

ICOS THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Ms Norine MacDonald QC, President and Lead Field Researcher of the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS)

The Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control's hearing on US Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan, 21 October 2009

Our organization, the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) is a project of the Network of European Foundations, which brings together twelve Europe-based foundations, as well as the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation in the United States.

Over the past years, ICOS has been working in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. I lead our field research teams. We have a particular focus on Southern Afghanistan where we have a permanent field office in Lashkar Gah City in Helmand province. We do research on the security and development situation, Taliban presence and recruitment, and the political and election process, with special focus on counter narcotics. I have just left Afghanistan now to come to this hearing. I have seen the return of the Taliban first hand.

Although over the past years there have been some small, temporal victories in our struggle against the illegal opium economy in Afghanistan, we are still losing ground in our overall fight against what has become a main obstacle on Afghanistan's road to stability and development. We have learned since 2003 when counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan really started that aggressive crop eradication without a solid short-term alternative development strategy has had only two structural effects: more poverty and more support for the Taliban. In this sense, our counter-narcotics efforts have so far unfortunately worked at cross purposes considering our overarching strategy to win the hearts and minds of the people in Afghanistan. We welcomed the statement of the new administration to halt forced poppy crop eradication which was clearly a failing policy.

We have learned that with the current policy tools at hand, we cannot provide all the Afghan people dependent on illegal opium with a profitable alternative source of income on the short to medium term. According to the UN, the past two years have shown reductions in both poppy cultivation and opium production, but even if these calculations are accurate, it still leaves a staggering 1.4 million people involved in illegal poppy cultivation. Many more are indirectly dependent on this crop. Despite good intentions and investment in alternative development programs, there is still no structural solution for these millions of Afghans.

Interdiction is an important part of the response, and in our view the involvement of members of provincial and federal government in opium trafficking is a challenge that must now be taken up by the international community, having been neglected in favor of political expediency in the past.

As you may know, we at ICOS have launched our *Poppy for Medicine* proposal in 2005, which is a joint counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency initiative. As such, it intends to bridge the gap between today's political and economic realities in Afghanistan and the longer-term impact of current alternative livelihood programs.

The key feature of the *Poppy for Medicine* model is that opium would be transformed into morphine tablets in the Afghan villages, adding to the employment base in the rural areas. This entails licensed production, run by a specially designed village *shura control process* in collaboration with the central government and international actors. We have developed detailed protocols regarding control and for establishing a competitive farm gate price. There is a global shortage of morphine, especially in the developing world, and ironically in Afghanistan itself.

The United States has previously used licensing of opium for medicine as a response to opium trafficking in Turkey and India in the 1970's to good effect.

Apart from the economic benefits of *Poppy for Medicine*, in many areas this project will provide us with one of the first opportunities to build a positive relationship between the Afghan people, the federal government and the international community. Bringing the poppy farmers within the legal economy will also integrate the rural areas more firmly within the structure of the Afghan state. Integrating poppy farmers and their communities into the legal economy will effectively drive a wedge between these farming communities and the Taliban insurgency. It turns the federal government and the West into the poppy farmer's business partners, severing their current business relationship with the Taliban and criminal elements. This counter-insurgency aspect of *Poppy for Medicine* is currently more important than ever as we see the urgent need to connect to the Afghan people at the local level in a positive way.

We see this as an elegant and innovative response to a seemingly intractable problem. While there are several ways to implement *Poppy for Medicine*, we should act fast. We cannot lose another year in which the Taliban insurgency can profit unhindered from the illegal opium economy. We would like to launch *Poppy for Medicine* **pilot projects** in Southern Afghanistan. As a second-best option for this coming growing season, we could provide poppy farmers with a one-harvest amnesty programme, which would entail buying up the illegal opium to start testing the morphine production phase of *Poppy for Medicine*.

I wanted to focus today on the Poppy for Medicine initiative but I would like to close by noting that we believe that today's approaches to the Afghanistan issue must be marked by creating new fulcrums in our relationships with the Afghan people. Our current research on the recruitment process of the Taliban focuses on inoculating the large number of young unemployed men from supporting the Taliban or being drawn into criminal activity through the use of marriage allowances, family allowance and related programs which we characterize as "non violent security instruments".

These types of new approaches and "out of the box thinking" are what is needed in Afghanistan - **and urgently needed** - and what cannot and should not be supported are cautious approaches and plans which are stamped "more of the same".

Norine MacDonald QC contact information:

Mobile number in Afghanistan: (+93) 799 129 205

E-mail: nmac@icosgroup.net

Website : www.icosgroup.net