

**UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND
CRIME'S EFFORTS TO PREVENT THE
DISTRIBUTION OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA THROUGH THE REGIONAL
FRAMEWORKS PROGRAMME 2022-2026**

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Abstrak: Upaya UNODC dalam mencegah peredaran narkotika sintetis di Asia Tenggara. Studi ini dilakukan untuk menentukan upaya apa yang telah dilakukan UNODC, sebagai organisasi internasional, dalam menangani tingginya jumlah kasus perdagangan narkotika sintetis di Asia Tenggara. Studi ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif. Data untuk studi ini dikumpulkan melalui analisis dokumen. Hasil studi ini menunjukkan bahwa UNODC telah melakukan upaya untuk mencegah peredaran narkotika sintetis di Asia Tenggara. Upaya ini dilakukan melalui Program Kerangka Kerja Regional 2022-2026, yang mencakup program-program seperti Memorandum of Understanding Mekong tentang Pengendalian Narkotika, Pertemuan Menteri ASEAN tentang Masalah Narkotika, dan Pertemuan Pejabat Tinggi ASEAN tentang Masalah Narkotika. Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya peran UNODC dalam kerja sama regional untuk mencegah peredaran narkotika sintetis.

Kata Kunci: UNODC, Organisasi Internasional, Narkotika Sintetis, Asia Tenggara.

Abstract: UNODC's efforts to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia. This study was conducted to determine what efforts UNODC, as an international organization, has made to address the high number of synthetic drug trafficking cases in Southeast Asia. This study used a descriptive qualitative method. Data for this study were collected through document analysis. The results of this study indicate that UNODC has made efforts to prevent synthetic drug trafficking in Southeast Asia. This effort is carried out through the Regional Frameworks Programme 2022-2026, which includes programs such as the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters, and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting

on Drug Matters. This study underscores the importance of UNODC in regional cooperation to prevent synthetic drug trafficking.

Keywords: UNODC, International Organization, Synthetic Drugs, Southeast Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

The illicit manufacture, use, and distribution of synthetic drugs for non-medical purposes is not a new global challenge. Developments in the chemical and pharmaceutical industries have significantly contributed to the discovery and proliferation of these drugs. Since the early 20th century, new drugs such as synthetic tranquilizers, stimulants, and anesthetics have advanced medicine. However, they have also expanded opportunities for the illicit supply and use of mind-altering substances. The ratification of the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, in which member states agreed to extend controls to several new synthetic drugs, many of which are of pharmaceutical origin, is a testament to the dangers posed by the non-medical use of synthetic drugs in the 20th century. It is crucial for countries around the world to implement early warning systems. Early warning mechanisms are needed to keep abreast of new developments in various regions and to respond promptly to emerging threats¹. Synthetic drugs are psychoactive substances produced artificially in a laboratory using specific chemicals.

The process of synthesizing these drugs often involves readily available chemicals, such as prescription drugs or industrial chemicals, which are then converted into psychoactive substances through a series of complex chemical reactions. Well-known examples of synthetic drugs include Methylenedioxy-Methamphetamine (MDMA), Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD), and Ketamine. The abuse of the illicit flow of narcotics, psychotropic drugs, and other dangerous substances, including synthetic drugs, is a phenomenon that has attracted national and international attention. In fact, the crime of using synthetic drugs, which

¹ *United Nations Office for Drug Control & Crime Prevention, Global Illicit Drug Trends (United Nations, 2001).*

can be termed synthetic narcotics, has developed into a transnational crime phenomenon perpetrated by organized crime groups. The existence of drug crime in the Southeast Asian region is a source of significant concern.

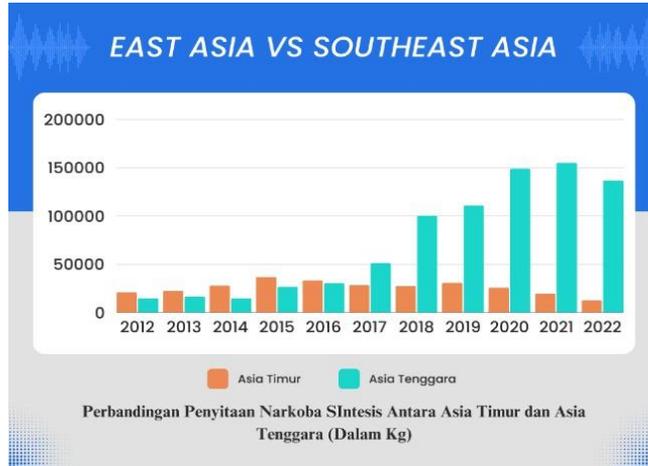
UNODC first established its presence in Southeast Asia in response to the increasing production and trafficking of drugs from the region to the rest of the world. In 1991, UNODC opened its first regional office in Bangkok, Thailand, with the aim of strengthening and supporting regional cooperation among countries in Southeast Asia in combating drug production and trafficking. UNODC's presence in the region also aims to assist UN member states in developing effective policies and programs to combat various forms of organized crime. Through these programs and initiatives, UNODC has helped mitigate the negative impacts of both synthetic drug production and trafficking in Southeast Asia since the establishment of its regional office. However, challenges remain, particularly with the emergence of synthetic drugs and new modus operandi in organized crime. Therefore, UNODC continues to update its approach and strengthen cooperation to ensure that drug and crime prevention efforts in Southeast Asia remain relevant and effective².

Synthetic drugs have grown massively in the drug market over the past decade. However, only a few synthetic drugs, particularly amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), particularly methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA), have established a strong global market. Methamphetamine is the most widely used and supplies synthetic drugs worldwide. Its production and use continue to expand in various regions such as Asia, North America, Southwest Asia, Africa, Europe, and even Southeast Asia³. The following is a graph showing a

² UNODC. 2020b. Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok, Thailand). Accessed through, https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/ATS/2020_ESEA_Regonal_Synthetic_Drug_Report_web.pdf. Last accessed 13 March 2024

³ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2022* (United Nations Publication, 2022).

comparison of synthetic drug seizures in Southeast Asia and East Asia in 2012-2022.

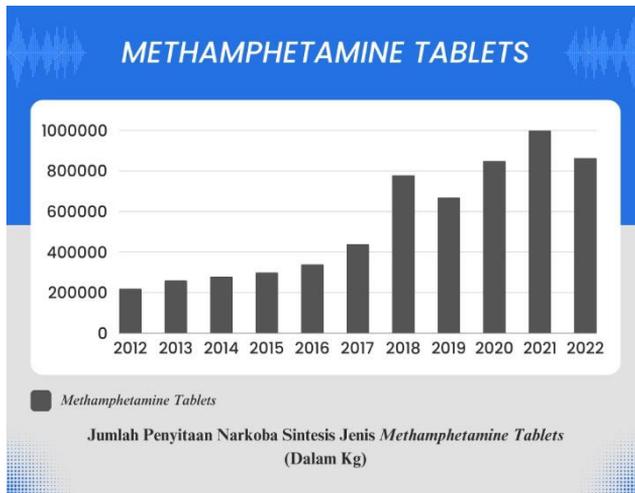


Graph 1. Comparison of Synthetic Drug Seizures in East Asia (*Left*) and Southeast Asia (*Right*) Between 2012 and 2022

Source: UNODC World Drug Report 2022.

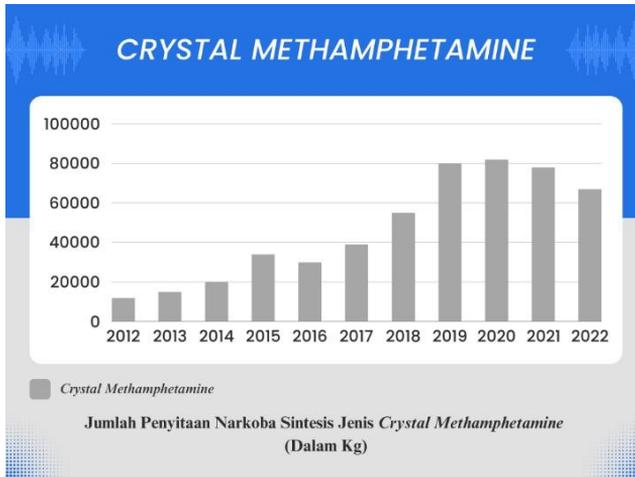
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2022.html>.
The data was tabulated by the researcher.

According to the graph, the number of synthetic drug seizures in Southeast Asia shows a consistently increasing trend compared to East Asia, which appears stable and even declining. Therefore, the high figures indicate an increase in synthetic drug production and users in Southeast Asia. Drugs hinder the development and well-being of a nation's young generation. Synthetic drug abuse is certainly a serious threat because it can damage the very essence of human life, community development, and national stability. The increasing frequency of drug crimes is a significant challenge for various countries, including those in Southeast Asia. The following is data related to the seizure of Methamphetamine Tablets and Crystal Methamphetamine in Southeast Asia:



Graph 2. Seizures of Methamphetamine Tablets Between 2012 and 2022 in Southeast Asia.

Source: DAINAP; UNODC, Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ); official communications with drug agencies in the region, March-May 2023. Data tabulated by researchers.



Graph 3. Crystal Methamphetamine Seizures Between 2012 and 2022 in Southeast Asia

Sources: DAINAP; UNODC, Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ); official communications with drug agencies in the region, March-May 2023. Data tabulated by researchers.

The data shown in graphs 2 and 3 shows the number of synthetic drugs most frequently seized in Southeast Asia, namely Methamphetamine Tablets and Crystal Methamphetamine. It is estimated that this number of seizures will continue to increase annually. This situation poses a direct threat to countries in the Southeast Asian region, considering that this crime not only disrupts social order and public health, but also damages the economy and political stability. With the continuing upward trend, a joint effort is needed from various parties, including the community, law enforcement agencies, and the government to effectively address this problem and prevent the wider distribution of synthetic drugs.

Synthetic drugs offer a significant way to reduce the risks and operational costs incurred by criminals. Synthetic drug manufacturing involves chemicals that, for some synthetic drugs, are readily available or can be replaced and improved with improved synthetic methods, thereby reducing the scale or nature of production, increasing yields, or leading to the development of new compounds that are more potent than traditional drugs or can evade existing controls and detection capabilities. Furthermore, suppliers can benefit by processing or distributing synthetic drugs as retail formulations, such as tablets, which have an attractive form and can increase the appeal to new users or those who dislike injections⁴. The following figure shows a comparison of labor supply between natural drugs and synthetic drugs.

⁴ *Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, "Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking: Final Report"*.



Figure 1. Comparison of Natural Drug Labor Supply (Left) and Synthetic Drugs (Right).

Source: Kilmer, B. and Reuter, P. DOPED. Foreign Policy, (175), 2009.

The image above shows the differences in the distribution stages from start to finish between natural and synthetic drugs. This difference is evident in the initial stage, where natural drugs still use manual labor and farmers, followed by production. Synthetic drugs, on the other hand, only use chemists and the production process. This means that synthetic drug production is one step more efficient than natural drugs because it eliminates the need for farmers, who sometimes rely on favorable weather conditions in a particular area. This is one factor contributing to the increasing ease of synthetic drug production, which can lead to increased production and use.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, here in after abbreviated as UNODC, is an international organization classified as an intergovernmental organization under the direct auspices and oversight of the United Nations (UN). Founded in 1997, UNODC focuses primarily on addressing transnational crime, illicit trafficking, terrorism, corruption, justice, and narcotics⁵. UNODC has a direct mandate from the United

⁵ UNODC. (n.d.-a). About UNODC. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Accessed through <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/about-unodc/index.html>, Last accessed 12 March 2024.

Nations to assist member states in fulfilling their commitments to combating drug trafficking globally, regionally, and nationally. UNODC's primary task and function is to provide technical assistance to UN member states with the aim of strengthening their capacity to prevent and combat drug-related crimes. UNODC's presence in Southeast Asia stems from the growing challenges facing the region related to drug trafficking and transnational organized crime. Since the 1970s, Southeast Asia has been at the center of global drug efforts, particularly with the "Golden Triangle" encompassing the borders of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. This region is known as one of the world's leading producers of opium and heroin, which impacts regional stability and security.

Through these various programs and initiatives, UNODC has helped mitigate the negative impacts of both the production and distribution of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia since the establishment of its regional office. However, challenges remain, particularly with the emergence of synthetic drugs and new modus operandi in organized crime. Therefore, UNODC continues to update its approach and strengthen cooperation to ensure that drug and crime prevention efforts in Southeast Asia remain relevant and effective⁶. This study aims to highlight UNODC's efforts in the Southeast Asia region represented by the UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (UNODC ROSEAP) as an international organization responsible for responding to various drug problems, including synthetic drugs in the Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific region. UNODC ROSEAP is headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand. UNODC ROSEAP has efforts in addressing various issues related to drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region. This regional office is responsible for implementing various

⁶ UNODC. 2020b. *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges*. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok, Thailand). accessed via, https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/ATS/2020_ESEA_Regional_Synthetic_Drug_Report_web.pdf. Last accessed 13 March 2024.

UNODC programs and projects designed to address the specific challenges faced by countries in the region⁷.

In its efforts to strengthen coordination and cooperation in the region, UNODC ROSEAP collaborates with various international and regional organizations, including those of ASEAN. This collaboration includes organizing conferences, training sessions, and meetings that allow for the sharing of experiences and best practices among countries in the region. One of UNODC's key strengths is its ability to work closely with national and regional governments⁸. With an integrated approach tailored to the regional context, UNODC ROSEAP helps create a safer and more equitable environment for all countries in the Southeast Asian region. This research focuses on UNODC's efforts to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in the region. UNODC identifies synthetic drug trafficking as a serious issue that requires addressing by various parties, including countries in Southeast Asia⁹. Therefore, UNODC strives to demonstrate its contribution by assisting its member states in addressing the issue of synthetic drug trafficking. Considering the urgency of the context outlined above, this study aims to explain the efforts undertaken by UNODC to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive method, which aims to describe existing phenomena, both natural and human-engineered. These phenomena include forms, activities, characteristics, changes, relationships, similarities, and differences between various phenomena. In general, descriptive research seeks to describe and interpret existing situations and conditions, emerging opinions, and the consequences or

⁷ UNODC. ROSEAP. UNODC Vacancy Announcement. accessed via, https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/vacancies/2023/TOR_Programme_Assistants_UNODC_Roster_8_Dec_23.pdf Last accessed 03 June 2024.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ UNODC. UNODC ROSEAP. Regional Programme. Accessed through, <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/what-we-do/index.html> Last accessed 01 June 2024.

impacts that arise. Descriptive research attempts to interpret and describe various aspects such as the circumstances and conditions of existing relationships, emerging opinions, and the impacts that occur. In this study, the researcher aims to describe UNODC's efforts to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia. The data sources used by the researcher to obtain data are UNODC reports on drugs, government reports, websites, and documents. The researcher also interprets the data with the support of previous related research such as articles, books, scientific journals, and websites that discuss the research subject to provide strong and accountable arguments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conditions of Synthetic Drug Circulation in Southeast Asia

Transnational Narcotics Trafficking (TransNT) in Southeast Asia has become one of the biggest Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) threats in Asia since the 21st century. A recent UNODC report estimated the illicit market for methamphetamine and heroin in Southeast Asia at approximately \$25.7 billion and \$6.3 billion annually, respectively¹⁰. Most leaders of the ASEAN anti-narcotics task force have recognized that TransNT has not seen a sustained decline since the transition to a “drug-free zone” in the 2000s.

The worsening synthetic drug situation in the region is also driven by Southeast Asia’s geographic proximity to the Golden Triangle, which covers approximately 950,000 square kilometers between the borders of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos and has weak border controls. Similar cases have also been reported in Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, where drug traffickers use various methods to conceal drugs from

¹⁰ UNODC. 2021a. *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Development and Challenges*. (Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)). Accessed through https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2021/Synthetic_Drugs_in_East_and_Southeast_Asia_2021.pdf. Last accessed 18 April 2024.

distribution or transport to other regions. Even the spread of COVID-19 in the early 2020s did not have a significant impact on black market trends and patterns at the regional level.

Although many countries have maintained the harshest penalties for synthetic drug-related offenses by implementing the death penalty both in law and practice, such as (Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam) and/or using the Philippines' war on drugs, this has not deterred perpetrators of synthetic drug crimes. Synthetic drug actors continue to play a cat-and-mouse game with Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) without fear¹¹. In addition to providing huge profits for dealers, the explosion in synthetic drug distribution has not only increased drug consumption and addiction, but also increased the level of violent crime, health crises, and the spread of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) / Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)¹².

The circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia continues to expand, raising questions about the clear distinction between traditional and non-traditional drugs over the past few decades. With the shift to methamphetamine, the border economy has begun to revive. Therefore, despite a fluctuating downward trend with some up-and-down years between 1996 and 2020, producing heroin from pure poppy has not been a top priority for traffickers as the synthetic drug market in the region

¹¹ Luong, Thanh Hai. 2021a. "Examining the Challenges of Controlling Illicit Drug Trafficking across the Mekong Since the Start of the Pandemic." *Asian Crime and Security* (blog), *Institute for Asian Crime and Security (IACS)*. Accessed through, <https://theiacs.org/examining-the-challenges-of-controlling-illicit-drug-trafficking-across-the-mekong-since-the-start-of-the-pandemic/?print-posts=pdf>. Last accessed 20 Mei 2024.

¹² UNODC. 2020b. *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Lates Developments and Challenges*. UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok, Thailand). https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/ATS/2020_ESEA_Regonal_Synthetic_Drug_Report_web.pdf.

continues to expand¹³. Over the past few years, seizures of synthetic drugs have increased rapidly to record levels. Across Southeast Asia, approximately 82 out of every 100,000 people in 2020 were reported to be drug users (with over 77% being ATS users), and the remaining ATS production has been trafficked to other countries in Asia and the Pacific¹⁴.

Additionally, synthetic drug manufacturers in Southeast Asia are now producing precursors needed to produce methamphetamine and other synthetic drugs, allowing them to increase production despite import restrictions or other supply issues. Laboratories producing these drugs rely on precursors such as pseudoephedrine and ephedrine imported and smuggled into northeastern Myanmar, primarily from China, while Laos has become a major transit hub for chemicals destined for Shan State, with over 125 tons seized in 2020. Much of this sourcing is done through ethnic armed groups and militias¹⁵.

While there is no reliable and accurate data on the number of dealers arrested annually for synthetic drug trafficking in Southeast Asia, the high profits from synthetic drug trafficking continue to lure thousands more into the business. A new report from the UNODC (2022) warns that synthetic drug trafficking continues to expand in Southeast Asia, with production and trafficking reaching record highs in 2021. The report, "Synthetic Drugs in

¹³ Luong, Thanh Hai. 2022b. "Paradoxical issues in eradicating opium cultivation in Myanmar: A perspective from local farmers" voices." *Poverty and Public Policy* 14 (2): 96-116.

¹⁴ ASEAN-NARCO. 2021. *ASEAN Drug Monitoring Report 2020*. ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO), (ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO)). https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ADM-Report-2020_2021Nov02.pdf.

¹⁵ Thomson, Nicholas, and Patrick Meehan. 2021. *Understanding the Drugs Policy Landscape in Myanmar: How Drugs Policies and Programmes Intersect with Conflict, Peace, Health and Development*. Drugs and Disorder (London: UK Research and Innovation). https://drugs-and-disorder.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/05_2021_Understanding-the-drug-policy-landscape-in-Myanmar_FINAL.pdf.

East and Southeast Asia: Recent Developments and Challenges 2022," confirms that extreme volumes of methamphetamine are being produced, trafficked, and used in the region and that synthetic drug trafficking continues to diversify.

UNODC Regional Framework Programme 2022-2026

The UNODC Regional Framework Programme 2022-2026 is a program designed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for the Southeast Asia and Pacific region. Fueled by the chemical trade and synthetic drug trafficking, the illicit economy in the Golden Triangle continues to grow year after year, impacting the stability of the Mekong region and the Asia-Pacific. While the supply of synthetic drugs is increasing, the availability of evidence-based drug prevention and treatment programs for those struggling with synthetic drug use is limited. Collectively, organized crime groups in Southeast Asia alone are estimated to generate at least US\$130 billion annually. Furthermore, the risk of ongoing crime continues to grow significantly.

The region requires proportionate support to achieve security and prosperity. UNODC's mission is to contribute to peace and security, human rights, and development by making the world safer from drugs, crime, corruption, and terrorism. The UNODC Regional Frameworks Programme 2022-2026 reflects this mission, working with governments, civil society, and private sector partners to design and implement smart solutions that build social resilience and protect vulnerable communities. In response, UNODC has developed approaches to guide action at the international, regional, and national levels to address this growing global problem. Some of the approaches facilitated by UNODC in the Southeast Asia region include¹⁶:

¹⁶ UNODC. Regional Programme for Southeast Asia and the Pacific 2022-2026. Accessed through https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/Publications/2022/RP_Broc_hure_2022-2026.pdf Last accessed 12 Juni 2024.

- a) Promote balanced drug policies and legislation, and support their adoption and implementation.
- b) Help address the trafficking of precursor chemicals to prevent the creation of synthetic drugs.
- c) Build capacity to address illicit drug production and trafficking.
- d) Increase the availability of evidence-based HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care, recovery, and social integration services.
- e) Support people involved in illicit drug production—such as opium farmers—to transition to legitimate livelihood options.

Based on the UNODC Regional Frameworks Programme 2022-2026, UNODC ROSEAP seeks to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia through three main programs consisting of the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control (MEKONG MoU), the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD), and the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Drug Matters (ASOD).

UNODC Efforts Through the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control (MEKONG MoU on Drug Control)

The Mekong MoU is an agreement that unites six countries in East and Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and China) to prevent the threat of illicit drug production, trafficking, and use. As a non-state signatory and the seventh partner in the MOU, UNODC provides secretariat and technical support for the MOU process. UNODC's Southeast Asia program is carefully designed to ensure effective UNODC support for the Mekong MOU mechanism¹⁷. The Mekong MOU provides an ideal operational platform to address these challenges. It is a framework that already has a strong foundation of collaboration and partnerships. The consultation and evaluation mechanisms built into the MOU process will enable it to respond to the evolving nature of the threat. Under the umbrella

¹⁷ UNODC. Partnership, Cooperation and Action in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/what-we-do/toc/mou.html> Last accessed 21 April 2024.

of the Mekong MOU, Mekong countries will continue to work towards holistic, balanced, and evidence-based drug policies. The trend of increasing drug use, and the resulting burden on public health and social well-being, can be reversed through stronger cooperation on drugs and health, and through more balanced, holistic, and evidence-based drug policies.

The Mekong MoU includes ministerial-level meetings, which serve as a regulatory and policy-making mechanism. Most importantly, they ensure a focus on key issues driving the political agendas of participating governments. The Senior Official Committee (SOC), held annually, is responsible for approving operational activities authorized at the ministerial level. The SOC oversees the overall implementation and development of the Sub-Regional Action Plan (SAP) and its various components. These two regular conferences foster ongoing senior-level consultations on appropriate policies to address drug control issues in the Sub-Region. They also serve as a primary platform for discussing other key issues, including strategies to address the critical linkages between drug trafficking and other transnational crimes (including migration crimes, human trafficking, and international terrorism)¹⁸. The Mekong MOU process can help develop national and sub-regional capacities, including through activities¹⁹:

a) Develop youth networks and target youth through prevention education.

b) Develop effective structures for the implementation of drug use prevention, harm reduction, and treatment and care interventions.

c) Train staff from relevant organizations to enhance their capacity to deliver and support evidence-based interventions.

d) Enhance research and the exchange of results among MOU signatory governments for planning, monitoring, and measuring progress

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UNODC. *The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Drug Control*.

Accessed through

https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2017/MOU_Brochure.pdf Last accessed 20 Mei 2024.

related to drug use prevention, harm reduction, and treatment and care interventions.

e) Enhance public health-oriented policies and programs for drug use prevention, harm reduction, and treatment and care in MEKONG MOU member countries.

f) Improve national legislation and government policies to ensure they meet needs and align with the principles of community-based care.

g) Strengthen prevention standards and improve drug use prevention and addiction treatment policies.

UNODC's first effort to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia can be seen through the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control (MEKONG MOU), which coordinates six countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China) in preventing the production and distribution of illicit drugs with technical support from UNODC. The Mekong MOU provides a robust collaboration platform and consultation mechanism to respond to evolving threats and strives to develop holistic, evidence-based drug policies. With the support of the international community, Mekong countries continue to work to stem the flow of illicit drugs and precursor chemicals.

UNODC Efforts Through the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD)

The second effort undertaken by UNODC to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia is through the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD). The AMMD is an annual ministerial-level meeting held by ASEAN member states to discuss issues related to countering narcotics and illicit drugs in the ASEAN region. This meeting serves as an important forum where ministers responsible for narcotics from each ASEAN member state can exchange information, share experiences,

and formulate joint policies and strategies to combat drug trafficking²⁰. The ASEAN Declaration of Principles for Combating Drug Abuse affirmed that they would implement internal and external cooperation to enhance effective measures in combating TransNT. For two consecutive decades, between 1976 and 1995, ASEAN continued to express their concern about the trafficking of illicit drugs as one of the threats to human security that could erode stability and development in the region, thus establishing the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD) in July 1996.

The AMMD aims to strengthen cooperation among ASEAN member countries in the prevention, control, and rehabilitation of narcotics and illicit drug abuse. This meeting also serves as a platform to raise awareness of the negative impacts of narcotics and encourage joint efforts to address the problem. In addition, the AMMD can also discuss issues related to law enforcement, intelligence exchange, capacity building, and international cooperation in handling narcotics problems at the regional and global levels. The AMMD plays a key role in advancing the narcotics countermeasures agenda in the Southeast Asia region and coordinating joint efforts among ASEAN member countries. According to the latest findings, UNODC's efforts through the AMMD include:

a) Reaffirming the strong commitment to strengthening the role of AMMD in coordinating ASEAN's direction towards a coherent, comprehensive, and effective strategy to realize a drug-free ASEAN with strict adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of ASEAN Member States.

b) Emphasizing the importance of addressing and mitigating the impact of the challenges arising from the current illicit drug situation in the region and reaffirming the need to implement concrete, evidence-based drug prevention measures as we witness the global recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, through strengthening inter-agency coordination among relevant ministries, public institutions, the private sector, and

²⁰ ASEAN. ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD). <https://asean.org/asean-ministerial-meeting-on-drug-matters-ammd/> Last accessed 04 May 2025.

development partners, as well as enhancing cross-sectoral and cross-pillar coordination among relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies.

c) Promote dialogue and facilitate the exchange of information with ASEAN Member States on the situation of illicit drug trafficking in the region under the ambit of the AMMD and its derivative mechanisms.

d) Conduct national anti-drug campaigns, which must be implemented by ASEAN Member States in the areas of preventive education, law enforcement, alternative drug development, research, treatment, and rehabilitation, guided by the ASEAN Work Plan 2016-2025.

e) Reaffirm ASEAN's firm stance against the legalization and production of illicit drugs for non-medical and non-scientific use or measures to undermine international control over all types of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances without relevant, verifiable, and reliable scientific evidence.

UNODC and ASEAN are strongly committed to strengthening the role of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD) in coordinating a coherent, comprehensive, and effective strategy to realize a drug-free region by adhering to the rule of law and respecting human rights, and safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its member states. Through the AMMD, UNODC will promote dialogue and exchange of information on illicit drug trafficking, as well as implement national anti-drug campaigns in various areas, including prevention education, law enforcement, alternative drug development, research, treatment, and rehabilitation. UNODC also emphasizes the importance of strengthening cross-sectoral and inter-agency coordination.

UNODC's Efforts Through the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Drug Matters (ASOD)

ASOD is a collaborative effort to address drug abuse at the regional level, involving all ASEAN member countries. This activity addresses five areas: drug prevention education, alternative development, law enforcement, treatment and rehabilitation, and research. This activity also

includes international assistance for ASEAN member countries to improve their drug analysis capabilities and verify drugs for intelligence and investigative purposes²¹. ASOD was established in 1976 under the name ASEAN Drug Experts (ADE) and later changed its name to ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) on May 12, 1984. ASOD is an annual meeting of senior ASEAN officials aimed at providing effective solutions to prevent drug abuse. As part of ASEAN's main pillar in combating drugs, ASOD designs agendas and plans for handling drug cases in the ASEAN region, which are contained in the "ASEAN Work Plan on Combating Illicit Drug Production, Trafficking, and Use"²².

The ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Drug Matters (ASOD) is part of one of ASEAN's main pillars, the ASEAN Political Security Community, which focuses on addressing drug abuse, trafficking, and smuggling in Southeast Asia. ASOD also serves as an information-sharing forum to protect the security of ASEAN member countries from the threat of drugs. ASOD has a working group focused on eradication through the scheme of "Preventive Drug Education, Treatment and Rehabilitation, Law Enforcement, Research, and Alternative Development." The development of drug cases in Southeast Asia will be included in the "ASEAN Drug Monitoring Report (ADM)" which is published annually. ADM is useful as a tool to facilitate the timely detection of drug problems, because ASEAN member countries participate in reporting drug crimes in their respective countries²³. Meanwhile, the main mechanism of ASOD consists of four points consisting of²⁴:

²¹ SEAN. *ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD)*. Accessed through, <https://asean.org/asean-senior-officials-on-drug-matters-asod/> Last accessed 05 Mei 2024.

²² Ibid.

²³ ASEAN-NARCO. 2021. *ASEAN Drug Monitoring Report 2020*. ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO), (ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO)). https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ADM-Report-2020_2021Nov02.pdf. Last accessed 18 April 2024.

²⁴ Ibid.

1) ASOD Working Groups:

The ASOD Working Groups are supported by five core working groups: education, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, law enforcement, research, and alternative development. The ASOD Working Groups conduct research focused on²⁵:

a) Facilitate discussions and exchange of information on research-related issues, such as methodology and research findings.

b) Share relevant research articles and studies related to drug abuse and addiction with ASEAN member countries.

c) Develop, provide input, and review any proposed initiatives and project proposals in the field of research before they are submitted to ASOD for approval.

d) Establish regular contact points to facilitate networking and coordination among relevant national institutions in ASEAN member countries on research.

e) Engage with relevant external stakeholders in accordance with the guiding criteria and modalities adopted in the AMMD and its derivative mechanisms.

2) ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO)

ASEAN NARCO is an institution responsible for coordination and cooperation between ASEAN member countries in countering narcotics. ASEAN-NARCO was established in 2014 to serve as a coordinating platform for ASEAN focal narcotics control agencies to work together in handling narcotics-related cases, particularly in developing an information database on anti-narcotics activities in ASEAN member countries. ASEAN NARCO was established to facilitate the exchange of information, strategies, and best practices in efforts to combat narcotics trafficking in the

²⁵ ASEAN. ASOD Working Groups. Accessed through, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/TOR-of-ASOD-WG-on-Research.pdf> Last accessed 22 Mei 2024.

ASEAN region²⁶. Its purpose is to enhance cooperation among member states in drug-related enforcement, prevention, and rehabilitation. It also serves as a platform for coordinating joint responses to drug challenges in the ASEAN region, including efforts to strengthen institutional, legal, and security capacities in each member state.

3) ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF):

The ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF) is a collaborative initiative established by ASEAN member states to enhance enforcement against the smuggling of narcotics and illicit goods through seaports in the ASEAN region. ASITF aims to strengthen cross-border cooperation in law enforcement, intelligence, and security in the maritime sector. ASITF was established in 2015. ASITF's primary function is to serve as a sharing platform to enhance joint operations and investigations among relevant ASEAN narcotics law enforcement agencies in cases of increasing drug trafficking through international ports and maritime checkpoints spread across the region²⁷.

The primary task of the ASITF is to coordinate law enforcement activities among ASEAN member states to identify, intercept, and apprehend narcotics shippers and dealers using maritime routes. This includes the rapid and effective exchange of information and joint training to enhance the capacity of law enforcement personnel at seaports. Through the ASITF, ASEAN member states work together to address the serious threat posed by narcotics trafficking in the region. By enhancing this cooperation, it is hoped that this will reduce the smuggling of narcotics and illicit goods and strengthen security and stability in the ASEAN region.

²⁶ ASEAN. ASEAN-NARCO. Accessed through, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Drug-Monitoring-Report-2022.pdf>, Last accessed 22 May 2024.

²⁷ ASEAN. ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF). Accessed through, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Doc-2-Publication-ASEAN-WP-on-Securing-Communities-Against-Illicit-Drugs-2016-2025.pdf>, Last accessed 30 May 2024.

4) ASEAN Airport Interdiction Task Force (AAITF):

The ASEAN Airport Interdiction Task Force (AAITF) is a program that serves as a sharing platform to enhance joint operations and investigations among relevant ASEAN drug law enforcement agencies in cases of drug trafficking through international airports across several ASEAN member states. Each country can share information on the drug situation, trends, and modus operandi in their respective countries²⁸. The AAITF was established in 2011, marking the official launch of the AAITF information system developed by Thailand, and the program has also been successfully endorsed by member states. The AAITF system was developed to promote and systematize the exchange of intelligence information among ASEAN member states, which can lead to the arrest of drug syndicates. ASEAN member states emphasized the importance of international cooperation and the exchange of intelligence information in bilateral and multilateral forums. Furthermore, member states raised the issue of joint AAITF training to enhance the capacity of drug interdiction officers in ASEAN member states at airports.

The third effort undertaken by UNODC to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs in Southeast Asia is through the ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) program, which involves all ASEAN member countries in regional collaboration to address synthetic drug abuse. This program also includes direct international assistance from UNODC to improve drug analysis capabilities for ASEAN member countries. ASOD aims to design an agenda and plan to address drug cases in ASEAN, including through the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO) and the ASEAN Drug Monitoring Network (ADMN). In addition, ASOD also focuses on cooperation in addressing synthetic drug cases through various mechanisms such as the ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF) and the ASEAN Airport Interdiction Task Force (AAITF).

²⁸ ASEAN NARCO. The 13th ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF). Accessed through, <https://aseannarco.oncb.go.th/uploads/AAITF/pdf/1792750214792672.pdf>, Last accessed 22 Mei 2024.

CONCLUSION

From the results of the presentation that has been delivered, it can be concluded that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) operates as a government agency under the direct supervision of the United Nations (UN) with a primary mission in enhancing global peace, security, human rights, and development by protecting against threats posed by terrorism, corruption, and drug crimes. Given the increasingly complex global challenges today, UNODC focuses its efforts on protecting humanity from criminal exploitation through a comprehensive, sustainable, and humanitarian-based approach. As an international organization, UNODC makes important efforts in combating various forms of crime throughout the world, especially in dealing with the circulation of synthetic drugs in various regions, including one of them in the Southeast Asia region.

Southeast Asia has seen a dramatic increase in transnational drug trafficking since the beginning of the 21st century. Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, part of the Golden Triangle, serve as a major hub for synthetic drug trafficking in Southeast Asia. This proximity exacerbates a situation characterized by minimal borders and controls. The proliferation of synthetic drugs in this region has highlighted the distinction between traditional and non-traditional narcotics, posing significant challenges. ASEAN's adoption of the "drug-free" initiative in 1998 for Southeast Asian countries marked a significant milestone, reflecting its commitment to combating the transnational trafficking of synthetic drugs through cooperative efforts at the bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels.

UNODC's first effort to prevent synthetic drug trafficking in Southeast Asia through the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control (Mekong MOU) has been a significant step in regional coordination. The Mekong MOU, involving six countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China), aims to prevent the production and trafficking of illicit drugs with technical support from UNODC. The platform facilitates robust collaboration and consultation mechanisms to respond to evolving threats and strives to develop holistic, evidence-based drug policies. The Mekong MOU also focuses on national and subregional capacity building through prevention education, staff training, enhanced

research, and strengthened public health policies, without including curative efforts in its programs.

Furthermore, UNODC and ASEAN are strongly committed to strengthening efforts to prevent the circulation of synthetic drugs through the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Drug Matters (AMMD), which is realized through coherent and comprehensive strategic coordination to realize a drug-free region. AMMD promotes dialogue and information exchange regarding illicit drug trafficking, and implements national anti-drug campaigns in various areas such as prevention education, law enforcement, alternative development, research, treatment, and rehabilitation. UNODC also emphasizes the importance of strengthening cross-sectoral and inter-agency coordination, and reaffirms its firm stance against the legalization and production of illicit drugs for non-medical and non-scientific use without relevant and verifiable scientific evidence.

The ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters (ASOD) Program is the third effort undertaken by the UNODC to prevent synthetic drug trafficking in Southeast Asia. This program involves all ASEAN member countries in regional collaboration to address synthetic drug abuse, including international assistance from UNODC to enhance drug analysis capabilities within ASEAN member countries. ASOD has developed an agenda and plan to address synthetic drug trafficking in Southeast Asia through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Narcotics Cooperation Center (ASEAN-NARCO) and the ASEAN Drug Monitoring Network (ADMN). ASOD also focuses on cooperation in handling synthetic drug cases through various mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Seaport Interdiction Task Force (ASITF) and the ASEAN Airport Interdiction Task Force (AAITF).

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