

ARE WE THERE YET? WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO WIN THE PHILIPPINE WAR ON DRUGS¹ Jorge V. Tigno, DPA

Key Points

- *The number of Filipinos who fear that there are many drug addicts in the Philippines is increasing. However, government and police authorities are increasingly faced with local as well as international criticisms over their handling of the drug problem.*
- *The drug problem facing the country cannot simply be reduced to supply-and-demand issues. Any effort by government to address the drug problem in the Philippines must by necessity adopt a comprehensive approach that is both multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional targeting not just users and pushers but society-at-large. The problem of illegal drugs cannot be seen simply and solely as a police and criminal matter. Therefore, punitive and retributive measures will not suffice.*
- *Government authorities need to reframe the anti-illegal drugs campaign less as a war against suspected criminal elements and more as a social development issue aimed not only at reforming and rehabilitating drug abusers but also preventing and curbing the onset of drug abuse altogether. Moreover, efforts need to be urgently exerted by police authorities especially not to turn the anti-drug campaign into a war against the poor.*

Introduction

Early into his campaign for the presidency in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte promised to rid the country of the drug problem just as he had done in Davao after having been its mayor for decades. Shortly after his election and assumption as president of the Philippines, in July 2016 Duterte embarked on a tough anti-illegal drug program led by the Philippine National Police (PNP) and one that has taken on the form of a war. On many occasions Duterte has even encouraged citizens to go out and kill drug addicts (AFP 2016; Matus 2016; Ross 2017).

The campaign was known Project Tokhang – a term that combines the Cebuano words *toktok* (to knock) and *hangyo* (to plead). At present, however, Tokhang has come to have sinister and morbid connotations, not unlike the time when the word “salvage” was used to refer to what happens to victims of extrajudicial killings during the Marcos regime in the 1970s and 1980s.

Shortly after the Tokhang campaign started, hundreds of thousands of suspects surrendered to the police and thousands more have been said to be killed while trying to resist arrest. And in the wake of reports of numerous casualties came the criticisms from local as well as international advocacy groups.

This policy brief outlines the current state of affairs of the Philippine government’s campaign against illegal drugs. It raises some issues and concerns that can serve to inform policy-makers towards eventually reframing and redirecting the anti-illegal drugs campaign towards a more effective and sustainable path.

The Operational Framework

The operational framework of the country’s anti-illegal drugs program under the Duterte administration was first outlined in a Command Memorandum Circular (CMC) issued by the National Police Commission (NAPOLCOM) and signed by then-Chief of the Philippine National Police (PNP), Director General Ronaldo M. Dela Rosa on 1 July 2016 (NAPOLCOM 2016).

The 18-page CMC No. 16-2016 sets forth the guidelines for the government’s campaign against illegal drugs dubbed: PROJECT: “DOUBLE BARREL” and was guided by earlier official “references” issued by NAPOLCOM, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), PNP, the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), and the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB), among others, including the recent pronouncements by President

Duterte, and provisions of the Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002 (NAPOLCOM 2016, 1).

The stated purpose of Project: Double Barrel is “in support to [sic] the Barangay Drug Clearing Strategy of the government and the neutralization of illegal drug personalities nationwide” (NAPOLCOM 2016, 2). More specifically, it involves clearing “all drug affected barangays across the country [of illegal drugs], conduct no let up operations against illegal drugs personalities and dismantle drug syndicates” by means of “the neutralization of illegal drug personalities as well as the backbone of illegal drugs network operating in the country” (3).

As provided in CMC No. 16-2016, Project: Double Barrel was to have a two-pronged approach: PROJECT TOKHANG and PROJECT HVT (most likely referring to “high-value target” although it is not specified in the CMC). Project Tokhang is to involve “the conduct of house to house visitations to persuade suspected illegal drug personalities to stop their illegal drug activities” to be undertaken “in all drug-affected barangays throughout the country in coordination with the Local Government Units (LGUs) particularly the Provincial/City/Municipal/Barangay Anti-Drug Abuse Councils (ADACs), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), stakeholders, and other law enforcement agencies” (NAPOLCOM 2016, 3).

PROJECT HVT is to involve “a massive and reinvigorated conduct of anti-illegal drugs operations targeting illegal drugs personalities and drug syndicates” and “will be employed at the national, regional, district, provincial and city levels to avoid overlapping of operational functions” with PROJECT TOKHANG (6).

The Current Situation

CMC No. 16-2016 states that the drug problem is worsening in the Philippines and “has victimized mostly the underprivileged and impoverished sector of the society (NAPOLCOM 2016, 2). The official document points out that a 2015 survey done by DDB shows that there were 1.8 million drug users throughout the country. Likewise, it also acknowledges a PDEA report showing that over 11,000 (mostly urban) barangays (out of around 42,000) were said to be “drug affected” with the National Capital Region (NCR) having the highest rate of “affectation” (92.96 percent of its barangays) followed by CALABARZON (49.28 percent) (2). CMC No. 16-2016 also points out that, based on PDEA arrest data, methamphetamine hydrochloride or *shabu* is the most abused among all illegal substances.

The true extent of the drug problem in the country is hard to determine. The official report on the problem

is likewise difficult to independently verify. Indeed, experts also point out that the war on drugs is a “slightly manufactured crisis” (Esguerra 2017). While the global prevalence rate for drug addiction is 5.2 percent, the Philippine average is said to be around 2.3 percent, says former DDB Chairman Benjamin Reyes, indicating that the seriousness of the drug problem and the necessity of the campaign against it may have been overstated (Ibid.). Available profile statistics of alleged drug abusers from DDB seem to bear this out.

DDB provides a rough profile of drug abusers admitted into its rehabilitation centers spanning several years. As the table below shows, the apparent trend seems to be that more and more drug abusers are (a) getting older; (b) unemployed; (c) married; and (d) the period during which they use drugs is getting longer. The data below does not appear to show the gravity of the drug problem in the country that would warrant a punitive approach against drug abusers.

DDB Profile of Drug Abusers*** (2002, 2010, 2016)			
	2002	2007	2016
Mean Age	27 years	29 years	31 years
Male : Female Ratio	11:1	9:1	13:1
Married	33.51%	47.36%	51.04%
Unemployed	31.76%	33.73%	44.69%
Duration of Drug Use	>2 years	>6 years	>6 years
Nature of Drug Use	Mono*	Poly**	Mono*
* Abuse of one drug only			
** Abuse of more than one drug			
*** Records from Residential and Out-Patient Facilities			

Sources: Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) Statistics

The idea that increased drug use leads to higher levels of criminal activity has been a strong sentiment among members of the general public. Increased criminal activity might also warrant a stronger approach towards drug users and abusers to prevent crime. However, statistics from the PNP show that the crime rate in the country has been declining for the past four years. Total crime volume across the country of recorded incidents actually fell 13 percent to 584,809 in 2016 from 675,816 in 2015. In 2013 the number of recorded incidents was 846,147 and fell to 714,632 by 2014 (Kyodo News 2017).

Likewise, official reports rarely emphasize the distinction between drug “users” and drug “abusers” and authorities are more likely to conflate the two. Moreover, authorities are likely to think (as does Duterte himself) that “users/abusers” are “beyond redemption” because drugs have “shrunk the brain” and that they are “no longer viable as human beings in this planet” (Lasco 2016) giving rise to police abuses and, in not a few cases, extrajudicial killings.

Over the years, Operation Tokhang has come to replace Operation Double Barrel as the flagship of the Duterte administration's campaign against illegal drugs. Far from its original conception "to knock and plead," however, Operation Tokhang has come to be associated with a rising body count of suspects killed ostensibly for resisting arrest. Current estimates reported in the media would have the number of deaths associated with the anti-drug campaign to be in the thousands with some reports estimating the casualties to be over 12,000 since Duterte assumed the presidency (Regencia 2018). The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) acknowledges in a report that around 4,000 lives have been lost between the time Operation Tokhang was launched on 1 July 2016 up until 10 March 2018 (Talabong 2018a).

Many of these deaths are reported to target vulnerable social groups particularly urban poor and even minors (Agoncillo and Ramos 2017; Aldama 2018; Lingao 2017). A survey in June 2017 by Social Weather Stations (SWS) says majority of Filipinos believe only the poor are killed in the war on drugs (Ballaran 2017; Licudine 2017).

These body counts have not gone unnoticed giving rise to criticisms both from domestic groups and from the international community. The Duterte administration, nevertheless, continues to have popular (albeit slightly mixed) support for its anti-drug war in the Philippines (see Licudine 2017).

Some Ways Forward

Operation Tokhang under the ambit of the PNP's Operation Double Barrel shows that a retributive and punitive approach cannot be a viable approach to the illegal drug problem that the country is facing. Indeed, international experts are quick to point out that, based on experiences in other countries, such a criminal approach may have a high degree of popular appeal and approval particularly at the beginning, but would not really, effectively, and sustainably succeed in curbing illegal drug use and abuse altogether (Esguerra 2017).

In the absence of realistic targets, body counts have become the likely measure of the extent of the government's campaign against illegal drugs. However, such a measure is problematic. In the absence of a more definitive measure of the extent of the problem of illegal drug addiction in the country, a growing attrition rate would be a vague measure of the success of Operation Double Barrel. It is highly unlikely that the 1.8 million drug users figure depicted in the official reports can all be confidently labeled as "addicts" or "abusers" and be effectively "neutralized" as per CMC No. 16-2016. As popular as it looks at the moment,

the current administration would do well to avoid the international, social, and political fall-out that comes from a government program measured in terms of the number of people killed.

The Duterte administration has much to gain and little to lose in moving away from framing its anti-illegal drugs campaign as a "war" to justify the death toll. As pointed out by Prof. Clarissa David: "When you call it a war, there are certain things that people are more willing to accept" (Talabong 2018b). There is a need to reframe the campaign less as a war against suspected criminal elements and more as a social development issue and a public health problem aimed not only at reforming and rehabilitating drug abusers but also preventing and curbing the onset of drug abuse and addiction altogether. Taking such a direction can also calm down criticism that the administration's campaign is a war against the poor.

The anti-illegal drugs campaign of the current administration has become a protracted struggle of attrition and can only bode ill for government over the long-term as the killings and criticisms against them intensify. A punitive and forced or violent approach can only trigger popular criticisms (here and abroad) and force drug users and abusers to retreat from society altogether; perhaps even force some of them to become part of the underworld of criminal activities.

The drug problem facing the country cannot simply be reduced to supply-and-demand issues. Any effort by government to address the drug problem in the Philippines must by necessity adopt a comprehensive approach that is both multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional targeting not just users and pushers but society-at-large. Government must be open to adopting multiple approaches in its conduct of the campaign grounded on clearly defined paradigm that promotes respect for life and the rights of people and acknowledges the complexity of the drug problem.

The problem of illegal drugs cannot be seen simply and solely as a police and criminal matter. Therefore, punitive and retributive measures will not suffice. Rather than commit police forces to the campaign, the Duterte administration needs to put health professionals in place that would provide a more sustainable and viable approach (as well as less lives lost).

Alternative modes of curbing drug abuse need to be taken into account such as those methods that are intended to reduce demand as well as other less harmful approaches. There is certainly a need to acknowledge that illegal drug use and drug abuse are, as pointed out by medical anthropologists, "embedded in, and in part

determined by, users' social and physical environment" (Lasco 2016). Such a move might be unpopular in the short term given the public's vindictive emotional inclinations towards criminal suspects in general but it would definitely go a long way towards providing a more viable solution to the drug problem in the Philippines.

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