

**Forum:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

**Issue:** Measures to building a comprehensive framework to approach the world drug problem

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## **Introduction:**

While COVID-19 has devastated the world, killing nearly four million people and taking tens of millions of jobs it may have seriously disrupted the illegal manufacturing and distribution of narcotics. The global government-imposed shutdowns and closures of international borders have crippled every aspect of the narcotics supply chain.

COVID-19 has created the biggest disruption in the drug market since World War II.

Today, global governments have the unique opportunity to capitalize on the weakness of the drug market and affect meaningful change. It is imperative now, more than ever, that the members of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime come together to create a comprehensive framework to approach the world drug trade, before this window of opportunity is gone.

## **Definition of Key Terms:**

- 1. Illicit Drugs.** Any substance in either schedule 1 or II of the 1961 Convention on Narcotics Drugs or that has been deemed illegal in the relevant jurisdiction. This includes natural, synthetic, and illegally prescribed drugs, some of which include: cocaine, heroin, LSD, cannabis, methamphetamine, and fentanyl. Illicit drugs is a blanket term that is often used in debate, however, it must be noted that different jurisdictions have different definitions of illicit drugs and different drugs have different levels of criminalization. For example, cannabis is legal in certain countries and drugs like heroin often have larger criminal sentences.

- 2. Pharmaceutical Drugs.** The term “drug” is most often connected with the term “illicit drug”; however, it also refers to medical pharmaceutical drugs. A pharmaceutical drug refers to a chemical substance that is used to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent disease. There are two main types of pharmaceutical drugs: prescription pharmaceutical drugs and over-the-counter pharmaceutical drugs. Prescription pharmaceutical drugs are a drug that legally requires a medical prescription from a doctor to be dispensed whereas over-the-counter pharmaceutical drugs have no such requirements to be purchased. Illegally produced or distributed pharmaceutical drugs such as fentanyl can also be considered illicit drugs. This distinction is important to clarify to avoid confusion when using the blanket term drug.
- 3. Organized Crime.** A complex international, national, or local enterprise organization that engages in criminal activity for profit. Organized crime is normally led by a centralized leadership with disciplined associates and partners. Similarly, crime organizations are also often well-financed, efficiently managed, and ferocious. Organized crime uses violence and money to monopolize and avoid criminal prosecution. Drug cartels fall under the category of organized crime and focus on drug manufacturing, trafficking, and distribution in an organized manner. This term is often used in debate, as criminal organizations control the majority of the drug market and are the source of the issue.
- 4. Drug Trafficking.** The act by an individual or an organization of importing or exporting illicit drugs. Many times, illicit drugs are manufactured in one country/region and are exported to another country to sell. Depending on the location and the local law enforcement, drugs are transported through a variety of methods. Some of which include, using unregistered small planes and boats, large commercial shipping containers, hiring drug mules, or bribing port officials. For example, the majority of cocaine is produced in South America which is either transported by truck to Mexico and then smuggled into the US or shipped

to Northern Africa where it is smuggled into Europe. While drug trafficking is normally referred to as the act of transporting illicit drugs across borders, it can also refer to the domestic transportation of illicit drugs. Drug Trafficking is a common blanket term that is often used in debate, and there has to be a clear definition.

5. **Dark Web.** The dark web is a collection of anonymous websites that can only be viewed through dark web browsers. In most countries, the dark web is not illegal and has many non-illicit uses. Users most commonly use a TOR network, a form of onion router that creates multiple layers of encryption which gives users nearly full anonymity. Since the Dark Web can only be viewed through onion routers, the load speed is significantly slower than the surface web and servers are more difficult to maintain. Recently, large online drug marketplaces, comparable to eBay, have opened on the dark web that allows users to easily buy illicit drugs. Dark web marketplaces such as Agora, Silk Road 2.0, and Pandora, are extremely hard to take down since all users are anonymous and all payments are made through untraceable cryptocurrency. These marketplaces have grown rapidly and have become top priorities for many governments.

## Background Information

The issue of preventing the manufacturing and distribution of illicit narcotics dates back to 1839 after the British introduction of opium to China. Creating widespread addiction to opioids in China, affecting Chinese society and economy. The Qing dynasty quickly prohibited opium consumption, after it became apparent that tens of thousands of Chinese citizens were addicted to opium and thus began to destabilize Chinese society, by not being able to work and causing public disturbance. The Qing dynasty's actions ended the lucrative legal opium trade for the British, leading to an armed conflict between the British and the Chinese, known as the Opium Wars, resulting in the British forcing the Chinese to end their prohibition of Opium. However, the illegal drug trade

began to grow exponentially in 1914 after the United States passed the Harison act, banning the legal trade of opium, and cocaine. Since opium and cocaine could no longer be purchased legally, addicted Americans had to turn to the black market. The limited supply of illicit drugs on the black market created an extremely lucrative industry for crime organizations who were able to bypass law enforcement. Since the passage of the Harison act, the drug trade has been largely controlled by organized crime and cartels who have developed strong and complex supply and distribution chains.

## **Current Situation**

Currently, it is more important now than ever that a framework for fighting the illicit drug trade is established as drugs have become more potent, cheaper, and more accessible. The global drug trade has opened the door to narcotics for millions of people, leading to increased addictions and exacerbating the effects of narcotics on society. Prior to the temporary COVID-19 disruption of the drug trade, prices of illicit drugs have been trending downwards, due to the legalization of Cannabis cultivation in many countries and the partial legalization of Coca (the active ingredient in cocaine) cultivation in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. As per the laws of supply and demand, the retail price of narcotics have dramatically fallen due to the increased supply of narcotics ingredients. For example, in 2020 the price of Coca leaf dropped 46 percent and the price of crystalline methamphetamine in Southeast Asia has fallen from 10,000 US dollars to 8,000 US dollars per kilo. Similarly, the American retail price for marijuana, cocaine, and heroin have decreased by 80%, and global prices dropping nearly 58.5%, 51%, and 13% respectively. The decline in prices of narcotics has not only led to increased access to drugs but has also increased competition between drug manufacturers. Since drug manufacturers can no longer compete on their retail price they have been forced to compete on other non price factors, namely the potency of drugs. From 1990 to 2010 the potency of cannabis has increased 161 percent and the potency of meth has increased from 39% purity in 2008 to 93% purity in 2018. Increased drug potency has

extreme ramifications on society, as it increases drug addictions and increases the risk of overdose.

However, the most substantial threat global governments are facing is the increased availability of illicit drugs. The increase in availability is directly correlated to the rise of dark web online illicit drug marketplaces such as Agora, Silk Road 2.0, and Pandora. Agora currently has over 17,000 listings for illicit drugs and allows users to anonymously purchase drugs at lower prices, more efficiently, and at lower risk. These marketplaces are hosted on the dark web, so users' identities are masked with TOR browsers and payments via cryptocurrency, are completely untraceable. These websites have become so advanced that users can leave customer reviews, contact a customer support officer, or be refunded for undelivered drugs. Online drug marketplaces are relatively new compared to other drug distribution channels, but they are rapidly growing, which means it is imperative for this office to find a solution to the issue before it becomes universally adopted as the main mode of selling illicit drugs. Luckily, there have already been major developments in tackling dark web online drug marketplaces. In 2014, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) worked with the European Union Intelligence Agency (Europol) and other multi-national law enforcement agencies in a joint operation known as Operation Onymous, to take down the largest drug marketplace, Silk Road. While they were able to shut down Silk Road, multiple similar platforms have opened up since to offer the same experience. Operation Onymous can now serve as a model on how to shut down similar platforms, however, a more sustainable solution must be found.

As noted above, we are currently in an unprecedented situation where the global illicit drug market is crippled by COVID-19. Cocaine production has been bottlenecked as a result of COVID-19 restrictions since coca farmers in Afghanistan are unable to bring in laborers from Pakistan to facilitate the harvest. With international borders closed, many drug trafficking routes are nearly impossible, forcing drug manufacturers to use new untested routes. With stay-at-home orders in place, most traditional drug distribution

channels are infeasible, forcing drug dealers to use riskier methods such as mail-in orders, food delivery services, and some going as far to use drones. This shift in the drug market has left many drug manufacturers and distributors vulnerable. Since the pandemic, there has been an upwards trend of drug seizures and crackdowns. The illicit drug market is in a transition and is thus at its weakest stage. Creating the best opportunity for global governments to fight the drug market before the market restabilizes

However, COVID-19 has only temporarily disrupted the drug market, and if countries are unable to act in a timely fashion, the issue of illicit drug manufacturing and distribution will continue to be prevalent. Drug consumption has continued to increase, and organized crime will likely default to their traditional methods of production and distribution which can reliably meet demand. Decreased price and increased potency of drugs, will intensify the effect of drugs on communities. Drug cartels and organized crime have become so advanced at drug trafficking that countries need to come together for international multilateral cooperation in means such as sharing of information, sharing of resources, extraditions, penalties, and cross border jurisdiction in order to oppose drug trafficking (refer to suggested solutions for more information).

## **Major Parties Involved and Their Views**

### **United States of America**

The United States is one of the top recreational drug consumers in the world and has placed fighting the illicit drug market as a top priority. In accordance with the United States's ongoing fight against terror, the US congress has put a priority on fighting illicit drug production and distribution by terrorist organizations. In 2000, the US Congress passed P.L. 106-246, known as Plan Colombia, to fight drug production with a 1.6 billion dollar initiative supported by the US armed forces. Domestically, the United States has also worked to reduce drug consumption through decriminalization and social work. The

US is one of the largest proponents of an aggressive global effort against the global illicit drug market and is one of the largest contributors to similar programs. The US government has also committed to unilaterally fighting the global illicit drug market in means such as aerial crop eradication of poppy plantations in Afghanistan without jurisdiction.

### **United Mexican States**

Mexican drug cartels are one of the top global producers of heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine. In 2006, Mexico with the support of the United States launched a war with Mexican drug cartels. Mexican drug cartels have extreme power in Mexico and have been the source of violent crime in Mexico, including over 300 murders. Mexico has begun to use military might to tackle the drug cartels, including deploying over 10,000 soldiers to support or replace local law enforcement. However, Mexico's ability to fight the illicit drug trade is severely stunted, due to the widespread corruption on a local, state, and federal level. Mexico has been working closely with the United States and other South American countries to fight the prevalent issue.

### **The Republic of Colombia**

Colombia is the world's top cocoa producer in the world and it is believed that over 60,000 households are involved in the cultivation of coca in Colombia, with a combined total of over 73,000 hectares of coca crop. The Colombian government has unsuccessfully tried to fight coca production and is instead going the route of legalizing coca cultivation. The Colombia government working with the UNODC has also worked to give Colombian farmers alternative options to cocoa farming through the Forest Warden Families Program and the Productive Projects Programme. However, the Colombian government has been severely stunted due to widespread corruption by

drug cartels. The Colombian government has committed to working with other nations and the UNODC to tackle the global illicit drug trade.

### **People's Republic of China**

China has always held a strict policy on the illicit drug trade. The Chinese have established the Ministry of Public security, with an allocated 20,000 police officers solely dedicated to fighting the illicit drug trade. Recently, the Chinese government ramped up surveillance of all ports of entry screening for drug trafficking. Furthermore, China has also developed a robust domestic program to fight off recreational drug use through state-led education, which has reportedly caused a 50% decrease in illicit drug use. The Chinese government has also prioritized rehabilitation of current illicit drug users by medical and social rehabilitation, with the intention of curbing drug use. China is also an active participant in international coordination to fight the illicit drug trade, working with the United Nations, ASEAN, and INTERPOL.

### **Kingdom of Thailand**

Thailand used to be one of the top producers of opium in the world until early 2000 when they implemented a zero-tolerance policy as well as a program to provide farmers with alternatives. However, there has been an increase in Thai methamphetamine production due to relaxed controlled chemical laws, although the Thai government believes that this will no longer be an issue after their increased chemical restrictions come to fruition. While there is minimal illicit drug production in Thailand, they remain to be a hub for illicit drug trafficking, and nearly 80% of Burmese illicit drugs are smuggled through Thailand. Recently, the Thai government has been working closely with the US government and the European Union to fight the illicit drug

trade. Although government cooperation remains to be an issue as there is widespread corruption in the government by drug cartels.

### **The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL)**

Nearly 40% of all criminal organizations in the European Union are involved with the illicit drug trade, and Europe has become a hub for illicit drug transportation due to their relaxed national borders. Local law enforcement in collaboration with EUROPOL has been working to tackle the illicit drug trade. By communicating through a central organization, there is a high access to information and resources between governments. EUROPOL has worked on multiple programs to directly take down the illicit drug trade, such as the Global Illicit Flows Programme and Crimejust. Through the EUROPOL's SEACOP and AIRCOP projects, local law enforcement agencies have been working to secure national ports and limit the follow of illicit drugs. Since 2010, EUROPOL has been focusing on international collaboration to fight the drug trade, which has resulted in 100 million Euros worth of illicit drugs seized and over 100 arrests.

### **The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL)**

INTERPOL has been a key player in organizing the global effort to fight the illicit drug trade market. Interpol provides “operational support, analysis, and training to help national police to tackle wide-scale drug trafficking”. Interpol has prioritized fighting global operations and provides training to local law enforcement so that they can fight the local illicit drug trade independently. Furthermore, INTERPOL has also organized international conferences on the illicit drug trade, so that governments from all around the world can share information, tactics, and technology with one another. Additionally, INTERPOL has been a key organizer in international operations such as the operation Lionfish, Green Light/Trojan Shield, and Onymous (refer to the timeline section above). INTERPOL also maintains the largest criminal database with over 18 million police

records that have assisted local law enforcement to carry out over 13 million searches per day.

## **UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events**

### **Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961**

The first United Nations-led international treaty on controlling the trade and production of illicit drugs mainly replaced the provisions created in the 1931 Paris Convention. The treaty mostly addressed the rise in synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine and morphine, as well as to address the rise in the criminalization of cannabis. All United Nations member states with the exception of Vanuatu, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, East Timor, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Tuvalu, and South Sudan signed the treaty. As of the writing of this report, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 is still legally valid and is often referred to.

### **Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971**

Signed in 1971, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances was created to control and combat the illicit trade and production of psychoactive drugs including benzodiazepines and other amphetamine-type stimulants. In addition to regulating the trade of psychotropic drugs, the treaty also includes provisions against drug-related crimes and money laundering. The convention created a 4 tier schedule which classified common psychotropic drugs at the time. It is important that the treaty does not include provisions regulating nicotine, and demonstrates that the UN continues to hesitate taking a tougher stance against nicotine.

## **United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988**

Signed in 1988, this treaty is the last of the three major United Nations resolutions on the illicit drug trade, which largely shape the United Nations stance and future plan on combating the illicit drug trade. It is important to note that the treaty recognizes that the bulk of the illicit drug trade stems from and is controlled by crime organizations, and thus outlines steps to reducing crime organization's power. Furthermore, the treaty also paves the way for increased international cooperation for combating the illicit drug trade by mandating mutual legal assistance between nations for international police searches, seizures, and other policing techniques.

### **Possible Solutions**

Building a comprehensive framework to address the global illicit drug trade is an extremely difficult task, but can be accomplished through a number of solutions. Given the nature of the global drug trade, it is imperative that the framework fosters international cooperation. Previous attempts to address the global illicit drug trade have largely been inefficient because of a lack of international cooperation, inefficient bureaucracies, and language/culture barriers. Furthermore, previous solutions have encountered problems due to insufficient infrastructure, rampant corruption, and political instability in developing countries where much of the global illicit drug trade is based. The following solutions in this section, are simply possible solutions, it is not an exhaustive list, and does not endorse the following solutions as the best solution.

Firstly, the illicit drug trade can be reduced by **decreasing the consumer demand for drugs through social outreach**. This is commonly done in two main ways: stopping existing drug users from consuming drugs and preventing potential users from

addiction. Each of these can be accomplished through drug addiction rehabilitation and education programs respectively.

On the other hand, through education and awareness campaigns, **governments can prevent prospective drug users from abusing illicit drugs**. A prime example of this is in the People's Republic of China which currently teaches students the harms of illicit drugs at every level of their education system. They have required that Chinese teachers explain both the long-term and short-term effects of using illicit drugs as well as explaining the legal and societal ramifications of using drugs. However, large education campaigns can be difficult for less economically developed countries (herein referred to as LEDC) that do not have sufficient education infrastructure or funding to create an illicit drug information campaign. Therefore, the United Nations could include guidelines specifically for LEDCs in the aforementioned framework to fighting the illicit drug trade which would enumerate effective education campaigns that can be adapted around the world, to inform citizens about the harms of illicit drugs. The creation of these guidelines ensures that LEDC has access to sufficient education plans that include up-to-date and accurate information. Ultimately, rehabilitation and education can be effective methods to fight the global illicit drug trade by reducing the demand for illicit drugs in the long term; however, it is unlikely to have a significant impact on the illicit drug trade in the short run.

Secondly, the framework would also include guidelines for decriminalizing or legalizing low-level narcotics. Decriminalizing, certain illicit drugs can have a profound effect on the illicit drug trade as it reduces the potency of drugs as well as reduces the revenue of crime organizations and thus reduces their power. For example, in 2021 when Portugal faced one of the worst addiction epidemics in the world, it departed from its strict drug policies that gave drug users extended prison sentences and shifted to decriminalization policies. As a result, convicted drug addicts were no longer sent to prison strife with illicit drugs, and would instead face a panel of experts in the field and were sent to

rehabilitation/treatment centers instead of jail. By treating drug addiction as a medical and social issue rather than a criminal issue, Portugal was able to significantly reduce its drug addiction rate with a reported 50% reduction in drug trafficking. Alternatively, Switzerland curbed its Opium epidemic by opening free drug rehabilitation centers and prescribing rehabilitation drugs for free, allowing drug users to seek treatment without the risk of being arrested.

Thirdly, the United Nations could create a framework enumerating the global police effort to crack down on illicit drug production and trafficking to reduce the availability of illicit drugs. The United Nations could lead a global effort to reform financial and tax laws which would stunt drug cartels and criminal organizations' ability to launder money. Without rigid models to launder money, it is significantly harder for these organizations to profit off of the lucrative drug trade, thus making it less likely that more criminal organizations participate in the global illicit drug trade. So far the United Nations Financial Action task force and the UK's drug liaison officer have had success fighting drug cartels by focusing on money laundering. The United Nations could take steps such as encouraging member nations to establish stricter banking laws, as well as establishing financial investigations agencies such as the FIS established by the United Kingdom. Working in tangent with local law enforcement these agencies can aid in research and investigation into money laundering activities by crime organizations. While, these policies may negatively affect countries that have established relaxed financial laws to encourage foreign investment, such as the Cayman Islands. corporations to invest in their country by having relaxed financial policies. The illicit drug trade framework can also include guidelines for large-scale multinational targeted anti-narcotics operations. Where law enforcement from multiple countries under the leadership of a single organization would conduct a specific operation to take down large players in the illicit drug market. The United Nations has led multiple operations in the past, each of which was able to either dramatically decrease the illicit drug trade or yield important information about the illicit drug trade (refer to the timeline of key events

for more information). While these operations can be very effective they are also very expensive and require a high level of international cooperation. Large-scale operations can also overstep jurisdictions as well as create inefficient bureaucratic practices.

Moreover, the United Nations should use their resources to investigate and research the issue at hand. The United Nations could create an independent panel of experts to review the illicit drug trade and provide information to local law enforcement. For example, a panel of computer experts could be formed to advise member nations on how to fight the rise of dark web illicit drug marketplaces. Furthermore, the United Nations could also facilitate member nations to not only share intel on the drug trade but also share policing and border security tactics. Many less economically developed countries and nascent countries have new police forces that are not well equipped to prevent drug smuggling. If the United Nations were to facilitate a multinational conference, where these countries can learn techniques and buy technology from countries with an effective policing system, such as the United Kingdom. INTERPOL has already had success in teaching nations effective policing techniques and holding multinational conferences. For example, INTERPOL sent delegates to FIJI to audit and teach their officers, which led to a dramatic increase in drug seizures and arrests.

Lastly, the United Nations could provide support to less economically developed countries and politically insatiable countries, which have become a stronghold for drug cartels. For example, the United Nations could provide support to law enforcement in Afghanistan who are unable to stop the cultivation of poppies. The UN could help by providing information and training as specified above, but they could also provide fiscal and manpower support. If this were to happen then the Afghan government would be better equipped to fight poppy cultivation and thus stunt the entire opioid market. While this may create a large economic burden on member nations of the United Nations, it is well within each country's best interest as many of the LEDC host the entire global illicit drug trade, and by increasing policing in just one area will greatly reduce the illicit drug

trade. The United Nations should support countries such as Afghanistan, Laos, Mexico, and Colombia.

In summary, the United Nations could include a variety of information and guidelines in their framework to approach the illicit drug trade. Some of the options that were discussed above include: preventing drug consumption, increased border security and drug enforcement, the creation of an international illicit drug market information database, increased training and support of local law enforcement, and the fiscal and manpower support by the United Nations to support law enforcement in drug strongholds.

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### Useful Links

[Dark Web: How easy is it to buy Drugs online? | Dark Web Part 1](#)

[How Cocaine Trafficking Actually Works | How Crime Works | Insider](#)

[Drug Trafficking, Politics and Power Part 1](#)

[Want to Win the War on Drugs? Portugal Might Have the Answer](#)

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