

1 Introduction

This report provides an assessment of how the global drugs market developed between 1998 and 2007. However, despite the fact that drug problems and drug policy have attracted considerable policy and political attention, this has not been matched by large-scale data collection and analysis. There remains a dearth of data or indicators for comparing how one country's drug problem compares to another, for describing how a country's drug problem has changed over time and for assessing how drug policy has contributed to observed changes in national drug problems over time. The main purpose of this report is to examine the most significant limitations and challenges to cross-country comparability of data on both drug problems and drug policy. We do not strive for a complete overview, nor do we aim at a thorough analysis and evaluation of these limitations.

Empirical challenges

The objective of this study was 'to produce a detailed analysis of the operation of the world market in illicit drugs and of policy measures to curtail it'. To make it workable we restricted our study to a sample of countries and to a selection of specific indicators and subjects for data collection. The choice of indicators and subjects was partly determined by the availability of data in our sample of countries (see report 4). Of course, the "availability-based" selection of indicators is not scientifically satisfying (see paragraph below on drug trafficking with drug seizures as an indicator).

In the course of our study we found that data for many potentially useful indicators were either limited or non-existent. This problem was exacerbated by the limited accessibility of data due to either the agency or the researcher disallowing analysis of their findings. As a result, existing national reports and international comparisons provide only a rough picture of drug problems and policies.

Conceptual challenges

Conceptual challenges include inconsistencies in definition and operationalisation of concepts. A well-known example of the former is the lack of consensus in defining problem drug use; another inconsistency is in the definition of 'drug' itself. In English-speaking countries, this concept covers both illicit drugs and medical prescription drugs; in several other countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and France), the term drug ("Droge" or "drogues") is used exclusively for illicit drugs. Therefore, this irregularity has consequences when comparing data

(on drug-related deaths, for instance).

A mix of empirical and conceptual challenges

The conceptual and empirical challenges may be related. Differences in definition and measurement of the concept of 'drug offences' illustrate both types of issues. Drugs offences may include drug consumption, possession, production, trafficking, dealing or drug-related money laundering. However, definitions of drug law-related crimes differ between countries: some countries do not record money laundering related to the drugs trade as a drug offence; in several countries drug consumption is no longer considered as an offence. To a large degree, data on drugs offences mirror both the focus of and investment in legal enforcement activities (cf. Canada and Mexico).