



GimBMUN 2026

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Study Guide

GimBMUN 2026

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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction of the chairs

Ms. Živa Primožič

Dear delegates,

I am thrilled to welcome all of you to the UNODC committee at the 2026 GimBMUN conference, where I will be one of your chairs.

I joined MUN in my first year of high school, hoping to improve my public speaking skills and my overall English. My experience with MUN has far surpassed my initial interests and expectations, becoming a fun way to spend my free time, get to know new people, and build precious bonds while expanding my horizons. This will be my first time chairing, and I am excited to experience this conference from a different perspective than usual, hoping for it to be memorable for both us chairs and you, the delegates.

I wish you the best of luck and look forward to meeting you!

Živa Primožič

Mr. Natan Vesnaver

Dear delegates,

I am very excited to accompany you as one of your chairs in the UNODC committee of GimBMUN 2026.

I joined MUN in my second year of high school, and it has since become one of the most valuable, fun, and interesting parts of my educational journey. This will be a new experience for me, as it will be my first time chairing as well, and I am very excited about it. I look forward to experiencing a conference from another point of view and can't wait to meet all of you, creating wonderful memories along the way. I hope you are as excited about this as we are, and I wish you the best of luck in preparing for the conference and the committee sessions themselves.

Natan Vesnaver

Introduction to the committee

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime was established in 1977 and has since then been a driving force in the battle against illicit drugs and international crime, developing the guidelines for tackling terrorism, corruption, and illegal trafficking.

Since combating drug-related crime is among the Office's primary goals, numerous initiatives have been launched in the past, aiming to educate people about the consequences of drug abuse. UNODC advocates for stricter policies regarding drug production and trafficking, as well as offering alternatives to drug cultivation in affected areas. Throughout its work, it

emphasizes the importance of international collaboration in addressing widespread problems that extend far beyond the borders of a single country.

ADDRESSING THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF WATERWAY DRUG TRAFFICKING

Introduction of the topic

Waterborne drug smuggling has become, like almost anything connected with illicit drugs, a global problem. Drugs transported by sea, rivers, canals, and other water bodies contribute a major share to all drugs being smuggled globally. It is often preferred over other methods of drug transport due to its high efficiency, relatively low risk, and capability of moving large quantities of product at once. Smugglers use different types of vessels for such operations, from fishing boats to cargo ships and even submarines. Such operations have a lot of negative consequences: they are often hard to detect due to the limited resources of authorities and the sheer volume of all the cargo being transported by water. Local communities are often entangled in crime, especially in developing countries, going hand in hand with the corruption of officials, or in most cases, entire governments. These are only a few of the many negative impacts and problems of waterway drug trafficking that governments around the world have already taken significant steps to reduce. However, there is a lot more to be done in order to truly improve the situation with its many sources and consequences.

History of waterway drug trafficking

Smuggling drugs by water is hardly a new occurrence, but since its beginnings in the 1900s, it has developed into highly organized, large-scale operations all around the globe. The first notable rise happened in the 1960s when cocaine and marijuana were shipped with fishing

boats and speed boats. In the 1970s, there was another enormous upsurge when the first cocaine seizures began happening in the U.S., and by 1980, major transatlantic smuggling routes were established. Over the following decades, the routes and markets for drugs shifted, with main routes and passages being: Caribbean passages, the Pacific corridors via Central America, trans-Atlantic, and African littoral routes. By the 2000s, increased trade via West Africa and Asia led to the revival of old sea paths, driven by higher European demand, caused the revival of old sea paths in those areas. Throughout this time, different crime organizations and cartels, like the Sinaloa Cartel, have developed and adapted. The nature of waterways regulation in affected countries, usually exceptionally low, led to entrenched smuggling networks, ecological scars, and weak governance.

Current situation

Waterway drug trafficking is a global problem that reaches all corners of the world. The most common route is the Latin America to North America and Europe, where cocaine, mainly from Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay, travels by sea through the Caribbean and Central America to the U.S. or via rivers like the Paraná river and then Atlantic to Europe. In Europe, major ports receive these packages as well as packages from North African and Middle Eastern ports. In Asia, methamphetamines and opium from the Golden Triangle are trafficked by sea through Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and after the pandemic, some

routes connecting Australia were revived. All of this accounts for a series of problems and challenges for legal bodies trying to battle them.

Consequences of waterway drug trafficking

To understand their problem and help them, the consequences of such actions need to be examined and addressed. We can divide the consequences of illicit drug trafficking into four sections: environmental, social, political, and economic. While being theoretically divided into groups, the real-life results of drug trafficking are intertwined and can therefore not be addressed separately.

Environmental consequences: Clandestine laboratories are frequently located in remote river basins or near other bodies of water to facilitate the export of their products. These sites often leak or deliberately dump highly toxic chemicals into waterways, causing widespread poisoning and devastating losses in wildlife populations. Cocaine production, in particular, is a major driver of water pollution: rivers and streams surrounding coca fields are routinely contaminated with solvents and acids, damaging ecosystems and harming cultivated crops. Smuggling vessels at sea pose additional threats, as they commonly spill fuel or lose cargo, inflicting lasting damage on coral reefs and mangroves.

Drug trafficking is also deeply entangled with wildlife crimes. Cartels often invest in illegal fishing or profit from the trade of high-value animal parts, at times even disguising contraband within animals themselves. In one notorious case in 2009, Mexican smugglers concealed a ton of cocaine inside frozen sharks. Beyond this, traffickers frequently finance illegal fishing operations and then repurpose the boats for transporting drugs. Such activities destabilize local economies, driving legitimate fishers out of business—or into criminal networks—and leaving marine ecosystems, coastal communities, and rural villages to bear the consequences.

On land, traffickers construct airstrips and roads near docks or container ports to improve their logistics. This expansion destroys coastal habitats and displaces local populations. Each year, hundreds of acres of untouched riverine forest are cleared to make way for smuggling infrastructure, accelerating deforestation, eroding soil, and choking rivers with sediment.

Social consequences: Drug operations often drag organized crime into the coastal villages of the Amazon. Young people are lured—or at times coerced—into working for river gangs in jungle camps along waterways, many of them never returning home. These networks foster pervasive violence; in the Amazon's tri-border regions, officials report that the majority of murders and other crimes are tied directly to narco-operations. Members are often compelled to sever their social ties, and in some cases are forced to commit murder as a way of enforcing silence.

Such organizations rarely restrict themselves to drug trafficking alone. They are deeply enmeshed with other illegal economies, including logging, arms trading, prostitution, and the trafficking of both wildlife and humans. For instance, Jamaican fishing canoes have been documented bartering marijuana for illicit firearms. As a result, the waterways serve not only

as routes for narcotics but as arteries for a suite of organized crimes, compounding the damage to local societies.

Those whose livelihoods make them useful to traffickers—particularly fishers—often pay the heaviest price. Struggling with poverty and low living standards, legitimate fishermen are easy targets for recruitment. Cartels lure them with promises of financial security, only to exploit them further and drive down their quality of life. Declining demand for fish, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has intensified this cycle of vulnerability.

The accessibility of supply via rivers and seas also fuels local drug abuse. As availability rises, so does demand, putting pressure on already limited social services, increasing crime, and deepening public health crises. In East and Southeast Asia, maritime trafficking has dramatically expanded access to methamphetamine and cocaine, triggering widespread addiction. Lakeside and seaside communities have been particularly affected, with drug prices plummeting to levels that made narcotics dangerously accessible.

Waterways that straddle borders further invite corruption. The sheer value of the cargo turns marinas and ports into hubs of bribery, where officials are routinely paid off to let shipments pass. In some cases, corruption extends to high-ranking government figures, fostering political instability and uncertainty. In extreme scenarios, traffickers exploit lawless river deltas to establish quasi-narco states, where drug lords rival or even eclipse official authorities.

Drug trafficking thus poses not only environmental and economic threats but also undermines governance and community resilience. Without decisive action, it will continue to erode both local societies and state institutions.

Political consequences: As noted earlier, maritime drug trafficking undermines stability and threatens peace, posing an especially serious security risk in developing countries. In some regions, drug smuggling is intertwined with maritime piracy and arms trafficking, fueling broader insecurity across entire coastlines. The presence of powerful traffickers with sea-based mobility erodes democratic institutions and fosters corruption. This creates a vicious cycle: weak enforcement at sea emboldens smugglers, whose growing influence in turn undermines judges, customs officials, and coast guard officers. Over time, such dynamics steadily weaken the rule of law in areas heavily affected by maritime smuggling. Officials and law enforcement personnel are often bribed into cooperation, benefiting alongside traffickers while citizens and the state bear the cost.

Waterways that cross multiple borders add another layer of tension. Straits or rivers shared between countries can become flashpoints if traffickers exploit one side to the detriment of the other. In some cases, mutual accusations of harboring smugglers escalate into diplomatic crises. Joint military and police operations, while intended to counter trafficking, can strain bilateral relations; yet at the same time, international naval collaborations against smuggling can strengthen ties on a global level. Maritime drug networks thus complicate regional politics, highlighting the urgent need for stronger dialogue and clearer frameworks for cooperation.

Economic consequences: Waterway drug trafficking siphons money away from legitimate, law-abiding sectors of the economy. The burden falls most heavily on lower-income groups, who often feel the consequences first. Fishermen, for example, may be drawn or pressured into smuggling if operations are based in their port or nearby waters, pulling them away from livelihoods that would otherwise contribute to the local economy. Money that could be invested in community development is instead funneled into luxury goods or laundered abroad. Regions with high levels of drug-related crime also tend to suffer from declining tourism, further weakening local revenue streams.

Governments and international organizations spend vast sums battling this issue. Coast guards, naval patrols, and customs agencies must be financed, often at immense cost. For coastal countries with fragile economies, these resources could otherwise support social programs or development projects. At the same time, the influx of illicit cash from smuggling can disrupt local economies. Near ports, real estate and consumer prices may rise sharply, placing everyday life further out of reach for local residents.

Although traffickers occasionally invest in infrastructure or small businesses, these ventures typically serve as fronts for laundering money rather than building sustainable prosperity. In coastal towns, small-scale fisheries in particular struggle to compete with operators who conceal contraband within their cargo, undermining fair trade and eroding trust. In the end, waterway drug trafficking leaves a deep mark on local economies, replacing transparent and legitimate markets with shadow networks that drain wealth from already vulnerable communities.

What can be done to combat waterway drug trafficking?

Transporting drugs via waterways has become a significant problem for many countries across the globe as it is hard to detect and can contribute an enormous share to illicit drug market. Many of them have already developed different strategies and approaches to the problem. They are battling the issue through law enforcement, increased port surveillance and international cooperation.

The United States, for example, battle waterway drug trafficking primarily through the U.S. Coast Guard with fast boats, airplanes, as well as with more advanced technologies, such as drones and radars. They participate in multiple anti-drug operations, like Operation Martillo, which is an ongoing multi-national anti-drug operation targeting trafficking routes in Central and South America. Another successful example of battling this problem has been seen in the EU, which faces immense challenges due to large quantities of drugs entering through major ports on different sides and numerous seas. Thus, it has developed efficient methods to prevent such shipments from entering the European market. Ports in the EU heavily rely on customs and port security, which uses intelligence-led inspections, X-ray scanning, and container tracking systems to detect hidden drugs. It also coordinates through Europol and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), which share intelligence on maritime routes. The EU's joint operations with Latin American countries help disrupt cocaine shipments before they even reach the continent. All of this, combined with special operations, helps the Union to decrease its drug import problem. South America,

from where Europe and North America receive most of the cocaine on their markets, is also trying to prevent such shipments from entering their ports or exiting them on route across the Atlantic. For example, in Argentina, a combination of ports and rivers control, naval and coastal guard patrols (especially in the Paraguay - Paraná waterway), X-ray scanning, canine units, and international cooperation with different international organizations like UNODC, DEA, and Europol helps prevent such shipments from entering or exiting their ports. Different countries and organizations battle this issue with their own strategies. A lot of them cooperate and share intelligence, some even participate in multinational operations to prevent waterway drug trafficking. However, a large portion of drug shipments still reach their destinations. For example, in Europe, estimates show that only 10-12% of cocaine inflow is intercepted by authorities (Hernandez-Roy, Bledsoe, Cerén, 2023). The rest is generating profit for drug cartels and destroying millions of lives. Therefore, further guidelines and frameworks on the international level need to be established in order to eliminate such transport as much as possible.

Past UN actions and resolutions

United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) is the cornerstone treaty mandating States to cooperate in suppressing drug trafficking by sea, air, and land. Its articles specifically require parties to “prevent and combat” illicit traffic by sea, authorize the boarding of vessels on the high seas, and facilitate mutual legal assistance among flag, coastal, and port States.

Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) resolution 3(XXXVI) established a Working Group on Maritime Cooperation in 1993 to promote the implementation of the articles of the 1988 Convention relating to illicit traffic by sea and to develop guidelines for regional maritime cooperation and joint interdiction exercises.

Commission on Narcotic Drugs Pilot Maritime Law Enforcement Project Commendation (1997) was designed as a project on maritime drug-law-enforcement training and model legislation, urging governments to support regional seminars and expert-group meetings.

UNODC Global Maritime Crime Program (GMCP), launched in 2010 to strengthen maritime domain awareness, train coastguard and customs personnel, and maintain an international “Vessels of Interest” database for drug-smuggling ships. Between 2018–2023, GMCP trained over 10,000 officers across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

UNODC Success of the Piracy Prosecution Model: A Blueprint to End Impunity at Sea event (2014) emphasized that traffickers apprehended on the high seas must be prosecuted under national and international law to close the “impunity gap” in maritime narcotics cases.

Summary

Waterway drug trafficking is a global issue, enabling large-scale smuggling of narcotics due to its efficiency and difficulty in detection. It causes severe consequences, including environmental damage from chemical dumping and deforestation, social harm through crime, violence, and addiction, political instability fueled by corruption, and economic disruption in coastal communities. Despite international efforts—such as UN conventions, coast guard operations, and multinational cooperation—most drug shipments still evade detection. Stronger global frameworks and international guidelines, technological innovation, and support for vulnerable communities are needed to reduce the long-term impacts of maritime drug smuggling.

Useful links and further reading

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Key terms and guiding questions

KEY TERMS: waterway drug trafficking, maritime smuggling, smuggling routes, organised crime, impacts, law enforcement strategies, international cooperation, prevention of transport

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. How effective are international organizations and operations in combating the issue of waterway drug smuggling?
2. How is advanced technology already implemented in discovering illicit drug shipments and how can it be used further?
3. Can indirect solutions like reducing the numbers of drug users or prevention of manufacture of illicit drugs help resolve the issue of waterway drug trafficking and if, how?
4. In what ways does corruption linked to maritime drug trafficking undermine governance and political stability?
5. Which waterway drug smuggling routes pose the biggest challenge to the authorities and what are possible solutions?
6. How does waterway drug trafficking impact local communities socially and economically, particularly in developing countries?

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