



Background Paper

Committee: Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Topic A: The impacts of covid-19 on drug production and trade

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UNODC defines drug trafficking as the “global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws”(“*Drug trafficking*”, n.d). Drug trade involves many roles, such as growers, suppliers and dealers. It undermines countries’ overall stability, deeply damages people’s health, and generates violence. In addition, criminal groups worldwide are usually involved in other illegal activities, such as human trafficking, money laundering, guns’ possession, etc, so their actions damage society in many ways. Similarly, the covid-19 pandemic has affected several areas of the global society. Drug production, markets and trade have not been the exception, as the virus has changed the dynamics of this industry.

In 2020, the year where the pandemic began, approximately \$400 billion were spent on illegal substances. Cocain, heroin and cannabis are the ones in which more money was spent. Drug routes are all over the world, but the major ones mainly concentrate and affect countries in Europe, Latin America, North Africa and South East Asia. Because of the difficulties due to the pandemic (border closures, reduction of commercial flights) there was an increased use of maritime trade in these routes. Although there is evidence of an initial shock on some drug’s production at the beginning of the pandemic, such as methamphetamine or cocaine, drug markets proved to be resilient to covid-19 restrictions. 56% of people who participated on the Global Drug Survey thought that drugs were less available during the pandemic. However, criminal groups were able to adapt, by using unconventional methods to distribute drugs, such as mail delivery, the use of drones, and purchases through the clear and dark webs. This was reported specially by countries in Europe and Southern Asia.

The pandemic-related crisis affected different drugs’ production and trade in different ways, depending on certain factors related to the production of each drug. Cocaine production was initially affected by covid-19 lockdowns, but evidence suggests it recovered to pre-pandemic levels soon after in the three main producers: Bolivia, Colombia and Peru. Opium production has

been unaffected, since its harvest is fueled by the labor of women, children, and local workers. Synthetic drugs production faced difficulties in the early stages of the pandemic, mostly because the supply of the chemicals needed for their production declined due to the decrease of global trade. A global survey conducted by specialists in medicine in 2020 revealed that cannabis consumption increased by 42% in the countries surveyed, which suggests an increased production. This may be because cannabis is produced in a small-scale way, so covid-19 lockdowns hardly affected its production and trade.

The covid-19 crisis seems to have triggered some criminal practices in drug trade. As previously mentioned, maritime trafficking increased due to the difficulty to transport drug by land and the dramatic reduction in commercial flights. However, criminal groups were still able to transport drugs by air, with the use of private aircrafts. Another pattern observed during the pandemic was the increased size of drug shipments, which were also less frequent. This may suggest that criminal organizations did find some difficulties to move the drug with the same frequency. However, other opportunities emerged, such as e-commerce. Evidence in countries like Thailand, China, New Zealand and the Russian Federation shows that online drug purchase have increased significantly.

There have been some international drug-related treaties in the UN. The first one was the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, signed in 1961 in New York. Its main goal was to ensure that drug production and consumption were only for scientific and medical reasons. It also served to combat drug trafficking through international cooperation. The second one was the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, which aimed to combat the expansion of a variety of synthetic drugs, but taking into account some of their therapeutic value. Currently, 183 countries are Parties of the treaty. The most recent one was the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, which contemplated measures against money laundering and the proliferation of precursor chemicals. It also involves international cooperation in actions such as drug traffickers' extradition and controlled deliveries. In addition, in 1971, the United States launched the famous "war on drugs", which still is fought today. The European Union has also taken action by establishing the 2021-2025 Drugs Strategy, which considers several aspects such as human rights, supply and demand, and the lessons learned from the covid-19 crisis.

It is crucial that the global community works together to solve this problem. The covid-19 crisis altered drug production and trade, so countries must adapt. Regulations and actions from previous treaties and conventions are important, but strategies must consider the changes that the pandemic brought in drug production and trade (online trading, private aircrafts, maritime transport, etc.). In addition, local and regional strategies (like the European Union Strategy) must be enacted in order to attack the drug issue from its core.

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