Illicit drug trafficking and production in Myanmar: drivers and future policy responses

By

Myo Myo

Master of Arts (M.A.)

Thesis

Submitted to Flinders University

for the degree of

Master of Arts (International Relations)

College of Business, Government and Law

13 December 2021

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACIC	Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission
AD	Alternative Development
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATS	Amphetamine-Type Stimulants
BLO	Border Liaison Offices
CCDAC	Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DED	Drug Enforcement Division
DOS	United States Department of State
DPAG	Drugs Policy Advocacy Group
DTC	Division Against Transnational Crime
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organisations
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDPC	International Drug Policy Consortium
INCSR	International Narcotic Control Strategy Report
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MKG	Matrix Knowledge Group
MMK	Myanmar Kyats
MOHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MOHS	Ministry of Health and Sports
MPF	Myanmar Police Force
MSW	Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NDLERF	National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund
OMCGs	Outlaw Motor Cycle Gangs
ONCB	Office of the Narcotics Control Board
PIS-CF	Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form
SOC	Serious and Organised Crimes
SOP	Standard Operating Procedures
Tatmadaw	The Armed Forces of Myanmar (Burma)
TOC	Transnational Organized Crimes
TNI	Transnational Institute
UN	The United Nations
UNODC	The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

ABSTRACT

The Golden Triangle, which is an epic centre for illicit businesses, located at the intersection of three specific countries – Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, has long been known for drug production and trafficking, particularly opium production. Nevertheless, the southeast Asian illicit drug market is undergoing a profound transformation, with the rise of synthetic drugs, particularly in Northern Myanmar. There is a large body of research by academic drug scholars looking at factors driving illicit drug production and trafficking of developed countries from across the globe (e.g., UK, US, Australia) and a lesser extent developing countries. However, there remain many gaps in knowledge about what is driving this trade in Myanmar.

This study seeks to identify the main drivers of Myanmar's illicit drug trade, including the recent rise in methamphetamine production and trafficking, and examine the adequacy of the 2018 National Drug Control Policy responses. This research used a qualitative methodology, including a semi-structured in-depth interview with thirteen stakeholders from three areas: 1) the criminal justice system, e.g., the Myanmar Police Force and the Australian Federal Police, 2) government agencies, e.g., the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement in Myanmar, and 3) Non-Government Organisations.

Stakeholders identified multiple factors driving Myanmar's illicit drug economy. This included a high profit derived from the sale of illicit drugs in a context of poverty and underdevelopment, corruption, political instability, conflict, and the presence of a plethora of non-state armed groups, a weak rule of law, ethnic armed groups and transnational organised syndicates and displacement of chemical precursors from China. Of note, interviewees stated that the Myanmar illicit drug business brings economic incentives and payoffs for opium farmers and local dealers as a means of economic subsistence. Interviewees also noted that most of the profit goes outside the country, particularly to large international criminal syndicates in Hong Kong and China. However, the biggest drivers of the Myanmar drug trade are under development and the weak rule of law, both of which are perfect conditions for a growing drug trade which has only been exacerbated by the coup d'état of 1st February 2021.

This thesis particularly looks at the adequacy of the 2018 Myanmar's National Drug Control Policy responses, and subsequently proposes suggestions for more effective policy responses. All respondents and given literature noted that the 2018 Myanmar's National Drug Control Policy is a good quality document because it is comprehensive, evidence-informed, and humane, and brings relevant stakeholders together. However, there are numerous issues with policy implementation due to issues such as a lack of resourcing, budget constraints, and a lack of comprehensive drug use data on the ground. Recent political change, as a result of the military coup d'état, and the Covid-19 pandemic have created more opportunities for the continued growth of the narcotic drugs industry, particularly amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) and opium.

This research project contributes a broader academic knowledge to the existing drug literature. This thesis reinforces the key roles that underdevelopment, weak rule of law and geopolitical circumstances can play in driving illicit drug markets in developing contexts and the importance of addressing these issues as part of a comprehensive drug policy responses. Therefore, this thesis suggests that each nation's policy needs to be fit for purpose by looking at broader geopolitics factors and development issues.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Date: 13 December 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to convey my sincere thanks and acknowledgement to those who have taken part in my research, and to those who has given me strong support while researching and writing this thesis.

First, I would like to extend my immense gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Caitlin Hughes, for not only accepting me as one of your students, but for always providing detailed and comprehensive feedbacks, and for excellent supervision throughout the writing and research of my thesis. I sincerely appreciate your strong support, insightful comments, and suggestions, and for the way you always welcomed me and my questions. I appreciate and acknowledge the time you have given to support me, patience, and kindness. As a result of your inspiration and encouragement, I have stepped into an exciting research field, and completed a milestone in my academic life.

Second, I also want to say "big thanks" to my topic coordinator, Dr Luis da Vinha for allowing me to do this research and believing in me although I have a weakness. I am pleased to acknowledge your strong support, incredible advice, and that you had your door opened to me whenever I needed to seek your help, regarding either my academic journey or my well-being, while studying at Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.

Third, I would like to show my gratitude to my superiors and the responsible officials from my office back in Myanmar for permitting my thesis, one of the most sensitive and poorly understood topics in Myanmar. Subsequently, I also want to extend my honest gratitude to those stakeholders who have taken part in my thesis and for their contributions regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic and recent political changes in Myanmar. Of note, I would like to send my earnest acknowledgements to Gloria, for her incredible help which enabled me to

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The study context: Myanmar

Myanmar, formerly known as 'Burma', is situated on the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. As the second-largest country by landmass in Southeast Asia, which is 678,500 square kilometres in total, Myanmar shares borders with Bangladesh and India to the north-west, China to the north-east and Laos and Thailand to the east. The total population in 2019 was over 54 million, and Naypyidaw is the capital city and centre of government administration. In accordance with its 2008 constitution, Myanmar is a parliamentary republic, provided that the political system runs by the bicameral national parliament, which has not been the case since the military coup d'état in 2021((ADB) n.d.; Cribb 1998; DFAT 2019; UN 2020). Myanmar has been a member of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) since 1997.

The 'Golden Triangle' which is one of Asia's two main illicit opium-producing areas and is located at the intersection of three countries of mainland Southeast Asia: Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. It is one of the global hubs of the illicit drug industry (Chalk 2000; Chin 2009; Pandit & Basu 2012). As an extended area of the 'the Golden Triangle', the narcotic drug issues have become a menace in Myanmar. Since 2017, illicit drug markets have increased significantly and particularly, methamphetamine production and trafficking has risen, posing a severe threat to citizens' health and the socio-economic development of the nation (CCDAC 2018; DFAT 2019; UNODC 2019a). A 2020 world drug report of the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) states that Myanmar is one of the largest opium producers in Asia, and its production stands at 20% of global opium cultivation, second only to Afghanistan, where 84% of global opium production is grown (UNODC 2020).

However, since 2019, Myanmar's production rate has declined by 33,100 hectares and a further 29,500 hectares in 2020 (CCDAC 2020; UNODC 2021a). While this reduction suggests that the country is gaining leverage over the problem, the illicit drug market has grown and diversified, and the high demand for a drug supply market remains unchanged (Kulsudjarit 2004). This remarkable decline is because of a growing methamphetamine production industry and trafficking that have arisen since 2017, and methamphetamine manufacturing in the north-eastern part of Myanmar has increased in the recent years. Statistics of 2020 UNODC report stated that a seizure of over 143 million methamphetamine tablets, and 441 kg of crystal methamphetamine proved a growing rate of synthetic drugs in

Myanmar(UNODC 2021b, p. 6). Overall, Myanmar's drug trends have shifted from heroin to methamphetamine, supporting a growing demand in Southeast Asia region.

Problems arising from Myanmar's drug industry are wide-ranging. The Transnational Institute (TNI) notes a dramatic increase in drug addiction and mental health problems, straining healthcare services for the drug users and increased community violence and fear (TNI 2019). Although controls and crackdown programs exist in Myanmar, drug issues remain significant on national and regional scales (UNODC 2021b).

Whilst Myanmar is a signatory to UN legal frameworks regarding drug elimination and control mechanisms, and it has amended its national laws to align with some of what the UN frameworks dictate and evolving international drug trends, its responses are inadequate, and these policies have not been fully implemented (CCDAC 2019). In the past, Myanmar's drug laws and policy responses have focused almost entirely on criminalisation and a law enforcement response to drugs and drug trafficking. But there have been concerns about this approach, particularly emphasis upon law enforcement alone, without considering alternative strategies. The criminalisation of drug possession is a serious issue for individuals, and drug users face harsh penalties and lengthy prison sentences (TNI 2019). Moreover, regions that rely on drug production for financial and employment stability cannot offer their citizens alternative economic pathways or develop strategies (Lone & Cachia 2021). Additionally, drug addiction programs have only focused on limited treatment services related to heroin, without considering the growing number of methamphetamine users (Lai 2015; TNI 2019). Since 2018, drug control policies have attempted to focus more on health-oriented approaches and decriminalisation of drug possession, and drug use such as promoting harm reduction services, and the expansion of treatment and alternative development policies alongside new policing approaches (CCDAC 2018).

Decriminalisation for many drug offences could destigmatise addiction and breakthrough powerful drug production and supply chains. Broadening current treatment programs to focus on broader harm-reduction measures could include the delivery of more methadone programs across the entire nation to meet the needs of its growing heroin addiction. Alternative employment and economic policies and incentives, especially in those regions reliant on the drug trade, could support new ventures and opportunities for these underdeveloped communities. But there has remained limited knowledge about whether or how these new policies are literally operating on the ground.

1.2　Purpose of this study and research questions

This research project seeks to explore the main drivers or enablers of the flourishing illicit drug manufacturing and trafficking industries in Myanmar. This research thesis will then critically analyse the efficacy of the 2018 National Drug Control Policy responses.

The objectives of this research are:

i)　To identify the main drivers of Myanmar's drug industry, including the recent rise in methamphetamine production and supply,

ii)　To examine the efficacy of Myanmar's current drug policy responses and identify the various avenues available to Myanmar for more effective responses to drug-related issues.

This research project has used qualitative methodology, including semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 key stakeholders from the Myanmar Police Force and the Australian Federal Police, the Myanmar Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, and Non-Government Organisations. Three main questions are formed in this research study:

1.　What are the factors or main enablers that drive illicit drug production and trafficking in Myanmar?

2.　What is the efficacy of the current drug policy responses and challenges?

3.　What are the potential avenues for more effective policy responses?

1.3　The significance of this study

This research is essential for two main reasons.

First, this research project occurs in a context of a large body of international drug research studies that have analysed drivers contributing to illicit drug industries in different parts of the globe. As outlined in Chapter 2, most studies have occurred in developed countries. But studies from developing countries bring to the fore a different set of factors and enablers of the drug trade e.g., importance of underdevelopment. Very little of this work has focused on the Myanmar context, even though illicit drug production and supply are a significant problem in that nation, and which has flow-on effects for the surround region and globally. This paper seeks to rectify this deficit.

This study critically analyses Myanmar's illicit drug trafficking and production, emphasising the main enablers, including transnational organised groups, strategic responses of neighbouring countries, and economic development factors. It also provides localised knowledge about factors contributing to Myanmar's illicit drug trade and current policy and practice implementation pragmatics. Issues raised herein are essential and timely given Myanmar's role as one of the leading opium-producing countries and the recent expansion of methamphetamine production and trafficking in the region. This thesis will directly contribute to better-informed policy responses that meet specific needs across Myanmar.

The second reason of significance is that this thesis adopts an international relation perspective to address this issue. As outlined in Chapter 2, international relations (IR) is "the study of the political and social interaction of state, non-state actors, and individuals" (Roach, Griffiths & Callaghan 2013, pp. 1-2). It means that two or more nations can interact with and regard each other, with respects to political, economic, or cultural relationships. There are several ways that international relations theory is applicable to drug trafficking and policy responses. Drug trafficking and production impacts neighbouring countries, and this paper thus explores multiple drivers of these drug markets, and how they challenge international cooperation. Issues include the reactions of neighbouring countries, difficulties in data sharing relating to drug issues, and border security issues. Consequently, the drug problem expands beyond the Southeast Asian region, and other nations have vested interests in controlling this problem.

1.4   The organisational structure of the thesis

Four chapters follow in this thesis. Chapter two provides a literature review and looks at drivers of illicit drug trafficking, highlighting differences in enablers between developed and developing countries. It also outlines existing literature relating to the 'Golden Triangle' interlinking Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand and factors supporting illicit drug production and manufacturing. Literature regarding potential factors that drive Myanmar's drug industry are discussed, and the chapter outlines the importance of international relations theories and their relevance to drug issues in Myanmar.

The third chapter focuses on methodology. The third chapter outlines a comprehensive picture of the whole thesis project and provides the detailed research design and plan that was created to complete this thesis. Qualitative methodology with semi-structured in-depth interviews with key stakeholders from Myanmar and the broader Southeast Asia region was utilised. There were 13 interviewees in total from police, health, and non-government

organisations. Recruitment methods, ethical considerations, and data collection, data analysis, data storage methods are presented in this chapter, and then it concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the adopted qualitative methods.

The fourth chapter outlines findings from the stakeholder interviews. According to the various research themes and participants' responses, this chapter has been organised into four main sections: 1) drug trafficking trends and other market shifts (e.g., from opium to amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS)); 2) adverse impacts of the drug trade e.g, on corruption, licit economics and other health and social issues from drug use; 3) enablers of Myanmar's narcotic drug industry, e.g. profit, underdevelopment, the weak rule of law; and 4) adequacy of the current drug policy responses and its challenges.

The final chapter includes a discussion of critical findings, drawing together all enablers and its 2018 National Drug Control Policy responses, and it concludes with a discussion of implications for the Myanmar government to consider.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter overview

This chapter reviews international drug trafficking research from across the globe, particularly that with focuses on the known drivers and enablers of drug trafficking, and similarities and differences between developed and developing countries. Secondly, it discusses enablers of the illicit drug industry relating to the 'Golden Triangle' region that interlinks Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand to form the epicentre of regional drug markets within Southeast Asia and beyond the region. This third section also outlines the known and potential drivers in Myanmar specifically. The final section examines international relations theory and its relevance to the analysis of drug trafficking in Myanmar. The last section summarises the key findings from the literature, which will inform subsequent chapters.

2.1   Drug trafficking studies from across the globe: key drivers and enablers

Much international research has examined illicit drug markets across the globe. Indeed, there are now hundreds of studies analysing drivers of, and trends in, drug trafficking, see also (Desroches, FJ (2007); Dorn, Levi and King (2005); Hughes, CE et al. (2016a); McKetin, McLaren and Erin (2005); MKG (2007); Pearson and Hobbs (2001)). For instance, Desroches, FJ (2007) reviewed studies of drug traffickers in the US, UK, Canada, and the Netherlands, found that most drug traffickers "make huge profits" and "operate within geographically niche markets". As the author noted: "The primary motivation for illicit drug trafficking is undoubtedly the lure of financial gain and personal enrichment" (p. 839). He further noted: "Many regards themselves as businesspersons, have inflated self-concepts, enjoy their wealth and lifestyle, justify their conduct as a form of business activity, and make huge profits despite their relatively small size " (p. 840). One limitation is that most of the studies to date have focused on experiences in developed nations. The section below summarises sentinel drug studies from developed and developing nations – the UK, Canada, Australia, US, Mexico, and Colombia – highlighting insights into the enablers and drivers of drug trafficking and other related factors.

The UK Matrix Study provides one of the most extensive analyses of drug trafficking (MKG 2007). Using 222 face-to-face interviews with incarcerated drug traffickers, researchers revealed that drug enterprises are well-organised and hierarchically structured amongst crime gangs. It found that the market is driven by high demand, high profitability, and a ready distribution chain. It particularly showed the critical role of profit in motivating drug trafficking in the UK (MKG 2007), as evidenced by very high mark-ups, or potential returns, associated with the importation and trafficking of cocaine and heroin. For example, in 2006, cocaine was worth £325 per kilogram at the point of production in Colombia but reached £51,650 per kilogram once entering UK retail markets – a 16,000% mark-up (MKG 2007, p. 20). The UK scholars also found the illicit drug returns far exceed trade in popular licit products like coffee that only reach a 223% mark-up (ibid.). Interviews with participants showed that profit was aided by a constant high demand, which means little volatility in the market. Additionally, this is supported by the fact that operations were low cost, except for several wide-ranging international dealers who employed more complex business models to reduce their risk of being caught (ibid.). The study also investigated motivators for trafficking (MKG 2007, p. 24). Incentives, where known, included financial gains where traffickers could spend their profits on themselves, funding lavish lifestyles, buying property and cars, or simply paying their mortgages (ibid.).

Another prominent example is Desroches, FJ (2003), who interviewed 50 high-level drug traffickers in Canada. This research revealed that the Canadian illicit drug trade was openly competitive among the small criminal networks based on entrepreneurial skills or kinship and family ties. Incentives for drug trafficking were often interrelated and include financial necessity, lack of alternative employment opportunities, greed and the appeal of luxury lifestyles, prestige, social interaction, and excitement (ibid.). In another study , Desroches, FJ (2007) focused on the patterns and routes of drug markets both within and beyond Canada to show the wide-ranging nature of its drug distribution patterns. This showed that outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) are used to distribute drugs across the country. These gangs are well structured and represent extensive criminal syndicates. Using bikers enables drug organizations' local distribution to be more widespread, including street-level dealers (Lauchs & Staines 2019). In response, Canadian policing focuses on breaking these outlaw gangs to disrupt the large organizations' drug distribution (Desroches, FJ 2007).

There have been many studies of drug trafficking in Australia (See examples (Hughes, CE et al. 2016b; McKetin, McLaren & Erin 2005; NDLERF 2004)). One key study is McKetin, McLaren and Erin (2005), which looked into a rise in the use, supply and availability of methamphetamine or 'ice' in Australia in the mid-2000s. Using interviews with 55 regular methamphetamine dealers, interviews with 54 health and law enforcement professionals and a survey of 310 regular methamphetamine users it highlighted the key roles of profit, rising local demand for amphetamine type substances, reducing international supply of heroin, involvement of specific criminal groups (both international and domestic), and personal contacts in driving the trade. For example, regarding the profitability, this study stressed that "the median profit from dealing drugs was $400 per week – almost double the median legitimate income of dealers" which "in some cases, provided an income comparable to a well-salaried job" (McKetin, McLaren & Erin 2005, p. 18). Of relevance to this current work, the growth in the Australian methamphetamine market occurred in the context of reducing heroin supplies from Southeast Asia to Australia. They found that "established heroin trafficking networks (i.e., Southeast Asian Crime groups) were involved in ice importation" and that these same groups were involved in the supply of ice within the inner region of Sydney. But they also found that a different set of players – namely Outlaw Motor Cycle Gang members – assumed the key role in the domestic production and distribution of amphetamine. This shows how in this instance different crime groups were involved in different supply chains.

Turning to developing countries, Colombia has long been one of the largest producers of coca leaf and cocaine, with key drivers in this context being geography, poverty, weak rule of law, corruption, organised crime groups, rebel and militia groups (Garcia 2003; Otis 2014).Coca leaf cultivation is mostly undertaken by subsistence producers in areas with poor infrastructure, and remote communities, where there is limited access to other jobs and where the army, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups vie for control. There have been multiple players involved in this trade. Of note, Filippone (1994) analysed the Medellin cartel - one of the key cocaine trafficking cartels in Colombia that operated until the 1990s. He noted the large profits born from the trade – including how at the height of its operations the Medellín Cartel brought in up to US$60 million daily in drug profit - but also the extensive levels of corruption behind the trade and embeddedness in multiple spheres of life. The author showed "the political, social, and cultural activities the cartel undertakes extend its influence well beyond those involved directly in the drug trade " (Filippone 1994, p. 110). Jonsson et

al. (2016) further note rebel or insurgent groups (e.g., the FARC) sustain Colombia's drug industry. While there is little evidence that the FARC is involved in the retail distribution of drugs to consumer countries, there are strong business alliances with drug trafficking organisations and multiple kickbacks e.g., taxing farmers which increases the rebel groups' influence across the country. Irrespective of the groups the economic returns from the trade are immense. Garcia (2003) also argues that the drug industry has brought considerable economic returns and played an important role in Colombia's infrastructure development.

Another developing country of note is Mexico. The Mexican drug trade 'ballooned' in the 1990s to become the dominant source controlling the US wholesale cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and marijuana markets(DEA, US 2017). What is behind this rise is a complex web of factors including poverty and under-development, corruption, political instability, weak rule of law, the growth of new and expanded organised crime groups and networks and failed 'war on drugs' responses (e.g. Campbell (2005); Astorga and Shirk (2010); Grayson (2013)). The growth in the drug trade in Mexico has been deemed to have been aided by the failed US 'war on drugs.' For example, by targeting Colombia cartels and their traditional cocaine supply chains it is argued to have incentivised Colombia drug traffickers to switch from sea to land routes – via Mexico (Campbell 2005). There have been many different organised crime groups behind the trade, including the Sinaloa Cartel (the oldest and most established DTO), the Juarez and the Zetas. Astorga and Shirk (2010) found that increasing connections between Mexican traffickers and prominent, organised crime figures in the US further helped to change the dynamics of the industry and expand drug flows.

Poverty and under-development are again important factors in this context. In major drug-trafficking centres like Ciudad Juárez/El Paso, the narcotics economy is so extensive and pervasive that it has been described as "a normal part of daily life" (Campbell 2005), as it is the quickest way poor people can increase their incomes. That said the biggest driver in the Mexican context is the role of corruption and weak rule of law. For example, it is noted that cocaine traffickers spend as much as $500 million a year on bribery which is more than double the annual budget of the Mexican Attorney General's Office, that the kickbacks are such that "there can be enormous competition amongst law enforcement to be assigned to key posts along smuggling corridors" (Andreas 1998, p. 3). Corruption of government and political officials is particularly apparent, with drug trafficking groups, such as the Sinaloa Cartel making it part of their modus operandi to penetrate political, economic elite and

security forces and cultivate a wide network of corrupt officials to gain distribution rights, market access, and protection (Murataya, Chacon & Gonzalez 2013). In his book "Mexico: Narco-Violence and a failed state", Grayson (2013) reported on interviews with Mexican and US officials, diplomats, and policymakers. This provides detailed biographies of drug kingpins, including their strategies and tactics that are interactive and monopolised among the cartels and by bringing to the fore the extent of corruption, raised questions of whether Mexico is in danger of becoming a 'failed state' (Grayson 2013).

A summary of the drug studies from developed and developing nations and their enablers and drivers are outlined in **Table 1** below: categorised using the UN's Human Development Index (HDI) (2021).

Table 1: Summary of key enablers of drug trafficking in sentinel studies from developed and developing countries

Author	Context	National Development Ranking (HDI)	Key Enablers
Matrix Knowledge Group (2007)	UK	Developed (HDI -13)	1. Profit 2. Corruption-particularly at the border 3. Personal contacts- friends and family 4. Demand 5. Organised groups:high-level drug dealers, particular ethnic groups
Desroches F.J. (2003/2005/ 2007)	Canada	Developed (HDI -16)	1. Profit 2. Organized crime groups: Outlaw Motor Cycle Gangs 3. Demand 4. Accessibility/ transportation 5. Personal contacts
McKetin et al. (2005)	Australia	Developed (HDI- 8)	1. Profit 2. Demand 3. Changing supply patterns and displacement 4. Organised crime groups: Chinese Organised Crime Groups and Outlaw Motor Cycle Gangs 5. Accessibility/ transportation 6. Social networks
Gracia (2003), Otis (2014) & Kenny (2007)	Colombia	Developing (HDI -83)	1. Poverty 2. Weak rule of law 3. Organised crime groups e.g. Medellin and Cali Rebel and militia groups eg FARC 4. Corruption across political, law enforcement social, and cultural spheres 5. Profit / economic return 6. Under investment in mainstream economies 7. Political instability
Astorga,Luis Shirk, David A. (2010) & Grayson(2013) & P.A.Chomczyński & R. Guy (2019)	Mexico	Developing (HDI-74)	1. Poverty 2. Weak rule of law 3. Organised groups e.g. Sinaloa Cartel & Los Zetas 4. Corruption across political, law enforcement, social, and cultural spheres 5. Profit / economic return 6. Failed US war on drug policies

2.1.1 Similarities and differences regarding enablers among developed and developing countries

Prior academic literature on drug trafficking and drug markets shows a variety of enablers that allow illicit drug industries to flourish around the globe. *Table 1* shows that profit and the economic rewards are the biggest or most common driver of the trade both in developed and under-developed nations (Garcia 2003; McKetin, McLaren & Erin 2005; MKG 2007; Morris 2012). It is evident that there is lucrative profitability, with excessive mark-ups, and rewards in multiple parts of the globe.

Corruption is another enabler that drives illicit drug trafficking in developed and developing countries, albeit it can assume different forms in different circumstances. Corruption occurs at UK borders, where it is used to pay off law enforcement officials and help smuggle drugs into the country (MKG 2007). In Mexico and Colombia bribery can occur at all levels of law enforcement sectors as well as to politicians, economic elites and other public officials (Filippone 1994).

Another commonality is the role played by organised crime groups in managing and controlling drug production and distribution. However, the types of groups and roles can vary across countries. In Canada, outlaw motorcycle groups distribute drugs across the country (Desroches, FJ 2007), whilst in Australia they have been found to be involved in producing and distributing some drugs (e.g. base amphetamine) but not others (McKetin, McLaren & Erin 2005). In less developed countries like Colombia and Mexico there can be many different groups such as militia and rebel groups e.g., the FARC, coupled with drug cartels (Garcia 2003; Grayson 2013; Kenney 2007; Otis 2014)

Importantly, while there has been less academic attention on developing nations, the literature shows that in developing nations like Mexico and Colombia, the drug trade can be directly related to development factors e.g., poverty, lack of legitimate employment opportunities and weak rule of law (Andreas 1998; Chomczyński & Guy 2019; Jonsson et al. 2016; Kenney 2007; Otis 2014; Thoumi 2012). This brief review also brings to the fore the importance of considering the unique different factors and contexts of each country. It also illustrates the importance of increased attention on the enablers of drug trafficking in under-developed nations e.g., Myanmar.

2.2 Illicit drug industry in the Golden Triangle- context and enablers in the Golden Triangle

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Figure 1: Map of the Golden Triangle Region
Source: UNODC Synthesis Drugs in East and Southeast Asia- latest developments and challenges 2021

The 'Golden Triangle' is one of Asia's two main illicit drug-producing areas, and it constitutes an area from the Shan Hills in Myanmar to the Yunnan province of China, Laos and Thailand (Chalk 2000; Cheurprakobkit, Kuntee & Vauhgn 1998; Chin 2009; Chouvy 2013; Pandit & Basu 2012). Many scholars have examined it as a 'known hub' for illegal drug businesses. It is a thick forested and mountainous region mainly beyond government control (Cheurprakobkit, Kuntee & Vauhgn 1998; Chouvy 2013; Pandit & Basu 2012; Su 2015). While the Golden Triangle is historically prominent in drug production and trafficking of opium production, particularly opium, contemporary trends have altered to a new focus on synthetic drug production (UNODC 2019b). Over the past decades, methamphetamine production has increased exponentially in the Golden Triangle alongside opium and heroin production to become the world's largest producer of synthetic drugs (Reed 2021).

Existing scholars have highlighted that drug supply and demand are competitive in the Golden Triangle region for many reasons. First, this is a remote mountainous location (TNI 2019) . Second, it provides a good terrain and climate for growing drugs, particularly opium poppy which grows best in temperate, warm climates with low humidity (Chalk 2000). Because many crops cannot grow at such a high altitude, and it is not easy to find a substitute crop that is so lucrative, and/ or grows well. Third, it is also a strategic hub linked to the international drug markets for its neighbours: Thailand and Laos, which are gateways to the drug markets in China and other locations (UNODC 2021b). Fourth, underdevelopment and the weak rule of law. Emerging transnational organised crimes syndicates (TOCs) often rely on underdevelopment factors such as poor governance, corruption, poverty, economic inequality and social mobility in developing nations (Ahmed 2017). Fifth, the absence of security access the region challenges drug enforcement operations. The scholars from TNI (2019) argue that in many Southeast Asian nations, governments cannot provide adequate law and order to meet security needs; and therefore, militias in this 'governance vacuum develop unauthorised security arrangements'. Taking advantage of such factors, the Golden Triangle has become an ideal location for drug production and related trade.

A significant example is Thailand, with many studies showing that most of the drugs are growing in the northern and mountainous areas, and those areas are far away from the rule of law (Chouvy 2013, pp. 4-5). Crooker and Martin (1992) first articulate that, prior to 2000, the illicit opium cultivation and production in northern parts of Thailand had a constant growth because it is a cash crop for the hill tribe people in those areas, and it has become a significant income source to cover the costs of rice and other essential needs. As such key drivers in this context are the mountainous terrain and ideal growing conditions for opium production, poverty and weak rule of law. Second, due to the advanced transportation and ease of accessibility to in imports of precursor chemicals in order to produce heroin, Thailand continues to be a producing hub and a gateway for heroin to the international market through destinations such as Hong Kong (Cheurprakobkit, Kuntee & Vauhgn 1998; Chouvy 2013). More recently, a report by UNODC (2020) states that Thailand remains a premier transit for crystalline methamphetamine trafficked to Oceania nations. The Australian authorities reportedly weigh the largest seizure of crystal methamphetamine in 2019, as 1.6 tons of crystalline methamphetamine trafficked via Bangkok, Thailand (Walker 2020).

Viet Nam is essential to the growth of the illicit drug industry in the Golden Triangle because of its location. First, Viet Nam shares borders with China, the world leading precursor manufacturer (Chin 2009; Luong 2020; UNODC 2021b). Luong (2020) claims that drug traffickers take advantage of geography and higher profitability, and smuggled precursor chemicals into Viet Nam. This also possibly result in increasing amphetamine-type stimulants trafficking across Viet Nam, mainly precursor chemicals are being increasingly diverted and trafficked from and within Viet Nam (UNODC 2021b). Second, as Luong (2016) argues, the strategic position and proximity with the Golden Triangle makes Viet Nam a good transit route for trafficking and distributing drugs. As such, Viet Nam is becoming a significant transhipment point for transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) that traffic heroin, crystal methamphetamine, and ketamine to markets throughout East Asia and the Pacific(DOS 2021).

There are a variety of known factors that enable the drug trafficking trade in and alongside the Golden Triangle, but again, factors can and do differ across and between countries.

2.3   Extant knowledge of drug trafficking in Myanmar

2.3.1   Myanmar's drug situation

There are limited studies on Myanmar, specifically from the academic perspective. As such, most of Myanmar's existing drug studies have come from 'grey literature', for instance, the UNODC and the International Crisis Group (ICG) or advocacy groups like the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC) and the Transnational Institute (TNI). The book "The Golden Triangle Inside Southeast Asia's Drug Trade' by Chin (2009) is based on the field research in northern Myanmar, with over 400 interviews with people who are involved in or affected by the drug trade, ranging from opium growers to state officials across the borders of Myanmar and China. This unique work observed the role of several groups that are particularly active in the Golden Triangle's drug business and examined how the drug business is closely related to politics. Other essential factors revealed in this field study are supply and the internal dynamics of the supply region, the Wa (a minority ethnic group) and their leaders, organised crimes, the politics of drugs and the need for international engagement.

The existing literature has highlighted a few key factors that may affect drug trafficking in Myanmar: ethnic conflicts, weak rule of law, displacement of chemicals, and underdevelopment. Each is outlined below.

2.3.2 Ethnic conflicts in Myanmar

The political system in Myanmar drives the prolonged conflicts between Myanmar's Army (Tatmadaw) and non-state armed groups, including ethnic armed groups such as United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Arakhine Army (AA), the Shan State Army- South (SSA), among many others (Davies & True 2017; Gutierrez 2020; ICG 2019; Lim & Su 2021; TNI 2019). Non-government organisations like the Transnational Institute (TNI) hypothesises that narcotic drugs are part of the financial backbone of ethnic armed groups in Myanmar. Such non-state armed groups participate in the drug trade in various forms, and to very different extents such as through the taxation of opium farmers, providing security arrangements in the drug manufacturing areas- laboratories, and protection for transportation while trafficking drugs to Thailand (TNI 2019). This can result in undermining border regions' resilience and stability (Kramer 2017).

Economic market competition, political leadership and geographical drivers, and a lack of financial autonomy and cross-border cooperation are challenges in managing drug controls (Sousa 2013, p. 669). Some NGOs like the International Crisis Group (ICG) suggests that Myanmar's illicit drug economy, including the drug trade, allow armed groups to generate revenue from taxation or extortion of the local population to fund, and sustain armed conflicts (ICG 2019, p. 14; Lone & Cachia 2021). A 2019 report by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade states that conflicts across the Shan state is to gain territorial control (DFAT 2019, p. 20). Nonetheless, the Myanmar's illicit drug economy is paired with and fuelled by the political instability, the need for revenue to fund conflict, underdevelopment, poverty, and a lack rule of law. The drug trade therefore flourishes in conflict affected parts of Myanmar, many are which are under or partly under the control of ethnic armed groups and have experienced conflict with the Tatmadaw, and in many locations with other armed actors as well.

2.3.3 Weak rule of law

Government and UN reports have stated that a lack of the rule of law at state borders facilitates the growth of the regional drug market (DFAT 2019; TNI 2019). Those reports stressed that law enforcers are facing many challenges while performing policing services

and assigning their teams at the border areas. First, daily illicit economic activities are booming across the borders from time to time, and second, those areas are adjoining with the neighbouring countries (DFAT 2019; Meehan 2015, p. 276). Hence, an effective policing strategy to deal with drug syndicates and transnational organised criminals across the borders is thus some academic views not possible and done in vain (Pandit & Basu 2012). Scholars from TNI (2019) argue that in many Southeast Asian nations, governments cannot provide adequate law and order to meet security needs, and therefore, militias in this 'governance vacuum develop unauthorised security arrangements'. In Myanmar, '[w]ith the absence of the rule of law and good governance, security potentially ceases to be a public good and becomes a private commodity' and 'markets of violence' dominate complex socio-economic institutions and governance processes (TNI 2019, p. 15).

2.3.4 Displacement of Precursor Chemicals from China

Myanmar's geographic position next to the global chemical-producing country of China, and next to ready transportation routes and smuggling channels, makes it a prime target for the displacement of precursor chemicals from China (Das 2018; Uhlmann & Tozer 2020). According to a UNODC report, the decline of methamphetamine laboratories in China from 526 in 2015 and to 85 in 2018, may directly affect Myanmar's methamphetamine supply market (UNODC 2021b). Since 2019, the seizure of controlled precursor chemicals in Myanmar has doubled, and resulted in a market worth of over 7012.63846 million MMK (CCDAC 2020)**.**

2.3.5 Underdevelopment

In recent years, UNODC reports that Myanmar government has gained an extensive illicit profit (approximately, US$71 billion) from drug production and trafficking, stemming from economic inequalities, lack of basic infrastructure systems, migration, and poverty (UNODC 2021b). These socio-economic deficiencies exacerbate the ability for Myanmar's illicit drug businesses to operate and grow (HRW n.d.; TNI 2016). According to UNODC's statistics, the regional seizures of methamphetamine proved that most of the seized drugs are produced in Myanmar's Shan State, bordering with Thailand and Laos. Historically, this area has been known for a low-level opium poppy cultivation (UN 2020; UNODC 2019b). Lone and Cachia (2021, p. 597) argue that "poverty, indebtment, land confiscation, political instability and armed conflict, marginalisation and criminalisation, absence of livelihood and job opportunities, [and] lack of access to basic infrastructure" are the major barriers for opium farmers to solve drug problems and its subsequent effects to their societies. In summary,

the literature reveals a number of factors that could play a role in enabling the drug trade in Myanmar.

2.4 International Relations theory and relevance to the drug trade and policy responses

Roach, Griffiths and Callaghan (2013) defines international relations (IR) as "the study of the political and social interaction of state, non-state actors, and individuals". Simply, it means that two or more nations can interact with and regard each other, with respects to political, economic, or cultural relationships. There are several ways that international relations theory is applicable to drug trafficking and policy responses. For example, multiple countries are involved in the drug trade, and the policy responses in one country can directly or indirectly affect another (Babor et al. 2018). Consequently, the need for intergovernmental collaboration and engagement in, and partnership with neighbouring countries is also essential (Dalby 2013). Furthermore, the narcotic drug trade is linked with other transnational organised crimes, such as money laundering and corruption, arms smuggling, and human trafficking, and thus, it is vital for the international crime controls to promote and align with policy responses (Lwin & Cachia 2019; Mckenzie 2018).

Another important international relations perspective that may affect drug trafficking is international cooperation. Milner (1992, p. 467) quotes of Keohane (1984), and says that international cooperation is defined as "when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination." International cooperation between the nations can result in mutual benefits for all involved nation, and correspondingly then aligned their national policies is vital to obtaining a better solution to anticipate policy coordination. Presumably, policy coordination among the agencies, and institutions, regardless of their status as government or non-governmental organisations, would require finding better ways to cooperate, and achieve their strategic goals for coordination to ensure sustainable development and improved health outcomes (Peters 2018). For instance, the neighbouring nations all have their drug policy issues to overcome, and such challenges are inter-related with other countries' drug scenarios, however, the current regional policies do not appear consistent with each other.

It is pretty apparent that every nation needs to develop their own policies in order to ensure effective implementation, and coordinate these with relevant neighbouring countries. For example, from Colombia to Mexico and from China to Myanmar are clear scenarios. Thoumi

(2012) acknowledges that the Colombian government has developed a broad 'gamut of anti-drug policies' that include increased international cooperation resources to better fight its illegal drug problem. The government reasons that few regions attain local success on their own and instead remain 'poor and frustrated', thus heightened cooperation benefits all (Thoumi 2012, p. 979). Then, greater international cooperation must be encouraged to establish competent links for global nations' 'mutual benefit and the benefit of the overarching objective of a world with fewer [drug] problems' (ibid.).

Summary

This literature review has identified that a large body of literature looks at drug markets, drug trafficking, and their key enablers, including profits, underdevelopment, poverty, corruption, the weak rule of law, geographical location, and different organised crime groups. It has further shown how enablers can vary, particularly between developed and developing nations. However, little of this literature relates to Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar's prolific drug industry. Existing local knowledge from NGOs points to a range of potential enablers, including conflict, poverty, political instability, the proliferation of armed actors, and precursor chemical displacement. International relations studies further highlight a gap in how other important drivers might include a lack of cooperation and coordinated implementation. This thesis will explore all these drivers within the Myanmar context.

3. METHODOLOGY

Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the qualitative methods used in this thesis, which is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with key stakeholders from Myanmar and broader South-East Asia who work in drug-related fields. The chapter summarises and explains the rationale and reasoning of the research design, recruitment, ethical considerations, and data analysis methods. It finishes by discussing the strengths and limitations of the adopted qualitative approach to this research.

3.1   Research Design

This study applied a qualitative-based interview method to analyse Myanmar's illicit drug market.

3.1.1 Qualitative research design

Kalof, Dan and Dietz (2008) describes qualitative methodology as a specific set of tools to utilise and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the root causes of emerging trends depending on the cultural norms, individual experiences, and phenomenon. Qualitative research means analysing descriptive and natural information to better understand real-life situations, problems, and consequences (Ritchie et al. 2013, p. 3).Luton (2010) argues that 'qualitative research involves careful planning, respectful engagement, conscientious analysis and deliberate presentation.' This research followed a qualitative design to capture the benefits of stakeholders' 'real life' understanding and their intimate knowledge of the machinations or plots of Myanmar's illicit drug trade based on their own experiences. This information was ascertained through a 'respectful engagement' interview process that valued and respected participants' experiences. This format was perceived as the best way to seek answers to probing 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions that garnered participants speciality knowledge in the field. Whilst all methods have their strengths and limitations, qualitative methods are particularly suited to situations where data is not already captured in other data sources such as crime statistics or administrative data systems and to provide in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon (Creswell 2014; Kruth 2015). These factors are vital for a greater understanding of Myanmar's drug industry.

3.1.2 Interview Approach

Semi-structured interviews are the most widely used interview type in qualitative research. This uses a set of open-ended questions that allow for a broader discussion, alongside follow-up probing questions (Bloom & Crabtree 2006; Creswell 2014; Sarantakos 1998). This thesis used five semi-structured interview questions to allow stakeholders to provide information that they consider relevant to the themes based on their expertise.

All interviews were conducted by a team of Associate Professor Caitlin Hughes and Myo Myo. Hughes is an expert in drug policy analysis, whilst Myo Myo works in Myanmar policing. Interviews took place between February and August 2021 i.e., all occurred after the coup. The majority of the interviews have conducted in English, and a small portion of interviews have only conducted using mother tongue (Burmese language). The length of interviews was based on the interests and communication of the key respondents, their extensive knowledge and practical experiences relating to Myanmar's illicit drug market. As each interview was around 1.30–2 hours in length, this meant that the research team and participants were engaged in in-depth discussions on key issues.

 The interviews were based on five set questions:

1. In your own words, tell me what has been happening regarding drug production and trafficking in Myanmar over the last decade?
2. What impact is drug production and trafficking (and use) having on Myanmar?
3. Which factors and/or enablers do you think are driving drug production and trafficking in Myanmar?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of current drug control policies in Myanmar?
5. What do you think should be the priorities for drug policy implementation in Myanmar going forward?

First, the participants explored the trends in drug trafficking and production in Myanmar, both over the last decade and in recent years, and any differences in trends for opium/heroin versus methamphetamine. Second, they were asked to discuss the impacts of illicit drug markets in Myanmar. This included the social impact (e.g., domestic violence or homicide), health issues (e.g., drug use or abuse), and the economic impacts. Thirdly, respondents were asked to discuss what enablers drive drug production and trafficking in Myanmar. For instance, they were asked to discuss the roles, if any, of local economic factors, geography,

actions of neighbouring countries, and transnational organised crime groups. They discussed current drug control policies' efficacy, including Myanmar's 2018 national drug control strategy and strengths and limitations. Finally, respondents were asked to consider recommendations for future policy responses.

3.1.3 Research Population- The sample: Key stakeholders

The sample for this research included three sets of stakeholders. The first group was from criminal justice system, e.g., Myanmar Police Force and Australian Federal Police. The second was from health and other governmental agencies, e.g., the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. The last group were stakeholders from non-government organisations (NGOs). These target groups were used in this study because they had extensive knowledge and experience from diverse fields such as policing and/or criminal justice systems, academia, and civil liberties. These groups provided relevant information from a variety of aspects of this wide-ranging industry.

3.1.4 Eligibility Criteria

There were three eligibility criteria for the study:
   1) respondents were over 18 years of age;
   2) they were key stakeholders working in drug-related fields in Myanmar or South-East Asia; and
   3) they were either proficient or native English or Myanmar speakers.

3.1.5 Method of Recruitment

This research applied an arms-length recruitment method. Three approaches have developed as recruitment methods to conduct the interviews (Minichiello, Callander & Scott 2014). A Letter of In-Principle support to enable recruitment was obtained from three agencies: the Myanmar Police Force, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, and the International Drug Policy Consortium (see **Annexure A '*Letter of In-principle Support'*). Following this, a letter of invitation and copy of the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (PIS-CF) was sent to each key agency-namely to nominate and circulate a recruitment flyer to the potential participants (see **Annexure B '*Letters of invitation' and PIS-CF**). This ensured there was arms-length recruitment, and

that each potential stakeholder had the opportunity to read the PIS-CF in full before contacting the research team. A summary of participants was set out in *Table 2* below.

The original ethics application aimed to recruit sixteen police officers, ten stakeholders from non-government organisations (NGOs) and five stakeholders from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement in Myanmar. However, COVID-19 and the onset of a military coup in February 2021 (see discussion below at 3.6) constrained interviewees to 13 participants: 5 from police and 3 from health (see **Table 2**). While this was a smaller sample than first anticipated, these participants all had over 10-years of working experience and expertise in their respective fields and provided invaluable information.

Table 2: Summary of research participants and their organisations and working experience

Targeted Groups	Organisations	Working experiences	Total
Group 1 (Criminal Justice System)	Myanmar Police Force (MPF)	Above 15 years	4
	Former Australian Federal Police (AFP) based in Myanmar	Above 15 years	1
Group 2 (Health and other governmental agencies)	Rehabilitation Department, Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR)	Above 25 years	1
	Drug Policy Advocacy Group (DPAC)	Above 10 years	1
	Kachin Coordination Office Medecins du Monde (France)	Above 10 years	1
Group 3 (UN-led agency, and other stakeholders-particularly NGOs	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	Above 20 years	1
	Transnational Institute (TNI)	Above 15 years	2
	International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC)	Above 15 years	1
	Mae Fah Luang Foundation (MFLF)	Above 20 years	1
		13 (in total)	

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Interview Schedule

All interviews were conducted via zoom. This was due to the international travel bans implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to each interview, the research team went through the PIS-CF with participants, ensuring that they fully understood the project and voluntary participation. With permission, the interviews were recorded for data collection and analysis. Once recorded, interviews were transcribed and then those recordings were deleted. The research team transcribed the recordings and sent them back to each participant within ten days of the interview for cross-checking. All participants have been de-identified to protect their identities.

All coded data has been stored on Flinders University's computer drive (One Drive), and this system provides data backup. Flinders University ethics dictates that all data must be encrypted in the Flinders University database system for at least five years in compliance with ethical considerations. Following this required storage period, all data will be securely destroyed following university protocols. Regarding data accessibility, only the research team, except for authorised personnel from Flinders University, can access the data. Moreover, all participants' information, such as the name, organisation address and even email addresses, have been separately stored in an encrypted file.

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the interview data. Thematic analysis is a method that is used to identify, analyse and interpret themes in qualitative data. This can provide accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data comparable across different stakeholders (Clarke & Braun 2017).

Six phases were used in the qualitative analytic process or thematic analysis being: familiarisation, coding, theme development, reviewing, and theme definition (Braun & Clarke 2006). Familiarisation with the data was the first stage in the collection process that included carefully re-reading interview transcripts for accuracy. The second phase was generating codes to ensure a profound understanding of the data collection. Next, the raw data was reviewed to ascertain groupings. Themes were then constructed based on priority, such as

central themes, sub-themes, and additional materials. In terms of construction, they were revised to obtain primary themes in compliance with the research questions. Next, these themes were defined and categorised.

3.4   Ethical issues and conflict of interest

Ethics is concerned with attempting to formulate codes and principles of moral behaviour in research and conducting interviews in a standard and the consistent format (Fisher & Anushko 2012). Ethical considerations are made for all research with human participants because the capacity for ethical inquiry needs to inform reasons for action while conducting social research and protect participants and the integrity of the inquiry (May 2011). Common risks include physical, psychological, social, economic, and legal harms, invasion of privacy, and any devaluation of the personal worth of the participants. There were several critical ethical considerations for this research, including the nature of research and the potential risks to the participants, especially given the tenuous socio-political climate in Myanmar.

3.4.1   Risks to the team

All research was conducted via zoom or telephone so that there was no need to travel or have direct contact with the potential participants or risks of physical, psychological, or legal harm. Both researchers have some extent of experience in their respective fields.

3.4.2   Risks to the participants

All participants in this research were key stakeholders working in drug-related fields, and they were highly experienced in talking about these issues and contributing to policy debates. Nonetheless, given state surveillance and the weak rule of law in Myanmar, participants were at risk if they were critical of the state or current policies. These risks included pressure to monitor or censor what was said to comply with current political pressures.

Therefore, five steps were taken to minimise these risks. The first included the research team obtaining verbal consent before interviews instead of written consent. Second, no names were associated with transcripts, nor was any information recorded that could identify interviewees with their words. Third, all audio recordings from interviews were transcribed by the research team themselves. Fourth, all audio recordings from interviews were destroyed within 10-days of transcription. Finally, as noted above, all participants had an option to review the transcripts from their interviews and to make any necessary edits before

analysis. This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethical Committee (HREC) at Flinders University under project No. 2716 (see *Annexure C 'Ethics Approval from the Flinders University'*).

3.4.3 Conflict of interest

All research participants for this study were expert stakeholders. Myo Myo has been employed in the Myanmar Police Force, Ministry of Home Affairs for ten years. As such, she had a good working relationship with police participants. Steps were undertaken to reduce the risks of coercion and actual or perceived conflicts of interest. First, this research project was conducted with Associate Professor Caitlin Hughes, who has no prior working or other relationship with any stakeholders. Second, an arms-length recruitment process was used throughout the study. Third, this research was open to diverse stakeholders from government institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Fourth, all data was de-identified for data analysis and publication.

3.5 Specific challenges of researching in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Myanmar Coup

A military coup occurred on 1st February 2021 in Myanmar and continued at the time of writing (November 2021), and this has had a profound effect on the research (Goldman 2021). The military seized power from the pro-democratic government because they officially stated that the election results were fraudulent. Therefore, they detained the leaders of the National League for Democracy and other civilian officials, declaring it as a 'national emergency'. The military government quickly controlled the basic infrastructures, suspending media broadcasting and cancelling domestic and international flights, and then telephones and internet access were of shortage. Consequently, this coup had an extensive impact on this research because it commenced just before data collection began, reducing willingness or ability of potential stakeholders to engage in the research. One stakeholder had agreed to take part but was then arrested. The coup further affected communication channels. For example, internet shutdowns imposed by the military regime meant some interviews had to be re-scheduled or conducted in parts. More broadly it meant that participants must be wary of their opinions, especially those perceived as criticising the current administration.

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic occurred in January 2020 and is ongoing (WHO 2021). It placed considerable stress on participants, both in Australia and in Myanmar, where the

virus remains out of control (Robbins 2021). Despite these challenges, the research team adapted to the circumstances as best possible. They extended the research time frame, increased flexibility in scheduling (and re-scheduling) interviews, and conducted more in-depth interviews with each interviewee. Finally, all interviews were conducted as a research team: Myo Myo and Associate Professor Caitlin Hughes to maximise rigorous data collection from each interview. The research has thus led to a very diverse and rich data set.

3.6   Strengths and Limitations of the research project

The research design has three key strengths. This is one of the first academic studies to critically examine the drivers and enablers of drug trafficking and adequacy of drug policy responses in Myanmar, mainly post the rise of methamphetamine- ATS. Second, the final sample included a diverse and highly experienced group of stakeholders from government institutions, non-governmental organisations, and community-based organisations who provided essential and relevant information. Third, and unexpectedly, the study timing has permitted insights into the added complexities of drug trafficking in a developing country during a coup and how the coup may impact current and future drug trafficking in Myanmar. The main limitation, as noted above, was that the overall sample was smaller than initially planned. A second but related limitation was that a smaller number of people were recruited from the health sector. This was despite having received a letter of approval from the relevant ministry. This may have affected some insights garnered.

Summary

This chapter has presented a full picture of research design used in this thesis. This included research questions, research population: interview sampling, method of recruitment, interview approach, ethic issues and conflicts of interest, specific challenges, emphasising strengths and weaknesses. The following section will discuss the findings.

4. RESULTS

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the results from the semi-structured in-depth interviews with the thirteen key stakeholders regarding the drug-related issues in Myanmar. This section has been organised into various research themes and participants' responses. Four main sections are included. The first section discusses trends in drug trafficking in Myanmar, and other market shifts; for example, the shift from opium poppy cultivation to methamphetamine production. Next, problems arising from the illicit drug industry: corruption, adverse impacts on licit and illicit economies, and other health and social issues from the domestic drug use are presented to reveal the detrimental impact on Myanmar. The following section discusses the enablers that stakeholders identified as supporting Myanmar's flourishing narcotic drugs market. These enablers include poverty, increased profit and demand, geography and displacement, a disregard for the rule of law, ethnic armed groups, and organised syndicates. The concluding section discusses the efficacy of the current drug policy responses.

4.1 Trends in the illicit drug industry in Myanmar

The stakeholders affirm Myanmar's illicit drug market has seen many significant changes over the last decade or two. Significantly, the drug industry has shifted from an opiate dominated market to an amphetamine dominated market, which is increasingly targeted at the international market (NGO-4).

4.1.1 Growth and shifts in illicit drug trafficking and production

All the participants noted that drug trafficking had gotten worse across the nation in recent years. This is evidenced by increased numbers and quantities of drugs being seized, and growth in production relative to other parts of the world. For example, the police noted:

> Locally, the opium seizure rate doubled, and methamphetamine become tripled in the five years. Methamphetamine trafficking seems profitable, and much demand from outside the country and demand within the SEA is also increasing (POL-3).

Additionally, **POL-2** argued that 'The quantity of illicit drugs has increased. A massive quantity of drugs has been seized, and more offenders and criminals are being arrested.'

POL-3 agreed and said '[t]he synthetic drugs has worsened…[a]s demand has increased within and beyond the region year after year, the drug market is more profitable.'

Stakeholders further noted the shifts in Myanmar's drug market. On the one hand, Myanmar has a long history of opium production. For instance, **NGO-2** stated that in the 1970s, international demand for heroin significantly impacted Myanmar's opium cultivation and led to an increase in local opium production and supply. Stakeholders noted the last 50 years has seen the expansion of sites of cultivation across the country: from Shan and Kachin states to Karen, Sagaing, and Chin States.

> If you look at the Myanmar drug market, in the last 50 years ago, we have had opium cultivation, primarily along with the China border areas: Wa and Kokang. In the 1970s, international demand for heroin dramatically changed the opium market here, leading to increased opium cultivation and more export-oriented outside investments in the production of heroin (NGO-2).

However, over the last two decades (2000 onwards), **Health-1** noted that there has been a reduction in opium cultivation which is likely to continue. **POL-2** concurred and said that since 2014, opium cultivation has decreased, and there has been a decline in heroin production. **NGO-2** suggested that high agricultural costs, labour intensity, difficulty in market access, and migration to neighbouring countries from the opium-growing villages has pushed opium farmers to reduce (to some extent) their opium cultivation and look for profits in alternative investment opportunities. This is found in synthetic drug production.

Stakeholders were unanimous in noting that the amphetamine drug market has taken off in Myanmar, outstripping the opium market, leading to a lucrative new business. **NGO-2** said that the ATS market has boomed since the 1990s-2000s to a largely international market, turning Myanmar into the **"largest methamphetamine producer in the world."**

> [There has been an] increase of methamphetamines in the eastern parts of Myanmar and methamphetamine exported around the world…Myanmar becomes the largest producer of methamphetamine and exports to other countries [including] Australia (Health-1).

This market includes both a low-quality yaba and a high-quality crystal methamphetamine trade (POL-5). Highlighting this, **POL-5** underscored:

> Crystal methamphetamine and Yaba are often produced in the same lab as heroin – in special jungle labs that have got bigger and bigger. Then, there are seizures of precursor chemicals and industrial chemicals because many of these industrial chemicals are not unique to just the production of methamphetamine. Cyanide can also be used as a precursor for crystal methamphetamine production. The seizures of equipment and specialised equipment which has other purposes in mass production, but also for industrial use. Those things got bigger and bigger, and more complex and newer equipment, and more sophisticated equipment, and the ventures, and the sizes of the labs in the jungles and the logistics and the supply chain got bigger and more complex (POL-5).

NGO-4 noted that methamphetamine markets have been in border regions, and this includes the border with Thailand:

> Methamphetamine [production] has moved from the Thailand border into the eastern Shan State, Myanmar. We assume that there is one reason for this. Most traders or businesspeople who used to trade in opium have changed their investment from opium to methamphetamine, bringing more profit and mass production (NGO-4).

4.2 Other Changes in the growth of Myanmar's illicit drug trade

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 2: Methamphetamine tablet trafficking flows in the Mekong Region, 2019 (UNODC Source)

In Myanmar, illicit drug trafficking routes are diverse. Typically, two common courses have been used, and they are by land (through the jungles) and maritime routes (crossing the Mekong River). The most common drug destinations for these routes are trafficked east to Thailand and China for global distribution. Diagnosing this, **POL-2** commented:

> The first is through the land: drugs are trafficked into the Myanmar-China border and smuggled into the neighbouring countries through the Shan state and then to China. Then, drugs supplied from Golden Triangle goes to Thailand, crossing the Mekong River, through

Laos, and transported to China and Vietnam. Another route would be using maritime routes and sent to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia (POL-2).

But other routes are also emerging. A recent new trafficking route has developed from Rakhine state west to Bangladesh and India. This route has helped extension to the international market, which is no longer limited to Southeast Asia **(NGO-3)**. **POL-5** reinforced the claim mentioned above that:

> Myanmar is a major maritime nation in the region, and it has large borders on the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Traditionally, people have used those sea transit routes and trading routes for genuine trading, but they also use those same things and expertise to traffic narcotics across the region and then know those areas, like the back of their hand (POL-5).

Collectively, this means that Myanmar's drug trafficking industry has increased and strengthened not only through more diversified productions (ATS, yaba, heroin and opium), and expanded regions for production, but also through the development of new supply routes.

4.3   Impact of drug production and trafficking on Myanmar

Interviewees identified a broader array of impacts on the nation. These comprise increased corruption, and adverse impacts on licit economies, and other health and social issues from domestic drug use.

4.3.1   Problems in terms of corruption

Participants noted that corruption ingrained from the drug trade is one significant factor impacting Myanmar. **NGO-3** stated that drug business that conceals and links with other crimes creates economic instability and uncontrolled corrupt actions. **POL-1** suggested that associated corruption with drugs and confiscated drugs money proliferates money laundering in Myanmar. **NGO-5** identified that because producing other goods can make less income, but drug industry can provide a high profitability, and thus it is an incentive to appeal many people. In turn, this means that government officials are also tempted to engage in the illegal drugs industry to supplement their incomes.

Health-1 claimed that corruption is endemic to Myanmar's growing drug manufacturing and trafficking, in the ethnic conflict-affected areas because drug money is a lifeblood for militia groups to support their organisations. Community members seek help to address drug issues in conflict-affected areas but face significant challenges in dealing with local authorities who are being bribed by wealthy drug organisations.

> Corruption is prevailing in drug trafficking and production. Although people are asking for help on how to deal with drug issues, they are helpless. Big dealers are distributing drugs in the communities in the particular villages from the conflict-affected zones. Nonetheless, no solutions have come out yet, and even the rule of law remains vague. If the government cannot handle these things, the community say that police does not take effective actions because they are getting involved in the crime (Health-1).

This means that corruption becomes an excepted way of life in local communities where many officials tacitly support an industry that favours them.

4.3.2 Adverse impacts on licit economies

Another concern relates to investments stemming from the drug economy. This includes investments in the housing market, construction, hotel businesses, and industrial enterprises. **POL-1** recognises that, at times, drug cartels invest in these areas resulting in inflated land prices. When they withdraw their investments, prices go back to normal, and a collapsed economy ensues. On the other hand, **NGO-2** noted a positive impact from the drug trade. The drug trade can contribute some potential financial support for many locals in the mountainous and conflict-affected areas that offer locals few other economic opportunities. If the drug trade was removed, there would be no alternative economic opportunities for farmers.

> Most of farmers are growing opium as a cash crop for their livelihood… [f]or them, opium is a saviour and is like a stabilizer or lifesaver in a challenging situation (NGO-2).

For instance, China has good networks in illegal logging, jade mining, online gambling, and casinos, and they are all inter-reliant on the industrial drug businesses **(POL-1).** Generally, money from illegal businesses supports licit market channels because these channels rely on the high cash-flows produced by illicit businesses like the drug industry that deals mostly in cash that is not easily traced. **POL-1** says that 'money from illegal business seriously undermines formal business [when] it is invested into formal channels that cannot [develop into] a competitive market…[or a]…legitimate economy'. **POL-1** notes the IMF findings that suggest between USD$ 10-100 billion is generated from the drug industry and is moved around the world, including to Australia. In developing countries, like Myanmar, this results in high inflation and unstable economies because legitimate economic mechanisms are unable to regulate funds and benefit from legal control such as taxation.

4.3.3 Other health and social issues from the domestic drug use

There are other important health and social issues that stem from domestic drug consumption. While most of the drugs goes overseas, drug consumption and drug-related harms, for example, drug injection and dependence are growing within Myanmar. ATS drug users' dependency rates are increasing year by year, and mostly among young people, however adults are more likely to attempt heroin injecting.

Drug use has high social impacts that creates a considerable burden for the community, youth, family members and users **(Health-1)**. For instance, **Health-2** said that even '[i]f I ignore the drug problem…it [still] comes to your country; it comes to your family and your children' advocating that drug is an inescapable social problem for everyone. **NGO-1**, **NGO-2 and Health-2** further suggested that 'there are families and communities who kick drug users out from their house or village.' Drug use and its related crimes have also led to public safety problems. **NGO-2** and **NGO-4** stated that family breakdowns and violence often occur along with drug use within the home and other associated crimes. **POL-2** underscored that drug business often occurs in the family and are a huge obstacle for drug enforcers. For example, '[i]f a father earns money from drug dealers, his household members, like his children automatically inherit the business."

4.4 Enablers

Stakeholders highlighted many different structural factors that support the burgeoning drug industry in Myanmar. This includes the role of profit-making and demand, poverty, geography, corruption, a weak rule of law, ethnic and other organised crime groups, and the recent coup. Below focuses on the most noted drivers.

4.4.1 Profit

All stakeholders noted that profits drive Myanmar's thriving illicit drug business. **POL-1** highlighted that the drug trade provides new economic incentives for farmers, 'previously, they grew opium for their daily family expenses. Now, they have changed their lifestyles to include becoming drug mules in methamphetamine production. For some people, this

livelihood means that they now earn more money.' **POL-2** emphasised the essence of profit and a readily market.

> Opium farmers are not concerned by the financial situation of cultivating opium. For example, if they want to cultivate opium, there are no significant issues in finding markets for their products. But, if they want to grow other crops, like potatoes, they have to worry about finance and finding a market to sell their products. Opium cultivation…is easy to earn money (POL-2).

NGO-3 and POL-5 affirmed that the drug business is lucrative and can lead to high profits over a short period, and ATS also brings more economic reward than heroin.

> [These] types of large narcotic syndicates provide livelihood to local villages where there is only rural agricultural employment that provides seasonal work that, at best, might bring USD$100 a month. Alternatively, they are offered USD$500 a month (to work in a lab), or maybe more, to work in any part of…these large laboratories, whether it is working in the lab or providing materials and other things (POL-5).

NGO-4 assumed that ATS are good businesses for traders and drug traffickers because they can manufacture low-quality products called 'Yaba' for domestic consumption as well as high-quality products called crystal methamphetamine (ice) for an international market, increasing the range of profit making.

Additionally, noting the scale of the industry, **POL-5** argued:

> Yaba production is widespread, and there are some extensive Yaba labs, but I think it is common sense in terms of business principles. Suppose you can diversify and increase your profit margin– any business will diversify. I think that it is a question of scale (POL-5).

Stakeholders recognised that there are also economic incentives of methamphetamine production. **NGO-4** and **Health-2** highlighted:

> We assume that there is one reason. Most traders or businesspeople who used to opium trade have changed their investment from opium to methamphetamine, which can get more profit and mass production. For methamphetamine or chemical-based drugs, there is no need to worry about the soil and the weather. It can be produced on a large scale as wish. This is also one incentive of the drug trade (NGO-4).

> The drug is so cheap [to buy]. If you want to buy amphetamine-type stimulants, it costs USD 1 for one pill (equivalent to Myanmar Kyat 1000), the impact on the country and drug availability is easy (Health-2).

These low production costs are further incentivised by the strong market prices gained from drug supply in consuming countries like Australia, where they sell on the retail market for the upper market price is estimated AUD$50-200 per point; equivalent to (USD$36-143)(Hughes, C et al. 2021; Peacock et al. 2021). Profits are driven by cheap labour and production costs as well as access to ready markets and broader industry scales.

4.4.2 Poverty

Respondents identified that poverty is another prominent factor in increasing drug trafficking, and this mainly arises in remote areas where there is economic instability and weak rule of law. **NGO-5** said that people in remote areas do not grow crops for their daily lives because of the lack of access to markets to sell their products that compromises their long-term survival. **Health-1** and **NGO-5** both said that local farmers who live in underdeveloped areas rely on opium cultivation to cover their daily expenses. Myanmar's underrated socio-economic development entices locals to become involved in the drug trade. Acknowledging those factors, **NGO-5** reiterated:

> The people who live in their remote areas are poor, and they have no choice except drug trafficking as their end. The poor people grow themselves, and they had to buy nothing; they have no market for the production, so they tend to be easier to access poppy cultivation and synthetic drugs production (NGO-5).

In some regional areas of Myanmar, the drug trade is so in-built in local economies that citizens have few options but to work in the drug industry. This is true of eastern Shan state where drug manufacturing and cultivation support the whole economy. **NGO-2** notes that:

> Opium not just provides income to people who grow it, but also benefits the whole village. Some people have shops in the villages, and other people are the daily labourers, and they all benefit from the opium economy. Income from opium plays a vital role in the economies in those areas, and there are few economic alternatives out there (NGO-2).

POL-5 acknowledged the potential incentives of working in synthetic drugs production sites and ATS brings more economic reward than heroin:

> These labs have employed potentially hundreds of people that support multiple villages, and this is an excellent income provided to those where there was no previous income. They can feed their family and send their children to school. [These] types of large narcotic syndicates provide livelihood to local villages where there is only rural agricultural employment that provides seasonal work that, at best, might bring USD$100 a month. Alternatively, they are offered USD$500 a month (to work in a lab), or maybe more, to work in any part of…these large laboratories, whether it is working in the lab or providing materials and other things (POL-5).

An additional factor underlying Myanmar's poverty relates to an increased migrant workforce. Poor citizens move to other regional countries in pursuit of work, and this increases drug-trade connections. **NGO-5** stated:

> Some displaced people from the Shan, Kayah and Rakhine states go out to the neighbouring countries. However, in my sense, displaced people have no essential things in their origins – no food or shelter. Instead, they might be recruiting in transnational crimes like trafficking – selling drugs, planting or production of drugs (NGO-5).

Myanmar's underdevelopment factors lead poor citizens to engage in the drug industry and thereby contribute to its feasibility in the nation.

4.4.3 Demand

In terms of synthetic drug production, **NGO-4** identified that Yaba is produced for local consumption, but ice or crystal methamphetamine is just for export. As crystal methamphetamine is expensive, most people can't afford to use it, except rich people. In this regard, **NGO-5** stated:

> The domestic market for ATS is growing. Even in the central Myanmar, you can find heroin or ATS easily; in the past, nobody knew about heroin or ATS. But nowadays if you talk about these drugs to people in central parts of the country, everybody knows about it (NGO-5).

The demand for methamphetamine from outside is growing, especially in developed nations, like Australia, and in other Southeast Asian countries.

> Low-quality amphetamine in Yaba is primarily produced and distributed around the Asian region for local consumption. It is not a feature of the big high-profit markets in the region like Australia, and Indonesia-although yaba features too in Indonesia (POL-5).

POL-3 said that especially 'there is increasing demand from SEA.' **POL-2** stated that 'drug traffickers and Chinese nationals brought chemists from China into Myanmar. They manufacture many synthetic drugs here and send them directly back to China'. This shows that the chain of demand from other regional countries increases the illicit drug industry in Myanmar. **Health-2** contended that 'It is a global problem, not just a problem for Myanmar, it is a much bigger issue.' This means that if global demand is persistent, Myanmar's drug problem is tenacious.

4.4.4 Geography and displacement

Stakeholders noted that other key drivers of increased drug production include geography and displacement of precursor chemicals. **POL-5** argued that geopolitical factors position Myanmar to be perfect conditions as a big-scale drug trafficking site. This intensifies major drug manufacturing sites in the northern parts of Shan and Kachin states. More importantly, Myanmar is adjacent to India and China, which place it well on the global supply chain, near to these primary producer of precursor chemicals nations. **POL-5** stated:

> Geography is another aspect. Particularly northern Myanmar is perfectly positioned strategically and geography—open to perfect conditions by which major drug production

centres have themselves in northern Myanmar, particularly Shan state around and Kachin. If we were logistics people, we would be thinking about our supply chain. Myanmar is perfectly positioned by the regional supply chain to be close to the primary producer of chemicals and globally (POL-5).

Displacement of drug trades and chemicals from neighbouring countries is apparent. For example, in the year of 2014-2015, China significantly ramped up their efforts to reduce precursor trade and production in that country (**POL-5**). Therefore, organised syndicates have relocated the drug industry outside China and set up ATS trade to the Myanmar's lawless and ungoverned border areas.

China was very effective at disrupting and dismantling that, but I think there are some unintended consequences of the efforts and the good work of Ministry of Public Security (MPS) was the displacement of methamphetamine production into northern Myanmar from Yunnan. It has been exacerbated in Myanmar by localised conflict and conflict zones, particularly in northern Myanmar, which is perfect for establishing large industrial scale clandestine meth labs (POL-5).

Extensive precursor importations from other countries enables Myanmar's narcotic drug industry to grow. **POL-3** affirmed that Myanmar could not produce drugs without the help of precursor chemicals, chemists, and technicians from other countries, as Myanmar does not have its own precursor trade (i.e., Myanmar cannot produce precursor chemicals). **POL-2** argued that there is no regional consistency in precursors control. **POL-2** noted the motto 'no precursor, no drugs' which means that limiting precursor accessibility in local countries would help to control drug production in Myanmar.

4.4.5 Weakness in the rule of law and border security

Interviewees noted that the lack of the rule of law at borders drives Myanmar's narcotic drugs industry. Political instability is perceived as an extensive obstacle, and long-running conflict has led unrestrained ethnic armed groups to become main actors in drug businesses. Acknowledging this, **POL-1** noted:

Every armed conflict area is unstable, so that government efforts cannot go inside [areas controlled by local militias]. There is no rule of law in those areas; even law is not consistent. If we can make efforts for border stability or if the government can go inside and exercise their practices, there is no problem for drug production (POL-1).

Another issue is border security which is a significant element of the drug trade in Myanmar. **POL-2** argued that the remote bordering areas, far from the rule of law, enable drug manufacturing and trafficking to flourish. **POL-5** stated that Myanmar and its neighbours have shared borders, cultures, and traditions, and therefore, people along these border areas can easily and freely cross from one country to another. Narcotic syndicates use these networks to distribute drugs across the region.

A large, porous border has been culturally and traditionally open for hundreds and hundreds of years. People from families and the same local tribes with shared cultures can cross freely between those. Again, criminals take advantage of that. They used those same traditional cultural links to move those chemicals and finished drugs across the border from Myanmar into Thailand, Laos down into Malaysia and up to Indonesia spread those drugs out across the region (POL-5).

Health-2 also affirmed the importance of border security and some loopholes with China's borders have directed at many criminal activities. For instance, **NGO-2** witnessed that some provinces in China are uncontrolled, and criminal groups can cross borders easily. Drugs are supplied across the borders amongst neighbours, including Thailand, China, and India. Myanmar's poor border control management, coupled with its weak rule of law, had led to trafficking issues. In this context, **Health-2** acknowledged that Myanmar faces many problems with its border security, and '[c]ontrolling the rule of law is difficult across borders [that] easily affect the drug supply chain.'

4.4.6 Ethnic Armed Groups and Organised Crime Syndicates

Drug trafficking and manufacturing is aided by ethnic groups and their ties with outside players and external investments. **POL-5** said that there are two types of militias who are involved in the drug trade. The first is government reserve force militias, and the other is opposing groups against the military. Although they can make money from alternative means, it is easier to make larger profits from the cooperative drug trade. **NGO-4** and **POL-5** stated that some groups directly take part in drug production and trafficking, some provide security and protection for transportation, and some obtain bribes and/or collect taxes from opium farmers.

Alongside militias or local armed forces, Myanmar has seen the rise of new organised crime groups and foreign investors that support the drug business. Recognising the fact that there are major economic players beyond Myanmar, **NGO-2** affirmed:

> [a]mphetamine started with Khun Sa, and he was dealing with ethnic Chinese businessmen from Thailand; Thai citizens, and they were doing it first in Thailand, and they moved their production across the border into Khun Sa's MTA territory, as police crackdowns and law enforcement increase on the Thai side. They were the ones who invested in it, and they brought the chemist, and the people used to make it there. From there, ATS production later spread out to other groups like the 'Wa', 'Kokang' and 'Mong La' groups (NGO-2).

POL-2, **NGO-1** and **NGO-5** highlighted that all chemists are foreigners from Taiwan, China, and Africa, but not locals. **NGO-2** emphasised that '[t]he first outside experts came for heroin production, which shifted from Hong Kong to Thailand, and crossing the border to Myanmar

where it came in the 1970s. Producers here needed expertise, people who knew how to make the product.'

> There is much space for other actors with money from abroad to invest in the Myanmar drug economy. I think that it is not those militia groups, also not the Myanmar army, who are controlling the drug trade, but outside businessmen who will make deals with different kinds of militia groups or Wa or Myanmar army officers. They make those deals with people or groups and shares profits for guarding drugs production facilities or give space to production facilities by the militia groups. They make transport back and forth to these areas, bringing in precursors and bringing out ATS pills, as they have good relations with the Myanmar army to go through checkpoints (NGO-2).

In relation to the links between Myanmar's militia and external organised crime groups, **POL-5** stated:

> Ethnic armed militia are thinking this about livelihood, income, and production of profits. Like any business owner, they will spot a gap in the market, and they will seek to fill the gap, try, and dominate that gap to produce much money. Those groups are producing narcotics in Myanmar, whether directly or on a subcontract basis for large criminal syndicates which are outside Myanmar (POL-5).

An important point that these stakeholders make is that the "kingpins" or managers, brokers and the large criminal syndicates behind the expanding ATS trade are external: i.e., not from Myanmar.

4.4.7 Military Coup

Stakeholders were unanimous that the coup has further exacerbated many of these drivers. For example, it increases lawlessness, reduces employment opportunities, increases corruption, affect the existing and future cooperation, and flourish drug flows. In so doing, it aids the transnational organised players.

> Time will tell how the current political situation impacts international cooperation, that will evolve in its way. It will probably limit some of the future cooperation between different countries (POL-5).

> Opium is going up a bit again; and methamphetamine business is flourishing despite Covid-19 and coup. We have not seen any change in availability of drugs on the market in Myanmar, amphetamine prices are recently even going down (NGO-2).

4.5 Responses to the current National Drug Control Policy

In the final section, we look at stakeholders' views regarding the efficacy of the new Myanmar drug control policy, promulgated on 20 February 2018. Overall, most respondents supported the new national drug control policy. They noted that it is comprehensive, evidence-informed, and humane and brings relevant stakeholders together.

> I think it is a good policy because it is Myanmar's policy. Moreover, they developed it through significant community consultations and engagement with help and support from UNODC and others. It is what the Myanmar community and Myanmar people and Myanmar government have decided is best based on extensive consultation, and it is a perfect platform for that (POL-5).

All health respondents argued that the drug control policy is a good step in developing a national harm reduction program and approaching drug-related problems:

> When the drug policy has developed, there are many strengths regarding the outcome documents. The goal is not limited to drug-free of Myanmar but also reduction consequences related to drug issues in Myanmar. It has prioritised supply, demand, and harm reduction areas, including human rights issues too. As a result, it is also strength of a good policy (Health-1).

All NGO participants stated that it is a first major step in line with international norms and standards- particularly as it was designed to be in line with UNGASS 2016. However, it has faced significant implementation challenges.

4.5.1 Limited implementation

Although the drug control policy is of good quality, its implementation is limited. This is, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, recent political changes in Myanmar, and a lack of resources, particularly local expertise. **POL-2** claimed that Covid and recent political upheaval are major obstacles to implementing a drug-control strategy:

> The current drug control policy is more effective than the previous drug laws, and its action plan is going well, but the Covid pandemic and current situation in Myanmar, some delays have occurred in implementing its action plan (POL-2).

NGO-3, **NGO-5** and **Health-1** argued that despite past good consultations at the central level, each state/ region has never implemented or developed drug control action plans.

Additionally, **Health-2** and **POL-3** highlighted that lack of resources is another big problem to an effective policy implementation.

> When we try to decriminalise drug users, we need to inform or educate prosecutors, lawyers in the justice system, or administrative machineries. Before we do intervention and prevention program, we need professional skills to train them, educate them, and provide them with the correct (Health-2).

Meanwhile, the absence of experts and technical expertise are constraining to develop effective strategies:

> After the drug policy, all operational plans at the regional level and all implementation plans are paper base. However, at the regional level, nobody cares about drugs because of Covid and in the political change. There is no strategic plan anymore. Also, it is hard to judge what kind of people are involved or expertise they have in developing a plan or strategy (Health-1).

These findings mean that poor policy implementation is an underlying problem.

4.5.2 Governance issues

Overall, the governing structure of the national drug control policy is mainly formed by government institutions, but roles of civil society and opium farmers are under-represented.

> I think drug trafficking should be controlled by drug police; detox centres and harm reduction services should be operated by the health department; rehabilitation, mange by social welfare; and the implementation of AD (alternative development) should be lead by rural departments. Importantly, affected populations, such as drug users and opium farmers, should have the right to participate and make decisions in the policy implementation process (NGO-4).

NGO-5 supposed that current top-down management interrupts a timely information-sharing mechanism:

> The delegation of authority and good communication, and international cooperation has already established in the paper. But, only through the minister how can we take prompt actions. I see that the document is good, but we need proper action and support to chain of command…. share information is hard in a timely and proper cooperation (NGO-5).

4.5.3 International Cooperation

Stakeholders stressed the importance of international cooperation. **NGO-5** said that international cooperation needs to further develop at the policy level. **POL-2** highlighted '[a] single nation cannot address the drug issue, and it is a global issue, and every country needs to pay attention to elimination drug issues.' **POL-5** underlined that 'I guess time will tell how the current political situation limits … future cooperation between different countries.' This means that although an existing international cooperation mechanism has been entrenched with its neighbours and international partners, a contemporary political setting could hamper further cooperation in the long term.

POL-3 and **NGO-4** stated that, in the matters of alternative development (AD) program, cooperation with partners or donor countries is pretty good, cooperative mechanism are aimed at short-term gains, but more long-term strategies are not present yet:

> [f]or international donors, they need long term support and a three-year project to eliminate drug-related issues is not enough. I think that for the international community or donors…long-term strategies plus funding, cooperation, and international support are necessary (NGO-4).

Moreover, **Health-2** highlighted the importance of interdepartmental collaboration among the respective ministries and departments, and a strong bilateral collaboration with neighbours in drug control programs:

> Intergovernmental collaboration not only in this country but also with neighbours is crucial. Some of the policy recommendations to be implemented, but we still need to enhance the interdepartmental collaboration because we have the law passed from the Parliament and Ministry of Home Affairs, the police and CCDAC are supposed to be dealing with the drug users, include crackdown. Sometimes, the GAD people do not understand the new law and how they should treat drug users and inform each other during the working environment (Health-2).

As drug issues are global issues, cooperative mechanism is essential – not only among neighbours, both also in region and even at globe. Thus, a multisectoral collaboration both with government institutions and civil society organisations at the national level needs to be well-functioning.

4.5.4 Criminal Justice Responses

Most interviewees highlighted the drug policy has made a positive shift, coupled with decriminalisation for small-time users. However, **NGO-1**, **NGO-3 and Health-2** argued that consistency between drug policy and drug laws is not strong, and criminalisation and a law enforcement response remain.

Currently, policing strategies in border areas remain reactive, focusing on gathering conviction evidence and not on proactive drug enforcement measures. **POL-5**, **NGO-4** and **NGO-2** argued that criminalisation on low-level drug traffickers continues to abound, but not on high-level criminal networks.

In support, **NGO-4** said:

> Police focus on arresting drug users and small dealers, and they can never touch big traffickers and people who are involved in a higher level of organised crime networks. People in possession and low-level traffickers are relatively straightforward, but a sense to interrupt high-level traffickers or organised crime networks are less likely to intercept (NGO-4).

This focus on personal drug possession and criminalisation reveals a lack of awareness for alternative possibilities in controlling drug-related issues, and the difficulties of starting to shift the laws and policing responses away from a drug-free enforcement approach in the current context.

4.5.5 International Aid and absence of drug-related data

Currently, most of the funding for drug policy responses comes from international donors. **Health-1** stressed that funding from international donors mostly goes to harm reduction programs. In the post-coup period, foreign aid has already decreased, and even if more funding is still not sufficient to market problem. **NGO-2** said that small farmers receive little financial assistance from the government to grow alternative crops. **POL- 2** and **Health-2** both recognised that the government's funding for alternative development programs is not adequate. Then, **NGO-2** affirms that government policy does not clearly outline the ways forward regarding implementation and funding for health care and treatment sectors.

Stakeholders further affirm that Myanmar's drug data collection system has not been consolidated. A gap in implementing strategies, may relate to a lack of relevant drug profiling data that would provide better understanding about real situation in Myanmar. **POL-1**, **POL-2** and **POL-4** stated that household drug use surveys, has been conducted in some townships, and a comprehensive drug profiling data remain in need. **NGO-1** argued that '[a]ll data collection is based on the government's reports and drug seizure data in Asia.' **Health-1** further supported that an 'organisation and operational search program and evidence-based approach are still needed' and relevant institutions are unable to implement effective policy without this material.

Summary

This section has shown that there are many factors that exacerbate Myanmar's narcotics drug industry. This encompasses driving factors of high profits, poverty, demand, Myanmar's geographical positioning, support from outlaw groups. These are worsened by the delays in implementing the new national drug control strategy and an inadequacy of international cooperation in Myanmar.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Chapter Overview

This research project had two key aims. The first and foremost important was to identify enablers or driving factors of Myanmar's illicit drug trade. The second was to examine the efficacy of 2018 drug policy responses. This research employed a qualitative method - using semi-structured interviews with thirteen stakeholders from the criminal justice sector health sector and non-governmental organisations. This chapter discusses the findings and what this adds to the existing academic literature. Next will discuss the policy implications resulting from this research project, including potential avenues to improve the current drug policy responses.

5.1   What are the factors or main enablers that drive illicit drug production and trafficking in Myanmar?

In this research, stakeholders have identified many factors which support the growth in the illegal drug trade. They include increased profit, demand, lack of basic infrastructure, heightened poverty, geography, corruption, the weak rule of law, involvement of local ethnic armed groups in the drug trade, displacement of precursors from China, political instability, rise of transnational organised groups in Myanmar, impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and recent political changes. The most critical ones as identified by the stakeholders from their interviews were a) profit; b) demand; c) poverty and under-development; d) corruption and the weak rule of law; and e) different groups: organised crime groups vs ethnic armed groups and added challenges posed by the coup. Those factors will be discussed below.

Profit

The results have reinforced the crucial role of profit in the Myanmar drug trade. Most stakeholders acknowledged that illicit drug business brings economic rewards for opium farmers, those involved in methamphetamine production, and dealers of opium, heroin or methamphetamine. In recent years, an increase in ATS production and a decline in opium cultivation has led to a dramatic shift in production. While growing opium is a livelihood project for the opium farmers, methamphetamine production is lucrative for businesspeople and criminal syndicates. In Myanmar, growing opium appears to have a lower profit margin than methamphetamine drug manufacturing and trafficking. The stakeholders noted that the most significant profits flow out of the country - to the transnational syndicates. This is

because transnational groups oversee the trade and bring industry chemists to manage the labs and transport drugs back.

The crucial role of profit or economic rewards in the Myanmar drug trade is unsurprising given the existing literature. Most scholarly literature from developed and developing nations recognises that profit or an economic return enables drug trade(Desroches, F 2005; Garcia 2003; Hughes, CE et al. 2016a; MKG 2007; Otis 2014). A difference in findings relating to profit across drug types is also consistent with existing studies. For example, in the UK's drug studies, the mark-up between heroin and cocaine varied, albeit they found heroin had higher mark-ups than cocaine, whereas, in Myanmar's case, methamphetamine has the higher market price. Overall, the gap in profit for opium and methamphetamine in Myanmar are remarkable.

We further see that while the drug trade is lucrative and highly profitable, the rationales or motivations for engagement can differ between developing versus developed countries. In the UK, US or Canada, and the Netherlands, profits from drug trafficking tend to support luxury living, encouraging and motivating criminal networks (Desroches, FJ 2007; MKG 2007). In the case of Myanmar, we find the funds intended to use for subsistence or survival– that is, to cover the daily expenses of local opium farmers or opium or ATS dealers. This is akin to the experiences from other developing countries – Mexico and Colombia. That said, the central role of the transnational players in overseeing and shaping this market (particularly the ATS expansion) is a noteworthy addition.

Demand

All the respondents identified that the high demand for drugs intensified the illicit drug industry in Myanmar. However, they noted that the local demand within Myanmar remains limited. Most demand thus comes from other Asian countries, particularly China or beyond the region like Australia and New Zealand. The consumption patterns, including local and external demand, further vary. For instance, 'Yaba' (the lower quality product) tends to be reserved for local consumption, whereas; ice or crystal methamphetamine is exported. Opium is smoked within Myanmar, particularly in case of illness, but heroin is exported.

These findings have more similarities with that of the developing as opposed to developed nations where most supply is for internal use. In Colombia and Mexico, most of the demand for illicit drugs comes from outside the country - particularly consumer countries like the US, UK, and Australia (UNODC 2021b). For example, Colombia is a significant global cocaine

supplier, including the US and Australian drug market, and most ATS, cocaine and heroin from Mexico principally furnishes the US market (DEA 2017; Filippone 1994; NDLERF 2004; Otis 2014).

Poverty and under-development

The stakeholders demonstrated that poverty and underdevelopment are vital to flourish Myanmar's illicit drug manufacturing and trafficking. Stakeholders noted how growing opium mainly occurs in economic instability and remote areas where other licit crops are not growing well. This might be due to partial government support in those areas, informal taxation over the opium crops, and repressive government's opium cultivation eradication projects.

Developmental constraints like poverty and the amplified migrant workforce reinforced large narcotic syndicates to provide a livelihood to local villages to some extent because the drug trade can contribute some potential financial support for many locals in the mountainous conflict-affected areas that offer locals few economic opportunities. The importance of poverty and under-development is consistent with other developing contexts outlined in Chapter two – specifically in Colombia and Mexico. For example, Campbell (2005) outlined how poverty and underdevelopment support the Mexican ballooned drug trade. Colombia's drug industry has primarily occurred in the areas of poverty and under-development related factors such as limited job opportunities (Garcia 2003; Otis 2014). But here we also see how these issues can be exacerbated by the geopolitical circumstances e.g., the coup and by the global pandemic. We further see the how under-development and poverty are just as important in fuelling involvement in the amphetamine trade as it is in the opium or poppy trade.

Corruption and the weak rule of law

The findings also highlighted the critical roles of corruption and the weak rule of law in driving Myanmar's narcotic drugs industry. It has been noted that corruption is ingrained in the drug trade, and associated crimes (e.g., money laundering) stemming from drug business create economic instability. Corruption is relatively persistent in conflict-affected areas as of the nature of financial backbone for the militia groups. Some findings affirmed that the locals from the conflict-affected areas and ungoverned regions are vulnerable to seek help against narcotic drug-related matters. Comparatively, this revealed that wealthy drug groups bribe

local authorities, including police and government officials. The drug industry is worthwhile to entice many people, and consequently, corruption becomes a typical pattern in local communities where many officials tacitly support an industry that favours them.

The crucial role of corruption is consistent with scholarly literature from both developed and undeveloped nations, showing how corruption drives or aids the drug trade (Astorga & Shirk 2010; Garcia 2003; Grayson 2013; Kenney 2007; MKG 2007; Otis 2014). For example, in Mexico, an extensive corruption of politicians and economic elites are substantively involved in the drug trade. It also noted that the extent of corruption by cocaine traffickers is extensive, followed by kickbacks incentivising the government employee (Andreas 1998).

Another critical finding from this research is lacking the rule of law. Political instability and a long-running conflict between the central government and ethnic groups appeal to the viability of Myanmar's illegal drug industry. Moreover, in those ungoverned and borderless areas, a weak rule of law is the biggest challenge to intervene in anti-narcotic drugs operations or extend trafficker networks beyond the region.

Geography and displacement

A prominent example is China's displacement of precursors across the border. A porous and borderless situation enables large-scale illicit precursors trafficking into Myanmar and encourages the burgeoning drug trade criminal groups and narcotics syndicates. However, the Myanmar government faces an extensive challenge because the government cannot deliver law enforcement services to the controlled areas by those militia or ethnic groups. This enables a booming drug production to spread throughout the Myanmar community and moves across the region, stretching out Australia. Therefore, lawless groups operating beyond government control significantly hamper the community, nation, and region. Issues re the weak rule of law are further challenging post the coup as they increase lawlessness and people's need to resort to the drug trade for money.

Transnational syndicates vs local ethnic armed groups

Interviewees recognised that transnational organised crime syndicates and local ethnic groups monopolised Myanmar's drug trade. Transnational syndicates transport precursors and bring expertise into Myanmar to produce synthetic drugs and invest in illegal businesses, including drug manufacturing. They further are the ones responsible for most

of the trafficking out of the country. In contrast, local ethnic armed groups are getting involved in the drug trade in different ways: many undertake to collect taxes from the opium farmers, while some provide security and protection for transportation, and still, others take part in the drug manufacturing process.

These findings reinforce the academic literature about the vital role of organised groups in the drug trade (Desroches, F 2005; Desroches, FJ 2003, 2007; Hughes, CE, Chalmers & Bright 2020; Hughes, CE et al. 2016a; Hughes, CE et al. 2016b), and that there are different groups and methods in different parts of the globe. Jonsson et al. (2016) note that rebel or insurgent groups (e.g. The FARC) maintain Colombia's drug industry. For instance, the FARC groups in Colombia are collecting taxes from cocoa farmers, which can assist in growing their autonomy across the country. Garcia (2003) stated that those FARC groups have made drug business for an economic return to infrastructure development, ascertain the hierarchical structures of criminal organisations, and contribute to the local economy. This is comparatively in parallel to Myanmar's context- different roles of ethnic groups. However, the finding that the transnational organised crime groups supplement the local ethnic groups, and that the latter are the key driver of the trade is a noteworthy difference, that further highlights the difficulty of responding to this issue by local authorities and actors alone.

The Coup

The coup is one key addition to support the academic studies. Significantly, deposition from the pro-democratic transition state to the military dictatorship can shape the drug trade more flourishing. Importantly, this thesis study shows that political instability plays a critical role in maximising drug trafficking fast, regardless of regional or international factors. Presumably, it is a new academic contribution to understanding more about a booming illicit drug industry of Myanmar.

Stakeholders highlighted the coup has further worsened and exacerbated most of the factors highlighted above: poverty, rule of law and corruption. The coup has further degraded the existing relations not only with partners but also neighbours. International cooperation is a significant example after the Coup. Overall, future cooperation, regarding drug policy responses and police-to-police cooperation would be controversial. In the post-coup period, drug industry keeps flowing and there is no shortage in drug supply in the market although there are many crossovers. More significantly, this incident apparently aids transnational

organised groups to displace more drug trade across the country and beyond the region. In brief, the coup brings more economic gains for traffickers, effects on the existing and future cooperation, limit effective implementation while developing strategies, increase flow of drugs, and bring more opportunities for transnational syndicates.

Overall, the thesis shows an interplay of factors to flourish the drug trade in Myanmar, some of which are similar and others unique to this context. The thesis further shows that some specific factors are vital to the growth of the ATS trade in Myanmar. Nonetheless, the primary ingrained factor is due to the high profitability. Collectively, many crucial factors grow Myanmar's illicit drug trade. Necessary to be noticed is that precursor controls program by China reinforce a thriving drug industry in Myanmar. Subsequently, poverty, limited employment opportunities, and ready corruption, e.g., armed forces that aid growth in methamphetamine trafficking and production and the weak rule of law, further supports outside investment and internal players to be united. Then, new international players swept in to lead the drug expansion to add the factors mentioned earlier. Overall, this perfect storm made Myanmar a ripe context for the trade to expand the drug supply chain within and beyond the country, particularly in and after the post-coup environment.

5.2 What is the efficacy of the current drug policy responses and challenges?

In addition to looking at enablers, the study also examined the efficacy of the new 2018 policy. Overall, all respondents and given literature supported the new national drug control policy, noting that it is comprehensive, evidence-informed, and humane and brings relevant stakeholders together. The 2018 national drug policy is deemed better than the old drug policy and drug laws because it aligns with international norms and standards. For example, this policy is aligned with the recommendations of the 2016 UNGASS and three international drug conventions. However, stakeholders note there have been significant challenges in implementing the policy due to a lack of planning, lack of resources, skills deficits, governance issues, the Covid-19 pandemic, recent political changes, international cooperation, criminal justice issues, and the absence of comprehensive local drugs data. See also: (ICG 2019; Kramer 2017; Lai 2015).

First, all stakeholders commented that a shortage in resourcing is an underlying obstacle that considerably affects the implementation of the whole policy and its strategies. In some ways, the challenges of lack of resourcing are to be expected in developing nations like

Myanmar. But a comprehensive drug policy requires sustained investment. The issue of under-resourcing is a common problem even in developed worlds (Babor et al. 2018). The lack of resources in Myanmar increases reliance upon international agencies and donor countries to implement policies on the ground. While donor agencies are good in the sense that they are helping to provide some supports on the ground (e.g., HIV harm reduction program), reliance upon them creates a significant challenge if donors pull out and do not provide the money anymore (as has occurred particularly after the coup).

Second, coordination is another notable difficulty that achieves more realistic and unified policy implementation outcomes. Police-to-police cooperation is well built; however, the current political situation might have an impact on future cooperation. Given the present communication and coordination, interagency collaboration is also affected by lack of capacity for coordination and some structural issues inhibit this. Even in highly developed countries like Australia, good coordination relating to illicit drug policy responses is a challenge and requires sustained long term commitment (Hughes, CE, Lodge & Ritter 2010).

Likewise, in Myanmar, if a more integrated and effective coordination achieves, regardless of with internal or external stakeholders such as NGOs, only a presence of interdependence needs to be well-functioned. Yet, it is doubtful regarding structural framework for coordination- who should be the leading agency, what the requirements are and where the discussion points initiate in engaging for broader drug policy outcomes. Therefore, the Myanmar government should focus on a cohesive organisational framework and decentralise the government agencies to develop policy implementation independently. As the drug is a global issue, stakeholders further noted that cooperative mechanisms could advance from the collective voices at multiple levels, e.g., among neighbours, regional and international, and non-state actors like ethnic armed groups.

5.3   What are the potential avenues for more effective policy responses?

This research would like to recommend more effective policy responses in terms of the findings and interview results. Stakeholders talked about several different things that may enable more effective responses on the ground. This includes a good data collection mechanism, better laws and policing, sufficient treatment and harm reduction, an increase

in resourcing (from within or outside of Myanmar), international cooperation, peace process, and political stability (Please see *Table 3*).

Table 3: Proposed recommendations by stakeholders to improve an effective drug policy response

Underdevelopment	To implement the most effective alternative development strategies in compliance with the needs of the local farmers.
	To do more research on how to create and organise community development programs, instead of AD
	To take lessons learnt and development model and better approach from other countries: for example, Thailand.
	To integrate development agendas by donors or other international organisations with Myanmar's alternative development programs.
The rule of law and policing	To promote better laws and better-policing strategies such as supplementing resources, providing training, installing telephone interception skills to deter technology-based crimes
	To develop an integrated and cooperative mechanism among the security personnel to facilitate coordinated operations and prompt information sharing mechanism at the ports.
Peace Process and political stability	To engage with the ethnic armed groups to attain a unified figure of ceasefire agreement
	To balance a concept of 'highly militarisation' in those ethnic conflicts' areas towards a stable and prosperous region
Treatment	To expand investment in evidence-based drug treatment and harm reduction strategies
	To promote the capacity of the clinical staff for rehabilitation services for drug users.
International cooperation	To open up more consultation with CSOs, and to engage more experts in consultation and implementation drug policy responses
	To develop new coordination mechanism among internal (i.e., interagency, or intergovernmental organisations) and external stakeholders like third parties' agencies like UNODC
	To expand local resourcing or working better with donor agencies and other international advocacy groups regarding harm reduction program
Research and analysis	To build local data collection systems among the relevant government institutions and their partners.
	To do research and analysis regarding the update of policies and their progress.
	To do more research about the drug trade and get to know the underlying problems on grounds (market, strategies, and drug trends

In Myanmar, underdevelopment enables a constant growth of the drug supply chain and the potential for other crimes. Real development opportunities are thus critical. Many of the existing proposed solutions have limitations. For example, growing avocado is not a proper way to alleviate poverty, and promote the licit economy with substituted licit crops, particularly given poor roads and issues of transportation that constrain an effective export market. Similarly, the coffee plantation cannot be a good solution to address poverty. Adequate budget allocation must boost promotion the lives of local opium farmers. This increased budget can be helpful to develop alternative approaches to obtain more job opportunities for the locals in those opium-drug cultivation areas. In brief, the Myanmar government should adopt a specific guideline to implement a broader range of community development program, including rural development agendas in the policy responses.

Next, some findings discussed that a weak rule of law could create more lawlessness relative to political and economic instability, border insecurity, ethnic conflicts, and a failing peace process—those underlying factors adversely ingrained in corruption and large-scale drug production in Myanmar. In nature, organised crime groups can move free without boundaries, and this constrains the capabilities of the Myanmar Police Force. If counternarcotic interventions and drug policing did not function well at the policy level, strengthening the capabilities of drug enforcers would not figure out but still, be controversial. If more resourcing were supplied and advanced technology such as telephone interception powers were installed, drug policing would efficiently enforce drug operations. As such, drug legislation and an update on policing should be amended or supplemented as consistent with the 2018 drug policy and laws.

In addition, the peace process should be another implication that needs to address drug supply and demand reduction. Sentinel drug studies on developing countries like Colombia highlighted an interrelation between the peace process, organised criminals, and the drug trade that contradicts Myanmar's backdrop to drug suppression and elimination, as other geopolitical situations are contiguous. Hence, an existing national reconciliation process (NCA) should be secured to help attain non-ceasefire agreements among the militia and local ethnic groups.

Furthermore, law enforcement cooperation, particularly drug policing, should be more assertive in the regional framework, ensuring the enhancement of cross-border cooperation. Full access to resourcing could adequately implement the drug enforcement strategy.

Unless a total capacity of drug policing did not resolve and political stability did not pay attention to reducing lawlessness, these complex policy responses are tenacious, so the drug policy is necessary but insufficient. The drug policy must be pretty good, but a broader and critical reflection of another geopolitical situation need to consider. Again, if it is ignored, the drug issue or some situation will keep going.

Explicitly, Myanmar's drug issue and international relations perspective is of relevance. A solely full and appropriate policy implications can be actively performed whilst countering narcotic issues. This is the essence of the application that adheres to international cooperation to become effective drug legislation combating new drug trends. For example, it is vital to notice how each country stresses the effective cooperation mechanisms within and across countries/ regions and how state and policymakers reassure their drug legislation (i.e., how they see drug issues).

A final but very important issue is the military coup. Stakeholders have revealed the critical impacts of the coup in aiding and expanding the drug trade and adversely affecting the capacity to implement the new drug control policy. This shows the importance to look at issues beyond traditional drug policy, and the vital importance of political stability and reducing lawlessness to have any chance of reducing this drug trade, and the flow on effects to other countries. Overall, this research provides some important implications for the drug policy scholars. This study highlights the importance of the local or district, and national or international specific analysis because each country or region can have a set of particular enablers, especially in the developing nations like Myanmar, policy contents and responses. Then, this study further pinpoints the importance of dealing with policy responses relating to updating laws in policing and increased investment in treatment, as well as to other broader factors such as geopolitics, development issues, and peace.

This research also highlights the fact that prevalence of international relations can be seen as another highly recommended area to achieve a more effective policy implementation in responding drug policy issues. Expanding relations with donor agencies, e.g., the Australian Federal Police (AFP) would build capacity for law enforcement agencies. Then, this study also stresses the importance of working with UNODC and relevant member states and regional partners, e.g., Australia to build capacity about good data collection systems on drug trends, build skill sets and expand effective treatment and harm reduction options on the ground, and promote the existing drug centre to accelerate drug-profiling survey data.

Finally, this thesis underpins the importance of working with different groups like the ethnic armed groups to build peace and stability in the region.

5.4   Conclusion

In conclusion, a spectrum of several factors exacerbates Myanmar's illicit drug production and trafficking: including profit motives, international demand, lack of basic infrastructure, heightened poverty, geography, corruption, the weak rule of law, involvement of local ethnic armed groups in the drug trade, displacement of precursors from China and political instability. These factors reflect some academic drug literature in developed and developing nations but also raises new and unique insights. Given the diverse geopolitical factors, the Covid pandemic and military coup, Myanmar's illegal drug industry is quite challenging to provide adequate sourcing to law enforcers, policymakers, and stakeholders. This coup and Covid brings more economic returns for drug traffickers and transnational syndicates to expand their markets beyond the region. One notable fact is that the 2018 National Drug Control Policy is comprehensive, but challenges restrain implementing drug policy. For instance, limited resourcing, including expertise and skills, poor data collection, and a lack of effective coordination among the government institutions and civil society organisations are constrained to develop drug control action plans at state and region. That said, it is very clear that addressing the coup will be the first key requirement to stem the growth in and harms from the Myanmar drug trade.

This thesis contributes a broader academic knowledge to the existing drug literature and intensifies a growing body of research into drug trafficking in developing countries like Myanmar. Finally, this thesis highlights the importance of international cooperation both within countries and with donor agencies and working together with other groups. Most importantly, this research study indicates a complex interrelationship between domestic and international factors in driving the drug trade or reducing it. For instance, a surge in domestic poverty and escalating underdevelopment factors attaches to a constant growth of drug trade to other countries like Australia. Attending to domestic and international issues, thus the coup can entice less attention by international donors funding and aid to Myanmar's drug control capacity to drug-related problems and its policy responses.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Interview Questions

Appendix B: Verbal Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (PIS-CF)

Appendix C: Letter of Support

Appendix D: Letter of Invitation

Appendix E: Ethnics Approval from the Flinders University