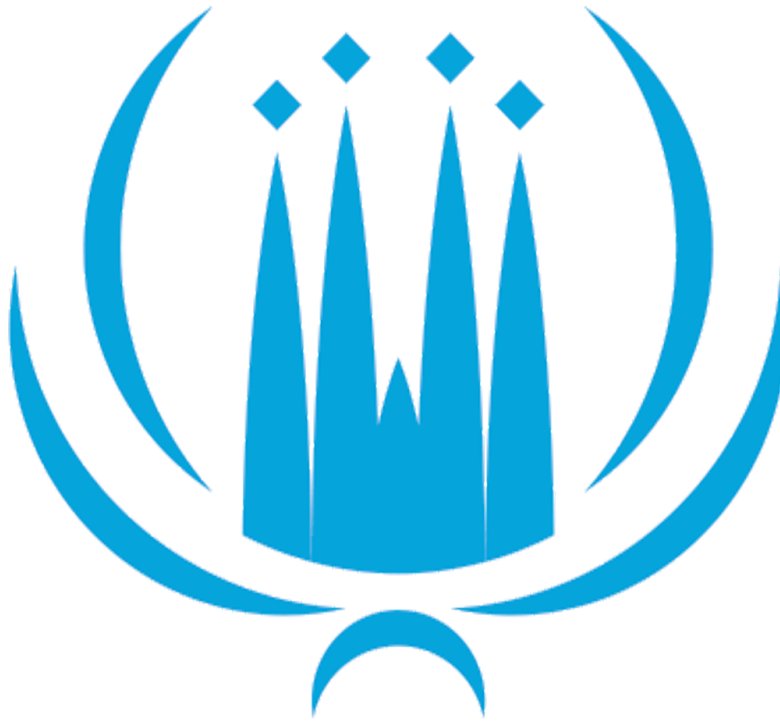




UNODC

BCNMUN 2026

From Crisis to Cooperation:
Navigating Instability in a Globalized World

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Definition of Key Terms.....	3
Background Information.....	3
Major Countries and Organisations Involved.....	3
Timeline of Events.....	4
Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions.....	4
Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue.....	4
Possible Solutions.....	5
Bibliography.....	5

Topic: Exposing Illicit Drug Economies as Hidden Employment Networks in Economically Vulnerable Communities

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Introduction

According to Europol, drug trafficking is a vast industry, bringing in a fifth of all profits from organized crime. It destroys communities, endangers business, strains government institutions, and weakens the wider economy. Global drug issues may be worldwide, but it's important to recognize that they do not affect the world equally; the vulnerable and the poor bear the highest cost, in the global south and in underdeveloped and underserved communities all around the world. They suffer from the violence and insecurity fueled by drug trafficking, as well as from insufficient access to healthcare.

Additionally, cartels are making around 24 billion euros annually from the illicit drug market in the European Union; this money is later invested in our free market economy, which distorts free market competition. Attempting to stop cartel violence at its root appears reasonable. However, by doing so, it places the blame on the young individuals and their socioeconomic status rather than addressing the structural inequalities in our society. If the lack of employment is addressed and more legitimate job opportunities are provided, young individuals may be less likely to depend on or become involved in the illicit drug economy for income. These economically vulnerable communities are victims of a criminal drug market that serves the entire society. The market has settled in disadvantaged and vulnerable communities because of the weak support systems that already exist. This makes the community even weaker, driving many individuals' dependence on illegal jobs such as selling and transporting drugs. Furthermore, illicit drug economies intersect with crimes that affect the environment and insecurity; for example, in the Amazon Basin, where poverty-stricken rural populations and Indigenous groups pay the price.

Drug trafficking is generating billions of dollars per year for organized crime groups, which are constantly finding innovative ways to boost production and increase distribution. These groups are frequently

involved in other crimes such as human trafficking, fraud, and online scams, meaning that the profits and networks created through drug trafficking can also strengthen other forms of organized crime.

The number of drug users rose to 331 million in 2024, 34% more than a decade ago. This statistic represents far more than a number; critics believe it reflects a wider system in which the illicit drug trade is closely linked to corruption and social instability.

Definition of Key Terms

Illicit drug economy

The global, underground marketplace built on the unauthorized cultivation, manufacture, trafficking, and sale of banned narcotics.

Economically vulnerable community

A population group facing a high risk of poverty, financial instability, and resource scarcity due to systematic socio-economic barriers.

Organized crime

Planned and organized ongoing illegal business that profits from high-demand illicit goods and services.

Alternative development

A long-term strategy that reduces illicit crop cultivation by creating legal opportunities and addressing poverty.

Illicit drug

Any substance whose production, possession, or non-medical use is prohibited by law..

Licit drug

Any substance allowed or approved by the government for legal production, use, and sale.

Ratifying

When a country formally accepts a treaty and agrees to be legally bound by it.

Opium Poppy

The opium poppy is a plant used to produce raw opium, which can later be processed into heroin.

Background Information

Historical Background Information

The organized drug economy has existed for centuries. During the nineteenth century, this was evident in the British-controlled opium trade between India and China. From the 1830s onwards, opium grown in India under the British East India Company's control was sold to private traders and smuggled into China. The system depended on a network of traders, smugglers, cultivators, and financial institutions, while those controlling the trade received the largest profits. This helped establish a pattern that can still be seen in modern illicit drug economies, where vulnerable workers often carry out production and transportation while those higher up the supply chain receive most of the wealth.

In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) instituted a free-trade zone in North America, abolishing tariffs on the majority of goods that are traded between the US, Mexico, and Canada. Although NAFTA made trade easier, economically vulnerable regions of Mexico did not benefit equally. Due to unemployment and greater inequalities, young individuals were exposed to fewer legal opportunities, making cartel recruitment more difficult to avoid.

According to data derived from wastewater analysis, North America, Western Europe, Central Europe, and South America continue to make up the largest markets for cocaine. The main cocaine trafficking flows continue to be from the Andean countries to North America and from the Andean countries to Europe, either directly or, to a lesser extent, by way of West and Central Africa. Moreover, the level of global illicit opium poppy cultivation and opium production remained unchanged from 2023 to 2024 but was greatly below the 2022 level. People believe it was primarily due to the drug ban imposed in Afghanistan in April 2022 on the cultivation, transportation, trade, and sale of all drugs, which resulted in the global area under opium poppy cultivation being 68% smaller and global opium production being 72% lower in 2024 than in 2022.

Ultimately, historically, there is a constant narrative in which economically vulnerable communities are left with little to no choice, risking their lives for little financial gain in comparison to the cartel bosses and drug lords.

Current Situation in the World

Growth and Expansion of Illicit Drug Markets

The impact of illicit drugs extends across societies, affecting countries and communities in different ways. From crime in local neighbourhoods, through families forced apart by dependency, to the corrupting effect of international organized crime. Drugs have a profound and negative effect on communities, families, and individuals. Like other sectors of activity in which goods or services are traded for a profit, the law of supply and demand essentially governs the illicit drug economy, although addiction and interdiction greatly influence the interaction of supply and demand for illicit drugs. Drug trafficking organisations tend to adapt in response to the market; as a consequence, the illicit drug economy continues to evolve, complicating efforts to address the problem.

Why do vulnerable communities become recruitment areas?

When legal employment is scarce or poorly paid, drug trading can often offer a quicker and more reliable source of income for individuals trying to support themselves or their family. Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán, also known as El Chapo, was one of the world's biggest drug lords. In 2016, he drew attention to why poor communities are targets for illicit drug-related jobs.

Guzmán claimed that drug trafficking activities helped his town rather than ruining it. His drug deals offered many people in the area job opportunities that were not present before. Furthermore, it created a “safe” environment for those living nearby because of the immense power Guzmán had in the drug community. Everyone had a sense of stability because of the illegal trade activity that was happening around them, thus highlighting the complexity behind the relationship between poverty and drug trafficking.

Unfortunately, a vicious cycle of socioeconomic disadvantages links poverty, limited education, conflict, drug use disorder, and limited employment. Illicit drug markets have been and are difficult to remove from economically vulnerable communities due to local treatment and prevention programs not addressing the wider economic and social conditions that allow criminal organizations to recruit workers. Furthermore, without legitimate investment in legal employment, education, and public services, drug networks can continue to rely on vulnerable individuals for sale, transportation, surveillance, and other dangerous roles associated with illicit drugs.

Governments are encouraged to improve the neighborhoods directly, as drug prevention programs and attempts to stop drug use will not truly improve much in susceptible neighborhoods. This might look like creating job opportunities, strengthening education, improving safety, and offering more resources to residents.

Limitations of current approaches

This issue is not easy to solve, as many factors come into play; we have to look at both sides of the issue. Drug programs designed to reduce drug use cannot solely focus on people living in poor neighborhoods. Drug consumers can live in many different places and come from different socioeconomic backgrounds; therefore, prevention and rehabilitation programs need to be within reach of all. Moreover, drug abuse affects society, both visible consequences such as violence and crime, as well as addiction and health problems. Addressing the root cause is essential. Governments must consider the issue comprehensively, keeping the future in mind.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

Mexico

Currently in Mexico, drug cartels function as hidden employment networks that constantly recruit people for surveillance, transportation, drug production, and distribution. A 2023 study by “Complexity Science Hub” estimated that Mexican cartels employed between 160,000 and 185,000 people and needed to recruit approximately 350 - 370 new members every week to replace those killed or arrested. Mexico's “War on Drugs” began in 2006, when President Felipe Calderón deployed thousands of troops to combat organized crime. However, military operations and competition over trafficking routes increased violence, and cartels demanded recruits. According to INEGI, in 2024, 33,241 homicides had occurred in Mexico, which demonstrates the scale of insecurity. Among the youth, many face unstable employment and limited access to job opportunities, which makes them vulnerable because cartels tend to offer income where they know legal opportunities are scarce. In response, the Mexican government introduced Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro in 2019, providing workplace training for people ages 18-29 who neither work nor study. Nevertheless, research suggests that the programme has mainly recruited women with high-school diplomas, which raises concerns that the programme may not reach the young men who are most vulnerable to cartel recruitment.

Afghanistan

Taliban's supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, announced a ban on the growth, transportation, buying, selling, and importation of opium poppies throughout Afghanistan. Opium was a monumental employment network, as the economy was extensive and countless families depended on it, as legal jobs and profitable legal crops were limited. After the ban, cultivation decreased greatly, but various rural households lost an incredibly important source of income.

USA

The US plays a major role in this issue for various reasons. First, it is a destination for cocaine produced in Colombia, meaning that demand from buyers in the US helps make cocaine more profitable, which leads to the income that is created through the illegal trade. This illegal network consists of vulnerable individuals who become coca farmers, transporters, sellers, and traffickers. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) highlighted the fact that demand for illegal drugs both in the US and Europe must not be ignored when considering drug-control efforts. Furthermore, the US spends large amounts of money attempting to stop that supply. It has invested over 10 billion dollars in Colombian counternarcotic efforts since 1999, such as destroying coca crops.

Colombia

Colombia is one of the world's major centers of coca cultivation and cocaine production, where illicit coca farming has become an important source of income. According to the World Bank, in 2018 more than 106,000 small subsistence farmers depend on coca cultivation and collection. This makes crop-substitution policies difficult, as legal alternatives must be profitable enough to compete with coca cultivation. In response, Colombia has increasingly promoted crop substitution and social investment to provide farmers with sustainable legal alternatives.

International Labour Organization (ILO)

The International Labour Organization belongs to the UN and focuses on employment, workers' rights, forced labour, and child labour. ILO is an extremely important organization as this issue is not solely about demand and supply of illicit drugs, but stems from political instability and poverty, in which illicit drug economies act as hidden employment networks that provide a "stable" income that often involves exploitative or dangerous work, including the recruitment of children into drug production and selling. The ILO helps address the lack of legal employment that leaves vulnerable individuals open to exploitation in illicit drug economies.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1909	Shanghai Opium Commission: The first international conference where countries discussed the global drug trade together. The conference's main topic to discuss was opium, as at the time it was extensively traded and produced across Asia, but specifically in China. Although the decisions were non-binding, achievements were seen. For example, Britain agreed to gradually stop selling Indian opium to China, and China agreed to eliminate its cultivation of opium poppies between 1909 and 1917.
1912	International Opium Convention: The world's first international drug control treaty in the Hague focused on placing greater control on the sale, distribution, and nonmedical use of drugs such as opium, Morphine, Cocaine, and Heroin. Unlike the Shanghai Opium Commission, formal commitments were to be made by countries that joined it. This was amongst the first times in history where drug control was part of international law, meaning governments were no longer making recommendations but formally committing to them

1920-1933

Alcohol Prohibition Strengthens Organized Criminal Networks in the United States

The prohibition of alcohol created an immense illegal market, in which local gangs developed more powerful national crime organizations. When the alcohol prohibition ended in 1933, some of these networks continued earning money through heroin and other narcotics sales. This demonstrated to society and institutions how banning a profitable product could push its production and sale underground without necessarily eliminating demand, expanding the illegal drug market, and harming many economically vulnerable communities.

13 July -1931

Convention for limiting the Manufacture and regulating the Distribution of Narcotic Drugs:

In the convention, countries aimed to restrict the supply of narcotic drug amounts needed for medical and scientific purposes. It strengthened control over substances such as morphine, heroin, and cocaine; however, the focus remained on restricting production and supply rather than addressing the economic conditions that influenced engagement in drug distribution and production.

26 June 1936

The Convention for the Suppression of the Illicit Traffic in Dangerous Drugs:

This convention focuses on creating stronger measures against the illegal trafficking of narcotic drugs. In past treaties, the main focus was how drugs were legally produced and distributed, whilst this

convention focuses on punishing individuals who have violated those rules and who have participated in illegal drug markets. An example of punishment could be through imprisonment or other restrictions of one's liberty. Furthermore, the convention attempted to stop traffickers from simply evading punishment by crossing borders; therefore, they established certain drug offenses that stated countries could prosecute people for offenses committed in other countries.

1961

Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

Adopted in 1961, the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs created a shared international system in place of many drug treaties. In accordance with the document, countries must cooperate and implement strict controls on the cultivation, production, trade, import, and export of narcotic drugs, except those for medical and scientific purposes. For example, countries allowing opium-poppy cultivation had to license farmers, control the land used, and require growers to deliver their crops to a governmental agency. It's important to recognize its main focus, which is regulating drug supply instead of explaining why vulnerable communities might depend on illicit cultivation for income.

19 of December - 1988

United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances

The convention strengthened international action against money laundering linked to drug trafficking. It also introduced controls on

precursor chemicals used in the production of illicit drug economies. The convention additionally showed how illicit drug economies depend on wider networks of people carrying out different roles.

2006

Mexico's "War on Drugs"

Mexico's 2006 strategy treated drug trafficking mainly as an organized-crime and security issue. It broke apart major cartels; however, critics say it failed to address the socioeconomic conditions that influenced criminal organizations to recruit workers, achieving little progress in helping the vulnerable communities.

2013

UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development

The UN encouraged countries to address illicit drug cultivation by creating suitable legal livelihoods by improving the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable communities. The UN recognized that illicit cultivation is not solely a criminal and/or supply problem; rather, it's a development, employment, and lack of opportunities problem.

19-21 April 2016

UNGASS on the World Drug Problem

The UN held a special meeting discussing how the world should respond to illegal drugs. UNGASS recognized that law enforcement alone was not enough and countries had to consider: human rights, inequalities, economic vulnerability and political instability. The outcome document was not a legally binding treaty; however,

countries agreed on a more balanced approach to tackle the issue.

3 April 2022

Taliban announces an opium ban in Afghanistan

The Taliban banned the trade, sale, and cultivation of opium, which led to a substantial decline in opium cultivation. At the same time, it discarded an important source of income for many rural households that had depended on the opium economy, as profitable legal alternatives were limited. Therefore, the ban proved how strongly illicit drug production can function as an employment and livelihood network in economically vulnerable communities.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

General Assembly Resolution 68/196 - United Nations Guiding Principles on Alternative Development, 11 February 2014

This resolution is significant because it emphasizes alternative development and the importance of providing legal and sustainable livelihoods, particularly in communities where illegal crop cultivation is not only a criminal or security problem but a deeply rooted poverty crisis. Furthermore, this resolution established a policy framework rather than creating a military mission or imposing sanctions, which have been seen by critics as not very successful in the past. This resolution defends and pushes for alternative development for various crucial reasons:

- **Communities need legal livelihoods:** Illicit drug production, trade, and cultivation operate as a financial and employment system that targets economically vulnerable communities.
- **Long-term programs:** Alternative development is not as easy as forcing farmers to change crops; it's replacing an entire illegal economy, which many communities rely on.
- **Attention to vulnerable groups:** Women, children, and youth are often the most vulnerable to participate in drug economies, not necessarily because they choose to but because it's typically the only option they have to survive.

General Assembly Resolution 58/4 - United Nations Convention Against Corruption, 31 October 2003

The convention's main purpose is to create a global legal framework against corruption. It brings to light the fact that corruption weakens democracy and the rule of law, which damages public institutions, increases inequality and injustice, and ultimately allows for organized crime and money laundering to grow. It especially emphasizes how corruption harms vulnerable communities as money intended for healthcare, education, and development often is misused or stolen. An essential part of this convention's suggestions is to discuss the assets obtained through corruption. This means that the goal is not only to punish the corrupt individual; however, countries should also freeze, confiscate, and restore those stolen assets. Unlike the other resolution, this convention does not directly provide legal employment and support for communities; rather, it attacks the financial and corruption system that keeps organized crime and illicit economies running.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Plan Colombia

In 1999, Colombia and the United States attempted to reduce coca cultivation and weaken armed groups. Their approach relied heavily on the military's actions against trafficking groups. Although Colombia's government was able to gain some control in certain regions, it failed to meet its illegal drug production reduction goal of 50%. Their failure was partly because many farmers still lacked a reliable legal livelihood and moved elsewhere.

Thailand's Alternative Development Programmes

Long-term development programmes in relation to opium-growing regions were implemented in Thailand to provide farmers with legal crops, access to markets and healthcare, and infrastructure. Through an approach that tackles poverty and isolation, the root cause of which influences communities to depend on the cultivation of opium, they were able to reduce labor demand. However, it is important to recognize that their success required decades of constant governmental support and financial investment.

Afghanistan's Alternative Livelihood Programmes

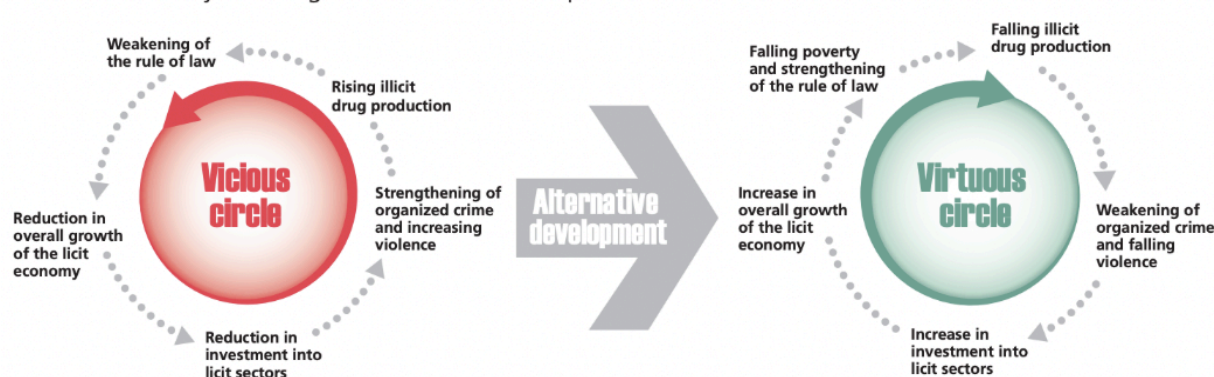
In 2022, following the ban on opium cultivation imposed by the Taliban, many rural families lost an important source of income. As a reaction to, UNODC has helped transition thousands of vulnerable households towards legal livelihoods who came from former poppy-growing areas. Its programmes consist of a combination of vocational training, drug treatment and rehabilitation, and employment with agricultural development. Furthermore, future projects may lead to an expansion into infrastructure training. These programmes demonstrate that replacing the opium economy requires not only banning

cultivation, but also developing an entire legal economic system that can provide communities with sustainable income.

Possible Solutions

Alternative Development

Alternative development addresses the social and economic conditions that push communities towards illicit drug cultivation. Rather than focusing solely on destroying illicit crops and/or punishing farmers, it aims to reduce poverty by creating sustainable legal livelihood opportunities. Its success, however, depends on long-term investment in areas such as human development, gender equality, land governance, security, the rule of law, institutional presence, and environmental sustainability.



Source: *World Drug Report 2015* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.XI.6).

The UNODC World Drug Report 2015 illustrates two opposing cycles. In the vicious cycle (on the left), poverty and weak rule of law contribute to a constant increase in illicit drug production. This creates a chain reaction that not only strengthens organized crime and increases violence but also reduces investment in legal sectors, weakening the legal economy even further.

On the other hand (Virtuous circle), Alternative development attempts to reverse this process. Increasing investment in legal sectors and supporting the growth of the licit economy can ultimately weaken organized crime, reduce violence, and lower poverty, with the ultimate goal of reducing illicit drug production.

Member states and international organizations should consider several approaches to reduce communities' dependence on illicit drug economies.

Creating stable and legal employment opportunities is viewed as necessary for improvement. These programs would include vocational training, access to employment through training programs, entry-level jobs, partnerships with local businesses, agricultural support, and assistance in developing legal local businesses. Individuals may be less likely to rely on illicit drug production and trafficking for financial stability if sustainable sources of income exist.

Access to markets and investment in rural infrastructure are also vital. In various vulnerable areas, communities lack sufficient transport and/or access to buyers, resulting in limited legal economic opportunities. Governments could invest in roads and transport systems, connect farmers and local businesses with legal markets, and support cooperatives that help producers sell their goods at fair prices. These measures could make business and legal crops more sustainable and profitable.

The rule of law and institutions must be strengthened as well. Alternative development entails stable public services and effective law enforcement. Creating a safer environment for legal economic activity will strengthen institutions by reducing criminal organizations.

Finally, programs should promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment by ensuring that women can access land, markets, education, and legal employment opportunities. Expanding these can reduce economic vulnerability and give women greater access to independent and sustainable sources of income.

Youth and community support

Young people who may be more vulnerable to involvement in illicit drug markets due to limited employment opportunities, poverty, or weak support systems may benefit from programs that help their whole community. These programs or new systems include mentoring, employment opportunities, and family support.

Reintegration for individuals who have left drug selling

Researchers have interviewed and worked both with ex-dealers and current dealers, and some mentioned that the support of a family member could be important; others mentioned legitimate work. In the past, an ex-seller explained how he was paired with a trained professional to provide a realistic overview of life after selling, with practical assistance. This approach of expert advice and empathy has allowed many to leave behind drug trading.

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