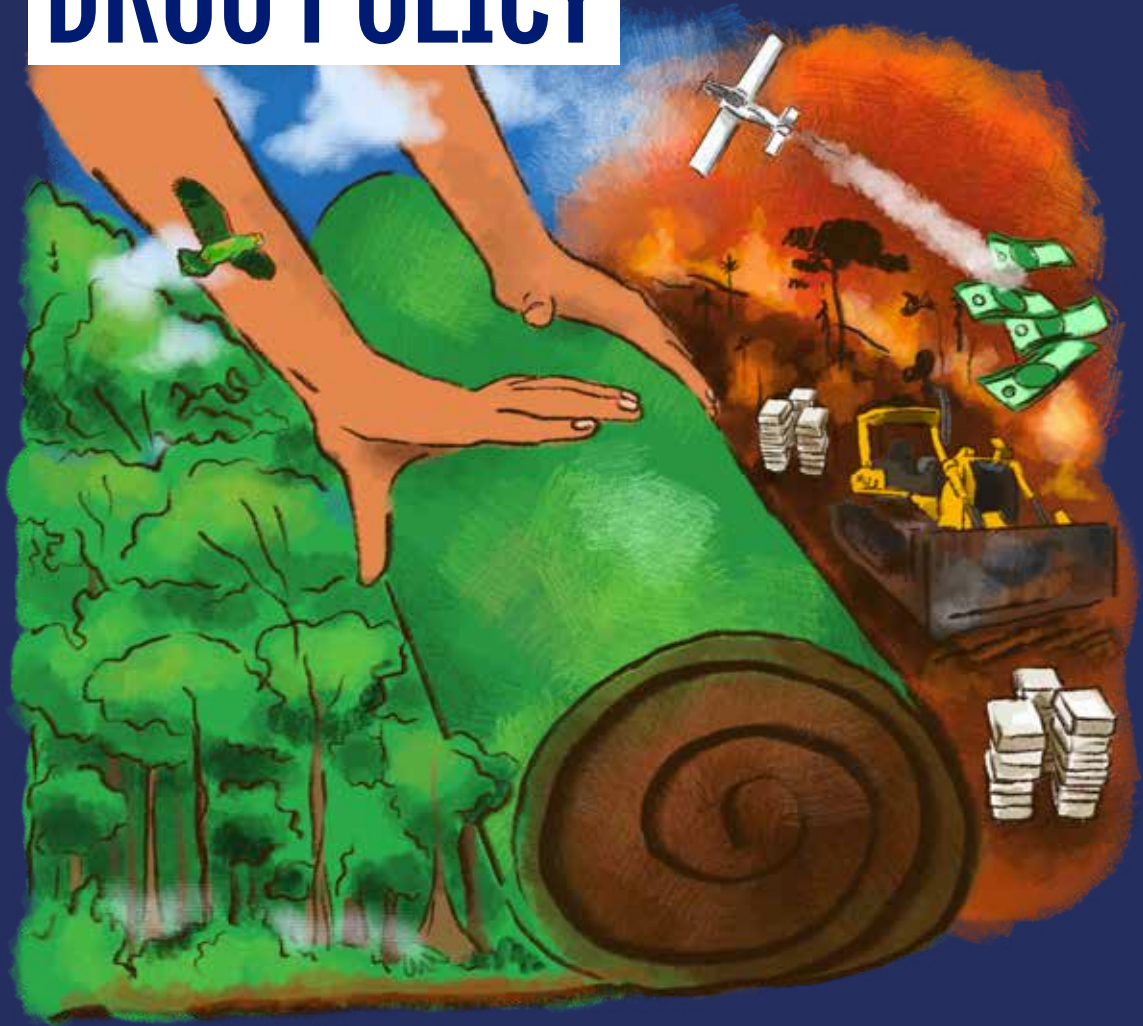


Revealing the missing
link to Climate Justice:

DRUG POLICY



DRUG POLICY REFORM
& ENVIRONMENTAL
& JUSTICE
INTERNATIONAL COALITION

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:

It's time to address the missing link in climate justice: drug policy.....1

SECTION 1:

Three key ways drug prohibition harms the environment.....5

1. Pushes drug production and trafficking into key6
environmental frontiers
2. Drug profits fund environmentally harmful activities.....11
3. Destabilises societies and obstructs efforts to18
mitigate climate change

SECTION 2:

Why is the environmental movement failing to act on34
(or even acknowledge) the problem?

SECTION 3:

The opportunities (and threats) of drug reforms42

SECTION 4:

Embracing drug reform as a path to climate justice48

RESOURCES:

An introduction to drug policy reform that supports human rights,52
public health, sustainable development and environmental justice

IT'S TIME TO ADDRESS THE MISSING LINK IN CLIMATE JUSTICE: DRUG POLICY

“Forests are disappearing at an extraordinary and stubbornly persistent rate. In 2022, the world lost 4.1 million hectares of tropical primary rainforests – areas of critical importance for livelihoods, carbon storage and biodiversity – equivalent to a rate of 11 football pitches a minute.”¹

World Resources Institute

In the face of “extraordinary and stubbornly persistent” rates of tropical forest loss² the UN’s International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has called for urgent action to protect and restore forests by strengthening their governance and management.

Action is needed now – and policy makers, environmental ministries, NGOs and civil society groups around the world are dedicated to implementing “urgent governance responses”³ to protect the planet’s largest carbon sinks, mitigate climate change, and head off climate catastrophe.⁴

But their efforts will fail as long as those committed to environmental protection neglect to recognise, and grapple with, the elephant in the room. That elephant is the global system of criminalised drug prohibition, popularly known as the ‘war on drugs.’

It is increasingly being recognised⁵ that criminal actors are financing land grabs, deforestation, timber and wildlife trafficking and socially and ecologically devastating mining. And that authorities at all levels are often rubber-stamping and profiting from those illegal activities. However, this recognition stops short of naming the driver of these criminal activities.

Prohibition: the international drug policy regime – primarily devised and championed by countries of the Global North, and maintained by the United Nations – has created an unregulated and immensely powerful shadow economy.



That shadow economy is undermining environmental progress and governance in the world's tropical forest frontiers. The jungles of South-East Asia, forests of West Africa and the rainforests of Central and South America are some of the planet's largest carbon sinks and key to our climate future. This equatorial line also correlates to the world's major drug trafficking routes.

Protecting ecologically fragile regions requires getting to the source of the shadow system that threatens them: the laws and treaties that make drugs illegal.

This report provides an introduction to this issue.⁶ It distils the ever-growing body of policy analysis and scientific evidence to expose how this shadow system functions, how it fuels environmental destruction and how it undermines climate mitigation strategies.

It is the first in a series, written by the academics, advocates and activists that comprise The International Coalition on Drug Policy Reform and Environmental Justice – the first ever global coalition focussed on this vital intersection between drug policy and the climate crisis.

It outlines three key ways in which drug policy impedes climate justice. First, the geographies of prohibition, pushing drug production and trafficking into remote and vital areas of biodiversity. Second, the reinvestment of drug profits into other environmentally harmful activities. Most importantly it highlights how drug policy creates the underlying conditions for environmental devastation. It explores how prohibitionist laws have empowered and enriched organised and violent criminal groups, and created an omnipotent shadow economy that destabilises state architecture, leaving officials to legislate in the interests of organised crime rather than people and planet.

Finally, it highlights the extraordinary opportunity before us to demolish this system of prohibition, and to build drug policy alternatives that work for public and planetary health.

At the report's core is a plea to the environmental movement to take on board – strategically and programmatically – one crucial idea:

Drug prohibition is a key driver of organised crime, corruption and state capture in ecologically fragile regions. Addressing the climate emergency requires urgent, coordinated action by the environmental and drug policy movements, to replace prohibition with regulation that supports people and planet.

Here's why this is necessary. And what we can do about it.

“Confronted with a situation that is growing worse by the day, it is imperative to rectify the ‘war on drugs’ strategy pursued in the region over the past 30 years. Prohibitionist policies based on the eradication of production and on the disruption of drug flows as well as on the criminalization of consumption have not yielded the expected results. We are farther than ever from the announced goal of eradicating drugs.”⁷

Statement by the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, chaired by César Gaviria, former President of Colombia; Ernesto Zedillo, former President of Mexico; and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former President of Brazil (2009)

SECTION 1

THREE KEY WAYS DRUG PROHIBITION HARMS THE ENVIRONMENT

Prohibitionist drug policies impact the environment in a number of ways.⁸ Here, we outline the three most impactful means by which prohibition either harms the environment, or undermines action to protect it.



1 Pushes drug production and trafficking into key environmental frontiers

Prohibition has created a situation where extremely profitable commodities are being produced and trafficked through some of the world's most remote and biodiverse spaces.

Tropical forests⁹ accounted for 90% of the 420 million hectares of forest lost globally between 1990-2020.¹⁰ Tropical forests represent a whopping 45% of the world's entire forested area, and “are among the most important regulators of regional and global climate, natural carbon sinks, and the most significant repositories of terrestrial biomass” on the planet.¹¹ Of forests lost in the past two decades, 44% occurred in Latin America, and 31% in the tropical Asia-Pacific region.¹²

The world's last forested frontiers are the places where many illegal drug crops are grown.¹³ These places are often biodiverse frontiers – either under some form of conservation protection (national parks or biosphere reserves), or in contested borderlands, or in indigenous territories, or all three.¹⁴

For many observers, that spatial overlap leads to the simplistic assertion that it is the production of drug crops that is a major cause of that forest loss. This is wrong, and fosters an incomplete picture of the dynamics at play.¹⁵

Whilst the total area of forest that drug crop producers clear annually is relatively trivial,¹⁶ in contrast to that cleared for the production of legal commodities,¹⁷ the key challenge is the way the mechanisms of prohibition push the production and then eradication of drugs into remote, biodiverse areas of particular environmental significance.¹⁸

The same is true for drug trafficking. Products are moved through remote coastlines, savannas, forests, and oceans,¹⁹ and trafficked over land and sea with the help of compromised agents at ports and borders. Those transshipment spaces include much of the Brazilian Amazon and the wildlands of Paraguay.



© Carlos Villalón

A couple of loggers working over an Abarco tree near the Taparal river, Colombia

It includes West African countries that receive South American drug shipments, including those within the global biodiversity hotspot of the Upper Guinean forests of West Africa (Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana). It includes the tropical dry forests, rainforests and cloud forests of Central America and Mexico, which lie along the northern routes for cocaine, heroin and cannabis traffic out of South America. It includes the forests of Lao, Myanmar and Thailand, through which heroin is exported in all directions.²⁰

If the markets for coca, cannabis and opium poppy were legal, those crops would be cultivated wherever producers had a competitive advantage in the context of global trade, just like coffee and tobacco. In fact, in the few cases where opium, cannabis, and coca *are* being legally grown—to supply the pharmaceutical and beverage industries—their cultivation occurs in conventional agricultural contexts.²¹

Wherever smallholders are growing drug crops at the forest margin, or traffickers transporting their products through tropical forests, it’s because the dynamics of drug law enforcement pushed them there. For the millions of farmers who grow prohibited plants, their activities are considered criminal. They live under the constant threat of arrest and violence from



© Transnational Institute

Opium poppy cultivation, Myanmar

authorities, and the risk that their harvests will be seized or destroyed through physical or chemical eradication.²²

The more drug producers and traffickers are pursued, the more they seek out remote landscapes to conduct their business, and the broader their area of influence becomes.²³ As outlined in the following section, their presence in these remote areas fuels further environmental harms. This is how the business of illegal drugs thrives in some of the world's most iconic lands and forests – the same ecosystems so crucial to our climate survival.²⁴ **The cascade of environmental effects associated with prohibition stems from this basic geography.**

“I want to say that it is not fair to blame smallholder opium farmers, who are criminalised by the law and marginalised by society and market mechanisms, for environmental harms. They have no power to respond. Support us. Don't just blame us.”

Sai Lone, Senior Advisor of the Myanmar Opium Farmers' Forum. Video input delivered at the first global meeting on Drug Policy Reform and Environmental Justice, London, December 2022.²⁵

The persecuted and the powerful – the great disparity in the drug trade

Just like legal economies, participation in the drug trade is highly unequal. At one end are small scale crop farmers and small scale traffickers who rely on their income to survive; at the other, organised criminal gangs who wield extraordinary money, power and influence.

Prohibition causes a vicious cycle of poverty around the world, which targets the most marginalised and vulnerable in society. The people most affected are not those in charge of the drug trade – instead, it's those caught up at the lowest levels of the trade that are persecuted and criminalised. This is felt most sharply by marginalised communities and women who engage in the small-scale trade out of necessity or lack of alternatives. In these contexts of significant

Spraying coca leaves with cement and lime early stages of cocaine production, Colombia



vulnerability, powerlessness and poverty, the drug trade can offer a decent income or means of survival, where no other exists.

For example, in Colombia it is estimated some 200,000 families make a living from growing coca; thousands more are involved in picking coca or in supplying producers.²⁶ Especially in contexts of civil war and displacement, growing drugs can be one of the few available economic opportunities in rural areas, and can be an essential life-line for disenfranchised indigenous and displaced peoples and rural migrants living at the forest margins.²⁷ Criminal networks who rely on peasant producers often act like extension agents, helping farmers access planting stock and agrochemicals.²⁸ Many drug crop farmers credit these arrangements with allowing their families to survive. Even when those farmers are persecuted by police or military, the pragmatic livelihood benefits of growing illegal drug crops often compel them to return to the business despite the high risks.²⁹

This is the drug crop paradox: risky, illegal crops can be *favoured* by disadvantaged small farmers. These are the ones who are the main targets of enforcement efforts, facing the eradication of their crops, incarceration and destruction of their livelihoods. Meanwhile, as explored in this report, those at the top of the trade remain largely unscathed as their power, money or violence buys them immunity from prosecution and influence over elite policy making.



© Carlos Villalón

Coca production,
Cauca, Colombia

2 Drug profits fund wider environmental destruction

Once prohibition pushes organised crime into biodiverse tropical frontiers, their profits are reinvested to fund other environmentally harmful activities in these same areas.

Criminal activities are less risky when those conducting them control the spaces in which they happen. Buying up and controlling large parcels of land along key transshipment routes, borders, and ports³⁰ is therefore a sound business strategy.

Rural land – especially far from established land markets and in places where land records are thin or non-existent – can be bought with cash and without any receipts or deeds changing hands. Corrupt notaries can legalise the transaction after the fact. In Colombia, Brazil, Guatemala,³¹ and Honduras, for example, researchers have repeatedly documented how ‘narcos’ use violence, threats and cash to buy up or take over large areas of indigenous and campesino land, and land under conservation protections.³²

Illegal drugs are a profitable business. When that business is in resource-rich areas, actors enriched by drug profits do what businesses everywhere do: they look to invest their money and diversify their income portfolios.³³ Sectors that are particularly amenable to drug-profit capitalisation are remote, cash-based industries where illegal profits can be reinvested into alternative businesses and sources of income.³⁴ These include a range of other illegal trades, in wildlife, tropical timber, archaeological artefacts, gold and other minerals, as well as investments in legal agribusinesses such as beef, palm oil, soy and avocados.³⁵ Drug profits also provide seed capital for the business of human trafficking.

In this way, **drug profits act like an investment bank for a host of other environmentally damaging organised criminal enterprises, extractive industries, and carbon-intensive agribusinesses.**³⁶



The Darién Gap³⁷

In 2004, photographer and member of the coalition, Carlos Villalon encountered a single-paragraph story in a Colombian newspaper with the headline “Chinese immigrants caught in the Darién jungle.” That story led him on what would become an annual journey into the rainforest spanning the border of Colombia and Panama, to the treacherous migrant trail he has now been documenting since 2011.

The Darién Gap is a 66-mile stretch of mountains, forests, rivers and wetlands; a remote and hazard-filled region that marks the only break in the otherwise continuous 16,000-mile span of the Pan-American Highway. ‘A motherland of biodiversity’, the Darién is one of the most unique and genetically rich wild habitats in the world, serving as a critical bridge for the exchange of plant and animal species between North and South America.

Villalon’s ongoing reporting on the Darién Gap³⁸ tracks the long and difficult odyssey experienced every day by thousands of migrants from Africa, South East Asia, and the Caribbean. Arriving in Colombia from various points in South America, individuals and families fleeing war, hunger, authoritarianism and precarious political and economic conditions put themselves in the hands of ‘coyotes’ offering to lead them through the unforgiving region. At the end of 2021, over 125,000 migrants from Bangladesh, Cameroon, India, Somalia, Nepal, Venezuela, Cuba and Haiti were en route to their ultimate destination, the United States.

Drug-trafficking cartels control the Darién route. The Gulf Cartel (aka the Urabeños), a former right-wing paramilitary group turned drug cartel – has controlled cocaine trafficking through the area for decades. That control allowed them to move into the migration business. Initially it was a side business, with just a few families daring to cross the gap in the early 2000s. Now, more than 3,000 migrants cross the Darién every day.

Initially, the income that these criminal groups earned from trafficking people was tiny compared to the millions they raked in from drug trafficking. But the power and territorial control that groups gained from the drug trade has allowed their human trafficking enterprise to flourish. Today, they charge each migrant who enters their turf, and in the process are making an estimated \$350,000 per day.

In the process, the Darién jungle is suffering. Pristine and relatively untraveled for years, now it is threaded with paths created by the migrant flow. Each day, thousands of desperate migrants leave in their wake tons of plastic, tin cans, diapers, clothing. Caught between migrant interdiction and drug interdiction, they are trashing an ecological jewel. Meanwhile, drug profits are pushing roads into the region from the Panamanian side, and the exposed forests are being converted to agriculture.³⁹

Migrants walking through jungle. The Darien Gap



The nexus of narco trafficking and illegal mining in the Brazilian Amazon⁴⁰

The connection between drug trafficking and illegal mining is not a recent phenomenon. Since the 1980s, there have been indications of the use of airstrips for illegal mining activities by drug trafficking groups operating in the Yanomami Indigenous Territory, one of the most threatened communities in the Amazon region.⁴¹ A notable example is the case of Leonardo Mendonça, who was Brazil's most infamous drug trafficker between 1997 and 2002. Mendonça worked as an illegal miner (*garimpeiro*) in Roraima, in the Brazilian Amazon, during the 1980s and later migrated to mining areas in Suriname, where he established a highly sophisticated drug and arms trafficking operation, leveraging his connections in illegal mining.⁴²

More recently however, the landscape has become even more complex due to a series of changes in the criminal ecosystem of the Amazon, involving primarily Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil. These changes are linked to economic, political, and social crises in South American countries, as well as the expansion of Brazilian and Venezuelan groups such as the Red Command, the First Command of the Capital and the Tren de Aragua, which have begun to establish armed control and criminal governance in Amazonian territories.⁴³

Illegal mining fronts establish a complex network of clandestine airstrips and ports, involving agreements with local economic and political elites, as well as corruption schemes involving state agents. All these elements are of interest to drug traffickers, as is the use of gold as a means to launder money derived from drug trafficking and the opportunity to invest illicit proceeds from drug trafficking in mining activities.⁴⁴

A noteworthy example occurred in November 2021 when the Brazilian Federal Police launched Operation Narcos Gold with the aim of combating money laundering from drug trafficking and dismantling a criminal group that had been operating in the Amazon for at least three years. The



© AP Photo/Edmar Barros

Brazilian Environmental Agency helicopter flies over an illegal mining camp during an operation to try to contain illegal mining in Yanomami Indigenous territory, Roraima state, Brazil

investigation revealed that the group received drugs from the Bolivia-Brazil border through clandestine airstrips in illegal mining areas in the Amazon region for distribution in major cities. The group operated an extensive network of illicit businesses across Brazilian territory, moving an estimated sum of over 200 million dollars.⁴⁵

Therefore, over the past decade, we have witnessed the emergence of new criminal practices in the Amazon that intertwine major drug trafficking groups with 'traditional' illicit activities in the region, such as illegal mining and deforestation. This new dynamic is likely to intensify environmentally devastating activities and has also contributed to an increase in violence in cities, villages, and indigenous communities in the Amazon.

Peru: Many connections between drug trafficking and gold mining

Gold mining is an attractive investment for organised crime groups involved in the drug trade. Unlike cocaine, gold is a legal commodity that can be easily traded on historically stable global markets, and can be easily smuggled (in multiple small pieces) and laundered into the legal trade.⁴⁶

But as with coca leaf production, small-scale gold producers are disproportionately punished for illegal mining, some of whom include indigenous people whose livelihoods depend on artisanal mining.⁴⁷ Today, in a post-pandemic economic crisis, coca cultivation has shifted to the lower Amazon, where areas under cultivation have increased by as much as 274%.⁴⁸ This is the case in Madre de Dios, a department known worldwide for the cratered, moon-like landscape left by rampant illegal gold mining.

Drug trafficking and illegal mining share infrastructure such as clandestine roads and airports⁴⁹ and the employment of impoverished labour.⁵⁰ Moreover, drug trafficking groups invest in legal and illegal gold mines to launder the proceeds of their highly profitable drug market activities.⁵¹ However, state responses to both activities display remarkable resemblance.⁵² Funding and capacity to dismantle these large-scale networks move at a slower pace compared to the enforcement efforts smaller producers are subjected to. Between 2015 and 2022 police budgets to enforce against illegal mining, was 4.1 times higher than those for formalisation – the transformation of mining practices into environmentally and socially responsible ones.⁵³

“Put simply, drug traffickers are diversifying their portfolios into the nature crime business.”⁵⁴

Robert Muggah, a principal at the SecDev Group and co-founder of the Igarapé Institute.

3 Destabilises societies and obstructs efforts to mitigate climate change

Prohibition not only funds environmental harms and reroutes these into areas of key environmental significance; prohibition, and its market dynamics create the wider underlying conditions to embed violence and corruption, destabilise entire countries and provide a direct barrier to environmental action.

The act of making high-demand products illegal creates a high-stakes shadow economy, with astronomical profit and power for those who control it. These are enough to embed violence and corruption, ‘buy off’ officials of all grades and divert resources and policies to meet the needs of organised crime. Pages 21 – 25 outline in detail the steps by which this happens.

Murders of environmental defenders

Every year hundreds of brave environmental defenders are murdered defending their land and resources, with killings concentrated in key drug production and trafficking zones.⁵⁵

It has proven exceptionally difficult to tie most of these crimes to specific actors. Analysis by Global Witness reveals that in 75% of cases, the murders of environmental defenders could not be linked to any legitimate industries.⁵⁶ Moreover, even in cases where the assassins are identified, it can be very hard to ‘follow-the-money’ from the assassin to the person who ordered the killing. Corruption in the police force and judicial system means it is frequently left to journalists and human rights groups – themselves often subject to intimidation and violence – to connect the dots. And repeatedly, what their courageous work shows is that those involved in the drug trade are regularly financing the harassment and killing of environmental defenders who threaten ‘business-as-usual.’⁵⁷

For example, in Ecuador, Fernando Villavicencio, a leading presidential candidate who after speaking out against the infiltration of politics by

organised crime, was shot dead in August 2023.⁵⁸ The murders of journalists Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, which shocked the world in 2022, were linked to their reporting on organised crime⁵⁹ in the context of rapidly expanding illegal drug activity in the remote Brazilian Amazon.⁶⁰

Indeed, Global Witness' most recent figures show that in 2022, almost two-thirds of all the killings of environmental defenders across the globe occurred in just three countries: Colombia, Mexico and Honduras.⁶¹ These three locations share one thing in common: they all play a critical role in the production and trafficking of cocaine and other drugs to the US, Europe and other global markets.

These dynamics are not limited to Latin America. A UN report released in June 2023 warned that Asia's synthetic drug trade was roaring to "extreme levels,"⁶² driven principally by methamphetamine.⁶³ In the Philippines, another country that consistently ranks among the most violent for

Aerial view of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest Guainía, Colombia. The land is now used for cattle ranching



environmental defenders, at least 8,663 people were killed between July 2016 and June 2020 in a ferocious anti-drug campaign overseen by then-President Rodrigo Duterte. Other estimates cite the number of deaths as up to triple that number.⁶⁴

Fighting the drug trade diverts resources

The drug trade consumes significant state resources via an immense yet ineffectual and counterproductive police and military effort to eliminate it. This effort – targeted primarily at those at the low-levels of the trade – has grown in parallel to the ballooning trade through the past fifty years. At a conservative estimate, enforcing anti-drug policies costs at least US\$100 billion a year globally, almost rivalling the \$130 billion worldwide aid budget.⁶⁵ This public money could otherwise be spent on supporting initiatives that promote public and planetary health.

The profits of the drug trade divert policy-making

If those in public office have been corrupted or otherwise undermined by corruption, it is much more likely they won't be securing the much-needed transition to sustainable agriculture, nor implementing climate-resilient development. They will not be governing for climate justice.

For example, in Guinea Bissau, the longstanding association between political-military elite and the cocaine trade, is well referenced; the profits from the trade are used to buy protection networks and supplement public budgets.⁶⁶

In 2022 Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado, President of Honduras from 2014-2022 followed by his former National Police Chief were extradited to the United States charged with receiving millions of dollars from drug traffickers in exchange for protection from arrest.⁶⁷

How prohibition destabilises societies – broken down in steps.



Writing laws, stimulating the market

When UN member states signed the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, they collectively made cocaine, heroin, and cannabis illegal everywhere (except for ‘scientific and medical uses’).⁶⁸ The moment they did so, the price of all of those drugs rose. When a good is made illegal, its trade is made risky, driving some to abandon the business and increasing the risks for those who remain. The drug then becomes scarce relative to legal commodities. Scarcity plus the risk premium drive up its price. The result of increased prices is to incentivise market participation, especially for socially and economically marginalised people facing structural barriers to involvement in legal economies. This effect is felt at all levels of the supply chain: from farmers to couriers, and street-level retailers.

“It is the efforts of law-enforcement agencies that mean that a simple agricultural product, which costs no more than coffee at its source, is worth more than its weight in gold by the time it arrives in Europe or the United States”

Tom Wainwright, Author “Narconomics: How to Run a Drug Cartel”

Creating criminals

Once a good is illegal, anyone involved in its supply chain is criminalised by default. For those at the bottom rungs of the trade this increases their vulnerabilities. Others use violence to enforce contracts, protect territory, and enable the smooth and profitable functioning of their business. They become adept and efficient in response to police tactics—from criminals to organised criminals;⁶⁹ from operating domestically, to expanding transnationally. Brazil’s largest criminal organisation, for example, moved into international cocaine sales a decade ago, and now is allied with Italian, Mexican, Colombian, Russian, and African criminal networks.⁷⁰

“Organised crime was birthed by prohibition. Now, every policing action—action which might be deemed to be ‘success’—merely

sharpens the sword of organised crime. Drug policies have made them become more sophisticated and better at what they do.”⁷¹

Neil Woods, Law Enforcement Action Partnership – UK, former undercover police officer and member of the coalition.

Policing the public

As determined by the UN Conventions, prohibitionist laws have to be enforced. That means legal, bureaucratic, police and military systems have to be oriented towards capturing and punishing the criminals created by the law. This enforcement is primarily targeted at the ‘low hanging fruit’ – those at the lower rungs of the trade, whilst organised criminals are often able to use money or violence to secure protection. When countries do not have the means to enforce these laws themselves, richer countries have often been quick to provide it as a way to exert control and encroach militarily in strategically important regions. Police and military budgets become increasingly reliant on domestic and external ‘drug war’ funding, and on proving that they always need more of it. Governments can then use police and military resources to brutalise and control political opponents, or communities deemed threatening to their political interests, and to consolidate state control while leaving the highest-level organised crime group actors relatively untouched.⁷²

“Political leaders and governments throughout the world supported drug prohibition and constructed a global prohibition system...they did so because drug prohibition, drug demonisation and anti-drug campaigns were very useful – especially to politicians, the police, the military, and the media.”⁷³

Political Scientist, Harry Lavine 2003

Enriching criminals

The profits made from prohibited goods can be astronomical.⁷⁴ Criminals who capture the largest share of those profits are those who control the wholesale movement of goods across borders. [See page 30: ‘How much money is in the drug trade?’] But the profits they make cannot easily move into the legal economy without attracting the attention of the authorities. Some drug-trade-enriched actors have the connections and financial sophistication to hide their profits off-shore. Others have to launder their money in other ways, with rural land and resources an ideal laundering mechanism.

Embedding corruption

To ensure the smooth functioning of their businesses, organised criminal groups attempt to buy off any person whose job or personal interests might stand in their way—from national park guards and judges, to police chiefs, elected officials and presidents. Those who resist economic coercions risk intimidation, torture, kidnapping and murder.

Undermining governance

In already fragile regions with weak governance, a culture of corruption can become endemic, with organised criminal groups able to operate with complete impunity. The capacity of governments to provide welfare, protection and support for their people is severely compromised when public institutions including the police, judiciary and environmental agencies, are undermined by corruption and the diversion of resources to expanding militarised law enforcement and surveillance.

Harming and destabilising communities

The fraying of the social fabric through the corrupting and undermining of public institutions compounds the already disproportionately felt harms of drug enforcement, hitting poor, indigenous, Afro-descendant, LGBTQ+ and peasant communities particularly hard.⁷⁵ Socially marginalised groups are already likely to carry the greatest burden of the climate crisis - the iniquities of prohibition adds to and amplifies this.

“The so-called ‘drug war’ in our Mosquitia has transformed the coastal areas of our territory into a militarised zone, with military check-points at every beach and near every community... While the goal is to control drug trafficking, in practice it serves to control the population that lives and works in the coastal zone, who have to constantly explain their actions and their movements even though they’re just circulating in their own territory...”

Manifiesto of Indigenous ‘Encuentro de Pastoral de Tierra y Medioambiente Busbun Tignika-Krata,’ Honduras, 11 December, 2022.⁷⁶

A brief history of drug prohibition

The first truly globalised drug prohibition framework was the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. It attempted to consolidate a patchwork of international drug control instruments from earlier in the century within the newly established United Nations system. This Convention had a dual function: establishing regulatory systems for the scientific and medical uses of ‘controlled’ drugs, alongside a punitive prohibition model for any use of drugs that did not fall into the category of scientific or medical.

Framed as a ‘duty to combat’ the ‘evil’ of drugs, the treaty regime – augmented by the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances – required signatory states to criminalise the production, supply and possession of specified drugs (excusing alcohol and nicotine). The Conventions provided the legal and conceptual foundation for various political narratives, namely the ‘war on drugs’, ‘zero tolerance’, ‘drug free society’, and related prohibitionist laws that emerged in member states in subsequent decades.⁷⁷

These UN initiatives were led by countries in the Global North, particularly the US, and shaped by their political and strategic priorities. In the US, the aftermath of alcohol prohibition (1920-1933) saw enforcement resources realigned to emerging markets for opium, cannabis and cocaine reflecting often openly racist narratives. They associated these new drug threats with Chinese, Mexican and Black immigrant labour. Indeed the threat based narrative of the ‘war on drugs’ provided a justification for the social control of ‘undesirables’, be they immigrants, racial minorities, indigenous communities, or political and ideological opponents. This became a defining feature of contemporary drug enforcement. While most famously expressed through Nixon’s 1971 declaration of a ‘war’ against ‘public enemy number one’, the same disproportionate impacts of drug enforcement on marginalised populations can be seen in drug policy across much of the world.⁷⁸



The fact that most of the drugs consumed in key markets in the Global North were sourced from, and trafficked through poorer regions in the Global South provided the US and other architects of the global regime, with political cover for a range of geopolitical, strategic or military interventions that had little or nothing to do with domestic public health concerns.

Despite the vast resources poured into the ‘war on drugs’ in the ensuing 60 years, its outcomes have been disastrous – even on its own terms. Illegal drugs are more available, cheaper, more varied, and more potent and dangerous than ever before; more people use drugs, experience drug related health harms and death.⁷⁹

Ultimately, alcohol prohibition was repealed almost 100 years ago in the US because the public came to understand that it fuelled organised crime and violence, political corruption, poisonous bootleg concoctions, and filled jails with poor people. The global ‘war on drugs’ has had the same impacts, yet on an exponentially greater scale, and over many more decades.

Prohibition's impacts in the Upper Guinean forest

The Upper Guinean forest of West Africa is “one of the most severely threatened forest systems in the world.”⁸⁰ Comprising the north-west segment of this transnational ecosystem are the forests of Guinea. Between 2002 and 2022, Guinea lost some 7.4% of its humid primary forest, and saw a 24% decrease in tree cover overall.⁸¹ This is due to a host of direct drivers, including illegal trades in rosewood and other valuable tropical timbers, bauxite mining, smallholder agriculture, and fuelwood collection.⁸² In response, in early 2021, the civilian government of Guinea announced a total ban on deforestation, reprising an earlier moratorium on logging.⁸³ By September, that government had been thrown out in a military coup. Since then, Guinea has resumed state-sponsored logging and has the highest rates of forest loss in the region.⁸⁴

The illicit logging sector has long been controlled by the Guinean military, with soldiers known to have been paid in timber concessions.⁸⁵ Chinese investments in natural resource extraction then amplified the military's forest-extractive activities. But the period over which forest loss surged in Guinea coincided with the country's rise as one node in the increasingly active West African cocaine trafficking ecosystem. In 2008, the UN Office of Drugs and Crime warned that organised crime groups – overseeing the trafficking of cocaine in containers from South America to be routed through West Africa, primarily en route to Europe – were taking advantage of weak states to expand their business.⁸⁶ In years since, Guinea – and its neighbours – have become increasingly involved in cocaine transshipment; their money laundering often reflected in otherwise inexplicable surges in foreign exchange earnings.⁸⁷

It is not difficult to infer that the coup in Guinea may have been at least partially financed with drug money, in order to re-establish a logging-friendly regime. Certainly, logging in Guinea has been linked to cocaine trafficking in neighbouring Guinea-Bissau and nearby Gambia.⁸⁸



How much money is in the drug trade?

While measuring illegal markets is inevitably challenging, estimates do provide an indication of the drug trade's vast scale. A commonly cited 1997 UN estimate of global illegal drug market turnover was \$400 billion⁸⁹ – noted at the time to be “larger than the international trade in iron and steel, and motor vehicles, and about the same size as the total international trade in textiles.” While the UN figure has been widely critiqued, in 2017 the think tank Global Financial Integrity estimated a not dissimilar figure of between US\$426 billion and US\$652 billion.⁹⁰ At the country scale, the wholesale value of cocaine passing through Guatemala represented 18% of the country's GDP in 2016.⁹¹

In short, there is enough money in the drug trade, all along its supply chains, to incentivise participation, distort regional and national economies, and create the conditions for the capture of state functions—from police and judiciary, to environmental ministries and the highest executive offices.

A new analysis of the drug trades in Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Chile sum up these effects:

“As indicated, while we lack precise numbers, economists estimate that the drugs industry makes up a significant and growing share of the overall economy for most Latin American countries. Most importantly... over time this illicit business develops significant linkages across a range of areas in the formal economy, feeding off them and/or propping them up. In other words, this industry's influence is much more comprehensive than has generally been thought, as drug-related wealth contributes to many economic activities.”

Feldman and Luna, 2023⁹²

How prohibition undermines environmental mitigation and adaptation strategies

In addition to issues of national governance and policy making, many international environmental policy initiatives exist to enhance forest cover and to foster sustainable forest management and rural development. The list below outlines the most common, including those endorsed by the IPCC in their latest assessment of tropical forests.⁹³ The second column describes how prohibition undermines those initiatives and maintains the destructive status quo.

Environmental Mitigation or Adaptation Strategies...	...and how they are undermined by prohibition
Conservation set-asides and protected areas	<p>In the fight to save biodiversity and carbon sinks, protecting tropical forests in biosphere reserves and national parks may seem a sensible option. However while land may be protected on paper, forest set-asides have to be enforced, and rural actors enriched by the drug trade invariably find ways to thwart that enforcement. They have the cash and the weapons to operate wherever they want; no area is truly 'protected' from them. Park guards and community forest managers can be either 'bought off', intimidated into retreat, or pay with their lives. As a result, protected areas are often 'ground zero' for drug-trade-fueled biodiversity loss.</p> <p>In Central America, for example, researchers found that the majority of lands deforested by 'narcos' were in protected areas where, despite the lands' strong protections on paper, they operated with impunity.⁹⁴</p>
Shore up indigenous land rights	<p>Indigenous peoples are the best managers of their forested homelands. As well as being a legal and moral imperative, recognition of their tenure rights is considered a low-cost climate change mitigation and adaptation option.⁹⁵ But it is the rare indigenous group, irrespective of their <i>de jure</i> land rights and legal protections, that can hold their ground in the face of well resourced, heavily armed and politically connected organised crime groups involved in the drug trade.⁹⁶</p>

<p>Sustainable supply chains for tropical commodities</p>	<p>Tropical forests are converted into production areas for beef, soy, cacao, coffee, and other commodities that are exported globally. Nations outside of the tropics can therefore leverage their buying power to encourage food corporations to source commodities from legally-acquired lands. This requires responsible and sustainable supply chain management, including clear information flow between participants, with transparent governance all along the supply chain. When land and commodity governance is corrupted by criminal actors, that transparency is impossible. It is therefore not surprising that “a decade-long surge of voluntary corporate commitments has been unable to stem the tide of global forest loss.”⁹⁷</p>
<p>Anti-beef campaigns</p>	<p>According to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, more than a quarter of the world’s ice-free land is in extensive pasture.⁹⁸ Many environmentalists advocate for changing our food habits, based on the assumption that those pastures exist to meet the demand for meat. But organised crime groups have multiple economic incentives to convert forest to pasture that have nothing to do with the land’s <i>productivity</i>, and so will not be influenced by what’s on our plates.⁹⁹ For example, research in Colombia has shown that powerful actors enriched by the drug trade acquire rural land to profit from land speculation, build political capital, control rural populations, and out-compete rivals for turf. The land is put in cattle for cultural reasons and to take advantage of tax laws that make holding land in pasture particularly cheap. Their accumulation and monopolisation of rural land in low-productivity pasture has been associated with significant increases in food insecurity.¹⁰⁰</p>
<p>Improved forest monitoring</p>	<p>Over the past decade, significant strides have been made in the remote monitoring of forests; it is now possible to track forest loss in near-real time.¹⁰¹ While this has been seen as essential for informing international forest-governance approaches, such as REDD+ readiness programs, improved forest surveillance “has not yet translated into forest governance effectiveness.”¹⁰² That is in large part because remote data cannot track <i>who</i> is clearing forests, or why. Connecting forest monitoring to meaningful on-the-ground action will require better integration of environmental policy with social policy, including drug policy. But rigid policy silos have for too long kept these apart, depriving environmental policy makers of opportunities to better grasp how drug prohibition fosters forest loss.¹⁰³</p>

<p>Land reform</p>	<p>Prime agricultural land is disproportionately held by the state, by transnational corporations, and by high net worth elites, and used for profit-making agribusiness.¹⁰⁴ Re-balancing highly unequal land tenure regimes is essential to address land inequality and enable small farmers to sustain and expand agroforestry systems and other diverse and high-productivity agro-ecosystems.¹⁰⁵ But those reforms will always be obstructed and undermined by shadow actors who grab land and buy agribusinesses for speculation and to launder illegal profits.</p> <p>In Guatemala, land parcels distributed to poor campesinos were recorded in a government database, where they were targeted by drug-crime enriched families who seized the land rights through coercion and fraud.¹⁰⁶ Worldwide, corruption in the systems that regulate land markets and land registries is common.¹⁰⁷ Not all are corrupted by drug monies, but it is clear that where drug profits distort and dominate regional economies, they are a major driver of illegal land transfers.</p>
<p>Strengthening environmental laws and policies</p>	<p>69% of agricultural conversion of tropical forests between 2013-2019 occurred in violation of national laws and regulations; in Brazil, the share was 95%, in Mexico, 97%.¹⁰⁸ The vast majority of countries with tropical forests report weak forest sector governance and institutional capacity, including “corruption and illegality,” as major drivers of forest loss.¹⁰⁹ This pervasive, core problem cannot be addressed by anti-corruption initiatives or more funding for law enforcement – because those initiatives don’t get at a major <i>source</i> of the corruption and illegality, which is the immense wealth and influence generated by the drug trade. Profits from the cocaine trade in Central America, for example, run into the billions of dollars, far beyond the budgets of environmental authorities or other related enforcement.¹¹⁰</p>

SECTION 2

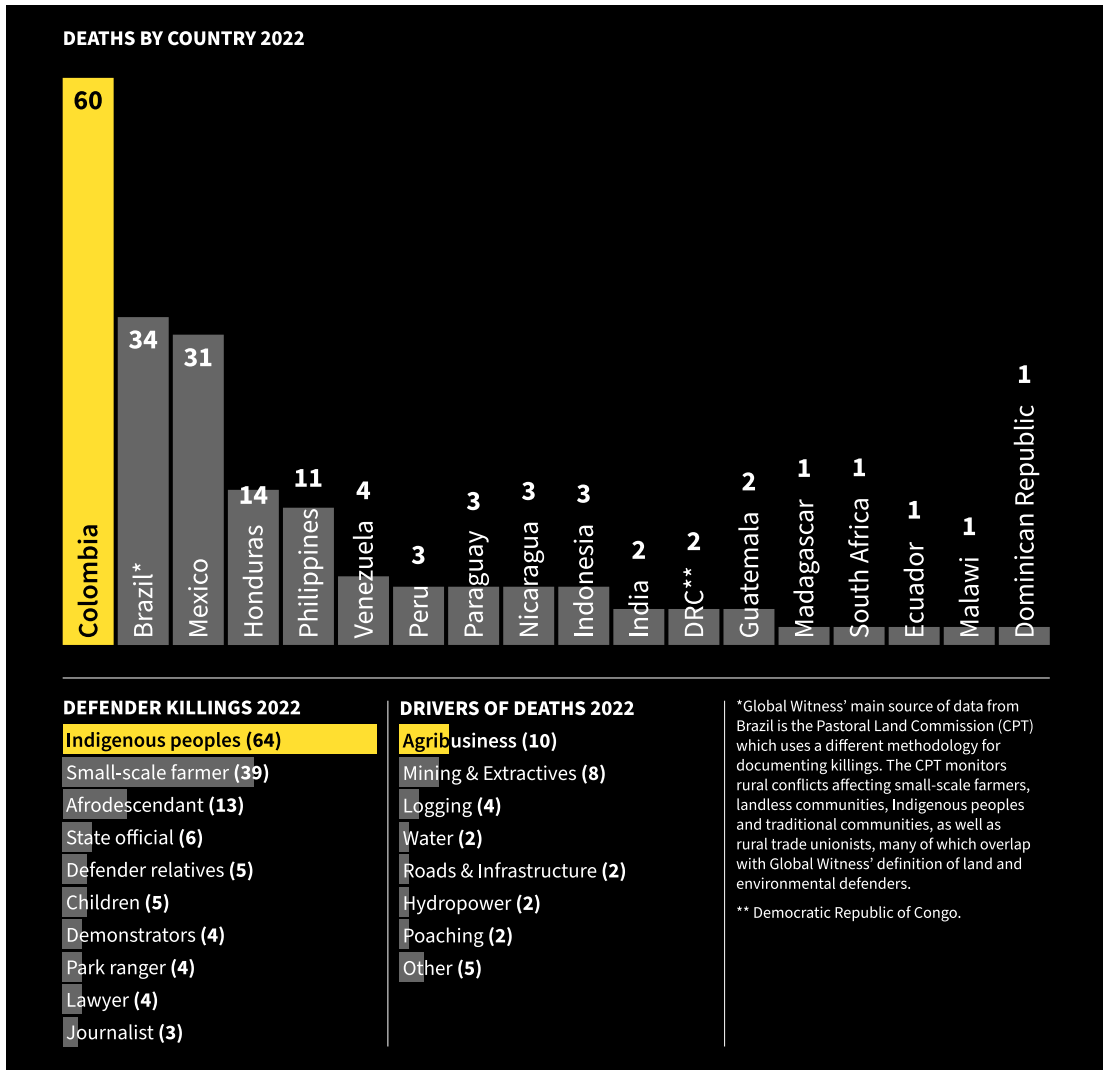
WHY IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT FAILING TO ACT ON (OR EVEN ACKNOWLEDGE) THE PROBLEM?

It is increasingly being recognised¹¹¹ that criminal actors are financing land grabs, deforestation, timber and wildlife trafficking, and socially and ecologically devastating mining; and that authorities at all levels are often rubber-stamping and profiting from those illegal activities. Yet these analyses stop short of identifying the driver of these criminal activities.

Bold and galvanising campaigns to end deforestation and illegal mining are run all over the world. Supporting environmental defenders and promoting indigenous rights is a key part of the strategies of environmental NGOs. Despite extraordinary efforts to mitigate climate change from our allies in the green movement, rarely, if at all, is the system that underpins so many of these crimes, and driver of so much harm ever mentioned.

“Given the climate emergency and the new violations of Amazonian territories, it is essential for the environmental movement to be able to think about the Amazon issue in an interdisciplinary way – not limited to the realm of environmental policies discussed in the environmental niche, but discussed more broadly, considering the effects of drug trafficking and other social and territorial complexities of the Amazon.”

Daniela Dias, Project Coordinator for SOS Amazonia and member of the coalition¹¹²



From Global Witness, “Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis”, September 13 2023

Despite their own overwhelming evidence on the role played by drug cartels in the killings of land and environmental defenders, NGOs like Global Witness do not yet include organised crime among their figures on the drivers of this violence. Nor do they consider prohibition in their analysis of the structural drivers. Can we begin to join these dots?

Refusal to acknowledge this link risks perpetuating harm, as it deliberately obscures the most significant drivers of violence against environmental defenders, directing attention away from the areas which are in most urgent need of action.

Greenpeace stated to its social media followers in summer 2023: “The Brazilian Amazon is still burning at an alarming rate, despite the decrease in deforestation this year. We must switch from an economic model that is based on the destruction of the forest and the exploitation of natural resources to a system that values the forest standing.”

Yes, the economic model running through these forests is unregulated and dysfunctional. But it needs to be clearly acknowledged that current drug policies are one of the main drivers of this economic and institutional dysfunction.

“The vast profits generated by the illegal drug trade provide an investment bank for other environmental crimes, fueling violence and destruction in fragile ecosystems and vulnerable communities worldwide.”¹¹³

**Kendra McSweeney, Professor of Geography, Ohio State University
and member of the coalition**

The solution is not a ramped up militarised approach¹¹⁴ but rather the progressive winding down and replacement of the system of prohibition that empowers, enriches and enables those organised criminals to thrive in that space. To achieve this, far greater intersectoral collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst civil society actors is needed.

We recognise talking about drugs, particularly challenging the entrenched status quo of prohibition, can be uncomfortable (See page 40). But this is a political choice. Whilst environmental defenders in Latin America are being murdered, indigenous communities are losing their land to drug gangs, and people in numerous countries are faced with failing and defunded public

services, the environmental movement (predominantly headquartered in wealthy countries) is failing to acknowledge, let alone act on, one of the identified structural drivers of this problem. It is a disservice to all those working locally, nationally and internationally to protect these climate-critical ecosystems not to disclose and expose the influence of prohibition and why its reconfiguration is urgent, necessary and achievable.

The causes of violence and environmental destruction need to be understood before we can expect to design and implement effective solutions.

“Reducing direct and indirect drivers of deforestation and forest degradation is...critical to building, maintaining or enhancing the resilience of tropical forests against climate and non-climate drivers alike.”

IPCC Report 2022 “Tropical Forests”¹¹⁵

Rainforest area with timber cut and ready to load, Ghana



The violent gears of the drug war machine

The experience of Honduras provides an excellent example of how the asynchrony between law enforcement efforts that target 'low-level' vs. 'high-level' has enabled environmental devastation.

In the mid-2000s, eastern Honduras began receiving hundreds of shipments of cocaine annually (by boat and air) from South America, serving as a transshipment point for the journey to North American and European markets.¹¹⁶ In response, the US government, working with the Honduran military, established a forward operating base there in 2012 as a deterrent to traffickers. Within months, a joint operation between the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and Honduras involved shooting at suspected drug traffickers from a US helicopter. Those 'suspects' were indigenous people in a dugout canoe, and the shots killed four people, including a 14-year old boy and a pregnant woman. Later, DEA agents killed others in the region.¹¹⁷

These efforts did nothing to curtail the drug trade. While indigenous residents were routinely harassed by authorities, the 'big fish' in the Honduran trafficking ecosystem remained untouched. For almost a decade, they dominated eastern Honduras, reaping millions of dollars from the drug flow, and using it to fund a massive takeover of state offices,¹¹⁸ as well as indigenous and protected lands, and to initiate an ongoing and tragic era of environmental destruction. The Honduran government and US Embassy were silent to the pleas of indigenous peoples who sought redress against those invading their ancestral territories.¹¹⁹ Without external support, environmental defenders were harassed and killed.

As all of this was playing out, the US intelligence community was collecting volumes of evidence that prominent Honduran businessmen, politicians, the country's Chief of Police, and two Honduran presidents – and their families – were directly involved in, or profiting directly from, the drug trade. When some of that evidence was leaked, the US defended its support for this egregiously corrupt regime on the grounds that Honduras was a valued ally in the 'war on drugs.'¹²⁰

It was only starting in 2015 that the US began to marshal its accumulated intelligence to extradite and indict well-known traffickers, and to use their testimony to slowly build cases against their superiors. As of 2023, the former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez is in jail pending trial on drug trafficking charges in the Southern District of New York. The revelations associated with his trial suggest that “state actors’ involvement in the drug trade in Honduras goes far beyond protection, and has evolved into a powerful network of public, private and criminal actors that has been able to capture the state’s basic sovereign functions with the aim of protecting and promoting their own private interests”.¹²¹

While the US was slowly building a case against the ‘big fish,’ it allowed the ‘little fish’ to be demonised, terrorised, and killed. It gave the wealthiest criminals years of freedom to grab the country’s lands and resources for personal gain. Even though they are finally being brought to justice, the damage is done.

In the indigenous communities of eastern Honduras, the cost of the two-pronged fast/slow US drug war is felt in loss of forests and homelands, and in the devastation of native livelihoods and lifeways.¹²²

“If you have cancer and at the first symptoms you seek treatment, perhaps you can be cured,” said Rommel Sánchez, president of the Tawahka Indigenous Federation of Honduras. Now, the cancer is too far advanced, he said. “Life is already being exhausted.”¹²³



© Kendra McSweeney

Indigenous Miskitu and Tawahka communities along the Patuca River in eastern Honduras

Addressing the barriers to talking about drugs

We recognise that talking about drugs and all the options for drug law reform can feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Here we aim to address some of the challenges and misconceptions about drug policy reform.

Talking about drugs is awkward and uncomfortable

You are not alone. One of the most persistent and damaging aspects of prohibition is to fuel stigma and to demonise those who are in any way involved in drug markets – as producers, traders, or consumers. This stigma can leak into the policy arena, repelling organisations that should otherwise be talking openly about the harms of the global response to those markets – the ‘war on drugs’ – including its serious harms to public health, human rights and the environment.

This seems like a racial issue, not an environmental one

In fact, these are one and the same. The ‘war on drugs’ has always been a racialised war.¹²⁴ Reforming global drug prohibition therefore aligns closely with climate justice, which is rooted in anti-racism and in ensuring that solutions to the climate crisis create a more just society for everyone, especially marginalised communities.¹²⁵ Drug prohibition is the knife edge of institutional racism and therefore incompatible with climate justice. Climate justice requires collaboration between groups, including advocating for things perceived as outside one’s ‘remit’ in solidarity.¹²⁶ Considering the way drug prohibition harms communities and undermines environmental progress detailed in this report, it is clear how drug policy reform is an essential part of environmental and anti-racist work.

Isn't demand for drugs the real issue?

People have always used drugs—including risky but legally regulated drugs like tobacco. While there are, of course, very real health and social challenges related to use of both legal and illegal drugs, the key problem here is not that drugs are being produced, traded, or used per se. It is that the production, supply and use of certain drugs is globally criminalised. Rather than eradicating illegal drug use or drug markets, drug law enforcement instead drives those activities underground.

Shouldn't the focus be on the corrupt governments that are allowing environmental destruction?

It's important to identify and denounce corruption, but it's even more important to identify and target its key structural drivers, specifically how much corruption is enabled and resourced by the billions of dollars generated for organised crime groups by prohibition and the illegal drug trade it enables.

Aren't corporations the real threat?

Much environmental devastation can be traced to legal corporate agribusiness, mining, and infrastructure development. In the world's tropical frontiers, however, it can be virtually impossible to distinguish between legitimate and illegal businesses: lands grabbed by criminal actors can be acquired, arms-length, by corporations; illicit capital can be laundered through legal companies. Holding corporations environmentally accountable, therefore, must include shedding light on the many ways in which they are subsidised and enabled by the illegal drug trade.

SECTION 3

THE OPPORTUNITIES (AND RISKS) OF REFORMS

“If we want to protect nature we have to regulate the economies that run through those landscapes. In our most ecologically fragile regions that means tackling the illegal drug economies – that the ‘war on drugs’ has not only failed to eliminate, but actually created, sustained, and made ever more harmful. While climate reparations from the Global North must include financial support, they should also include repealing the colonial legacy of the drug war to ensure restoration and healing can happen.”

Clemmie James, Senior Policy and Campaigns Officer, Health Poverty Action and member of the coalition.

Cannabis drying in the sun, Jamaica



In recent years there has been a growing consensus acknowledging the historic failings of prohibition, alongside significant shifts towards a new drug policy paradigm rooted in the principles of public health, human rights, and sustainable development.

There has been significant shifts towards pragmatic public health thinking (with 105 countries now including harm reduction in their national policies), and ending the criminalisation of people who use drugs (with 30 countries, or 51 jurisdictions, adopting some form of decriminalisation).¹²⁷

More recently this situation has also shifted further and faster, with more and more voices articulating alternative thinking. A growing number of NGOs, Member States¹²⁸, and even offices within the UN itself, are calling for ‘transformative change’ and an ‘end to the war on drugs.’¹²⁹ On September 20 2023 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights became the first UN agency to recommend member states to consider the legal regulation of drugs to protect public health and human rights.¹³⁰

“Adopt alternatives to criminalization, “zero tolerance” and elimination of drugs, by considering decriminalisation of usage; and take control of illegal drug markets through responsible regulation, to eliminate profits from illegal trafficking, criminality and violence... Consider developing a regulatory system for legal access to all controlled substances.”¹³¹

**Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Human Rights Council Fifty-fourth session 11 September – 6 October 2023**

Crucially these debates are no longer purely theoretical, with transitions from unregulated illegal drug markets to regulated legal ones underway in multiple jurisdictions on every continent. The legalisation and regulation of non-medical cannabis has been at the forefront of these reforms. Despite being inconceivable in relatively recent history, the last decade has seen

non-medical cannabis regulation implemented (or in the process of being implemented) in various forms across the world, including; 22 US States (with Bills for Federal reform currently in the Congress and Senate), Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, Luxembourg, Malta, Switzerland, The Netherlands, South Africa, Germany, Czech Republic, South Africa, Thailand and multiple Caribbean states. More than half a billion people will soon be living in jurisdictions where cannabis is legal.

The legal regulation of drugs other than cannabis is also now a reality, with a legal coca leaf market established in Bolivia, and a Bill proposing a legal coca and cocaine market being debated in the Colombian Senate, reforms allowing access to psychedelic plants being implemented in Colorado and Oregon states, and the Netherlands exploring options for regulated MDMA/ecstasy access.

The transition towards regulated drug markets undoubtedly raises difficult questions. But the reality of resilient demand for drugs has to be the basis of any rational discussion; we either responsibly regulate drug markets or we continue with the manifest failings of prohibition, and abdication of control to destructive organised crime groups. There is no third option in which they can be magically wished away, or the ‘war on drugs’ somehow emerging victorious.

“The last thing we need is more militarization of this region. Sending the army to fight cartels in the Amazon would only drive more violence – and those commanders would soon become corrupt and part of the trade itself”

Daniella Dias, Project Coordinator at SOS Amazonia and member of the coalition

There is a need to clearly set out priorities and valuation frameworks in terms of public health, crime reduction, social justice,¹³² and sustainable development;¹³³ to continue progress in cautious incremental steps; to engage a wide range of expertise and stakeholders including impacted communities; and to learn



Communities Rising
Rally, No More Drug
War, USA

lessons from successes and failures of alcohol, tobacco, legal cannabis, and pharmaceutical regulation.

Regulation is no silver bullet, but designed well, legal regulation could be transformative.¹³⁴ It can allow countries to reduce the harms of this trade to people and the planet as well as produce much-needed public revenue for education and health through taxation.¹³⁵ Responsible regulation of the trade would complement sustainable development goals¹³⁶ and work in tandem with regenerative agriculture and the wider transition to a greener future.

However, designed poorly, without the input of the environmental and social justice movements at this critical window of opportunity on the threshold of a global paradigm shift, there is a profound risk that the iniquities of prohibition will be recreated in new guises. And that destructive patterns of over-commercialisation, corporate capture and market monopolisation define reform processes.¹³⁷ Concerns raised by small scale drug farmers include losing the financial benefits of the 'prohibition premium', and being squeezed out by big business. Other growers see multiple upsides to regulation—including the fact that for many, these 'prohibited plants' have for millenia been used as medicine and in cultural/religious ceremonies and practices. For all of these reasons, any discussion about drug policy reform must prioritise their involvement from the outset.¹³⁸

“We have been led to believe that the climate emergency is the fault of deforesters and obscure criminal networks (and this may be partly true); and the drug problem is the fault of ‘narcos’, and ‘addicts’ without criteria or willpower. But the problem is more complex. The roots of these environmental and crises associated with the ‘war on drugs’ are in the structures of capital, patriarchal power and financialisation.”

Dr. Diego Andrés Lugo, Indigenous and campesinx rights activist and member of the coalition.

Positive examples of drug policy are emerging in which those harmed by prohibition play a key role in the designing of those reforms. Strong leadership from impacted communities in New York State resulted in the State¹³⁹ designing its new cannabis regulation framework to promote equity and reconciliation, ensuring that 40% of tax revenue is invested back into communities disproportionately impacted by previous criminalisation, 40% into education, and 20% into substance abuse and mental health services.

In the Caribbean, the Fair Trade Cannabis Working Group was formed in 2019 in light of ongoing reforms to cannabis markets and laws emerging in a number of countries in the region and beyond. Bringing together traditional cannabis cultivators, regulators, policymakers, civil society organisations and academics, the Working Group advocates for an inclusive model that allows small and traditional cannabis growers to shape and benefit from the emerging licit cannabis market.¹⁴⁰

This year, 2023, the government of Bolivia officially launched an initiative aimed at ending the international prohibition of coca leaf. This will see the World Health Organisation undertake a review of the coca leaf, and the possibility to reclassify it, removing it from the list of prohibited plants – pending a potential vote on this at the UN’s Commission on Narcotic Drugs.¹⁴¹



© Roberto Calzailla

Traditional coca growers at a market, Bolivia

Colombia, considered ‘prohibition’s frontline’¹⁴² only a few years ago, has made some of the boldest moves so far. The world’s first Cocaine Regulation Bill, tabled by Senators Iván Marulanda from the Green Party and Feliciano Valencia from the Indigenous party MAIS, went as far as having its 4th reading in the Colombian Senate. The Colombian Truth Commission¹⁴³ published its final report in June 2022 and urged the new government to legally regulate drugs¹⁴⁴ in order to end violence and secure peace.

“What is more poisonous for humanity, cocaine, coal or oil? The opinion of power has ordered that cocaine is poison and must be persecuted, while it only causes minimal deaths from overdoses... but instead, coal and oil must be protected, even when it can extinguish all humanity... By hiding the truth, they will only see the rainforest and democracies die. The war on drugs has failed”

President Petro of Colombia addressing the UN General Assembly in 2022¹⁴⁵

SECTION 4

EMBRACING DRUG REFORM AS A PATH TO CLIMATE JUSTICE

“We need to embrace the opportunities that are opening up to influence reforms across the world. To do so we need our movements to come together. Ignoring this would be a huge missed opportunity for all who care about our planet.”

Clemmie James, Senior Policy and Campaigns Officer, Health Poverty Action and member of the Coalition

Delivering climate justice requires a ‘just transition’¹⁴⁶ away from extractive systems of production, consumption and political oppression, towards resilient, regenerative and equitable economies. This cannot happen whilst environmental reform efforts focus exclusively on one system – the legal and often corporate economic system. Meanwhile, violent, destabilising and extractive shadow economies continue to operate with impunity, under the radar of the environmental justice movement. These economies not only reshape physical landscapes but impede and stymie the political governance required to deliver the bold policy changes needed to address the climate emergency.

Right now, drug policy reforms are underway across the world. This opens up a once in a lifetime opportunity to shape an unprecedented legal framework that reconfigures one of the world’s major illegal trades – to make it work for environmental justice rather than against it. On the other side of the coin, for climate regulatory initiatives to work, effective and responsible drug regulation is necessary, especially in regions that are key to our collective climate future. Achieving the goals of both the drug policy reform and environmental movements requires mutual solidarity and support.

The alternative: drug reforms co-opted by big corporations and powerful elites that replicate the harms of prohibition,¹⁴⁷ whilst climate initiatives fail, missing the opportunity to avert climate catastrophe, because they ignored one of its underlying causes.

Drug reform is not only relevant to the cause of climate justice, but an essential part of the solution. It is time for the environmental movement to include drug reform in their agenda to deliver climate justice.

Traditional coca-leaf grower, Peru



Recommendations to the environmental movement¹⁴⁸

Acknowledge the problem

Share this report with your networks. Learn about drug policy and the impacts of current drug policies on human rights, public health, sustainable development, indigenous communities and the environment.

Start an honest dialogue...

within your organisation and with other allied groups, without fear or stigma, on the links between current drug policy and environmental and climate justice. Ease your colleagues into this subject by identifying where your work intersects with themes in this report. How might the people you work with as well as the places they seek to protect be at risk from current drug policies?

Invite drug policy activists and advocates into the environmental space

This is an opportunity for mutual learning and capacity building between our two movements. We need your support to bring drug policy reform to international conference spaces, like the annual United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. We need drug policy reform to be introduced within grassroots organising. Invite us to your meetings, conferences and events.¹⁴⁹

Integrate drug policy reform into the climate agenda

Join The International Coalition for Drugs Policy Reform and Environmental Justice to strengthen the allyship between our two movements. Begin to include narratives around prohibition as a driver of environmental destruction and a barrier to much needed climate mitigation and adaptation in your work and analysis. Work up to calling out prohibition, by doing so you will be shouldering some of the risk and sharing some of the labour often left to environmental defenders.

Be part of designing new legal regulatory drug systems...

to complement ongoing action on the environment and climate justice. We need your expertise in ensuring all new reforms to this trade protect indigenous communities, nature and are aligned with sustainable agricultural practices. We can not reform this multi billion dollar global trade without your experience. We need solidarity.

RESOURCES

An Introduction to drug policy reform that supports human rights, public health, sustainable development and environmental justice

1. **The Global Commission on Drug Policy**, [Regulation – the Responsible Control of Drugs](#)¹⁵⁰
2. **UNDP**, [International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy](#)¹⁵¹
3. **UN Chief Executive Board (CEB)**, [United Nations System Common Position Supporting the Implementation of the International Drug Control Policy through Effective Inter-Agency Collaboration](#)¹⁵²
4. **Transnational Institute**, [Fair\(er\) Trade Options for the Cannabis Market and Prohibited Plants – Environmental Justice in Drug Policy](#)¹⁵³
5. **International Drug Policy Consortium**, [Principles for the Responsible Legal Regulation of Cannabis](#)¹⁵⁴
6. **Health Poverty Action**, [Legally Regulate Drugs Through a Social Justice Lens](#)¹⁵⁵
7. **Release**, [Regulating Right, Repairing the Wrongs – Cannabis Regulation](#)¹⁵⁶
8. **Transform Drug Policy Foundation**, [After the War on Drugs: Blueprint for Regulation](#)¹⁵⁷ and [How to Regulate Stimulants: A Practical Guide](#)¹⁵⁸
9. **Drug Policy Alliance**, [Protecting our Communities Toolkit](#)¹⁵⁹
10. **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)** – [Report on Human rights challenges in addressing and countering all aspects of the world drug problem](#)¹⁶⁰

ENDNOTES

- 1 World Resources Institute, Global Forest Review, “Forest Pulse: The Latest on the World’s Forests”, <https://research.wri.org/gfr/latest-analysis-deforestation-trends>.
- 2 World Resource Institute, “Forest Pulse”.
- 3 Jean Pierre Ometto et al., “Tropical Forests,” *Climate Change 2022 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, 2023, 2369–2410, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844.024>.
- 4 Nancy Harris and Michael Wolosin, “Ending Tropical Deforestation: Tropical Forests and Climate Change: The Latest Science,” World Resources Institute, March 6, 2020, <https://www.wri.org/research/ending-tropical-deforestation-tropical-forests-and-climate-change-latest-science>.
- 5 See, e.g., UNODC, “The Nexus between Drugs and Crimes That Affect the Environment and Convergent Crime in the Amazon Basin”, https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH4_Amazon.pdf. See also, Europol, “Environmental Crime” <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-statistics/crime-areas/environmental-crime>, and Steven Broad, “A Moving Target: Organized Crime and the Illegal Wildlife Trade,” Global Initiative, March 14, 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/illegal-wildlife-trade-ocindex/>.
- 6 This does not cover all aspects of this complex issue, and is likely the first of several reports
- 7 Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, “Drugs and Democracy: Toward a Paradigm Shift,” www.opensocietyfoundations.org (Open Society Foundation, February 2009), <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/drugs-and-democracy-toward-paradigm-shift#publications-download>.
- 8 Kendra McSweeney, “The Impact of Drug Policy on the Environment,” Open Society Foundations, 2015, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/impact-drug-policy-environment>.
- 9 We define tropical forests following Ometto et al. (2022), including tropical rainforest, tropical moist forest, tropical dry forest, and tropical mountain systems. We also include mangroves.
- 10 Ometto et al., “Tropical Forests” 2374.
- 11 Ometto et al., “Tropical Forests”, 2371.
- 12 “Illicit Harvest, Complicit Goods,” *Forest Trends*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.forest-trends.org/publications/illicit-harvest-complicit-goods/>.
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DRUG POLICY REFORM & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

INTERNATIONAL COALITION

A coalition of advocates, activists, artists and academics aiming to raise awareness of the environmental impact of current drug policy by centering the voices of those from impacted regions.

This report is the first in a series and has been written by a coalition of scientists, activists, academics and artists. Our aim is to raise awareness of how current drug policies undermine environmental justice. We seek reforms to drug policy that centre ecological harm reduction and the responsible legal regulation of the drug trade. We are a multi – sectoral coalition of organisations and individuals.



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