

The Security Approach to the Drugs Problem

Perpetuating Drugs and Conflict in Colombia

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The drugs problem in Colombia is intertwined with structural factors at the social, economic, institutional and cultural levels that have contributed to its consolidation over the past three decades. In addition, the drug problem has taken on even more complex connotations because of its relationship to the armed conflict, particularly over the past 20 years. Nevertheless, the anti-drug policy, especially during President Alvaro Uribe Vélez's administrations (2002-2006 and 2006-2010), has been incorporated as an integral part of a solution to the internal conflict. This has had serious consequences for the socio-economic conditions of peasant and indigenous communities affected by the production of raw materials used to produce cocaine.

At the same time, drug trafficking and other illegal economic activities are being consolidated through a process that is reconfiguring the State, co-opting State institutionalisation within a dynamic that is legitimizing elites involved with these criminal activities. This situation can be witnessed in different regions around the country. Despite these factors, current U.S. assistance policies with Colombia overlook the structural dimension of the drug problem.

Finally, drugs continue to be a relevant aspect of the threats identified by Washington in the framework of global security and strategies for the Latin American region. As such, the security angle remains the central focus with respect to drugs, but in the background are other key issues, such as access to strategic natural resources. Colombian territory in this context continues to be a platform for regional security control.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assistance should be much more attentive to what is behind the structural factors that have contributed to reproducing the maps of the drug economy. If access to land is one of these factors, assets confiscated from drug traffickers should be used to defend and strengthen peasant economies and the collective territories of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities.
- The Colombian government should review the strategic scope of the current regionalization model, which is based on the results of the State offensive and its consolidation. More effective action against drug trafficking would come from recognizing the existence of illegal regional elites who have co-opted a large part, if not all, of local State institutional structures.
- Drug production and trafficking could be fought more effectively if the State impeded support for local orders and arrangements dominated by illegal regional elites and traditional powers linked to drug trafficking. This could be done by creating watchdog groups to oversee the rule of law and defence of justice, consequently strengthening citizen control.
- Support for military bases as part of U.S. anti-drug assistance is counterproductive in terms of regional stability. A joint action on the part of the region's countries, which could be coordinated by a regional body such as UNASUR, would play a more constructive role.

LOOKING AT DRUGS FROM THE OPTIC OF THE ARMED CONFLICT

With the formulation of President Uribe's 2002-2006 National Development Plan "Toward a Communitarian State," the government presented an overview of the situation of illicit crops in Colombia, pointing out that it was an expanding problem, particularly in the 1980-2001 period when land used for these crops went from 3,500 hectares to 144,000 - or an average annual increase of 25.6 percent. According to these numbers, Colombia produced more than 70 percent of the world's coca leaves and cocaine. This assessment was accompanied by an overview of the worsening armed conflict up to 2001, which is expressed in indicators such as the homicide rate as a result of the internal war, towns seized by the guerrillas, massacres, forced displacement and the existence of conditions that diminished security for economic life and the development of societal and institutional activities within the country.

The principal cause behind the guerrilla's offensive capacity, according to this analysis, was their link to drug trafficking, which had become one of the principal sources of incomes for these armed organizations. To illustrate the problem, the document estimates that "between 1991 and 1996, \$470 million, representing 41 percent of the FARC's income, came from the illegal drug business."²

As such, the plan proposed that "the fight against terrorist groups, drug traffickers and organized transnational crime be focused on attacking their financial structures";³ tackling, in other words, the illegal economy of the drug trade. In addition, the official document that set out the alternative development policy in Uribe's first administration, *Conpes 3218*, reiterated the plan's assessment of the drugs situation in Colombia, seeing alternative development as complementing the objective of democratic security and including it as a component of the strategy "for development in depressed and conflictive zones."⁴

Conpes 3218 stated that growth of the illegal drug economy was facilitated by the weaken-

ing of the State's legitimate control over a large part of the nation's territory. At the same time, State control was weakened by the drug economy, particularly by armed groups that were sustained by these illegal crops. Under this logic, the document concluded that the problem of illicit drugs had harmful effects on democratic governance, including intensification of the armed struggle, weakening of State institutions and civil society, as well as destroying confidence in the State.

The most extreme levels of insecurity in the territories without State control in Colombia were in two areas, the coca-growing zones and the border regions. In the first area this was a result of the financial resources that could be used to maintain the forces and armed resistance of the guerrillas, and in the second, it was because it served as an area of refuge and a supply route for weapons to continue the war.

Forced aerial and manual eradication

Aerial spraying and Forced Manual Eradication Mobile Groups (*Grupos Móviles de Erradicación Manual Forzosa* – GME),⁵ together with other eradication mechanisms, are the result of the security strategy described above. Alternative development strategies are, in the end, basically appendages of this strategy.

The GMEs are front-line groups based on the use of force and include the involvement of police officers. Put differently, they are groups that apply the "stick" along with aerial spraying. What is alarming is that the same structure that promotes alternative development – the Presidential Program against Illicit Crops (*Programa Presidencial contra los Cultivos Ilícitos*—PCI) – also manages the use of force, sending contradictory signals to the communities involved. In other words, the menacing presence of the GMEs does not generate confidence in the relationship between the State and communities producing illicit crops, but creates a mentality in which the actors play their part in a script. The communities temporarily eradicate coca to receive some subsidies but, because the State is not committed to developing viable

alternatives specific to each region, this is not a sustainable approach. The government, for its part, is content counting the number of hectares eradicated each year as part of their commitment of “zero tolerance” regarding coca production.

The GME’s eradication operations ignore the existence of agreements with communities growing coca, which means they overlook the goals expressed in *Conpes 3218*. The document’s fourth objective states that the Alternative Development Program includes “support for strengthening social capital, enhancing organization, participation and community as a way of consolidating democratic security and establishing the foundation for sustainable development in areas free of illicit crops.”⁶ The GME framework cemented the dissuasive use of force, which does not work in areas afflicted by exclusion and severe marginalization.

The simplistic view that coca crops are a potential source of financing for the guerrillas has led to a situation that overlooks the existing social problems in areas that have been colonized.⁷ In effect, manual eradication of coca became so intertwined with the armed conflict that some of the first operations were part of the State’s response to attacks by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC*); such as the response to the attack on a military unit on December 27, 2005 in the Sierra de la Macarena that left 29 casualties. The operations in the buffer zone of this reserve area began with Operation Emperor at the start of 2005 and were part of the larger counter-insurgency offensive known as the “Patriot Plan.”

This combined process continued in departments on the border with Ecuador, Nariño and Putumayo, leading to protests by regional peasant groups at the end of August 2007 because of the displacement of 8,000 farmers along the Mira, Mataje and Nulpe rivers on the Ecuadorian border. The protesters advanced in groups toward San Lorenzo (Ecuador) and the Llorente, La Guayacana and Vallenato area near Tumaco (Nariño) to block the manual eradication

teams, sparking clashes with the security forces.⁸

Aerial spraying was intensified in 2007 in the Lower Cauca and in some areas in northern Antioquia and southern Córdoba, affecting animals, food crops, pastures and some of the region’s remaining forested areas. In January 2008, the government launched in the Lower Cauca a combined force of 3,000 eradicators and 1,800 police officers to move ahead with the manual eradication of coca crops. In response to this offensive, on February 7, 2008 close to 1,500 peasants from three rural towns in Antioquia, Tarazá, Nechí and Valdivia, called for dialogue with the government around several basic issues:⁹

- Suspension of aerial eradication with glyphosate;
- Manual eradication done by peasant from the zone;
- A two-year grace period for crop substitution and productive projects;
- Access roads, storage centres, and guaranteed markets for products;
- Economic protection consisting of 3.5 times the monthly minimum salary (around \$820) paid only once to each family;
- Guarantees and resources to return (to rural areas) if an agreement is reached.

These kinds of protests tend to generate hasty negotiations with governments, which are more interested in neutralizing the potential political fallout than resolving underlying structural problems. This basically means that peasant protests are cyclical, given that the problems tend to resurface because the conditions that caused them in the first place continue to exist.

A similar situation has taken place in the collective territories of Afro-Colombian communities. On April 3, 2009, a small plane escorted by the Colombian Army flew over the Santa María, Coteje, Cheté, Velásquez and La Fragua communities, spraying glyphosate on water sources, forests, homes and crops along the left bank of the Timbiquí River in the Cauca department. Aerial spraying has continued since then, covering

that entire municipality and seriously affecting the health of the population, and its water and food sources.

The problem is the same: aerial eradication in 2008 affected 480 Afro-Colombian families and 21,300 hectares of food crops and reserve zones. Community leaders protested to representatives of the government, demanding protection of food sources, health and life by suspending aerial spraying. The demand did not have sufficient support to impact people in decision-making positions, which is why the effects on their crops, community productive projects and health have not been addressed by the government. The local hospital has reported 36 cases of poisoning and burns attributable to aerial spraying. The aqueduct in Santa María and lakes in Cheté, Velásquez and Mataco, which feed into the Timbiquí River, were polluted by aerial spraying.¹⁰

Aerial spraying was carried out in October 2009 in the rural municipalities of Orito, Valle del Guamuez, Puerto Asís (La Golondrina, La Cocha) and Puerto Guzmán within the context of a dramatic social and economic crisis. Farmers in this zone had temporarily abandoned coca thanks to the benefits generated by financial pyramid schemes. The abrupt decision of the government to declare these schemes illegal generated a massive income crisis in the Putumayo and Nariño departments. Farmers returned to coca as an alternative to the economic crisis caused by the pyramid model.

As was stated earlier, the identification of coca and coca farmers with the FARC's financial and support structures has sidetracked dialogue with the regions and their residents in favour of the use of force, prioritizing security and not the complex problems caused by the marginality of many of the area's farmers.

In effect, the new Policy for Consolidation of Democratic Security and the Strategy for the Social Consolidation of Territories¹¹ aims in the opposite direction. This policy reproduces and strengthens the repressive policies that overlook the social and economic causes that have contributed to generating dynamics of

inequality in marginal areas such as the Lower Cauca or Putumayo. The changes to the security policy have made alternative development part of the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism, leaving aside the issue of extreme poverty and social exclusion.

In the meantime, the marches and peasant protests will continue sending a clear message: more radical efforts using force will not lead to better solutions.

REALIZATION OF THE SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

As part of the implementation of the Strategy for Consolidation of Territories (ECT), the Colombian government has divided intervention zones based on the progress made by the State's military offensive: 1) areas where the guerrillas have been forced to retreat; 2) areas where paramilitary demobilization has taken place; 3) border areas where the guerrillas still wield some influence; and 4) areas where the insurgents have an active presence.

In the first two areas the government is combining military work with economic intervention through the Integral Action Doctrine (*Doctrina de Acción Integral* –DAI). The DAI has a dual role. On the one hand it aims at legitimizing the presence of the armed forces, giving them a significant role in planning the use of State resources to meet the basic needs of communities in areas where the military offensive was carried out (through actions such as health brigades, road repair, engagement in local decisions, etc.)

On the other hand it implements a mechanism aimed at speeding up the disbursement of resources from the national budget that have been assigned to respective ministries. This mechanism is part of the so-called Centres for Coordination of Integral Action (*Centros de Coordinación de Acción Integral* – CCAI). Added to them are the State programmes for reinsertion and the Family Forest Warden Program (*Programa de Familia Guardabosques* – PFGB), a failed model that has little to do with the environment-friendly name it was given.

Security Zones in Colombia and Models of State Action

Classification of zones	Zones with CCAI intervention	Kinds of actions
Zones in the process of institutional recuperation	<p>Zone where the military offensive has led to a guerrilla retreat (Patriot Plan, Colombia I Plan):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caquetá (Middle and Lower Caguán) • Guaviare (area of influence of San José, El Retorno, Calamar) • Meta (Sierra de La Macarena) • Northern Cauca • Montes de María 	DAI DAI, plus private investment
Demobilized zones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle and Lower Atrato • Southern Córdoba and Lower Cauca • Catatumbo • Sierra Nevada • Caquetá (Curillo-Florencia axis) • Putumayo (areas of influences of San Miguel, Valle del Guamuez and Puerto Asís) • Tumaco 	Re-insertion program, primarily for paramilitaries and the PFGB
Border zones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putumayo (rural zones in San Miguel, Valle del Guamuez, Puerto Asís near the border with Ecuador). • Arauca 	Military offensive, forced manual eradication, aerial spraying
Zones where the armed groups are still active	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caquetá (axis of the plan in Florencia San Vicente del Caguán, Yarí region) • Rural areas of Guaviare (San José, El Retorno, Calamar) • Southern Tolima • Cañón de Las Hermosas 	Military offensive, forced manual eradication, aerial spraying

Source: Prepared by the author with information from the Republic of Colombia, Ministry of National Defence, "Policy for Consolidation of Democratic Security," 2007, Bogotá; and Republic of Colombia, Presidency of the Republic of Colombia, 2007, "Strategy for Strengthening Democracy and Social Development," Bogotá.

In the final two areas, border zones and areas where the guerrillas maintain control, the State is concentrating its security actions through a combination of military offensives and aerial spraying campaigns designed to block the insurgencies ability to survive using the illegal drug economy (see box).

The first two zones are also characterized by a strengthening of the agricultural model that has taken hold in Colombia, which is based on large ranching operations and export-oriented agro-industry of products such as African palm oil and other agro-fuel crops.

This model has in different areas led to the violent expropriation of peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian lands. It is also undermining peasant economies, as well as failing to promote access to loans or appropriate technologies, implement policies and infrastructure for commercialization of products, or help strengthen peasant organizations.

Different areas throughout these zones are also home to extractive industries, including mining, hydrocarbons and logging, or major infrastructure projects that will connect regions with mono-crop production or resources extraction to export zones.

The model is characterized by further concentration of wealth and greater social exclusion in areas of colonization, as well as in urban centres where peasants are relocating after being forced off their territories.

These are the structural factors that continue at the heart of the repetitive cycles of mono-production of coca in rural zones where the poorest sectors have lost their territories. This expulsion continues reproducing an irrational expansion of the farming frontier in areas where productive potential is found in maintaining the forest cover and not in agriculture.

The anti-drug policy responds to the effects and not the causes of a problem that has complex linkages. It also overlooks factors that cyclically reproduce the presence of an illegal economy, which result in patterns of coca cultivation being repeated continuously over the past 20 years. The result is a situation that can be compared to a pressure cooker that does not have an escape valve for the steam building up inside.

The cyclical social explosions that have been mentioned, the levels of crime witnessed today in cities like Medellín and other departmental capitals, the continuation of forced displacement, increases in criminal violence and multiplication of illegal activities, including coca growing, are holes that provide an escape for some pressure in a socio-economic model that continues to exclude a significant part of Colombian society.

Paradoxically, the control systems opposed to these manifestations are supported by a privatized security apparatus that is highly influenced by new elites produced by these illegal activities. These new elites resulted from three decades of paramilitary activities in vast regions of the country. During that time, they consolidated a military, politically and economically presence covering big portions of the territory, being able to seize a set of invaluable resources, generating accumulation processes and consolidating local and regional economies. The new economical and political elites are thus linked to the expansion of the paramilitarism. The

criminalization of control systems, which include a reconfiguration of the State and its cooptation, are a fast track that is well-established in some areas where the emerging elites wield a huge amount of power.

This is, by far, the most serious problem hanging over Colombia and it is beginning to show within the existing institutional structure. To give just one example, the so-called "false positives" (the systematic practice of assassinating citizens, usually young, unemployed men, alleging they were guerrillas and then admitting that mistakes were made) are an eloquent manifestation of the magnitude of the ethical crisis that dominates political power in Colombia.

DEVELOPMENT, SECURITY AND COOPERATION

The security model that is being applied today in Colombia feeds on the idea of the global terrorist threat formulated by former U.S. President George W. Bush and his advisors. With assistance provided by the U.S. Southern Command, Colombia has incorporated into its policies the use of complementary economic proposals in marginalized territories that are fertile ground for illegal economies and armed groups that threaten State security.

What follows is a more detailed examination of the conceptual framework of this approach - part of the Uribe administration's Strategy for the Social Consolidation of Territories.

Impact of the new context of global security

In the framework of the U.S. global war against terrorism, the areas of defence, diplomacy and development became the foundation for a single, unified and inter-related security system. The State Department proposed that all channels of U.S. foreign assistance be coordinated with one another and also with diplomacy and defence. For the U.S. National Security Strategy 2002-2006, whatever purposes motivated development assistance in the past now should become a direct instrument of national security.¹²

The strategic goals for U.S. foreign assistance were designed under this new perspective. For agencies responsible for U.S. assistance, development had to become an instrument for the transformation of the meaning and scope of diplomacy in times of terrorism. For example, development efforts should strengthen weak states and improve the lives of their people by creating a State presence in “ungoverned territories” where “terrorists” can plan their attacks.¹³

For policymakers, this perspective was intended to bring about a much more coherent U.S. foreign assistance program. If U.S. assistance in the past had been linked to the defence of the interests of national security in a general sense, today it is aimed at making this link much more explicit in strategic terms. That is, assistance is linked to the particular role a country can play with regards to broader U.S. regional interests.

This means that countries do not have to be recognized as homogenous entities, but could be identified according to social composition or even internal divisions. There could be countries where part of the territory is considered as a developing nation, while other parts are controlled by pre-modern and brutal powers that often entail an extremely high cost in humanitarian terms.

Uganda is an example of this, and to a lesser extent so is Colombia, due to the relative control exercised by the FARC over some territory. But due to the Colombian State's control over most of the populated country, it is classified as a 'Sustaining Partnership Country'.¹⁴ From the US perspective, the 'reconstruction' should aim towards the development of a unified and homogeneous State, thereby allowing for the country to be treated as a single and unified strategic partner.

In this way, the global terrorist threat has meant changes in the political and institutional order, with significant weight given to the State and Defence Departments in articulating the role of international cooperation, including the role of USAID. While respecting the obvious differences with the case of Afghanistan, the areas in Colombia that are

still not under the State's control are also considered scenarios where there are obstacles generated by armed groups, the presence of collective territories and demands from indigenous communities facing grave social exclusion. All of these factors block the optimal access of large capital to strategic resources. Furthermore, the growth of non-state threats in these areas could be hastened if neighbouring governments that are not enamoured by the U.S. security hegemony lend support to insurgent groups.

It is within this context that Washington's plans to beef up the infrastructure of military bases in Colombia, and the corresponding uneasiness among other members of UNASUR, takes on a special significance. If the problem of drug trafficking is to be truly faced, joint efforts should be concentrated on blocking elites in the illegal economy from taking root and literally wiping away the scant institutionalization that exists in some regions of Colombia so that they can consolidate corridors for the passage of drugs and capital. Assets continue to be laundered through the concentration of land and investment in “legal” agro-export businesses.

Washington continues to put a premium on the Colombian government's efforts to eradicate illegal crops, instead of focusing on results in asset forfeiture and seizing properties and goods of those who run the drug trade.

An agrarian model that favours large landholdings has helped guarantee the control of territories by legalized drug traffickers. These new regional elites – with the use of criminal bands – have displaced democratic institutions, the existing pockets of peasant economies, spaces with collective control of land, rule of law and public security.

As far as the economic assistance model continue using the security approach that considers the anti-terrorism war its priority, Washington will be helping the *mafioso* power emanating from drug trafficking to become more entrenched.

The issue of alternative development in Colombia between 2009 and 2013 opens a

discussion in this direction and allows for questions to be raised concerning the assumptions and implementation mechanisms at the root of present assistance programs. This could help in thinking through a new U.S. assistance strategy.

The most important area in this sense is the link between security and development, prioritizing the first over the second. Development today is subsidiary to security and is focused primarily on access to strategic resources. Assistance programs should be redesigned to prioritize development over security, and to separate development issues from security issues.

NOTES

1. Senior fellow with the Transnational Institute TNI.
2. Republic of Colombia, National Planning Department, National Development Plan "Toward a Communitarian State," 2002-2006, Bogota.
3. DNP, Ibid.
4. Republic of Colombia, National Planning Department,, Conpes 2318, Alternative Development Program 2003 – 2006, March 3, 2003, Bogota.
5. Units composed of civilians accompanied by police officers or soldiers to carry out forced manual eradication campaigns.
6. DNP, Conpes 2318, pg. 6
7. This does not overlook the fact that the guerrillas do indeed derive an important amount of their resources acting as intermediaries between producers and traffickers of cocaine. Another thing is to place axis of the complex problem of illegal economies and, as a consequence, political decisions, on the role the FARC plays in drug trafficking.
8. "Clashes between coca farmers and the police," *El Tiempo*, Sept 1, 2007. The summary of the situation of aerial spraying and its impacts refers to a few cases that are taken as examples. In general, these effects are reproduced throughout the different zones that are sprayed.
9. Peasant Association of Antioquia (*Asociación Campesina de Antioquia—ACA*), 2008, "The legitimacy of social protest in the context of coca eradication in Antioquia's Lower Cauca region: Consequences and projections." Bulletin # 8 January/March 2008.
10. Diakonie, Katastrophenhilfe "Aerial spraying in Timbiquí affects food security projects," Popayán, May 12, 2009. There are documents from the Timbiquí Municipal Health Secretariat that report

patients with symptoms attributable to aerial spraying with glyphosate (which is the herbicide *Round Up* that is modified in its composition and dosage to spray on coca).

11. These security policies stem from several assumptions: 1. That there is not a social or armed conflict in Colombia, but the presence of terrorist groups that are a threat to security; 2. That the Colombian state has managed to do away with paramilitaries and drastically reduce the guerrilla forces; 3. That as a consequence there is a post-conflict scenario that needs to be consolidated and, in this sense, it is fundamental to direct international assistance resources for development; 4. That it is necessary to reformulate a plan for economic assistance to these regions that is aimed at legitimizing the armed forces and win over communities to the state, a context that would establish peace and security.
12. Gerald F. Hyman, 2008, "Assessing Secretary of State Rice's Reform of U.S. Foreign Assistance", Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment.
13. Ibid, pg.1
14. Ibid, pg. 23

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