

Customs inspections – building a culture of proactive curiosity: Thailand case study

Araya Siripanukul, Atittaya Sommana, Sirima Panyarnpisit, Siriporn Mekdee, Nuttha Ummarakoon and Thomas Dixon

Abstract

The global drug trade continues to expand, straining public health and law enforcement resources, financing transnational organised crime and terrorism, and causing unfathomable harm to communities around the world. Law enforcement at our borders is the ‘first line of defence in the fight against cross-border illicit trade and the protection of our citizens and economies against criminal organisations operating internationally’ (Mikuriya, 2019, p. 4). Nowhere is this more evident than the Golden Triangle, where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) intersect. This area is one of the primary international sources of narcotics, producing methamphetamine, heroin and opium. Criminal syndicates commonly try to export contraband from the Golden Triangle to other countries via Thailand, seeking to exploit Thailand’s large, well-connected ports and airports. Thus, Thai authorities are often the first line of defence against drug flows from this key area to the rest of the world. However, criminals are employing increasingly sophisticated concealment methods to evade detection. Faced with this constantly evolving challenge, Thai authorities are actively building a ‘Culture of Proactive Curiosity’, enhancing internal cooperation and sharing knowledge among staff to enhance risk management systems. Furthermore, the integration of internal, interagency, and international cooperation is vital to control borders, promote sustainable economic growth and protect the international trade supply chain.

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1. Introduction

Reaching far beyond their traditional role in revenue collection and trade facilitation, customs administrations are now a key law enforcement institution. Customs officers play a critical role in preventing transnational organised crime groups from engaging in the trafficking of narcotics and other contraband. As criminals apply increasingly sophisticated methods to shift illicit goods across our borders, successful detection and disruption requires a new mindset within customs administrations. The recent seizure of over 314 kg of heroin at Laem Chabang Port in Thailand demonstrates that a culture of proactive curiosity is a critical weapon in the fight against the illicit drug trade. When customs administrations equip officers with technical skills and empower their teams to apply proactive curiosity, they enhance their capacity to protect their borders and combat transnational organised crime. This paper examines the positive disruption outcomes that can be achieved when customs teams are encouraged and empowered to apply proactive curiosity to advance law enforcement at frontline borders.

2. Thai Customs – disrupting illicit drugs

Thailand is a logistical hub for trade flows in South-East Asia due to its strategic location and its political, economic and geostrategic importance. In 2020, Thailand's largest port, Laem Chabang, was ranked the twentieth busiest port in the world for container movements, and the fifth busiest in South-East Asia, up one place from the previous year (World Shipping Council, n.d.). Many neighbouring countries, such as the landlocked Lao PDR, rely heavily on Thailand for imports and exports. However, Thailand's enormous legitimate trade flows also provide an opportunity for criminals to smuggle contraband since no port in any country can scan every container which passes through it.

Thailand's proximity to the Golden Triangle also means that many criminal organisations and other actors use Thailand's large, well-connected ports and airport as transit hubs to export narcotics and import precursor chemicals and other kinds of contraband. Due to these dangers and the sheer volume of legitimate trade flowing through the country, the Thai Customs Department must be extremely effective in risk-profiling to ensure interdiction of contraband while avoiding unnecessary delays to legitimate trade. This is particularly important in South-East Asia today, where many countries rely heavily on trade for their economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mission of the Thai Customs Department is to 'enhance social protection capability within the Customs control system' (Thai Customs Department, 2021). This involves balancing trade supply chain security on one hand, and the facilitation of legitimate international trade on the other.

3. Outsmarting criminals

On 5 July 2021, Thai Customs officials seized 314.63 kg of heroin at Laem Chabang Port. The illicit drugs were concealed in a shipment of 270 drums of acrylic paint destined for Australia (heroin was found in 134 of the 270 drums). This case demonstrates that a new mindset matched with practical innovations can significantly enhance seizure outcomes.

Criminals are using increasingly sophisticated concealment methods to smuggle narcotics. In response, customs administrations must move beyond pure technical competence to outsmart international crime syndicates. The movement of acrylic paint shipments may seem like a routine consignment in the international supply chain and, ordinarily, customs officers might facilitate the shipment to avoid delays to the vessel's departure, damage to the goods and potential litigation against the customs office on behalf of the exporter. Promoting a culture of proactive curiosity empowers customs officers to 'look a little deeper' and ask questions outside the usual procedural format to effectively detect and disrupt the illicit movement of goods. This case demonstrates the importance of 'thinking like a criminal'.

All customs officers – no matter their rank or gender – play an important role in preventing, detecting and disrupting transnational crime. Currently, all three members of the Laem Chabang Port Control Unit are women who report to the Chief of the Investigation and Suppression Unit. Moreover, the Customs Inspector and the representative of the Investigation and Suppression team who made the arrests in this case were both women. Clearly, this case also highlights the critical value of women in law enforcement organisations.

Cooperation is a critical element of customs law enforcement duties. Customs officers must be collaborative with national divisions and agencies, but also with authorities in other countries and even international organisations. This promotes a holistic, global approach to disrupting transnational organised crime and is essential to improve the safety and security of the international supply chain. During the seizure at Laem Chabang, the Port Control Unit members facilitated local profiling and interagency coordination on behalf of Thai Customs which resulted in the successful seizure and prevented the movement of drugs to Australia.

4. The case study – seizures start with risk indicators

On 5 July 2021, the proactive, curious, inclusive, and collaborative culture of the Thai Customs team at Laem Chabang Port were critical factors in the seizure of the large amount of heroin, valued at USD29 million, destined for Australia. When customs officers reviewed an export declaration for 270 drums of acrylic paint labelled ‘JOTUN MAJESTIC TRUE BEAUTY MATT’, with a total net weight of 6,750 kg, the officers identified several key risk indicators:

- The high-risk destination: Australia is considered a high-risk destination country for drug importation due to the high street price of narcotics.
- The type of company: previous seizure statistics indicate that drugs are frequently sent through exporters with low capital. In addition, the exporter had not previously used Laem Chabang Port.
- The type of goods: the commodity was drums containing acrylic paint. This type of commodity has been used to conceal drugs in the past, but moreover, the type of commodity did not match the type of company, which purportedly sold machinery and industrial materials.
- A suspicious X-ray image: the Thai Customs electronics system identified this shipment for X-ray imaging and inspection. The Image Analysis Officer reported the image to the Inspector, after which the Inspector noticed an abnormality inside the drums of acrylic paint. Upon further inspection, it became apparent there was another substance hidden inside the drums of paint.

4.1. Progression to a physical examination

The Inspector, assigned by the Thai Customs computer system to review this shipment, requested the Investigation and Suppression Team to jointly conduct the physical examination with her. This collaboration between key units and divisions promotes public confidence in the integrity of the inspection process.

When the Inspector, the Investigation and Suppression Team, and the shipping agent opened the container on the morning of 5 July 2021, they found two types of paint drums: 135 drums presented with a blue paint label and 135 drums with a purple label. The suspicious paint drums were placed on top of the pallet and returned to the container X-ray. The second image revealed a box-shaped object inside some of the drums. The customs team also noticed that some drums were smeared with paint and were easy to open without pulling the seal off at the top of the drums.

Upon opening one of the paint drums for further inspection, the investigation team found a plastic box inside. This box contained a brick-shaped package of white powder covered with brown tape. As a first step, the customs officers tested the white powder with a Heroin Field Test Kit and Raman Handheld Spectrometer Tool. The results tested positive for heroin.

Customs liaison officers from the Office of Narcotics Control Board (ONCB, the Thai narcotics police) used another test with brown heroin reagent and marquis reagent to confirm the positive result. The positive cooperation between ONCB, Thai Customs and other relevant authorities began the process in a correct, collaborative way. The rapid confirmation also facilitated swift follow up, including subsequent investigations.

Customs then proceeded to open all 270 paint drums and found 134 of the 135 blue-labelled drums contained heroin. In contrast, no heroin was found in the 135 purple-labelled drums. This suggests that the drums were colour-coded to allow the criminals to easily off-load the heroin. In total, 134 bricks of heroin were seized. Each package was wrapped with brown plastic featuring a printed picture of a lion on the cover. Each package weighed approximately 2 kg, with a total net weight of 314.63 kg. The seizure was stored at the Royal Thai Police Narcotics Suppression Bureau in Bangkok.

The Laem Chabang Customs team worked in close collaboration with partners in the Investigation and Suppression Office, the Narcotics Suppression Bureau, the Laem Chabang Police, the Royal Thai Armed Forces and the Armed Forces Security Centre to investigate the offenders, again highlighting the critical value of interagency cooperation. As a result of effective cooperation, the investigation team successfully apprehended suspects with the support of the Narcotics Suppression Bureau in Bangkok.

Currently, the Royal Thai Police are progressing their investigations into the arrested offenders, and the Prosecuting Attorney has already completed the compulsory processes and issued this case to the court.

5. What lessons have been learned?

5.1. Build a culture of proactive curiosity

Customs administrations need to build a culture where staff are encouraged to be alert and curious. At Laem Chabang Port, officers are encouraged to use creative thinking, ask questions, and ‘look a little deeper’. When the Inspector noticed that there may have been something wrong inside the paint drum, she asked to open the container and put the suspicious drum on top of the pallets and returned it to X-ray. The second X-ray image more clearly identified a suspicious rectangular object.

Criminals are becoming more inventive. In response, customs officers need to think like them to actively intercept illicit goods. Applying a parallel risk management element in Customs’ computer systems is an important step. Using the ‘Risk Management on Profiling’ in the Thai Computer Electronics system allows Customs to continuously analyse, develop and improve profiles to detect suspicious cases and lead to arrests. Effective profiling and targeting enables the identification of high-risk commodities, which leads to effective seizures. However, customs officers still have a critical role to play in manually checking manifests and import and export declarations. Curious customs officers are key to noticing unusual shipments, which can then be targeted and passed on for inspection even if it is ‘Green Line’ (i.e. marked for easy clearance – usually reserved for trusted parties who make routine shipments).

5.2. Build diverse teams

Facilitating legitimate trade and detecting the illicit movement of goods requires a quality workforce. If women are not engaged in customs administrations, the performance capability of these administrations becomes limited. This case was led by women officers in key frontline and management roles.

In addition, the risk profiling of the Laem Chabang Port Customs Office was developed by the local profiling team and committees, which consisted of 18 members from different units in the Laem Chabang Port Customs Office. These members are staff from the Investigation and Suppression unit, the Port Control Unit, the Customs service unit and the Laboratory unit. All members work closely together under the supervision of the Chief of Investigation and Suppression Unit and are advised by the Director of Customs Control Section. The group’s brainstorming has created a variety of ideas and knowledge that have become great analytical sources for advanced risk profiling. It covers all aspects to support the prevention and suppression of offences such as violation of customs tariffs, prohibited items and restricted items, including concealment and smuggling methods. This working methodology was instrumental in the heroin case described above.

5.3 Collaborate

Customs administrations cannot work alone. They need to cooperate with local officers, national partners and international stakeholders. Laem Chabang officers worked shoulder to shoulder with the Investigation and Suppression Office at Customs Headquarters to track the offenders, with support information provided by the shipping agency. Initial cooperation between different customs units (including the X-ray imaging team and the Investigation and Suppression Team) was an important countermeasure to the possibility of an ‘insider threat’, and this collaboration also served to enhance public confidence.

Cooperation at the testing phase between Customs, the ONCB and the Narcotic Suppression Bureau was achieved under time constraints and advanced the investigation process, resulting in the successful apprehension of the offenders.

International cooperation between the Thai authorities and other international partners, including the Australian Border Force (ABF), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Customs Organization (WCO), also ensured a successful seizure. Thailand has been recognised as a leading partner in several international collaborative efforts, including the UNODC – WCO Container Control Programme. This seizure exemplifies the need for all parties to realise the importance of cooperation between national units, agencies and countries. Therefore, Thailand Custom’s international partners are considering strategic plans to enhance cooperation and support investigation processes in the future.

6. Conclusion

Officers at the Thai Customs Department foresee that criminals will continue to devise new and sophisticated smuggling methods to avoid detection. To counter these techniques, customs administrations need to constantly develop, assess and update their risk indicators, search techniques, risk analysis systems and all other relevant technologies and processes. The development of risk profiles is enhanced when customs officers are empowered to apply a mindset of proactive curiosity. Thai Customs adopts an organisational culture which encourages staff to be curious, observant and analytical. This seizure also highlights the importance of promoting an inclusive environment that empowers women to excel in their professional roles and reach their potential. Finally, the case study demonstrates the importance of cooperation at the internal, national and international levels with government and private sector stakeholders. As national customs administrations search for solutions to disrupt transnational crime, Thai Customs advocates for a proactive, inclusive and collaborative approach. Amidst the uncertainty brought on by the current COVID-19 pandemic, one thing remains clear: as criminals around the world become increasingly sophisticated, inventive and collaborative, we must be prepared to do the same.

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Atittaya Sommana



Atittaya Sommana is a practitioner level Customs Technical Officer in the Customs Office Investigation and Suppression Unit at the Customs Control Section of Laem Chabang Port Customs Office in Thailand. Her team's responsibility is to investigate and suppress illegal goods. She has also worked at the Customs X-ray and Technology Centre and is well-versed in X-ray image analysis.

Araya Siripanukul



Araya Siripanukul is a professional level Customs Technical Officer in the Customs Control Section at Laem Chabang Port Customs Office in Thailand. She is the Secretary to the Profile Committee and the Assistant Secretary to the Effective Revenue Collection Analysis. Araya oversees the analysis of import and export shipping data as well as revenue collection. In addition, she serves as a coach for new customs officers in the Customs Control Section.

Siriporn Mekdee



Siriporn Mekdee works as a practitioner level Customs Technical Officer in the Customs Control Section of Laem Chabang Port Customs Office in Thailand. She is a member of the UNODC – CCP Port Control Unit. Siriporn has experience in the investigation and suppression of customs law crimes, including knowledge of the risk profiling management system.

Sirima Panyarpisit

Sirima Panyarpisit is a professional level Customs Technical Officer at the Investigation and Suppression unit, Customs Control Section of the Laem Chabang Port Customs Office in Thailand. She is a member of the local profile committee, where she analyses data and manages risk to detect smuggling and illicit goods. As a member of the UNODC – CCP Port Control Unit, she collaborates with UNODC – WCO and serves as a local contact point for international relations.

Thomas Dixon

Thomas Dixon is a Programme Officer based in Thailand, working at the UNODC – WCO CCP. Tom is part of a team of UN and WCO personnel working to deliver capacity building training and technical assistance projects to law enforcement and other partners in South Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific, aiming to strengthen supply chain security and enhance cooperation against transnational organised crime and terrorism.

Nuttha Ummarakoon

Nuttha Ummarakoon works as a Programme Assistant to the CCP, UNODC, Regional Office for South-East Asia and the Pacific. She is responsible for assisting with program implementation and administrative duties. Nuttha is also a member of the CCP Women's Network.

