



## Abstract

**Criminals Without Borders**

**Resilience and Interdependency in Opium and Coca Commodity Chains**

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Despite everything that has been thrown at the problem over the decades, opium and coca production and distribution reached the highest levels ever recorded in 2018. What explains such extraordinary resilience to prohibition?

This study conducts a comprehensive investigation. First, it historicises the emergence of opium and coca enterprise as a product of commodification and social construction. Next, it examines the two global mechanisms – the US and the UN systems – for tracking and monitoring the ubiquitous markets typically hidden in plain sight, and critically assesses official information and knowledge published since 1986.

Having assembled bases for understanding, this study then narrows down by focusing on the key actors and posing the questions:

*How do criminal entrepreneurs shape, and are in turn shaped by, the resilience of the illicit production of the crops opium and coca, and what are the implications of their enterprise on the governance over the livelihoods of poor rural households they affect?*

To answer those questions, this study makes a comparative assessment of four country cases: Afghanistan, Myanmar, Colombia and Bolivia. The assessment analyses three ‘configurations’ — the combination of factors or variables that represents the diverse outcomes or consequences – that may provide the answers. These are: (a) **resilience** and survival in the borderlands where the illicit crops are grown; (b) the **careers** or life stories of selected criminal entrepreneurs; and (c) **prices** and price changes of the illicit crops.

This study concludes that interdependency, first elaborated by Blok (1974) and defined as political, economic, or social forms of symbiosis, *quid pro quos*, collusion, or connivance — not fragility, coercion and criminal enterprise, or prices — best explains the resilience of opium and coca to prohibition. Analysing interdependency not only provides an alternative framing, it also opens up the options for tackling the policy dilemmas posed by illicit crop economies over the governance of rural livelihoods.