



Chemical Romance

While the country's drug war has taken center stage, its underlying issue is hardly addressed: drug addiction.



Michael Raqim Mira

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This is not victim-blaming. The drug addict did not cause the drug war. Drug addiction, however, is the foundation in which the war on drugs planted its pillars. The Duterte administration expanded drug enforcement operations upon taking office, and named Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa as the then-Director General of the Philippine National Police.

The initiative was in line with President Duterte's campaign rhetoric and political history as Mayor of Davao.

Mr. dela Rosa spearheaded Oplan Tokhang, a nationwide anti-drug campaign, to unprecedented levels. According to data collected by the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), police operations throughout the country resulted in the deaths of over 3,000 citizens--from July 1, 2016 to September 26, 2017--who were either suspected of using drugs or distributing them.

When the campaign was launched, much of the world's attention centered on the killings. However, the underlying issue of drug addiction hasn't been fully explored. There have been numerous long-form articles devoted to the drug war killings. An in-depth report on the subject by [Reuters even won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting](#).

The less-flashy subtopic of addiction within the Philippine drug war matrix has not reached the same level of examination. Often, discussions of drug addiction are funneled back into the aggressive rhetoric of the Duterte administration, in which the president stated that it is imperative "to save the next generation from perdition."

Human rights groups in the Philippines and abroad have pointed out that the current stance on the war on drugs does not address the drug use epidemic itself. While a militaristic theory and practice could have a valid argument in hindering drug manufacturing, trafficking and distribution, critics of the anti-drug campaign opined that drug addicts should not be included in this blanket approach.

"Crime against humanity? In the first place, I'd like to be frank with you: are they [drug addicts] humans? What is your definition of a human being?"

- President Rodrigo Duterte, August 26, 2016, in response to the United Nation's criticism of the Philippine anti-drug programs.

The criticism of the anti-drug program is not just concentrated on the shoot-first-ask-questions-later mentality of police officers, but the numerous vigilante-initiated killings of alleged drug users. The added dynamic of vigilante groups--who, regardless of intention, committed murder by killing suspected drug users and dealers--created a Wild West atmosphere in Metro Manila and many parts of the country where drug addiction is rampant.

Many supporters of the drug war cite nations like China as prime examples where very tough laws against drug possession and trafficking suppresses the overall drug problem. President Duterte himself opined that the death penalty should be re-introduced in the country.

However, despite China's seemingly effective anti-drug policy, drug sales is still a booming industry in the country, with an estimated \$80 billion in annual revenue. Additionally, China has government-funded rehabilitation programs for drug addicts. Force is not the exclusive solution in China and Malaysia--there are alternatives as well.

Alternatives

Scholars and public health officials suggested that the government should treat drug-dependent citizens as medical patients rather than just criminals. This way of viewing drug addiction--as a public health issue rather than a criminal one--has led to successful innovative rehabilitation programs in countries like Portugal and Switzerland.

For instance, in the 1990s, Portugal faced rising heroin addiction rates. In order to curb the epidemic, Dr. João Castel-Branco Goulão proposed that lawmakers decriminalize all drug use by 1998. The Portuguese government created a taskforce that was very different from the Philippines' and United States' current anti-drug initiatives: doctors, mental health specialists, and social healthcare workers were the ones on the frontline in the war on drugs, not law enforcement agents.

This approach became the base model for other European countries in tackling above-average drug addiction rates, such as the Netherlands, as well as Latin American nations like Argentina and Ecuador.

President Duterte is often criticized in the national and international media--whether rightfully or wrongly--but it is worth noting that the Duterte administration has tried to offset aggressive police tactics by introducing community-focused livelihood initiatives, such as organic farming and raising livestock. These types of programs have had mixed-results in rehabilitation effectiveness in the United States, but the effort shows the administration's open-mindedness nonetheless.

One of the hurdles in setting up a viable rehab program in the Philippines is that some local governments are [too cash-strapped to build drug rehabilitation facilities](#). Without proper funding--whether through tax money or private donation--it is difficult for both local governments and non-governmental organizations to launch effective medical programs that could treat addicts.

The question now is whether the Duterte administration is willing to spend money on rehabilitation programs. [In a previous article, I reported](#) that the government is willing to spend \$180 billion on infrastructure projects, such as the New Clark City development in Tarlac. Could the government match even a quarter of that amount in drug rehab programs?

The backbone of the Philippines is and always will be its people. The masses who occupy this land are just as much part of the national infrastructure as highways and bridges. Today, there are over 1 million Filipinos suffering from drug addiction. When a bridge has

cracks, you don't simply blow it up. Instead, you fix it. When the government finally sees drug addicts as human beings that need treatment instead of jail time or bullets, the country will finally get closer to winning the war on drugs.