

# How to beat the opium economy

**A**t NATO's summit meeting in Riga this week, one thing was undisputed: In order to save Afghanistan from turning into a narco-state the all-invasive drug industry has to be crushed. The opium business sustains a clan-based and crime-ridden society, it impedes Afghanistan's economic growth, hinders reconstruction efforts of the international community, and ultimately fuels instability and terrorism.

Today, the drugs crisis is worse than ever. Afghanistan's economy thrives on the illegal growth of opium poppy and the trafficking of drugs. This accounts for \$2.8 billion each year, or around half of the country's gross domestic product. More than three million Afghans rely on poppy cultivation for survival, most of whom live in the south in extreme poverty.

Since the U.S.-led invasion in October 2001, the international community has supported Afghan security forces in their efforts to wipe out this opium-based economy by military force, spending \$325 million annually on destroying poppy crops — but to little avail. Last September, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime announced record poppy cultivation levels, with a potential yield of 6,100 tonnes of opium — a 59 percent increase from 2005.

With Afghanistan's drug industry booming and opium production at an all-time high, it is time to acknowledge that existing policies are failing miserably.

Force-based poppy eradication campaigns are not just ineffective, but also extremely counterproductive, since they undermine the livelihoods of farmers who depend on the crop to feed their families. Poor

and disgruntled farming communities are an easy target for warlords and terrorist groups, who have picked up widespread support from these farmers in exchange for the protection of their sole cash crop.

A new, long-term counternarcotics strategy is necessary that addresses the immediate needs of the local population and wins back the hearts and minds of the rural communities. But is such a strategy possible?

The Senlis Council, an international think tank, calls for setting up scientific pilot projects to study the possibility of an opium licensing system for the production of medicines such as morphine and codeine. Instead of being turned into narcotics, poppy crops could provide the raw material for valuable pharmaceutical products. Such a system would give farmers, as well as all other stakeholders, the opportunity to profit in a legal economy, encouraging them to cut ties with warlords and terrorists, while addressing the current world shortage in these pain-relieving medicines.

Before such an attractive idea can become reality, two important questions must be answered. First, could Afghan farmers be given a financial incentive to legally cultivate opium that would compete with the illicit drug trade? Second, is Afghanistan stable enough to stop legally produced opium flooding into the illegal system?

Through extensive field research over the past two years, the Senlis Council has documented how an integrated social control system could work at village

level. Village elders and traditional councils, which exercise considerable control, could oversee opium licensing. Essential medicines such as morphine have a huge mark-up price, allowing ample opportunities to redirect money back to the licensed poppy farmers, who would receive a decent and sustainable income.

To test these findings, pilot projects should be started in different parts of Afghanistan. The terms of reference for these projects are already drafted, which means the final test is within reach. All that is needed is the political will of the international community to put the idea to the test.

Both the European Union and the United States need to take this alternative seriously. Afghanistan is not only strategically crucial in the global struggle against illegal drug production; it could easily become once more a breeding ground and

support base for terrorism, as it was under the Taliban regime from the 1990s onwards.

Medicinal poppy cultivation could help to rebuild support for the central Afghan government outside of Kabul, thus serving as a bridge between economic development and lasting security in Afghanistan, as well as providing an effective nation-building opportunity.

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