

Is the War on Drugs a “Humanitarian Crisis”?

Considerations for UNGASS 2016

The War on Drugs in Latin America has encouraged a highly militarized yet unsuccessful approach to drug control, leading to violence, displacement and human suffering throughout the region. In response, humanitarian organizations have begun to frame the War on Drugs in the language of “humanitarian crises”. Moreover, they are increasingly labeling violence in Latin American cities as “complex urban emergencies” to facilitate new spaces of humanitarian entry. To contribute to critical conversations in the Latin American drug policy community in the run-up to the April 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session, we consider four policy implications of the strategic use of the humanitarian crisis label in the context of the War on Drugs: the abdication of state responsibility; the ‘invisibilization’ of policy alternatives; the impediment of discussions on regional drug policy; and the sidelining of civil society in favor of international humanitarian actors.

Brief Points

- The War on Drugs in Latin America is increasingly being framed in humanitarian language.
- This facilitates humanitarian entry into new spaces – particularly urban areas – where agencies may be unfamiliar in operating.
- This framing reduces political space for transformative discussions about regional drug policy, and minimizes both the agency and responsibility of the state and civil society.
- The framing of the War on Drugs as a state of emergency requiring international aid comes at a cost. Humanitarian organizations must incorporate awareness of these costs into their programming.
- Discussions at UNGASS 2016 should address human suffering as a structural health and welfare issue.

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United Nations General Assembly hall. Photo: Patrick Gruban / Wikimedia

Ending four decades of War on Drugs?

In 1971, US President Richard Nixon declared a War on Drugs in order to eradicate the supply and demand for illegal narcotics. The toll of this war – both human and financial – has been enormous, costing billions of dollars and taking thousands of lives annually. The War on Drugs has had colossal impacts on the health, safety and wellbeing of rural communities; and has imposed *de facto* states of siege in heavily militarized urban areas where government forces engage narco-trafficking groups.

Contrary to past decades, there is growing recognition that the War on Drugs cannot be won. Encouragingly, in this search for a plausible post-prohibition framework, the War on Drugs is beginning to be reframed through a set of different narratives focusing on decriminalization, legalization and public health. Reflecting this, the Organization of American States (OAS) launched a groundbreaking report in May 2013 calling for the legalization of the drug trade, and considerable expectations surround the April 2016 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on Drugs dedicated to develop more effective responses to drug trafficking based on public health, respect for human rights, and harm reduction.

The War on Drugs as “Humanitarian Crisis”

Humanitarian organizations have also begun to engage with this situation, framing the War on Drugs in the language of “humanitarian crises”. In labeling narco-related violence in cities as “complex urban emergencies”, these organizations facilitate new spaces of humanitarian entry, as part of the “reimagining” of the humanitarian project and the “remaking” of humanitarian institutional relevance in Latin America. While this frame presents opportunities, it also comes with particular costs.

The narrative of “War on Drugs as humanitarian crisis” encompasses heterogeneous arguments concerning suffering, human rights violations, and experienced violence. But it is often framed around three main terms: *location*, where the crisis occurs; *agent*, whom violence is committed by or to; and *impact*, including rural or urban-based forms of displacement, violence, disappearances or other forms of control. These terms are combined in various ways to produce situated understandings of “crises”.

Discursively, the phrase “humanitarian crisis” has until recently most often appeared in relation to the War on Drugs in Colombia, referring to both the violent actions by drug producers and traffickers, and the human cost of the government’s prohibition agenda. In Mexico, widespread cartel related violence – and the State’s

war against them since 2006 – is deemed to have contributed to a humanitarian emergency with disappearances at a magnitude resembling a humanitarian crisis. Regional transshipment countries are increasingly experiencing their own crises of forced migration and displacement, particularly in Central America. In 2014, the sizeable presence of unaccompanied children from Central America at the US border was described as a humanitarian crisis resulting from the War on Drugs.

Importantly, however, this reconceptualization of the War on Drugs as humanitarian crisis often refers to very different and geographically distinct forms of human suffering. On one hand, while invocations of humanitarian crises frequently refer to primarily rural forms of violence and displacement in drug producing and transshipment areas, these have largely been decreasing in recent years. Conversely, humanitarian organizations are at the same time increasingly linking a War on Drugs narrative to justify engaging in contexts of urban violence under the moniker of “non-conventional violence”. Importantly, in both contexts, the humanitarian frame is deployed with a double meaning; implicitly referring to both the suffering resulting from drug trafficking, and that stemming from the prohibition regime itself.

Therefore, the terms “humanitarian crisis” and “humanitarianism” are both ambiguous and contested concepts, being frames that can be



US Navy combatting a fire set by suspected drug traffickers to secure evidence in the War on Drugs. Photo: Navy News Stand

appropriated or transformed. Considering the War on Drugs through a humanitarian frame is therefore not a neutral description of a factual situation. Rather, it is a political position with an attendant set of consequences.

Consequences of this framing

There are distinct advantages in engaging a humanitarian frame when considering the human costs of the prohibitionist approach to the War on Drugs. Numerous national and international organizations specialize in humanitarian relief, and have experience in negotiating with local armed actors for the safe passage of civilians. Additionally, the multi-faceted nature of terms mandating humanitarian engagement could help alleviate concerns of national governments that urban humanitarian operations do not necessarily signify the presence of an armed conflict or challenge to the authority of a sovereign state. However, despite the attractiveness of framing the War on Drugs as a humanitarian crisis, and organizations addressing humanitarian need including in situations of chronic urban violence, the approach also presents significant costs and challenges.

Abdication of state responsibility

The assumed impartiality and neutrality of the humanitarian frame may allow governments to avoid political responsibility for policy choices that may exacerbate the consequences of the War on Drugs. Governments are often complicit

in the “routinization of states of emergency”, which normalizes the deaths of particular civilians. Moreover, the humanitarian frame may obscure the role that governments have and can play in this process, and minimize the range of policy choices available to some narrow combination of military and humanitarian approaches, despite other responses potentially being more relevant or effective.

‘Invisibilization’ of policy alternatives

Despite the importance of multi-sectorial integrated violence reduction policies, humanitarian framings may ‘invisibilize’ these policy approaches. These include those that encourage social capital formation or creation of economic opportunity, particularly for at-risk youth who are enrolled in or targeted by criminal narco-trafficking organizations. Such policies can include job training and income generation; youth clubs and social programs incorporating sports and the arts; and the adaptation of public urban spaces such as parks and libraries for the needs of adolescents. However, a discourse framing these situations as complex urban “emergencies” often means that social and economic policy choices are deemed as secondary to those required by the humanitarian response frame.

From transformative discussions to humanitarian aid

The humanitarian frame also depoliticizes international responsibility for the problems of narcotics related violence in Latin America.

Chief issues here include both the demand for drugs in and the supply of light arms from Western states, which prolongs urban and rural-based conflicts. There is insufficient discussion in the international community regarding the humanitarian implications of the legal and illegal supply of arms to states and non-state actors; or responsibility borne by the United States in supporting counterinsurgency operations whose strategies are then replicated in drug wars against unarmed civilians.

Broadly speaking, the debate centers around the pressing demand from Latin American governments for a reprieve of United States support for prohibition, and for a consideration of post-legalization scenarios. Yet introducing a humanitarian frame may be counter-productive to these discussions; refocusing debates on how and where humanitarian organizations may engage, and shifting focus away from important questions regarding support for public health or economic growth-based post-prohibition approaches. Rather than driving post-prohibition framework discussions forward, a humanitarian framing of the War on Drugs risks contributing to the postponement of these debates.

Sidelineing local governments and civil society

The frame arguably assigns a subsidiary role to local governance structures, which are often bypassed by humanitarian actors. Agency mandates justify the imperative of humanitarian

entry, largely allowing organizations to skirt the need to deeply engage with domestic politics. Moreover, framing these contexts as complex emergencies and humanitarian crises implies a breakdown in authority, which rarely matches on-ground realities where urban and rural areas are variously controlled by state and non-state actors.

Humanitarian action further risks undermining social movements, who in order to advance local activism may broker truces, or develop informal community 'rules' with violence entrepreneurs. Problematically, humanitarian actors can unwittingly upend these local processes and balances of power, and often occupy political space at the expense of local forms of social mobilization and resistance. The 'apolitical neutrality' of humanitarian engagement, therefore, risks deeply misreading local logics of power, and may contribute to, or exacerbate, weak or unaccountable local governments and fractured civil societies.

Recommendations

We remain unconvinced whether humanitarianism is the adequate frame to understand the human costs of the War on Drugs in Latin America due to the broader policy outcomes that may emerge from this frame. We observe that:

1. **Humanitarian actors may contribute to the abdication of state responsibility:** It is our contention that this framing shifts the focus from the role that states – both in Latin America and the US – must play in addressing the structural conditions and policy failures that have contributed to how the War on Drugs has undermined human security.
2. **A 'state of emergency approach' but-tresses prohibition:** We are concerned that

a humanitarian frame makes invisible the range of political actions available to address this situation, and understates attendant costs of current militarized courses of action. Making these costs visible would open current policy choices to greater scrutiny, and likely assist in steering the debate surrounding illicit drugs towards adopting emerging alternative paradigms, particularly those favouring regulation, distribution, and harm control.

3. **A humanitarian framing can postpone discussions** about a post-prohibition framework and skew the popular and political attention towards the implementation and consolidation of humanitarian services and bureaucracies
4. **Undemocratic humanitarianism can sideline local government and civil society:** The institutionalization of the War on Drugs as humanitarian concern can disrupt local power structures, sideline grassroots actions to achieve social justice, undermine transformative political movements, and deflect attention from the policy choices and responsibilities of both national governments and the international community.

We suggest that policy makers in the Americas and beyond consider the implications of this framing, particularly in the lead-up to UNGASS 2016 and subsequent discussions. We recommend that:

- Governments in the Americas recognize that militarized approaches to drug prohibition and interdiction are failing.
- Discussions at UNGASS 2016 address human suffering as a structural health and welfare issue.

- Parties continue serious discussions about developing a post-prohibition framework, addressing issues of geographic scope, timelines for implementation, and legal frameworks.
- The War on Drugs is reiterated as a collective challenge demanding international responsibility, and must address issues of arms transfers and supply, and demand for narcotics outside of Latin America.

We consider the War on Drugs in Latin America as being increasingly understood through a humanitarian frame to facilitate entry of humanitarian agencies into urban areas. In light of this, we recommend that:

- Humanitarian organizations acknowledge and address the costs brought about by framing of the War on Drugs as a humanitarian concern.
- Humanitarian actors carefully consider their capacity to responsibly engage in contexts of urban violence, and if it is appropriate to do so with reference to the classic humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.
- When engaging, humanitarian actors pay concerted attention to be sensitive and responsive to local political economies, devise longer-term programming approaches, and support existing civil society efforts to address violence.

Further Reading

Sandvik, Kristin Bergtora & Kristian Hoelscher (forthcoming) *The Reframing of the War on Drugs as a "Humanitarian Crisis": Costs, Benefits and Attendant Consequences*, *Latin American Perspectives*.

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THE PROJECT

This policy brief emerges from work at the Norwegian Center for Humanitarian Studies, and on the Norwegian Research Council funded projects 'Brazil's Rise to the Global Stage' (BraGS) and 'Aid in Crisis? Rights-Based Approaches and Humanitarian Outcomes'.

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