

Understanding Drug Use as a Social Issue: A View from Three Villages on the Outskirts of Battambang Town

John McAndrew highlights the results of a small-scale study that examines the causes and consequences of drug use among young people outside of Battambang town.*

Until the mid-1990s, drug use in Cambodia was primarily associated with foreigners and local youth from wealthy families. However, by the late 1990s, drug use was on the rise among young Cambodians from all social strata. This was particularly true of drugs in the category of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), the most common known locally as *yaba* or *yama*. In the new millennium, the flow of amphetamines into Cambodia had reached staggering proportions. In 2003 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that 100,000 methamphetamine tablets entered Cambodia each day from the north-eastern border alone, some 75 percent of which were thought to be exported to Thailand. In 2002 the UNODC reported that methamphetamine trafficking from Thailand into western and north-western Cambodian provinces had evidently increased due in part to greater local demand, especially in urban areas. The UNODC further documented an apparent increase in the trafficking of precursor chemicals into Cambodia for the local production of ATS. Noting the huge supply of drugs flowing into Cambodia, this article explores the trends of drug use among young people in three villages on the outskirts of Battambang town in north-western Cambodia. The research attempts to identify the causes and consequences of drug use among young people, examine the effects of drug use on family life and assess the impact of drug use on community life.

Research Methods

The field research was conducted by the ADI team and trainees in February 2004 in three villages of Battambang district on the outskirts of Battambang town: Anhchanh and Ou Char villages in Ou Char commune, and Rumchek 1 village in Rotanak commune. Two primary research methods were used:

* John McAndrew is the project adviser of the Analysing Development Issues (ADI) Project of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC). The full study, authored by the ADI team and trainees, is available in English and Khmer at the CCC office.

focus group interviews and survey questionnaires. Focus group interviews were conducted in the three villages with key village and commune leaders and with non-drug using youth. Survey questionnaires were also conducted through purposive sampling in the three villages with drug users, drug user households (in most cases not those of the drug users interviewed) and non-drug user households. In the three villages a total of 30 drug users, 33 drug user households and 60 non-drug user households were interviewed.

Trends in Drug Use

In the sample of drug users and drug user households, the taking of drugs was a fairly recent phenomenon, starting predominantly from 1998 and increasing steadily thereafter. All of the 30 drug users interviewed were male, primarily between the ages of 15 and 22. Similarly, all of those taking drugs in the 33 drug user households were male, mostly from the same age group. All 30 drug users interviewed acknowledged that their drug of choice was amphetamines (*yaba*). Generally, users found the drugs accessible and affordable.

Occupations pursued by households in the villages studied provided members with a degree of independence. Despite slight differences in economic status, the drug user and non-drug user households both relied primarily on wage labour, petty trade and small businesses for their subsistence. Only small numbers of households relied on rice and cash crop farming. Unlike farming, in which households usually work together as a unit and subsist on a clearly delineated harvest, wage work and involvement in small enterprises often mean that household members work and earn separately from each other. While a portion of each member's earnings is pooled to support the household collectively, a portion is invariably retained as the disposable income of individuals. This enables even young people to have some buying power independently from their parents. Of note, almost half of the drug user respondents had worked as migrant labourers.

Notably, the persons who introduced users to drug taking in the three villages studied were predominantly their friends. This pattern was reported by the drug users themselves and observed by respondents from both drug user and non-drug user households. Among the drug takers, peer groups had emerged as an important focal point in their lives, and the influence of their friends had come to have considerable bearing on their behaviour. Moreover, drug users relied primarily on their friends to support their drug habits through the sharing of money or drugs. This helped mutually to sustain their addictions. At the same time, drug users acknowledged that they stole money from their own families and from other people to buy drugs. A small number also dealt drugs to get drugs. About one-third of the drug users spent earnings from legitimate work to support their habits.

Tellingly, many of the drug users interviewed had tried to break their drug habits but had little success. Several strategies were tried. Some users stopped going

out with their drug user friends. Some ate fruits like mango and lemon to curb their taste for drugs. Some even moved out of the village for a while. Some also worked hard, exercised, smoked cigarettes or tried to fill themselves with *yaba* to the point where it would no longer be enjoyable. Half of those who tried to stop emphasised the need to be strongly committed to stop.

While most parents were anxious to help their children with drug problems, they had little in-depth knowledge of drug addiction, and therefore their interventions were largely ineffective. Almost half of the drug user households interviewed did not even know what kind of drugs their members used. Nonetheless, two-thirds of the drug user respondents said that their parents had done something to help them stop. But this usually involved nothing more than advising the children to stop without giving them a clear method on how to do so.

While local authorities were less involved than parents, their knowledge of drug addiction was similarly limited and their actions likewise ineffective. By contrast with parent intervention, only one-third of the drug users interviewed stated that the local authorities had educated them about drug use. Usually, the authorities just told them to stop using drugs and causing problems in the village. They too provided no clear method to the users on how to overcome their amphetamine addiction.

Causes and Consequences of Drug Use

Perhaps contrary to popular belief, drug users did not take drugs primarily because they were beset with problems but because they found it attractive. They wanted to be accepted by their friends, to try something new and to be happy. This again underscored the influence of peer groups and the importance of social networks in supporting drug use. Intriguingly, the drug users interviewed often talked about “being pulled” into drug use by their friends. Meanwhile, modern lifestyles in other Asian countries, and particularly in Thailand, were depicted daily in television broadcasts and in movies shown regularly in public places in Battambang town. In this media exposure to new hairstyles, clothes and body ornamentation, drug use was often associated with being modern and cool. Young boys wanted to try or “taste” it. In addition, young men working as migrant labourers near the Thai border or in Thailand learned that they could work longer hours and earn more money by taking amphetamines. Observations made by respondents from drug user and non-drug user households about why their child or other young people took drugs, were largely consistent with the reasons given by the drug users themselves.

The Story of Rim Samath

Rim Samath was born in Siem Reap, the second child in a family of 10 siblings. He was 23 years old and still single. His parents were relatively

poor petty traders who moved from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh to Battambang to deal with the jealousy of his father, who was overly possessive of his mother. Frequent changes of residence disrupted Samath's education, as did the recurrent domestic violence that plagued his household. At the age of 20, Samath migrated to Thailand to work carrying bags of sugar at a factory. It was at that time that he started to take amphetamines (yaba) every day along with many of the other workers. He found that the drugs gave him energy and allowed him to work for long hours without feeling sleepy or hungry. But the drugs also made him feel weak and dizzy, and he became thin and anxious. Although he wanted to stop, his friends persuaded him to continue.

Samath was now back in Battambang living with his family in Ou Char village. He worked irregularly in Pailin loading wood and logs and continued to take drugs. When he worked, he earned Thai baht 100 (about US\$2.50) per day but spent much of this on drugs. Occasionally, he gave his mother some money to buy rice. Samath's friends were mostly other drug users. Other people his age who did not use drugs largely avoided him. Some of his neighbours likewise were afraid that he would steal their belongings to buy drugs. His mother often complained about his drug use and threatened to have the police arrest him. He had tried to stop using drugs but when he was tired he needed the drugs to function. Samath had never entered a drug rehabilitation programme.

Drug users had more fun as a result of their drug use; they were equally forthcoming about the adverse consequences they endured. Most had suffered health problems. These included becoming thin and pale, being tired, being unable to sleep, loss of appetite and fever.

Effects of Drugs on Users

While a large majority of the 30 drug users interviewed maintained that they had more fun as a result of their drug use, they were equally forthcoming about the adverse consequences they endured. Most had suffered health problems. These included becoming thin and pale, being tired, being unable to sleep, loss of appetite and fever. Many had also experienced losing self-control, becoming involved in fights and/or dropping out of school. Some users acknowledged that they had been arrested by the police, had stopped working, had been involved in crime and/or had lost interest in life.

Clearly drug use had taken a toll on interpersonal relationships. More than half of the drug users interviewed reported that, as a consequence of their drug use, they had more arguments with their parents and other household members. Many had left home, at least for short periods, had fewer friends and had problems with other villagers, local authorities and the police. Some countered that they also had more friends now among their fellow drug users. Drug user households noted similar breakdowns in the relationships of their drug using children.

Effects of Drug Use on Family Life

The 33 drug user households interviewed revealed that the drug use of their members had serious adverse economic effects on their families. Many respondents acknowledged that their households were less productive than before and that their children who used drugs no longer contributed to household livelihoods. Meanwhile households were spending more money on health costs incurred by drug using members. Likewise disturbing, other children in drug user households had started to take drugs, no doubt influenced by their older siblings. Drug user households were particularly worried that their children who used drugs would introduce them to their other children who did not take drugs.

Impacts of Drug Use on Community Life

With respect to the effects of drug use on community life, security issues were paramount. Large numbers of drug user and non-drug user households reported that there had been more theft, more fighting, more gang activities, a disruption of community events and a general worsening of security in the village as a result of drug use. Many drug users had also dropped out of school and left home, and parents were increasingly worried about their children. Some respondents noted an increase in HIV/AIDS, and several indicated that there was more distrust among villagers. While government and NGO programmes sought to reduce poverty, promote education and build solidarity among villagers, drug use had insidiously worked to undermine these efforts.

Concluding Observations

Cambodia's transition to a market economy opened up borders and spurred trade with neighbouring countries. In large measure, this trade offered the promise of a better life for most Cambodians. But left unregulated, it threatened to exacerbate existing social inequities and tear apart the very fabric of society. Together with the trafficking of human beings, the trafficking of drugs represented one of the most vile and despicable forms of trade to have emerged within the free market economy.

In the villages studied, corruption was embedded in local networks that included drug sellers, district officials and police, village and commune authorities and drug users. For example, village and commune officials complained that drug sellers handed over to the district police were released once they paid a fine. In one instance, a local drug dealer was reportedly released after his family paid 20,000 baht (about \$500) to the police. This represented a significant amount of money for local families and indicated that some drug sellers had access to large sums of money. Wealthy drug sellers considered themselves untouchable and even mocked village and commune authorities for their inability to keep those who were arrested in jail. No wonder that several local sources described the flourishing drug trade as one in which "money can buy impunity."

In situations where police made serious attempts to arrest drug sellers, the local networks adapted in response and made accommodations to thwart the law

enforcers. For instance, after several crackdowns at known drug outlets in one village, the drug dealers became mobile and enlisted young schoolchildren to make deliveries for them. The drug sellers would drive along the main road of the village on motorbikes or bicycles and distribute the drugs to the young schoolchildren, who in turn would pass the tablets on to the drug users. As part of the delivery network the schoolchildren could earn 1,000 riels (about \$0.25) per tablet sold.

The social networks emerging among the drug users likewise helped to sustain their drug habits. Drug users in the three villages studied were mostly young single men. Living on the outskirts of Battambang town they had been caught up in the broader urbanisation process of this north-western province. This included shifts from farm to off-farm work, from village to migrant work, and from family dependence to increased mobility and personal independence. Through the media, these youth were exposed to modern lifestyles, often associated with frequent drug use. As the focal point of their lives shifted from their families to their peer groups, being accepted by their friends became an important rationale for their behaviour.

Young men who took drugs relied on each other to sustain their addictions and often shared drugs, inhaling them together in groups. Drug taking likewise emboldened the users to steal property from their families and from public places in the provincial town. Stealing from others was often done with friends, and the booty that was realised was normally converted to drugs for group consumption. When individual drug users tried to stop taking drugs, it was usually their friends who "pulled" them back into their drug habits.

In general, parents of drug users had not been able to curb the addictions of their children. While awareness of drug use was apparently high among parents even before it became a problem in their families, they lacked an in-depth understanding of drug addiction and how to deal with it effectively. Similarly, local authorities lacked a thorough knowledge of drug addiction and were unable to respond adequately to the problem. On their part, villagers remained largely immobilised waiting for others to solve the problem. As long as these conditions prevailed, drug use in the three villages was likely to continue.

Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (March 2004), *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2003*.
2. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Regional Centre for East Asia and the Pacific, *Summary Report of the Illicit Drug Situation in Cambodia, 2002*.
3. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2003*.
4. *Ibid.*

ECONOMY WATCH – EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Although high crude oil and food prices continued to drive up consumer prices in most countries in Asia, GDP growth climbed down somewhat from the high rate of the first half of the year. In the US, economic performance was not as strong as many economists expected, but it was still considered the best performance in the past three quarters (i.e. the fourth quarter 2003, the first quarter 2004 and the second quarter 2004). In the euro area economic growth slowed; however, looser monetary policy is expected to boost domestic demand in the region.

World Economic Growth

In the third quarter 2004, the US economy grew at an annual rate of 3.9 percent; 0.8 points lower than in the second quarter. The slowdown primarily involved three factors: personal consumption, gross private domestic investment and exports. According to the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, growth of personal consumption in the third quarter 2004 slowed to 3.5 percent year on year, compared with 3.6 percent in the second quarter. In the third quarter 2004, gross private domestic investment grew at 12.5 percent, the slowest rate in three quarters, while export growth declined to 9.2 percent from 10.8 percent in the second quarter. By contrast, imports increased by 12 percent in the third quarter 2004, up from 10.7 percent in the second quarter. The US current account deficit reached a historical high of US\$166.2 billion equivalent to 5.7 percent of GDP in the second quarter 2004, tending to dampen performance. It is important to note however, that the Federal Reserve raised its benchmark overnight bank-lending rate five times in 2004 in the face of US economic recovery and to stem possible inflationary pressures from developing.

The economic growth of the euro area in the third quarter 2004 was 1.9 percent year on year basis, down from 2.2 percent in the second quarter 2004. According to Reuters, high oil prices and the appreciation of the euro were the primary causes of the deceleration. Reuters also noted that the slowdown in the euro area was anticipated by a weakening of the two largest euro economies, Germany and France. Due to a concern about the continuing decline of economic growth in the euro area, the European Central Bank decided to leave its main refinancing lending rate unchanged at the historically low level of 2 percent at its meeting on 2 December 2004. The euro area GDP growth is estimated to range between 1.6 percent and 2.0 percent in 2004. It is projected by the European Central Bank to be between 1.4 percent and 2.4 percent in 2005.

In Japan, economic recovery lost some momentum as GDP growth continued to decelerate, reaching 2.6 percent in the third quarter, down from 4.4 percent in the second quarter and 5.6 percent in the first quarter.

The slowdown largely reflected a tapering off of both domestic and external demand. Domestic demand fell to 2.9 percent in the third quarter from 4.6 percent in the second quarter, and export growth declined to 14.5 percent in the third quarter from 17.9 percent in the previous quarter. The outlook for the Japanese economy has become more uncertain as a result of high oil prices, weak demand and recent natural disasters.

Economic activities in some other Asian economies have gradually decelerated in recent months as well. GDP growth in China eased to 9.1 percent in the third quarter of 2004, from 9.6 percent in the previous quarter. Administrative measures to cool the economy appeared to affect China's GDP growth for the third consecutive quarter. Due to a rising concern over administrative controls (i.e. that lending restrictions will further slow the world's seventh largest economy), the central bank has recently planned to replace them with an interest rate policy, according to Bloomberg News. Hong Kong's economy grew by 7.2 percent over a year earlier in the third quarter, 4.9 percentage points less than in the second quarter. However, the second quarter 2004 rise is due partly to the unusually low 'base' figure for the second quarter of 2003, in which the economy was seriously affected by SARS. For this reason, government economists are very optimistic about Hong Kong's economy, which is expected to reach the forecast 7.5 percent growth for 2004 as a whole.

In third quarter 2004, the Singapore economy grew more slowly at an annual rate of 7.5 percent, compared with the growth rate of 12.5 percent in the second quarter 2004, reflecting a decline in both external and domestic demand. External demand fell to 21.4 percent in the third quarter 2004, down from 25.8 percent in the previous quarter. Domestic demand eased to 10.3 percent in the third quarter, from 13.6 percent in the second quarter.

World Inflation and Exchange Rates

In spite of higher crude oil prices, consumer prices in the US declined by 0.1 percentage points between the second and third quarter, 2004. However, the core inflation rate, which excludes food and energy, remained unchanged at 1.8 percent. The anti-inflationary stance of the Federal Reserve may have been responsible for this. It may be noted that the Fed raised interest rates twice in the third quarter, in August and September 2004 (by 25 basis points each time). Consumer prices in the euro area rose by 2.3 percent in the third quarter of 2004, the fastest rise in six quarters. The price decline in Japan eased to 0.1 percent in the third quarter, driven by higher prices of food and energy, up from 0.3 percent in the second

(Continued on page 16)