

UN Expert Group Meeting on Alternative Development
The Future of Alternative Development
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Panel session 1:

The evolving context of alternative development: Expert Insights

I would like to thank the organizers of this expert group meeting for inviting me and giving me this opportunity to speak.

In my short presentation, I would like to address the implementation of alternative development from a human rights and gender perspective.

Before going any further, I would like to acknowledge the discussion paper, *Human Rights, Illicit Cultivation and Alternative Development: Connecting the Dots*,¹ authored by Martin Jelsma, which is being disseminated here and provides the basis for some of the arguments I will make.

By way of introduction, I think that the agenda for this expert meeting reflects the evolution of the alternative development concept. The incorporation of themes such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and applying alternative development principles to urban settings shows that the discussions we are having have advanced.

However, looking back over the evolution of key documents from the 1998 UNGASS, the 2009 Political Declaration and Action Plan and of course the 2016 UNGASS Outcome Document, I was struck that the need to prioritize human rights and to shift to using human development indicators for evaluating progress are recurring themes.

We have to ask ourselves the question, to what extent have the advances in the discussion among the experts convened here translated into changes on the ground? We have to recognize that some of the key principles we have been talking about for some time now remain lofty ideals, rarely and barely put into practice.

To illustrate, I would like to throw out three challenges or ideas to stimulate discussion and debate over the course of this meeting.

¹ This briefing paper will be published shortly and can be found on the website of the Transnational Institute's Drugs and Democracy Program, <https://www.tni.org/en/work-area/drugs-and-democracy>.

(ONE) Gender mainstreaming is now firmly rooted in the drug policy discourse and official documents; the challenge now is to implement it in practice.

Little research is available on the role of women in the cultivation of crops for the illicit market, or the gender dimensions of alternative development programs more broadly.

While some countries, such as Peru, have made progress in implementing gender-based alternative development programs, much more attention needs to be given to the incorporation of women into alternative development programs.

All of us here know that men and women living in areas where drug crops are cultivated are among the most marginalized and poorest sectors of society. However, women face even greater socioeconomic challenges than their male counterparts and may be the victims of gender-based violence. They have even less access to education and gender-appropriate healthcare.

Because of the discrimination women face in patriarchal societies, they often lack access to property rights, to credit and to economic opportunities more broadly, greatly limiting their social mobility.

Women living in these areas have two jobs – they have to balance their domestic responsibilities with economic activities in order to contribute to the household income.

In some cases in Latin America, women have been able to secure an income stream directly from coca cultivation, either as single heads of households or by having a separate plot of land that they farm in addition to that of the family, giving them some independence.

The additional income generated by coca cultivation allows women to provide for the family's basic needs and invest in their children's education, health care, improved housing and the like. Hence, it is particularly important that alternative development programs take into account the specific needs of women.

Women must be empowered to play leadership roles in their communities and be included in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of alternative development programs.

Finally, a portion of alternative development funds should be designated for strategic projects identified by women and any funding and support should be provided directly to them.

(TWO) The “challenge” of implementing alternative development and repressive drug control efforts simultaneously.

We have spent a lot of time in these meetings talking about proper sequencing. The UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development state:

To ensure, when considering crop control measures, that small-farmer households have opportunities for viable and sustainable licit livelihoods so that the measures may be properly sequenced in a sustainable fashion...

In other words, if you eliminate a poor farmer’s primary source of income *before* an alternative income source is in place, that farmer is simply going to return to coca or poppy production. He or she has no other alternative. Any short-term gain is quickly reversed.

There are two points I would like to make related to this.

First, where has proper sequencing been implemented in practice? Thailand spearheaded the concept and Bolivia developed its own approach with the objective of containing cultivation. In both countries, their different approaches were quite successful given their local context.

But in other countries, prior eradication, either voluntary or forced, is a precondition to participation in alternative development programs.

So “proper sequencing” remains the exception to the rule, even as the concept has evolved and become enshrined in the UN Guiding Principles on Alternative Development.

Second, the UN Guiding Principles once again place alternative development as “complementary” to “law enforcement and illicit crop elimination,” rather than as the primary means of creating conditions that allow for improved livelihoods and ultimately the reduction of coca and poppy crops.

It is time to acknowledge that effective and equitable economic development programs cannot succeed if forced eradication is being conducted in the same place. That is not to say that there should be no drug control-related law enforcement. But that is most effective if focused higher up on the drug trafficking chain.

At the start of my professional career, I worked for a development agency in Peru, funding, monitoring and evaluating rural and urban development projects. The first lesson I learned was the importance of community engagement and involvement every step of the way.

Small farmers must be seen as partners in development, not criminals. I can't speak to Asia but in Latin America, all coca and poppy producing countries criminalize cultivation in some form. Often, no distinction is made in the law between small farmers and larger cultivators who may be connected to criminal networks.

(THREE) The challenge of shifting the debate on human rights and alternative development to recognize that states have the *obligation* to ensure that its citizens' human rights are not violated. This includes the right to an adequate standard of living and to be free from hunger.

References to human rights and alternative development are often put in the context of ensuring that human rights are taken into account in implementing drug control programs.

But as argued in the discussion paper cited previously, these are not policy choices per se; but rather obligations that need to be respected.

UN member states are bound by their obligations under the Charter of the United Nations to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The Charter explicitly states that in the event of conflicts between states' obligations under the Charter and other international agreements, their Charter obligations take precedence. Yet in practice, inherent contradictions and inconsistencies exist in the application of international drug control and human rights treaties.

Eradication prior to the establishment of alternative livelihoods pushes people deeper into poverty, and fosters human rights violations, social unrest, instability and violence, among other negative impacts.

It exacerbates stigmatization and marginalization of small-scale producers, and can result in imprisonment, displacement, and the criminalization of indigenous and traditional cultural practices.

I'll sum up this argument by quoting directly from the discussion paper I referred to earlier: "People have the right to be free from hunger, to an adequate standard of living, to live a life in dignity, and to social security. When states fail in meeting their obligations to secure these rights, a strong argument can be made that they cannot interfere when people as a consequence are forced to find their own ways to do so, even if that means their involvement in illicit cultivation in absence of viable licit alternatives."

It is important to note that these obligations apply to donors as well as to States.

Though I do not have time now to say more about this, it is also important to point out that there is an undeniable conflict between the obligations imposed by the UN drug control system and indigenous rights.

The Single Convention requires states to abolish all traditional, cultural and ceremonial uses of coca, cannabis and opium, while such uses are protected under international human rights law relating to cultural, religious and indigenous rights.

To conclude, we will soon have an important tool for ensuring that alternative development and drug control efforts more broadly are carried out with full respect for the human rights of small farmers and others. The UN Development Program (UNDP) and the International Centre on Human Rights and Drug Policy at the University of Essex have a project to elaborate *International Human Rights Guidelines on Drug Control*, including sections devoted to cultivation, rural development and indigenous uses of psychoactive plants.

Thank you.