



Harm Reduction International's "Aid for the war on drugs" report calls for a change of course in the fight against drugs.

Context

Harm Reduction International (HRI) is an international NGO that uses data and advocacy to promote harm reduction and drug policy reform. It works to “demonstrate how rights-based, evidence-informed responses to drugs contribute to healthier, safer societies, and why investing in harm reduction makes sense”. With this in mind, Claire Provost, senior investigative journalist and the HRI team wrote the report we are focusing on here, entitled “[Aid for the war on drugs](#)”, which was supported by funding from the Elton John AIDS foundation.

This report monitors the evolution of development aid allocated to the fight against drugs worldwide. It suggests that governments and donors disengage from punitive and prohibitionist approaches to drug control, which undermine their other commitments to health and human rights, and encourages them to invest in programs emphasizing community, health and justice.

An ineffective punitive, colonial and racist approach

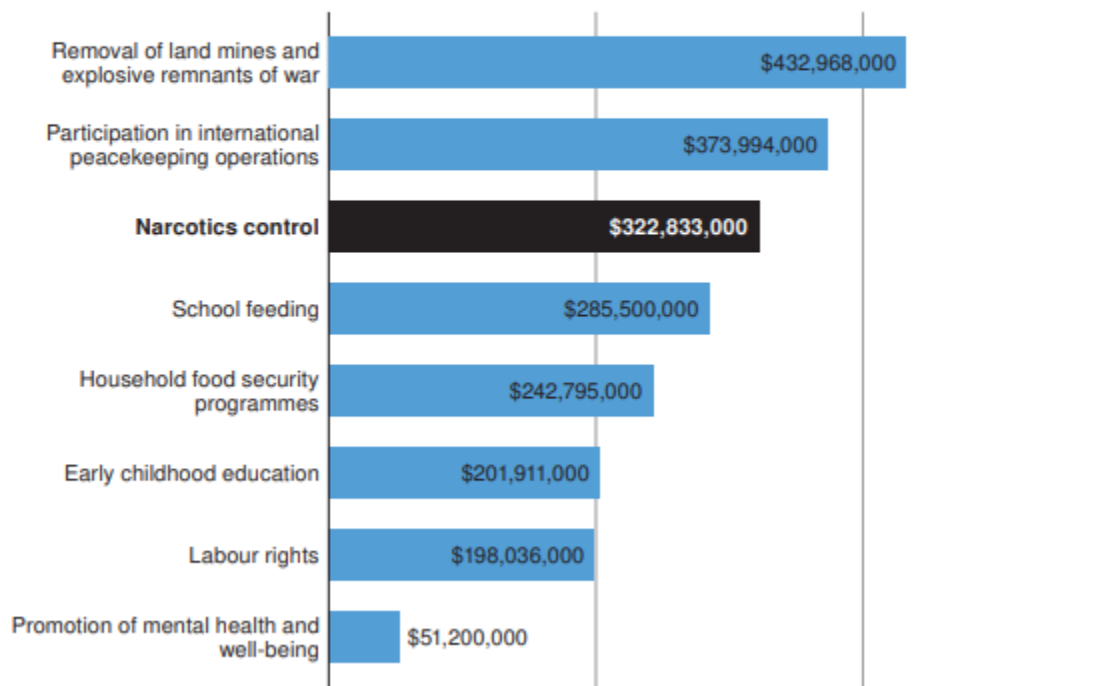
From the outset, the report highlights the grave consequences of the global war on drugs, including mass incarceration, overcrowded prisons, death sentences, lethal police operations, and the destruction of poor farmers' livelihoods through forced eradication methods. It highlights rights violations linked to forced treatment programs, discrimination and barriers to healthcare, particularly affecting poor, marginalized and racialized communities around the world. Despite abundant evidence and international recognition of these negative effects, significant international funding continues to be allocated to punitive drug control

activities, neglecting harm reduction approaches that promote public health and human rights.

Since 1971, the United States has spent over a trillion dollars on its war on drugs, with annual funding of over 1.1 billion USD in 2021, mainly directed by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the State Department. European countries are also major financial contributors, devoting up to 0.5% of their GDP to the fight against drugs, according to a 2017 Council of Europe report.

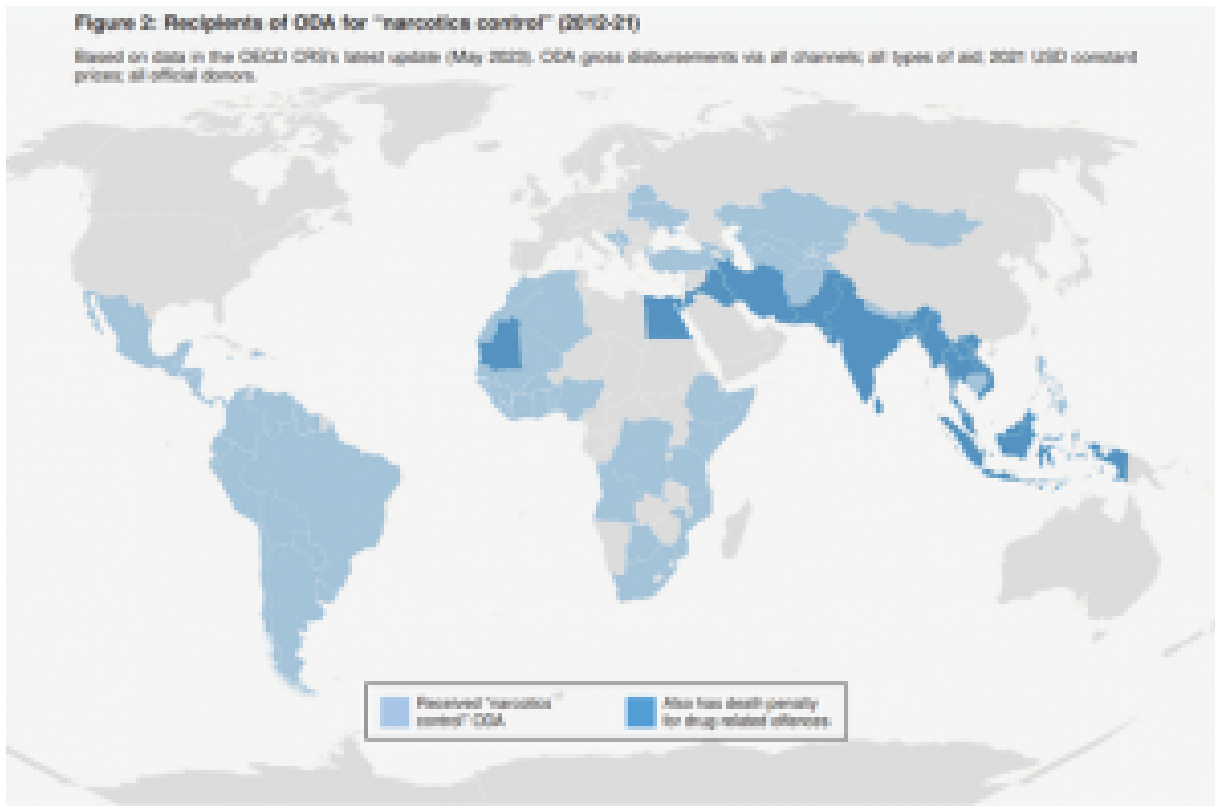
Figure 1: ODA for “narcotics control” vs other sectors (2021)

In US dollars, 2021 constant prices. Based on data extracted from the OECD's Creditor Reporting System⁴⁶



Source: [“Aid for the war on drugs” \(HRI Report\)](#)

More broadly, according to the most recent data, over 930 million USD in aid has been allocated to “counter-narcotics” projects between 2012 and 2021, with major donors including the United States, the European Union, Japan and the United Kingdom. Of this expenditure, at least 68 million USD went to countries applying the death penalty for drug-related offences. This raises concerns that aid may have supported regimes that execute people. While some donors have reduced their aid spending, others, such as the USA, have significantly increased it in 2021. This analysis highlights how financial aid has supported approaches contrary to global development goals, particularly detrimental to poor and marginalized communities. In other words, although financial aid is intended to assist disadvantaged communities, punitive drug control regimes, as conclusive evidence shows, disproportionately affect them. As a result, these regimes do not align with substantial but limited development budgets. And global powers, notably the United States, use drug policy to reinforce their control over other populations, perpetuating racist and colonial dynamics.



Source: ["Aid for the war on drugs" \(HRI Report\)](#)

These investments raise questions about the effectiveness and impact of these approaches, highlighting the imperative need for a reassessment of anti-drug policies in favor of more evidence-based, human-rights-respecting approaches. This is all the more the case given that substantial expenditure on law enforcement, surveillance and mass incarceration can put considerable pressure on limited public budgets, diverting resources that could be used more effectively. The report stresses that donors have both the opportunity and the responsibility to redirect their investments towards evidence-based risk reduction efforts, focused on global health and human rights. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which maintains a Creditor Reporting System (CRS) and to whom the donors must report their spending also has a role to play in ensuring that countries reveal and reorient their material and financial foundations of punitive drug control. The evidence is there to see. This report provides a glimpse by synthesizing research on international financial flows devoted to punitive drug control, analyzing data on official development assistance (ODA) spent on "counter-narcotics", revealing spending being often linked to policing activities rather than international development.

At the end of its investigation, the report proposes a series of recommendations specifically addressed to various stakeholders in the global fight against drugs. We present them here in full.

Recommendations

International donors should:

- Stop using money from their limited aid budgets (supposed to help end poverty and achieve global development goals) for “narcotics control” activities.
- Divest from punitive and prohibitionist drug control regimes and be more transparent about their spending on drug-related activities, including harm reduction (regardless of what budget line this money comes from).
- Invest in evidence-based and health- and human rights-centred harm reduction initiatives that align with global development and other commitments.

Civil society and journalists should:

- Demand greater transparency in how aid money is spent.
- Conduct further, in-depth investigations into how money has been spent on “narcotics control” in different countries (including how it was justified; any results claimed; and any direct or indirect impacts that may have undermined other goals or aid rules).

Taxpayers in donor countries should:

- Demand integrity and transparency in their governments’ international spending, including that from limited aid budgets.
- Demand that support from public budgets flows to evidence-based and public health and human rights-centred measures.

OECD should:

- Solicit and listen to advice from health and human rights experts, as well as people who use drugs, on whether to remove “narcotics control” from their list of categories of spending eligible to be counted as aid.
- Conduct and publish a thorough review of all aid spent on “narcotics control” so far, whether any spending breached guidance on this category, and the use of national security or other justifications by donors to withhold details about funded projects.
- Increase transparency of all current and previous aid spending, making data and details of projects easier to access, thereby facilitating accountability.

Governments should:

- Decriminalise drug use and possession and support harm reduction for people who use drugs, and until then, promote evidence-based and health- and human-rights centred alternatives to incarceration.
- Critically evaluate their own spending on drug control, divest from punitive drug control, and invest in evidence-based harm reduction programmes.
- Meaningfully involve communities and civil society in the financial decision-making and monitoring of

all drug-related policies.

The report underlines that to decolonize drug policy and promote health- and human-rights-based approaches, it is necessary for everyone to step up and look at the data to arrest the punitive action that has become the hallmark of drug enforcement.

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