Reaction to Booklet 5

Gideon Lasco, MD, PhD
Research Fellow, Ateneo de Manila University
Senior Lecturer University of the Philippines
Booklet 5

- Focuses on “the association between socioeconomic characteristics and drug use disorders.”
- This is the first time, at least in recent years, that a booklet has been dedicated to this topic.
- Beginning with population health frameworks, it reviews the literature that links socio-economic factors - both macro- and micro-level- with drug disorders.
• It also presents evidence that drug use disorders negatively impacts the socioeconomic status of individuals and communities.
• Finally, it discusses specific populations considered especially vulnerable - including women, indigenous peoples.
1. The focus on socio-economic contexts of drug use is relevant and most welcome. However, I have the sense that the chapter conflates “drug use” and “drug use disorders” as if they were on and the same, implying that drug use necessarily leads to drug use disorders, and drug use is necessarily detrimental in the lifeworlds of people who use them.
1. In my ethnographic work among young people, some of the risk factors are indeed present - poverty, social exclusion, childhood adversity - but they call drugs their ‘vitamin’ because it helps them cope with the demands of the informal economy, and serves as a bond with their peer group. Some may develop ‘substance use disorders’ but many engage in ‘non-problematic drug use’; If anything, it’s their association with drugs that makes them vulnerable given how drug use is punished.
2. The frameworks in the chapter, while rightfully linking drug use and socio-economic disadvantage, inadequately captures the complexity between these factors.

• For instance, ethnographic work in Southeast Asia and elsewhere point not just to people’s drug use leading to their unemployment, but also, precarious labor in the informal economy leading them to use drugs - from truck drivers needing to stay awake to sex workers.

• It is not just, as the report says, “psychosocial distress” that lead people to use drugs amid economic difficulty.

• We need to fully account for the ways in which certain socio-economic configurations engender the use of drugs.
Participants also considered that modernization characterized as “fast-food lifestyle,” “the preferences of a new generation,” and “increased economic competition” had made people vulnerable to stimulant drugs because it demanded more energy and improved work performance. – Iran


I use [methamphetamine] a little not to feel sleepy so that I can earn money to support my children. Most importantly, I am happy as I sleep with my children at home. I ate rice. I went to the market to buy clothes for my children. This makes me happy (Sopha, 32 year-old FESW Battambang). – Cambodia

3. Also missing in the discussion is the impact of drug policies themselves on the social and economic lives of people. For instance, Asia’s drug wars.

- One of my own informants in the Philippines, an 18-year old boy, told me that he witnessed his cousin get killed in Duterte’s drug war, and took meth as it was the only way that he could cope with the shock. Without this fine-grained ethnographic picture, we might just file his ‘drug use’ to income inequality, poverty.

- Punitive drug regimes set back entire generations and further exclude young people from employment opportunities through policies like mandatory drug testing
Coming from a country where a drug war is going on, I can say that at least in some contexts, it is the drug war, not drug use, that is killing people’s lives and livelihoods. We cannot leave out the impacts of drug policies in the socio-economic lives of people who use drugs.
4. The focus on particularly-vulnerable groups is welcome, to which we must add children - who are certainly impacted by the nexus of drug policy, drug use, and socio-economic deprivation, even as some also use drugs themselves and engage in the drug trade.

- In the Philippines, a recent *Human Rights Watch* report details the lasting consequences of children orphaned by drug war - including "economic hardships that follow loss of a breadwinner".

Jennifer M. drew this using pencil and crayon as part of her therapy for the psychological distress she suffered after witnessing the killing of her father by police officers inside their Quezon City home in December 2016. © 2016 Kiri Dalena for Human Rights Watch
In summary

• The chapter opens up a new way of framing drugs within the context of global drug policy, as a population health issue with social and economic causes and consequences, and is therefore a welcome addition to the WDR.

• However, to realize its full potential I think we have to move beyond just linking socio-economic factors with drug use disorders, but considering the broader social and how it not just drug use but drug policy.