

Burma: Drug Control Progress and Possibilities

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dawson, J., & Barlow, D. (2006). Burma: Drug Control Progress and Possibilities. *Südostasien aktuell : journal of current Southeast Asian affairs*, 25(1), 7-16. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-337764>

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Studie

Burma: Drug Control Progress and Possibilities

Jenna Dawson and Daniel Barlow

Abstract

Burma is the second largest opium producer in the world, and is quickly becoming a hotbed of methamphetamine production. Opium profits have helped to finance conflict within Burma for both the central government and the insurgent ethnic groups; however, with the 1989 ceasefire agreements with the insurgent ethnic groups the drug control context changed dramatically. In April 2002, the Kokang and Wa ethnic leaders, whose regions account for the vast majority of opium poppy cultivation, committed to making their territory opium-free by 2003 and July 2005 respectively.

The combined drug control efforts of national and local leaders have shown promising results, as both UN and US opium surveys have confirmed large declines in poppy cultivation. As Burma continues to reduce opium cultivation, it has struggled in recent years with an increase in the production of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS). Combating the threats from opium and ATS will require different strategies. Stronger border controls, improved law enforcement and interdiction techniques must complement development strategies and alternative cropping policies. (manuscript received 31.5.2005, accepted 24.6.2005)

Key Words: Burma, Drugs, Regional Security

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Studie

Myanmar: Strategien zur Drogenkontrolle

Jenna Dawson und Daniel Barlow

Abstract

Myanmar ist der zweitgrößte Opiumproduzent der Welt und hat sich zu einer Hochburg der Methamphetaminproduktion entwickelt. Die Gewinne aus der Opiumproduktion halfen sowohl der Zentralregierung als auch den aufständischen ethnischen Gruppen, den Konflikt zu finanzieren. Seit den Waffenstillstandsvereinbarungen 1989 hat sich der Kontext der Drogenkontrolle dramatisch verändert. Im April 2002 versprachen die Führer der Kokang und der Wa, in deren Einflussbereich die überwältigende Mehrheit des Mohnanbaus und der Opiumproduktion stattfindet, ihre Gebiete bis 2003 bzw. 2005 opiumfrei zu bekommen.

Die vereinten Anstrengungen nationaler und lokaler Führer bei der Bekämpfung der Drogenproduktion zeigt viel versprechende Ergebnisse; sowohl die Statistiken der UN als auch der USA bestätigten einen starken Rückgang des Opiumanbaus. Während Burma den Anbau von Opium reduziert, erlebte es in den vergangenen Jahren einen Anstieg der Produktion der Amphetamin-Derivate (ATS). Stärkere Grenzkontrollen, verbesserte Rechtsetzung und Untersuchungstechniken müssen die Entwicklung dieser Strategien komplementär ergänzen. (Eingang des Manuskripts 31.5.2005; angenommen 24.6.2005)

Key Words: Burma, Drugs, Regional Security

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Introduction

The Union of Myanmar, as Burma¹ is now known, is a study of an isolated country that is desperately seeking legitimacy in the eyes of the world. The ruling military junta has given autonomy to several of the ethnic groups that led insurgencies against the government, and together with these ethnic minorities has vowed to crack down on the drug production that runs rampant throughout the Union. Burma, the second largest opium producer in the world, is also quickly becoming a hotbed of methamphetamine production. However, in the last 15 years, mutually reinforcing international, regional and national goals have dramatically changed the drug control policies and possibilities in Burma. While it is commonly reported that political, social and economic conditions in Burma are only deteriorating, we would argue that there has been significant progress in the context of drug control. This issue brief details the background of drug control in Burma, both the opium and amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS) situations, and will discuss how the face of drug production in Burma has changed over the last few years. Finally, several recommendations and a brief discussion of the alternative development projects in the country will be presented.

1 Background: The History of Drug Control in Burma

The United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control (UNFDAC), the predecessor to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), began activities in Burma in 1976 (for further information see Lintner 1994). Over the next twelve years, UNFDAC, in collaboration with other UN agencies, initiated a national drug control program that included agriculture-related activities, preventative education, public information, treatment and rehabilitation of addicts. The main emphasis, however, was on law enforcement, narcotics suppression and eradication. Despite UN efforts and bilateral assistance from the US, the opium poppy eradication campaign was only moderately successful. The border areas in which opium cultivation was concentrated were highly contested, and experienced frequent incidents of armed violence as well as military operations. Opium profits financed the conflict for both the central government and the insurgent ethnic groups, and

¹ Please note that the geographic names “Myanmar”, “Union of Myanmar” and “Burma” will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

allegiances could be bought and sold for the lucrative income from the sale of narcotics.

The drug control context changed with the military hand-over in 1988. The new junta government sought to establish its legitimacy by bringing stability to the re-named “Union of Myanmar“, and to this end pursued ceasefire agreements with the insurgent ethnic groups. From 1988 to 1996, the junta signed 17 ceasefire agreements with the various insurgents, granting them differing degrees of autonomy and self-governance over certain areas of the country. Initially, the ceasefires led to an increase in opium cultivation in the autonomous regions as the newly autonomous groups sought drug profits to help administer their regions. As the ethnic minorities became more integrated into the Union, however, the government was able to assert some degree of control over a policy of phasing out opium production. The first tangible result of this turn of events was the surrender of notorious drug lord Khun Sa and his Mong Tai Army to government forces in 1996.

In April 2002, the Kokang and Wa ethnic leaders, whose regions account for the vast majority of opium poppy cultivation, reiterated their commitment to making their territory opium-free by 2003 and July 2005 respectively. This commitment was made as part of a larger 15-year plan instituted by the junta in 1999 to make Myanmar opium-free by 2014. Thus far, the combined drug control efforts of national and local leaders have shown promising results, as both UN and US opium surveys have confirmed a spectacular decline in opium poppy cultivation since 1996. The opium challenge for the coming years will be to maintain the phase-out policy while ensuring its sustainability by providing poppy farmers with alternative sources of income and enhanced development opportunities.

As Myanmar continues its encouraging progress on reducing opium cultivation, it has struggled in recent years with an increase in the production of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS). While ATS production bears some resemblance to the opium trade by taking advantage of Myanmar’s porous borders, both to import the necessary precursor chemicals and to export the finished product, it is not replacing the income lost by poor farmers through the opium eradication effort. ATS can be produced in simple, mobile laboratories, but its production requires chemicals, water, electricity and knowledge that Myanmar’s poor farmers do not possess.

As such, combating the threats from opium and ATS will require different strategies. Stronger border controls, improved law enforcement and interdiction techniques must complement development strategies and alternative cropping policies. Recommendations along these lines will be discussed later in the brief.

2 Opium Production

Burmese opium cultivation began in the 18th century, and commercial exploitation of the crop began when the British colonized Burma. As the northeastern parts of Burma are ethnically diverse and geographically difficult to reach, it was difficult to produce and transport marketable goods. Opium was one of the only cash crops that were viable in the area. The “cultivation was restricted to some remote hill areas east of the Salween River: Kokang, a district dominated by ethnic Chinese, and the Wa Hills” (Lintner 2000: 5). By the 1950s, opium production in Burma yielded 300-600 tons, a 20% increase from the years prior to WWII (Lintner 2000: 8). Approximately 90% of Myanmar’s opium is grown in the Shan state (for further information on where the illegal poppy cultivation areas are, please see Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control), and the profits fuelled warfare between the ethnic minorities and the central government in the capital city, Rangoon (Yangon).

The ceasefire between the Wa and the ruling junta came into effect in 1989, and by 1996 opium cultivation in the autonomous areas skyrocketed to its peak of 163,000 ha (US Department of State 2004). As part of the drug control efforts in the country, the US government has conducted a yield survey on an annual basis since 1993, and the UN has conducted one since 2002. Critics of the Burmese regime have argued that these surveys do not take into account the “balloon effect” and that they rely too heavily on government-provided information. As a means of addressing this criticism, the UNODC has conducted assessments across Burmese territory to ensure that opium production has not simply moved outside the Shan state.

In 1999, the Myanmar military government, in conjunction with the Wa Authority and the decision by ASEAN to make the region drug-free by 2015, developed a plan to end opium production in the country by 2014. The plan seems to be working, as by early 2004, poppy cultivation was 44,200 ha, down 73% from the peak in 1996 (UNODC 2004: 3). There are many converging reasons for this decline. On the international agenda, what happens within Myanmar fits within

the larger global context of the 1988 UN Convention, the ASEAN agreement, and the military junta's desperate quest for legitimacy. Regionally, Southeast Asia is entering a new era and turning its back on its history of instability, cross-border plundering, and financing of the proxy armies that operate in the lawless border areas of Myanmar for both ideological and profit-driven reasons. If Myanmar wants to be a part of the region, it must demonstrate progress in strategic areas, particularly in curbing opium production. Domestically, the military junta benefits from drug control, as drugs have always been one of the primary means for continuing instability and conflict. “Purging drugs out of the country definitely furthers the domestic agenda of reconciliation” (Lemahieu 2004).² Thus the international, regional and domestic agendas are mutually reinforcing one another, resulting in the reduction in poppy cultivation in Burma.

However, Burma remains the second largest opium producer in the world. Cultivation of opium poppy is intimately intertwined with the extreme poverty in the country, as the poppy is grown primarily to generate cash to offset food deficits and to purchase basic needs such as clothing and medicine. Due to the lack of health care supplies and infrastructure, opium is widely used for medicinal purposes, including the treatment of malaria and diarrhea. As such, medicinal use fuels addiction among the local population.

The government continues to address the problem in a traditional, top-down manner. The government strategy is designed to gradually eliminate poppy cultivation by increasing the standard of living in the border regions through a program of improved accessibility and communication in addition to the provision of income-generating crops. The implementation began with large-scale infrastructure projects which included road and bridge construction, energy generation, and factory assembly and construction. Much of this approach to opium-reduction has been implemented via strict deadlines and the mandating of policies from the top down with authoritarian methods of enforcing them.

In addition to these projects, the Kokang and Wa Authorities have used unorthodox methods to eradicate the poppy crop, including forced relocation. The ethnic leadership has relocated entire highland villages to more economically prosperous lowland areas, which provide the relocated population with land to

² This and other interviews were conducted during an internship with UN in Myanmar, and we would like to thank all of the contributions that made this paper possible. We would also like to state that while this information was collected from the UN and other sources, it does not reflect the official position of the United Nations.

farm and housing opportunities. The UN and other humanitarian organizations in Burma have opposed these efforts because of their ill effects on the population, but they have nonetheless contributed to the reduction in poppy cultivation.

While recent reductions in opium production are welcome from the perspective of drug control efforts, attention must be paid to the humanitarian consequences of the rapid decline in poppy cultivation. The *UNODC 2004 Myanmar Opium Survey* has shown that 260,000 households³ in Burma are engaged in opium cultivation, with the average opium farming household's total annual income around US\$ 214, with 62% of this amount derived from poppy cultivation. The *Survey* also shows that families relying on poppy cultivation have a lower income than non-opium farming households (UNODC 2004: 2), further demonstrating that opium is truly a crop of last resort for the poorest of the poor farmers.

Providing economic opportunities for opium-growing households is imperative to ensuring the sustainability of the current opium-reduction strategy. UNODC and its partners in the Kokang and Wa Initiative (KOWI) have taken a broader, more holistic approach to supply reduction, by using a multi-sectoral approach to increase food security, improve access to essential services such as health and education, and provide further income-generating opportunities rather than simple crop substitution. UNODC Representative Jean-Luc Lemahieu cautions that the rapid reductions in opium crop are not sustainable without the provision of alternative livelihoods for the farmers in the border regions. As the opium cultivation decreases, the average farmgate price for opium in Burma has increased to US\$ 234 per kilogram, an 80% increase over 2003 prices (UNODC 2004: 4). With this increased farmgate price, greater incentive for farmers to cultivate opium poppy may not be far behind.

3 Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) Production

While the Burmese government and the Wa Authority are cracking down on opium poppy production, methamphetamines have become the hot new narcotic of the criminal elements in the opium chain. ATS tablets are cheaper to produce, require no plant base, are easier to smuggle and market than heroin, and large quantities of the so-called *yaa baa*⁴ or “crazy medicine” are rivaling the traditional

³ The average household size is 5 people (UNODC 2004: 2).

⁴ *Yaa baa* may also be spelled as *ya ba*.

trade in opiates (Chouvy/Meissonnier 2002). In the mid-1990s, when the drug producers diversified into methamphetamine production, a mere trickle of these pills was reaching Thailand, the primary market for this drug. Today it is a torrential overflow, as demand for *yaa baa* in Thailand and China has exploded over the past two years.

Thai officials, along with UN and US anti-narcotics agents, have estimated that 800 million to one billion pills are produced in Burma on an annual basis, with production becoming increasingly sophisticated. Some labs can turn out 50 million pills a year (Chouvy 2004).

Until recently, most of this was produced in mobile laboratories along Myanmar’s border with Thailand [...] some of these have moved inland [...] and over the past two years there has also been a migration of mobile factories up to the border with Laos (Jagan 2004a).⁵

US intelligence sources believe that the majority of mobile methamphetamine labs are located near the Laotian border, with some being established across the border. According to Jeremy Milsom of the UNODC country office in Burma, the production is not limited to the Shan state area and that location choice likely has more to do with “loose border controls in an area that is close to Thailand and China, which are the major destination countries as well as the sources for the necessary precursor chemicals“ (Milsom 2004).⁶ Thus from a strictly geo-economic viewpoint, combating methamphetamine production requires radical new logistics as the factors of production for ATS are no longer tied to a particular territory.⁷

Thai military officials contend that most of the *yaa baa* from Burma is produced by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), and the United States view this organization as one of the world’s largest and best-armed drug-dealing organizations. Drug experts have estimated that it costs the producer approximately

⁵ It should also be noted that the Wa territory does not share a border with Thailand.

⁶ According to Nikolas Win Myint, Press Information and Analysis Unit, UNODC Myanmar Country Office, Burma does not possess the internal infrastructure to produce the necessary precursors for ATS. He suggests that the chemicals are trafficked in through the same channels through which ATS is trafficked out, via porous borders in the remote regions of the country that severely lack law enforcement capabilities (Personal Interview, 24 November 2004).

⁷ Translated from the French “induit des logiques radicalement nouvelles puisque les facteurs de production ne sont pas liés à un terroir particulier“ (Chouvy/Meissonnier 2002: 54).

5 cents to make a *yaa baa* pill.⁸ They sell it for 30 cents to Thai intermediaries, and by the time the crazy medicine reaches the streets of Bangkok, it can sell for as much as US\$ 2 a pill. This is a much higher return on investment than can be achieved with heroin production (Wechsler 2004). The drug gangs have devoted their business to *yaa baa* production in order to supplement their reduced profits from decreased heroin sales, and to satisfy the growing number of addicts in Thailand who cannot afford the expensive heroin.

Former spokesman for the Burmese government, Lt. Col. Hla Min, has said that on the whole, the UWSA is not involved in methamphetamine production and that the Thai estimate of 800 million pills being smuggled across the border is “overblown” (Jagan 2004a). According to Wa leader Bao Yuxiang, the Wa does “not tolerate the production of synthetic drugs in areas under our control” (Jagan 2004b). One thing the Thai government, the Wa leaders and Myanmar’s junta do agree on is that criminal gangs are behind the production and trafficking of the crazy medicine. Many argue that it is primarily Chinese criminal elements with connections to Hong Kong and Macau that are behind ATS production. While it is unknown who is responsible for ATS production in Burma, one aspect the UN and other aid agencies are certain of is that few, if any, opium farmers are involved in the manufacture of *yaa baa*, as the production process requires access to capital that they do not have: clean water sources, chemicals, electricity, expertise, and access to markets (Win Myint 2004).

About 80 tons⁹ of *yaa baa* are smuggled into Thailand from Burma every year, mostly overland, in convoys of seven to ten couriers who often travel with heavily armed escorts and backpacks filled with 200,000 pills apiece.

Ya ba tablets marked with the UWSA brands ‘99’ and ‘WY’ are packed in plastic bags and forced down the throats of cows before crossing the border from Karenni State to Thailand’s Mae Hong Son province, where the cows will be killed and the bags retrieved (Wechsler 2004).

The use of cows and buffalo is widespread along the Thai-Burmese border, but cars, boats and planes, as well as riders on horseback are common as well. Pills are concealed in tinned food, bamboo, timber, fish, or packed in sacks of garlic or tea.

⁸ Demand for ATS in Myanmar itself is low, and *yaa baa* pills sell for as little as 15 cents in the country.

⁹ 80 tons is approximately equivalent to the estimated 800 million–one billion *yaa baa* pills trafficked into Thailand on an annual basis.

While some of the pills are shipped to other Asian countries, Australia, Europe and the United States, most remain in Thailand where the use of methamphetamines has skyrocketed among teenagers and young adults. The abundance of crazy medicine has provided people who could never afford heroin with a quick, cheap high. Students take it as an inexpensive replacement for Ecstasy at dance clubs, as the pills give users a feeling of hyper-alertness. Millions of poor labourers in Thailand use cheap *yaa baa*, which often costs as little as US\$ 1 per pill, to help them stay awake, and alarming stories have surfaced of farmers paying seasonal labourers with *yaa baa* (Wechsler 2004).

In Burma, however, there is no recent evidence of increased ATS production. As measured by seizure statistics, there is an indication of a decline of 88% from 2001 to 2003 (Asia Pacific Amphetamine Type Stimulant Information Center 2004). It is particularly important to interpret these statistics with caution, however, as they may be a result of fewer seizures instead of less production. The seizure data indicates a continuing decline, with 2.01 million *yaa baa* tablets seized in the first six months of 2004, and only one clandestine ATS laboratory destroyed by law enforcement in 2003 (Asia Pacific Amphetamine Type Stimulant Information Center 2004).

While Burma’s ruling junta and the UWSA appear to be taking concerted steps to eradicate opium poppy cultivation, they appear to be far less rigorous in eliminating the production of methamphetamines. It must be noted, however, that the Wa and the junta receive far less assistance in combating the ATS problem than they do with opium eradication. The international community appears willing to contribute to fighting poppy production as they see the humanitarian aspects of its elimination. Combating ATS is predominantly a law enforcement issue, and assistance is less likely due to its highly politically-sensitive nature. Nonetheless, it is clear that Myanmar does not possess the law enforcement capacity to fight this problem on its own.

4 Why the Changing Face of Drug Production?

There appears to be a shift in Burmese drug production from opium poppy cultivation to methamphetamine production. Both the military junta and the leadership of the Wa are seeking international legitimacy for their governance, and realize that they need to clamp down on the production of opium in order to achieve this goal. Opium is still regarded as a greater threat to international

security and public health than is methamphetamine. Additionally, opium has only served to continue the cycle of poverty in the border regions, and has led to widespread addiction problems, both of which threaten the domestic agendas of the junta and the autonomous ethnic leadership. The ethnic Wa and Kokang leaders have profited from the opium trade, and have begun to invest in legitimate Burmese enterprises as part of their quest for legitimacy and international recognition. As part of their concessions during the ceasefires, the ethnic leaders were given mines and other businesses with the intention of integrating them into the Burmese economy. “The key of this policy is that the ethnic minority groups become anchored within the Union” (Lemahieu 2004). These leaders must now consider Yangon before they make decisions, since they risk losing or harming their valuable investments withing the legitimate Burmese economy.

The leaders appear to genuinely want to improve the livelihoods of their people, as they have seen the living standards of the neighbouring Chinese increase by leaps and bounds and are seeking similar achievements. Wa Authority leader, Chairman Bau Yuxiang has invested in the construction of local cigarette factories, hydroelectric power plants, a tin smelting plant, and large-scale rubber plantations in hopes of generating income for the people of his region, as well as for himself. All of these efforts are designed to improve his image among the people, which will in turn increase his hold on power (Wa Alternative Development Project Staff 2004).

In terms of ATS, the pills are easier to transport, cheaper to produce and the end markets much closer than for opiates, with the majority going to fuel Thailand’s enormous demand. Burma’s proximity to China and India facilitates the precursor chemical traffic into the border regions, and since the borders are porous and corruption rampant, Burma is a popular place for criminal syndicates to operate without repercussion. Evidence points to organized crime connections with Chinese traffickers in Hong Kong and Macau as fueling the ATS production in the lawless border regions, and mobile laboratories can easily escape detection. Smuggling syndicates on both sides of the Burma-Bangladesh border have recently stepped up their operations, and “WY” drug tablets are flooding into Bangladesh at an unprecedented rate due to the lack of cooperation between Burma and Bangladesh on repression of smuggling along the common porous borders (*Kaladan News* 2004).

5 Recommendations

Any successful drug policy requires efforts on both sides of the same coin: repression of the criminal elements, and sustainable livelihoods for the opium farmers. While Burma is plagued by internal instability and must deal with thousands of kilometers of porous borders, the emphasis of drug control policy has unfortunately focused on repression rather than on sustainable development. As the regional and international legal frameworks clearly indicate, no country should be left alone to deal with drug control.

Regionally, the convergence of interests in controlling narcotics necessitates regional, cross-border cooperation that was impossible only a decade ago when neighbouring countries or business interests supported the proxy armies within Myanmar. There has been progress since the ministerial Beijing Declaration in June 2001, and intelligence exchange, precursor chemical control and even joint border operations may be pursued within the context of shared regional interest. For example, Thailand has proposed the “setting up of 10 more border liaison offices in the four Mekong countries and an increase in the frequency of patrols along the Mekong River in a bid to stem the flow of illicit drugs” (Chuennian 2004).

Thailand’s strict drug suppression drive in northeastern Burma has forced drug gangs to switch their smuggling routes, and more border offices will help to clamp down on the smuggling. The drug business booms in the hands of those who loathe transparency and swear by instability and lawlessness. “Keeping the status quo of ethnic warfare and unrecorded cross-border trade might be the best guarantee of going unpunished” (Lemahieu 2004). It is thus imperative that law enforcement and border control be improved in the border areas where criminal syndicates thrive.

In terms of alternative development, “Myanmar’s war on drugs has impoverished thousands of former opium-growing farmers who cannot sell their cash crops due to curbs imposed by the military junta” (Reuters 2004). While it must be noted that these farmers have always been poor, the ban on opium production has further exacerbated their dire economic situation. For farmers forced to stop growing opium, the switch to cash crops has slashed incomes by almost 70% due to restrictions on movement that prevent their goods from reaching the market. Sheila Sisulu, deputy executive director of the World Food Programme, has questioned the “point of these people being assisted to grow cash crops if

they do not have market access?” (Reuters 2004). Market access for alternative crops must be assured, as well as freedom of movement and transit for farmers to transport and sell their crops at market.

The local people fear for their future, as the poppies they have cultivated for hundreds of years were their hedge against the chronic food shortages in Burma. Chairman Bau, leader of the ethnic Wa, has suggested that new techniques such as irrigation, different crops and new seeds, will help change the habits of the former opium farmers. “Its good for them and it’s in the interest of the whole people” (Jagan 2004a). For the Wa’s relocation programs, the people are moved from “infertile highland areas where poppy is one of the few crops that can be grown successfully to lower, more fertile ground where rice cultivation and fruit trees flourish” (Jagan 2004b). While the Wa leaders concede that mass population movements and the ban on poppy cultivation will cause extreme hardship for the Wa people in the short run, the leadership acknowledges that it will have to give up poppy cultivation in order to preserve its political and economic autonomy to pursue a Wa state within the Union of Myanmar.

According to the 15 year drug elimination plan, three methods will be used to put an end to opium cultivation: (1) improving the socio-economic conditions of the border areas, (2) “for the producer and abuser of narcotic drugs to enlighten their belief, conviction and their psychological make-up for the better” (Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control: 3), and (3) to increase accessibility and communications between ethnic groups living in the highlands and those in the rest of the country. Community development is the cornerstone of the plan. Each participating village should have input into their own development, giving them both a sense of involvement and ownership in the process. Microcredit lending programs would also benefit the community projects, creating sustainable development possibilities for participants. Another way of improving the socio-economic conditions is through infrastructure development that will provide access to villages by automobile, which will also facilitate market access and communications amongst the population.

Construction of schools, clinics and other community buildings will greatly enhance the potential for development and education of the local population. Education-for-food programs would be an appropriate incentive for sending children to school. “Improving on the 90 percent illiteracy rate is key to helping farmers become independent of poppy” (Wa Alternative Development Project Staff 2004). Having access to medical care will reduce the demand for opiates that

serve as alternatives to health care, and by training village health volunteers, both livelihood sustainability and vocational training will be promoted. Treatment and detoxification centers are also crucial tools to combat the demand side of drug control.

In addition, exposing the leaders of the ethnic groups and the military junta to international standards and values would reduce the danger inherent in putting political reform solely in the light of democracy (the opposition, including the ethnic groups) versus dictatorship (the junta in Yangon). “Exposing the ethnic groups, through a persistent international presence, to more universal values and governance will promote a political reform agenda” (Lemahieu 2004), that may help alleviate the drug problems without the need for repressive drug control policies, forced relocations and humanitarian crisis.

If the international community is serious about drug control, wants to promote regional conflict management and prevention, is concerned about political reform in Myanmar and wants to avoid another Afghanistan, humanitarian disaster and a human rights catastrophe, then it should live up to its commitments and responsibilities. The wider implications of drug control must be emphasized, particularly the political, environmental, humanitarian, development and cultural perspectives. New partners with differing fields of expertise must be cultivated to create a broad base of support and mobilization.

Drug are less a single problem and more of a symptom of one or many underlying social, economic and political issues. If these underlying causes cannot be tackled then drug control efforts might not be sustainable in the long run (Lemahieu 2004).

6 Conclusion

While there is a long road ahead, improvement in the drug situation in Burma is “undeniable, tangible and visible” (Lemahieu 2004). Opium has a long and storied history in Burma, and the ruling junta, the Wa Authority and the ASEAN region as a whole have committed to making the country drug-free by 2014. While this massive undertaking seems to be making progress, it has not been without cost. Poor farmers continue to suffer while organized criminals gain from the transition from opium to ATS production. Forced relocation programs and alternative

development projects have not done enough to provide sustainable incomes for those most profoundly affected by the ban on opium cropping. The reasons for the changing face of drug production are many, and have international, regional and domestic dimensions and agendas that must be considered when designing and implementing development projects in Burma. Drug control cannot succeed without development and transparency, particularly in one of the most isolated, impoverished countries in the world.

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