

# Opium and Development

## Global and Local Interactions in the Golden Triangle

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One significant aspect of the “Golden Triangle”, formed by Thailand, Laos and Burma has been that until recently, the governments of the states to which the region belongs to, could hardly exercise control over this territory, characterized by multiple ethnic groups. Even though the local communities were only slightly integrated into the nation states, the region had world wide significance in the fight against communism (the so-called roll back in China and later the war in Vietnam), and as the major source for the production of illicit drugs traded in global networks. Instead of states, the golden triangle was dominated and more or less controlled by warlords, paramilitary organizations such as the United Shan Army or the Kuomintang and secret organizations reaching from the CIA to Triads. For the local power holders, the major source of revenue has been Opium.

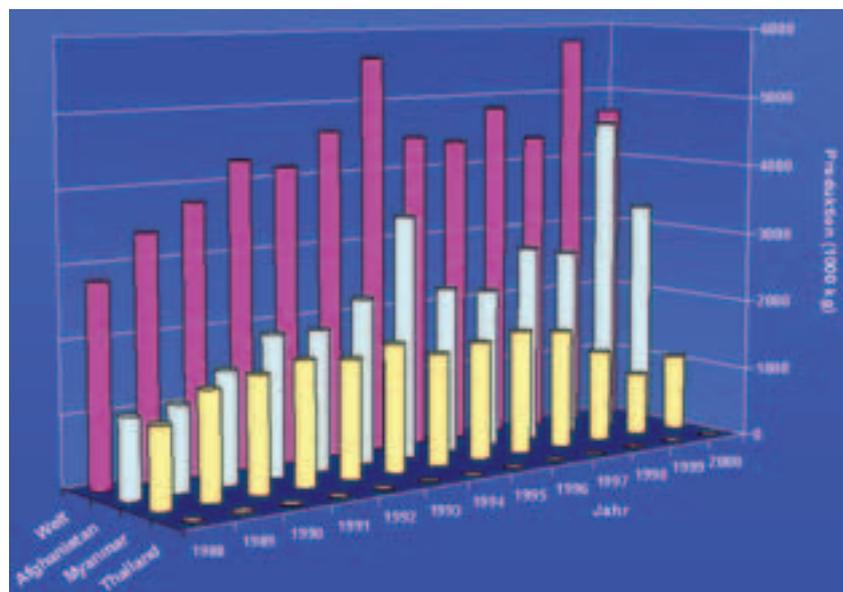
Interestingly *Papaver Somniferum* is not generic to the golden Triangle. In fact, the earliest evidences of opium (about 2000 B.C.) come from Egypt and the Alps. The spreading of poppies in the golden triangle resulted from global developments, namely the shift of opium production from India to China in the early 20. century, and the abolition of poppy production and opium consumption in China following the revolution in 1948. The rise of the “golden triangle” as a global (instead of domestic) centre for Opium and later Heroin production in the late fifties and particularly the sixties is closely linked to the rise of paramilitary groups within the region, the American war in Vietnam (McCoy 1997), and the increases of drug abuse in the USA and Europe. The Golden Triangle became a production zone to supply the world market - even if it was an illegal one - with demanded goods. Up to the early sixties the total amount of opium produced in the golden triangle was rather small. It steadily rose and slightly declined only,

when Afghanistan turned into the major opium producing region (partly supported by the CIA) during the struggle against Russia in the eighties. Recently, opium production increased again in the golden triangle, probably as a result of shortages resulting from the decline of opium production in Afghanistan in 2001.

Opium and development are brought together in the so-called crop (opium)-substitution development projects, like those that have been conducted during the last thirty years in northern Thailand by “Royal projects”, the UNDCP and f.e. the GTZ. In these projects not only different understandings of local society, meaning and generally reality are articulated, but beyond this the global realities of development as much as the global world of drugs and their trade. Such development projects can be cited as nearly paradigmatic cases where local and global overlap and coincide. They include project activities and modifications on the local scale, while their reason, funding and instruments are based on global development discourses and respective organizations. The “lessons learned” in the projects on the local scale are to be fed back into the global development

discourse, which, however, hardly happens. The objective of the crop-substitution projects is the local reduction of the production of a commodity traded in global networks.

The international crop substitution projects started in the seventies. The reasons for these projects are as much international treaties, which made the production of Opium and its derivatives illegal, as well as drug abuse especially in the USA since the late sixties. It is not the first time that Opium played a major role on the global scale. In fact, one might argue that the British colonial empire was strongly founded on the trade of Opium. (TROCKI 1999). Starting in 1912 international treaties were formulated outlawing the production of opium and its derivatives, although Heroin was banned only in 1972. These treaties in themselves were certainly insufficient as reason for prolonged development efforts. The more drug abuse became a problem in the USA and Europe, however, crop substitution projects were seen as a means to fight drug abuse. In this regard, crop-substitution development projects are a way of externalization of problem solving. Instead of or besides fighting drug trade and consumption



Opium-Produktion in 1000 kg (metric tons)



Density of Opium Poppy Growing Areas

within the affected countries, it was assumed that if the drugs are not produced anymore, the abuse problem will automatically disappear. While consumption was a problem in the western world, the production had to be defined as a problem of the countries to which the golden triangle belongs to. In this regard, a problem of the developed countries was “externalized”, and thereby redefined as a problem of local communities in the Golden Triangle.

The basic difficulty of the development projects had been that their understanding of the local reality of opium, which was quite apart from the reality Opium had within the local communities. Within the projects opium was defined as a cash crop (because it was exchanged for silver) that could be substituted by other cash crops like vegetables, coffee, garlic, fruits or flowers. This understanding of opium was rather different from the reality of the local populations, for whom opium was certainly not the same as cabbage or garlic, but a semi-subsistence product used especially to get rice in periods of shortages. This basic problem of divergent realities between local people and the development projects is

often mentioned in the critique of development projects, and as such nothing particularly surprising. In this case, however, we do not only have different local realities, but furthermore, different global realities that impact on the local level of projects as well as communities and opium. In fact, opium is the link between different global “worlds” and diverse local realities like the global development discourses and local projects, global political issues like the cold war with local conflicts like communist insurgency, and the global drug networks with local opium producers.

Crop replacement projects in Thailand started in the 70’s when Nixon’s advisors met Thai and UN officials in Chiang Mai and discussed about the support the U.S. would give concerning a crop substitution program to stop opium and thus drug addictions at its source. Within weeks, the project was drafted. The general assumption was that opium is a cash-crop for the local people and accordingly, this crop would have to be substituted by other cash crops. Thus the main task was seen in identifying possible cash crops that might substitute opium on agricultural field research sites. Interna-

tional donor assistance came to Thailand to help solve „existing“ problems with a clear and fixed policy on illicit crop control and crop replacement strategies (RENARD 2000). This „carrot“ was combined with the „stick“ of destroying the poppy fields.

During the seventies and early eighties little progress was made, not the least due to limited funding and especially during the initial period, lag of knowledge about everyday life among the hill tribes. Based on the experiences a multi-sectoral, integrated rural development approach came up in the eighties, emphasizing a new aspect, namely to better meet the needs of the target population. The objective was to improve the family income, the overall quality of life, and induce a more sustainable management of natural resources. Unfortunately, the new approach did not generate the intended changes.

The prominence given to participatory methods in the global development discourses of the nineties affected the crop-substitution projects in the golden triangle as well, and planners and managers of the large projects together with government officials gradually adopted participatory methods. It was recognized that without active people’s participation little sustainability could be achieved. The Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) also recognized that the communities had the potential to prevent and solve drug-related problems and was authorized in 1997 to use Community-based Drug Abuse Control (CB-DAC) measures in more than 1,000 villages with drug addiction problems. The goals of this community based development concept was to ensure that project approaches and activities never lost touch with field level realities, stay integrated into national plans of actions and to assist the strengths and lessons of local practices. (Dirksen 2001). Up to now, the development projects have always been accompanied by law enforcement activities and crop destruction.

So far, the efforts to eradicate opium at its source met with mixed success. Local cultivation has diminished significantly

over the last 30 years. Currently, Thailand's poppy crop is minor and accounts for approximately 1% of the production of opiates in the Golden Triangle. However, one has to keep in mind that Thailand never was a major supplier. Nevertheless, significant amounts of Heroin from Myanmar (Burma) continue to cross into Thailand for local consumption and also for shipment to world markets. Even though Thailand today plays a negligible role as producer, it still has a vital relevance as a conduit for Heroin. Most of the production and refinement of opium is located along the borders in Myanmar and Laos, where opium yields stand at well over 2.500 tonnes per year and are rising.

To conclude one can say that Opium still has advantages for the growers in Myanmar, Laos and in the remote areas of Northern Thailand. The price of opium has increased considerably since the war in Afghanistan and international as well as domestic consumption within Southeast Asia constitutes an attractive market for several small and medium scale drug syndicates. The annual report by the United Nation's International Narcotics Control Board said that improvements in communications and transportation for expanded trade have made it easier for drug traffickers to operate. Recently, Heroin as drug of choice has been substituted by methamphetamine.

The closely related problems of ATS (Amphetamines), HIV/AIDS and Heroin injections are problems, against which most of the villagers in the Golden triangle are highly vulnerable (FEINGOLD 2000). The production, trafficking and use of Methamphetamine is reported to be rising rapidly. Most Methamphetamine usually arrives from either Myanmar or Laos and is sold locally by traffickers and brokers. Furthermore, the abuse of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) is increasing in the uplands region, although exact data are not available. Obviously, besides crop substitution instigated by development

projects, we can recognize drug substitution activities by which the traditional agricultural product opium, is substituted by modern chemical drugs that don't need to be grown, are less detectable and require less inputs.

In the Golden Triangle a clear distinction between local and global can hardly be made. Something is local in its concreteness, and at the same time, global in being part of wider networks. Like the two sides of a coin, global and local refer to different realities of the same thing. Opium as well as the crop substitution projects were embedded in global relations, although into quite different ones: Opium into the illegal world market, crop substitutions projects into the foreign policy of the US, the development discourse and the "war on drugs". This means that global actors try to integrate their respective interests and agendas into the local project and /or the reactions of local society to them. Thus within a local development project we find not only interfaces linking the local project with local society, but this interface includes at least in the case of the projects discussed here, the different global contexts, agendas etc which impact on the local Hill-tribes and the projects. Often these agendas turn the local people as much as the local development workers into mere objects. An alternative has been started in the final phase of the Thai-German Highland Development Project in terms of participatory oriented projects. The idea is that participation allows for the local people and the local project workers to establish their own rapport with each other and thereby reduce the pressure from other interest-groups. Thus, participation can as well be seen as a means of "empowerment" of the local project workers and experts! The question is, however, whether it is sufficient to allow for participation within a project, where priorities and rules have more or less been defined already, or if participation would have to get beyond

this, in the sense that the local people themselves are agenda setters, as it is at least potentially intended with the recent decentralization policies. This requires, though, a shift in development thinking, financing, and not the least, in development politics.

#### **Anmerkungen**

*Der Artikel basiert auf Daten, die im Rahmen des Projektes "Entwicklungsprojekte, staatliche Verwaltung und lokale Gesellschaft" (Sub-Projekt F3 des SFB 564 'Nachhaltige Landnutzung und ländliche Entwicklung in Bergregionen Südasiens' der Universität Hohenheim) erhoben wurden.*

*Im Zusammenhang mit diesem Projekt fertigte Ruth Sharifa Djedje ihre Diplomarbeit zu Opium-Ersatzprojekten in Nordthailand an.*

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