

Demographic Profiles of Drug Peddlers in Manipur: A Retrospective Analysis (2015-2024)

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ABSTRACT: Manipur, as an unfortunate consequence of its strategic location, occupies an important point on the drug trafficking map of the world. Years of unrest fuelled by ethnic tensions fuelled by internal and external forces have created a fertile breeding ground for illicit activities. The main objective of this study is to perform a retrospective analysis based on newspaper reports of some basic demographic data of apprehended drug peddlers in Manipur during the period 2015-2024. Data pertaining to 823 drug peddlers has been examined with respect to demographic parameters like sex, age group, district of residence and ethnicity. The overwhelming majority of peddlers were found to be males, and most of the peddlers were within the age bracket of 17-45 years. More than half of the peddlers hailed from four districts of the state, two in the valley region and two in the hill region. Finally, about 75% of the apprehended people belonged to two particular ethnic groups of the state. A combination of factors like civil unrest, economic pressures, gender socialization, structural and geographical implications, etc can be used to interpret the findings. However, the findings of this study are quite basic in the larger scheme of things and research should be expanded to include more parameters and perspectives. Interventions at societal and government level need to be taken up in earnest to tackle the drug menace in the state.

INTRODUCTION

The global drug trade represents one of the most concerning and complex challenges facing the world today. It was estimated that approximately 296 million people worldwide used illicit drugs in 2021 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). It represents an important health and security concern. Considerable research has been done on drug users and health impacts of drug abuse. However, less attention has been given to demographic profiles of those who sustain the drug network- the drug

peddlers. Looking into this area is also important because trafficking dynamics is influenced by local socio-economic and geographic factors. It is important to understand the demographic profiles of drug peddlers, and how the characteristics change with time. This would be helpful for developing effective law enforcement responses and effective intervention strategies.

Research worldwide on drug trafficking has revealed demographic diversity among the people involved in the illicit trade. Latin America is a region historically associated with the drug trade. In this region, drug peddlers often hail from communities

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that experience economic marginalization. Poverty in combination with high unemployment rates serve as main factors behind people entering into the illegal drug trade (Werb *et al.*, 2011). Studies on street-level drug markets in the United Kingdom revealed some common characteristics among drug dealers/peddlers. Youth who dropped out of school early, were unemployed and had prior criminal records were commonly found to engage in drug peddling (Coomber and Moyle, 2014). A link between socio-economic disadvantage and involvement in drug peddling has also been reported widely. This suggests that structural inequalities heavily influence the recruitment into the drug trade (Fleetwood and Urquiza Haas, 2011).

Asia can be regarded as one of the two epicentres of the global drug trade (the other being Latin America). The continent has two of the world's major drug production zones- the Golden Crescent in south and west Asia and the Golden Triangle in south-east Asia. The latter includes parts of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos and lies in close proximity to India's northeastern region. Studies have shown that some ethnic minorities and economically vulnerable populations easily become entangled in the drug trade (Chouvy, 2013). Sandwiched between the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, India serves both as a transit route for drugs destined for global markets and as an expanding consumer market. The country's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment reported a significant prevalence of substance abuse across states. Variations in drug availability and consumption patterns were also observed (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, 2019). Also documented is an increase in drug seizures across the country. The types of drugs trafficked and the demographic profiles of those apprehended for drug-related offenses also vary regionally (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2004).

Within this context, India's northeast (the state of Manipur in particular) occupies a crucial position in the drug trafficking landscape. Manipur's strategic location along the India-Myanmar border, combined with its position along Asian Highways 1 and 2 places it directly on the transit route from

the Golden Triangle. Thus, it is very vulnerable to drug trafficking activities (Khangembam, 2015). The state has witnessed a devastating drug epidemic in the past few decades, with several types of drugs flowing through its territory. Drug peddlers easily pass through the hill districts of Manipur bordering Myanmar viz., Ukhul, Kamjong, Chandel, Tengenoupal and Churachandpur. Heroin produced in the 'Golden Triangle', especially Myanmar is trafficked into India through the India-Myanmar border into the states of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The most important drug route is the one which starts from Mandalay, continuing to Monya and Kalewa within Myanmar and then bifurcating to enter India at two points. The first moves northwards, enters Moreh in Manipur through Tamu and travels thence to Imphal (National Highway 102) and Kohima via National Highway-2. The second branch moves southwards and enters Champai in Mizoram through Rihkhawdar.

There are three other routes through which heroin and other drugs are brought into Manipur illegally. These are the New Somtal-Sugnu-Churachandpur-Imphal route, the Kheiman-Behiang-Singhat route and The Homalin-Kamjong route (Das, 2012). After the narcotic drugs reach Imphal, Aizwal, Kohima, Silchar or Dimapur, they are dispatched to Calcutta, Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai or Bangalore and other places. Even if the police manage to stop them in one place, traffickers quickly find new ways and new routes. Catching some drugs might slow them down for a bit, but it doesn't really stop the whole business. Small, poor peddlers get caught most of the time. Drug trafficking makes so much money that many people feel it is worth taking a risk. Only a small amount of drugs are apprehended by law enforcement, so smugglers feel like they have a good chance of getting through the net. The impact of drugs has been severe, with Manipur experiencing one of the highest rates of HIV infection in India. It is largely driven by injecting drug use (National AIDS Control Organisation, 2015). Despite this crisis, empirical research looking into the demographic profiles of drug peddlers in Manipur remains limited. Quite a few studies have addressed drug use patterns and health consequences among consumers in the

region. But few have analysed the profiles of those engaged in the drug economy.

The idea of *War on Drugs*, which was first introduced by US President Richard Nixon in 1971, has taken on several forms across the globe. Manipur's state government too in collaboration with Indian central agencies has initiated campaigns, such as *Nisha Thadoklasi* (Let us Leave Drugs) and *War on Drugs* in 2018 and *War on Drugs 2.0* in 2022 to combat rampant illegal poppy cultivation in certain hill regions of the state and to disrupt its distribution and trade. In addition to this, they focussed on stopping the production and sale of illegal drugs in the state. Despite these campaigns and operations to seize illicit drugs, the issue remains persistent and complex. Manipur faces a grim dual challenge. On one hand, there is a need to control drug trafficking and on the other hand a need to rescue her youth from the pits of drug abuse. The number of drug peddlers apprehended (along with common drugs such as heroin, WY tablets, and SP capsules) has increased after the implementation of the *War on Drugs* initiative. Understanding their demographic profiles is important for several reasons. Firstly, we can get to know who are the most vulnerable groups. It will shed light on how drug cartels recruit and use people and which parts of the state are more affected. In places like Manipur where many different ethnic groups live together, knowing who is involved in drug peddling and why can help in

preventing unfair blame on particular communities. It can lead to fair and smart decisions to fix real problems instead of creating more misunderstanding between groups. Without this understanding, all efforts to create targeted interventions and effective prevention programs to tackle the social and health consequences of drug trafficking in Manipur will always be incomplete. Prior studies have shown that demographic profiling based on empirical evidence can be used ethically to enhance the efficiency of resource allocation in drug control (Weatherburn, 2009).

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study is to perform a retrospective analysis of demographic profiles of apprehended drug peddlers in Manipur, focussing on parameters such as age, sex, ethnic group, districts to which they belong, etc. during the period from January 2015 to December 2024.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The present study can be described as a quantitative retrospective content analysis of newspaper reports. Data was collected over a period of ten days in March 2025 from the newspaper archive sections of the Manipur University Central Library in Canchipur, Imphal and the Manipur State Central Library in Keishampat, Imphal. The newspaper referred to was the 'Sangai Express

TABLE 1
Sex-wise distribution of drug peddlers in Manipur

Year	Male	Percent (%)	Female	Percent (%)	Unidentified	Percent (%)	Total
2015	13	1.93	5	3.91	1	5	19
2016	24	3.56	4	3.13	0	0	28
2017	44	6.52	15	11.72	0	0	59
2018	48	7.11	12	9.38	2	10	62
2019	98	14.52	12	9.38	2	10	112
2020	70	10.37	18	14.06	4	20	92
2021	109	16.15	11	8.59	1	5	121
2022	191	28.30	39	30.47	5	25	235
2023	43	6.37	9	7.03	3	15	55
2024	35	5.19	3	2.34	2	10	40
Total	675	100	128	100	20	100	823
Percent (%)	82.02		15.55		2.43		100

Source: Compiled from reports in 'The Sangai Express English Edition' newspaper, January 2015-December 2024.

English Edition', one of the oldest and the largest circulated English language newspapers in Manipur. The collected data spanned a period of ten years from January 2015 to December 2024- a period marked by significant events in Manipur's recent history, especially in relation to drugs. The demographic profiles of 823 drug peddlers mentioned in the news reports were analysed with respect to parameters such as age, sex, ethnic group, district of residence, etc.

RESULTS

The data on demographic profiles of 823 apprehended drug peddlers in Manipur reported in the Sangai Express English Edition from January

2015 to December 2024 has been arranged in the form of tables for separate parameters.

This table shows the sex distribution of apprehended drug peddlers in Manipur from 2015 to 2024 (one decade). The categories include male, female and unidentified (sex not specified in reports). Both numerical counts and percentages for each group annually are also provided. It has been observed that about 82% of the apprehended peddlers are males, while only about 16% of them are female. The number of apprehended peddlers witnessed notable spikes in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, with the biggest spike coming in 2022 for both males and females. A drastic fall in the number of cases was then observed in 2023 and 2024.

TABLE 2
Age-wise distribution of drug peddlers in Manipur

Age group	Young adults (17-30)	%	Middle aged adults (31-45)	%	Old aged adults (above 45)	%	Unidentified	%	Total
2015	6	1.79	8	2.68	4	4.82	1	0.94	19
2016	5	1.49	13	4.35	7	8.43	3	2.83	28
2017	19	5.67	29	9.70	7	8.43	4	3.77	59
2018	20	5.97	13	4.35	12	14.46	17	16.04	62
2019	55	16.42	36	12.04	8	9.64	13	12.26	112
2020	42	12.54	34	11.37	10	12.05	6	5.66	92
2021	48	14.33	48	16.05	6	7.23	19	17.92	121
2022	101	30.15	87	29.10	22	26.51	25	23.58	235
2023	25	7.46	18	6.02	3	3.61	9	8.49	55
2024	14	4.18	13	4.35	4	4.82	9	8.49	40
Total	335	100.00	299	100.00	83	100.00	106	100.00	823
Percent (%)	40.70		36.33		10.09		12.88		100

Source: Compiled from reports in 'The Sangai Express English Edition' newspaper, January 2015-December 2024.

This table shows the age distribution of the peddlers. For the convenience of analytical study, the age groups are classified into four categories (Bhat and Patil, 2016) as children (0-16), young adults (17-30), middle-aged adults (31-45), and old-aged adults (above 45). Additionally, individuals whose ages could not be determined are categorized as unidentified. The child group is excluded from the table as peddlers are not found from this age group. This could mean that while drug abuse and peddling affect many parts of society, children are rarely involved as active peddlers. The highest percentage

(around 40 %) is found among the young adults group, which is followed by the middle-aged group with 36.33%. Only around 10% of the peddlers were above the age of 45. The ages of 106 peddlers were not specified in the reports. More than 75% of the apprehended peddlers are thus within the age bracket of 17-45 (young adults and middle-aged adults).

For better analysis, the district wise table is divided into valley and hill districts. The valley districts include Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Kakching and Bishnupur while the represented hill districts include Tengnoupal, Churachandpur,

TABLE 3.1
District-Wise Distribution of drug peddlers in Manipur (Valley)

Year	Imphal East district	Percent (%)	Imphal West district	Percent (%)	Thoubal district	Percent (%)	Bishnupur district	Percent (%)	Kakching district	Percent (%)
2015	3	3.16	0	0	1	0.62	0	0	1	3.57
2016	8	8.42	0	0	6	3.73	2	5.26	1	3.57
2017	8	8.42	1	2.22	20	12.42	3	7.89	5	17.86
2018	12	12.63	2	4.44	14	8.70	3	7.89	1	3.57
2019	15	15.79	8	17.78	30	18.63	1	2.63	2	7.14
2020	13	13.68	6	13.33	14	8.70	2	5.26	6	21.43
2021	8	8.42	12	26.67	31	19.25	6	15.79	6	21.43
2022	18	18.95	12	26.67	18	11.18	14	36.84	5	17.86
2023	3	3.16	3	6.67	19	11.80	1	2.63	1	3.57
2024	7	7.37	1	2.22	8	4.97	6	15.79	0	0
Total	95	100	45	100	161	100	38	100	28	100
Percent (%)	11.54		5.47		19.56		4.62		3.40	

Source: Compiled from reports in ‘The Sangai Express English Edition’ newspaper, January 2015-December 2024.

TABLE 3.2
District-Wise Distribution of drug peddlers in Manipur (Hill)

Year	Tengnoupal district	PC (%)	Churachandpur district	PC (%)	Ukhrul district	PC (%)	Tamenglong district	PC (%)	Kamjong district	PC (%)	Jiribam district	PC (%)	Kangpokpi district	PC (%)	Chandel district	PC (%)	Senapati	PC (%)
2015	7	5.34	3	2.33	2	18.18	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	0	0	0	0
2016	1	0.76	4	3.10	2	18.18	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	1	2.13	2	5.88
2017	7	5.34	4	3.10	0	0.00	1	25	1	100	0	0	3	7.5	2	4.26	0	0.00
2018	15	11.45	11	8.53	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.13	1	2.94
2019	16	12.21	7	5.43	2	18.18	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	25	2	4.26	4	11.76
2020	24	18.32	15	11.63	1	9.09	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	5	5	10.64	1	2.94
2021	15	11.45	12	9.30	0	0.00	0	0	0	0	1	50	11	27.5	7	14.89	5	14.71
2022	39	29.77	57	44.19	2	18.18	3	75	0	0	0	0	11	27.5	24	51.06	15	44.12
2023	5	3.82	9	6.98	1	9.09	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2.5	5	10.64	5	14.71
2024	2	1.53	7	5.43	1	9.09	0	0	0	0	1	50	0	0	0	0	1	2.94
Total	131	100	129	100	11	100	4	100	1	100	2	100	40	100	47	100	34	100
Percent (%)	15.92		15.67		1.34		0.49		0.12		0.24		4.86		5.71		4.13	

Source: Compiled from reports in ‘The Sangai Express English Edition’ newspaper, January 2015-December 2024.

Ukhrul, Tamenglong, Kamjong, Jiribam, Kangpokpi, Chandel and Senapati. There are two other categories i.e., outside Manipur and unidentified groups. The peddlers in these two categories are either unspecified in the reports, or are non-Manipuris. Among the valley districts, Thoubal district has the highest percentage of drug peddlers being caught with 19.56%. After Thoubal, the second highest is Imphal

East district with 11.54% which is followed by Imphal West district with 5.47 %. In the hill districts, the highest percentage is found in Tengnoupal district with 15.91%, closely followed by Churachandpur district with 15.67%. If we look at the whole data, Thoubal district represents the highest percentage of drug peddlers being caught, which is followed by Tengnoupal district and Churachandpur district.

TABLE 4
Ethnicity-wise Distribution of drug peddlers in Manipur

Year	Kuki	Percentage (%)	Meitei	Percentage (%)	Muslim	Percentage (%)	Naga	Percentage (%)	Non-Manipuri	Percentage (%)	Unidentified	Percentage (%)
2015	7	2.13	2	2.60	4	1.33	1	7.14	0	0	5	6.17
2016	10	3.05	2	2.60	9	2.99	0	0.00	5	22.73	2	2.47
2017	17	5.18	10	12.99	27	8.97	1	7.14	0	0.00	4	4.94
2018	21	6.40	10	12.99	25	8.31	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	7.41
2019	34	10.37	15	19.48	45	14.95	1	7.14	10	45.45	7	8.64
2020	36	10.98	9	11.69	35	11.63	0	0.00	3	13.64	9	11.11
2021	48	14.63	9	11.69	51	16.94	2	14.29	0	0.00	11	13.58
2022	123	37.50	14	18.18	58	19.27	8	57.14	4	18.18	28	34.57
2023	24	7.32	3	3.90	21	6.98	0	0.00	0	0.00	7	8.64
2024	8	2.44	3	3.90	26	8.64	1	7.14	0	0.00	2	2.47
Total	328	100.00	77	100.00	301	100.00	14	100.00	22	100.00	81	100.00
Percent (%)	39.85		9.36		36.57		1.34		2.67		9.84	

Source: Compiled from reports in 'The Sangai Express English Edition' newspaper, January 2015-December 2024.

The table shows the ethnicity-wise distribution of drug peddlers in Manipur. The categories included in this table are Kuki, Meitei, Muslim (Meitei-Pangal), Naga and Non-Manipuri. Those whose ethnicities are not reported are classified as unidentified. The Kukis stand out as having the highest representation, accounting for approximately 39.85% of the total cases. The second highest drug peddling percentage is found among the Muslims (Meitei-Pangal) with 36.57%. The two communities thus account for about 75% of all apprehended drug peddlers in the period under focus. Meiteis and Nagas together account for only around 10% of the apprehended peddlers.

DISCUSSION

Drug trafficking in Manipur is no longer a small-scale, localized trade. It has morphed into a sophisticated operation involving international drug mafias and cartels. It has deep roots in local and regional history and politics. For years, ethnic tensions and overlapping demands for self-determination have led to violence and unrest in the state. The situation is further compounded by instability in the broader neighbourhood, especially in Myanmar. This creates a fertile environment where illegal activities like drug trafficking flourish. The state's proximity to Myanmar, a major producer of opium and synthetic drugs, facilitates the smuggling

and sale of a wide range of narcotics. The state is thus virtually a "victim of its own geography". The common trafficked drugs include plant-based opiates such as heroin, brown sugar and opium, as well as synthetic drugs like SP tablets, amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), including methamphetamines like crystal meth and WY tablets/ *Yaba* ('crazy medicine' in Thai). The diversity of drugs reflects the adaptability of trafficking networks to meet both local and international demand.

The yearly data of drug seizures from 2015 to 2024 records a spike in the period 2019-2022. The spike is probably a consequence of the state government's *War on Drugs* initiative, which was first introduced in 2018 and re-launched with renewed vigour in 2022. The numbers dipped considerably in the following two years (2023 and 2024), owing to the state's weakened law and order situation in the wake of ethnic clashes that started between two communities in May 2023. The priority of the state's law and order agencies shifted to controlling the violence rather than on drug seizures. An overwhelming percentage of apprehended peddlers are males (about 82%). It is a common finding globally as well. Males are more likely to engage in drug trafficking due to a combination of sociological, economic, and cultural factors. Gender socialization patterns often expose males to

higher-risk peer groups and create greater tolerance for risky behaviour. Traditional norms around masculinity may emphasize financial provisioning and status acquisition through any available means (Fleetwood, 2014). Additionally, males typically have greater mobility and access to public spaces where drug transactions occur. They are also frequently recruited into criminal networks that are themselves male-dominated. However, research also suggests that female involvement in drug trade may be underreported, or manifested differently. Women often occupy lower-level or support roles that attract less law enforcement attention (Anderson, 2005). With regards to the age groups of the apprehended peddlers, the fact that more than 75% of them belong to the age bracket of 17-45 is on expected lines as the perennially volatile situation in Manipur for years has prevented many youths from having proper education or employment, especially the latter. According to a NITI Aayog report (2025), Manipur's annual unemployment rate (ages 15 and above) in 2022-23 was 4.7%, higher than the national average of 3.2%. A severe lack of employment opportunities leads many towards nefarious activities in search of a livelihood. They become easy prey for anti-social elements like drug mafias and cartels who are always on the lookout for innocent people to do their bidding.

A majority of the apprehended drug peddlers hailed from the four districts of Thoubal, Tengnoupal, Churachandpur and Imphal East - accounting for over 60% of the total. There are probable compelling reasons for this finding. Churachandpur district shares a porous international border to its south with Chin state in Myanmar (a region known for high levels of poppy cultivation and opium production), and communities with similar language and customs inhabit both sides of the international border. Meanwhile, Asian Highways 1 and 2, which act as main transit routes for drugs from the Golden Triangle passthrough Imphal East, Thoubal and Tengnoupal districts. Also, there is a sizable population of ethnic groups tied to the drug trade in these districts. It may also be mentioned that illegal poppy plantations (which some have compared to an extension of the Golden Triangle into Manipur)

are rampant in hill districts like Churachandpur, Tengnoupal, Kangpokpi and Chandel, under the patronage of certain organizations with ties to drug mafias and cartels. The state government clamped down hard on these plantations during the *War on Drugs* initiative, leading to significant tensions with particular ethnic groups. Thus it would be fair to say that it is on expected lines that the highest number of apprehended drug peddlers in Manipur are from these districts.

The ethnicity-wise distribution of drug peddlers has been a bone of contention in Manipur for quite some time. Data has time and again pointed out a high percentage of drug peddlers among the Kukis and Muslims (Meitei-Pangals) of the state, leading to uneasy relations with other communities of the state. A combination of various factors may be responsible for the high percentage of drug peddlers among the two communities. The primary explanations can be attributed to structural and geographic factors. Contrary to popular mass perspectives, it has little relation to inherent cultural predispositions. Communities (mostly ethnic minorities) living in border areas or along established trafficking routes are more exposed to the drug trade. Thus, they are more likely to get involved. They may also experience marginalization in the economy and in employment opportunities. Exclusion from mainstream economic opportunities is also quite common for such communities (Adler, 1993). A combination of factors such as patterns of traditional administration, migration, and political marginalization can create conditions of persistent poverty in certain communities. This makes illicit drug trade a viable, survival strategy despite its illegal status (Bergman, 2018). Income inequality plays a critical role too. In some communities, a majority of members face severe economic disparities compared to its elite members, alongwith limited upward class mobility. They are more vulnerable and likely to be pulled into the illicit drug economy. The possibility of quick financial gains becomes quite attractive in the face of structural poverty (Enamorado, *et al.*, 2016).

For some communities, pre-existing networks of kinship and transnational ethnic ties can aid in

cross-border trafficking. Trust-based relationships can reduce monetary costs and risks in illegal markets (Paoli, *et al.*, 2009). This is especially true for the Kukis of Manipur, who have kindred groups just across the international border in the Chin state and Sagaing region of Myanmar. Muslims in Manipur (or more specifically, the Meitei-Pangal ethnic group) also have good networks with fellow Muslims in neighbouring states like Nagaland and Assam, and countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. Tensions have often existed over their alleged harbouring of illegal co-religionist migrants from other regions. However, it is crucial to recognize that statistical overrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in arrest data does not offer the full picture, as the apprehended peddlers are only the tip of the ice-berg. Many local peddlers are themselves drug users who sell small quantities to sustain their habits. Many pass through the net of law enforcement undetected, and the major kingpins and mafia bosses remain elusive, operating in other states of India or abroad.

CONCLUSION

Manipur stands at a critical juncture in her history today, heavily influenced by external forces beyond her control. Better connectivity as a result of globalization has been a double-edged sword for the state- improving the standard of living on one hand and leading to a proliferation of the drug menace on the other hand. This short retrospective analysis of news reports in the Sangai Express English Edition of drug seizures in the time period of January 2015 to December 2024 (a decade) has shed some light on basic demographic profiles of apprehended drug peddlers, especially with respect to their sex, age group, residence and ethnicity. The possible reasons and implications behind the findings have also been discussed. The findings may be utilised to inform government policy in tackling the drug menace and as data for larger studies on the complex world of drug trafficking in a sensitive and crucial Indian border state like Manipur lying in close proximity to the infamous Golden Triangle. However due to limited time, the study could not come up with cross-referencing of parameters to come up with

more demographic perspectives. Other than cross-referencing of parameters, future research could focus on more parameters like socio-economic and family backgrounds of drug peddlers, history of drug abuse, case studies on specific drug peddlers, etc. Speaking of a broader picture, the findings of this study should be a wakeup call for the state. Conversations in the public and policy space need to focus on solving of ethnic tensions, improving the law and order situation, generating employment opportunities and offering targeted and effective interventions for communities historically tied to the drug trade without further alienating them.

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