

# United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Enhancing Global Coordination in  
Combating Drug Trafficking Networks



<b>Forum</b>	United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs
<b>Issue:</b>	Enhancing global coordination in combating drug trafficking networks
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## Introduction

Drug trafficking is a growing global concern, it undermines public health, destabilizes national security and weakens economies. The drug trafficking industry brings civil unrest and corruption to government systems, and often uses mass violence and fear to prevent enforcement of law. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the illegal drug trafficking industry has a value of 32 billion USD<sup>[1]</sup>, the majority of this money going into further developing crime organisations and narco-terrorism.

The illegal drug trade contributes heavily to organised crime, providing the funding needed to further develop these groups. Criminal organisations have heavy impacts on a nation's economy, they deduct potential tax revenue through black market selling, worsen living standards and discourage potential citizens from moving to these areas, all this only further strengthening the grip the criminal organisation has on the area.

Despite numerous attempts to establish international treaties, task forces and other organisations to combat drug trafficking, international cooperation is insufficient and the global response is fragmented. Varying legal frameworks, under-equipped governments and limited intelligence sharing allow the spread of drug trafficking groups. The increased use of modern technologies such as encrypted communication and cryptocurrency help criminal organisations avoid detection and require more modern solutions if drug trafficking is to be stopped.

To effectively address the growing threat of drug trafficking networks, coordinated international action is essential. This includes strengthening anti-money laundering efforts, greater



enforcement of border control, harmonization of legal frameworks, and the increased oversight of cyberware – such as the dark web – to prevent its use for malicious intent. Equally important is the development of international information sharing platforms regarding transnational criminal organisations.

This report will outline key parties and the role of the United Nations as well as other stakeholder nations. Furthermore this report proposes potential solutions and examines previous attempts to resolve the issue of drug trafficking through international cooperation.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking is the illicit trade of substances that are subject to prohibition laws. This process involves cultivation, manufacture, distribution and the sale of substances. More specifically drug trafficking is on a major level, typically large amounts transported internationally, in contrast to drug dealing which is on a minor level.

### Transnational Organised Crime

Transnational organised crime is organised crime coordinated across various national borders. Organised crime refers to criminal activities that are planned and controlled, typically carried out by large organisations.

### Narco-Terrorism

Unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims, with specific relation to illegal drug trade.

### Money Laundering

Money laundering is the act of disguising illicit income alongside legal income so as to avoid suspicions of government agencies. Typically criminal organisations would use this to hide illicit drug related income (*see appendix VII*).

### Cartel



A structured criminal organization made up of independent groups involved in the trafficking and distribution of illicit drugs. Designed to control territory and supply on a large scale often through fear and violence.

### Black Market

A market facilitating the transaction of illegal goods or services, or to avoid government oversight and taxes, or both. The black market typically involves the selling of illicit drugs. In modern times the black market is more commonly found online, on the “dark web”.

## General Overview

Drug trafficking and drug sales are estimated to generate hundreds of billions of dollars annually<sup>[2]</sup>, with the largest trafficking networks extending from Myanmar, Mexico, Columbia and Afghanistan, these contrast with the drug consumer continents of the world, most notably; North America, Europe and Oceania. This money goes primarily to a handful of multinational criminal organisations, cartels and mafias. A lack of effective national governance due to internal conflicts and insufficient international support further exacerbates the issue of drug trafficking.

### Impact of drug consumption on affected regions

Drug trafficking causes widespread drug use and addiction, particularly in vulnerable groups such as the young or the homeless. The most commonly used illicit drug<sup>1</sup> is cannabis<sup>[5]</sup>, a relatively harmless drug (*see appendix I*). Cannabis is said to be less harmful than alcohol<sup>[6]</sup> and has been made legal for recreation in many countries. On the contrary cocaine and MDMA are the 2nd and 3rd most used, these drugs are among the most addicting substances known today, and have extreme adverse effects. Abuse of these substances can lead to stroke, various cancers, lung disease and heart disease<sup>[8]</sup>. Drug abuse has also been shown to impact a person's personality, over time changing who they are entirely<sup>[9]</sup>. Addiction can ruin lives, tear families apart and destroy entire communities if left unchecked.

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1- Cannabis is legal for recreation in the following nation states: Uruguay, Georgia, South Africa, Canada, Mexico, Malta, Mexico, Thailand, Luxembourg, Germany, Netherlands, United States of America (24 of the 50 states) and parts of Australia. Due to a majority of nation states deeming cannabis as illicit it has been referred to as such.



Drug empires spread like wildfire, growing in their control and influence. A good example of this is Joaquín Guzmán (also known as El Chapo). Over multiple years in power Guzmán was able to gain control over an area in Southeast Asia called “The golden triangle” (see appendix VI), this region consisted of three nations; Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. The golden triangle is known for its thriving opium economy and has since become a pillar location for the narcotics industry worldwide<sup>[18]</sup>.

Unlike Pablo Escobar, Guzmán stayed out of public view and higher level government and maintained power through localised control of law enforcement in towns and cities. Guzmán used an extreme level of violence to maintain control and pushed citizens to either be complicit with his actions or in many cases, join the cartel. As a result, Guzmán destroyed the legal section of the economy in these countries for years to come, with permanent damage to the local communities.

### Advancing difficulty of stopping the drug trade

Despite international cooperation to stop drug trafficking, criminal organisations have developed new methods of getting around both legal and physical barriers, using more advanced money laundering, encrypted communications and more complex trafficking routes. These networks are increasingly more reliant on digital platforms such as the dark web<sup>[16]</sup>, and typically use cryptocurrency. By using these methods traffickers make government financial oversight and control incredibly difficult.

Additionally use of synthetic drugs – which can be produced in small mobile labs as opposed to traditional crops – are becoming increasingly more popular among illicit drug manufacturers, these smaller labs are much harder to trace and are often dispersed in order to make production harder to stop. The constant evolution of these methods often outpaces the rate at which governments are able to adapt, making global collaboration imperative.

As traffickers continue to innovate and grow in their methods the ability to monitor their actions becomes increasingly more difficult, let alone dismantle. Any method or route that is stopped is quickly altered and changed to prevent further action by law enforcement agencies. Criminal organisations not only adapt their logistics and methods of trafficking but their internal structuring, becoming more decentralised and segregated, this allows more individual operations to take place, preventing the total collapse of the organisation in the event of one operations takeover. Without sustained global cooperation law enforcement remains one step behind the criminal underworlds ever developing methods.



### Lack of international communication

One of the main factors preventing effective prevention of drug trafficking is a lack of transnational communication among affected states. Despite the existence of organisations such as INTERPOL or the UNODC, national law enforcement agencies often operate independently with little to no cross border communication. Political tensions and security concerns often discourage these agencies, and often believe that their issues are isolated and there is little need for communication.

This disjoint approach is not effective for long term results and allows for criminal organisations to exploit and take advantage of blind spots between national jurisdictions. Traffickers use methods such as operating across multiple borders, funneling money through international banking systems, and coordinating internationally through digital communication to take advantage of these flaws.

The absence of international cooperation also undermines the efforts to take global or regional threat assessments. When countries fail to provide data or refuse to share invaluable case insights it allows shifts in production, emerging narcotic use and the growth of criminal organisations to go undetected, leading to permanent action only being taken after issues become severe. This fragmentation leads to inconsistent response to threats, with some nations over-prioritising local enforcement and some even being unaware of growing threats. Moreover, with consistent, coordinated action, gaps can be filled in enforcement and prevent the growth of cartels before they become a major multinational issue.

### Corruption and legal complicity

Criminal organisations often rely on corruption, legal oversight and judicial manipulation to bypass enforcement. In many cases, government officials such as police, military, border control and even judges will be on payroll or indebted to criminal organisations, leading to the further facilitation of criminal activities. For example, in Colombia in the mid 1980s Pablo Escobar ruled over governments and police organisations not through direct political power but through fear (*see appendix IV*). Escobar demonstrated his power over the government which eventually led to their unofficial submission to the Medellín cartel<sup>[17]</sup>.

Joaquín Guzmán is the most infamous drug lord in history<sup>[10]</sup>, and with his influence he was able to avoid extradition and escape from prison twice, in one case Guzmán simply walked out of prison<sup>[16]</sup> with no opposition. Finally, on January 8th 2016, Guzman was arrested for the last time by



Mexican authorities, where he was extradited to the US and locked away in a supermax prison in Colorado, where he still resides to this day<sup>[20]</sup>. Many current day criminal organisations attempt to implement these fears to force submission and compliance as well as ensure legal immunity.

This all highlights the extreme influence that drug empires can have even on the very systems we rely on for peace and justice. Combating drug trafficking therefore requires government reform and measures put in place to prevent corruption.

## Major Parties Involved

### UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)

The UNODC is a global agency tasked with the support of UN member nations regarding illicit drugs, crime and terrorism. This agency promotes transnational agreements and establishes legal frameworks in order to bring justice to criminal organisations. The UNODC is a central platform for international cooperation regarding the tackling of drug trafficking networks.

### INTERPOL (International Police) or ICPO (International Criminal Police Organization)

INTERPOL (or the ICPO) is an organization that facilitates the international cooperation of different national police agencies to prevent and control crime. This is often used to capture and extradite fleeing criminals or take down transnational crime organisations.

### United States of America (USA) & Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)

The USA plays a key role in both the combat of drug trafficking and the participation in its consumption. The USA has the largest drug enforcement agency in the world<sup>[10]</sup>, the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration). The DEA has foreign officers in 68 different countries and is a big player in helping prevent trafficking. The United States also however is the largest consumer of illicit drugs, with an estimate of \$100 billion being spent on illicit drugs annually<sup>[11]</sup>.

### Colombia

Colombia has been ridden with drug production and criminal gangs for many years. Colombia's stands as the lead producer of cocaine world wide, providing 70% of global supply and producing nearly two thousand metric tonnes of cocaine annually<sup>[12]</sup>. The Colombian government is in collaboration with other governments and agencies to attempt to tackle these issues, most notably would be the USA.



## Mexico

Mexico is key for both drug movement and production. Due to Mexico's low standard of living many resort to joining criminal gangs, this has led to incredibly large cartels and gangs forming. Mexican cartels control 70% of the foreign illicit drugs entering the US<sup>[13]</sup>. The Mexican government works closely with the US and other nations to break down these gangs and stop drug trafficking.

## European Union (EU)

The EU works closely with its member states, coordinating drug policies to minimise use of drugs. The European Union is not known for any significant amount of illicit drug production however they do stand as the second highest consumer of illicit drugs, with the EU spending a total of roughly \$25 Billion USD on illicit drugs annually<sup>[22]</sup>.

## Europol

Europol is similar to INTERPOL however it only operates within the member nations of the EU, it coordinates national police agencies and helps break down transnational criminal organisations.

## INCB

Established in 1968 with the “Single Convention on Narcotics”, the INCB is a semi-judicial independent body, overseeing the implementation of UN drug control conventions and ensuring they are followed accordingly<sup>[21]</sup>.

## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of Event
December 19 <sup>th</sup> 1988	Adoption of the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Vienna Convention).
June 26 <sup>th</sup> 1990	Establishment of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP). <i>(Merged into the UNODC in 2002).</i>
October 8 <sup>th</sup> 1997	Creation of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), done through the merging of the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and the Centre for International Crime Prevention (CICP). This was renamed to the United Nations on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2001.



November 15 <sup>th</sup> 2000	Adoption of the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention).
December 11 <sup>th</sup> 2006	Launch of Mexico's "War on Drugs".
September 15 <sup>th</sup> 2012	Launch of the UNODC "SMART" (Synthetics Monitoring: Analysis, Reporting and Trends) Programme ( <i>See Appendix II</i> ).
February 22 <sup>nd</sup> 2014	Capture of "the largest drug lord in history", Joaquín Guzmán (also known as El Chapo) in Mexico ( <i>See Appendix III</i> ).
April 19 <sup>th</sup> 2016	UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on the World Drug Problem.
October 8 <sup>th</sup> 2018	Operation Lionfish by INTERPOL results in 1,300 arrests and seizure of 55 tons of drugs across 93 countries.

## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

### Resolutions

- CND Resolution, March 16th, 2012 (E/CN.7/2012/CRP.1)
  - Strengthened international cooperation to address the links between illicit drug trafficking and illicit firearm trafficking and recognizing that the drug problem remains relevant as a global concern.<sup>[15]</sup>
- UNGASS Outcome Document, April 21st, 2016 (A/S-30/L.1)
  - Promoting a more balanced view on the management of illicit drug use, emphasising human rights, health and harm reduction. Contains over 100 operational recommendations focused on reducing supply and demand for illicit drugs.
- CND Resolution, March 22nd, 2019 (A/RES/S-20/2)
  - Advancing effective and innovative approaches through internationally cooperative action in order to address the growing concern of misuse of non-medical synthetic drugs and opioids.
- UNGA Resolution, June 10th, 1998 (A/RES/S-20/2)
  - Initiated a ten year long plan focused on reduction of drug use, increased law enforcement on drug trafficking and development alternatives.



## Conventions

- Vienna Convention, December 19th, 1988 (E/CONF.82/15)
  - A complex legal framework for extradition, seizure of stock, financial surveillance and precursor control. Targets links between drug trafficking and organized crime.
- Palermo Convention, November 15th, 2000 (A/RES/55/25)
  - Aims to combat all forms of multinational organized crime through international cooperation, joint information networking, witness protection and extradition agreements.
- Single Convention on Narcotics, March 30th, 1961 (E/RES/834)
  - An incredibly important and foundational treaty regarding the use, trade and production of narcotic drugs. This convention established the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), this organisation manages threat reports, promotes access to medicine and controls international narcotic drug trade.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

### UNGA 1998 drug resolution

The 1998 drug resolution, also known as “The Political Declaration and Action Plan on the World Drug Problem”, was a major agreement among member states in the General Assembly to attempt to reduce supply and demand of illicit drugs. The agreement was aimed at eliminating drug crops, strengthening enforcement and expanding treatment by 2008. While this resolution created a foundation for future drug combatting efforts and raised the importance of combating drug use and the trafficking organisation behind it, its unrealistic deadlines and lack of proper attention to public health made it not succeed as hoped.

### Paris pact initiative

The Paris pact was a UNODC led partnership among over 80 member states and organisations to reduce trafficking of Afghan opiates. The pact aimed to strengthen border control, increase intelligence sharing, and coordinate international cooperation. This pact was a success in that it



improved communication and cooperation among member states, however the uneven commitment of member states and persistent instability made long term effects scarce.

### INTERPOL's "Lionfish" operation

The "Lionfish" operation was a coordinated effort by international police agencies in INTERPOL targeting drug trafficking along maritime routes. Launched in 2013, this operation led to the seizure of many illicit drug stashes and hundreds of arrests. This operation was a success in that it was able to disrupt major trafficking operations and introduced the effectiveness of multinational cooperation, however it was limited in its finite nature, allowing criminal groups to adapt and rethink trafficking methods and routes in response.

### African Union's Plan of Action on Drug Control

The goal of this framework was to coordinate and facilitate the cooperation of all African states, improving national drug policies, increasing border security, and educating its citizens of the effects illicit drugs have. While this project did succeed in educating its people and fostering international cooperation among the African countries, its lack of funding and weak implementation made results scarce.

### UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs

Launched in 2022, the United Nations toolkit on synthetic drugs was a way to help member states with the growing issue of fentanyl and methamphetamine usage. It provides resources on law enforcement, treatment, chemical regulation and in depth information regarding the illicit drugs in question. The success of this project is notable in its information sharing and attempt at coordinating methods of combating illicit drug use; however its lack of definitive action means lower class states must fund the changes themselves and often don't have the resources to do so (*See Appendix V*).

## Possible Solutions

### Establish treatment and rehabilitation programmes

Through the development of greater treatment and more effective rehabilitation it is possible to reduce demand for drugs among communities, prevent spread of addiction, and potentially save



the lives of those who may be killed with continued drug use. By decreasing the demand for illicit drugs, criminal organisations would naturally begin to lose a large amount of income. This can loosen the grip that these trafficking organisations have on communities.

#### **Enforcement of extradition treaties**

Enforcement of legal proceedings ensures that criminals will be fairly tried and prosecuted for the crimes they commit, regardless of the country in which they are arrested. Additionally, by allowing more stable governments to process high status criminals judicial corruption is significantly less likely.

#### **Increase education regarding illicit drug use in at risk communities**

Education is often scarce in lower income communities, this lack of knowledge can be a dangerous road for those in communities littered with illicit drug trade. By taking drugs without the knowledge of its addictive and harmful properties it can already ensure its grip on your life, this often happens at a young age for most as they get influenced by adults around them.

#### **Enhanced international information sharing**

Almost all drug trade is connected in some way to a larger multinational drug trafficking network, by only examining one nation's issues it does not address the source of the problem and is incredibly ineffective. Coordinated data sharing can allow governments to identify sources of illicit drug related activity as well as prevent border exploitation.

#### **Establishment of international joint task forces**

Joint task forces between nations in combination with information from each member state allow for increased efficiency in how criminal networks are tackled and potentially prevent further illegal trafficking between borders. Such task forces would ideally be involved with countries that possess governments unable to independently tackle these issues. These would likely operate under the direction of INTERPOL and/or a UN body such as the UNCND.

#### **Support of economic development and government stability**

Many countries are unable to defend themselves against the control of drug cartels, they are ridden with corruption and do not have the capital to rebuild themselves. Investing in these states



will allow them to prevent further criminalisation, rebuild their economy and hopefully get rid of the criminal gangs which reside there. In order to stop drug trafficking at its roots, this is imperative.



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## Appendix or Appendices

- I. “How harmful is marijuana?” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK224396/>
  - Summary: Marijuana is similar to tobacco in regards to its respiratory effects, this includes chronic bronchitis, reduced lung function and lung cancer. Marijuana produces more tar than a cigarette due to lack of filtration but due to its lack of a directly addictive substance such as nicotine in vapes and cigarettes it is often consumed less. Long term studies are still underway but evidence suggests that smoking cannabis is not harmless, despite its distinct safety compared to other substances.
- II. “Global SMART Programme. UNODC” <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/smart.html>
  - Summary: The SMART programme quote; “*aims to address these very needs through enhancing the capacity of Member States and authorities in priority regions. It aims to do so by assisting Member States to generate, manage, analyse and report synthetic drugs information, and to apply this scientific evidence-based knowledge to design policies and programmes.* “. This source provides in depth data on drug crime and the reasons behind this programme.



- III. “Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joaquin-Guzman-Loera>
- Summary: Said to be responsible for the deaths of over 34,000 people, Guzman stands as one of the largest if not the largest drug dealer in history. The U.S. DEA referred to him as “the godfather of the drug world” and estimates his influence to have been larger than the infamous “Pablo Escobar”.
- IV. “Pablo Escobar” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pablo-Escobar>
- Summary: Pablo Escobar was an infamous Colombian drug lord. Escobar was the leader of the Medellín cartel and oversaw an incredible amount of violence and death while he ruled and eventually he decided to run for mayor after having a seat at congress in 1982. Escobar died in 1993 shortly after celebrating his 44th birthday, leading to the collapse of the Medellín cartel and ending the horrific rule of the cartel in Colombia.
- V. “United Nations Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs”
- <https://syntheticdrugs.unodc.org/syntheticdrugs/en/toolkit-index.html>
- Summary: This toolkit is made and provided by the UNODC, it helps to provide vital information on the management, provision and oversight of illicit drugs. Member states of the UN are encouraged to use the resources provided here to implement policies to reduce the supply and/or demand of illicit synthetic drugs.
- VI. “Heroin Trafficking in the Golden Triangle”
- <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/heroin-trafficking-golden-triangle>
- Summary: The golden triangle—spanning parts of Burma, China, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar—is a major hub for drug trafficking and a key source for opium and heroin. Heroin gained popularity in this region following World War II and especially in the Vietnam war. Despite attempts to stop this since the 1960s, aid from the US has been withdrawn amid concerns it funded insurgency, fueling even greater heroin production and use in the region.
- VII. “What Is Money Laundering?”
- <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/moneylaundering.asp>
- Summary: Money laundering is the process of illegally concealing the origin of money obtained through illicit activities like drug trade. Methods of money laundering typically include the use of businesses with hard to trace income, these often include cash and service based businesses. A criminal or criminal group would disguise the



illegally earned income alongside the legal business earnings, pay tax and then spend it without the suspicion of government agencies (for example; the IRS).

