



**Report from**

# **The First Southeast Asia Opium Farmers Forum**

**Yangon 2-3 July 2013**  
**Transnational Institute (TNI) & Paung Ku**

In July TNI and Paung Ku organised the First Southeast Asia Opium Farmers Forum, bringing together some 30 representatives of local communities involved in opium cultivation and local community workers from the major opium growing regions in Southeast Asia: Chin, Kachin, northern and southern Shan, and Kayah States in Burma/Myanmar<sup>1</sup> and Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India.<sup>2</sup>

Current drug control policies in the region are repressive and criminalise opium farmers, and have greatly affect the lives of the communities cultivating opium. However, until now these communities have had little or no influence on the design of these policies. Aim of the forum was to identify the main concerns of opium farmers and formulate alternative policy options that respect the rights of producers' communities, and involve them in decision making processes.

As the subject is sensitive, the meeting was held under Chatham House rules and the names and places of origin of the participants will remain confidential. This report reflects these views and captures the main conclusions and recommendations that emerged from the forum.

## **Repression and Criminalisation**

Since decades nations with opium poppy and coca bush cultivation have seen intense crop eradication and law enforcement, ostensibly to protect consumer nations from 'drugs' and 'addiction' of its derivatives heroin (opium) and cocaine (coca). These countries have borne the brunt of the war on drugs: the violence and corruption that has followed the creation of

<sup>1</sup>In 1989 the then military government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar. They are alternative forms in the Burmese language, but their use has become a politicised issue. Myanmar is not commonly used in the English language. Burma will be used in this report and is not intended as a political statement.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, due to logistical obstacles, it proved to be impossible to have participants from Lao PDR and Thailand present at the meeting.

the criminal market; indigenous and cultural traditions have been trampled, traditional and medicinal use of opium and coca has been ignored, and traditional growers and peasant farmers have been branded as criminals and been deprived of their livelihoods, without alternative options to meet their basic needs and live a life in dignity.

According to UNODC, in 2012 in Myanmar alone some 300,000 households were directly involved in opium cultivation, and another 20,000 households in Laos.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of thousands of marginalised people are directly dependent for their livelihoods on opium cultivation. These figures do not include opium farmers in Northeast India where cultivation has increased in recent years, and which has most likely surpassed that of Laos. Opium cultivation in Thailand has been very limited over the past three decades, and Thailand is a net importer to serve the domestic opium and heroin market. According to UNODC, in 2012 opium cultivation in Burma was estimated at 51,000 hectares, in Laos 6,800 hectares and in Thailand 209 hectares.<sup>4</sup> Opium cultivation figures from India are not available.

Poppy cultivation is strongly linked to poverty, and is driven by several socio-economic and security-related factors. As an EU statement outlines: “illicit drug crop cultivation is concentrated in areas where conflict, insecurity and vulnerability prevail. Poor health, illiteracy and limited social and physical infrastructure reflect the low level of human development experienced by the population in these areas.”<sup>5</sup>

Opium cultivation mostly takes place in remote and isolated mountainous areas lacking public services. Most growers are impoverished subsistence farmers from different ethnic minority groups in northern Burma, Laos and Northeast India. These marginalised communities practice swidden upland rice cultivation. The opium cash crops compensate for food shortages as not enough rice can be grown to feed their families. It also provides savings, is used for personal consumption and for medicinal purposes. Some communities still use opium in traditional ceremonies and spirit worship. Until now local communities have been excluded from any of the decision-making processes on drug control policies that have a direct negative impact on their lives and livelihoods.

### **‘Nothing About us Without Us’**

Alternative drug policy options on the demand side have received great attention in international drug policy debate, and consumers have been able to raise their concerns in various platforms. Representatives of drugs user networks - especially those living with HIV/AIDS - have been able to voice their demands at international platforms and policy meetings. In Burma, for instance, they have a seat at the Myanmar Country Coordinating Mechanism (M-CCM) which oversees and coordinates

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<sup>3</sup>UNODC, *South-East Asia Opium Survey, Lao PDR, Myanmar, 2012*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>EU Presidency Paper, *Key points identified by EU experts to be included in the conclusion of the open-ended intergovernmental expert working group on international cooperation on the eradication of illicit drug and on alternative development, Open-ended intergovernmental expert working group on international cooperation on the eradication of illicit drug crops and on alternative development, Vienna, 2-4 July 2008, UNODC/CND/2008/WG.3/CRP.4.*

responses to HIV, malaria and tuberculosis.<sup>6</sup>On the production side this has hardly been the case. Until now farmers growing opium poppy have not had a voice in any of the debate and decision-making process on drug control policies.

In an effort to redress this, TNI was one of the co-organizers of the 'First World Forum of Producers of Illicit Crops'<sup>7</sup> which took place in Barcelona in January 2009. The forum was attended by representatives from Latin America, Africa and Asia (including three representatives from Burma), and produced a Political Declaration with recommendations. As a follow-up, two representatives of the Forum presented this Political Declaration at the March 2009 United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs and its High Level (political) Segment.

In Latin America, TNI partners have organised several forums for coca farmers to involve them in policy discussions, to give them a platform to organise themselves and voice their demands. In Southeast Asia this has proven to be much more difficult, as cultivation is criminalised and the space for farmers to organise themselves in key producing countries Burma, Laos and Northeast India was difficult due to government restrictions and the ongoing armed conflict. However, after decades of military rule and oppression of civil rights, the reform process in Burma that started in 2011 has opened up new opportunities. Using the new space, Paung Ku (an initiative to strengthen civil society in the country) initiated a first 'National Farmer's Forum' in March 2013, and has organised follow-up meetings to strengthen the farmer's network and organizational structure, some of this in cooperation with TNI. This national farmers' forum identified key shared values and concerns and alternative policy options taking into account experiences and insights from farmers' communities.

The First Southeast Asia Opium Farmers' Forum started with some introductions by the organisers on the background of the meeting and previous related activities. After that the participants broke out in smaller groups divided by region to discuss key issue related to opium cultivation and use; drug control policies in their areas and the relation between drugs & conflict; the changes that have taken place over the last decade and future expectations. The groups reported back to the plenary after each session. At the end of the forum, the groups came up with recommendations based on the previous discussion, and presented these to the forum. The main conclusions and recommendations are listed below.

### **Why people grow opium**

There are many different reasons why people cultivate opium. Opium is mainly grown as a cash crop to solve food security problems and improve livelihoods, and to achieve a better living standard and solve people's basic needs. It also provides access to health and education. Opium is also cultivated for medicinal and traditional use.

Opium is often grown in places where other crops cannot easily be

<sup>6</sup>See: Myanmar Health Sector Coordination Committee, <http://www.myanmarhscc.org>.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.tni.org/archives/acts\\_fmpeci](http://www.tni.org/archives/acts_fmpeci)

cultivated, for instance in areas with high elevation and cold weather. There are no alternative crops that can compete with opium as it is a very profitable crop; takes only a few months before it can be harvested; has a high value; is easy to transport; and has an easy market access (buyers will come to the village) with a high demand (from drugs users and traffickers). Commercial investment by outside businessmen and investors asking villagers to cultivate poppy also contributes to opium production.

The absence of crop substitution programmes, poor infrastructure and transportation, lack of assistance from the government and corruption by local authorities further stimulates poppy cultivation. Some participants from Burma felt the central government is using drugs as a 'weapon of war' against the country's ethnic people, by allowing cultivation, trade and use to flourish in ethnic regions. The continuing conflict also contributes to opium cultivation, and funds derived from opium (directly or indirectly) has also been used by some conflict parties as a war fund.

## **Diverse use of opium**

There is a great variety of what opium is used for. Opium is used as a traditional medicine especially in remote areas, and as healthcare for elderly persons more generally. In particular, opium is used to treat dysentery, malaria and persons suffering from fever. A common way of administration is putting a small piece of opium into a garlic glove which is then grilled over a fire and subsequently eaten.<sup>8</sup> Some participants mentioned opium was used 'to live a long life'.

Opium has various traditional uses, and is used for recreation and pleasure, mostly among the higher classes and by businessmen concluding a deal. It is offered to guests and to entertain people. Parts of the opium plant, especially the seeds and the leaves, are used in cooking. Opium is also used to tame animals including elephants and chickens, and has veterinary functions to treat animal diseases. One participant mentioned opium is used 'to tame violent husbands'.

Opium is a saving asset as it can be kept for several years, and can be used as cash to pay for household and farming utensils and labour, and to barter for food, supplies and even education. In some cases opium is reported to be used as a community fund, for instance to help pay for a new church or support religious functions. Some participants mentioned opium is used for political influence and vote buying. In some cases it was reported that opium farmers fleeing fighting between government troops and ethnic armed opposition groups had not time to bring any possessions apart from the opium they had saved as contingency cash. While in hiding they traded the opium for food and other necessary goods in order to survive.

Opium can be used to produce brown sugar (brown heroin base with low heroin contents usually called 'No.3' in Southeast Asia) and heroin (white heroin powder referred in the region to as 'No.4').

## **Positive and negative aspects**

During discussions at the forum a wide range of positive aspects of opium were identified. These included its medicinal value in areas that lack access to essential medicines. The other main positive value of opium is that it can secure family needs as a cash crop and can help to address poverty and food shortages, and buy access to education and health.

The main negative aspects of opium identified by the forum were related to problematic use of its derivative heroin. Participants mentioned an increase in drugs use among young people. Associated problems with heroin use included addiction; declining morality; negative impact on family relations and social conflict including discrimination and stigmatisation against opium growers by some community members; loss of self-confidence; violence, theft and crimes to sustain drug use; health problems and spread of diseases especially HIV/AIDS; and death due to overdoses. Opium use was seen as less harmful compared to heroin, but

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<sup>8</sup>Garlic itself has been used as a medicine for thousands of years. See for instance: The University of Maryland Medical Center, Garlic, <http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/herb/garlic>

negatives aspect attributed to it included laziness and addiction of opium users

Opium cultivation caused farmers to feel insecure as it is illegal, and some participants felt opium farmers could lack the desire to engage in other business or grow other crops. Opium cultivation is linked to deforestation and negative impacts on the environment (to make way for opium fields mostly by slash-and-burn upland cultivation).

### **Rapidly changing environment**

During the discussions it became clear that the opium cultivating regions have undergone dramatic changes in the last decade, that have great impact on the way people live, their livelihoods, and their health and socio-economic situation.

All groups at the Forum mentioned an increase in opium cultivation in their respective regions. They identified the spread of opium cultivation to new areas that previously have not seen opium poppy being planted, as well as more systematic cultivation patterns and techniques, including the use of pesticides and fertilizers. Furthermore, drug use has increased among young people, and demand for opium and heroin has grown. The heroin processing methodology has changed, and (perhaps related to this,) the number of overdose cases from heroin has increased among middle-aged drug users. The rapid spread of infectious diseases among injecting drug users is of great concern, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C. At the same time, other substances have replaced opium and heroin as drug of choice, and amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) have become more popular, and ATS production has been on the rise in the region.

Changes in the environment include deforestation, climate change and changing weather.

There is also a growing gap between the rich and the poor resulting in more migration from the village to the city and to neighbouring countries. Globalisation has reached poppy farming communities, resulting in growing demand for mobile phones and motor cycles among the youth, including children of opium growers. This also contributes to the increasing number of opium growers as well as the land used for poppy cultivation. Many of the poppy growing areas are situated in conflict zones, and in Burma the majority of ethnic armed opposition groups have signed ceasefire agreements with the government, although there is no peace yet. Corruption among government officials is increasing as a result of opium cultivation

### **Drug control and law enforcement**

The region has strict drug laws for cultivation, trafficking and use, but implementation varies. In Burma, in recent years more opium farmers have been arrested by local authorities, but many were released after paying a bribe. In many areas, corrupt army and government officials tolerate opium cultivation in their area in return for 'taxation', sometimes agreed upon in advance.

Weak governance, corruption and lack of awareness of the government drug control laws and policies all contribute to opium cultivation and use. One participant felt that 'bribery and secret deals have become part of everyday life among the authorities'. Family members of government officials sometimes cultivate opium. Many drug users are arrested by the authorities, but there is also increasing 'taxation' of drugs dealers and drug users by government officials. There are very few services for drug users. In Northeast India there is sporadic eradication of opium fields by the police, but cannabis cultivation is tolerated. Drugs traders and traffickers are arrested, but farmers are not.

Taxes are collected at an increasing number of toll-gates and checkpoints erected by the national army and government-backed militias. These militias use revenue derived from opium cultivation and drug trade as a source of income and to buy arms and ammunition. In contrast, some ethnic armed opposition groups, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in Kachin and northern Shan State, do not tolerate opium cultivation and arrest drugs users and traders. They also carry out poppy eradication campaigns.

Drug use related problems are also causing misunderstanding and problems between family members. In Kachin and Shan States, local communities feel the government is deliberately allowing drug production, trade and use to flourish in ethnic areas and is using it as a weapon of war. There are many natural resources in ethnic regions, but these are extracted by the central government. Local communities are not allowed to touch them and benefit from them. There is no public consultation about opium cultivation and how best to deal with it.

The participants of the forum expect that if the governments' policy does not change, opium cultivation would further increase. Local authorities will continue to tax opium cultivation. And there will be many more companies from outside coming into ethnic areas to invest in large-scale mono plantations especially rubber.

However, if peace will be achieved and a real federal democratic government will come to power, expectations are that the country will develop and opium cultivation will subsequently decrease. There will be more crop substitution and more job opportunities in the future, and more involvement of civil society organisations in policy making. It is expected that climate change will remain to be a factor to cope with: it is foreseen that in future less rain will be coming to the region.

## **Recommendations**

At the end of Forum the participants made the following recommendations for policy change and alternative policy options:

1. Government and local authorities' policies to reduce opium cultivation should focus on providing assistance to address the basic needs of the people, as well as to develop infrastructure such as irrigation, electricity, and roads. The government should implement welfare schemes for the people to offer alternatives to

opium cultivation, including introducing other crops and improved farming techniques. Farmers need stable prices for their crops as well as for essential commodities and household goods.

2. Governance should be improved, and the problems related to corruption of government officials and army units as well as informal taxation – often in combination with the threat of arrest – should be addressed. Opium farmers should not be criminalised and arrested. Instead the government should develop policies that support local communities in consultation with the local people. Local authorities should be made aware of the rights and needs of opium farmers.
3. Local communities should have the right to decide on and manage natural resources in the areas and receive the benefits from these. There should be sustainable farming practices to reduce deforestation, and awareness raising about alternative crops through community and religious leaders, who have influence in local communities. Religious institutions and CBOs can also make policy suggestions to policy makers within the government.
4. There should be forum for communities growing opium to exchange ideas and advocate for policy change; network of farmers should be established so that they can help and organize themselves; to improve agricultural techniques; and advocate for receiving basic infrastructure such as electricity.
5. Part of the opium cultivation should be legalised to help families meet their basic needs, and to preserve the medicinal value of opium and its traditional and veterinary use. Apart from local use and needs, local production could also be used to serve international demand for essential medicines. A fixed amount of acres of opium cultivation should be legalised for farmers to allow them to have permanent places and ‘special opium cultivating areas’. Local authorities should sit down and discuss these issues face to face with the local communities. The production of opium should be limited and controlled by the government and relevant local organisations. A local committee should be established to monitor opium cultivation, and an opium bank could be set up to finance community development projects. The government should also create a system to buy opium from farmers free from corruption and at a guaranteed price.
6. There is a need to establish services for drug users to protect their health, including harm reduction services as well as rehabilitation and treatment centres. The government should allow these to operate freely. The law should protect drug users, and they should be helped to access services. The prescribed use of opium should be legalised. At the same time there should be public awareness about excessive amount of drug use and the risk of overdose.