

**ANALYSIS OF THE WORLD DRUG REPORT 2023:  
THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF GOING GREEN  
JANUARY 2024**



# Executive summary

- With a format including not only the continued use of separate booklets, but also a new complementary online web-based element, the World Drug Report 2023 presents – as ever – an impressive array of largely accessible and user-friendly data and analysis of what the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC or Office) continues to refer to as the ‘world drug problem’. In so doing, readers can identify many familiar and predominantly alarming trends regarding the growing scale and increasing complexity of the illegal drug market. We are also informed, again, of ongoing inequalities relating to a range of official responses and policy interventions, including the availability of pharmaceutical opioids for medical consumption and significant barriers to treatment.
- As in previous years, the Report remains reticent to explicitly engage in discussion of an array of evidence-based approaches, including decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use and harm reduction. Relatedly, the UNODC’s relative lack of engagement with the intersection between drug policy and human rights means that it remains an outlier within the broader UN system; a situation that becomes starker as other agencies and bodies focus ever more explicitly on the connection.
- That said, following on from last year’s Report, it is welcome to see the UNODC continue to fix attention on the relationship between drugs and environmental harm. The 2023 publication devotes considerable space to the issue in the form of an in-depth analysis of ‘The Nexus Between Drugs and Crimes that Affect the Environment and Convergent Crime in the Amazon Basin’. It consequently reveals the Office’s emerging use of green criminology as a lens through which to view the increasingly pressing issue. The perspective adopted is important since the UNODC possesses considerable ‘productive power’ to set agendas and shape narratives within international drug control debates. While not alone as a beneficial disciplinary approach, green criminology offers substantial promise for ongoing analysis. Its fundamental ‘critical’ nature, however, means that its deployment is accompanied by significant challenges.
- Having explained the selection criteria for the geographical scope of study, the Report analyses the situation within the region using a new ‘preliminary’ conceptual framework through which to better understand the ‘crime ecosystem’. This includes introduction of the concept of convergent crime. Within this context, discussion incorporates the idea of direct and indirect environmental impact (notably deforestation and ‘narco-deforestation’), the related diversification of criminal organisations into a range of illegal markets, and the role of drug trafficking groups in undermining the rule of law and amplifying the impact of criminal economies. Although not without its problems, discussion also focuses to a limited extent on the negative environmental impact of drug policy interventions rather than simply illegal drug markets.
- While also limited in scope, the space devoted to communities and Indigenous populations indicates the potential of green criminology to move beyond a preoccupation with criminality and criminal actors and focus instead on the harms associated with, and victims of, illegal markets. To be sure, the approach connects well with discussions of environmental justice and human rights and as such could do much to enhance the UNODC’s limited and cautious engagement to date.
- However, if adopted to its fullest extent and in line with the intentions of its founders and key proponents, the structural critique inherent within green criminology generates a key dilemma for the Office: how to deal with the overarching prohibitive paradigm? The approach certainly has the potential to generate a much needed and better understanding of the complex reality within the Amazon Basin, including through the legitimate integration of the drug issue into a broader portfolio of criminal activities and resultant environmental harms. Yet, despite the increasingly obvious ineffective and harmful character of global drug prohibition, the UNODC remains unable to question the system that sustains it and apply the truly holistic and integrated analysis that is required.

## Introduction

Following on from a shift to separate thematic booklets in 2017, the *World Drug Report* continues to evolve in format and presentation. As the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC or Office) website notes, 'For the first time since its conception', the 2023 publication 'consists of two products, a web-based element and a set of booklets' with 'The latest global, regional and subregional estimates of and trends in drug demand and supply' now 'presented in a user-friendly, interactive online segment'.<sup>1</sup> With a searchable function filterable via, among other things, region, topic and market, this excellent new feature certainly adds a valuable and welcome dimension to the Report and enhances the accessibility of data within what is an innately multi-faceted issue area. Keeping pace with other interactive drug market and policy-related databases,<sup>2</sup> the online segment supplements the existing web-based Statistical Annex and Data Portal and combines well with the increased use of infographics and data visualisations. That said, it should be noted that the adoption of an overly reductive visual approach risks obscuring data sources, including the fact that – considering the often poor information provided by Member States – much uncertainty still surrounds the veracity of the empirical foundations upon which the Report is constructed.<sup>3</sup>

More traditionally, in a similar approach to recent years, booklet 1 takes the form of an 'Executive Summary', although on this occasion it is based on 'analysis of the key findings of the online segment and the thematic booklet 2 and the conclusions drawn from them.' Indeed, 'in addition to providing in-depth analysis of key developments and emerging trends in selected drug markets, including in countries currently experiencing conflict', booklet 2 – 'Contemporary Issues on Drugs' – focuses on several other topics selected for specific attention by the UNODC.<sup>4</sup> Completing the set, booklet 3 – 'Special Points of Interest' – is then presented as offering a 'framework around key takeaways and policy implications drawn from the analysis of the latest trends and estimates of the online segment' and the discussions within booklet 2.

Although repetitive in places, perhaps an unavoidable result of the new interlocking format, the 2023 *World Drug Report* once again provides an impressive range of more accessible and user-friendly data and analysis on what the UNODC Executive Director, Ghada Waly, refers to in her Preface as the 'world drug problem'. This remains the case despite gradually growing use within the UN system, including at times by the UNODC itself, of other more appropriate

terms such as 'world drug situation' and 'global drug phenomenon'.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, in spite of the change in format, such continuity in terminology is in many ways reflective of a continuousness in content, conclusions and resultant headline messages from previous years. As the Executive Director emphasises within the context of efforts to 'revive stalled progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) in 2030, '[T]his edition of the *World Drug Report* highlights the growing complexity' of what are described as 'evolving drug threats'. Moreover, while not explicitly mentioned in the Preface, the increase in scale of many elements of the global drug market shown within various sections of the Report is unambiguous. For example, even the most cursory glance at the booklets and limited engagement with the online segment reveals among other things a 23% increase in drug use between 2011 and 2021 (with opioids continuing to be the main drug type that impacts the global burden of disease), an estimated 13.2 million people who inject drugs in 2021 (18% higher than the previous year), an estimated 1.6 million people who inject drugs living with HIV and 6.6 million people who inject drugs living with Hepatitis C worldwide in 2021, and total deaths attributed to drug use increasing by 17.5% between 2010-2019 to 494,000.<sup>6</sup> In terms of market dynamics, the Report shows a prolonged surge in both supply and demand of cocaine, an expansion of methamphetamine beyond traditional markets, an increase in opium poppy production in 2022,<sup>7</sup> the appearance of new cannabis-related products, shifting synthetic markets and supply chains, an ongoing opioid crisis in North America and increases in the New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) market in 2021. On the flip side, we are informed once again of inequalities relating to a range of official responses and policy interventions, including the availability of pharmaceutical opioids for medical consumption and significant barriers to treatment, especially for women.

Across these and an array of other important topics, and aware of ongoing if not explicitly acknowledged uncertainty surrounding various data sets, the UNODC undoubtedly provides a wealth of useful – frequently worrying – information, as well as, at times, accompanying policy advice. This is most obvious within the 'Special Points of Interest' booklet. Here topics selected by the UNODC as 'Key Findings' are supplemented with a set of generally productive 'Possible Responses'. Curiously, however, even in booklet 3 and within the context of the Executive Director's statement in her Preface that the Report offers 'impartial evidence', there is an ongoing reticence to deal directly with several evidence-based policy respon-

ses that are being embraced and promoted by many member states and other parts of the UN system.

For example, while last year there was limited discussion of decriminalisation of drug use and related activities, it is barely mentioned within the 2023 Report. Where it is explicitly discussed, it is specifically in relation to psychedelics and moves within some US states in chapter 2 of booklet 2, 'Recent developments Involving Psychedelics'.<sup>8</sup> This contrasts with other individual UN bodies, as well as the unequivocally supportive stance adopted in the 2018 UN System Common Position on drugs<sup>9</sup> and its accompanying 2019 Task Team Report.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, there is an ongoing reluctance to use the term 'harm reduction'. As in 2022, the occasional reference to specific harm reduction interventions can – with some effort – be found within various parts of the Report. For example, chapter 6 of booklet 3, 'Service Innovations During Covid-19' makes brief reference to needle and syringe programmes and opioid agonist therapy.<sup>11</sup> The lack of a dedicated section on the 'health consequences of drug use', as used to be the case within the no longer produced 'Global Overview' booklet, certainly makes references to an array of widely used harm reduction interventions harder to locate within the Report. That said, even within the targeted discussion of 'Inequalities, Disparities, Public Health and Human Rights' in the 'Special Points of Interest' booklet, the term itself is assiduously avoided. This can perhaps be explained, if not excused, by the enduring tensions surrounding its use within the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND). Instead, preference is given to the diplomatically accepted proxy phrase 'comprehensive services to minimize the public and social consequences of drug use in a continuum of care for people who use drugs'.

As with the related issue of decriminalisation, what comes across as a lukewarm approach leaves the UNODC very much as an outlier within the broader UN system, including once again in relation to the strong support for, and use of, the term harm reduction by individual agencies such as UNAIDS, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in addition to the Common Position and its Task Team Report. This is the case even while, ironically, the UNODC remains the Task Team's lead agency, and its admittedly limited Common Position-related publications note that 'measures aimed at minimising the adverse public health consequences of drug abuse' are 'sometimes referred to as harm reduction'.<sup>12</sup>

As has been the case in previous years, the 2023 Report is also still lacking in its approach to human rights. As we have repeatedly noted in previous critiques of the *World Drug Report*, it is concerning that such an influential UN publication continues to largely avoid meaningful engagement regarding the intersection between drug policy and human rights, particularly in relation to potential and actual abuses resulting from drug control policies on both the supply and demand sides of the issue. Again, such a position is particularly stark relative to other UN agencies and bodies beyond the OHCHR, for example UNAIDS<sup>13</sup> and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,<sup>14</sup> the Common Position and Task Team Report, and increased discussion of the issue in the CND and at the national level within many States. Much can be said for the view that, if approached carefully,<sup>15</sup> a dedicated chapter on human rights would be a timely and constructive contribution to international drug policy debates. This is especially so considering the new format of the *World Drug Report* and opportunities for the UNODC to select individual topics and organise them under the heading of 'Contemporary Issues on Drugs' or something similar. As it stands, human rights receive limited and fragmentary attention.

Where the issue is mentioned explicitly, the Report's messaging is in the main positive, however. For instance, acknowledging the need for a holistic appreciation of the issue area, it is noted that 'Inequality and social and economic disparities continue to drive and be driven by the drug phenomenon, threatening public health and human rights'.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, and in a welcome reference to specific policy interventions, when outlining 'possible responses' vis-à-vis treatment services, the UNODC highlights that 'provision *must be voluntary and based on human rights*' (original emphasis). Similarly, the Report's useful discussion of illicit drug economies is – at the headline level at least – also framed in terms of human rights. Here, furthermore, the Report engages with the issue of complexity as emphasised in the Executive Director's foreword. Indeed, readers are informed in the Special Points of Interest booklet that 'Illicit drug economies', what are referred to as 'converging crimes', as well as 'displacement and conflict are accelerating environmental devastation and degrading human rights, especially in vulnerable groups', including crucially Indigenous Peoples.<sup>17</sup> The attention given to these intimately interconnected topics within both the Executive Summary<sup>18</sup> and Special Points of Interest booklets highlight the discussions and analysis presented within chapter 4 of booklet 2, 'The Nexus Between Drugs and Crimes that Affect the Environment and Convergent Crime in the Amazon Basin'. Such welcome attention to the environment follows on from last year's Report. This contained, for

the first time in its history, a most welcome and long overdue thematic chapter dedicated to the issue of drugs and the environment;<sup>19</sup> a largely constructive segment that was the focus of our analysis of the 2022 *World Drug Report*.<sup>20</sup>

Considering the increasing urgency to elevate discussions of environmental harm within drug policy debates, not only at the mid-point towards achieving the SDGs but also in terms of the 2024 Midterm Review of the 2019 Ministerial Declaration,<sup>21</sup> this IDPC/GPDO/Viso Mutop critique will also focus on the issue, predominantly chapter 4 of booklet 2. Rather than concentrate on specific blind spots as was the case last year, this analysis both examines some key aspects of the chapter and explores the promise and peril of the UNODC's emerging use of green criminology as a lens through which to view the drugs-environment nexus. It is argued that while other disciplinary approaches exist, green criminology has the potential to simultaneously shift attention away from criminal markets and actors and raise the profile of victims' rights, particularly Indigenous Peoples' rights, and associated State obligations within future World Drug Reports and related outputs. This is important since via its annual publication, especially in its new format and selection of topics for special attention, the UNODC possesses considerable 'productive power'<sup>22</sup> to set agendas and shape narratives within international drug control debates. However, as will be demonstrated, engagement with a range of green criminology perspectives also presents the Office with an uncomfortable fundamental dilemma.

## The Nexus Between Drugs and Crimes that Affect the Environment and Convergent Crime in the Amazon Basin: Chapter Overview

Setting the tone for the discussion and analysis to follow, the chapter begins by stating plainly that 'Significant parts of the Amazon Basin are wracked by a complex ecosystem of drug crime, crime that affects the environment and convergent crime'. Consequently, we are told that it 'sheds light on this nexus, including the diverse impacts of drug-related activities where natural and human ecosystems are most at risk'. Indeed, while most readers will no doubt already be aware, the broader scene is established early on with the reminder that the world's largest rainforest is 'threatened by deforestation and degradation, virtually all of it illegal'. More specifically, emphasis is placed on the fact that 'The countries hosting the

largest share of the Amazon Basin rainforest – Brazil (59 per cent), Peru (13 per cent), Plurinational State of Bolivia (8 per cent), and Colombia (7 per cent) – are particularly at risk of forest and biodiversity loss'.

As noted, this section of the Report builds on the 2022 publication, which the UNODC points out 'provided an overview of the possible environmental impacts of illicit drug cultivation and production on natural ecosystems and communities'. Crucially, reflection upon last year's thematic chapter also highlights how analysis at that point kept 'the size of those effects in perspective relative to other human activities that cause environmental degradation'<sup>23</sup> – an important point to which we will return.

In terms of geographic focus, the UNODC acknowledges that while Ecuador, Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and French Guiana are also part of the Amazon Basin that are 'affected by drug and related crime issues' the chapter focuses on the Amazon region covering Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. Not only are these the largest within the Amazon basin, they are also States 'that either host nearly all global illicit cultivation of coca leaf and cocaine manufacture or have high levels of cocaine trafficking'. Case study selection is further, and again not unreasonably, justified by the fact that it is 'in these four countries that UNODC has a stronger research capacity' and 'could build on existing programmes'.<sup>24</sup> As in other areas of the Office's work, a paucity of data and associated methodological challenges remains an ongoing concern. Additional, once more legitimate, justification given for focusing on one specific geographical region is that such an approach allows a 'comprehensive focus on the multi-layered relationships between drug production, trafficking and consumption on the one side, and crimes that affect the environment and convergent crime on the other'.<sup>25</sup> And it is fair to say that, especially in relation to some other parts of the Report, the chapter successfully offers an impressive wealth of well-referenced information and analysis across a broad range of interconnected issues. Despite this richness of content, here we will concentrate attention on several specific topics only.

## Introduction of a new preliminary conceptual framework

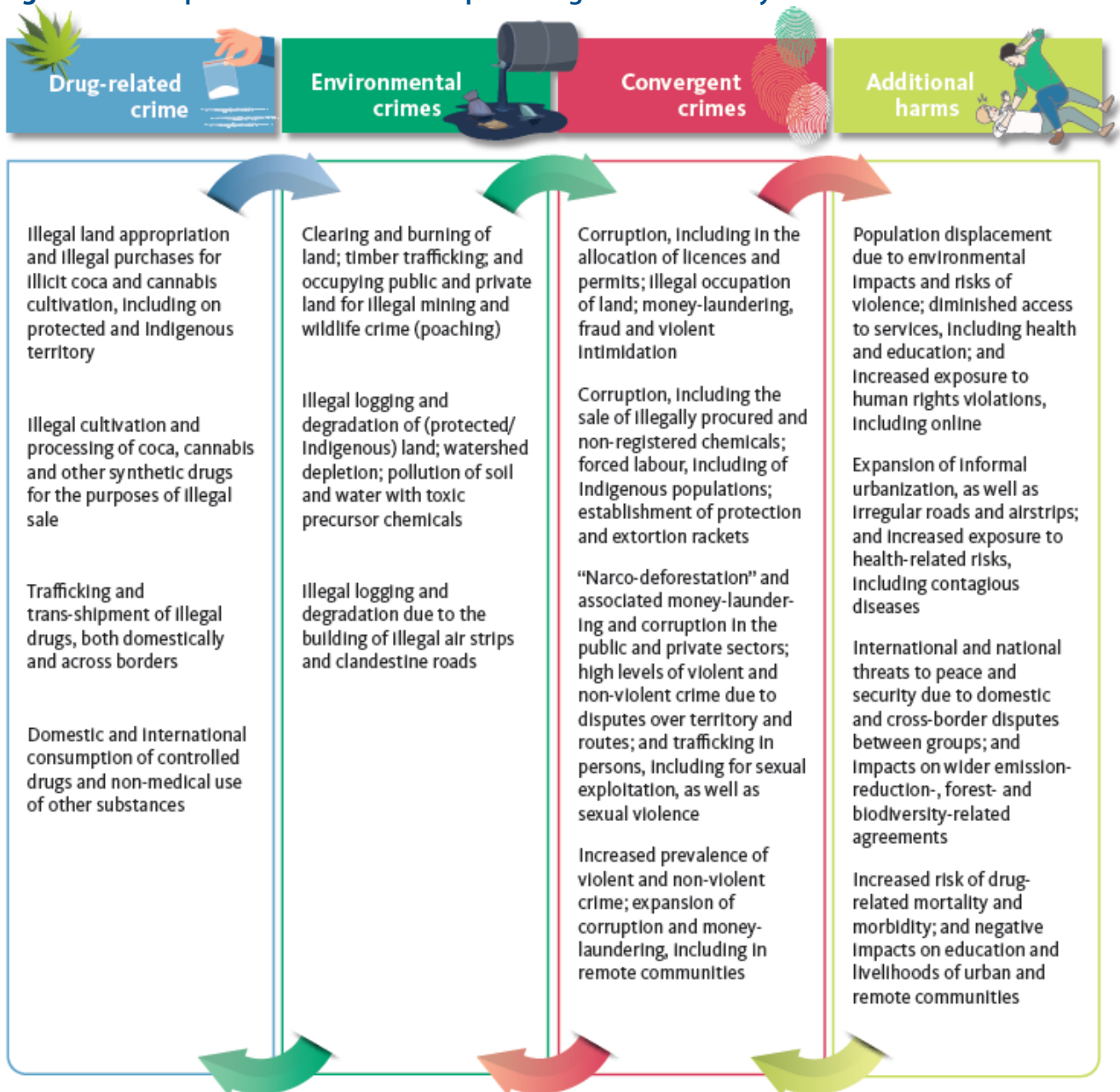
As the title of the chapter suggests, building upon its previous 'deep dive into the nexus between drugs and the environment',<sup>26</sup> the UNODC this year introduces a new framework 'conceptualising' what it terms the 'crime ecosystem' (see Figure 1). Moving beyond

the 'three routes of environmental impact' presented in 2022,<sup>27</sup> this useful addition also incorporates the phenomena of 'convergent crime': '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.'<sup>28</sup> Within this context, we are informed that 'The relationships between drug-related crime, crimes that affect the environment, and convergent crime in the Amazon Basin are complex and evolving'. Consequently, and not unreasonably, it is noted how 'Any assessment will be partial and non-exhaustive' with the chapter offering 'a preliminary analysis of basic trends and patterns'.<sup>29</sup> Drawing from research focusing specifically on the tri-State border between

Brazil, Colombia and Peru, what is honestly introduced as a 'preliminary conceptual framework tracing the ways in which drug-related crimes interact with crimes that affect the environment and convergent crime, as well as highlighting wider impacts on society', is offered as a 'roadmap for diagnosing risks and formulating prevention strategies'.<sup>30</sup>

With this in mind, the UNODC highlights several features of its new conceptual framework; a framework that provides the organising structure for the entire chapter. First, it is noted how 'the process of producing, processing and trafficking, can have a *direct* and *indirect* impact on the environment' (emphasis added). This is described as ranging from 'selective illegal deforestation and degradation, which makes

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Conceptualising the crime ecosystem**



Credit: Taken from Booklet 2 – 'Contemporary Issues on Drugs', Chapter 4: The nexus between drugs and crimes that affect the environment and convergent crime in the Amazon Basin, p. 64, 2023 World Drug Report

way for the cultivation and processing of drugs, to the pollution of the environment due to the burning of trees and use of precursor chemicals, as well as financial and land acquisition crimes associated with what is referred to as “narco-deforestation”. Second, the UNODC points out that ‘drug trafficking groups are diversifying into crimes that affect the environment by default and design, including illegal land occupation for industrial agricultural purposes, illegal logging, illegal mining, poaching and trafficking in wildlife as a way of generating and laundering illicit profits’. And third, the authors stress the fact that ‘drug trafficking undermines the rule of law and amplifies criminal economies that facilitate and incentivize the involvement of a wide range of individuals and actors involved in crimes that affect the environment’.<sup>31</sup> On this last point, the chapter devotes considerable space to analysis of drug trafficking routes and drug seizures as well as some attention to ‘Mapping drug trafficking organizations’.

## Deforestation and ‘Narco-deforestation’

As the chapter notes, the relationship between the illegal drug market and deforestation in countries in the Amazon basin, particularly Colombia, is not a new issue of concern: ‘From the 1990s onward, governments started explicitly linking the production of coca, and the trafficking of coca paste and cocaine, with the destruction of the rainforests’. We are reasonably informed, however, that the ‘relationships between coca production and deforestation and degradation in the Amazon Basin are not clear cut’. Whereas traditional conceptions and related analysis as recent as a decade ago often focused on the direct impact of drug production – and to a far lesser extent drug policies – on deforestation, the Report stresses that ‘the far more important drivers of forest clearance are crop and livestock production’. To be sure, as the chapter discusses in detail, while there are undoubtedly some direct impacts, ‘the actual production of coca leaf and processing into cocaine overall appear to have a comparatively limited direct effect on deforestation and degradation’.

Synthesis of the growing evidence base presented in the chapter reveals the extent to which the indirect impact of the illegal coca economy is more significant, especially in connection to related money laundering tied to local ‘extractive sectors’. As such, activities associated with ‘narco-deforestation’, are seen to include ‘the reinvestment of drug trafficking proceeds into legal and illegal land acquisition, forest clearance, the creation of pasture for cattle, and other agricultural

activities such as soy and palm plantations’.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, analysis demonstrates how ‘Alongside the recycling of profits into agricultural activities is the financing of accompanying infrastructure, ranging from landing strips to irregular roads, all of which affect the integrity of forests and biodiversity’.<sup>33</sup> The increasing complexity of the drug-environment nexus or ‘crime ecosystem’ becomes even more profound with the acknowledgment that ‘The expansion and diversification of drug trafficking organizations and other criminal groups into cattle ranching, selective logging, gold mining, real estate, and trafficking in wildlife are directly and indirectly contributing to a host of negative environmental impacts’.<sup>34</sup> In this regard it is interesting to note the Report’s deployment of the term ‘narco-deforestation’. Chapter 5 in the 2022 *World Drug Report* made no reference to the phrase within the text, although McSweeney and colleagues’ important 2014 piece in *Science* introducing the concept is referenced.<sup>35</sup> This year, however, it is given some visibility, including in the chapter’s key findings and the Report’s Executive Summary<sup>36</sup> where ‘narco-deforestation’ is highlighted as ‘posing a growing danger to the world’s largest rainforest’.

## Forced crop eradication

Considering the chapter’s presentation of the new conceptual framework as a ‘roadmap’ for the formulation of strategies, there is disappointingly little discussion of the impact of specific drug policies themselves on the environment, let alone the effect of the overarching international legal architecture within which they operate; issues that are receiving increasing critical attention.<sup>37</sup> In terms of individual interventions, however, it is worth noting here inclusion within the chapter of a brief discussion on forced eradication. It is positive to see the Report note that, along with a range of other factors, forced eradication can ‘trigger deforestation and environmental degradation since it can push illicit cultivation into new areas’ as well as ‘contribute to population displacement and voluntary migration, thus imposing new pressures on forested areas through urbanization and increasing deforestation and degradation’.<sup>38</sup> It is also noteworthy that, although the chapter seems to overlook some relevant research in Bolivia, it implicitly suggests the need for investigation beyond Colombia.

That said, it is important to highlight several areas of concern regarding the UNODC’s presentation of existing research. Specifically, while the chapter refers to a 2013 assessment suggesting a ‘positive correlation between eradication and shifting cultivation’, the UNODC once again counters this with reference to

a study six years later indicating that ‘the effect on new coca cultivation is either non-existent (in the case of manual eradication) or leads to a reduction of new coca cultivation in neighbouring areas as well (in the case of aerial spraying)’. It is of course good practice to present a balanced account of the existing evidence base. Nonetheless, this must be done with careful consideration, including with research that incorporates implications for development and human rights. As it is, and in an unfortunate repeat of discussion in last year’s Report, the same 2019 study is presented uncritically and without any consideration for methodology and consequent issues concerning comparability. Since discussion around the validity of the balloon effect in Colombia was given significant attention in our 2022 analysis of that year’s *World Drug Report*, there is no need to reprise the arguments here. Amidst many other studies on the phenomena in Colombia, it appears methodologically unwise – if perhaps politically useful – to continue to deploy a single study as the ‘definitive’ counteracting ‘statement on this subject.’<sup>39</sup>

In terms of balance, the chapter does a better job in its brief discussion of aerial fumigation. It notes that ‘while some research has shown that aerial spraying can generate negative health effects on coca growing communities’ other research is not so conclusive about the size and scope of the impact on the environment of glyphosate, spraying mixtures and the precision of spraying’. Readers are directed to Booklet 5 from 2022<sup>40</sup> for evidence for the latter perspective and once the reference is located must then turn to the online Methodological Annex to dig out supporting material.<sup>41</sup>

To be fair, here the UNODC has drawn together an impressive list of research publications into the issue. Importantly, however, discussions under the heading ‘Eradication and the Environment’ begin with the critical qualification that ‘The impact of illicit crop eradication on the environment may have different outcomes and different ramifications depending upon the context’; a crucial message that might have been usefully included within the main Reports themselves.

Moreover, despite ongoing academic debate concerning the carcinogenic properties of glyphosate,<sup>42</sup> it is surprising that the UNODC does not apply a more overtly cautious approach to the policy option in general. This is particularly the case bearing in mind the findings of the WHO’s International Agency for Research on Cancer in 2015 that the pesticide was ‘probably carcinogenic to humans.’<sup>43</sup> Further, and while not explicitly noted within the Annex or chapter 4, assessment of the impact of eradication, including

aerial fumigation, on the environment will ultimately depend on the indicators deployed. This is the case for both academic research design and official policy evaluation. For example, on the latter and influenced to some extent by the Global Drug Policy Index,<sup>44</sup> recent work by Colombian researchers suggests that where that country is concerned, specific indicators relating to forest conservation should be included with more holistic metrics focusing on socioeconomic conditions through multidimensional poverty measures, protection of human rights defenders, social leaders and their communities and local legitimacy of State institutions. As the authors of the March 2023 Report note, ‘one advantage of these indicators is that they are all quantifiable and have already been monitored by cooperation agencies such as UNODC through surveys of households linked’ to Colombia’s Comprehensive National Program of the Substitution of illicitly used crops’ (PNIS).<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that there is no need for more environmentally focused metrics, however.

## Communities and Indigenous Peoples

In a welcome expansion of the scope of analysis from the very limited mention in last year’s Report,<sup>46</sup> it is largely positive to see chapter 4 devote specific attention to communities and Indigenous populations. A dedicated – although still relatively brief and somewhat problematic – section on the topic begins by explaining how ‘In under-policed areas of the Amazon Basin where State presence and associated social services are limited, drug production, trafficking and consumption typically have a disproportionately high impact on vulnerable communities and the environment for each unit produced.’ ‘One reason for this’, it continues ‘is that drug producers and traffickers have fewer constraints in place to minimize their environmental impacts’. The Report goes on to outline how, in an attempt to ‘reduce the risk of disruption from security services’, what are defined as ‘drug groups’ often confine production and trafficking to more isolated, protected areas where many of these environmental impacts are hidden from public scrutiny.<sup>47</sup> We are also informed how the encroachment of ‘organized criminal groups’ into national and state parks, conservation areas and Indigenous territories has multiple implications. These range from property disputes to ‘periodic cooptation’, or assimilation, and ‘recruitment into various facets of the illicit drug trade’ with the impact having the potential to be extremely violent.<sup>48</sup>

Although in many ways useful, analysis here is open to challenge for several reasons. First there is an inbuilt



assumption that increased State presence will by its very nature improve the circumstances of communities and Indigenous populations and is therefore warranted. Such a perspective overlooks the reality of political situations where, seeking to enrich themselves and close associates, those in power actively encourage environmental degradation and at the very least turn a blind eye to related criminal activity and human rights violations. The former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) was a case in point. Moreover, it should not be forgotten how 'over-policing' can also result in serious and extensive negative outcomes. Again, Brazil provides an example of what can be described as 'structural violence' with related police action – frequently brutal in nature – disproportionately impacting Indigenous groups. Second, the UNODC's analysis overlooks how, in the absence of a functioning State, in many instances the illegal drug economy can act as a lifeline for communities and Indigenous Peoples.<sup>49</sup>

While discussing the alarming growth in homicidal violence within Indigenous populations in Brazil, the Report notes the rapid increases in exploitation of protected lands, in particular from land-grabbers, illegal loggers and *garimpeiros* (wildcat goldminers) and highlights the role of members of the criminal group the PCC in a range of nefarious activities. Illegal gold mining in the Yanomami and Munduruku territories of Brazil is shown to have resulted in shockingly elevated levels of mercury poisoning within the Indigenous populations. This consequence of environmental degradation is in addition to mining-related deforestation. An analogous situation is also reported in parts of Colombia and Peru, with, in the latter, armed groups routinely targeting 'Indigenous and community leaders in the Amazon region'. What the UNODC terms, 'narco-penetration' is also revealed as extending to trafficking in wildlife and illegal fisheries.<sup>50</sup> All of which leads the authors to highlight as one of the chapter's key findings, and hence also stress within the Report's Executive Summary, that 'Indigenous Peoples and other minorities are disproportionately affected by the criminal nexus in the Amazon Basin, as they suffer forcible displacement, mercury poisoning and other health-related impacts, increased exposure to violence and victimization and more'.<sup>51</sup>

Mindful of this important aspect of the complex intersections explored in the chapter, such attention is clearly positive and complements increased attention within the CND. Admittedly after protracted and difficult negotiations, the 66<sup>th</sup> session in March 2023 saw the Committee of the Whole adopt, for the first time, a resolution emphasising indigenous rights within a

sustainable and inclusive alternative development framework.<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, considering once again presentation of the new conceptual framework as a guide for 'diagnosing risks and formulating prevention strategies', the paucity of meaningful analysis of the impact of drug control interventions on the intricate relationship between rural communities, Indigenous peoples and the environment is disappointing. For instance, despite the discussion on forced eradication, it is surprising that there is no mention of the problems associated with post-2016 coca control policies in Colombia. In spite of its links to rural reform adopted in the Peace Agreement and the concomitant promise of 'environmental recovery',<sup>53</sup> research has shown how 'Certain flaws in the design and implementation of the PNIS have had negative consequences' including 'the rise in the murder of leaders, deforestation and inter-ethnic and socio-environmental conflicts'.<sup>54</sup>

It is worthwhile recalling here that, in her Preface to the Report, the Executive Director stressed how 'Putting people first requires policymakers and service providers to actively protect human rights of all by demolishing barriers to evidence-based services across the continuum of care'. It is true that her comments in this instance relate specifically to drug treatment. They are equally applicable, however, to discussion of a range of issues within the crime-environment 'ecosystem', particularly regarding those people who bear the greatest burden of not just criminal activity but ill-conceived and/or poorly implemented policy approaches. And as such, while in-depth analysis of an array of interconnecting illegal markets and the behaviours of a range of criminal actors operating within them is important and illuminating, this should not be at the expense of meaningful discussion of affected communities and, crucially, States' obligations to protect them and indeed the environment itself. It can be argued that the predominant focus within chapter 4 on criminal markets and criminal actors is an inevitable product of how the topic is perceived, and moreover how the favoured analytical lens is deployed. After all, it is natural for different ontological perspectives to generate different conclusions and priorities.

## **Green criminology and beyond: 'Possibilities and problems'**

Combined with booklet 5 of the 2022 *World Drug Report*, this year's chapter 4 of the 'Contemporary Issues on Drugs' booklet can be seen as the beginnings of the UNODC's engagement with green criminology as an approach to interrogate, better understand and

help guide the development of policies to address the complex and increasingly important relationship between various aspects of illegal markets, drugs key amongst them, and the environment. This should certainly be regarded as an encouraging and potentially rewarding – if not entirely unproblematic – move. To paraphrase the title of a recent academic article, it is this type of criminology ‘That Matters in the Age of Global Ecological Collapse.’<sup>55</sup>

Other disciplinary perspectives, including explicitly human rights-focused approaches, can also be deployed as conceptual lenses and organising frameworks for investigation of the issue area (see Box 1). Yet, as noted earlier, despite encouragement for the UNODC to engage more meaningfully with the myriad human rights dimensions of drug policy and become less of an outlier within the UN system, it is a delusion that the Office on Drugs and *Crime* will dispense completely with criminologically-oriented perspectives. Not in

the short term at least. For some, the introduction of environmental (including convergent) crime into the UNODC’s work can be seen as an important route for breaking down the ‘notoriously siloed approaches within the UN drug and crime control systems’ with the ‘chapter on the Amazon’ leaving ‘little doubt that there is a strong need for comprehensive approaches, both at the global policy-making level, as well as at the implementation level.’<sup>56</sup> An emphasis on crime, however, is not without its problems. Recent research into the nexus between crime and development ably exposes this point (see Box 2). Nonetheless, with that reality in mind, the careful application of green criminology does offer real opportunities to move beyond a traditional focus on the study of criminal activities and criminal actors and function as an entry point for engagement with a range of critical issues that intersect with many of the concerns of other approaches, including those focusing on human rights.

## Box 1. Narratives beyond crime: Alternatives are available

In addition to green criminology and green International Relations theory, it is possible to use a range of other organising intellectual/disciplinary frameworks through which to explore the complex relationship between drugs, convergent crimes and the environment. For instance, if deployed with care, recent developments in critical security studies provide entry points in terms, among others, of human and environmental security.<sup>57</sup> Mindful of the UN’s fundamental concern for human rights, however, a particularly relevant alternative approach to the current crime focus, even in the form of green criminology, can be found in the increasingly rich connections being explored through the lens of human rights and environmental protection.

At its simplest, this can be broken down into three interconnected frameworks. Each overlap and supplement one another and in places correspond in many ways, including in terminology and outlook, with some perspectives within green criminology.

Within a **human rights and environmental law** framework, for example, beyond a range of UN documents enshrining different human rights, including those after the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, recent developments have seen nature, including rivers and forests, accorded legal rights.<sup>58</sup>

Emerging out of a concern for the disproportionate impact of a range of environmental challenges on

certain communities, as in green criminology the **environmental justice** approach is multifaceted. Including important works like Joan Martinez-Alier’s ‘environmentalism of the poor’,<sup>59</sup> it nevertheless coalesces around the search to establish the duty bearers and recipients of justice, sees environmental problems as exacerbating existing inequalities, and often ‘relates to situations in which those who are least responsible for a problem are the ones most affected and vulnerable to its consequences’. Some legal scholars also include inter-species justice within this typology.<sup>60</sup>

Not without its critics, stemming originally from the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (commonly known as the Brundtland Report), the **Sustainable Development** framework unsurprisingly deploys the Sustainable Development Agenda as an overarching concept and its associated SDGs as tools and indicators for dealing with the intersection between different forms of environmental degradation and human rights.

These and indeed other frameworks, including traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, the law and society approach, and the North-South divide, consequently, provide alternative narratives to that apparently establishing dominance within the emerging international policy discourse on drugs and the environment.<sup>61</sup>

Now over three decades old, green criminology remains somewhat difficult to define. The term itself was first coined in 1990 and has now been widely accepted as describing a perspective within criminological work 'devoted to the study of crime against and harms to the natural environment'.<sup>62</sup> Its utility, therefore, lies in the fact that it expands the scope of criminology to address forms of crime that are ordinarily excluded from criminological research. Indeed, green criminology extends 'beyond the focus on street and interpersonal crimes' to incorporate consideration of what has been described as 'the destructive effects of human activities on local and global ecosystems'.<sup>63</sup> In so doing, the approach goes further than the mainstream's focus on individual offenders and 'considers not just questions of crime as defined by a strict legalist/criminal law conception',<sup>64</sup> but also among other things examines questions concerning 'rights, justice' and crucially 'victimization'.<sup>65</sup> In many ways, its emergence and subsequent evolution outside traditional disciplinary boundaries parallels what can be seen as the 'green turn' in other social science disciplines. For instance, while environmental problems have long been a concern within the discipline of International Relations (IR), critical green theories that also emerged in the early 1990s challenge the State-centric framework, rationalist analysis and 'ecological blindness of orthodox' IR approaches and can be seen to 'offer a range of new environmental interpretations of international justice, democracy, development, modernization and security'.<sup>66</sup>

To some extent like the plurality of green theory perspectives in IR, a broad approach embracing an array of different names (including eco-critical criminology, conservation criminology and eco-global criminology), typologies and associated subfields has led to the view that there is 'no green criminology theory as such' (original emphasis). Rather, as observed in 1998 by one of the key figures in the development of the approach, there is what can be loosely described as a green 'perspective'.<sup>67</sup> This draws on 'various philosophical, sociological, legal and scientific traditions'<sup>68</sup> with Nigel South's view arguably as pertinent today as it was 25 years ago. Writing in 2016, another leading figure in the field observed that 'Green crime is a fast-moving and somewhat contested area in which academics, policymakers and practitioners frequently disagree not only on how green crimes should be defined but also on the nature of criminality involved, potential solutions to problems of green crime and the content and priorities of policy'.<sup>69</sup> That said, it should be highlighted that there is an understanding that green criminology 'provides for inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary engagement' with not only

'environmental crimes' but also 'broader environmental harms'.<sup>70</sup>

As part of an evolutionary process whereby the discipline of criminology has moved to reframe the parameters of enquiry outside traditional conceptions of crime, and to some can thus be seen as part of a shift towards 'supranational criminology'<sup>71</sup> and even 'criminology beyond crime',<sup>72</sup> the consideration of a range of harms within green criminology is indeed paramount. It might also be viewed as an aspect of the emergence within the discipline of the notion of 'social harm'<sup>73</sup> as an important guiding concept. As has been noted, this itself is 'not without analytical problems in its definition, but 'unlike "crime" the concept of harm can be constituted primarily by its operationalisation, rather than a strictly defined legal system'. Moreover, "'harm" can primarily be defined as such by those who have experienced or witnessed it' and 'therefore may be more responsive to considering the ranges of causes of human suffering than the concept of "crime"'.<sup>74</sup>

With this in mind, and conscious of green criminology's gaze beyond anthropocentric concerns, at its 'most abstract level' it can be seen to include the study and acknowledgement of 'those harms against' not just 'humanity' but also 'against the environment [...] and against non-human animals committed by both powerful organisations (e.g., governments, transnational corporations, military apparatuses) but also ordinary people'.<sup>75</sup> Criminal organisations, including those involved in various ways within the illegal drug markets can of course be added to the list of 'powerful' actors. It must not, however, be forgotten that the actions of government also remain a main area of concern. Moreover, influenced in many ways by political economic green criminology (PEG-C) – the original approach employed to define its boundaries – green criminology is fundamentally concerned with the operation of, and harm associated with, overarching economic and political systems. Although the principal focus is capitalism,<sup>76</sup> this is not at the expense of other organising ideological frameworks, a critical point for our discussion.

At the risk of oversimplification, it is plausible therefore to suggest that one of Rob Whites' core arguments in his 2008 *Crimes Against Nature: Environmental Criminology and Ecological Justice* still stands. Then he put forward the view that 'most environmental criminology can be distinguished on the basis of *who or what precisely is being victimized*' (original emphasis). With this proposition as a starting point, White argues that there are 'three broad theoretical tendencies that generally frame how specific writers view the nature of environmental issues, including harm and responses

to harm': environmental justice, ecological justice and species justice.<sup>77</sup>

Admittedly the subject of some contestation within the field, these interconnected 'tendencies' could all be usefully deployed in further UNODC analysis of the drugs-environment nexus. For example, ecological justice, with its focus on the relationship or interaction between humans and the natural environment, insists that any contact be assessed within the context of damage to other living things. From this perspective, 'Ecological notions of rights and justice see humans as but one component of complex ecosystems that should be preserved for their own sake, as supported by the notion of the rights of the environment.'<sup>78</sup> This links with other approaches, including International Relations green theory and some approaches within

international law, that accentuate the identity of the environment, or components thereof, in its own right (see Box 1). At a practical level it also highlights the importance of issues relating to monitoring and the use of appropriate indicators. For example, in relation to assessing biodiversity loss associated with a range of not only illegal market activities but also drug control interventions. The non-human or biocentric focus of species justice and its assertion that there is no hierarchy of existence with human beings at the pinnacle encourages similar considerations and questions concerning the monitoring and evaluation of drug policies. Attention here, however, will focus on the potential of the environmental justice approach, particularly its intersection with human rights, to enhance future analysis.

## Box 2. Unravelling the crime-development nexus



Writing in their 2022 monograph, Jarrett Blaustein, Tom Chodor and Nathan W. Pino ask a deceptively simple question: is crime a development issue? Combining historical analysis with both interviews with high-level international crime policy officials (past and present) and a sophisticated theoretical framework, the book forensically '...interrogates the claim that crime is an obstacle to development by considering how and why this issue-linkage has been constructed to advance and secure variations of a global capitalist agenda'. In so doing it illuminates the 'political economy of global crime governance' and argues persuasively that radical

reforms are necessary for 'aligning the work of the international crime policy community with the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals'.

As the research demonstrates, the UNODC is a late comer within a framing process that has been evolving since the League of Nations. Yet, from an institutional perspective, the Office's advocacy for linking the issues of crime and development has been 'driven by material and bureaucratic considerations'. From this perspective, and mindful of the important role it plays within the maintenance and operationalisation of States' activities within the nexus, the authors argue that 'Reforming UNODC, transforming the global governance of crime, and reframing the focus of its work is therefore essential for constructing a more inclusive and authentic transnational legal order that *might* prove consequential when it comes to creating conditions that support a more equitable and sustainable future' (original emphasis).

Moreover, they continue, 'In the absence of significant institutional reforms, UNODC's contributions to the SDG agenda may at best prove inconsequential and out of synch with the wider UN system, and will thus continue to undermine the long-standing aim of promoting system wide coherence. At worst, it may simply serve to reproduce a transnational legal order that is fundamentally designed to preserve an unsustainable and inequitable model of global capitalism which would represent an obstacle to the realization of the most ambitious and progressive aspirations of the 2030 Agenda.'<sup>79</sup>

## Green Criminology, environmental justice, and human rights

Environmental justice is a discourse focusing on the 'distribution of environments among peoples in terms of access to and use of specific natural resources in defined geographical areas, and the impacts of particular social practices and environmental hazards on specific populations.'<sup>80</sup> With analysis of human health and wellbeing at its core, central to the approach is an understanding that various types of crime related environmental degradation do not affect individuals and communities equally. Put simply, 'some people are more likely to be disadvantaged by environmental problems than others.'<sup>81</sup> In this regard, much green criminology focuses on patterns of 'differential victimization' relating to the 'siting of toxic waste dumps, extreme air pollution, chemical accidents, access to clean drinking water and so on.'<sup>82</sup>

The perspective, however, is equally applicable to communities in the Amazon Basin impacted deleteriously by various aspects, both direct and indirect, of the illegal drug market on the environment. It should be recalled that certain groups also incur disproportionate costs associated with poorly conceived, designed and/or implemented government policies as the example of PNIS mentioned above illustrates. As with the more typical application of the environmental justice approach, within the Amazon Basin it is often Indigenous Peoples that are the victims of a range of harms, including those relating to 'convergent crime'. A point that, as discussed above, chapter 4 rightly acknowledges.

This reality connects in a direct fashion with a bifurcation of perspectives concerning human interests within the environmental justice approach. While a focus on humans remains at the core of both, the anthropocentric dominated conception privileges what White refers to as the 'conventional instrumentalist view of the world and human's domination over nature including nonhuman animals'. An more ecocentric approach, however, can be seen to be based on '*enlightened human self interest*, one that is informed by notions of interrelationship between humans, biosphere and nonhuman animals' (original emphasis).<sup>83</sup>

Although it is 'widely accepted that the environment and human rights are interdependent to the extent that environmental harms can, and often do, undermine progress towards the full realization of human rights',<sup>84</sup> such a perspective is particularly poignant vis-à-vis the rights of Indigenous Peoples and their often symbiotic relationship with their local natural

environments.<sup>85</sup> As the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs points out, their 'relationships to ancestral lands are the source of cultural, spiritual and social identity, and form the basis of their traditional knowledge systems'.<sup>86</sup> This was a point recognised within the UN system as long ago as 1992 at the Conference on Environment and Development. Mindful of the focus of the event, the Earth Summit, as it is sometimes called, recognised that Indigenous Peoples and their communities have a critical role to play in managing and protecting the environment. Nonetheless, it also highlighted the importance of their 'traditional knowledge and practices'.<sup>87</sup> This is a key issue within the Convention on Biological Diversity; a hard law instrument that came out of the Earth Summit and that is central for emerging analysis of the drugs-environment nexus, particularly regarding States' obligations to protect biodiversity. With this in mind, and despite the tendency of green criminology and traditional criminology even more so to neglect the 'green victimization' of Native and Indigenous Peoples, the environmental justice approach clearly creates strong conceptual and practical links between human rights and the environment, including what can be defined as the subset of Indigenous rights.

Recent research drawing on Marxist ecological theory goes further and explores the ways in which the 'structural organisation of capitalism cofacilitates the intersection of ecocide with genocide and illustrates how ecological destruction contributes to genocide'.<sup>88</sup> Relatedly, the approach taken by another strand of green criminology, Southern Green Criminology, contends that the North-South divide is 'fundamental in the production of environmental harm'.<sup>89</sup> And such a perspective can certainly be applied to analysis of the global cocaine market and the growing recognition of the unequal distribution between the so-called Global North and Global South of a variety of costs, including those concerning not only market-related violence but also environmental degradation and associated human rights violations.<sup>90</sup> Writing in 2015, McSweeney explains how 'Countries from the global South have been paying a huge ecological and human price for drug policies driven primarily by affluent nations of the global North'. 'This disproportionate burden carried by poor countries', she continues, 'includes lost economic opportunities, pollution and health problems caused by defoliants, the enriching of militaries and elites, cities ravaged by violence-not to mention steep environmental costs'.<sup>91</sup>

Within this context, and in parallel with gradual and overdue moves in the scholarship on drug history and policy to shift away from the privileging of Western narratives,<sup>92</sup> there is much to be said for the view that,

harnessing the ‘epistemological power of the marginalised, impoverished and oppressed’, Southern green criminology’ must seek to critically uncover the harmful practices that make the South victim to ecological discrimination.<sup>93</sup> As Avi Brisman and Nigel South point out, while at the ‘macro/global level, green criminology has always recognised global inequalities, the north-south divide and the weight of exploitation bearing down on indigenous and colonial peoples’, recent years have seen a powerful connection to the ‘important new area of southern criminology’ and investigation of, among other things, ‘injustice against Indigenous peoples.’<sup>94</sup> To be sure, while its scope extends beyond the purely anthropocentric nature of traditional human rights approaches, green criminology is ‘fundamentally [...] concerned with “rights” (whether considered in terms of law, philosophy or fairness).’<sup>95</sup>

With all this in mind, the UNODC should be commended for devoting some, albeit limited, attention to communities and Indigenous peoples when discussing illegal markets and criminal actors. What is missing from the analysis, however, is a more explicit connection to Indigenous rights and the obligations of States to consider the protection of human rights more broadly in the development and deployment of policy interventions. As mentioned earlier, the issue is included, in general terms, in the Special Points of Interest booklet.<sup>96</sup> It is also particularly welcome to see it highlighted in the associated ‘Possible Responses’ section. Here it is noted that ‘Tailored, community-level interventions for local and Indigenous communities should protect their rights to health and safety and to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP], while addressing their needs and providing sustainable alternatives to the illicit economy.’

The Declaration, and the need to meaningfully involve affected communities as laid out in articles 18, 19 and 32 as well as other – internationally binding – commitments, is clearly central to any consideration of the issue.<sup>97</sup> It is, however, but one international legal instrument, and associated set of obligations, in need of attention. As noted in a 1997 case before the International Court of Justice, ‘damage to the environment can impair and undermine all the human rights spoken of in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and in other human rights instruments’ including both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, while there is no need to reproduce it here, the comprehensive list of obligations and associated

commentary accompanying guidance produced by the International Guidelines on Human Rights demonstrates the breadth of issues States must take into consideration, including crucially monitoring the implementation of drug control activities.<sup>99</sup>

It is telling, therefore, that within the text of chapter 4 itself there is only a single mention of human rights. And then, included within the ‘Conceptualizing the Crime Ecosystem’ graphic (see Figure 1), it is framed as an ‘additional’ rather than core harm. As this suggests, from the perspective of green criminology and its focus on harm as much as crime,<sup>100</sup> there is certainly scope for work. A more fundamental challenge for the UNODC and its use of green criminology, however, lies within the perspective’s implicitly critical foundations.

## Structural critiques: The inherent dilemma for green criminology and the drug-environment nexus

Despite the numerous approaches and internal debates within green criminology, a common theme binding many of them together relates to a perception of capitalism as an overarching structure of harm. As Michael Lynch has argued, ‘Given the connection between capitalism, corporate expansion, and ecological destruction/disorganization’, green criminology ‘recognizes that laws and environmental policies can, at best, *limit some, but cannot solve the ecological damage caused by overproduction, overconsumption, and economic growth associated with the inherent expansionary tendencies of capitalism*’ (original emphasis).<sup>101</sup>

While perhaps not immediately obvious, it is possible to draw a direct green line between such a perspective and a critique of global drug prohibition as sustained by the treaty-based UN drug control system. Recent years have seen a growing number of excellent analyses, some of them cited by the UNODC itself, exploring the impact of drug policy on the environment. Once again, there is no need to reprise their arguments here. Suffice to say, what has been usefully defined as the ‘drug policy-environment nexus’ shows ‘just how profoundly counter-narcotics policies can work in opposition to policies intended to protect the environment and sustain development.’<sup>102</sup>

Green criminology, however, allows the discussions to be taken a step further. For example, drawing on, among other works, David Courtwright’s seminal *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*, Tammy Ayres argues that ‘drug prohibition has always prioritised, or at least been tied to, the exigencies of capitalism and the interests of the state.’<sup>103</sup> She conse-

quently contends ‘Drug prohibition and policies and programmes aimed at supply (rather than demand) are contradictory, discriminatory, harmful and prioritise the expansion of capitalism and the interests of those in power.’<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Ayres articulates the view that:

‘In fact, because of the War on Drugs’ adverse impact on the environment (e.g., biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution of air soil and water), one could argue that it is an ecologically destructive intervention that amounts to state-induced ecocide—a prohibition scheme that causes untold harm and irreversible damage beyond ecosystem level, disproportionately effecting developing (transit and producer) countries, many of which are located in the Global South.’<sup>105</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with this ‘critical’ perspective, as with most other areas of attention within the *Report*, it is difficult to disconnect analysis of drugs and the environment from the prohibitive emphasis of the overarching multilateral framework within which drug policy takes place. Indeed, while it is possible to argue that similar markets operating within the capitalist framework, coffee production for example, are not always environmentally harm free, their legal status allows for regulation that can minimise negative effects. Moreover, even in the absence of such an overtly anti-capitalist critique, as a social science (sub)discipline, green criminology must go beyond the gaze of physical scientists to explore *why* a range of harms occur.<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, despite productive discussion of the increasingly complex interconnections between various forms of crime in the Amazon Basin – including the useful introduction of the idea of convergent crime and the associated conceptions of a ‘crime ecosystem’ – chapter 4 and related parts of the *Report* more broadly assiduously avoid engagement with pertinent discussions of structurally determined market dynamics.

As presented by the UNODC, increasing research into the issue certainly reveals the enormous indirect effect of the illegal market on the environment and related infringements of human rights. Various aspects of ‘narco-penetration’ and ‘narco-deforestation’ as well as other forms of illegal activity, including mining, have a larger deleterious impact than activities directly relating to the illegal cultivation and trafficking of crops, coca principal among them.

Emphasising this complex reality legitimately integrates the drug issue into a broader portfolio of criminal activities and enhances our understanding of how criminal groups behave and how this generates

environmental impacts. Yet what is missing from the analysis is any acknowledgement that it is precisely the huge profits made from the illegal drugs market in the first place that underpin those activities generating such extreme levels of indirect ecological harm. Ironically, by shining a light on an epiphenomenal dimension of the illegal drug market in the region, the *Report* emphasises – albeit implicitly – the inherent structural problems relating to prohibition as an ideology rather than simply focus on specific aspects of the market and policy interventions designed to deal with them. Thus, what might then appear as an attempt to side-step broader systemic dilemmas in many ways backfires.

Omission of any discussion of broader systemic challenges is unfortunate considering not only the critical importance of this larger picture for meaningful and sustained environmental protection, and associated protection of human rights, but also since recent years have seen government authorities themselves initiate discussions concerning the need for alternative policy approaches and the importance of such shifts for the Amazon rainforest. Prominent in this process was Colombian President Gustavo Petro’s September 2022 speech, his first, to the UN General Assembly. Then, as UN News reported, Petro said that ‘the world’s addiction to money, oil and carbon is destroying the rainforest and its people under the excuse of a “hypocritical” war against drugs.’<sup>107</sup>

## Concluding comments

Continued attention within the *World Drug Report 2023* on the topic of drugs and the environment must be seen as a positive move. Not only does the UNODC’s significant consideration of the issue via a green criminology perspective raise its profile within policy debates in Vienna, and hopefully beyond, the introduction of the concept of convergent crime and ‘criminal ecosystems’ also enhances understanding of the complexity of criminal markets and associated activities within the Amazon Basin; a framework that has the potential to be deployed in other ecologically sensitive regions.

From this perspective the Office is right to highlight that, in protecting fragile ecosystems, Member States need to employ ‘integrated efforts’ that permit law enforcement agencies to keep pace with agile criminal models.<sup>108</sup> This is very much in line with the perspective of green criminology whereby attention is given to ‘innovative ways to combat the multi-dimensional nature of environmental crimes.’<sup>109</sup> Moreover, in articulating the complex nature of the drugs-environment nexus,

chapter 4 of the Report does well to highlight the deleterious impact of criminal activities on communities, Indigenous Peoples and the environment itself.

Missed opportunities and fundamental challenges remain, however. And it can be argued that these are a product of an ongoing tendency by the Office to privilege the phenomena of 'crime' over associated harms and human rights. This is a trend that is difficult to disconnect from the eagerness of Member States to invest in 'anti-crime' policies – notably 'countering transnational organised crime' – and the associated imbalance towards the crime as opposed to drugs programme within the UNODC's consolidated budget.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, the relationship between special purpose funding and UNODC research can be seen as a reinforcing circle whereby States support work that privileges the crime narrative, which itself in turn then highlights the need for more anti-crime oriented investment. And so on.

Consequently, for instance, despite the presentation of the new conceptual framework as a 'roadmap for diagnosing risks and formulating prevention strategies', the Report contains limited attention – even if presented as preliminary discussions – to the harmful impact of policy interventions and the 'drug policy-environment nexus'. Analysis of forced eradication is welcome. But further emphasis would have been constructive, including in relation to the design and implementation of 'alternative development' programmes, as well as regarding its impacts on human rights and the environment.

Similarly, special mention of the importance of the UNDRIP should be commended. Yet, given the centrality of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples' rights and environmental protection, further analysis of this and other human rights obligations of States represents a missed opportunity that characterises the UNODC's ongoing operation as an outlier within the UN system vis-à-vis the issue of human rights. The crucial nature of this relationship is powerfully outlined by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: 'There is an urgent need to advance these rights to improve Indigenous peoples' well-being but also to address some of the most pressing global challenges, including climate change and environmental degradation.'<sup>111</sup> Moreover, and considering the 2018 UN Declaration on the topic, for Andean countries like Colombia it is vital that the rights of farmers and 'other people working in rural areas' are also considered.<sup>112</sup>

For some, a growing interest in the role of indigenous wisdom and the connection between psychedelics and the environment holds promise for the future.<sup>113</sup>

Relatedly, recent efforts of the Bolivian government to initiate a WHO critical review of the scheduling of coca leaf within the 1961 Single Convention certainly links a number of relevant strands relating to indigenous Peoples' rights, environmental protection and the increasingly germane topic of decolonisation of drug policy more broadly;<sup>114</sup> the latter providing another potentially productive lens through which to analyse the drugs-environment nexus. Further, and while deviating from the environmental justice approach within green criminology espoused here as a promising path forward, more attention could have been given to States' obligations relative to other relevant international legal instruments. For instance, while biodiversity is mentioned in passing within chapter 4,<sup>115</sup> its criticality to discussions of the intersection between drugs and the environment, both in terms of direct and indirect impact, means it deserves more space. This is particularly so in terms of biodiversity risk assessments.

These, and other examples of gaps in the analysis are important but can be easily addressed within any further research, related publications and statements – including crucially during what remains of the Midterm Review process.<sup>116</sup> A more problematic challenge, however, lies in how the UNODC handles, or once again side-steps, the harms generated by the overarching framework of global drug prohibition. For all the potential benefits to result from the adoption of a green criminology perspective, and there are many regarding its role in not only opening discussion of human rights – particularly Indigenous rights – but also in highlighting a series of broadly defined harms, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the overarching influence of the UN drug control architecture. Year on year, like other parts of the Vienna-based drug control apparatus, the UNODC consequently finds itself in a progressively more awkward position. Emphasising the role of convergent crime and the enormous indirect impact of illegal drug markets on environmental well-being, and within that the serious implications for both biodiversity loss and climate change, admittedly captures other parts of a complex equation. Yet, even with a full application of a green criminology approach demanding it, the UNODC is not yet able question the system that sustains it and apply the truly holistic and integrated analysis that is required.

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## Endnotes

1. See: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023), *World Drug Report 2023*, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html>
2. See, for example, the Global Drug Policy Index: <https://globaldrugpolicyindex.net/>. In terms of crime, also see the Global Organised Crime Index: <https://ocindex.net/>
3. For details, see: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023), 'Methodological Annex', *World Drug Report 2023*, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html>
4. These are 'The synthetic drug phenomenon', 'Recent developments involving psychedelics', 'Herbal cannabis for medical use: A spectrum of regulatory approaches', 'The nexus between drugs and crimes that affect the environment and convergent crime in the Amazon Basin', 'Substance use disorders in humanitarian settings', 'Service innovations during Covid-19', 'Use of the dark web and social media for drug supply' and 'Developments and emerging trends in selected drug markets'. See: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023), 'Booklet 2: Contemporary issues on drugs', *World Drug Report 2023*, [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr-2023\\_booklet-2.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr-2023_booklet-2.html)
5. See: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023), 'Booklet 3: Special Points of Interest', *World Drug Report 2023*, p. 3, [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr-2023\\_Special\\_Points.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr-2023_Special_Points.html). Hereafter 'Booklet 3'
6. Cognisant of lag times for the collection and analysis of data, it remains worrying to see that the latest available information on drug use-related deaths dates to 2019
7. It should be noted that there is also an admission that actions of the Taliban authorities may reverse the trend in 2023 and this is proving to be the case
8. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023), 'Chapter 2: Recent developments involving psychedelics', in 'Booklet 2: Contemporary issues on drugs', *World Drug Report 2023*, p. 34, [https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23\\_B3\\_CH2 psychedelics.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/WDR23_B3_CH2 psychedelics.pdf). Hereafter 'Booklet 2'
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29. Indeed, despite such an honest admission, the UNODC should be applauded for its methodology. As chapter 4 points out, research findings are 'based on official data, site visits to selected countries, open sources and qualitative information collected through 25 interviews with experts from law enforcement authorities, the judiciary, environmental protection agencies, intergovernmental entities and civil society'. See: Chapter 4, p. 63. Even after a review of the 'Notes and references' and cognisant of research ethics protocols, however, it is unclear which civil society representatives were interviewed and whether this included members of affected communities

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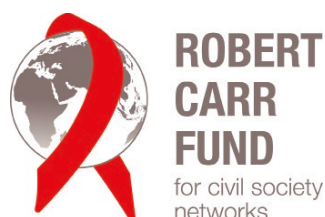
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**The International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC)** is a global network of NGOs that come together to promote drug policies that advance social justice and human rights. IDPC's mission is to amplify and strengthen a diverse global movement to repair the harms caused by punitive drug policies, and to promote just responses.

Building on our response to last year's World Drug Report, this analysis of the 2023 World Drug Report examines the promise and peril of the UNODC's emerging use of 'green criminology' as a lens through which to view the drugs-environment nexus.