

➤ Executive Summary

John Collins, Guest Editor

International drug control efforts began in 1909, with the aim of eradicating the abuse of certain drugs by controlling their supply. A complex international system of enforcement grew up based on this belief in supply control. A century on, the empirical data is available and overwhelming: the system has failed. Worse, it has become increasingly clear that the human cost of pursuing many of its policies renders them unjustifiable. From mass incarceration in the United States and Asia, to the HIV/AIDS epidemic flooding Russia and the waves of violence rippling through Latin America – current global drug policies are worsening current global drug problems. This is no longer a point of controversy, but as Joseph Spillane suggests, is something which ‘no serious scholar questions’. Nevertheless, driven by a mixture of bureaucratic and ideological inertia, the international drug control system, governed through the UN and enforced by a number of core states, continues to pursue many of the same failed policies. This report asks why the system evolved in the way that it did, and explores the potential for reform.

Often, those seeking to understand the complex and opaque international drug control system look to the wording of its various conventions and governing treaties – both of which are open to wide interpretation. However, as William McAllister points out, the system evolved through complex diplomatic, bureaucratic, social and interpersonal forces. It is only through an understanding of these broader forces that we can properly explain how the system was constructed and why it continues to function in the way that it does. Building on this discussion of historical complexity, David Courtwright examines the reasons why some drugs have traditionally been the subjects of ‘war,’ while others have become deeply ingrained in the mainstream economy. This is a question expanded upon by James Mill’s survey of the questionable scientific evidence underpinning cannabis’ co-option into international controls.

As Joseph Spillane’s analysis shows, in order to better understand current international drug policies we should focus more attention on the considerable harms that these policies create. In particular he suggests that researchers should concentrate on the wealth of evidence available from the daily experience of contemporary drug addicts, which reveals the, often-harrowing impacts of the various drug wars. Paul Gootenberg analyses the interaction between international policies and shifting cocaine ‘commodity chains’ in Latin America over the last century, culminating in the current Mexican crisis. In so doing, he highlights a seemingly inherent tendency of international drug policy makers to create larger and more violent problems than their interdictionist policies resolve.

Former Swiss President Ruth Dreifuss and her colleague Diane Steber evaluate Switzerland’s interaction with the international system, highlighting the pressure exerted on states trying to pursue policies outside the traditional supply-centric paradigm. David Bewley-Taylor then examines ‘the UNGASS decade’ between 1998 and 2008, when the international community committed itself to achieving ‘a drug free world’. He argues that the consensus that characterised this period is now fracturing as nation states are more openly pursuing alternative approaches.

In the final section of this report we look towards the future of the system and highlight specific areas in need of immediate reform. Damon Barrett shows that the current system is lacking in basic human rights oversight, and as a result is permitting systematic human rights abuses. Joanne Csete focuses on the International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) support for unscientific policies internationally and its refusal to endorse best practice public health policies, particularly around HIV/AIDS prevention. She argues that the INCB remains 'the most closed and least transparent of any entity supported by the United Nations.'

The machinery of international drug control has solidified around outdated modes of thinking and failed policies. Despite this, it has proved remarkably successful at restricting policy experimentation worldwide and encouraging the continuation of counterproductive approaches. Two steps need to be taken. First, there need to be immediate measures to incorporate basic human rights standards and improve the level of oversight within the system. This is particularly urgent in the areas of international funding decisions and the operation of the INCB. Second, an independent root and branch review of the approach to, and apparatus governing, international drug control needs to be conducted with a view to long-term structural reforms. Such a review must begin with a deep understanding of the historical forces that have shaped and continue to underpin the current policies and system. This report should serve as a starting point. ■