

# Development Dimensions of Drug Policy:

Assessing New Challenges,  
Uncovering Opportunities, and  
Addressing Emerging Issues

# Executive summary

Both licit and illicit drug markets have significant implications on human development, and realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the pledge to leave no one behind.

While the SDGs mention drug policy only in relation to substance abuse and communicable diseases, drug-related challenges impact broader areas of economic development, governance, public health, human rights and environmental sustainability. Conventional punitive drug control approaches have proven ineffective or actively counterproductive on key metrics in these different policy areas. In response to these failures, many countries are shifting away from the punitive enforcement paradigm toward public health-led reforms, following guidance from an array of United Nations entities, with a growing focus on harm reduction, and decriminalization of drug possession for personal use. Despite these reforms, organized crime groups (OCGs) still control most drug markets, fuelling harm and limiting positive outcomes. This has led a growing number of jurisdictions to extend their pragmatic reform thinking to supply-side drug policy and to explore options for legal regulation of some previously prohibited drugs. These reforms, however, often conflict with United Nations' drug treaty obligations, meaning that they tend to proceed without scrutiny or guidance from global institutions and civil society. Consequently, the SDGs, already inadequately considered in drug control, risk being further diluted in reform processes, and unique opportunities to support progress on the SDGs and the pledge to leave no one behind are being missed. These reforms raise questions about how to manage ongoing transitions to regulated drug markets while addressing sustainable development priorities.

## Sustainable livelihoods

The global illegal drug trade generates vast profits, estimated at between US\$600 billion and US\$1 trillion annually, disproportionately benefiting vendors in the

Global North compared to small-scale producers of plant-based drugs in poorer regions. Many individuals in these regions, often displaced by conflict and with limited opportunities, turn to illicit drug production out of economic necessity. However, control of the trade by OCGs fuels corruption, violence and insecurity, hindering broader economic development, undermining good governance, and deterring investment.

The intersection of drug policy and development has historically been dominated by the concept of alternative development implemented through programmes aiming to help rural communities transition from illegal drug production to legal livelihoods. Over time, these programmes have evolved away from eradication goals to place greater emphasis on sustainable livelihoods, community participation and gender-sensitive policies. However, alternative development has not significantly affected global drug supply and demand, often leading to the geographical displacement of production.

The emergence of new legal drug markets offers potential to reduce the scale of, and harms associated with, illegal drug trade, but also threatens the few economic opportunities available to certain marginalized communities. The concept of 'leaving no one behind' must be central to this process. The possibility of transitioning illicit drug crop producers into legal markets requires careful management, regulatory support and political commitment.

Equity-focused policies, such as those in some U.S. state-level cannabis reforms, show potential for embedding social justice principles into emerging legal drug markets. These initiatives facilitate the participation of communities disproportionately impacted by the historic war on drugs, and also incorporate a reparative element, expunging criminal records and redirecting tax revenues to affected communities. To mitigate risks and realize the opportunities of legal drug markets to support sustainable development, proactive engagement from

multilateral agencies, governments and civil society is essential.

## Governance

Illegal drug markets and related enforcement efforts disproportionately harm economically marginalized communities, especially in key production and transit regions in the Global South. OCGs exploit institutional vulnerabilities of such regions, undermining good governance by using violence and corruption to expand their interests and maintain control. In conflict affected regions, armed groups use drug profits to fund militarization. Law enforcement efforts risk escalating conflicts, with counterproductive strategies like deposition of OCG leaders leading to power struggles and further violence.

Illegal drug markets also disrupt land reform efforts. Drug crop production thrives in regions with insecure land rights. As enforcement and commercial farming push drug crop production into increasingly marginalized areas, it often results in informal and illegal land use in protected conservation zones and Indigenous lands.

Illegal drug markets enabled by the war on drugs undermine governance, security, and sustainable development, making it critical to address these challenges to achieve drive progress on the SDGs. De-escalating militarized drug enforcement and transitioning to legal, regulated markets can potentially help mitigate these destabilizing forces. By fostering land reform and strengthening local governance, economic opportunities could be created for communities currently dependent on illegal drug production.

## Public health

The current public health landscape in drug policy reveals worsening outcomes, despite increased resources being directed towards drug control. UNODC reports that, as of 2023, approximately 316 million people worldwide had used drugs in the preceding year, reflecting a 28% increase over the past decade. This increase exceeds population growth and

indicates a rising prevalence of drug use. A concerning increase in injecting drug use has also been observed, alongside the rise of synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, fuelling an overdose crisis, especially in North America.

Despite a growing focus on public health, punitive drug enforcement remains the dominant drug policy paradigm globally, exacerbating health inequalities. Criminalization and related stigma, particularly among marginalized communities, contributes to higher drug-related deaths, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C infections.

Structural drivers such as poverty, inequality and punitive enforcement exacerbate the challenges of addressing drug-related harms. Stigmatization and fear of legal repercussions hinder access to treatment and harm reduction services, which remain underfunded and insufficient in coverage, particularly for women.

The displacement of critical resources from evidence-based health interventions to ineffective or counterproductive law enforcement compounds the problem.

Decriminalization in countries like Portugal has reduced enforcement costs and enabled the reallocation of resources to treatment and harm reduction, leading to better health outcomes and reduced stigma. However, decriminalization of possession and use alone does not impact illegal markets, which remain under the control of OCGs and subjected to ongoing enforcement. Regulation of drug markets presents an opportunity to reduce the scale of the illegal trade and redirect further enforcement savings and potential tax revenues into health and social programmes, as seen in some U.S. state-level cannabis regulation models.

Legal regulation of drug markets creates opportunities to promote safer drug use through controls on pricing, potency, quality and availability. Lessons from alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries highlight the dangers of commercial interests seeking to expand market profits, including by targeting vulnerable populations, especially youth. To mitigate these risks, regulatory frameworks must prioritize public health, remove profit incentives to expand markets, heavily restrict marketing, and ensure that policies are

implemented cautiously and incrementally subject to careful monitoring and evaluation. Corporate capture, i.e. undue corporate influence over regulatory and governmental decisions, poses significant risks to public health and sustainable development in regulated drug markets. Corporations, such as those producing alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceuticals, often use their economic and lobbying power to delay or weaken regulatory frameworks that threaten their profit margins. The emerging legal cannabis industry, particularly in North America, shows signs of similar corporate consolidation. Large transnational cannabis companies, often backed by alcohol and tobacco corporations, are gaining control of both medical and non-medical cannabis sectors, limiting opportunities for smaller, local actors, especially in regions like Latin America.

To mitigate these risks, civil society advocates have emphasized the need to incorporate protections into drug policy and legislation from the outset. Suggested strategies include promoting equity-based programmes, enforcing robust anti-trust measures, limiting the number of licences per commercial entity, and restricting market access for certain sectors, such as the tobacco industry. Additionally, non-commercial market models such as state monopolies, social enterprises and non-profit associations have been proposed to mitigate risks of market consolidation, and corporate capture. Ultimately, while drug market regulation has the potential to reduce harm, it also carries risks if commercial interests dominate, or safeguards are inadequate. United Nations guidance, informed by community input and lessons from current regulatory models, is essential to shaping drug policy reform that prioritizes health and sustainable development. The importance of addressing gender dimensions in drug policy and development has become increasingly recognized, with a focus on promoting gender equity and women's empowerment. Women involved in illicit drug markets face greater challenges due to intersecting discrimination, despite their significant roles in household and community life. Gender-sensitive policies, particularly in alternative development, aim to empower women by improving their access to land, financial services and decision-making roles, and challenging harmful gender norms.

## Human rights

Punitive drug control has led to human rights abuses, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups, minorities and Indigenous Peoples. Human rights violations tied to current drug enforcement approaches include discrimination and disproportionate sentencing, mass incarceration, use of corporal punishment and the death penalty, forced labour and inadequate access to healthcare. These abuses have been highlighted by several civil society and United Nations entities, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNDP, and multiple independent special procedures of the Human Rights Council. Contributions helping shape a more human-rights-focused approach to drug control in recent years notably include the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy.

One important shift in global drug policy discourse has been the recognition of the need for an exploration of regulated drug markets. The OHCHR and civil society organisations, including Amnesty International, have called for the responsible regulation of all drugs to support the realization of human rights.

A number of human rights arguments have been proposed in support of a transition to legally regulated drug markets. Regulated markets have the potential to decrease the power of organized crime, reduce violence, and eliminate many of the abuses linked to militarized drug enforcement.

Recent court cases in Mexico and South Africa have successfully used arguments based on privacy and bodily autonomy to challenge cannabis prohibition laws. These cases raise important questions about the proportionality of punitive measures in addressing drug-related harms, emphasizing the need for less intrusive policies that balance the right to privacy with public health concerns.

The rights of Indigenous Peoples to use psychoactive plants for traditional, medicinal and spiritual purposes are also a critical aspect of drug policy reform. International human rights frameworks emphasize the need for states to involve Indigenous communities in the design and implementation of drug policies,

ensuring that their cultural practices are protected and not criminalized.

As drug policy continues to evolve, transparent human rights assessments, and minimum standards devised with active participation from affected communities will be essential to ensuring that any transition to regulated markets prioritizes human dignity, health and equality.

## The environment

The environmental impacts of illegal drug production are multifaceted, involving deforestation, pollution, water depletion, desertification and high energy consumption. These activities directly impact realization of the multiple SDGs 3 (health and well-being), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 13 (climate action), 14 (life below water) and 15 (life on land).

Despite the attention given to drug enforcement, the wider environmental dimensions of drug economies have been under-researched. Recent efforts, such as research by UNODC's World Drug Reports 2022 and 2023, have drawn attention to these impacts, but drug policy remains absent from global environmental and climate agreements.

The environmental footprint of drug production is relatively small compared to legal agricultural industries, but the effects are concentrated in ecologically sensitive regions such as protected areas, forests and Indigenous lands. Enforcement measures, particularly crop eradication via aerial herbicide spraying, cause severe impacts on both the environment and human health. Efforts to eliminate drug crops often result in the 'balloon effect,' moving production to new, often more vulnerable areas, further aggravating environmental harm.

OCGs often reinvest drug profits into other environmentally harmful extractive industries, such as ranching, illegal logging and unregulated mining, which compounds the environmental damage. In regions under cartel control, weak governance exacerbates the environmental impact, hindering efforts to protect biodiversity and reduce carbon emissions.

Additionally, drug-related enforcement destabilizes local governance structures, perpetuates violence,

and impedes environmental protection initiatives. In drug-producing areas, OCGs have often captured state functions, rendering environmental action and climate mitigation almost impossible.

There are growing calls for drug policy to meaningfully incorporate environmental considerations. More structured and systematic evaluations of drug policies are essential, using environmental indicators and coordinated efforts across international organizations. Reforming alternative development programmes to prioritize environmental sustainability and ending harmful practices such as forced eradication and aerial spraying are critical. Legal, regulated drug markets, with strong environmental standards, could help mitigate these issues by promoting sustainability through eco-certifications and fair-trade practices.

## Ways forward

The global drug policy landscape is evolving, with increasing evidence of the harmful consequences of the punitive 'war on drugs' approach and a shift towards development-led, human rights-centred strategies. As of 2025, over halfway through the strategic goals set in the Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening Our Actions at the National, Regional and International Levels to Accelerate the Implementation of Our Joint Commitments to Address and Counter the World Drug Problem (2019), there is growing recognition that current drug control paradigms may hinder achieving these objectives. Despite some progress, key indicators related to governance, security, public health, human rights, and environmental sustainability have deteriorated, highlighting the need for a more balanced and comprehensive approach to drug policy.

Innovative approaches, documented by UNDP and supported by the United Nations System Common Position Supporting the Implementation of the International Drug Control Policy Through Effective Inter-agency Collaboration (UN System Common Position on Drugs) –prioritize health, human rights and sustainable development. These approaches include decriminalization, harm reduction and gender-sensitive alternative development programmes. While these reforms show promise, they do not fully

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address the systemic harms of illicit drug markets or the negative consequences of prohibition, which disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Regulated legal drug markets as alternatives to illicit ones is a concept gaining traction. Over 500 million people now live in jurisdictions where cannabis has been legally regulated, and this trend may expand to other drugs. However, regulation poses complex challenges, including balancing competing priorities and ensuring that reforms promote equity and sustainable development.

The path forward requires concerted, multidisciplinary engagement, involving policymakers, impacted communities, and experts from health, human rights, and development sectors. United Nations entities, with

their unique expertise, can play a crucial role in guiding evidence- and rights-based policy reforms. However, institutional and political obstacles, such as tensions between national-level reforms and the United Nations drug conventions, complicate direct engagement on these issues.

While reforms are advancing globally, there is concern that, due to a lack of guidance from relevant United Nations entities and experts, they may miss opportunities to anchor sustainable development in emerging legal drug markets. To maximize the potential of these reforms, stakeholders must acknowledge that drug policy is a critical development issue and seize this moment for transformational change.

# Ways forward

As critiques of the war on drugs from a development and human rights perspective have become stronger, alternative, innovative approaches that might deliver better sustainable development and human rights outcomes have become more prominent.

Today, in 2025—over halfway through the United Nations ten-year drug strategy outlined in the 2019 Ministerial Declaration, and also past the midway point toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the pledge to leave no one behind by 2030—it is important to review and reflect on progress.<sup>1</sup> While there have been advancements in some areas, in recent years, generally there have been growing challenges and deteriorating outcomes on key development indicators in the drug policy context such as in governance, peace and security, economic development, public health, human rights and environmental sustainability. A compelling case is made by a growing number of institutional and civil society voices that key SDGs may not be achieved within the existing punitive drug control paradigm.<sup>2</sup>

As UNDP has documented in previous discussion papers in 2016 and 2019,<sup>3</sup> many different communities and countries are innovating drug policy in different ways. The common theme of these innovations has been a reorientation away from ineffective or harmful punitive enforcement, towards more pragmatic people centred, evidence- and rights-based approaches

that prioritize health, human rights and sustainable development. These messages have been powerfully reinforced by the United Nations System Common Position on Drugs<sup>4</sup> and the United Nations System Common Position on Incarceration, speaking on behalf of all 31 United Nations agencies.<sup>5</sup> A recurring theme in much of this analysis has been how the burden of negative impacts from drug prohibition and criminalization disproportionately affects marginalized individuals, groups and communities. Correspondingly, and drawing on lessons from other areas such as the global HIV response, it is clear that the most effective policy innovations are those that meaningfully reach vulnerable and marginalised people and leave no one behind. These innovations have, for example, notably included ending the criminalization of people who use drugs, providing treatment and harm reduction services, and embedding environmental sustainability and gender-sensitive principles into alternative development programmes.

The limits of these innovations, however, are also becoming clear. Decriminalization, while bringing benefits to health and human rights, does not address the wider harms associated with the illegal trade. Alternative development, however well implemented, does not reduce the scale of illicit drug markets. Many of the problems that harm reduction interventions seek to mitigate are created or exacerbated by illegal drug

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1 Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening Our Actions at the National, Regional and International Levels to Accelerate the Implementation of Our Joint Commitments to Address and Counter the World Drug Problem". 2019. [www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/2019/Ministerial\\_Declaration.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/2019/Ministerial_Declaration.pdf)

2 Health Poverty Action. 2018. *SDGs and Drugs Policy Briefing*. [www.healthpovertyaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HPA-SDGs-drugs-policy-briefing-WEB.pdf](http://www.healthpovertyaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HPA-SDGs-drugs-policy-briefing-WEB.pdf); Global Commission on Drugs. 2018. *Drug Policy and the Sustainable Development Agenda*. [www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2018SDG\\_ENG\\_web.pdf](http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2018SDG_ENG_web.pdf); International Peace Institute (IPI). 2018. *Aligning Agendas: Drugs, Sustainable Development, and the Drive for Policy Coherence*. [www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1802\\_Aligning-Agendas.pdf](http://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1802_Aligning-Agendas.pdf)

3 UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2019. *Development Dimensions of Drug Policy*. New York. [www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Development\\_Dimensions\\_of\\_Drug\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Development_Dimensions_of_Drug_Policy.pdf)

4 UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). 2023. *UN Common Position on Drugs*. Vienna. [www.unodc.org/res/un-common-position-drugs/index\\_html/2315371E-eBook.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/res/un-common-position-drugs/index_html/2315371E-eBook.pdf)

5 UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). 2021. *UN System Common Position on Incarceration*. [www.unodc.org/res/justice-and-prison-reform/nelsonmandelarules-GoF/UN\\_System\\_Common\\_Position\\_on\\_Incarceration.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/res/justice-and-prison-reform/nelsonmandelarules-GoF/UN_System_Common_Position_on_Incarceration.pdf)

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production and supply. In this context, it is unsurprising that civil society, United Nations entities, human rights mechanisms, and policymakers are increasingly exploring how the pragmatism and principles that underpin successful drug policy innovations might be extended into thinking about the supply-side dimension of drug policy,<sup>6</sup> i.e. exploring options for regulated licit drug markets as alternatives to illicit drug markets under prohibition.

These debates are not new and remain politically challenging; however, they become harder to ignore as the systemic failings of global drug control become more acute, and real-world reforms continue to shift these debates from theory into practice. Indeed, today over 500 million people now live in jurisdictions where adult access to cannabis has been or is being legally regulated in some form for non-medical use. It seems likely that this trend will continue, and even accelerate, both for cannabis and other drugs.

This raises a series of challenging questions about the detail and practicalities of drug market regulation, and how the complex array of intersecting legal and policy challenges can be negotiated to balance the sometimes-conflicting priorities of different stakeholders. As this report has highlighted, any drug policy reform presents both opportunities and risks. As licit drug market reforms progress around the world, the shared aspiration should be to ensure that the opportunities for realization of the SDGs are maximized, and risks minimized. Achieving this aspiration will require concerted engagement from policymakers, affected communities and expertise across a range of disciplines in health, human rights, development, science, academia and civil society. The voices of affected communities, such as those of people who use drugs and those involved in drug production, must be at the centre throughout each stage of policy development. There is potential to

pursue a just transition, establishing new regulated markets that not only reduce the harms of prohibition, but also create opportunities for poverty reduction, more equitable economic development, and the transfer of enforcement spending and new tax resources into public services and support for wider development goals.

There is no guarantee, however, that reforms will follow this path. Addressing specific development risks entails preventing marginalized communities who depend on illicit economies from being neglected. It also entails preventing post-prohibition market models from recreating inequities, harms and injustices of the racist and colonial war on drugs in new forms.

United Nations entities are uniquely positioned to inform and facilitate policy development within their dedicated areas of expertise. They can guide the joined-up thinking that will be needed to navigate the complex intersection of thematic areas that drug policy represents. Such work has already informed many areas of drug policy, such as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the United Nations Common Position on Drugs, the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drugs Policy, and the HIV/AIDS response relating to people who inject drugs.

For key areas of the dialogue on licit markets, however, institutional obstacles create dilemmas that can hold back more direct engagement from United Nations entities, Member States and key civil society voices in the development field. There are tensions between the growing momentum for specific drug market reforms at a national level and the unambiguous prohibitions on drug production and supply for non-medical/scientific uses established under the United Nations drug conventions. Some options, including medically prescribed 'safer supply' models, and some forms of cultivation for personal use, or non-profit collective decriminalization, are, or are potentially, permissible

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6 Scottish Government. 2023. *A caring, compassionate and human rights informed drug policy for Scotland*. [www.gov.scot/publications/caring-compassionate-human-rights-informed-drug-policy-scotland/pages/1](http://www.gov.scot/publications/caring-compassionate-human-rights-informed-drug-policy-scotland/pages/1); OHCHR. 2023. *Human Rights Challenges in Addressing and Countering All Aspects of the World Drug Problem: Contribution of the Czech Republic*. [www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/drug/cfi-hrc54-drug-policy/submission/subm-s-ohchrs-report-member-states-czech-republic-11.doc](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/drug/cfi-hrc54-drug-policy/submission/subm-s-ohchrs-report-member-states-czech-republic-11.doc); Forbes. 2023. Colombian President Proposes Latin Alliance To Shift War On Drugs Towards Public Health Approach. [www.forbes.com/sites/dariosabaghi/2023/09/11/colombian-president-proposes-latin-alliance-to-shift-war-on-drugs-towards-public-health-approach/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/dariosabaghi/2023/09/11/colombian-president-proposes-latin-alliance-to-shift-war-on-drugs-towards-public-health-approach/)

within the United Nations drug treaty framework. Yet, the wider shifts towards licit retail markets for non-medical use of certain drugs, in many cases already being implemented, will ultimately require some form of accommodation within the drug control framework for it to remain a viable multilateral tool. While possible pathways for these reforms have been proposed and discussed,<sup>7</sup> due to the lack of consensus among Member States, civil society and indeed United Nations entities, any modernization or evolution of the global drug control framework to achieve such an accommodation will be politically challenging and take considerable time.

The immediate challenge is that, in many places, reforms are moving forward regardless, with new legal markets being established without input from key centres of expertise that are uniquely positioned to provide guidance but are politically constrained from doing so. This is happening despite growing calls for collaboration and guidance from civil society and Member States.<sup>8</sup> While some civil society organisations have focused on the development dimensions of a transition to licit drug markets,<sup>9</sup> the same barriers have constrained many key civil society voices in the development sphere from proactively engaging in drug policy reform. There is a risk that a unique opportunity to prioritize sustainable development in significant and rapidly emerging global markets will be missed, and arguably is already being missed, when it is most needed. This is not because the issues are not understood or that expertise is lacking, but rather, because of political and institutional inertia. A key message for all relevant stakeholders must be that drug policy is an important development issue.

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<sup>7</sup> OAS (Organization of American States). 2013. *Scenarios for the Drug Problem in the Americas 2013–2025*. [www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Scenarios\\_Report.PDF](http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Scenarios_Report.PDF); TNI (Transnational Institute), WOLA (Washington Office on Latin America), GDPO (Global Drug Policy Observatory). Transform Drug Policy Foundation, CDPC (Canadian Drug Policy Coalition), MUCD (Mexican Institute of Competitiveness). 2016. *New Report Offers Strategies for Regulating Cannabis in Ways that Uphold and Modernize International Law*. [www.tni.org/en/article/new-report-offers-strategies-for-regulating-cannabis-in-ways-that-uphold-and-modernize](http://www.tni.org/en/article/new-report-offers-strategies-for-regulating-cannabis-in-ways-that-uphold-and-modernize)

<sup>8</sup> 8th Brandenburg Forum on Drugs and Development Policies. 2023. *The Way Forward to 2029: Accelerating Progress in Global Drug Policies*. [www.gdpdp.org/fileadmin/media/file-upload/media/bericht\\_des\\_8\\_brandenburg\\_forums.pdf](http://www.gdpdp.org/fileadmin/media/file-upload/media/bericht_des_8_brandenburg_forums.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Health Poverty Action. 2025. The legal regulation of drugs: The potential to deliver global justice <https://www.healthpovertyaction.org/the-legal-regulation-of-drugs-the-potential-to-deliver-global-justice/>

# Strategic considerations

While the debates regarding transitions to regulated markets play out, it is important to recognize that other reforms for which there is a greater consensus continue to progress. Policy should shift away from punitive enforcement approaches that have proved ineffective and counterproductive, and prioritize evidence-based, human rights-centred policy models that support the realization of the SDGs. Here are some suggested strategic considerations for evaluating opportunities for reforms to evidence-based, rights-focused and development-oriented models on drug policy.

- Use SDG targets as a core framework for guiding design and evaluation of drug policy implementation.
  - Foster meaningful community engagement in policy development, reform, implementation and monitoring/evaluation, including with people who use drugs and those providing services to them, people working in drug markets, and other disproportionately affected groups.
  - Address systemic racial, gender and social inequalities, including integrating a gender dimension into all elements of drug policy design and implementation.
  - Identify and target underlying structural drivers of high-risk drug use and substance use disorders, or that lead people to engagement with the illegal drug trade, including poverty, inequality and discrimination, conflict and forced displacement, trauma and social marginalization.
  - Building on progress, support and catalyse further change towards the decriminalization of possession of drugs for personal use, including decriminalization of small-scale cultivation and not-for-profit sharing, and expunging past criminal records for decriminalized offences,<sup>10</sup> thus enabling more effective public health interventions, reducing stigma and institutional obstacles to accessing services, and freeing up resources to scale up services .
- Promote alternatives to incarceration for drug and drug-related offences.
  - Review militarized approaches for the control of illicit drugs, such as the use of military personnel, equipment and techniques, and shift towards a policing approach that puts the protection of public health and human rights at the centre.
  - Ensure access to justice and due process for all, specifically with regard to drug and drug-related offences.
  - Support comprehensive evidence-based drug prevention and harm reduction service provision in particular targeting vulnerable populations such as youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) communities, and people engaged in sex work and high-risk behaviours such as injecting drugs and using stimulants/chemsex.
  - Support and scale up access to voluntary and evidence-based drug treatment, recovery and harm reduction services to meet needs for all people, including in community and prison settings.
  - Ensure access to essential medicines, such as opioid pain medication, and also OAMT and other substitution medicines, as well as naloxone to manage opioid overdoses.
  - Work with and for communities of people who use drugs and other stakeholders to remove legal barriers to access to prevention, treatment, care and support services, in line with the commitments made in the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS.

<sup>10</sup> International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC). 2022. *Decriminalization of People Who Use Drugs: A Guide for Advocacy*. <https://idpc.net/publications/2022/02/decriminalization-of-people-who-use-drugs-a-guide-for-advocacy>

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## In the context of emerging licit markets

- United Nations entities working with civil society, academia and impacted communities should seek to establish system-wide coherence in the response to licit drug markets, developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks, as well as minimum standards in their relevant areas of expertise, in order to support policymaking aligned with the United Nations System Common Position, the SDGs, and international human rights law.
- Learn lessons from successes and failures of regulatory policy and law regarding alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries, with particular attention to mitigating risks of over-commercialization, market consolidation, and attendant risks of corporate capture and distortion of policymaking.
- Address the gap in good practice guidance in the public health domain in a similar fashion to the guidance informing alcohol and tobacco regulation, as has been requested by civil society and Member States in order to inform emerging cannabis markets and other non-medical drug regulation models.
- Provide reparations for harms of ongoing punitive models, specifically from key consumer market regions to key producer and transit regions – and ensure that the interests of marginalized individuals and communities disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs are not neglected. Hence, the principles of equity and social justice must be embedded into the policy design of regulatory frameworks and applied to emerging market architecture from the outset.
- Consider developing international human rights law standards in the context of licit market transitions, including an expansion of the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy.
- Good practice from alternative development can usefully inform a just transition into future licit drug markets or other sustainable livelihoods for those working in illicit drug markets and traditional drug crop-producing regions in the Global South.
- Ensure the protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples who use plant-based drugs in traditional, ceremonial and religious contexts.
- Address the negative environmental impacts of illicit drug markets, drug enforcement efforts, the reinvestment of drug profits into environmentally harmful industries, and the undermining of good governance and environmental resilience—areas that have not yet received sufficient attention. Enhance monitoring and evaluation of the environmental impacts of drug control, along with the provision of good practice guidance and increased international cooperation to support and inform reforms.
- Explore and address the emerging challenges related to state practice in licit market regulation, not least the issues of system wide coherence and options for resolving tensions with UN drug treaty obligations. This is consistent with a resolution at the 68th UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs<sup>11</sup> which has called for an independent expert panel to prepare a ‘specific and actionable set of recommendations aimed at enhancing the implementation of the obligations’ under the UN drug conventions and ‘other relevant international instruments’, and further ‘[s]tresses the need to strengthen the capacity of Member States and relevant United Nations entities, within their respective mandates, to effectively respond to persistent and emerging drug-related trends and challenges’.

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council – Commission on Narcotic Drugs. “Strengthening the global drug control framework: a path to effective implementation” (E/CN.7/2025/L.6/Rev.1), adopted 14 March 2025. <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.7/2025/L.6/Rev.1>