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The Amazon in the crossfire: Review of the special chapter of the UN World Drug Report 2023 on the Amazon Basin

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The Amazon in the Crossfire. Review of the Special Chapter of the UN World Drug Report 2023 on the Amazon Basin

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REVIEW



ABSTRACT

This article reviews the chapter of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report (WDR) 2023 on 'The Nexus Between Drugs and Crimes that Affect the Environment and Convergent Crime in the Amazon Basin'. The WDR 2023 gathers the evidence on the multiple impacts of a complex crime ecosystem on natural and social systems in the four countries that share most of the Amazon Basin. Evidence on the magnitude and complexity of the impacts of drug-related crime, crimes that affect the environment, and convergent crime suggests the need for comprehensive approaches at different levels of policymaking and its implementation. So far, the siloed approaches of the UN drug control and criminal justice and crime prevention regimes, replicated in many of its Member States, do not properly reflect the situation in areas like the Amazon. The WDR 2023 is considered to make a meaningful contribution to bridge the wide gaps between policy debates and realities on the ground.

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The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report (WDR) 2023 includes a chapter that focusses on drug-related crimes that affect the environment, as well as converging crimes in the Amazon Basin, defined as

“criminal activities that connect, overlap, enable and co-locate with drug-related crime and crimes that affect the environment including corruption, money-laundering, fraud, extortion, violence and other forms of victimization...” (UNODC 2023, 91).

While the UNODC has focused on specific regions before in its reports, it is the first time that the WDR seeks to explore the drugs issue in the context of converging crimes through a multifaceted analysis.

While the 2022 WDR (UNODC 2022) was ground-breaking due to its comprehensive overview of research on the nexus of drugs and environmental harm, it did not specifically focus on environmental crimes, nor did it focus at the converging criminal activities. While there is a solid basis of evidence for the functional relevance of corruption, money-laundering, and to certain degree, the credible threat or application of violence for drug economies to thrive (Brombacher 2023, 113–118), the triangular relationship of drugs, environmental and convergent crimes, is certainly an innovative approach within the series of World Drug Reports.

At the same time, UN drug control, criminal justice, and crime prevention regimes are built on separate conventions, mandates, and decision-making bodies, frequently leading to an artificial separation of deeply intertwined issues in policymaking and reporting. While there is a growing body of research on the environmental impacts of illicit economies and state’s responses (Negret et al, 2019, Murillo-Sandoval et al. 2020, Brombacher/Garzón/Vélez 2021, Lu/Dev/Petersen-Rockney 2022, Carry/Maihold 2022) and on converging crimes (Magliocca et al. 2021, Tellman 2021 et al., Devine/Wrathall/Aguilar-González, et. al 2021), policy debates frequently remain in silos. The WDR 2023 is bold enough to overcome the separation of drug policy and crime control policy-guiding research.

Despite the growing academic interest in illicit economies and environmental impacts, the evidence basis on the triangular subject of the WDR is still rather weak. The Amazon basin, roughly sixteen times the size of Germany and spanning over a total of nine countries, is the largest rainforest in the world and critical for world climate. It is scarcely populated and to large parts impenetrable and across all the nine countries weakly controlled if controlled at all. The widespread absence of state control, and almost non-existent borders, makes it prone to illicit depletion of its natural resources, biodiversity, and ecosystem services.

At the same time, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, three countries within the Amazon basin, concentrate most of the global cultivation of coca crops and cocaine production on its territories, with the illicit cultivation sites predominantly located in the Amazon or adjacent areas as well. The impenetrability and inaccessibility of the whole area and the lack of data on the manifold illicit economies within make it difficult for both research and authorities to grasp the real scope and impact of these interconnected criminal economies.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the WDR 2023 has some methodological limitations. Data availability and UNODC research is traditionally strongest in those countries where an annual crop monitoring survey is conducted, i.e., Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. Also, in Brazil, UNODC can build on previous research in the area of environmental crime. Therefore, the special chapter of WDR 2023 focusses on these four countries and their territories within the Amazon basin. However, there is enough anecdotal evidence on similar patterns of crimes and their convergence in Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Suriname, and Venezuela (Igarapé Institute and InsightCrime, 2022).

To conceptualize drug-related crime, crimes affecting the environment and convergent crimes in the Amazon, the WDR 2023 firstly lines out drug-related crimes ranging from illicit drug crop cultivation and processing to trafficking and possession. Crimes that affect the environment linked to drug-related crime include issues as diverse as land-grabbing, illegal logging/mining, cattle ranching, and farming-related activities. The convergent crimes comprise corruption in a broad array of sectors - corruption with the goal of attaining natural resource extraction

licenses and permits, to apply money-laundering schemes, to enable the sale of illegally procured and non-registered chemicals or to access forced labour. Furthermore, convergent crimes also include “Narco-deforestation” (McSweeney et al. 2014), as well as high levels of violence caused by disputes over territorial control. Finally, the WDR summarizes the evidence on additional harms of this complex crime ecosystem, such as population displacement due to environmental impacts and risks of violence, higher exposure to human rights violations, increased exposure to health-related risks, and others (UNODC 2023, 64).

MAIN FINDINGS

Deforestation is the main environmental concern related to illicit drug crop cultivation (UNODC 2016). Based on an increasing body of research, the WDR 2023 finds that the scale of its direct impact is limited however, and the deforestation phenomenon in the Amazon basin is mostly led by other factors (Davalos et al. 2021, UNODC 2022, Murillo-Sandoval/Kilbride/Tellman et al, 2023.). Although drug markets have expanded in the region overall, illicit coca cultivation does not appear to be clearly associated with large scale-deforestation. However, there is evidence showing that the drug economy has driven the expansion of the agricultural frontier, cattle ranching activities, mining, and others that potentially contribute to deforestation. Coca cultivation serves as some sort of first mover paving the way for secondary effects that develop a massive negative impact on forests and ecosystems. In addition, the WDR 2023 mentions that in Colombia, in 2020, almost half of all illicit coca cultivation took place in areas with special protection status. Also in Bolivia this activity is driving deforestation in protected areas. In Peru, although not mentioned in report, the most recent official data (2022) show higher levels of illicit coca cultivation in special management areas such as indigenous territories, national parks, and their buffer zones, compared to previous years (DEVIDA, 2023).

In terms of policy responses to illicit drug crop cultivation, the evidence collected by the WDR 2023 only refers to the impacts of forced eradication in Colombia (manual and aerial spraying). The findings include potential deforestation, as coca crops may be pushed into new areas, population displacement, and voluntary migration increasing pressures on forested areas. In the case of aerial spraying, some findings suggests that it may have negative effects on coca-growing populations, while other studies are not so conclusive on the extent and the magnitude of the environmental harm of this eradication method (UNODC, 2023, 66–67).

The WDR 2023 emphasizes the growing evidence on the indirect nexus between drug markets and deforestation in the Amazon basin. Dubbed ‘Narco-deforestation’, activities comprise “the reinvestment of drug trafficking proceeds into legal and illegal land acquisition, forest clearance, the creation of pasture for cattle, and other agricultural activities...” (UNODC 2023, 67). In addition, drug trafficking organizations and criminal groups are involved in gold mining and wildlife trafficking leading to enhanced environmental harms.

Apart from deforestation, related crimes also include protection services, extortion of workers, and communities. This is often accompanied by convergent crimes such as bribery of politicians and officials, violence, and trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2023, 71). The WDR provides examples, particularly in tri-border areas, where crime convergence takes advantage of weak law enforcement, the presence of multiple criminal actors, and the lack of relevant legal economic activities. In this context, vulnerable populations resort to illegal coca cultivation, illegal logging/mining, may be victims of forced sexual labour, and may even succumb to recruitment by criminal groups. Regardless of their involvement in crime, local populations are constantly exposed to toxic residue from mining activities (UNODC, 2023, 71–73). Furthermore, the WDR gathered evidence on the impact on indigenous communities and lands in Brazil, Colombia, and Peru that may suggest enhanced harms of the impacts mentioned above especially in terms of violence.

The WDR also describes the enablers of drug-related crimes, crimes that affect the environment and convergent crime in the Amazon basin. ‘Structural demographic changes, and infrastructure expansion have played a critical role’ (UNODC, 2023, 86) in the spread of this crime ecosystem, enhanced by corruption that often facilitates the expansion of illegal economies. Road infrastructure enables forest fragmentation and exposure to human clearance, hence making the land more vulnerable to land-grabbing and illegal extractive activities. Similarly, evidence

shows robust linkages between illegal airstrips presence and forest clearance, illegal mining, and drug trafficking (UNODC 2023, 87), whilst the waterways play an important role for illegal trafficking of commodities and drugs (UNODC 2023, 87–88).

Other than generally expected, the WDR 2023 presents evidence that indicates that the most harmful effect on the Amazon ecosystem is not directly caused by the illicit drug economy thriving in its uncontrolled areas, but by the converging crimes intrinsically connected to both illicit drugs and crimes that affect the environment. The report displays the growing amount of research suggesting that it's not illicit coca cultivation that directly causes a major share of deforestation in the main cultivation countries. While the report does not manage to create a fully coherent picture of the manifold relationships between the drug economy and environmental degradation and deforestation due to lack of data, the overall tendency appears to be clear. The salient point of the report appears to be that the secondary or converging effects related to the drug economy such as land grabbing, money laundering, extensive cattle ranching, or logging on land acquired through laundered funds, have the most severe effect on deforestation.

A similar pattern can be found in some countries in Central America (Tellmann et al. 2021), where large-scale illicit drug crop cultivation is mostly absent, but massive drug trafficking creates comparable effects. While there are a few exceptions – the WDR 2023 mentions the border area between Colombia and Venezuela where coca cultivation indeed appears to have a direct impact on forest surface – the overall pattern is quite clear. Deforestation is not a direct function of coca cultivation, but of the convergent crimes and secondary socio-economic development effects related to the drug economy. The complex relationship between deforestation and coca cultivation is best summarized by the WDR on the case of Bolivia: *'Most of the deforestation in Bolivia is not driven by coca cultivation but coca cultivation is driving deforestation into protected areas'* (UNODC 2023, 68).

The WDR 2023 also leaves little doubt that not only the most harmful effects on the environment are related to convergent crimes, but also those on the affected societies. The report gathers sufficient evidence to showcase the diversification of organized crime groups formerly understood as drug cartels.

Many of the major drug trafficking organizations in the wider Amazon area have started to get involved in and to build up streams of income in illicitly extracted commodities. The already weak territorial and border control within the area is further deteriorated through the widespread patterns of corruption that goes hand in hand with the illicit extractive and non-extractive patterns of criminal rent-seeking (UNODC 2023, 63–65; 89–90). Rampant organized crime in the wider Amazon basin also stimulates violence, forced labour or exploitation, sexual violence, and increasing violence against environmental activists or indigenous peoples, one of the most shocking effects of the diversification of illicit flows related to former drugs-related organized crime networks (UNODC 2023 74–76).

Maybe most important: the report does not focus solely on the negative primary and secondary impacts of criminal economies, but also sheds light on the evidence on the consequences of state-led counternarcotic efforts. Most prominently, the report focusses on the non-intended effects of the aerial spraying of coca fields, causing severe negative effects on the environment and affected populations. The report quotes evidence for some cases where this kind of forced eradication displaced cultivation into new (frequently pristine) forest areas and triggered farmers migration. However, the evidence is partly mixed and only available for Colombia (the only country in the region where aerial spraying used to be applied).

Yet for the domestic policy debates in the region, as well as at the UN level, the report has its merits in making it clear that not only illicit economies are a potential trigger for environmental harm, but also state-led drug policies. This angle of analysis has been raised within research and by civil society (Kay 2022, 17–20; Brombacher/Garzón/Vélez 2021, 3–4; Lu/Dev/Petersen-Rockney 2022, 11), but in the past frequently denied on an intergovernmental level. Nonetheless, the report misses the opportunity to expand the analysis to the potential negative and positive environmental impacts of alternative development programs, another key pillar of supply side drug control policies in the Amazon area. Again this may be explained by the lack of comprehensive evidence on the matter or its outdatedness (UNODC 2022, UNODC 2015, 107–109, TNI 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

What are the main implications for global policy debates stemming from this report? The notoriously siloed approaches within the UN drug and crime control systems have strong effects, not only on policy-making, but also on funding schemes; therefore, objectives and indicators, both politically and technically, are centred around either drugs or around other crimes. The WDR 2023 chapter on the Amazon leaves little doubt that there is a strong need for comprehensive approaches, both at the global policy-making level, as well as on the technical implementation level. With its differing mandates and scope, the three drug control conventions (1961, 1971, 1988) and the two conventions on transnational organized crime (2000) and against corruption (2003) with their respective UN decision making bodies (Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ)) do not properly replicate the converging reality of the different phenomena and sorts of crime that e.g. can be found in the Amazon basin.

For the first time, the 66th CND, in 2023, has adopted a resolution putting a stronger emphasis on indigenous rights within the framework of sustainable and inclusive alternative development (UN CND, 2023), a potential step towards a more comprehensive approach to address the highly complex relationships between the drugs and other illicit economies that affect the environment and converging crimes with highly harmful social, political and, environmental impacts (such as the massive victimization of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin).

The evidence appears to be quite stark. It is to be seen if the report contributes to a better alignment of policies and technical approaches to address criminal ecosystems that in reality cannot be tackled individually, like in the highly complex Amazon basin.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The review reflects exclusively the opinions of the authors and not those of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) or the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

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