

Opinion & Analysis

Time for
'war on
drugs' to
target users

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NOT LONG ago, the Garda seized 32kg (77lb of heroin) worth 66.5 million, capturing one of Dublin's allegedly most notorious drug traffickers. That's 32kg that won't be injected into anyone's veins, and perhaps a drug dealer taken off the streets for several years.

Surely, a major fillip for society. Except it's not: it's a total waste of taxpayers' money. Not a single heroin user will forego his/her fix. Meanwhile, others will step forward to take the captive's place and keep the criminal drug supply chain humming.

That's the fallacy of the utterly fruitless global war on drugs, of which the only spin-off may be a slight rise in drug prices to offset the inconvenience of harassment by the boys in blue, which may marginally deter a few marginal users. The reason for the drug warriors' universal failure is simple: they are all aiming at the wrong target.

Mistakenly, it's drug-peddlers who get attacked and demonised everywhere, from capitalist America to authoritarian Russia to socialist Venezuela to communist Cuba to Islamist Iran. Thoroughly antipathetic to each other, such countries make strange bedfellows when it comes to drugs, doing little to co-operate in their fights against the common enemy.

The secondary mis-targeted target is the drug growers, those wondrously industrious and inventive developing-world farmers in such places as Afghanistan, Columbia, Laos. To feed their families, these hardy men find ever better ways of growing poppies, coca, cannabis, despite the attempts of international drug-busters to ruin their harvests while vainly tempting them to adopt less lucrative careers.

You have to marvel at how stone-age Afghan tillers of the soil, in a desperately poor, war-torn, gun-happy, terrorist-ridden, land-locked, almost infrastructureless country, nevertheless meet over 90 per cent of the world's demand for heroin and other opiates. What other country produces – and exports – 90 per cent of the world's anything?

The growers and pushers are the wrong targets because they're not the source of the world's drug problem. That dubious honour belongs to the customers, who alone create the demand and provide the money that fuels the drugs industry.

Thus the only one way to suppress it is through relentless, merciless pressure on drug users themselves. While they continue buying, no amount of napaalming crops or incarcerating traffickers is going to halt production and trade. New farmers and new traffickers will spring up to meet the demand.

Two distinct attacks are needed. Firstly, users need to be hunted down in their thousands and punished, notwithstanding the huge strain on judicial systems. Of course this will become supremely unpopular, because whereas dealers are easily vilified, drug-takers are "victims", "addicts", "prostitutes". Or pillars of society, or celebrities, or just ordinary guys and gals enjoying a night out or a private dinner party.

Yet the criminalisation of thousands, causing uproar as people see the law cart off friends and relations, will undoubtedly cut consumption and thus



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production and trafficking, a feat which no other "war on drugs" has come close to achieving.

The second approach should aim to cut people's desire for drugs in the first place. Certainly, widespread TV advertising about the dangers would help, just as ads about the horrific effects of alcohol-fuelled car accidents reduce drink driving.

But wholesale change in the drug-taking culture will not happen without targeting people so young their world-views are only forming. As already happens over things like global warming, nature conservation and bad driving, that means starting anti-drugs education at primary school, if not kindergarten. And keeping it going, relentlessly, throughout children's education, so that when they hit adulthood, drug-taking seems as ridiculous as driving without a seat belt or leaving all the lights on.

The effectiveness, whether for good or ill, of such social brainwashing of the very young and upwards is well proven. Examples abound.

Indoctrinating generations of Ireland's kids in the Catholic catechism maintained this country as almost a theocratic state until only a couple of decades ago. Instilling a huge sense of knowledge and pride in one's nation, history and – indeed – race, helped to create and fuel countless empires over the centuries, for better or for worse.

Or, witness the tribal loyalties and hatreds, inculcated from the cradle, leading to conflicts such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, Northern Ireland's 30-year war, the current violence in Kenya pitting Kikuyu against Luo. To this day, innumerable madrassas across the world teach Muslim children the alleged wickedness of Jews and the virtues of suicide-homicide. So whole generations are now growing up with such notions hard-wired into their brains, and hot for jihad.

Brainwashing kids with anti-drug ideas will certainly cut the number of adults with a yen to snort or inject. But it is unglamorous, difficult to implement, pretty boring and will take 20 years to yield results. Compared to the fun of rooting out dealers and poisoning poppy fields, it provides few kudos for politicians and law-enforcers.

Yet no battle against drugs can ever be ultimately successful until it confronts the true culprits, ie those who ingest the stuff, both today's consumers (adults) and tomorrow's (children). For both groups of citizens, the solution is the same: to conquer and bend that most powerful of mankind's attributes – the mind. This means declaring drug-war on both users and kids. Or simply legalising the wretched chemicals.

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