such as Indian and Chinese descent. Some had committed general crimes like stealing, robbery and killing. But most of the Shan convicts were charged with drug-related crimes – either use, possession or trafficking.

Prisoners were often rented out by prison authorities (who collect the profit) to work as forced labourers in the farms or paddy fields. The prison staff asked the inmates to raise their hands if they knew how to plough and till the land. I did not raise my hand, although I did know how. But a few other inmates knew that I knew how to farm and the prison staff approached me and told me not to lie. So, I had no choice but to work on the farm. There were four of us in our group. I had to take the lead in working 200 acres of paddy field owned by the military.

‘Prisoners were often rented out by prison authorities (who collect the profit) to work as forced labourers in the farms or paddy fields.’

The paddies happened to be having a good yield and so the prison authorities allowed me to have certain freedoms. I stayed in a make-shift shelter that we built ourselves and worked in the field during the day. I was still a convict and under the prison department's watch.



Rice field in Lashio township, northern Shan State. Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)

For five years I had to work, for free, in the farm and paddy field. During those five years I had many chances to escape. But I did not as I knew it would not be a true freedom. I wanted to go back and stay with my wife, my children and my relatives freely. So, I had to resist the urge to escape.

Throughout 12 years of imprisonment, I had different experiences involving all kinds of work and forced labour. Towards the end of my prison term, I was called in by the monks to stay and assist in the monastery. I used to accompany the monks to collect alms. I stayed in the monastery for about six months. The monks told me that I no longer needed to worry about anything and that I was a free man. I replied to the monks that I would not feel like I was a truly free man until I got the discharge certificate from the prison department.

On the day I completed my 12 years in prison, a monk went to the prison authority to get me the discharge certificate. As soon as I saw it, I was so joyful that I could not control my tears. There were a few inmates who got released on the same day. We were hugging and looking at each other. We were too numb to even feel the happiness. We didn't know if we should cry or laugh.

Looking back at my life in the prison, it was ups and downs. I'm not sure if I should say that I was lucky or unlucky. I was unlucky to get arrested and put in prison and I was put on the frontline as a porter, carrying weapons and ammunition. But I was lucky to have

had the chance to stay in the monastery and do the morning alms round with the monks.

Return home

Returning home was quite a journey for me too. It had been over 10 years. I could no longer recognise the surroundings, including the houses or the people I met. I had to ask the names of their parents to identify who they were.

I was so happy that I got the chance to return to my hometown. I still am. People in the community treated me the same and there was no discrimination at all. I returned to my community as a totally renewed person and with a full recovery.

When I first arrived, I did not go out much as I did not want my relatives and people in the community to think that I had gone to look for drugs. I would stay at home and help my family in the household so as to gain back their trust.

After a while I gradually interacted with the community and re-entered into society. Over time, my full status as a normal person was restored. With the help and connection of one of my friends who was working in the business department of one of the militia groups in the area, I got work in the same department. Only then did I gain my physical and financial strength, and my self-esteem, back. Working for this department

that serves the people gave me a chance to restore and recover. I needed that courage and strength to reunite with my daughter.

Reunion with my wife and daughter

I hadn't seen my daughter's face since the day I was arrested. Throughout my time in the prison, I only had a picture of her taken when she was a little child. I had no idea what she would be like by the time I was released.

'I hadn't seen my daughter's face since the day I was arrested. Throughout my time in the prison, I only had a picture of her taken when she was a little child. I had no idea what she would be like by the time I was released.'

Not long after my release, I had the chance to attend my daughter's university graduation ceremony. Please

imagine that! I had wasted over 10 years of my life in prison. I had left my daughter as a young child and she had already completed university! The day that I attended my daughter's graduation ceremony was the happiest moment of my life. I do not know how to express the joy that I felt on that day.

I was so ashamed and had no confidence at all when I saw my wife's and my daughter's faces for the first time. I had lied to them and left them for such a long time. I had made a lot of mistakes. But it was important to admit my mistakes and face the consequences of what I had done. The guilt struck me as I was taking a picture with my wife and daughter. But I told myself that I would work hard, behave myself and become a new person.

This is my life story and it is a huge life lesson for me. I would like to encourage young people to learn from my mistake and my life. I would like to urge you to stay away from drugs. Finally, I would like to encourage all the young people to study hard and seek to become educated and live their lives wisely.



Village in northern Shan State. Photo by Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)



Downtown Hpakant, Kachin State. Photo by Kachinland Research Centre (KRC)



Cycles of trauma

A story told by Seng Raw⁴⁹ and adapted by Mandy Sadan⁵⁰

Myanmar's **Kachin State** borders Yunnan and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, as well as the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It is ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse, although communities who identify as Kachin claim the region as their ancestral homeland. Kachin State's capital, Myitkyina, is relatively prosperous but rural areas remain impoverished. Armed conflicts have been both a cause and an effect of the region's marginalisation. Until the 1980s, the most significant confrontations were linked to the triangular conflict between the Myanmar army, the Communist Party of Burma, which was backed by China, and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), founded in 1961. Other ethnic armed organisations also emerged, as well as smaller militia groups. Many of these armed organisations have been implicated in the opium economy, although the KIA later shifted to suppression of opium poppy cultivation. In 1994, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) – of which the KIA is the military wing – and the Myanmar army signed a ceasefire agreement. This led to 17 years of armed peace and hope for a better future. But it also facilitated an increase in logging and mining, which caused environmental desecration, and large agri-business developments, which relied on dispossessing villagers of their land. In addition, many inhabitants believe the ceasefire led to an upsurge in harms caused by drug use. These issues contributed to the collapse of the KIO ceasefire in 2011. Over the past decade there has been a significant increase in fighting across Kachin State and instability has continued to worsen following the February 2021 military coup.

My family all come from the jade mines region. I have many relatives in and around the Hpakant township close to the jade mines. None of my family is well educated. From my parents' generation, my father, from what I can recall, couldn't read or write, and his brother and sister were only educated to primary level education. They all worked as farmers. My father's family was relatively well off when compared to others. My grandfather was village chairman. When my grandfather passed away, he had enough in his estate to be able to divide his buffaloes and cows between his two sons. So, their wealth was in land and livestock, not money.

Now there is only my aunt left from my father's family and I don't see her often, even though she is not far away.

My aunt used to do some trading as well as work on the farm. If you wanted to sell any goods in Hpakant at that time, you had to walk along the path through the forest to get there. She also used to do some jade business before the companies came and when the jade was all dug by hand. My father and uncle just concentrated on the farm and made a living that way; they never got involved in the jade mines.

My mother passed away several months ago. I was close to her but not to any of my other relatives. Her side of the family comes from Tanai and they were also farmers. It was a big family with seven children, but only three of them are still alive. None of the children went to school apart from my mother. They couldn't read or write and just worked on the farm, but my mother, the youngest daughter, was sent to school and trained as a nurse. She worked in the hospital in Myitkyina. They weren't as well off as my father's family, but overall they had a comfortable life because they had land they could farm.

Like most Kachin at that time, the families of my parents arranged for them to get married. In fact, my mother wasn't originally the one who was going to get married to my father. My father's family had arranged the dowry and was preparing for their son to marry my mother's older sister, but it turned out that she already had a boyfriend, a soldier in the KIA [Kachin Independence Army], and so she ran away to avoid getting married to my father. She had quite a lively character! But my mum had a simpler character and so it was agreed that my mother would marry my father instead. So, they got married because of the arrangements between the families and not because they loved each other.

My grandfather was a very forceful character and none of his children could refuse his wishes. It seems my father also had a sweetheart but my grandfather wouldn't let him marry the one he loved. My parents' marriage wasn't happy. I don't think my father liked my mother and he used to beat her badly when he was angry. They split up when I was eight years old but remained officially married until they were separated by death.

‘My father used to drink a lot and when he was drunk, he would become very quarrelsome and violent. When he wasn't drunk, he used to love us, his children.’

My father used to drink a lot and when he was drunk he would become very quarrelsome and violent. When he wasn't drunk, he used to love us, his children. I have five siblings but one of my sisters and both of my brothers have passed away.

I was told that, when I was born, I was very cute. I used to blame myself for the beatings my mother received because one of the issues that would trigger this violence was that I didn't really look like him. My elder brother and I don't have the same dark skin tone, and I am a little bit tall and a bit fat, and so he said that my brother and I were not his children. He used to say that my mother was not faithful to him. Because of this, he

would beat my mother, and I would be beaten often, too; but he didn't beat my brother. When I was little, if the neighbours said that I was very cute; I would ask them not to say that because my mother would be beaten. Sometimes we tried to intervene to stop him beating her. I remember one time when I was eight, he even stabbed her in her thigh with his 'Dah' [traditional sword], which Kachin people use for farming. He was blind drunk and it was only because my brother was there that something even worse didn't happen. Later in my life, my mother would also tell me frequently that I was one of the reasons that she would be beaten. She was quite simple and I don't think she really knew what she was saying. My father would look for any opportunity to criticise my mother and to beat her.

My father used to believe in animist *nat* or spirits, but then our family converted to Christianity. My siblings and I were Catholics and other family members were Baptists. But I think sometimes when he was blind drunk that, although he had rejected animism, the spirits were still bothering him because he wouldn't comply with their wishes and make offerings.

‘One day, when my father was drunk, my mother took me and my sister and she ran away with us.’

One day, when my father was drunk, my mother took me and my sister and she ran away with us. My father always said that the reason she did this was because she was being unfaithful with other guys. The fact that she only took me and one other sister caused problems with my siblings. She left one of my sisters behind as she believed that my brother, who was looking after the farm, would need someone at home to feed him and make sure that he had enough rations when he was working. My sister was left behind with a sense of injustice and she developed a very cold relationship with my mother, even when she became an adult and had her own family. She refused to have much contact with my mother after that. My sister thought that my mother took me because she must love me the most.

My mother ran away back to her parents several times, but she was always sent back to my father. The family on my mother's side felt that they had to send her back because the arrangements between the family were fixed and dowries had been paid. My father's family never had to come and fetch her; she was always just sent back.

The last time I saw my father was when I was 12. At that time, when I went back to the village to see him, again people told me how much he used to beat my mother. My father took a second wife according to a tradition we have: when my father's brother passed

away, he had the responsibility to marry his brother's wife. When my father died, he died in her arms. My mother passed away recently. Now both of my parents have passed away and I don't want to be involved in the village anymore. I used to rely on my mother but now she is gone, I feel that I am just wandering and flowing in the current.

I remember when my mother grabbed me to go to Tanai to her parents' house, it was a really difficult journey, and I became very ill. I cried a lot and my mother almost left me on the road while she went in search of her younger sister to stay with. I cried the whole night. The next morning, we decided to go to Kamaing where there were some more relatives. You could only travel there by boat and people would take it in turns to carry me on their backs until we got to our destination. My mother registered me at the local school and then she went to another village to stay with some other relatives and where she could do some trading.

When I needed to pay for extra tuition at the school, I couldn't pay and I was so embarrassed. Over time, I realised there was some water spinach around the house where I was staying and so I used to pick it and sell it.'

So, I was just left in Kamaing. No one else from the family came to look after me or to give me money. When I needed to pay for extra tuition at the school, I couldn't pay and I was so embarrassed. Over time, I realised there was some water spinach around the house where I was staying and so I used to pick it and sell it. This helped me to pay for school and also to buy rice. Gradually the water spinach ran out and so I decided to go to the place where my brother was living and ask him for help. He gave me some rice, but he didn't give me any money. I still blame my brother for that. My brother was fairly well off and he could have given me some money. I also blame his wife; my sister-in-law is really immoral. They had cows and would get about five new calves every year; they also had a lot of paddy fields. But they never supported me. I think my brother had the same diseased blood as my father when he is drunk. My brother later died in prison. He started dealing drugs and was put in prison for that. While he was locked up, my sister-in-law had a relationship with a KIA officer, which my brother heard about. One day, he ran away from the work camp he was in, outside the prison, and shot his wife's lover dead. He did it openly where people could see him clearly so he was rearrested. He was sentenced to death by hanging, but he was beaten to death first in the prison. The family had to pay a lot of compensation according to customary law and so we lost all the cows, which were each worth about 30,000 kyats at the time. The KIA could have handled the case differently, but

we didn't know anything about this legal process at the time and so we lost all the cows. I still bear a grudge because of that.

When I was in the third grade, I sent a letter to my sister. I could no longer bear the hardship anymore and so I went to stay with her. But it was difficult. She had a bad relationship with me and my mother. I went to another village for Grade 4 but the school only went up to that grade. So, I would have to go back to Kamaing to progress to Grade 5. But I couldn't stand going to school any more in Kamaing because they used to beat me with a broom; my life there was so hard. That is why I stopped my education at the fourth grade.



Morning market in Tanai, Kachin State. Photo by Kachinland Research Centre (KRC)

I went to see my aunt in a nearby village, where she and her family are farmers. I was crying because I had been beaten with a broom. She thought it would be best if she taught me how to plant paddy and then I could work as a day labourer. That was in the time when they introduced the 200 kyat note. I have worked as a casual and day labourer ever since. My cousin is just one month older than me and so it was decided that we would both stop school at fourth grade together and my aunt would teach us what we needed to know.

I just continued planting and reaping paddy and never thought about doing anything else. I was paid 200 kyats per day. I did that until I was 16. Occasionally,

a group of us would go to the shallow ponds and catch fish by bailing out the water. We just went from one job to another. Eventually, I went to the village where my mother had been living and stayed with her.

Close to where my mother was living there was a KIA post. They would often seize young people from the area, probably two out of every four people coming from nearby villages, although their parents would sometimes take them back later. It was a problem for us because, at that time, the KIA needed more women soldiers. Although I was younger than all my friends, I looked more mature than them and couldn't dress like them, and often the soldiers would tease me. I would respond angrily and sometimes get into trouble. My brother didn't want me to stay there because he was worried I would be taken by the KIA for military training, but my mother said that one of the commanders was a relative and this would help me to avoid it and she gave me a ring that I could give to him.

It was around this time that I met my first husband. The relative I was living with needed to move and I was worried that I would have to move too, and so I plotted how to avoid that outcome. My first husband didn't like me but he had an affair with me secretly – his family had a shop on the opposite side of the road to my relative. My uncle, who I lived with, didn't like him. Still, we got married and we had two children, but it was really bad, and I was in so much trouble.

‘As my husband was the youngest son, we had to live with his family. My father-in-law used to be a soldier in the Burmese army and he would curse me because I couldn't speak Burmese.’

As my husband was the youngest son, we had to live with his family. My father-in-law used to be a soldier in the Burmese army and he would curse me because I couldn't speak Burmese. He treated me badly. He also encouraged my husband's drug habit. Whenever my father-in-law wanted my husband to go and work on the family farm or bring goods from the river, he would offer him money to do it, but my husband would refuse to take it. He would only go if he were given drugs and so my father-in-law gave him drugs. Because of this, we didn't have any money. I didn't like it but when I complained, my father-in-law would slap me. Lots of my husband's relatives were drug users.

I was beaten so much because of this drug issue. My husband used to beat me a lot, mainly when I tried to interrupt his drug taking. The family also wouldn't allow me to cut my hair. My husband used to plait it and dye it and then he would loop my hair around his hand and beat me with it. My hair fibres became ruined because of it.

‘My husband joined the KIA and went to the front line in Hkaya Mountain. It was there that he started injecting heroin.’

My husband joined the KIA and went to the front line in Hkaya Mountain. It was there that he started injecting heroin. He had two brothers but one brother had a broken hand and the other brother had many children to support, and so my husband joined up. I just waited for him, but by then I knew that he had a lesser [or second] wife too. I didn't want to do any work in the family and I just bought rice for myself. As my husband was a soldier and on the front line, I was supposed to take rice to help support the army camp. We were supposed to take a bushel of rice to the camp every month. My husband's friends went and took rice but I wasn't interested in doing it. I just stayed away and fed the pigs and distilled liquor.

I think I am very headstrong and in the past I was very loud and rebellious, and could be rude to people. My mother told me before she died that I should not be too proud and outspoken but I think I am like this because I was never reprimanded or supported when I was a student. As the wife of a KIA soldier, I think I became even more fearless than I was before!

One time after my husband had left the KIA camp, a relative who was also his commander in the KIA and whose pigs I used to feed, bought some piglets from me. We agreed that they would pay 30,000 kyats. However, the next day, my husband told me he already asked for a 10,000 kyat advance from them, which he had spent on heroin. We quarrelled really badly and he beat me so much. In the past when we quarrelled, he would sometimes wait around for me and then beat me again, but this time I decided to leave. My children were still young, with a gap of just two years between them; my eldest son was just about to enter primary school. I wanted to take them with me very much, but I didn't want my husband to follow me. My mother also didn't like him at all and so I left my children and all the money I had with my sister-in-law, his first brother's wife, to look after them. That's when I started working in the opium cultivation sites, to provide money for my children.

When I moved to the new village, I started to drink more and more. Before this, although I would distil alcohol, I couldn't drink it; but I missed my children and soon I found myself drinking a jug of liquor in a few minutes and getting drunk. I then also started to use drugs because I was very fat and I thought taking drugs would help me to lose weight. I wanted to wear jeans, but I didn't dare to do so. I couldn't wear skirts or short pants because I was very fat. With drug use, I soon became slim because I didn't eat anything. So, I was able to wear whatever I wanted and I didn't feel embarrassed or ashamed. Ever since then, I have used drugs. I also started smoking, but when I smoked cigarettes my lips



Mine workers in Hpakant, Kachin State. Photo by Kachinland Research Centre (KRC)

became very dark. Some of the camp commanders from nearby told me that I should be put in the pigsty with the hogs because my lips were very dark.

The first time I tried to detoxify from formula [opium mixed with cough syrup], I had withdrawal effects for about three or four days. I suffered a lot. I lost body weight, and my face was thin. I couldn't sleep the whole night. After that, I started going to the opium farms and used drugs there but this time I used black opium. There were many people there, both men and women, living and working on the farms. The farm guard cooked black opium and the workers didn't have to pay the farm owner for it. They didn't tell you that you had to use it, it is your choice, but I used black opium for as long as the opium cultivation lasted.

Using black opium was different to using formula. When I used formula, I didn't want to speak a lot, but with black opium although at first I was dizzy with its smell, I was very happy. We positioned the long pipe with the black opium in the middle and formed a circle around it. Then, we chatted and took it in turns to take it. When we use formula, we don't need friends to take it, but when we use black opium, people crowd together.

The people who cultivate the poppy are the bosses. We were the workers. Young boys and girls from Myitkyina also came and worked there. After we had scratched opium, we weren't allowed to go back home until the poppy cultivation had finished. Even the opium owners didn't leave from that point. When the cultivation had finished, people could leave, but no one was allowed to carry opium with them; we even had to throw away

our clothes and leave them behind. There were a lot of checks at the check points in Tanai. Sometimes they would even check your little finger to see if you had a small cut from where you had scratched the poppy with a knife.

I worked in opium poppy farms in Tanai for a few seasons, and also in Tarung. Altogether I did it for about seven seasons. When I was away from the cultivation sites, I didn't use opium, but when I was there, I used it all the time. I didn't suffer very much when I stopped using it at the end of the season. It wasn't like when I stopped heroin. When I stopped using heroin, I suffered a lot and got a very haggard face.

At first when I used heroin, I didn't like the smell of it. I first tried it when I went to Hkun Sar Kong to scavenge for jade stones. Initially, I brought some black opium with me, which I hoped would last about a week while I worked there. When I ran out, I gave 15,000 kyats to the person who used to examine our jade stones for quality and asked him to buy some black opium for me. He knew the area and knew a lot about the drugs scene because he was a drug user. He went out but he didn't get it for me as he said he didn't want to cook black opium. I was craving the drug by this point, and he went out again at 12 o'clock but came back after he had already used heroin and told me again that he didn't get it. I asked him again to go and find some for me. He went again and this time brought back some heroin and a syringe for me. I told him that I didn't want it, but by the time it got to 3 o'clock and I couldn't eat rice because I was craving the drug, I took some heroin and it gave me a bit of relief. I then used it again that night.

This is one of the differences between opium and heroin. If we use black opium just once, it is enough to last all day, but with heroin, you can't stay without it for that long.



Local jade market, Hpakant, Kachin State.
Photo by Kachinland Research Centre (KRC)

‘This is one of the differences between opium and heroin. If we use black opium just once, it is enough to last all day, but with heroin, you can't stay without it for that long.’

When I was staying in the mountain area with my first husband's family, I became very ill. All the family used drugs and when I got sick, they would always suggest that I use some heroin to take away the pain. When I had a stomach ache, they would give me a little heroin. Later, if my back ached, I was told to use heroin and when I said I didn't want to, they injected me with it anyway. As soon as they had injected me, the pain was relieved. The next morning, they injected me again and from that point, I started to become addicted. I didn't inject heroin myself as I was afraid. My friends injected me. I put the heroin in the syringes, but I didn't dare to inject it into my body myself. This happened for about four months and I started to use heroin more and more. Also, in the village where I lived, the Pat Jasan anti-drug movement had made it very difficult to gather to use a long pipe. After a while, I chose heroin because I liked the taste. Soon I was spending all the money that I needed for my children on drugs. When I had money, I would just sleep all day. But as soon as I got up, I would wonder how I could get the drug.

‘When I was staying in the mountain area with my first husband's family, I became very ill. All the family used drugs and when I got sick, they would always suggest that I use some heroin to take away the pain. When I had a stomach ache, they would give me a little heroin.’

After the terrible time of my first marriage, I married another KIA soldier. We have two children and my youngest became addicted when she was in my womb. I was living with my mother-in-law at this time and she didn't know I was using heroin at first. She is very god-fearing. I used to use heroin secretly when I was lying under the mosquito net, and it used to make me yawn after I had used it.

I was using more than one bottle of heroin a day when I was pregnant. For the first months of the pregnancy I didn't inject, but in the last month, I started to inject. I gave birth to my baby at 11 o'clock at night by caesarean section and after the baby was lifted from my womb, I yawned because I had exerted myself and I really craved heroin. I asked my husband if he could go into Kamaing and get me some drugs but it wasn't so easy to find there and he couldn't get any. I hadn't used heroin since 3 o'clock and I was really craving it so much that I didn't even want to stay with my baby. Also, the baby was crying a lot because she was aching and also craving heroin. She wouldn't stop crying even when I breast-fed her. As I was craving the drug so much, I left the hospital and went out onto the street. At that time, my husband came back and took us home. Before we arrived at our house, I injected heroin in the house of our brother-in-law. My husband held our baby and when my baby sensed the smell of heroin from my body, she started to cry. After I had taken the heroin, I breast-fed my daughter. From that point, I knew she was addicted to the drug. Since then, we have had to be very careful with her because of this problem. In the mornings, I would suck in the smell of the heroin and blow it into my baby's nose. She really knew the smell. Since then, as she has grown up, she has come to recognise it even more. When she smelled heroin, she approached us. She wouldn't take my breast milk unless I had injected heroin. We really had to look after her because she could have died. My daughter has got emphysema because everyone uses drugs in the place where she lived with me and she inhaled the smoke and fumes. I became very thin, and initially my child was even thinner than me. I saw her recently and now she is very plump and her face is very big and full. At least I never beat my child.

While I was breast-feeding my baby, she was taken from me and then I came here to this rehab centre. This was two months ago and I have really missed her a lot in the last few days. I didn't like that my relatives did that



The Hpakant jade mines, Kachin State.
Photo by Kachinland Research Centre (KRC)

to me and I cried a lot at that time when they took her away, but now I really thank them. We were all in trouble, my children and myself. It is not that I don't love my children, but I don't have strong feelings of attachment.

‘It was very difficult when I had to look after the two children I had with my first husband in the past. I had to look after them, so that is why I went to the opium farms for work.’

I haven't had close relationships with any relatives apart from my mother, and she has passed away. I won't go and meet my children when I leave from here in case I feel too attached to them. It was very difficult when I had to look after the two children I had with my first husband in the past. I had to look after them, so that is why I went to the opium farms for work. But my relatives then were not helpful. They didn't like it if I left my children with them. That's why I don't have a close relationship with my relatives. I don't like my siblings. I am not upset about it because I have never got anything from them and I have never relied on them. I don't have feelings of attachment to my children, my sisters or my brothers.

My two eldest children are now in the old village where their father, my first husband, looks after them. I don't want to go back to that house or to meet my children there. Who would feel the most hurt? Me or them? My married life was unfortunate, but I wasn't unfaithful and I always fulfilled my duties, unlike others.

Some women who need drugs sell their bodies, I have never done that even though men have asked. They assume that if you are a woman user that you will sell your body. I usually take drugs with men and

that has probably made my use worse, but I don't sell my body.

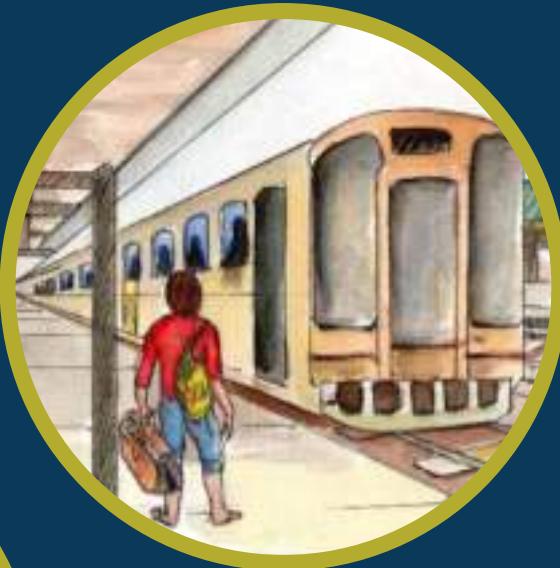
I have a room close to the main place where you buy drugs in the town, near the bridge, and I was staying there with my baby and my young child that I had with my second husband because it was easier to live near the place where I could get drugs when I had two young children than have to travel a long distance. I built the room myself. People see me with my children, one holding my hand and one on my back and they are surprised – the police and the dealers are surprised. Sometimes if my child cries or if I hit my child, some of the dealers will give me a large bottle of formula because they feel sorry for the child.

I only buy from the big dealers, and I also sell some drugs. One of the big dealers, a woman, built a place almost like a house with small holes in it. Yaba [methamphetamine pills] was sold from one side and heroin was sold from the other side. They have their own security there and you can't use your phone. If you do, they will beat you up, especially if they don't know you. It was recently set on fire. But the police told them beforehand and such things happens sometimes.

When I became a drug user I became shy and ran away when I saw my friends and relatives. In the past, because I needed to make money, I used to be very friendly with bosses and administrators, but now when I see them coming to me, I run away from them and hide in the alley. I don't even want to leave home anymore. I am ashamed in front of those I know and I am not ashamed in front of those I don't know. If there is no sense of shame, it is difficult to detoxify from drugs. If there is no shame, I might continue to use drugs without caring or paying attention to anyone.

Learning from the edges

Reflections and
implications



In the following section we provide some reflections on life stories as an approach and some of its implications for social science researchers/ We reflect on common themes and insights that emerge from these narratives, notwithstanding the specificities of each life story. And we put forward some of the implications of these life stories, for policymakers and researchers committed to developing more humane and contextualised drug policies and interventions.

Working with, and listening to, borderland narratives

Life stories as method and approach

This publication has focused on the stories and narratives of people engaged in illicit economies in borderland spaces. The growing focus on life histories and oral histories is reflective of a narrative, or biographical, ‘turn’ in social science research – based on the recognition that individual lives and lived experience have a major contribution to make to understanding of the social world. However, though it may have become more fashionable in recent years, social historians and anthropologists have long deployed biographical approaches.

A narrative ‘organis[es] a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole’ and thereby becomes a tool for conveying ‘the meaning of events’.⁵¹ The stories people tell are not isolated, individual affairs but reflect and constitute power relations and competing truths within wider society.⁵²

A first distinguishing feature of life stories is its focus on ‘the perspectives of non-authoritative voices so as to reclaim the experiences of marginalized groups’.⁵³ In so doing, life histories seek to go beyond grand narratives; a subaltern perspective captures the ‘little narratives’ that contest the stability of received knowledge. Life histories humanise the research process and understanding of social phenomena, and they take us away from stereotyped understandings of illicit economies and the motivations of those involved.

Second, life stories capture human agency, the meaning of behavior and the perspectives of the actors involved.⁵⁴ For example, across the nine life histories shared in this publication, people make sense of and tell very different stories about drugs. In Myanmar, drugs –

heroin and methamphetamines – are connected to stories of abuse, violence, drug dependence and exclusion. Whilst the life trajectories of Seng Raw, Nang Khong and Sai Sarm differ, they all present drugs as an external and destructive force, which constrains and degrades individual agency. In Colombia and Afghanistan, life histories with producers and traders respectively gave a different – though still ambivalent – picture of drugs as a commodity, a currency and an economic lifeline, notwithstanding the downsides particularly linked to violence, that we explore further below.

Life histories humanise the research process and understanding of social phenomena, and they take us away from stereotyped understandings of illicit economies and the motivations of those involved.

Third, the focus on thick description brings out the complexity, contingency and inherent messiness of social life. Our stories involve complex entanglements – of people, things, landscapes, ideas and affects – emphasising the need to think carefully about relations, encounters and connections.

The protagonists in these stories are well aware of these entanglements. Don Tito, for example, states that ‘coca is a chain that ties everything together... it’s a long, long chain’. Indeed, for Don Tito, coca is entangled with other problems such as the ‘dispute over the land’.

Life histories also create a space to explore unanticipated events and moments of rupture or transition. These turning points may be linked to wider events – for example, Aziz Khan moved from the fuel trade to the drugs trade because of the growing



Illustration by Sebastián Narváez

regulation of the Afghan-Iranian border; or to personal tragedies – for the example, Carmen's son being killed by paramilitaries in Putumayo, Colombia.

Fourth, life histories foreground temporality; they place people's lives within a historical context and bring out the complex relationships between the past and the present. Memory is, in this sense, an active process involving the creation of meaning. Individuals do not simply recall the past, they also implicitly interpret the past by what they choose to say or omit from accounts, and in the emphasis (or lack thereof) that they place on particular incidents or experiences.⁵⁵

Memories belong to the individual but they are not solely theirs; memory is both cultural and collective. Some stories are driven by an integrative and even redemptive narrative – this comes out powerfully in the stories of Carmen and Don Tito, Colombian social leaders who look back on their lives with some pride and satisfaction. In Myanmar, Sai Sarm narrates his life – including the 12 years he spent in prison – as a warning and a lesson, but also as a message of hope and redemption that it is possible to overcome adversity and turn one's life around. This is very different from Nang Khong's story of family breakdown and a downward spiral caused by drug dependency.

Fifth, life histories are highly contextualised; they are about particular spaces and places – in this case, marginal frontier regions. Frontiers are not merely the background or the stage on which our stories unfold; they are themselves agentic spaces that act as a

propulsive force driving and shaping the individual stories of frontier dwellers. As Doreen Massey writes, space is 'the pincushion of a million stories.'⁵⁶ Individual life histories are inseparable from the spatial histories or 'borderland biographies' of these frontier spaces. Individuals respond to new projects of space making or territorialisation – for example, César Mariño recounts the separate waves of colonisation in the Sierra Nevada, and how different authorities – the state, FARC and the paramilitaries – shaped the marijuana and coca booms. The stories also show numerous examples of place-making and counter territorialisation 'from below'. Carmen, for example, talks about the experience of arriving in Putumayo in 1986, and the community efforts to settle the area and the bonds this created; *'The region was populated by settlers, and those who were already established always lent a hand to newcomers. You could feel the warmth. Everyone was ready to help'*. Later in the 1990s, she was a leader in the coca growers' mobilisations, which ultimately were violently put down by the government and paramilitary forces. As this last example shows, illicit economies are deeply embedded in these frontier zones; they are in part a response to the specific characteristics of these spaces, at the same time as being pivotal in shaping and transforming these landscapes. This includes, for example, the frontier boom town of Muse where Sai Sarm first got involved in the drugs and gambling businesses, or the coca frontier of Tumaco where Don Tito advocated for the rights of the Afro-Colombian community affected by the waves of violence associated with illicit drugs.

Story telling

Although our nine narratives are recounted by individuals, they also need to be read as collective stories: 'The storied self becomes inserted into collective narratives'.⁵⁷ Carmen talks about 'following in my mother's footsteps'. Seng Raw tells a story of violence and trauma transmitted through three generations of her immediate and extended family.

The stories are often morally ambiguous, rendering meaningless simplistic binaries between 'bad' and 'good', 'legal' and 'illegal', 'licit' and 'illicit'.

Notwithstanding the unique positionality of each storyteller, their narratives resonate with, and are informed by, other borderland narratives, which tell similar stories of life on the margins. These are friction-laden stories, marked by disruption, violence, dissonance and indeterminacy. They rarely have clear beginnings and endings – they do not follow the developmental narrative of 'progress'⁵⁸ and 'improvement'.⁵⁹ Few follow a neat, linear chronology; many have a non-linear fragmentary construction, marked by moments of rupture, recovery and circling back on events.

And the stories are often morally ambiguous, rendering meaningless simplistic binaries between 'bad' and 'good', 'legal' and 'illegal', 'licit' and 'illicit'. The protagonists are not unaware of the ambiguities and tensions associated with their engagement with illicit drugs – for example, Aziz Khan does not tell his children about his involvement in the drug trade. But, on the other hand Begam Jan unsettles popular narratives about exploitative human trafficking when she talks matter-of-factly about providing food and lodgings for people being smuggled across the Iranian border – and how the payments '*provided a vital lifeline for many families here*'.

Life histories: 'the art of noticing' and the 'art of listening'

Anna Tsing in her book 'Mushrooms at the End of the World'⁶⁰ writes about the 'art of noticing' linked to the need to pay close attention to particularity and peculiarity – to look seriously at people, things and landscapes situated on the margins of the global political economy: 'to learn anything we must revitalize the art of noticing and include ethnography and natural history.... A rush of stories cannot neatly be summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos.'⁶¹

Life histories are not scalable – they do not lend themselves to generalizable lessons or conclusions. But just as Tsing's 'rush of stories' about mushrooms

tell a bigger story about 'life in capitalist ruins', our narratives provide a portal into the illicit lifeworlds of borderland dwellers and the relationships between drug economies and processes of conflict, development and statebuilding. As Tsing's work so powerfully shows, paying particular attention to the edges, tells us something important about the whole.

The art of noticing is inseparable from the art of listening. For the researcher this means combining methodological expertise with deep contextual knowledge, as well as personal rapport and empathy. These stories are not exercises in detachment and objectivity. The listener is an active player, influencing the narrative that is recounted, since story telling is a recursive process involving communication between listener and teller. The researcher needs to be attentive and acutely aware of the boundaries between what can and cannot be told – what is tellable and what is hearable. This is particularly important to bear in mind in contexts affected by armed conflict and illegality.

The nine lives foregrounded above – like the voices from the borderlands more broadly – are neither homogenous nor harmonious. Rather than following a unifying beat and rhythm, they are polyphonic – revealing many different views, voices and narratives, sometimes in harmony and often discordant.⁶² As Tsing notes: 'When I first learned polyphony, it was a revelation in listening; I was forced to pick out separate, simultaneous melodies and to listen for the moments of harmony and dissonance they created together'.⁶³ Tsing's idea of a polyphonic mushroom assemblage, mirrors in many respects the complex entanglements surrounding the illicit drugs commodity chain; in which volatile, fragmented and friction-laden relationships, combine with hierarchy, order and force, along with forms of reciprocity, obligations and shared norms.

These stories do not aim to capture drug assemblages⁶⁴ in their entirety – our focus on seven borderlands of three drug producing countries in the global south misses the wider regional and global dimensions of illicit economies; we did not talk to traders along major trafficking routes and drug consumers or dealers in the 'developed' world. Therefore, our stories are only fragments entangled within a wider set of narratives and experiences that are part of the global drugs trade. This assemblage connects a myriad of people, most of who are only vaguely aware of how they are connected to, and nested within, the lives and stories of others, within and beyond the borderlands.

But focusing on the local and the specific does not mean turning a blind eye to the broader structures that shape illicit drug economies. Instead, life histories provide a privileged vantage point, or a portal for studying how political economy 'hits the ground' and with what effects.

Making sense of the stories; common themes and insights

Questions of agency and voice

We have zoomed in on the lives of people whose stories and perspectives are missed or downplayed in most accounts of illicit drug economies. This is, in part, because such people often choose, borrowing from James Scott,⁶⁵ to 'stay outside of the archives' – remaining illegible may be key to making a living, and indeed to staying alive. If they are mentioned, it is in stereotypical terms as passive victims, or unscrupulous opportunists, unmoored from wider community value systems and norms. Our research tells a different story, in which individuals repeatedly assert their agency, albeit in very circumscribed and contingent ways.

Of course, the spaces and opportunities for asserting agency (individually and collectively) vary significantly across the cases, as well as over the trajectory of an individual's life. The narratives show extreme variation in terms of the degree to which people feel that they have some control over their lives and their surroundings.

Carmen and Don Tito are older civic leaders, who reflect back on the trials, tribulations and lessons drawn from their lives. They unflinchingly narrate the setbacks, the risks, the constant violence and the personal tragedies that have punctuated their lives. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín argues elsewhere that this spiral of conflict, abuse and dispossession in Colombia is experienced by those on the margins as one of 'institutionalised calamity' – in other words what appear to be random events and misfortunes, can be understood as part of a broader pattern, in which frontier dwellers are systematically exposed to high levels of violence and precarity.⁶⁶ But Carmen's and Don Tito's stories also powerfully capture the leadership and claim-making roles they have assumed, the lessons they take from these experiences and the small victories that have been won through social mobilisation and organised resistance. Their portrayal of the frontier is far more complex and layered than the common caricature of the margins as zones of illegality, violence and social breakdown – instead we get a picture of drugs being embedded within a wider agrarian and moral economy. Frontier communities, far from being atomised, draw on deep reserves of social capital and repertoires of mobilisation – through for example Community Action Boards – to exercise collective voice and make claims on regulatory authorities. In the words of Carmen, '*you feel like a leaf flying in the wind, heading nowhere if you're not doing something*'. Her history of activism includes the cocalero mobilisation of 1996, the National Agrarian Strike of 2013 and then participation in the peace process. These claims are frequently unheard,



Illustration by Sai Kham Loen

and may come at a personal and collective cost – evidenced by the assassination of social leaders (itself, an attempt to suppress particular forms of agency) – but these two stories are infused with what Elizabeth Wood⁶⁷ would characterise as a 'pleasure in agency' and a sense of redemptive meaning being found in protecting and representing one's community.

Individuals repeatedly assert their agency, albeit in very circumscribed and contingent ways.

These examples of individual and collective agency run counter to Scott's idea that frontier dwellers automatically seek to evade and remain illegible to the state;⁶⁸ Carmen and Dan Tito are part of wider movements in which people seek to make themselves legible, so they can make claims on the state and assert their rights. Borderland agency may also involve making claims on, and finding ways of influencing non state authorities – such as FARC, the Taliban or the KIA – who provide alternative systems of rule and service provision at the margins.

The life histories from Myanmar appear to be at the other end of the spectrum, in terms of the spaces for individual and collective agency. In many respects the context, in the Kachin and Shan borderlands, is over-determined; linked to the presence of powerful and repressive states on both sides of the border, the specific dynamics of post-ceasefire extractive development and military pacification, and the growth of drug use within the borderland communities. The life stories are infused with a sense of contamination,

helplessness, personal misfortune and self-blame. Each story tells a tale of reduced or degraded agency, with drug use being associated with a vicious spiral of impoverishment, stigmatisation and diminished life chances. In the words of Nang Khong, whose two brothers became drug users; '*No matter how much I earned and how hard I worked, the money was never enough. We felt so embarrassed and humiliated. People would talk badly about our family.*'

Drugs shape the narrators' lives – they change material circumstances as well as social norms, hopes and expectations, they (dis) empower individuals, forge new connections and transform landscapes.

Notwithstanding this common narrative of feeling diminished and entrapped by drugs, the individuals are far from passive victims. Sai Sarm and Nang Khong both find some consolation and solace in Dharma (Buddhist teachings). And concerns about drug use do engender collective responses, for example in the form of Pat Jasan, a community-based attempt to address drug consumption – though not without problematic consequences in terms of the constrained agency and further stigmatisation of drugs users, as we have explored elsewhere.⁶⁹ Across the seven frontier/borderland contexts, there are numerous examples of counter narcotics interventions that limit individual and collective agency and diminish the life chances of borderland populations – including fumigation or poorly implemented drug substitution programmes in Colombia, the impacts of border securitisation on livelihoods dependent on cross border trade in Afghanistan, or the targeting and imprisonment of vulnerable populations by counter-narcotics police in Myanmar.

Frontier dwellers assert their agency, but with major risks and costs attached. For example, Jangul's two journeys to Moscow, smuggling drugs, are fraught with risk and almost end in personal disaster. His decision to engage in this risky behaviour is less about choice, than the absence of alternative ways to survive and to feed his own, and his sister's family. Similarly, Aziz Khan got involved in the drugs trade because the closing of the Iranian border shut down other economic opportunities. And gaining a foothold in this business was difficult and risky as shown by the disappearance of his Iranian business partner with his entire inventory.

The life histories show that in contexts of great risk, uncertainty and precarity, borderland dwellers are constantly forced to make 'Faustian bargains'.⁷⁰ The bargaining power of farmers, small-scale traders and drug users is limited, in contexts marked by violence, extreme inequality and the absence of recourse to legal mechanisms to deal with disputes and conflicts. Their engagement in illicit economies provides them with

a short-term solution (or form of solace) to an urgent need – including access to land, credit, food, consumer goods, or the drug itself -- but it involves discounting the future; it locks them into a set of difficult and irresolvable trade-offs that constrain future prospects.

Finally, it is important to remember that drugs themselves are powerful actants – as a social lubricant, a medicine, a source of credit, a currency, a form of recreation and escape, an instrument of barter or a political bargaining chip.⁷¹ Drugs shape the narrators' lives – they change material circumstances as well as social norms, hopes and expectations, they (dis) empower individuals, forge new connections and transform landscapes.

Violence & peace

As noted in the introduction, fragile war to peace transitions in all three countries have either broken down entirely or become more unstable and violent. Each individual recounts multiple instances of violence, and their attempts to navigate chronic and episodic armed conflict – often in contexts where conflict fault-lines were constantly changing and it was difficult to determine the sources of threat.

As Don Tito graphically recounts, '*to live through war is to feel death breathing down one's neck*'. The frontier regions during the narrators' lifetimes, have rarely experienced peace – they have been and remain disputed zones in which there are multiple wielders of violence. Frontiers and borderlands are frequently zones of confrontation, between guerrillas, paramilitaries, agents of the state, local militias and community defence groups. There is the danger of getting caught in the crossfire – for example between government, guerrilla or paramilitary forces in Colombia; or, like Jangul's business partner, being in the wrong place at the wrong time and getting killed by a suicide bomber; or, like Carmen's son, being killed by the paramilitaries because of the way he was dressed.

There is also the danger of being targeted by one of the armed parties because you have inadvertently stepped on, or over, a boundary, or are perceived to have the 'wrong' loyalties – for example Carmen being forced to escape to the Ecuadorian border because of the threat from paramilitaries, or Jangul having to move from Nangarhar to Kabul, as the mujahideen questioned his loyalties, because his father worked for the Soviet-backed government.

One way of dealing with these dangers is to join an armed group as a form of self-protection. For example, Aziz Khan joined one of the mujahideen parties during the Soviet occupation, whilst in Myanmar, Seng Raw recounted how her husband's position in the KIA helped

give her a level of status and protection: '*as the wife of a KIA soldier, I think I became even more fearless than I was before!*' However, she also refers to the forced recruitment of women into the KIA and being afraid of being taken at a KIA checkpoint for military training.

Mixed up with wartime conflict are other forms of non-war violence, including that associated with illicit economies or attempts to combat them. César Mariño, like the other Colombian respondents, highlights the relationship between coca and violence; '*coca generates fights and makes people jealous.... where there was coca there were always armed groups*'. He goes on to say that this violence was associated with both the marijuana and coca booms; '*There was violence all around. Everybody was armed. To be in the marimba business you had to have a gun*'. And Don Tito bemoans the fact that '*for us black people, coca has brought more sorrows than joys*'.

Counter narcotics policies are themselves a form of violence against people and things. Don Tito, recounts that '*coca also brought fumigation to our territory*' and as well as its negative effects on people's health it '*killed thousands of hectares of palm*'. Carmen also talks about the violence enacted by government and paramilitary forces against the coca growers' mobilisation in Putumayo in 1996.

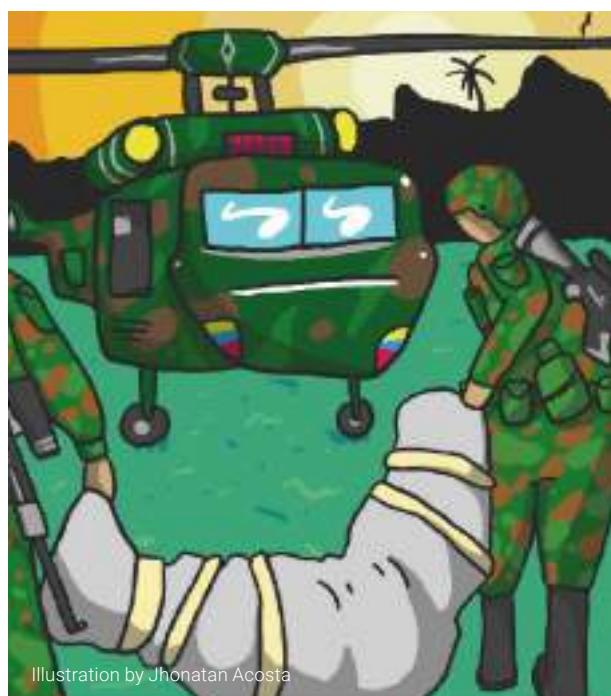
In Myanmar, the narrators portray the 'slow violence' of drug use, and how apart from violence to the self, it had spillover effects into other areas of life including criminality, domestic abuse, as well as the violence of efforts to counter drugs, by the police or the Pat Jasan movement. Sai Sarm was imprisoned for 12 years on drug offences and had to endure years of forced labour. Seng Raw's brother died in prison, whilst Nang Khong's youngest brother was arrested and imprisoned in 2014 and hasn't been heard from since.

Counter narcotics policies are themselves a form of violence against people and things.

However, there are other vectors of violence besides drugs. Development processes and interventions are often the handmaidens of violence and dispossession. Carmen refers to the oil companies in Putumayo and how they threatened peasant land rights, water sources and local infrastructure. She also tells the disturbing story of how the president of their social organisation was assassinated five days after engaging in talks with the government and an oil company. The jade mines referred to by Seng Raw are associated with land grabbing, exploitative labour conditions and the diffusion of drugs, which are sometimes used as a form of payment for workers. Therefore drug economies are not uniquely violent – other sectors of the economy are shown to be associated with high levels of structural and physical violence.

The violence of the borderlands is also deeply gendered. Begam Jan recounts the violence meted out by the Taliban's Virtue and Vice police on a woman who lifted her burka in public. Similarly, Seng Raw, whose life has been shaped by multiple forms of physical, symbolic and structural violence talks about an episode when her father attacked and stabbed her mother with a sword. This is one of a litany of different forms of violence she has either witnessed or experienced during her life.

Individuals navigate violence – its threat and deployment – by exercising a combination of 'exit', 'loyalty' and 'voice'⁷² they move to safer terrain, for example Begam Jan and her family migrate to Iran during the Taliban period (Exit); they keep quiet and/or ally with powerful groups – for instance Samir Jan joins a mujahideen party (Loyalty); or they attempt to challenge their situation and assert their rights – for example Don Tito's efforts to improve the living conditions of his community in Tumaco, as well as Carmen who '*made the decision to follow the path of those who fight for the welfare of others. That took me away from the ordinary life of a family women. It has been a good life!*' (Voice).



For everyone, the promise of peace has been a mirage. People look back with nostalgia at certain periods in their lives when there was a level of optimism and a measure of peace – for Carmen it was when she moved to Putumayo in the 1980s, for Aziz Khan it was during the first Taliban regime in the late 1990s (though for Begum Jan this was a time of oppression). But no one expresses optimism about the current situation. In Colombia, the peace process has not delivered on its promises – in the words of Don Tito: '*peace has*

been a scam'. Life in the borderlands has become more unstable, not less: 'We are working towards the substitution of illicit crops ... But armed people are back in the territory willing to defend coca ... peace is dying in Tumaco... it seems that black communities always lose, both in war and in peace'. And as the later part of this quote, as well as the experience of Begum Jan, suggest, the 'costs of peace' fall heaviest on those with the least voice. In Myanmar, similarly the Kachin and Shan populations, even prior to the military coup, did not feel the benefits of 'peace' – for them the years following the launching of a formal national peace process in 2011 were associated with more conflict, more extractive development and more drugs. The life histories unsurprisingly do not reveal smooth war to peace transitions, but instead protracted periods of no-war, no-peace, or violent interregnums. At the time of writing there seems to be no end in sight. Our protagonists may be hoping for peace, but they are certainly not planning for it.

Frontier histories; negotiating marginality

The frontier/borderland regions that are the homes to our nine protagonists, are agentic landscapes, places of innovation and experimentation, zones of risk, incertitude, liminality and marginality – as well as being places of opportunity, flux and 'freedom'. These are defining features of what might be termed a 'borderland habitus', in which people seek to both negotiate and leverage their marginality.

The margins never stand still. They experience cascades of change and transformation, wrought by war, drugs and development.

These frontiers and borderscapes are 'disturbed' and 'damaged' landscapes,⁷³ riven by conflict and competition. At the same time, they are places where cultural resources, social capital and collaboration are key to survival. Carmen, for example talks about the fraternity of frontier settlers '*you could feel the warmth.... those were the times of fat cows!*'

The margins never stand still. They experience cascades of change and transformation, wrought by war, drugs and development. Development occurs in fits and spurts, boom and bust cycles – the oil and coca economies in Putumayo; in Santa Marta, the coffee, marijuana and coca booms; the new economic developments in Myanmar related to mining and infrastructure; the closing down of opportunities linked to border hardening in Afghanistan.

These moments of rupture mark individual lives in very concrete ways – Begum Jan, after the Iranian border closure, could no longer trade across the border or visit

her relatives on the other side: '*We can't be part of each other's happiness and sorrows*'. On the other hand, Aziz Khan, was forced to get involved in drug smuggling as other economic niches closed down. In Myanmar members of Nang Khong's family make the transition into drug use, whilst Sai Sarm manages to exit out of drug dependence.

Frontiers are also spaces of politicisation and radicalisation – as shown in Carmen's political trajectory; her move from her liberal party background to the communists after moving to Putumayo, laid the foundations for her career in activism including her engagement with community action boards, coca growers' mobilisation and rallies.

The risks and opportunities inherent to these marginal spaces are unevenly distributed. As noted by Don Tito: '*Coca isn't such a good business for small growers. The profit goes to those who trade it or grow more than 10 hectares.... the money ends up going to those who don't even live here'*

Profits are often spent on consumption – for example, César talking about the marijuana boom says that '*many peasants were not used to handling so much money, and since everyone believed that the bonanza would never end, they wasted it*'. Similarly, Don Tito narrated that '*coca growers saw those times were good because they could buy three crates of beer... Their dining rooms were full of bottles. But the next day they ran out of money... small coqueros spend all their money on booze. They don't invest it or save it*'.

Illicit economies, like other economic activity, are rooted in mutual obligations that arise when people exchange with each other over the course of time – moral economies emerge out of building up debt and mutual dependencies over time⁷⁴. These moral economies are associated with local conceptions of honour and pride and what it means to be a good person. Trust is absolutely central, since there are no formal legal mechanisms for dealing with disputes – as Aziz Khan found to his cost when his business partner in Iran disappeared.

Borders and boundaries

Frontiers and borderlands are dynamic spaces of intense 'border work'; these involve territorial borders – between and within states – as well as social, cultural, symbolic and political boundaries.

A great deal of coercion, resources and discursive work goes into erecting, maintaining and policing borders. The border may be very sharp and clearly delineated as in the case of the border walls erected by Iran and Pakistan. Or it may be more fuzzy and fluid, for instance

the discursive boundary that separates the ‘barbarous’ periphery from the ‘civilised’ centre. Narratives about drugs are entangled with these centre–periphery discourses – for example drugs are portrayed in Myanmar’s borderlands as an external force, deployed by the central state to undermine the ethno-nationalist struggle. At the same time within the borderlands there are multiple boundaries, associated with forms of othering and stigmatisation – for example in relation to the divisions between peasants, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in Colombia’s frontiers; or between drug users and non-drug users in Myanmar.

Individuals are acutely aware of which boundaries to ignore, respect, challenge or transgress. Smugglers like Aziz Khan and Jangul, need to find ways of transgressing boundaries – which involves negotiating with brokers and ‘outwitting’ state agents. People find ingenious ways of circumventing borders – for example Aziz Khan explains how smugglers catapult drugs to their business partners across the Iranian border wall.

Journeys and pathways

Stories are about personal journeys, as each individual navigates and narrates a different pathway through life. Some tend to emphasise their journey of escape, to evade conflict or fumigation efforts (moving across the border to Iran, or from Putumayo to Tumaco), or alternatively journeys in search of better futures and new economic opportunities (Carmen and Begum Jan). Others emphasise journeys of personal learning, involving new political awareness (Carmen and Don Tito) or personal redemption (Sai Sam). Still others recount journeys of impoverishment, despair and downward spirals (Nang Khong & Seng Raw).

Borderland journeys occur through time as well as across space. Stories cover the arc of an individual’s life, or of several lives as most narrators tell inter-generational stories. As already noted, these don’t follow a simple teleology – the journeys wind around, circle back and contain false starts, dead ends and moments of rupture.

These stories are shaped by, and deeply entangled, in their borderland contexts. On the one hand, at certain times, these are dangerous spaces that people try to escape from – often across borders to leave the violence and persecution behind, yet on the other hand, they can be places where people seek refuge and safety. Most journeys, within or outside the borderlands, are fraught with risk. For example, even at the prosaic level of transport connections, the road to Putumayo is known at ‘*the trampoline of death*’.

At certain times the borderlands may appear to be parochial and disconnected; but in reality, as manifest in the drug economy, they are highly connected to the outside world. They are key hubs in the circulation and flows of resources, substances, people and ideas – which are transformed, reshaped, reconstituted in the course of these journeys across borders. The management and filtering of these flows involves complex logistics and infrastructure, labour regimes, financial packages and risk management.

Notwithstanding the ingenuity of these logistics operations, connectivity often works to the disadvantage of borderland communities. In many respects illicit economies represent the unequal ways in which borderland regions are integrated into the global economy and the failure of globalisation’s promise of inclusion.



Illustration by Kruttika Susarla

Engaging with life histories

Some implications for researchers and policy makers

Our stories are fragmented, discordant (or polyphonic) and sometimes contradictory. They do not lend themselves to clear, generalisable policy implications and lessons. And they do not necessarily reveal much that is new to local people who usually know a great deal about the issues around drugs.

But drawing on Tsing's ideas about the art of noticing and the art of listening these narratives do provide some questions, provocations and pointers for policy makers (and researchers) regarding how to think about and respond to borderland drug economies and how to engage with communities on the margins.

We suggest that life histories are not simply tales, they are narratives that can help motivate public action and influence policy.⁷⁵ They provide, potentially, a vehicle for empowering marginalised voices, encouraging greater empathy, and opening up conversations on challenging and sensitive issues, as touched on below.

The case studies reveal in concrete and compelling ways how people's lives have been affected by war and illicit economies, as well as external efforts to address them.

There is a need to be more open as to what constitutes 'data' and 'evidence'; rather than lionising quantitative knowledge as being rigorous and scientific, and dismissing qualitative data as anecdotal, there is a need to work more seriously with situated knowledge as evidence. This also means that drugs and development policy makers need to place a high premium on, and indeed reward, deep regional expertise within their organisations.

The 'contextualising disciplines' – such as history and anthropology – are critical to developing understandings about how illicit economies manifest themselves and become deeply embedded in particular settings, how they change over time, the role of individuals and collectivities within these political economies, and the ways that policies and interventions affect these processes in particular contexts and moments. This knowledge can help ensure that policies, aiming to support more inclusive war to peace transitions, work with the grain of borderland societies. Efforts to develop more humane and rights-based drugs policies, can only be effective if they are based on a fine-grained understanding of the embeddedness of illicit economies in particular contexts.

Whilst the power of mixing of methods is widely recognised in the social sciences, this has been less

commonly applied, in a systematic way, to the study of illicit economies. We have tried – though incompletely – to adopt a mixed methods approach in our project, so as to develop a better understanding of drug economies, the actors within them, as well as their wider structural dimensions, and the role of policy.

Researchers, as well as developing more complex and contextualised analysis of illicit economies, need to build more cogent and persuasive stories that challenge mainstream accounts; better evidence is only part of the battle – it is about changing hearts as well as minds – and the role of life stories is key in drawing policymakers into the lifeworlds of borderland populations, to generate both empathy and understanding.

Of course it would be naïve to think that 'more empathy' is the key to changing policy – the political economy of policy making means that financial, institutional and political interests will always be preeminent, but it is also clear that individual narratives 'talk' to policymakers and wider audiences in more compelling ways than dry and disembodied data.

By focusing on particular lives and contexts, we can see how different kinds of policies come together, and intersect at particular moments – from the perspective of borderland communities, on the receiving end of these interventions, the bureaucratic divisions between policies and interventions related to drugs, development or peacebuilding are irrelevant. These institutional siloes dissolve when they hit the ground and shape people's lives for better or for worse.

Policymakers need to develop a more contextualised and integrated understanding of the world they are attempting to change. And they should be encouraged by researchers to pluralise the evidence that they draw upon, and relate the people they talk to and interact with. Otherwise, they will continue to suffer from 'borderland blindness' – a bias towards the national order of things and a worldview filtered through the eyes of national level elites.

If there is a common story to emerge from our borderland life histories it is the story of constant improvisation, ingenuity and social energy – people *do* make history – collectively – though not in contexts of their own choosing, and the history they are making -- drawing on James Scott – tends to remain outside of the archives. Where we depart from Scott is the idea that people in the borderlands wish to remain 'ungoverned', beyond the state and thus 'out of the archives'. The voices from the borderlands tell a different story from Scott's – in which people complain about state absence, neglect

or repression. Far from wanting less state, borderland dwellers ask for another kind of state based on a different kind of social contract. As Carmen's experience shows, those living on the margins often want to be *more* legible to enable them to collectively make claims on the state and assert their rights.

Borderland communities across the three countries have exercised collective agency – often at great personal cost and with varied effects – to change their situations. These accounts challenge lazy stereotypes that frontier societies are atomised, and that participants in drug economies are free-floating individuals responding solely to price incentives.

Our project has challenged these stereotypes and to the extent possible engaged with, and supported different forms of borderland agency, often by initiating and building upon conversations that have emerged from our research. These conversations may provide a starting point and some clues about how to move towards more humane drug policies in conflict-affected borderlands.

In Colombia for example, our partners have worked with some of the social leaders whose life histories are shared in this report, and with their constituencies. This has involved using information generated from our research to support their legal claims in relation to their rights under the illicit crop substitution element of the 2016 peace accord. We have also developed ongoing conversations with coca farmers, pickers and processors about the health harms linked to processing and fumigation.

In contrast to Colombia, where recourse to a judiciary within a democratic state structure is an option, in Myanmar and Afghanistan this kind of work – using research to support a rights-based political engagement – has been far more challenging, and the spaces for explicitly political forms of engagement and claim making are much more limited. Notwithstanding these constraints, in Myanmar our engagement has relied on developing and deepening longstanding relationships with our research partners in civil society, leading to the research – including life history comics in Shan and Jingphaw – contributing to their ongoing engagement work with local youth groups, drug treatment centres and local authorities. It has also involved, since the coup, engaging with migrant youth across the border in Thailand on drug issues.

We have found that this kind of collaborative, extended engagement work can help marginalised voices – for example women, ethnic minorities, drug users – to be heard in local forums; such voices have been marginalised, not only in wider policy debates, but within the borderlands themselves. In Afghanistan, at the time of writing, high levels of conflict and the humanitarian crisis in borderland regions have radically closed down the space for any form of political agency amongst borderland populations. Therefore, the onus has shifted onto our international researchers to assert agency in ways that are not currently open to our partners – including promoting a grounded understanding of the role of illicit economies at the current juncture, so as to inform unfolding policies particularly in relation to the UK government.

Our experience suggests that grounded and more humane drug policies can only emerge by opening up and pluralising the spaces for such conversations. This means viewing participation less as a prescribed input into a project than as an extended process that aims to support the political agency and voice of borderland individuals and groups. Key to that political agency is the need to (re)constitute state-society relations and inter-dependencies – participation within 'boutique' projects will fail to address the wider structural constraints that keep people marginal.

This is not simply about extending the footprint of the state and rolling out development efforts, as an alternative to drugs, into the margins. These efforts, as we have seen, have often been associated with more exclusion and conflict, not less. There is a need to reset the terms of the conversation, and as a starting point this means recognising and promoting an understanding of violence as one of the most important constraints on the agency and voice of borderland communities – this reinforces the need for stabilisation and development policies that focus on violence reduction and management, a key message from both 'Voices from the borderlands' reports.

In conclusion, life histories do not, of course, provide easy answers or policy prescriptions to the challenge of addressing illicit drugs and building a sustainable peacetime economy; instead, they encourage a mind set and approach amongst both policy makers and researchers that is more contextualised and human centred.

Endnotes

- 1 For more details, see: <https://drugs-and-disorder.org/2021/12/13/afghanistan-heroin-and-human-trafficking-are-the-only-two-sectors-of-the-economy-still-thriving/>
- 2 Lawrence Craig Watson & Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke. (1985). *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*. Rutgers University Press. p. 2
- 3 While some view life stories as a sub-field of oral history, others distinguish the two on the grounds that oral history projects typically seek to reconstruct a broader history via 'the systematic collection of [multiple] testimonies' (Tierney & Lanford, 2019, p. 7). Perhaps a simpler way to frame the issue is that life story research can be used in different ways. Two classic examples of life story research demonstrate this.

Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) five volume publication *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* includes a full autobiographical life story alongside other materials, like letters and newspaper extracts, which they use to reconstruct a broader social history and sociological analysis of changing peasant life in Poland and the immigration of Poles to the United States. See Brock, Peter (1960). Review of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 4, 187–189.

In contrast, Shaw's and Stanley's (1930) *The Jack Roller* focuses on just one boy's life story. The boy, who Shaw gave the pseudonym Stanley, actually co-authored large parts of the book. The story fed into ongoing sociological research into juvenile delinquency. See Shaw, Clifford R. (1966) *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (new edition with introduction by Howard Becker). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 4 See, for example: Slim, Hugo, Thompson, Paul Bennett, Olivia & Cross, Nigel. (1993). *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Development*. London: Panos.
- 5 Tierney & Lanford, 2019, p. 12. See also Kothari & Hulme (2004). Narratives, stories and tales: understanding poverty dynamics through life histories. Global Poverty Research Group and Institute for Development Policy and Management University of Manchester, p. 7.
- 6 See, for example: Richardson-Ngwenya, P. (2013). Situated knowledge and the EU sugar reform: a Caribbean life history. *Area*, 42(5), 188–197; Kothari & Hulme (2004).
- 7 Koslov, E., Reuveni, G., Steege, P., Sweeney, D., Bergerson, A. (2009). FORUM: Everyday life in Nazi Germany, *German History*, 27(4): 560–579.
- 8 Pilkington, H. (2007). Beyond 'peer pressure': Rethinking drug use and 'youth culture', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 18, 213–224. Rhodes, T. 2009. Risk environments and drug harms: A social science for harm reduction approach, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 20, 193–201.
- 9 Hedström, J. (2021). On violence, the everyday, and social reproduction: Agnes and Myanmar's transition, *Peacebuilding*, 1–16. Thawngmung, A. M. (2019). *Everyday Economic Survival in Myanmar*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. Wood, G. (2003). Staying secure, staying poor: The 'Faustian Bargain', *World Development*, 31(3): 455–471.
- 10 See, for example: Jonathan Goodhand & Adam Pain (2021). Entangled lives: drug assemblages in Afghanistan's Badakhshan, *Third World Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2021.2002139; Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín (2021) Mangling life trajectories: institutionalised calamity and illegal peasants in Colombia, *Third World Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2021.1962275
- 11 We would like to acknowledge the work of Dr Mandy Sadan who designed, prepared and delivered these trainings for each of the country research teams.
- 12 See, for example, Wen-Chin Chang's (2014) *Beyond Borders: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese Migrants of Burma*. Cornell University Press. The author followed her informants over many years. This allowed her to build strong relationships of trust and to gain an intimate and in-depth knowledge of her informants' lives.
- 13 Some life history researchers draw on multiple sources, such as diaries, letters, photographs or video recordings and, in more recent years, digital artifacts like social media posts. See Tierney & Lanford, 2019, p. 13
- 14 See, for example, Pamela Richardson-Ngwenya's use of participatory video to document the stories of small sugarcane farmers in Barbados. Richardson-Ngwenya, P. (2013). Situated knowledge and the EU sugar reform: a Caribbean life history. *Area*, 42(5), 188–197.
- 15 Cited in Tierney & Lanford, 2019, p. 9. See also Kothari & Hulme (2004). Narratives, stories and tales: understanding poverty dynamics through life histories. Global Poverty Research Group and Institute for Development Policy and Management University of Manchester. They adopt a similar approach, using life stories to explain poverty dynamics in Bangladesh.
- 16 For some, such as Thomas & Znaniecki, 'life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material' (cited in Tierney & Lanford, 2019, p. 4). Their 2,000-page book, *The Polish Peasant*, published in installments between 1918 and 1920, included a 300-page life story of Polish immigrant Wladek Wisznienski.

- 17 Jangul is not his real name. This story has been adapted from interview transcripts. The interview with Jangul took place in October, 2018. It was conducted by a member of the OSDR team. To maintain anonymity, names of specific places and people have also been changed or removed from the story.
- 18 Sana Safi is a journalist and writer. She was born in Kabul and lived in Kandahar, Helmand and Nangarhar, Afghanistan. She currently lives and works in the United Kingdom.
- 19 Zakat is a payment made annually under Islamic law on certain kinds of property and used for charitable and religious purposes.
- 20 The Taliban enforced a ban on poppy farming in 2000.
- 21 Begum Jan is an inhabitant of Kang district and she used to be a small-time trader. Begum Jan is not her real name. This story has been adapted from interview transcripts. The interview with Begum Jan took place in November 2020. It was conducted by a member of the OSDR team in the meeting room of a community centre. To maintain anonymity, names of specific places and people have also been changed or removed from the story.
- 22 Sana Safi is a journalist and writer. She was born in Kabul and lived in Kandahar, Helmand and Nangarhar, Afghanistan. She currently lives and works in the United Kingdom.
- 23 By the time of the interview one of Begum Jan's daughters had got married and was no longer living with the family.
- 24 Aziz Khan is a trader from Nimruz province. Aziz is not his real name. This story has been adapted from interview transcripts. The interview with Aziz Khan took place in November 2020. It was conducted by OSDR. To maintain anonymity, names of specific places and people have also been changed or removed from the story.
- 25 Sana Safi is a journalist and writer. She was born in Kabul and lived in Kandahar, Helmand and Nangarhar, Afghanistan. She currently lives and works in the United Kingdom.
- 26 César Mariño is a coffee farmer and inhabitant of the Sierra Nevada. César requested explicitly that we publish his story with his real name instead of a pseudonym. This story has been adapted from interview transcripts. The adaptation process involved creative curation, while aiming to remain true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice. The adapted contents (events and opinions) are all drawn from the interviews and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. The interview with César, on which this story is based, was conducted by Luis Castillo and Howard Rojas in December 2019 in the rural area of Ciénaga.
- 27 Luis Castillo is a philosophy graduate from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and a master's student in political studies at the Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales (IEPRI) of the same university. He currently works as a researcher at the Observatorio de Restitución de Tierras y Regulación de Derechos de Propiedad Agraria. He is responsible for research within the Santa Marta region for the Drugs and (dis)-order project.
- 28 This refers to a period of violent confrontation between Liberals and Conservatives, known simply as 'La Violencia'. It is considered to have started with the murder of the popular presidential candidate of the Liberal party, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, on 9 April 1948. His murder caused riots in Bogotá in which 5,000 people died. Alternative historiography suggests that La Violencia began earlier, with the return of the Conservatives to power after the 1946 elections. Police and political leaders in smaller towns and rural areas encouraged Conservative peasants to seize lands belonging to peasants who supported the Liberal party. This led to brutal violence on both sides. It is estimated that at least 200,000 people were killed during La Violencia, and two million were displaced, out of a total population of around eleven million.
- 29 The term *raspar* literally means 'to scrape' and is used colloquially to refer to the process of coca leaf harvesting.
- 30 Carmen is a leader in Putumayo. Carmen is not her real name. This story has been adapted from interview transcripts. The adaptation process involved creative curation, while aiming to remain true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice. The adapted contents (events and opinions) are all drawn from the interviews and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. The interviews with Carmen, on which this story is based, were conducted by Camilo Acero (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) in November and December 2020. To maintain anonymity, names of specific places and other people (non-public figures) have also been changed and/or removed from the story.
- 31 Researcher at the Observatorio de Restitución y Regulación de Derechos de Propiedad Agraria on the Drugs & (dis)order project.
- 32 Cabildos, or indigenous councils are made up of members of an indigenous community, elected and recognised by them. They legally represent the community, exercise authority within it, and carry out activities as determined by state law, custom and internal regulations.
- 33 Life Plans are created by communities through participatory planning exercises, which include consideration of the communities' problems and difficulties in terms of economy, culture, territory, environment, health, education and political organisation, among other aspects.

- 34 Don Tito is an Afro-descendant leader in Tumaco. Don Tito is not his real name. This story has been adapted from interview transcripts. The adaptation process involved creative curation, while aiming to remain true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice. The adapted contents (events and opinions) are all drawn from the interviews and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. The interviews with Don Tito, on which this story is based, were conducted by Diana Machuca, Francisco Gutiérrez and Sebastián Cristancho between November 2018 and January 2020. To maintain anonymity, names of specific places and other people (non-public figures) have also been changed and/or removed from the story.
- 35 Diana Machuca is a political scientist from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, has a master's degree in political studies and international relations from the IEPRI, a research institute at the same university, and works as a researcher at the Observatorio de Tierras.
- 36 A *raspchín* is a person who harvests coca leaves.
- 37 Plan Colombia, first established in 1999/2000, was a strategic counternarcotics and counterinsurgency alliance between Colombia and the United States in which the US government provided training and funding to its Colombian counterparts, mostly focused on strengthening the military.
- 38 The Afro-Colombian Community Councils are ethnic entities with legal status. The councils administer the collective territory (black communities can apply for collective property titles) under their jurisdiction, following Colombian constitutional and legal mandates created in 1993.
- 39 A coquero is a person who grows coca.
- 40 *Corridos* are a type of song/music that became famous during the time of the Mexican Revolution, when they were sung in plazas. Initially, *corridos* told the feats of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, the heroes of this revolution. Nowadays, *corridos* often tell the stories of drug dealers and mafioso. Such *corridos* cannot be played on the radio because, according to the Mexican government, they encourage the illegal drug culture – hence, they became 'corridos prohibidos' or the forbidden *corridos*. *Corridos prohibidos* are also popular in Colombia, especially in areas of coca production.
- 41 *Panela* is a product made from sugar cane. It's very similar to molasses, but it's solid. It's very common in Colombia, and many people consume a beverage made from it – *aguapanela* – daily.
- 42 These terms refer to people from specific parts of the country. For example, *caleños* are people from Cali.
- 43 This means lands under collective title cannot be bought or sold, cannot be seized (for example, by an entity attempting to recover unpaid debts), and it is not possible to claim property rights over such land via prescription or an extended period of possession.
- 44 Luker is one of the country's most important chocolate production and marketing companies.
- 45 Nang Khong is not her real name. This story has been adapted from an interview transcript. The adaptation process involved creative curation, while aiming to remain true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice. The adapted contents (events and opinions) are all drawn from the interview and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. The interview with Nang Khong, on which this story is based, was conducted by Sai Aung Hla and Sai Kham Phu in May, 2019 in Kengtung Township, eastern Shan State.
- 46 Sai Aung Hla is the executive director of the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN). He is also the project manager at SHAN for the GCRF Drugs & (dis)order research programme.
- 47 Sai Sarm is not his real name. This story has been adapted from an interview transcript. The adaptation process involved creative curation, while aiming to remain true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice. The adapted contents (events and opinions) are all drawn from the interview and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. The interview with Sai Sarm, on which this story is based, was conducted by Sai Aung Hla and Sai Kham Phu in June 2019 in Muse, northern Shan State.
- 48 Sai Kham Phu is the research manager at Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN).
- 49 Seng Raw is not her real name. This story has been adapted from an interview transcript. The adaptation process involved creative curation, while aiming to remain true to the interviewee's accounts, views and voice. The adapted contents (events and opinions) are all drawn from the interview and the interviewee's own words are used wherever possible. To maintain anonymity, names of specific places and other people (non-public figures) have also been changed and/or removed from the story. The interview with Seng Raw, on which this story is based, was conducted by members of the research team at Kachinland Research Centre in March 2019. The story was subsequently revised for publication in this volume by Mandy Sadan as part of the Myanmar Country Working Group.
- 50 Mandy Sadan is associate professor and director of graduate taught programmes at the University of Warwick.
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