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Addressing the elephant in the room: filling the policy vacuum of the international counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan

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This year's Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), the United Nations central policy-making body on drug related matters, dedicated a [special round-table session](#) to the principle of common or shared responsibility. It tries to revitalise the principle that basically refers to the joint responsibility of producer, transit and consumer countries to tackle the drug problem. While this classification is [no longer clear-cut](#), Afghanistan could still be regarded as a case where the traditional understanding of the concept applies. While there are also more and more drug addicts in the country, it remains the principle supplier country of more than 90 percent of the world's opium and heroin.



U.S. Marine patrols in the Golestan district of Farah province, Afghanistan (Reuters).

But is this common or shared responsibility actually applied in Afghanistan as the basis for effective international cooperation? In the tenth year of the international community's presence in Afghanistan, there is still no clear counter-narcotics strategy to enable Afghan and international efforts to address the country's pervasive illegal opium economy. The current plan is largely based on the wishful thinking that in the long-term rural development and general reconstruction efforts will prove sufficient to decrease the choking grip of the illegal opium economy on Afghanistan.

A [critical report of the United States' Inspector General](#), released in December 2009, confirmed this when stating that the US counter-narcotics effort in Afghanistan lacked a long-term strategy, clear objectives and a plan for handing over responsibility to the Afghan government. In other words, there is no clear end state towards which the Americans (still the main player when it comes to determining the course of counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan), their international partners and the Afghan government are working. There may be a sense of shared responsibility at the international political level, but no clear, coherent strategy in Afghanistan.

To be effective, international cooperation requires an operational framework on the ground, and in the case of Afghanistan, the largest framework currently operating is the coalition of NATO countries and its non-NATO partners. Therefore, it is important to analyse how NATO and its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) relate to the international efforts to rein in the illegal opium economy.

In November last year, the [NATO summit in Lisbon established the transition calendar](#) of Afghanistan, aiming for 2014 to be the critical year when the responsibility for security in Afghanistan will be shouldered entirely by the Afghan authorities. At that summit, the illegal opium economy was once again the 'elephant in the room': almost no mention was made of the Afghan opium challenge, despite the fact that the United Nations confirmed in October 2009 that [the Taliban derives an estimated £80 million a year from this illegal industry](#). Manifestly, these alarming figures indicate that opium production should be one of the top strategic security concerns for the Atlantic Alliance.

The gradual withdrawal of NATO-ISAF troops from Afghanistan over the next three years is an important factor that should not be overlooked: NATO-ISAF forces on the ground currently play an important supporting role in the Afghan government's counter-narcotics efforts. In the past few years, our boots on the ground have provided crucial intelligence, logistical support and, since November 2008, have from time to time assisted in raiding and destroying illegal heroin laboratories.

On top of this, it is [still very uncertain whether Afghan security forces can take care of overall security and policing tasks by 2014](#), which means that we should also ask ourselves whether they can deal effectively and independently with the illegal opium economy.

In the face of the Afghan opium crisis, the international community should do more rather than less. NATO-ISAF troops have access to areas where other agencies and NGOs cannot go, which means they can have a direct impact on counter-narcotics operations and interventions targeting the bigger traffickers and trafficking routes. In other words, they can provide key information and intelligence on trends and developments related to the supply side of the illegal opium industry.

The focus of the counter-narcotics policy that NATO was trying to assist was predominantly on the weakest link in the value chain: the farmers, shopkeepers and middlemen that receive little more than a subsistence income from the illegal opium economy. At the same time, the problem of the major traffickers has hardly been addressed. It has become clear that [President Karzai has pardoned several drug traffickers since 2009](#), but there has been very little international outcry about this.

In the meantime, the illegal opium economy continues to blossom. [2010 showed stable poppy cultivation figures \(at 123,000 hectares\)](#). The [sharp decline in opium production \(down 48%\)](#) was mainly caused by a poppy blight that wreaked havoc on the poppy crops. In addition to this negative snapshot of last year, there is still no structural solution for those 1.6 million Afghans directly dependent on illegal poppy cultivation and many more millions who indirectly derive a livelihood from the illegal opium industry. [The United Nations currently predict only a slight overall decrease of poppy cultivation for 2011](#).

But the illegal opium economy has much broader implications: the narcotics problem is fuelling corruption, increasing instability, and turning into a domestic public health challenge with ever more Afghan opium and heroin users. In 2009, the United Nations confirmed that [drug use in Afghanistan had increased substantially since 2005](#), with the number of regular opium users increasing from 150,000 to around 230,000 (a 53% increase) and the number of regular heroin users from 50,000 to 120,000 users in 2009 (a 140% increase).

The sheer size and scope of Afghanistan's illegal opium economy, together with the serious international impact of Afghan heroin flooding markets in Europe and the Russian Federation, provide the best arguments for not turning our backs on this problem. The principle of shared responsibility should be turned into joint and coordinated action. This is particularly the case at a time when we are witnessing the first signs of an improved international policy, led by developments in the United States. At the end of June 2009, the late Richard Holbrooke, then US Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, announced that the [US counter-narcotics policy in Afghanistan would be changed](#), phasing out the Bush-era eradication policy.

After years of complaints and evidence gathered by organisations working in the field about the negative side effects and the inefficiency of the counter-narcotics policy, the US shift from crop eradication to support of farming communities and interdiction was a first step in the right direction. However, since then, the international debate has died down, and the opium problem seems to have disappeared from the international community's radar screen.

What can the international community do in the coming years to help Afghanistan solve this problem? Firstly, in the short to medium term, ICOS argues for an obvious option: the ["Poppy for Medicine"](#) proposal. This proposal seeks to implement a scientific pilot project to test whether the legal production of opium-based medicines would be a realistic option for Afghanistan. The pilot project would assess whether such an industry could be a short-term, transitional option before enough alternative livelihoods become available and profitable for all the Afghan farmers currently dependent on illegal cultivation. Given the positive impact such projects could have on both the development and security situation, a scientific pilot project should be started in the next planting season.

While boosting the rural economy and diversifying it over time, "Poppy for Medicine" also integrates farmers and their entire communities into the legal economy, thus strengthening the ties between the rural communities and the central government. In addition, the project can solve part of the vast unmet needs for morphine and other analgesics both within and outside of Afghanistan. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) stated in 2005 that there is a [critical shortage of drugs for pain relief](#) around the world. An astonishing 80% of the world population has little to no access to analgesics, some of which could be provided by a new brand of Afghan morphine.

Secondly, in the short term, more funds should be made available to improve the lives of the people in the main poppy-producing areas. This would include more funds for humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and alternative livelihood programmes. Given the amounts of [funds available for destructive crop eradication campaigns](#) since 2002, it should be possible to increase this positive form of international support. Alternative livelihood programmes have already been implemented around Afghanistan, but their potential impact has so far not been achieved. This is partly because of underfunding and under-prioritisation, but also because most of these projects take years to become both widely available and profitable for the farmers.

Lastly, in the long term, the only sustainable solution is increasing stability and fostering economic development to raise levels of income and welfare for the Afghan rural population, so that they no longer need to cultivate opium poppies to feed their families. In areas such as southern Afghanistan, this will also require a full reassessment of the agricultural sector, and investment in more agro-industry and other light industrial activities such as the production of pharmaceuticals.

NATO and the wider international community should not ignore the need for a concrete and effective counter-narcotics strategy in Afghanistan. Inspired by the notion of shared responsibility, all parties should actively think about what they can contribute, at least in the next four years, to bringing about a solution to a problem that affects everything the international community is trying to achieve in Afghanistan. Concretely, in the United Kingdom and Europe in general, we have to fulfil our obligations in what is truly a problem of shared responsibility. The bottom line is that without our domestic drug use, Afghan farmers would not have demand for the opium they produce, and in turn would not be directly funding the Taliban insurgency.

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