

The 9th Asian Informal Drug Policy Dialogue

*Chiang Rai – 13th and 14th
of December 2017*

On behalf of



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



Key points

- In regards to current drug trends, particularly methamphetamine (both in crystal and pill form) has become increasingly accessible and affordable throughout Asia, reflecting the trend of rising use of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) in the region.
- Governments in the SEA region have implemented different kinds of national drug policy reform, including diversion programmes (Indonesia and Cambodia), harm reduction measures (Malaysia and Myanmar), and steps towards decriminalisation of cannabis cultivation and use for medical and scientific purposes (Thailand).
- The scale of illicit cultivation of crops continues to be largely influenced by various socioeconomic and political factors such as poverty, conflict, and weak institutions, both in Myanmar and Afghanistan. In areas affected by conflict, households often grow opium poppy as a means of survival in an environment where markets are not accessible.
- Lessons can be learned, for instance, from experiences in Thailand or Colombia. The Thai experience demonstrates the importance of integrated rural development as a foundation of AD measures, addressing short-term needs as well as long-term sustainability. This includes community planning, inclusive value-chain development and sustainable land management, among other aspects. Experiences regarding coca cultivation areas and the recent peace agreement in Colombia confirm that multi-stakeholder dialogue is important for being able to access local communities and building trust.
- In order to meet sustainability criteria and to fulfill the long-term needs of the population, Alternative Development (AD) needs to address the root causes of illicit cultivation of crops. Successful AD programmes are entrenched in principles of sustainable development and community involvement. Repressive supply-side policies such as forced eradication measures have often demonstrated to weaken livelihoods of subsistence farmers, while yielding little impact on (global) drug markets.
- Harm reduction practices and interventions are emerging in the region but need to scale up, in order to reach more people. There is an urgent need for public funding and institutional commitment to achieve long-term positive results. Acknowledgement of the benefits of a health-based approach is slowly gaining support among government officials and politicians. Malaysia appears to be leading the way with nationwide practice of harm reduction, including a gradual move away from compulsory drug treatment centres.
- Local experiences show that the meaningful involvement of (affected) communities in policymaking increases the effectiveness of the policies; in order for services to be efficient and far-reaching they need to be fully integrated into the main priorities of public institutions.
- Following the 2016 UNGASS on the 'World Drug Problem', Southeast Asian countries look forward to further deepening cooperation in the coming years. The 10th revision of the sub regional action plan of the Mekong MOU was adopted by six countries in Asia, providing a stronger basis for regional cooperation in (health-oriented) drug policy, but the lack of mechanisms to involve civil society organisations and affected communities in regional drug strategy meetings remains a concern.

- In conclusion of the Dialogue, it was recommended to include the following issues in future dialogue agendas: issues regarding broader development in illicit crop cultivation areas, gender aspects, human rights, legal matters, urban development, alternatives to incarceration, as well as advocacy and law reform strategies.

Introduction

From 12 to 14 December 2017, the Transnational Institute (TNI) and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ), in collaboration with the Thai Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) and the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage (MFLF), jointly organised the **9th Asian Informal Drug Policy Dialogue** (IDPD) in Chiang Rai, Thailand. Representatives from government institutions and civil society organisations from Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia, China, and Afghanistan, as well as several international NGOs, intergovernmental organisations and experts, including experts on drug policy from Latin America attended the Dialogue. At the Dialogue, 48 participants discussed issues around AD as well as broader (rural) development issues in the context of drug policy.

On 12 December, the Dialogue started with a visit of the Doi Tung Development Project of the MFLF, in Chiang Rai Province of Thailand. Over the past 30 years, the Doi Tung project has successfully worked towards sustainable alternative livelihood development and reforestation in the previous opium-growing upland area in the Golden Triangle. The Thai AD experience rests upon four fundamental principles: proper sequencing of viable livelihood alternatives and eradication; integrated and holistic alternative livelihoods rather than a limited crop substitution approach; long-term solutions for development instead of “quick-fix”; and integration of stakeholders and involvement of local communities. During the visit, participants learned about land management and reforestation in the context of local governance. They visited production sites of macadamia nuts, coffee as well as local cottage industry and exchanged with project staff and community members about value chain development, job creation, and social entrepreneurship.

Following the field visit, the Informal Drug Policy Dialogue took place on 13 and 14 December guided by short presentations as a basis for discussion. The Dialogue was held under Chatham House Rule in order to encourage open and fruitful discussions. This report provides a summary of inputs and discussions during the Dialogue under five main thematic issues. Information in this report does not represent a consensus among participants, but rather reflects different inputs, opinions or debates during the dialogue.

Regional trends in drug markets and consumption

Regarding regional consumption trends, participants of the Dialogue presented current development from different countries, widely acknowledging a significant growth in the consumption of methamphetamine in most Southeast Asian (SEA) countries. Methamphetamine, both in its crystal and pill form, has become increasingly accessible and affordable throughout the region, while the substance’s purity has also been perceived to be higher than ever before. Nevertheless, cannabis remains the most

commonly used controlled substance in most SEA countries, followed by methamphetamine (in Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia), and heroin (in Malaysia).

As noted by a number of participants, methamphetamine pills are commonly used in several countries, for instance, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand, reportedly to maximise physical stamina among workers, or as a means of coping mechanism due to economic and social difficulties, particularly among the younger generation. Methamphetamine has also become a frequent choice among a similar demography in Indonesia, where the substance's crystal form is generally preferred.

Furthermore, several participants expressed concerns with regard to the emergence of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), such as the rising prevalence of cases involving synthetic cannabinoids in Indonesia, as well as the rapid advancement of online drug markets and cryptocurrency, all of which have largely contributed to the complexity of drug-related issues in Southeast Asia over the past decade.

Regional trends in policy responses and development

In Thailand, where according to the 2016 Thai Institute of Justice public opinion poll 69 percent of the population has shown to be in favour of medical (as opposed to criminal) approach to drug addiction¹, the Office of Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) has led recent changes in policy responses towards drug-related issues. With regard to the personal consumption of illicit substances, Thailand gradually incorporates a public health-oriented approach on drug policy resulting from the recognition of international guidelines among Thai government institutions such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and recent developments from UNGASS 2016. Some of the most significant changes over the past decade reflected in the new Thai Narcotic Law are reductions in penalties for possession, import/export, and production for sale. The legislative amendments also modify how culpability is determined, replacing mandatory sentences (in cases where the amounts seized exceed a designated threshold) with a rebuttable presumption of the intention to sell controlled drugs. Recent steps have also been taken in order to decriminalise the small-scale cultivation of controlled plants such as cannabis and kratom for medicinal purposes. As observed by some participants, these reforms have also been driven by pressing issues such as overpopulated prisons and the heavy burden on the Thai criminal justice system.

A process of drug law reform is also reported to be taking place in Indonesia. Following the government's repressive approach over the past two years, drug-related crimes are still on the rise, triggering debates about the effectiveness of highly punitive policies such as the use of the death penalty and long-term jail sentences for low-level drug offences. During this stage of evaluation and drafting of the new narcotics bill, commentators observed what appears to be an attempt to categorise different types of possession (for personal consumption or for the purpose of sale), as well as to provide more comprehensive guidelines on diversion and rehabilitation programmes. Local experts and observers have criticised the proposed amendments to be too procedural, yet many seem hopeful that in the upcoming year(s) of reform, future policies will also reflect the views and roles of other important public institutions such as the Supreme Court, who have recently advocated for the prioritisation of health services (e.g. rehabilitation) over criminalisation through imprisonment.

¹ This is based on a poll conducted in 14 provinces where a total of 5,300 respondents were interviewed. The poll was initiated by the Thai Institute of Justice and Super Poll. The full report of this public poll (in Thai) can be made available upon request.

As Indonesia considers diversion programmes for individuals charged with drug possession, Cambodia has implemented similar programmes since 2012, after passing a new drug legislation. Cambodia's post-2012 diversion programmes allow for arrested people who use drugs to opt for rehabilitation and treatment services instead of being transferred to correctional facilities. People who use drugs who participate in the diversion programme are free of criminal records. Although the programmes are proposed as an alternative to imprisonment, some participants remarked they perceive them as compulsory treatment centres. Nonetheless, significant progress is noted in the area of cooperation between the National Authority for Combating Drugs (NACD) and the Ministry of Health in Cambodia.

A drug law reform process is also underway in Myanmar, where a new draft narcotics law was released for public review in 2017. Participants acknowledged the government's proposal to remove criminal sanctions for personal consumption, yet expressed disappointment due to its dismissal at the Upper House of Parliament. Moreover, similar to the situation in Indonesia and Cambodia, several participants voiced their concerns over the continuation of compulsory treatment centres in Myanmar. Nevertheless, progress is under way in Myanmar given the government's reference to harm reduction and human rights in the context of a new drug policy, and demonstrated by the removal of compulsory registration requirement (of people who use drugs) and the embracing of the UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development (UNGPs on AD) within Myanmar's drug control policies.

Malaysia has implemented a large set of practical changes in its intervention policy towards drug-related issues. The country adopted essential harm reduction services for people who use drugs and discussed the abolishment of mandatory death penalty for drug offences in Parliament, in December 2017.

Considering recent policy developments in the region, participants raised a number of key challenges at the Dialogue. Firstly, there appears to be a lack of agreed definition of treatment and other forms of health services mentioned within policy documents, which indirectly relates to the lack of clarity in the use of concepts such as 'drug addiction'. Secondly, while some SEA countries aim at gradually abandoning certain punitive policies, some participants reported to also observe extreme measures such as torture and extrajudicial killings. This has caused concern among many participants about possible influence on other countries in the region.

Regional trends in cultivation and production

In the context of illicit crop cultivation, Myanmar remains the country with the largest cultivating areas of opium poppy in Southeast Asia and the second largest in the world after Afghanistan. Cultivation and production predominantly take place in the mountainous areas of Myanmar, often still burdened by ethnic and/or political conflict. In 2015, the cultivation of opium poppy in Shan State has dropped by 25 percent, according to the 2017 UNODC crop monitoring report. Some participants noted the difficulty of determining comparable figures for opium poppy cultivation for some regions, and also considering that due to security reasons data for specific opium poppy cultivating areas in Myanmar relied on 2015 yield estimates. A household survey conducted by UNODC in 2016 found that opium poppy growing villages in Shan State have a higher average income; however, the impact on household income from opium poppy is offset by higher costs of living. The survey also finds that poppy farmers in specific areas must cope with food insecurity. Poppy growing villages often lack local markets and are more dependent on forest resources, and sensitive to environmental and climate-related challenges.

Opium poppy cultivation and production continues to rise in Afghanistan, where the most recent UNODC opium survey indicates a 63 % increase of opium poppy cultivation leading to a historic high 328.000 ha under cultivation. In some of the major cultivating provinces, between one fourth and one third of arable land is under poppy cultivation. Furthermore, cultivation has spread from 21 to 24 provinces. This is in line with one participant's personal observation, according to which cultivation has become an increasingly important source of livelihoods for Afghan refugees who recently returned from Pakistan and Iran. In Helmand province, located in the South of Afghanistan, a participant reported the cultivation of opium poppy had spread to dry areas where agriculture had not been practiced before, utilising solar-powered irrigation systems. In the North Eastern part of Afghanistan, the relatively higher reward of opium poppy cultivation, according to observers, has attracted more women to grow opium as a means of generating income, gaining access to land, or attaining independence from their husbands and/or male relatives. Similar to Myanmar, the involvement of armed groups in these regions is seen as an important factor in the illicit opium market.

Alternative development and land governance

Building on the insights from the field visit to the Doi Tung Development Project, participants discussed AD as an element of drug policies in the SEA region and in the context of broader rural development issues, in particular land governance and policies. Until today, supply reduction policies in SEA countries, as well as AD programmes, have often applied the decrease of the area under illicit cultivation as an indicator for successful interventions. Participants, in turn, highlighted the significance of socio-economic and political indicators, such as poverty reduction, access to public services (e.g. health and education), security, as well as the availability of sustainable alternative livelihoods and the socioeconomic welfare of the wider population.

In Northern Thailand, for instance, development projects were first implemented in the late 1960s and on a broader scale at the beginning of the 1980s. While one of the purposes of these programmes in Northern Thailand was to reduce opium poppy cultivation, these programmes were carried out without discriminating between poppy farmers and non-poppy farmers. Taking into account the local historical and cultural background, the interventions addressed significant economic needs among the farmers, their families, and the wider community. Successful AD programmes in Northern Thailand applied an integrated rural development approach, attending the short-term needs of the local population, such as food security and health services, as well as medium and long-term determinants of sustainability by promoting value chain development with a focus on market access. These programmes were also characterised by the deployment of effective formal and informal land governance in order to achieve a balance between productivity and (environmental) sustainability. In this context, secure access to land can provide long-term incentives to sustainable natural resource management. Many participants also spoke up to underline the importance of multi-stakeholder dialogues and community involvement in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation process of AD projects, regardless of the geographical contexts in which they take place.

As several participants observed, crop control measures (including both crop substitution and eradication) have led to mixed results in different parts of Myanmar. Participants observed adverse effects, especially in cases where measures do not sufficiently address communities' vulnerabilities as well as the political complexity within Myanmar's opium producing regions. As reported by many civil

society and community organisations, policies towards opium cultivation in Myanmar primarily concentrate on crop eradication which is often carried out at the expense of small-scale poppy farmers, who can be penalised (for cultivating and/or selling an illicit commodity) and are further impoverished as they lose their livelihoods. Eradication measures have been reported to have forced farmers to relocate to more remote areas to continue growing poppy, in order to repay high-interest and short-term loans. Indebtedness of farmers and pressure from criminal organisations is therefore deemed a major vulnerability, providing strong incentives for small-scale farmers to replant opium poppy. From this perspective, farmers may opt for opium poppy cultivation in some cases as the only 'cash crop' available in the short term that allows them to both feed their families and repay loans. In this regard, several participants mentioned the relevance of access to arable land and land tenure for providing access to formal credit and incentives for small-scale farmers to make investments in medium and long-term licit livelihood strategies.

Some participants highlighted the importance of taking into account cultural backgrounds in regards to the traditional significance of opium poppy to some local communities. In cases in Myanmar, for instance, participants reported the use of poppy in the context of medicinal needs and cultural purposes. Following a similar line of reasoning, some participants also drew attention to the various sustainable and traditional ways in which certain rural communities – including in other parts of SEA – have managed (communal) land. Because of the growing political and economic interests of actors ranging from local authorities (including armed groups) to large-scale investors and corporations, these communal practices are often under threat or have been banned altogether. Some of the most alarming repercussions of this development are land confiscation, environmental degradation, as well as the marginalisation of local communities. Participants mentioned as an example that investments by Chinese companies in Myanmar had resulted in large-scale plantations (e.g. rubber, bananas), designed without consideration of local markets and the needs of small-scale farmers. In this context, participants mentioned "The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT)" as a global initiative that provides guidance for land governance, the regulation of land tenure in general and large-scale farm investments in particular.

Throughout this discussion, participants identified a set of key challenges relating to issues around rural development and land governance in general, and AD in particular. First and foremost, AD requires adequate funding, logistical support, and close coordination with relevant sectoral policies which often lacks in many parts of SEA. In order to fulfill the long-term needs of local populations, AD needs to address the root causes of illicit cultivation such as poverty, lack of access to markets and public services, as well as violence and fragile statehood. AD needs to be mainstreamed into broader rural development strategies. Access to land and land tenure, for instance, have often been a critical issue. While access to land in many cases is conducive to promoting alternative livelihoods, AD programmes, in turn, can be conducive to land fulfill the right to land for communities in areas where land reform processes have not been properly implemented, yet.

Secondly, as repeatedly emphasised by several participants, alternative livelihoods need to be in place before eradication measures. Without proper sequencing, unintended consequences like the so-called 'balloon effect' are ignored. Thirdly, a precondition of illicit crop eradication – in some cases also referred to as voluntary eradication – is considered problematic. To what extent eradication can be considered voluntary remains often unclear for beneficiaries of AD programme, many of whom are trapped between the need to keep cultivating opium poppy for means of living and the difficulty to obtain economic

assistance. Dialogue and consultation at the community level is therefore critical. Not least, participants highlighted the need for AD project design to be inclusive and responsive to affected communities, raising questions around how to effectively involve local communities in a meaningful way.

Alternative development and rural development in a fragile context

In the context of AD and broader rural development, participants discussed the interdependence of (armed) conflicts and rural drug economies. Until today, fragile statehood and violence remain one of the most difficult challenges when it comes to design and implementation of development programmes in Southeast Asia, for example in opium poppy cultivation regions in Myanmar. In areas affected by conflict, for instance, households often grow opium poppy as a means of survival in an environment where markets are not well developed, land tenure is insecure, and public services and goods are scarce. In some cases, these are provided by armed groups. The ongoing conflict presents several obstacles for development to reach local communities, let alone to promote or carry out AD programmes.

In comparison to the situation in Myanmar, several participants shared their views on drug control policies for coca cultivation in Colombia. In this case, the government and the armed group FARC signed a peace accord in 2017, officially ending a decades-long conflict in the country. Based on the experiences of Colombia, multi-stakeholder dialogue has shown to be one of the most crucial aspects for ensuring long-term success of development programmes, but is also deemed to be the most difficult and sometimes even controversial one. While the peace agreement gave the government access to areas formerly under FARC influence, some observers have criticised the government for cooperating with the armed group in coca substitution projects. Public opinion is reported to be split in regards to providing assistance to coca growers, who are at certain times portrayed as criminal, or accused of being complicit in prompting conflict and/or violence due to their association with armed groups. On the other hand, several participants observed that, in areas with a long history of conflicts (such as in Colombia and Myanmar), it appears to be vital for governments to consider the essential role of a wide variety of stakeholders in governing the ways of life of local communities.

Other remarks were also made with regard to treating drug-related issues such as illicit cultivation only as a security issue, for instance through forced crop eradication by the military. While security remains one of the main issues for illicit crop cultivating areas and is critical for development measures to reach local communities, participants highlighted the common repercussion of the securitisation of drug-related issues, which might deepen distrust among local communities towards the government or in cases even spur further violence in the region. In this regard, participants again mentioned the importance of dialogue with local communities, as well as access to basic services and other short term needs in order to build trust and create ownership for mid to long-term development measures to be sustainable. Strengthening the institutional capacities as well as accountability of local governments remains a crucial challenge as well as a key for rural development in a fragile context. Participants pointed out the importance to take into account gender aspects and particularly the specific needs of women in the context of fragility, insecurity and rural poverty.

Harm reduction and treatment

Despite the increased consumption of methamphetamine and other stimulants in Southeast Asia, it is reported that harm reduction efforts in the region mainly focus on heroin users and the prevention of blood-borne diseases, while not sufficiently taking into account the latest developments in drug consumption beyond intravenous heroin use.

Nevertheless, harm reduction practices and interventions are being implemented on the ground in spite of limited acknowledgment from politicians and/or policymakers. In Indonesia, for example, the rise of methamphetamine consumption has led to more research and intervention initiatives by civil society and community organisations, sometimes supported by academic institutes and later on, by local health centres who have begun providing basic services for people who use drugs. In several parts of Indonesia, community-based treatment centres have played a positive role in providing treatment and other health services for people who use drugs, implementing evidence-based practices which focus on their clients' quality of life (as defined by the World Health Organisation), and no longer aiming for abstinence as the indicator of success. International agencies, such as UNAIDS, applaud these community-based centres for their effectiveness in reducing drug-related harms. Other local health centres and law enforcement officers also view the centres positively and refer people who use drugs to receive services there.

As participants explored the different contexts of drug consumption and harm reduction needs in SEA countries, comments were also made that most people who use drugs, including those using methamphetamine, do not develop problematic behaviours and thus would not require treatment. Recent qualitative interviews conducted in Myanmar show that most individuals have their own ways of regulating (and reducing the harms associated with) their methamphetamine consumption. Some, for example, are reported to do so by eating regularly before use, by limiting the number of pills they take per day, by regulating frequency and time interval between intake, by using plant-based substances to alleviate side effects, or by sharing harm reduction practices with other users. It was announced that TNI will publish an in-depth report about harm reduction practices and methamphetamine use in the course of 2018.

However, for people who use drugs who require and wish to have treatment, access to treatment services that are effective and evidence-based remains a great challenge. Throughout the SEA region, the types and quality of treatment services greatly varies as a result of the lack of legal and regulatory guidelines and logistical support for treatment and harm reduction practices. In Cambodia, community health centres play an important role in providing treatment services for people who use drugs, yet are still facing problems in terms of referral and access. Concerns were also raised by participants over the use of extreme methods observed in different countries, such as heavy physical exercise and military drills in treatment facilities, or the reported use of electrical shock and "near-boiling water treatment".

On the other hand, positive experiences have been observed for instance in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In this case, harm reduction and treatment programmes have covered peer-based education, not only focusing on drug-related harms, but also on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, slowly shifting away from the abstinence model to a more pragmatic one that takes into account the specific needs of local communities. In Malaysia, where abstinence remains a principle held by public institutions such as the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Health has succeeded greatly in promoting harm reduction and evidence-based treatment practices for people who use drugs, as demonstrated by the reportedly sharp

decline in HIV infection rates and drug-related deaths in Malaysia. Compulsory treatment and correctional facilities in Malaysia are gradually being transformed into voluntary treatment and training centres. Due to recent success, the Malaysian government designed a system called 'One Stop Centre for Addiction' or OSCA, as an institution that will deal with all forms of substance use disorder based on harm reduction principles which have yielded positive results over the past decade in Malaysia.

Following concrete examples shared at the Dialogue, several participants highlighted the urgent need for public funding and institutional commitment in order to achieve long-term positive results in this area. Success has mainly been attributed to health services being managed by community organisations, yet in order for services to be efficient and far-reaching, they need to be fully integrated into the main priorities of public institutions.

Community involvement

As illustrated by the bottom-up dynamics of harm reduction and treatment provision for people who use drugs, where community organisations organise themselves at the local level, many participants acknowledged that the involvement of affected communities is crucial, not only in the design of policies, but also in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of those policies. At the Dialogue, a number of participants showed their appreciation of the Thai government's efforts to include the public as much as possible in their policymaking processes, particularly through dozens of public hearings organised by the Ministry of Justice and the ONCB. This was seen as a positive example for other SEA countries in general, where government institutions still appear reluctant to embrace non-governmental actors in the drug law reform process. With regard to Cambodia, some participants indicated that NGO consultation within UNODC-led programmes could be improved.

Furthermore, participants expressed their concern over a set of difficulties, which prevents government agencies, NGOs, and civil society organisations to reach out and involve affected populations such as people who use drugs and farmers involved in illicit cultivation of crops. In comparison to other SEA countries, people who use drugs and farmers involved in illicit cultivation of crops in Myanmar and Thailand are relatively well organised and involved in policy discussions despite their different contexts and, at certain times, different perspectives in relation with the issues at hand. In Kachin and Northern Shan State of Myanmar, for example, a community organisation has initiated efforts to eradicate poppy fields and arrest people who use drugs and dealers, relying on a zero-tolerance principle which prioritises abstinence as a primary goal of treatment. Despite various CSOs criticising this approach, many participants agreed that a dialogue with this group might be helpful. In relation to this, it was furthermore acknowledged that given the crosscutting nature of drug-related issues, policy discussions should also include communities and groups that focus on themes such as gender or human rights.

In the context of rural development and land governance, participants raised the importance of involving ethnic groups and rural communities who have been affected by the impacts of conflict, injustice, and environmental degradation – some of which are interrelated with drug policy aspects, such as crop eradication. Moreover, development programmes should mainstream gender aspects and provide opportunities for women and men in accordance with their specific needs.

International Cooperation and Development

The United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) took place in April 2016 in New York and resulted in an outcome document² which will be guiding future UN drug policy efforts. Although some participants criticised the process leading up to the UNGASS, especially in terms of civil society participation, the UNGASS outcome document (which also relates to other UN documents agreed throughout the past decade) includes a set of steps forward in comparison with previous decades.³ To name a few, these include the integration of multi-issue pillars such as drugs and health, drugs and human rights, as well as alternative development and broader socio-economic development – as opposed to only concentrating on the three main pillars of demand reduction, supply reduction, and international cooperation.

In Southeast Asia, the latest form of regional cooperation is demonstrated by the adoption of the ASEAN Work Plan on Securing Communities Against Illicit Drugs 2016-2025 and the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Cambodia, China, Lao DPR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The tenth revision of Sub-Regional Action Plan (2017-2019) under the Mekong MOU has adopted recommendations from UNGASS 2016, and has taken into account the importance of the drug policy to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goal⁴. Participants noted the significant progress achieved within the growing focus on health-oriented approaches. While the term 'harm reduction' is not explicitly mentioned, the Mekong MoU highlights the great value of programmes such as needle and syringe exchange programmes and opioid substitution therapy, as well as the importance of health services for people who use drugs (in prison) and services in response to the rise of ATS consumption in the region.

In terms of cooperation in the wider region of SEA, many participants underlined the urgency for more meaningful and efficient mechanisms for civil society and affected communities' participation at the regional policy-making level.

Furthermore, according to several participants, a lack of funding and institutional support occasionally causes inconsistency within regional cooperation programmes. Funding cuts among international agencies such as UNODC and UNAIDS have also been raised as an issue. Additionally, participants highlighted that regional cooperative efforts are often obstructed by the lack of agreement in a wide array of policy issues ranging from controversy surrounding the death penalty and extrajudicial killings, to resistance towards harm reduction and human rights principles, which are sometimes viewed as incompatible with cultural values in the region.

As Southeast Asian countries look towards further deepening cooperation in the coming years, many participants shared their hopes and criticisms at the Dialogue. Thematically and geographically speaking, the SEA region faces a promising future in terms of its extra-regional cooperation with China, especially regarding funding opportunities for health-oriented programmes. At the same time, many participants considered the nature of ASEAN's repeated drug-free targets as unrealistic or even unattainable. Policymakers in the region also face the challenge of setting meaningful objectives for the years and

² <https://www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf>

³ <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/edging-forward>

⁴ <https://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/what-we-do/toc/mou.html> (accessed 31 Jan 2018)

decades to come, taking into account the different policy outcomes experienced by countries in Southeast Asia.

Feedback

Upon conclusion of the Dialogue, participants shared feedback and suggestions for similar events in the future. In regards to themes and topics covered, many participants wish to see the following issues to be further incorporated in the agenda: broader development issues in illicit crop cultivation areas, gender aspects and human rights, legal issues, urban development, alternatives to incarceration, as well as advocacy and law reform strategy.

On the other hand, comments were also made regarding the need to invite a greater number of representatives of government institutions, ethnic organisations, young people, and marginalised populations.

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