



# Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies

ISSN: 2963-1394 (Online) Journal Homepage: <https://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/hjsis/>

## The Dilemma between Environment and Economy: Combatting the Challenges of Illicit Drugs in Laos

Muhammad Ismail Ash Shiddiq, Regina Farah Nafilah

To cite this article:

Shiddiq, M. I. A., & Nafilah, R. F. (2022). The Dilemma between Environment and Economy: Combatting the Challenges of Illicit Drugs in Laos. *Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies (HJSIS)*, 1(1), 39-44.

To link to this article:

<https://doi.org/10.20956/hjsis.v1i1.24846>

Published by: Hasanuddin University

Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies (HJSIS) is an open access, and international peer-reviewed journal. Our main objective is to disseminate current and original articles from researchers and practitioners that enrich understanding, and contributes to the past, current, and future discourse and issues of strategic and international studies relevant to the Indo-Pacific region. The article should address multidisciplinary research on theoretical and/or empirical questions in the topic around: strategic studies, international relations, international politics and security, international political economy, transnational society, international diplomacy and negotiation, international and regional organization, governance & democracy, terrorism and transnational organized crimes. HJSIS encourage a robust analysis and rigorous methodologies (quantitative or qualitative or mix-method) written in an engaging and analytical article style, so that it promote new ideas, discourse, controversy, and solid reflection theoretically or practically toward Indo-Pacific's strategic and international studies issues.



Hasanuddin  
University

## The Dilemma between Environment and Economy: Combatting the Challenges of Illicit Drugs in Laos

Muhammad Ismail Ash Shiddiq<sup>1</sup>, Regina Farah Nafilah<sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

### Abstract

This research aims to analyze 1) the Lao government's responses in coping with illicit drugs in Laos; 2) the responses of IGO, particularly UNODC, in addressing the illicit drugs issue in Laos; (3) the impacts of opium farming on the economy and environment in Laos. The results of this research reveal that the Lao government is very committed to dealing with the illicit drugs issue, reflected by its involvement in international conventions and long-term national planning. However, these steps could not achieve maximum results as many former opium farmers in Laos could not find sustainable jobs, thus at risk of reverting to opium farming. Meanwhile, as IGO, UNODC played an essential role in assisting the Lao government in eliminating opium farming and creating sustainable jobs. The cooperation between UNODC and the Lao government improved the opium farming situation in Laos. However, the concern for the environment caused by opium farming has not been found, even though illegal opium farming causes deforestation, decreased biodiversity, and soil erosion.

### Key Words

Lao government, UNODC, illicit drugs, drug trafficking, opium farming, illegal opium

### 1. Introduction

Illicit drugs are a significant problem as drug trafficking has become a transnational issue. There is a high demand for this psychotropic substance, which translates to the illegal trafficking of drugs. At first, drugs were recommended in ancient Indian and Chinese manuscripts by inhaling or consuming drugs to relieve pain and treat various diseases (AIPACODD, 2021). However, the use of drugs has diverged as people seek happiness through consuming drugs which lead to unhealthy addiction and dangerous side effects such as heart attack and liver damage. As much as illicit drugs affect one's body, they also harm the environment. Those who produce illegal drugs mean they do not obey the law and regulations intended to protect the environment. The most apparent effect is deforestation because drug traffickers create irrational space for planting crops, even carving out trees for transporting, storing, and processing drugs (Chow & Lin, 2015).

One of the drugs that are susceptible to abuse is opium. Opium is the raw plant of narcotics, and it has been used by people to get drunk and to achieve pleasure. In order to ensure opium is not cultivated carelessly, the cultivation is regulated in Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961. In this respect, as one of the Golden Triangle countries which produced 70% of illegal opium, Laos was once the third-largest illicit opium producer in the world. Its geography and society's economic condition certainly make a substantial contribution to it. Laos is classified as a

\*CORRESPONDENCE Regina Farah Nafilah | regina.farah.nafilah@ut.ee | Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia.

developing country, and the lives of its people are also challenged by the rapid development, increasing their life needs. The cultivation of opium became an easy alternative for the People of Laos as they suffered from remoteness due to the lack of road access and opium offered them many opportunities since it was in high demand, including from their neighbouring countries, like Thailand and Vietnam (UNODC, 2009).

The Lao government has made many efforts to encounter opium farming by signing international agreements. Laos signed a Memorandum of Understanding with ASEAN countries related to drug trafficking to show their commitment to solving the issue. It did not stop within regional cooperation as Laos also ratified several international conventions such as Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs 1961, Convention on Psychotropic Substances 1971, Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988, and The 1972 protocol amending The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. The most crucial part is that the Lao government encouraged people to shift from poppy to coffee. However, the struggle was constant as it demanded former opium farmers a different set of skills. After a series of efforts, in 2006, the Lao government announced its success in decreasing the number of opium cultivation significantly (Gateway Foundation, 2021). The Lao government achieved a result of 26,837 hectares in 1998 to only 1,500 hectares in 2007.

The success of the Lao government in tackling illegal opium farming can not be credited only to them. Recognizing the problems of illicit drugs, the involvement of INGO is crucial to solving the problem. In this regard, UNODC has actively contributed much as an INGO focusing on preventing drug abuse. The role can be seen by the given advocacy from UNODC towards the Lao government in the national strategic plan to control opium cultivation in Laos, known as the Master Plan. This plan aims to increase the proliferation of production, trafficking, abuse, and criminal activity related to illicit drugs in Laos. With such endeavour, this research then sets the interrelationship of UNODC's role in encountering illicit drugs issue in Laos as the epicentre of analysis. Thus, this research focuses on answering two questions, covering (1) what are the Lao government's responses in coping with illicit drugs in Laos and (2) what are the responses of INGO, particularly UNODC, in realizing the illicit drugs issue in Laos and (3) what the impacts of opium farming to economy and environment in Laos are.

## **2. Research Method**

The type of research used in this research is descriptive qualitative. This method explains the interrelationship of UNODC's role with the Lao government in tackling the illicit drugs issue. The data collection technique used by the authors to acquire the necessary data for this research is the literature review. The method of collecting data is undertaken by examining various kinds of literature related to the problems studied, covering books, journals, documents, papers, reports, magazines, newspapers, and articles related to research problems. The data analysis technique used by the authors is the qualitative analysis technique. Quantitative data will be used to strengthen the explanation by analyzing the qualitative data. The problem will be described and explained based on the data and then find the interrelation of existing facts to make conclusions. The methodology used in writing is a deductive writing method. The authors will describe the problem in general, then narrow its scope of discussion, and create specific conclusions in analyzing the data afterwards.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

### **3.1. The Lao government's responses in dealing with illicit drugs issue in Laos**

Since 2005, it has been illegal to cultivate opium in Laos. However, this law did not result in a decrease in opium cultivation (IRIN, 2011). It was not easy for the people of Laos who had been

working as opium farmers to suddenly shift their jobs, explaining why opium cultivation was still growing even after the ban. In response to illicit drugs, the Lao government took serious actions and placed the issue on a top priority list. The commitment to combat illicit drugs in Laos, especially opium, is reflected through developing policies, strategies, and programs to face the challenge. Through The Tenth Meeting of the AIPA Fact-Finding Committee (AIFOCOM) to Combat the Drug Menace held in 2013, Laos emphasized several strategies to deal with illicit drugs issue, including The National Drug Control Master Plan, advocating alternative jobs to help susceptible families, increasing the data and report collection on the matter of illicit drugs, ratifying many international conventions related to drugs, and cooperating with several international organizations concerning on illicit drugs, especially UNODC. Even if the Lao government has tried various attempts to deal with the illicit drugs issue, the survey done in collaboration between the Lao government and UNODC reported that poppy cultivation land kept increasing from 1,600 hectares in 2008 to 6,800 hectares in 2012. Furthermore, there was inconsistency in eradicating the poppy cultivation land as the data showed fluctuation starting from 2009 to 2012 in order, which was 651 hectares, 579 hectares, 662 hectares, and 707 hectares. This fluctuation happened even though the opium cultivation land kept growing and even four times wider by 2012. The explanation showed that the eradication of poppy farming did not achieve significant results due to the amount of land successfully eradicated not comparable to the abundance of poppy farming in Laos. It further proves that the Lao government alone was struggling to face the emerging opium farming in Laos, especially since most of the farming is done in an isolated area, so it was not easily accessible to reach the farmers.

Besides the aforementioned efforts, the Lao government designed a new master plan for dealing with illicit drugs, namely the National Drug Control Master Plan 2016 2020. It consists of nine main pillars, such as legislative improvement, drug use prevention and civic awareness, creation of a drug-free Lao DPR, treatment, alternative development for the community, law enforcement, monitoring and evaluation, international cooperation and capacity-building government staff (Jones, 2018). It was reported through the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the AIPA Advisory Council on Dangerous Drugs that the number of seizures of illicit drugs in Laos for opium has decreased from 89,43 kg in 2019 to 60,301 kg in 2020. Together with UNODC, the Lao government is working on a coffee cultivation program as an alternative for opium farmers. These efforts have shown that the Lao government is highly committed to dealing illicit drugs. However, the challenge is to create a sustainable alternative for opium farmers as they are at high risk of reverting to farming opium due to its accessibility and high price.

### **3.2. The INGO “UNODC” responses to combat illicit drugs issue in Laos**

As the Lao government keeps facing challenges in dealing with illicit drugs issue, thus, it is inevitable for an organization like UNODC not to step in. Collaborating with the Lao government, UNODC has a vital role in controlling the cultivation of opium in Laos, mainly by giving support to increase the Lao people's quality of life and capability. It is proven by how UNODC plays a role in the National Drug Control Master Plan, especially in pursuing a coffee cultivation program across ten former poppy-growing villages in a province that borders Vietnam, Houaphan (Simanungkalit, 2011). In Houaphan province, people cultivate opium to generate income, but now they are shifting to growing coffee. This transition has been happening since late 2016 with the support of UNODC and the Lao Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC). There are around 400 hectares of coffee and a cooperative to process and commercialize coffee independently (UNODC, 2019). Furthermore, this coffee production has also reached the international market as the farmer signed a long-term commercial partnership agreement with Malongo, a renowned

French coffee roaster, for five years. It proves that coffee can be a sustainable alternative for opium farmers in Laos.

In addition, UNODC made a joint UNODC-European Union (EU) alternative development effort to create sustainable alternatives for former opium farmers. By giving loans, this project was able to change the lives of opium farmers. For example, a used to be a farmer, Mr Tongyear Thor was struggling to provide for his eight children. Then, he borrowed 190 USD from the program and made a profit of 216 USD by making Hmong flutes (UNODC, 2015). Not only for the farmers, but this program was also able to help opium addicts by providing 15-day detoxification sessions. All in all, UNODC contributed a lot to dealing with illicit drugs in Laos, especially in assisting the Lao government in providing a more sustainable life for former opium farmers. There was a synergy between UNODC and the Lao government. These achievements would not be achieved without the excellent collaboration the Lao government did with UNODC.

### **3.3. Environment vs Economy in Laos: Encountering the challenge of illicit drugs**

The main reason why many people in Laos exploit opium to make a living is that there is no other alternative than cultivating opium. Its geographical condition, low human resources quality, inadequate infrastructures, and the lack of job opportunities pushed Laos to be one of the largest opium producers in the world. Opium offers a high return to its farmer as it is high in price. The latest research in 2015 by UNODC, collaborating with Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control and Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision, showed that the retail price of raw opium in Laos reached 1,980 USD, an increase of 7% from 2014. There was a considerable increase in retail price from 2002 to 2015, when the retail price of opium was around under 200 USD skyrocketing to almost 2,000 USD. It proves that opium has high-income potential. Thus it is attractive for farmers, especially those who do not have access to legal jobs (UNODC, 2013). The issue is closely related to poverty. According to Laos Statistic Bureau (LSB), through the Lao Consumption and Expenditure Survey (LECS), the poverty rate in Laos by 2015 was 8,11%, estimating 76,600 families (Chow & Lin, 2015). Even though it reached the government's goal of having less than a 10% poverty rate, it is still not enough to reduce opium farming because many people, especially in remote areas, still depend on this job. Thus, providing a more stable job for opium farmers became very important.

In addition, the existence of opium farming in Laos is harming the environment. Even though the research was not held in the Laos region with opium farming, the result might be similar due to the resemblance of nature. Based on the research held by UNODC in Shan State, Myanmar, the majority reported significantly deteriorated forest resources and a more rapidly deteriorating forest quality in opium villages (UNODC, 2012). It is concluded based on the report of 67% of village headmen. Opium farming turns to bring deforestation, decreased biodiversity, and soil erosion. The Lao government and UNODC must pay attention to this condition, especially environment is an essential part of human lives. However, there has been no further research regarding the interrelation between opium farming and the environment in Laos. It proves that policies to combat opium farming in Laos have not been strategic and sustainable for the environment. Note that much of this opium farming is done illegally, meaning there is very little attention from the farmers towards the environment since it is not following the laws and regulations.

Another example is Afghanistan, the world's largest opium producer, taking 80% of the world's supply and contributing up to 11% to the national economy as of 2021 (UNODC, 2021). Afghanistan only has 1.7% of forest left from a total of 3% [13]. It shows that Afghanistan is experiencing severe deforestation caused by opium cultivation since illegal cultivation inevitably leads to irresponsible cultivation damaging nature. Moreover, opium farming also caused the

destruction of soil and water resources and biodiversity resources in Afghanistan. The use of toxic chemicals to cultivate opium polluted the soil and water. It is perilous, considering that soil and water are essential for humans to survive. These examples parallel what might happen in Laos if the Lao government and UNODC do not put extra effort into measuring the damage of opium farming done illegally. Thus, 1) to protect nature, implemented policies must also consider environmental sustainability, further research on this matter must be done, and 2) alternative jobs for former opium farmers must be sustainable for the environment.

It became illegal to farm opium in Laos in 2005, resulting in many farmers being left without jobs because they had not developed any skill other than cultivating opium. Projecting opium farmers to stop means providing them with better jobs. To answer this challenge, UNODC and the Lao government have been working toward providing alternatives for former opium farmers. Many former opium farmers now are cultivating vegetables, fruits, and coffee. Not only are these more sustainable jobs, but the income is also up-and-coming. In the case of vegetable and fruit farmers, their income increased from 3,500 USD in 2008 to approximately 6,500 USD in 2011, almost doubling in only three years. Furthermore, shifting to coffee cultivation is also more promising for the environment. Many former opium farming lands are becoming forests, and the production of coffee is more eco-friendly. It is undoubted a good achievement, where UNODC as INGO has succeeded in assisting the Lao government to create sustainable alternatives for former opium farmers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Lao government is aware of the illicit drug issue. Hence opium farming has been forbidden since 2005. Furthermore, the Lao government has actively signed and ratified international conventions regarding drug matters and built its national planning, The National Drug Control Masterplan. However, this was still not enough to combat opium farming as the number of cultivation land kept growing until 2012, and many former opium farmers failed to find sustainable jobs. They have depended on their life in opium farming forever, which explains why there is a lack of skill to opt-in another option for cultivation. Thus they are at high risk of reverting to being opium farmers. This scenario will be very critical to the environment of Laos.

In combating illicit drugs, UNODC, as INGO, has shown its efforts by collaborating with the Lao government in dealing with the illicit drugs issue in Laos. In it, multiple, purposive, and simultaneous actions have been taken, focusing on eliminating the opium cultivation land and creating sustainable jobs. It also involves other international organizations as a partner to create better lives for former opium farmers, such as the European Union. The good synergy between UNODC and the Lao government resulted in exemplary achievements where former opium farmers could explore more sustainable jobs, such as growing coffee and vegetables.

After all, there is no further research on the interrelation between opium farming and its environmental impact. Meanwhile, the illegal activities of the environment are most likely to be affected by farming in Laos. Opium farming triggers deforestation, decreased biodiversity, and soil erosion. These problematic situations have happened in a country like Afghanistan and Myanmar, both prominent opium producers. It is why the Lao government and UNODC should measure two things for future policies; 1) taking into account environmental matters and doing further environmental research, and 2) creating sustainable alternatives not only for former opium farmers but also for the environment.

## References

- AIPACODD. (2021). Prevailing the Contemporary and Responsive Challenges towards DrugFree ASEAN. AIPA Advisory Council On Dangerous Drugs. <https://www.councils.gov.bn/AIPA/Shared%20Documents/AIPA%2042%20-%20SOC.1.3%20Resolution%20of%20the%204th%20AIPACODD.pdf>
- BBC News. (2021). Afghanistan: How much opium is produced and what's the Taliban's record?. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58308494>
- Chow & Lin. (2015). Laos - The Poverty Line. <https://www.chowandlin.com/the-poverty-line>
- Gateway Foundation. (2021). The Environmental Impact of Growing Drugs. <https://www.gatewayfoundation.org/addiction-blog/environmental-impact-growing-drugs/>
- IRIN. (2011). Laos: Poor farmers need alternatives to opium. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4eb3cf3a2.html>
- Jones, A. (2018). Getting high in Laos' opium-riddled mountains. The Jakarta Post. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2018/09/09/getting-high-in-laos-opium-riddled-mountains.html>
- Malikyar, G. M. (2020). Narcotic and Environmental Disruptions in Afghanistan Will Narcotics legalization reduce the impacts on environment?. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341345063\\_Narcotic\\_and\\_Environmental\\_Disruptions\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_Will\\_Narcotics\\_legalization\\_reduce\\_the\\_impacts\\_on\\_Environment/link/5ebbd422299bf1c09ab9825f/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341345063_Narcotic_and_Environmental_Disruptions_in_Afghanistan_Will_Narcotics_legalization_reduce_the_impacts_on_Environment/link/5ebbd422299bf1c09ab9825f/download)
- Simanungkalit, P. (2011). The Globalization of Drug Trafficking and Its Prevention in Indonesia. Globalisasi Peredaran Narkoba dan Penanggulangannya di Indonesia. Wajar Hidup Foundation: South Jakarta.
- UNODC. (2009). The Government of the Lao PDR National Drug Control Master Plan 2019-2013: A Five Year Strategy to Address the Illicit Drug Control Problem in the Lao PDR. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/laopdr/COLA/NDCMP\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/laopdr/COLA/NDCMP_Eng.pdf)
- UNODC. (2012). UNODC assists Lao PDR farmers to find alternatives to opium poppy cultivation. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2012/July/unodc-assists-lao-pdr-farmers-to-find-alternatives-to-opium-poppy-cultivation.html>
- UNODC. (2013). Bringing hope to former opium-growing Laos communities. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/laopdr/2013/10/opium/story.html>
- UNODC. (2015). Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2015: Lao PDR, Myanmar. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/sea/Southeast\\_Asia\\_Opium\\_Survey\\_2015\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/sea/Southeast_Asia_Opium_Survey_2015_web.pdf)
- UNODC. (2019). Opium poppy cultivation and sustainable development in Shan State, Myanmar 2019. UNODC Research. [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Myanmar/Myanmar\\_Socio-economic\\_Survey\\_2019\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Myanmar/Myanmar_Socio-economic_Survey_2019_web.pdf)
- UNODC. (2021). UNODC empowers coffee growing communities in Lao PDR. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/laopdr/2021/04/empowers-coffee-growing-communities/story.html>