

# ENDING THE DRUG WARS



International governments have been waging a war on drugs for over four decades, with little success and an ever-growing financial cost and body count. It is time to accept that the war on drugs has failed and to move beyond prohibitionist policies, argues **John Collins**.

The LSE IDEAS International Drug Policy Project began during a period of unprecedented discussion around the strategic direction of international drug control. There has been a recent revolt within the US and at governmental levels in Latin America against blindly continuing the “war on drugs”. After four decades and \$1 trillion dollars spent, President Obama and his Attorney General Eric Holder have described it as an “utter failure” and have sought to roll back the excesses in the US context – most notably the explosive growth in mass incarceration over the past few decades.

In Latin America a number of governments pushed the idea of pursuing a war on drugs to its logical extreme, yet it has failed to produce any of the desired outcomes. Instead these policies brought an epidemic of violence and political destabilisation. Even if the governments succeeded in pushing down on the trade in the short term and driving it out of their countries, they merely displaced it, via the so-

called “balloon effect”, to their neighbours. When Colombia had some success against the cartels there, the operations were shifted to Mexico, along with the accompanying violence and destabilisation. Now that Mexico is shifting some of the activity back out of its country, it is wreaking havoc in Guatemala and other Central American countries.

Similarly, as the global transshipment routes diversify away from Latin America towards West Africa we are seeing the rise of narco-states there, along with all the political destabilisation and damage to socio-economic development this will bring. The response at international level to the West African situation has been predictable and disheartening. Instead of addressing the fact that prohibition has failed, the international community has instead sought to double-down once again and respond by “sending in the hardware” of military and police supplies to governments that are entirely ill-equipped to accept them.

Overall, the immediate cost of the war on drugs for producer and transit countries in terms of

violence, corruption and political destabilisation is enormous. The marginal benefits of the drug war for the international community remain non-existent. Enforcing global prohibition shifts the drug market around, but at a macro level the market remains undiminished. Decades of evidence now confirm this outcome. Despite vast increases in the levels of enforcement intensity and political efforts around shrinking the size of markets, drugs have remained readily available, prices have long been in decline and purity is increasing. This indicator is the single best metric we have for evaluating the outcome of global drug war policies and that outcome is clear: the strategy has failed on its own terms.

At a global level the UN had long remained a bastion for drug war ideologues who populated nominally technocratic bodies such as the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These bodies were used to channel the interests of Global North consumer countries wishing to displace the

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burden of executing the drug war onto the Global South producer and transit countries, while accepting no obligation to pay the costs. Hence the global drug war became an example of enforced outsourcing, whereby consumer countries such as the US used the UN to pressure other states to assume the cost of enforcing prohibitions.

Meanwhile, the social and collateral costs continue. The US, as a direct result of the drug war, is now the most incarcerated nation in the world, having only 5 per cent of the world's population but 25 per cent of its

prisoners. Mexico, attempting to decapitate the cartels under President Calderon's administration, saw the murder rate explode, with roughly 100,000 people killed in the space of five years. On top of this, the global toll from an artificially created HIV and Hepatitis C epidemic in Russia, the political destabilisation being wrought in Afghanistan and West Africa, and the systemic human rights abuses being fostered in the name of the war on drugs, has continued to mount.

LSE IDEAS began the International Drug Policy Project in 2012, led by Professor Michael Cox.

Its first report, *Governing the Global Drug Wars*, examined the historical evolution of the international drug control system, governed through the UN. This report brought together the contributions of six world-leading international historians on the topic, as well as contributions by the former President of Switzerland and public health and human rights experts. Its conclusion – that the global strategy had failed – was endorsed by President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia, who called, in his foreword to the report, for the academic community “to dutifully study



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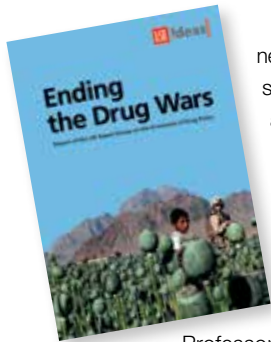
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new formulas and approaches screened through an academic, scientific and non-politicised lens".

Taking up this challenge, LSE IDEAS established the Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy in 2013-14, chaired by

Professor Danny Quah. Its report, published earlier this year, represents the most thorough independent economic analysis of the global drug control strategy ever conducted. It involved leading economists and experts on drug policy from around the world and brought together an advisory network of world-leading figures, including five Nobel Prize winning economists, Colombian Minister of Health Alejandro Gaviria Uribe, former Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Luis Fernando Carrera Castro, LSE human rights expert Professor Conor Gearty, former US Secretary of State George Shultz and numerous others.

Our conclusions were clear: "It is time to end the 'war on drugs' and massively redirect resources

towards effective evidence-based policies underpinned by rigorous economic analysis." Although there is no silver bullet solution to solving the global drug problem, a militarised solution is not an effective way to manage this issue. Instead, we argue, resources should be drastically reallocated, away from punitive and militarised enforcement approaches and towards proven public health and illicit market impact reduction approaches. Further, the report calls for a new wave of regulatory experimentation in this field outside the traditional one-size-fits-all prohibitionist model.

The report was received by the Guatemalan Minister for the Interior at LSE in May and received coverage in hundreds of press outlets internationally. Prominent figures have endorsed its conclusions. George Soros, for example, writing in the *Financial Times*, described it as "perhaps the most thorough account of the war on drugs done to date"; *The Economist* stated that "the LSE report is worth a read in its own right. But it is the changing political context that makes it really interesting."

We have since held launches in a number of countries, including Mexico, Guatemala and Costa Rica, and further launches are planned in the USA

and Argentina this year, before moving on to other countries and regions in the New Year.

As we look to the future of global drug policy, we at LSE IDEAS intend to be at the forefront of this debate: challenging ideologies, examining evidence, elaborating alternatives and designing the most effective policy proposals based on evidence and rigorous analysis.

We will continue to work with governments and multilateral bodies such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations as they seek to devise a new multilateral strategic response to this issue at the upcoming UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs in 2016. In line with LSE's pre-eminent history of leading public debate on issues of vital global significance, LSE IDEAS will continue to drive public debate around this issue and redefine the global response to drugs and drug policy for the coming century. ■



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