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# Background Guide **UNODC**

**Reassessing Global Counter-Narcotics  
Strategy in Light of the Expanding Power  
and Transnational Reach of South and North  
American Drug Cartels**

# Table of Contents

Letter from the Executive Board	Page 3
Overview of UNODC	Page 4
Mandate	Page 4
Nature and Proof of Evidence	Page 5
Introduction	Page 5
International Laws/Legislations	Page 9
Case Studies	Page 11
Conclusion	Page 12
QARMA (Questions a resolution must answer)	Page 13

# Letter from the Executive Board

The Executive Board of The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) extends its warmest regards to all participants. As experienced delegates who have attended numerous Model United Nations conferences, we recognize the importance of the background guide as a valuable tool for research. We believe that the purpose of the background guide is to aid in research rather than provide all the answers on a silver platter. While we acknowledge that the background guide can serve as a starting point or reference for your study, we encourage delegates to conduct further research and delve deeper into the topic at hand.

We believe that MUN conferences are not just about acquiring knowledge, but also about expressing ideas, gaining a broader perspective, and comprehending the complex issues that our world faces today. This comprehensive background guide aims to provide you with sufficient information to familiarise yourselves with the agenda "**Reassessing Global Counter-Narcotics Strategy in Light of the Expanding Power and Transnational Reach of South and North American Drug Cartels.**" However, it is crucial to understand that this guide is just the beginning of your research journey and should not be considered the final word on the subject. With that said, we emphasise the importance of conducting extensive research and preparing diligently to ensure meaningful discussions and productive debates during the conference. We encourage all delegates to approach the conference with an open mind, a spirit of diplomacy, and a commitment to finding viable solutions to the challenges faced by the religious and emerging communities.

Thank you,

SEAMEI OAKMUN'25 UNODC Executive Board

**Chairperson:** Alby Mathew

**Vice Chairperson:** Ayaan J. Sachdeva

**Moderator:** Yavisht Sethi

# Overview of UNODC

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is a specialized UN office established in 1997, headquartered in Vienna, Austria, with a presence in 150 countries worldwide. It focuses on making the world safer from drugs, crime, terrorism, and corruption through research, policy analysis, normative work (such as conventions on drugs and crime), and technical assistance to governments. UNODC operates in key areas including drug trafficking and abuse, crime prevention, criminal justice, international terrorism, political corruption, human trafficking, money laundering, and organized crime.

The agency supports Member States by promoting international cooperation, providing training to judges, police, border officials, and social workers, and helping countries implement relevant treaties and conventions. It also produces the World Drug Report, a comprehensive yearly assessment of the global drug situation. Its work is aligned with sustainable development goals, emphasizing health, security, justice, and human rights to build resilient societies. Funding largely comes from voluntary government contributions, and its budget for 2022-2023 was around US\$822 million.

## Mandate

The mandate of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is to support Member States in the prevention of illicit drugs, crime, and terrorism. This mandate is grounded in various United Nations General Assembly resolutions, international treaties, and conventions. UNODC's work focuses on assisting countries in combating transnational crime, including corruption, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and terrorism.

The mandate is implemented through three main pillars:

- 1.) Research and analytical work to increase knowledge and understanding of drug-related and crime-related issues and to build the evidence base for policy and operational decisions.
- 2.) Normative work to assist States in the ratification and implementation of international treaties related to drugs, crime, and terrorism, and to provide secretariat and substantive services to the treaties and governing bodies.
- 3.) Field-based technical cooperation projects aimed at enhancing the capacity of Member States to counter illicit drugs, crime, and terrorism.

UNODC also advocates a balanced approach to drug control, emphasizing preventive education, treatment for addicts, and measures to reduce drug production and trafficking. It supports law enforcement with training, technical equipment, and assistance to dismantle trafficking networks and improve criminal justice systems. Additionally, UNODC promotes efforts to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS through drug abuse prevention and treatment programs.

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## Nature and Proof of Evidence

Documents from the following sources will be considered as credible proof for any allegations made in committee or statements that require verification:

**Reuters:** Appropriate documents and articles from the Reuters News agency will be used to corroborate or refute controversial statements made by the committee.

**UN Documents:** Documents by all UN agencies will be considered sufficient proof. Reports from all UN bodies including treaty-based bodies will also be accepted.

**National Government Reports:** Government Reports of a given country used to corroborate an allegation on the same aforementioned country will be accepted as proof. The documents stated above will hold a binding nature of establishment.

NOTE: Other sources like Wikipedia, Amnesty International, or newspapers like the Guardian, and so on and so forth will not be accepted as credible proof; but may be used for a better understanding of any issue and even be brought up in debate, if the information given in such sources is in line with the beliefs of a government or a delegate. The background guide cannot be used or cited as a valid source for credible proof.

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## Introduction

The global challenge posed by the expanding power and transnational reach of drug cartels from South and North America demands a critical reassessment of current counter-narcotics strategies. These criminal organizations have evolved into sophisticated, far-reaching networks that exploit borders, technology, and socio-political vulnerabilities to amplify their illicit activities, contributing to widespread violence, corruption, and instability. Addressing this complexity requires a holistic and integrated approach that goes beyond traditional law enforcement measures to include strengthening international cooperation, enhancing national capacities, and promoting judicial and community resilience. This agenda aims to foster renewed global commitment and coordinated action, guided by principles of evidence-based policy and respect

for the rule of law, to effectively counter the pervasive influence of these drug cartels and safeguard global peace, security, and sustainable development.

### **Overview of Current Global Counter-Narcotics Strategy**

The contemporary global counter-narcotics framework emphasizes a multifaceted and balanced approach incorporating supply reduction, demand reduction, and harm reduction strategies. At its core, this strategy aligns with the three main international drug control conventions (1961, 1971, and 1988) and is anchored around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which insist on integrating drug control efforts with broader social, economic, and health policies. Supply reduction involves law enforcement, border security, eradication of illicit cultivation, and dismantling trafficking organizations. Demand reduction encompasses prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration. Harm reduction focuses on minimizing health and social damages, introducing measures such as opioid substitution therapy and needle exchange programs. The strategy also stresses research-driven policymaking, increased data transparency, and strengthening judicial and law enforcement institutions worldwide. It promotes coordination across sectors and borders to address the globalized nature of drug markets effectively, positioning agencies like UNODC as critical coordinators providing technical assistance, normative guidance, and operational support to Member States.

### **Evolution of South and North American Drug Cartels**

What began as loosely organized groups focused on local drug markets in regions of South and North America has transformed into agile, complex, and transnational criminal enterprises. These cartels have expanded beyond narcotics to engage in human trafficking, arms smuggling, cybercrime, and money laundering, blurring traditional crime boundaries. They operate with hierarchies that mimic corporate structures, employing cutting-edge technology for encrypted communications, logistics, and financial operations. Geographic reach has broadened as cartels develop global distribution networks extending into continents such as Europe, Asia, and Africa. These organizations adapt swiftly to law enforcement pressure by diversifying drug types, altering trafficking routes, and infiltrating political and economic systems through corruption and intimidation. Their evolving modus operandi presents a critical challenge to state sovereignty and international security frameworks.

### **Impact of Drug Cartels on Global Security and Stability**

The devastating social, economic, and political repercussions of drug cartels reach far beyond drug markets. Cartel-driven violence destabilizes communities, engenders internal displacement, and fuels sustained insecurity, undermining governance and state legitimacy. Corruption penetrates law enforcement, judiciary, and political institutions, eroding public trust and weakening rule of law. The illicit profits finance armed groups and terrorist organizations, sparking conflicts that further exacerbate humanitarian crises. Economically, drug trafficking distorts markets and diverts resources from legitimate development, entrenching cycles of poverty and inequality. This trauma

spills over into neighboring regions and global markets, creating challenges for international peacekeeping, economic development, and migration management.

### **Challenges Posed by Transnational Drug Trafficking Networks**

The complex web of transnational drug trafficking exploits porous borders, weak regulatory frameworks, and discrepancies in legal systems. Cartels use front companies, nested financial entities, and complex smurfing techniques to launder vast sums, compounding enforcement difficulties. Coordinating cross-border legal actions demands harmonious legislation, extradition treaties, and fast-track judicial cooperation—areas often hindered by bureaucratic inertia or political reluctance. The movement of precursor chemicals used in synthetic drug production poses additional control challenges, as these substances are legally traded commodities that require tight international monitoring. Furthermore, drug traffickers continually mutate their supply chains and routes in response to interdiction efforts, necessitating agile enforcement and real-time intelligence sharing.

### **Role of Technology and Innovation in Drug Cartels' Operations**

Technological advances have become fundamental tools enabling drug cartels to increase operational efficiency, evade law enforcement, and maximize profits. End-to-end encrypted messaging apps and dark web marketplaces enable covert communication and sales. Drones and GPS technology are used for autonomous drug delivery and evading detection at border checkpoints, while sophisticated cybercrime techniques facilitate illicit financial flows and fraud. Cartels utilize data analytics to monitor enforcement activity and optimize transport logistics. This technology-driven expansion demands a corresponding evolution of law enforcement capabilities, including investment in cyber forensics, artificial intelligence for pattern detection, and international collaboration on techno-legal challenges.

### **Strengthening International Cooperation and Law Enforcement**

The transnational nature of drug trafficking necessitates robust international partnership mechanisms. These include joint operations and task forces involving multiple countries, exchange of intelligence through secure platforms, synchronized legal frameworks, and coordination of extradition procedures to prosecute traffickers effectively. Capacity-building programs enhance skills and resources in vulnerable states. Furthermore, international treaties and multilateral bodies, such as UNODC, facilitate norm-setting and provide operational support. Effective cooperation ensures a unified front against a globalized threat, reducing safe havens and closing loopholes exploited by cartels.

### **Enhancing National Capacities for Drug Supply and Demand Reduction**

Countries must develop comprehensive national responses, strengthening institutions tasked with interdiction, judicial process, and public health. Enhancing border management capabilities entails training, technology upgrades, and inter-agency coordination to detect and disrupt trafficking

operations. Judicial reforms aim to expedite prosecution and ensure fair trial standards. On the demand side, scaling up prevention campaigns, evidence-based treatment, and social services is necessary for reducing consumption and supporting recovery. Community-based programs build local resistance to drug markets. Investment in monitoring and evaluation ensures adaptive management and impacts assessments.

### **Legal and Policy Reforms for Effective Counter-Narcotics Measures**

Legal systems require continual modernization to address the evolving tactics employed by cartels. This includes creating laws addressing organized crime offenses, asset forfeiture, witness protection, and anti-corruption. Policies must balance enforcement with respect for human rights and due process. Legal reforms also involve harmonizing national laws with international conventions, facilitating mutual legal assistance treaties, and implementing more effective sentencing guidelines to deter crime without exacerbating prison overcrowding or social marginalization. Strengthening the judiciary and prosecutorial independence is essential for maintaining public confidence.

### **Integrating Public Health Approaches and Harm Reduction**

Acknowledging drug abuse as a health rather than purely criminal issue broadens the strategy's effectiveness. Harm reduction interventions, such as supervised injection sites, opioid substitution therapy, and distribution of naloxone to prevent overdoses, reduce morbidity and mortality. These programs require integration into national health systems, with training for healthcare workers, social support services, and community engagement to combat stigma. Preventive education, especially for youth and vulnerable populations, disrupts initiation into drug use. This approach also reduces the social costs of incarceration and enables reintegration of individuals into productive society.

### **Intelligence Gathering and Information Sharing Mechanisms**

Operational success depends on timely, high-quality intelligence. Developing robust intelligence units using data analytics, human intelligence, and signals intelligence enhances detection of trafficking operations. Information-sharing platforms and joint analysis centers enable coordinating actions and identifying transnational links faster. Cooperation with financial institutions supports tracing illicit money flows. Building trust among countries and agencies is essential for overcoming sovereignty concerns, while attention to data security ensures protection against leaks or manipulation.

### **Community Resilience and Preventive Education Programs**

Engaged communities act as the first line of defense against drug proliferation. Preventive measures involve educational curricula fostering awareness about the dangers of drug use and the tactics cartels use to recruit youth. Social programs address underlying causes such as poverty, lack of opportunity, and marginalization. Empowering civil society organizations to provide support

networks and alternatives strengthens societal resilience. Community policing and local stakeholder involvement in policy development promote transparency and trust, creating environments hostile to criminal influence.

### **Addressing Corruption and Money Laundering Linked to Drug Trafficking**

Cartels depend on corruption to operate with impunity, bribing officials to avoid prosecution or gain sensitive information. Anti-corruption strategies include strengthening institutional transparency, enacting whistleblower protections, and enhancing internal audits within enforcement agencies. Financial controls require enhanced know-your-customer standards, improved regulatory oversight, cooperation with international financial task forces, and asset recovery mechanisms to strip criminals of illicit gains. These measures disrupt the economic lifeblood that sustains drug trafficking networks.

### **Aligning Counter-Narcotics Efforts with Sustainable Development Goals**

Effective drug control contributes directly to the achievement of several SDGs, including those related to health, justice, peace, and partnerships. Addressing drug trafficking supports social inclusion, reduces inequalities, and fosters economic growth by promoting safe communities. Development-oriented approaches such as alternative livelihoods for drug-crop farmers, investment in education and public health, and crime prevention strengthen societal foundations. Integrated monitoring frameworks link counter-narcotics outcomes to broader development indicators, ensuring programs deliver holistic impacts.

### **Recommendations for Renewed Global Commitment and Coordinated Action**

The expanding global threat posed by drug cartels requires revitalized political will and resource commitment. Countries must enhance multilateral cooperation frameworks, prioritize counter-narcotics in national security agendas, and provide sustainable funding for enforcement and public health programs. International organizations should continue to facilitate knowledge exchange, technical assistance, and normative leadership. Emphasizing adaptive strategies allows for rapid response to emerging trends. Renewed global commitment ensures a united and resilient approach capable of offsetting the growing sophistication and reach of transnational drug cartels.

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# **International Law/Legalities**

## **1.) The UN International Drug Control Conventions**

*These form the cornerstone of the international legal framework:*

- a) The Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961, amended 1972): This treaty defines narcotic drugs subject to control and seeks to limit their production, manufacture, and supply to medical and scientific purposes while preventing diversion to illicit channels.

- b) The Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971): It extends control to synthetic psychotropic substances such as amphetamines, LSD, and ecstasy, prescribing regulatory systems for their licit use and measures against abuse.
- c) The United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988): This convention specifically targets illicit drug trafficking, including provisions on precursor chemicals, money laundering, corruption, and establishes frameworks for international cooperation in criminal matters such as extradition and mutual legal assistance.

## **2.) International Cooperation Mechanisms**

These conventions emphasize cooperative measures among States Parties, facilitated by bodies like the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). Cooperation includes:

- a) Joint law enforcement operations and investigations
- b) Mutual legal assistance and extradition agreements
- c) Intelligence and information sharing
- d) Harmonization of laws and judicial processes to prosecute traffickers effectively

## **3.) Money Laundering and Anti-Corruption Legal Instruments**

The 1988 Convention encourages States to adopt measures to combat money laundering connected with drug trafficking and to enhance transparency and accountability in financial and governmental sectors to prevent corruption, which is vital given cartels' reliance on these acts to safeguard operations.

## **4.) Human Rights and Rule of Law Principles**

Enforcement of drug control must uphold human rights and adhere to due process to ensure legitimacy and global compliance. The UN promotes balancing drug control enforcement with public health approaches and protections against abuse of power.

## **5.) Additional Regional and Bilateral Treaties**

Apart from UN instruments, regional frameworks such as the Organization of American States (OAS) drug control treaties, and bilateral agreements between countries enhance operational collaboration specific to the Americas, where these cartels operate extensively.

## **6.) National Compliance and Enforcement Laws**

Countries implement these treaties through domestic legislation, such as the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act in India or the Controlled Substances Act in the United States. These laws authorize law enforcement, border control, and judicial systems to investigate, charge, and prosecute violations aligned with international standards.

# Case Studies

## **Project Flatlined: Breaking Hells Angels Drug Operations in Canada**

Project Flatlined was a decisive law enforcement initiative that dismantled an influential chapter of the Hells Angels involved in cocaine distribution across Winnipeg, Manitoba. Over a prolonged 10-month investigation, police utilized advanced intelligence techniques such as electronic surveillance, undercover operations, and financial audits to expose the cartel's deeply entangled network. The group employed decentralized cells with encrypted communications, complicating detection. By targeting the logistical framework, including street-level distributors and supply chains, authorities achieved significant disruption in cocaine availability in the region. The operation also highlighted the importance of interagency cooperation and building capacity for tackling street and higher-level organized crime. It serves as a blueprint for similar interventions globally against violent, technologically savvy drug networks operating in urban settings.

## **The Capture of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and the Sinaloa Cartel**

Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán's capture in 2016 was a landmark success in international counter-narcotics efforts. The Sinaloa Cartel's operations spanned continents with sophisticated methods to traffic enormous quantities of cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl. The cartel's financial tactics involved layered money laundering schemes, sometimes disguised through legitimate businesses such as garment manufacturing and real estate. The capture was made possible by unprecedented intelligence sharing and joint operational planning between U.S. agencies (DEA, FBI), Mexican counterparts, and financial regulators. The legal proceedings and asset seizures that followed demonstrated how targeting the cartel's financial underpinnings was as crucial as stopping drug shipments. The case illustrated the need for comprehensive cross-border cooperation, combined law enforcement, financial surveillance, and judicial processes to dismantle large-scale drug trafficking organizations.

## **The Triangular Initiative: Cooperative Counter-Narcotics Operation in South Asia**

The Triangular Initiative epitomizes successful multilateral collaboration among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, involving intelligence sharing and joint law enforcement actions targeting drug trafficking routes along strategically important and otherwise volatile border regions. Established under UNODC auspices, the initiative created a Joint Planning Cell to synchronize activities, exchange real-time intelligence, and coordinate interdiction efforts. This framework effectively addressed challenges posed by difficult terrains and complex political considerations. Seizures of vast quantities of opiates and precursor chemicals, along with arrests of major traffickers, underscored the efficacy of trust and institutionalized cooperation. These results demonstrate how geopolitical complexity and criminal sophistication in one of the world's largest opiate-producing regions can be countered with collective political will and pragmatic mechanisms for cooperation.

## **Ukraine and DEA Cooperation against Cocaine Trafficking**

The 2019 operation involving Ukraine's National Police and the U.S. DEA showcased the expanding geographic reach of South American cocaine trafficking networks into Eastern Europe. Intelligence-led interventions uncovered a cocaine shipment pipeline sourced from Colombia that penetrated the European market. This complex case involved coordination of surveillance, interdiction, and judicial follow-up on multiple continents. The seizure of approximately 400 kilograms of cocaine worth millions disrupted a financially significant channel for the transnational cartel. The success demonstrated the growing necessity of global policing partnerships, unlocking key logistical nodes, and the crucial integration of international agencies to respond to drug flows beyond the traditional hemispheric boundaries of cartels.

## **CARICC Multinational Operations Against Central Asian Drug Trafficking**

The Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) offers a long-term example of how sustained regional cooperation combats drug trafficking stemming from the Afghanistan border, the world's largest opiate producer. CARICC facilitates information sharing, operational coordination, and precursor chemical controls among its member states to curb heroin and synthetic drug flows. Since its inception, CARICC has supported over 85 multinational operations resulting in significant seizures and dismantling of trafficking networks. This institutionalized cooperation demonstrates the power of building stable, trust-based platforms among countries sharing trafficking corridors, enhancing the collective capacity of weaker states, and implementing joint strategies in politically sensitive, conflict-prone regions.

# **Conclusion**

The global challenge posed by the expanding reach and sophistication of South and North American drug cartels demands a renewed and comprehensive reassessment of counter-narcotics strategies. The complexities of modern drug trafficking, characterized by transnational networks leveraging advanced technologies and exploiting legal and institutional gaps, require a holistic, multi-dimensional response. Effective strategies must integrate enhanced international cooperation, robust law enforcement, legal and policy reforms, and public health approaches that emphasize harm reduction and demand management. Strengthening national capacities, fostering resilient communities, and dismantling the financial networks underpinning drug trafficking are equally critical. Aligning these efforts with broader sustainable development goals ensures long-term societal stability and resilience. Ultimately, a reinvigorated global commitment supported by coordinated action across governments, international organizations, and civil society is essential to counter the pervasive influence of these cartels and to protect global peace, security, and well-being. This agenda serves as a vital framework guiding the evolution of international and national policies to meet the pressing drug control challenges of the 21st century.

# QARMA

- 1.) What investigative techniques were crucial in dismantling the Hells Angels drug operation in Winnipeg during Project Flatlined?
- 2.) How did cross-border cooperation facilitate the capture of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and the dismantling of the Sinaloa Cartel?
- 3.) What factors made the Triangular Initiative among Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan an effective model for countering drug trafficking?
- 4.) Why was intelligence sharing essential in the cooperation between Ukraine and the DEA to disrupt cocaine trafficking networks?
- 5.) What impact does the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) have on multinational operations against drug trafficking in Central Asia?