

Forum: Second General Assembly (GA2)

Issue: Combating the influence of drug cartels in less economically developed nations

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Introduction

The pervasive influence of drug cartels in less economically developed nations (LEDCs) presents a multifaceted challenge that threatens social, economic, and political stability. Drug cartels take advantages of weak institutions, poverty, and corruption to establish powerful networks undermining governments, destabilize communities, and maintain violence cycles. Their influence does not only limit to narcotics, but also involve human trafficking, weapon smuggling, and money laundering. There are many countries that have borne impact from drug cartels. Especially Colombia, Mexico, and Guinea-Bissau, when centers of production or transit in the narcotics trade to more affluent countries. The lack of wherewithal to fight organized crime is one of the main reasons why they are vulnerable. Very few law enforcement agencies are capable of dismantling cartel operations, and the potential for financial gain often results in pervasive corruption. The societal cost is immense. It may lead to drug-related violence, displacement of populations, and erosion of confidence in state institutions. These are further assisted by globalization, which aids in the transnational nature of cartels and their ability to capitalize on digital platforms and global supply chains.

This report delves into the historical background of the impact created by drug cartels in LEDCs, the major parties involved, previous attempts at resolution, and potential solutions. The focus will be to devise long-lasting frameworks that promote global collaboration while addressing the root causes of cartel influence and institutional flaws.

Definition of Key Terms

Drug Cartel

A criminal organization involved in the production, distribution, and sale of illegal drugs. These groups often use violence and corruption to maintain control and evade law enforcement.

Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs)

Countries with lower income levels, weaker institutions, and limited industrialization. They often face challenges such as poverty, corruption, and insufficient infrastructure.

Corruption

The abuse of power for personal gain, which can include bribery, embezzlement, or manipulation of public funds. It undermines the rule of law and enables drug cartels to operate.

Narcotic

A drug or other substance illegally sold and consumed for nonmedical purposes.

Narco-Terrorism

The use of drug trafficking profits to fund terrorist activities or the use of terrorist tactics by drug cartels to achieve their goals.

Money Laundering

The process of concealing the origins of illegally obtained money to make it appear legitimate.

Background

In July 2010, a drug organization used a car bomb in Mexico and caused the death of four people in Ciudad Juárez. The following month, in August, the bodies of 72 migrants were discovered in northern Mexico. And what was the cause of their deaths? They had been shot as they refused to work for a drug gang. Several days later, a prosecutor and police officer responsible for investigating the incident had disappeared. The above are among the numerous headlines detailing the escalating violence and broader impacts of illicit drug trade organizations, colloquially known as “drug cartels”, on low income countries. Despite the extensive historical origins of such criminal organizations, the academic literature on drug cartels is limited and we are only beginning to understand the factors causing the emergence and consequences of cartel activities. Nevertheless, the global drug trafficking market, with particular emphasis on less economically developed countries (LEDCs), must be examined, as the market is constantly undergoing change and significantly undermining economic and social development.

Operation of drug cartels

Several studies have been conducted regarding a variety of criminal organizations, but very little research has been published about the drug trafficking and transporting process of drug cartels as they tend to reveal rather little about the internal details and processes. However, there is information about Mexican drug cartels specifically, and thus, understanding concerning the global processes of drug cartels can be generalized based on current available research on Mexico.

Drug trafficking in Mexico

Mexican drug trafficking organizations dominate the import and distribution of various drugs such as cocaine, fentanyl, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine in the United States. Mexican suppliers produce heroin and methamphetamine, while cocaine is largely produced in Colombia and transported to the United States thereafter. Drug cartels smuggle large quantities of marijuana into the United States, and these groups are also known for engaging in extortion, migrant smuggling, oil and mineral theft, prostitution, and illegal weapons trade.

Throughout the seven decades that Mexico was ruled by the Institutional Revolutionary party (PRI), the cartels were able to cultivate a vast network of corrupt officials and gain protection. The cartels used their profits to pay off judges, police, politicians and coerced these individuals to cooperate with these organizations.

Production

The figures on illicit drug production vary greatly as estimates depend on the type of methodology and assumption. However, it is certain that illicit crop cultivation is situated in specific regions, with most of the world's opiates coming from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, Lebanon, Colombia, and Mexico. Cannabis production occurs in many parts of the world and coca production is mainly concentrated in the three Andean countries Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru, which account for over 98 per cent of world cocaine supplies.

The complexity of the drug trafficking market

Illicit drugs remain at high availability across the world, posing threat to the public health due to their increased risk of life-threatening illnesses. The risk is further increased when these products are available at cheap prices, which is particularly the case for cocaine. As drug cartels have access to a diverse range of networks to operate in the market, they demonstrate a high level of flexibility by taking advantage of technological advancements and exploiting legal business structures. Hence, they demonstrate a high level of resilience to global crises and instability, with examples including the COVID-19 pandemic and recent wars. In response to these events, these organizations adapt trafficking routes and methods to transport and deliver drug products. The intersection between licit and illicit markets further complicate the issue, as illicit organizations will capitalize on loopholes in legislation to access chemicals for drug production. For instance, legal industrial hemp cultivation may be taken advantage of for the production of unauthorized cannabis products.

Violence and corruption

Globally, communities have suffered the effects of drug market-related violence, including killings, torture, kidnappings, and threats, which usually take place between criminal networks, with innocent individuals also being victims. One example of this was the 2014 abduction and murder of forty-three students in the Guerrero state of Mexico. Investigations following the incident discovered evidence that police and authorities conspired with cartels to carry out the crime. Agreements made with corrupt government authorities and officials will exacerbate cartel-related violence as these organizations will continue to operate. Hence, delegates must consider the connections and influences of drug cartels as well as the ways to strengthen government competence to mitigate the effects of the issue.

Technology

Technological advancement has resulted in higher outputs of drugs produced. Criminal networks continue to use novel chemicals to produce synthetic drugs and conceal chemical content of drugs, which complicates detection of such products and law enforcement. At the same time, illicit communication can be concealed digitally to reduce risk and make substances more accessible.

Major Parties Involved

Mexico

Mexican authorities have been waging an ongoing war against drug cartels for nearly two decades. During the process, thousands of Mexicans including politicians, students, and journalists die as a result of the conflict every year. Mexican administration has responded cartels through the deploying of security forces, which usually cause more violence. President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) deployed thousands of military personnel to replace local police forces he believed were corrupt. The Mexican military captured and killed twenty-five drug kingpins in Mexico. However, the president's strategy has been criticized for creating more violent drug gangs. Calderon's successor, Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) continued to rely on the military to battle the cartels. Current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-present) announced that he would take the focus away from a militarized approach, and instead, improve security and reduce homicide rates. However, his approach has yielded limited results, with homicide rates continuing to hover at high levels.

Colombia

The production of chemicals are widespread and legitimate in Colombia. Chemical companies have governmental permission to import or export these substances, which makes it difficult for authorities to prove that these chemicals are intended for illicit drug production. Since the 1970s, Colombia has also been home to many drug trafficking organizations. The government of Colombia has since tightened restrictions on specific chemicals and implemented the prohibition of certain chemicals.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UNODC assists Member States in developing legislations on drugs and has established three UN conventions namely the "Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, as amended by the 1972 protocol", "Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971", and Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988". The organization promotes programs to address issues associated with the illegal drugs market and also provides studies and analyses on market. The World Drug Report is published annually by the UNODC and gathers data on the production and consumption of illegal drugs.

Afghanistan

Acetic anhydride (AA), a key chemical used in producing illegal drugs is smuggled into Afghanistan each year by criminal groups. The chemical is re-packaged and re-labelled to hide the identity of the shipper. Currently, limited police and administration have been able to hamper the transportation of these substances.

Peru

Peru is a major importer of precursor chemicals used to produce cocaine including acetone, sulfuric acid, and calcium oxide. These chemicals follow an illicit transportation route. The government of Peru has implemented legislations to monitor and control the production and transportation of chemical precursors. Additionally, Peru has participated in enforcement strategy conferences with neighboring countries to address chemical diversion. However, due to the complexity of drug cartels and the wide networks these organizations have access to, the issue remains largely unresolved and must be addressed.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1800s	Chinese immigrants arriving in California were exposed to opium smoking.
December 17, 1914	The Harrison Act of 1914 made the use of opium and cocaine outside of medicinal purposes illegal. However, the use of illicit drugs continued.
1965 - 1970	The Vietnam War caused a boost in heroin being smuggled into the United States, and by 1971, 15 percent of Vietnam soldiers were heroin addicts.
1970-1975	The Medellin Cartel, an illicit drug organization based in Colombia began operating during this time, and illegal drug trade became an opportunity to make money.
1980	The U.S. Mexican border was a major transport route for illicit drugs into the United States during this time and methamphetamine was introduced.
1996	Newspapers published information claiming that the CIA was involved in drug smuggling. These claims have not been confirmed and continue to be debated today.
2000 - Present	The illicit drug trade and its presence will continue to be addressed internationally by governments. Tom Wainwright, an editor of The Economist, highlights an important distinction, emphasizing, “The choice that I think we face isn’t really a choice between a world without drugs and a world with drugs. I think the choice we really face is between a world where drugs are controlled by governments and prescribed by pharmacists and doctors, and a world where they’re dealt by the mafia, and given that choice, I think the former sounds more appealing.”

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has developed various programs against the power of drug cartels in less economically developed countries. Two main methods have been developed: first, enhancing law enforcement capacities, and second, reliant on illicit drug crops. While both have achieved some success, most are burdened with numerous problems and, thus far, have experienced limited success overall. The main areas focus by UNODC have been law enforcement. The organization offers technical assistance, training,

and resources to help the LEDCs develop effective and transparent judicial and policing institutions. Programs such as the Global Program against Organized Crime seek to provide tools and competent means for the local law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute the crimes committed due to drugs. The latter, for example, has allowed countries like Colombia to develop specialized anti-narcotics groups and to improve inter-agency coordination. Another example is the Container Control Program, which was initiated jointly with the World Customs Organization, drug shipment interdiction through the strengthening of customs and border security. Tangible results of these activities disrupted trafficking routes and arrested high-level operatives of the cartels. However, systemic corruption and underfunded judicial systems often undermine such successes and continue to allow the cartels to operate. Alternative livelihoods form another important pillar in the UNODC strategy, especially in rural communities where either coca, poppy, or cannabis crops are grown. Its “Alternation Development Program” encourages farmers to leave illicit crop cultivation behind and head toward legal and sustainable alternatives, such as coffee, cacao, or other cash crops. This approach tries to eliminate one of the factors that breed cartel influence: economic desperation in rural areas. For example, in Afghanistan, the UNODC worked toward decreasing opium cultivation by introducing the farmers to a more lucrative and less resource-intensive means of farming: saffron farming. Likewise, in Bolivia, small programs are generally showing some bright promise about the production of quinoa. Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Transitioning to legal crops often requires significant upfront investment, reliable access to markets, and infrastructure improvements—resources that many LEDCs lack. Additionally, cartels often retaliate violently against farmers who abandon illicit crops, deterring participation in these programs. These factors have limited the scalability and long-term sustainability of alternative livelihood programs. Overall, though specific instances of success can be identified within UNODC programs, their broader effectiveness remains practically hampered by ongoing corruption, weak institutions, and the socio-economic issues of LEDCs. Their underlying causes of cartel influence, such as poverty and governance problems, must be critically tackled to the core, while at the same time efforts against drug cartels need to be all-rounded and multi-pronged. These solutions will require more international cooperation, capacity building, and investment in economic development if they ever are effectively put into place.

Another previous attempt was the National Anti-drug Strategy introduced by the Mexican government in 2017. Instead of the previous militarized approaches, this strategy shifted to a more comprehensive model that highlighted social development, health of the public, and people's participation together with law enforcement. These changes brought various beneficial outcomes. For instance, the increased focus on drug addiction as a public health issue created more awareness and discourse about rehabilitation services. However, the community development initiatives focused on providing other means of livelihood and education, which consequently lessened local dependence on drug trafficking. In addition, international cooperation was increasingly characterized by joint efforts against drug cartels. However, this strategy faced major challenges and limitations, including persistent drug-related violence and high-profile incidents that underlined still-current insecurity. Corruption within law enforcement and government institutions remained a critical barrier, undermining proposed reforms and community programs by dint of their sheer ineffectiveness. But beyond that, even the flexibility within a drug cartel structure allowed them to operate with near impunity, and indication of poor implementation of the strategy to deal with the now-entrenched drug trafficking in the country.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening Institutions

- Provide training and resources to law enforcement and judicial systems:
 - Cartels thrive on weak institutions and corrupt officials to sustain their operations. Anti-crime training for law enforcement personnel on investigation techniques, anti-money laundering processes, and human rights practices is very essential in dismantling these networks. It is also important that judicial systems are equipped with what they need to prosecute the leaders of cartels in a transparent way to prevent corruption and enhance accountability. Inter-program development for collaboration among agencies or international funding mechanisms could be discussed by the delegates.
- Create independent anti-corruption bodies:
 - Encouraging LEDCs to establish independent agencies dedicated to investigating corruption, particularly within law enforcement and judiciary systems, can help address systemic vulnerabilities exploited by cartels.

Economic Development

- Promote sustainable development programs for alternative livelihoods:
 - Cartels have long histories of thriving in rural areas that offer limited opportunities for economic betterment. It is here that sustainable development programs should further incentivize farmers away from growing illicit crops, such as coca or opium poppies, and toward legal alternatives. Subsidies, available market entry, and infrastructural investment would be ways that governments and international organizations could incentivize this behavior. For example, crop diversification programs have seen success in Bolivia and Colombia but face scaling issues based on long-term investments and reducing farmers' risk from cartel retaliation.
- Focus on infrastructure and market access:
 - The building of roads, irrigation, and access to markets both nationally and internationally for legal crops will further encourage alternative livelihoods. Delegates may discuss how international trade agreements or partnerships can support these efforts.

International Cooperation

- Enhance cross-boarder intelligence sharing:
 - Drug cartels work on a transnational basis, taking advantage of the discrepancy in coordination among countries. Stronger intelligence sharing via regional or international task forces can break up trafficking networks. The UNODC could expand initiatives such as the Container Control Program to ensure greater coordination in areas like Latin America and Southeast Asia.
- Trace illicit financial flows:

- Cartels rely on money laundering through global financial systems. Closer cooperation among states, financial services, and bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force can identify and confiscate proceeds of crime. Delegates can focus on providing a framework for the LEDCs to increase resources and expertise in financial forensic skills.

Education and Prevention

- Launch awareness campaigns to reduce drug demand in consumer nations:
 - The global demand for drugs fuels the power of cartels. Consumer nations must take responsibility by investing in public education campaigns about the consequences of drug use, not just domestically but also globally. Reducing demand can weaken the profitability of cartel operations.
- Educate vulnerable populations in LEDCs:
 - Most of the times, many rural communities fall victim to cartel influence because they do not know any better or have options. Programs should be in place by governments and NGOs that help educate these communities of the dangers of cartel involvement, among other economic opportunities available. Schools could teach these young people the dangers of cartel recruitment.

Technology-based solutions

- Invest in technologies to monitor shipments and border security:
 - Drug cartels find extremely sophisticated means to transport narcotics across borders. Advanced scanning technologies, AI-based surveillance, and real-time data analytics will go a long way in finding and intercepting shipments. Delegates can thus advocate for international funding and expertise that shall assist LEDCs adopt these technologies.
- Use blockchain to track supply chains and financial transactions:
 - Emerging technologies such as blockchain can trace financial transactions and improve transparency in supply chains. This could reduce money laundering and help governments identify cartel-linked financial activities.

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Appendix or Appendices

- I. https://www.oas.org/en/sms/cicad/maritime-narcotrafficking/docs/4.%20MEXICO_Captain%20Carranza-ENG.pdf (Illicit Drug Trafficking by Waterway in the Americas) *Maritime drug trafficking routes play an important role in the transportation of illicit drugs, which can be an important source of information to delegates when identifying solutions to combat the issue.*
- II. https://in.ewu.edu/chst-content/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/10/Global-Crime-Narcoballads-FGLC_A_201341_P.pdf (The Psychology and Recruitment Process of Drug Cartels) *The psychology behind why specific communities are vulnerable to being attracted by joining drug cartels may be helpful towards crafting solutions to discourage the involvement in such illicit organizations.*