

## The Statistics Bazaar

*Statistics are another front of combat in the war on drugs in Colombia*

By Ricardo Vargas Meza <sup>1</sup>

The drugs scene in Colombia is characterized by the fact that it is dominated by a confusion of insufficiently supported statistics and speculative diagnoses which produce policies that reflect this chaos. The common denominator is the political manipulation of the data.

This prioritises the desire to present successful results that will endorse and guarantee the continuity of the existing policy. With this goal, contextual situations – such as the break down of organisational structures that make up a drug exportation chain, or large seizures of substances, extraditions etc. – are often used as a basis for inferring structural diagnoses that announce an imminent end to the drug economy.<sup>2</sup>

The manipulation of data and diagnoses that has taken place in Colombia in order to consolidate the “success of the strategy” is now catching on in countries such as Mexico who look to Colombia as an exemplary country. Some experts and observers from the United States close to the decision-making circles on anti-drugs matters are also disseminating this interpretation.

Until the anti-drug strategies are based on a serious evaluation, one that represents what is really happening on the drugs scene, it will be impossible to adjust the policies or change the direction they have been taking for decades. In this context, the accuracy of the figures and their interpretation is cru-

### Conclusions & Recommendations

- The inadequate or poor diagnoses of the reality of the drugs picture affects the effectiveness of the policies at every level of the chain of the illegal economy: the strategies that are trying to have an effective influence on the production of raw material; the policies linked to use and abuse; on trafficking and decisions aimed at having an impact on the exit points; and finally, the decisions related in general to international trafficking and the persecution of illegally made capital.
- The accuracy of the statistics and their interpretation are crucial elements for the production of more appropriate strategies.
- The dimensions of problems related to the production, traffic and consumption of controlled substances are seriously affected by the statistics and diagnoses which prevail in Colombia today, producing this scene of confusion, extremely misleading information and absence of rigor in the treatment of the key elements which are the basis for policy making.
- Reducing the new dynamic of drug trafficking to the domestic stage leads us to consider the problem in a purely national context. This goes against the real dynamic of the illegal drug economy that tends to be characterised by a more significant regional involvement and transnationalization. A regional overview of the problem would facilitate the development of policies that are in keeping with this situation.

cial for producing more appropriate strategies.

This report looks at what is happening to coca and cocaine statistics in Colombia with the aim of raising a few questions on what the authorities present as the success of drug control in Colombia.

### THE STATISTIC ACCORDING TO UNODC

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's June 2009 survey shows a decline in the world's cocaine supply due mainly to the reduction that has been brought about in Colombia, a fact that according to this multilateral agency, can be seen on two fronts:<sup>3</sup>

1- An 18% reduction in cultivation, which dropped from 99,000 hectares in 2007 to 81,000 in 2008.

2 - A 28% decrease in cocaine production, which fell from 600 metric tons in 2007 to 430 metric tons in 2008.

According to the same survey, a rise of 6% was seen in the area under coca cultivation, rising from 28,900 hectares in 2007 to 30,500 in 2008; and in Peru this area rose 4%, from 53,700 to 56,100 hectares. (See Table No. 1)

What stands out in the case of Colombia is the fact that an 18% reduction of planted area represents a dramatic reduction of cocaine production (28%); in other words a

decrease of over one quarter in just one year.

UNODC's 2007 survey showed a major increase in planted areas, which rose from 78,000 to 99,000 hectares between 2006 and 2007. At the time this result was strongly rejected by the Colombian government, who threatened to break their agreement with UNODC and to create their own entity for measuring the impact of the counter-narcotics activities. This situation contributed to creating a less than favourable setting for a calm and objective analysis of the drug problem.

In 2004 UNODC published a study that updated the CBP (coca base paste) yields per ton of coca leaf produced, as well as the averages of cocaine hydrochloride and pure cocaine per kilo of CBP. One of the most valuable findings of this study was that there was discrepancy in the yields established for different regions.

However, UNODC's 2008 figures showed considerable alterations in the ratios of yields given for some regions. There are significant cases of changes to yields of coca leaf production (tons) per planted hectare. These changes are so substantial that they considerably affect the national average.

Such is the case, for example, in Sierra Nevada or the Meta-Guaviare region, whose yield (ton of coca leaf/Ha) is reduced by 50%. The same can be seen in the case of

**Table No. 1**

#### Global cocaine production/metric tons 1998-2008 according to UNODC

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	change 2007/08	% of total 2008
Bolivia	150	70	43	60	60	79	98	80	94	104	113	9%	13%
Peru	240	175	141	150	160	230	270	260	280	290	302	4%	36%
Colombia	435	680	695	617	580	550	640	640	610	600	430	-28%	51%
Total	825	925	879	827	800	859	1.008	980	984	994	845	-15%	100

Source: UNODC, "Colombia Coca Survey", June 2009.

**Table No. 2**  
**Calculations of potential CBP and**  
**Cocaine Hydrochloride production by region, Colombia 2008**  
**(based on UNODC's 2004 Colombia study)**

Region	Total prod. of coca leaf with yields from 2004 survey (ton)	Yields CBP kilos/ton coca leaf, from 2004 survey	CBP per Region (kilos)	Aprox. CBP (ton)	Cocaine hydrochloride (1:0.9) (ton)	Prod. pure cocaine (1:0.85) 2008 (ton)	Official calculation cocaine production UNODC 2008 (ton)
Putumayo – Caquetá	78,182	1.74	136,037	136	122,4		
Sur de Bolívar	104,577	1.41	147,454	147	132,7		
Pacífico	77,784	1.46	113,565	114	102,6		
Catatumbo	13,276	1.38	18,321	18	16,2		
Sierra Nevada	2,975	1.45	4,314	4	3,6		
Meta Guaviare	120,325	1.52	182,895	183	164,7		
Orinoco	25,709	1.73	44,477	4 4	48,9		
Amazonas	8,273	1.5	12,410	12	10,8		
<b>Total</b>	<b>431,101</b>	<b>1.63</b>			<b>724,3</b>	<b>616</b>	<b>430</b>

*Drawn up by the author based on UNODC figures*

Putumayo-Caquetá, with a reduction of 27%. The immensity of these changes should be the focus of new specified studies that would show in a consistent manner the new tendencies argued by UNODC in its surveys since 2004.

On the other hand, the statistics concerning the Pacific and Orinoquía regions for 2008 lack updated studies and in the case of the Pacific are based on very low coca leaf yields per planted hectare, showing only 2.5 harvests for the year, when the average for 2005 was 4.2 harvests. This in turn translates into an average of only 1.46 kilos of CBP per ton of coca leaf for this region.

The magnitude of these changes can be seen by taking the 2008 figures for coca leaf

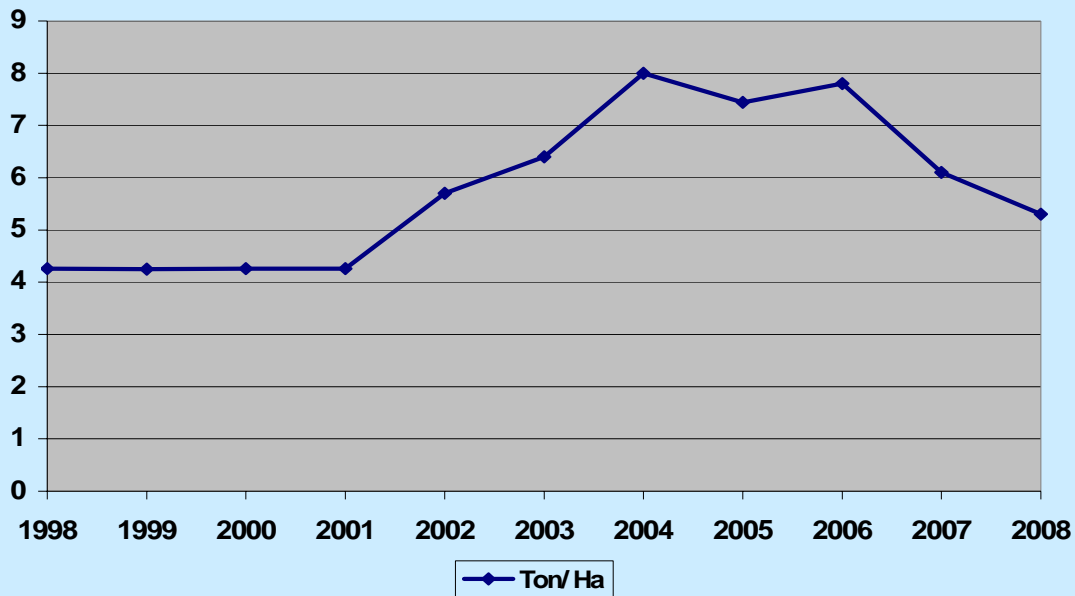
areas and applying the yields of the 2004 study to them. The final results are significant. This situation is shown in Table No. 2.

Indeed, as we can see, by applying the averages established in the 2004 survey to the 2008 figures for the areas of coca, the end result is surprising: using the 2004 standards, pure cocaine production in Colombia would reach 616 tons, a figure that differs from the official calculation of the 2008 survey, where it is shown that the production was 430 tons. This reveals a major difference of 186 tons.

Using a graph to show the changes made concerning the yields of pure cocaine per hectare of coca leaf in the various reports

Graph No. 1

Relationship between hectares of coca and cocaine production (ton)  
in Colombia according to UNODC figures (1998-2008)



Source: drawn up using UNODC figures

on cocaine production in Colombia, the situation is the following. (See Graph 1)

As we can see, the different situation that appears between 1998 and 2001 due to the underestimation of cocaine yields in Colombia was reviewed from the 2004 survey onwards revealing averages of around 7.5 kilos per hectare. This was applied retrospectively with some changes for 2002 and 2003 and then applied with slight modifications for the years 2004 to 2006.

However, after this we see some very sharp declines in 2007 and 2008, with an average of nearly 5 kilos per hectare. No convincing explication is given for this significant reduction. By studying the graph we can suppose that this is not contextual behaviour but a trend. This demands an explanation that looks beyond dynamics such as the weather or the intensity of fumigations and forced manual eradication of coca leaves.

Thus, to the debate on the statistics concerning planted areas- which, in the case of Colombia, differ enormously between those offered by UNODC and those presented annually by the United States Department of State in its world drug reports<sup>4</sup> – can be added the inconsistencies of the statistics related to the yields. Another point is that whilst the US figures concerning areas are accurate, conclusive studies to back their calculations for cocaine production yields are unavailable or unknown. These calculations, as we will see further on, end up being very speculative.

#### COCAINE STATISTIC FROM THE UNITED STATES EMBASSY IN COLOMBIA

One official report presented by the Embassy of the United States in Colombia on November 6, 2009 states that, “The government of the United States completed its 2008 annual survey on the quantity of coca

harvests and the potential cocaine production in Colombia. The results show that the cultivated area reduced by 29 percent in just one year, dropping from 167,000 hectares in 2007 to 119,000 hectares in 2008. New information on productivity indicates that in 2008 the maximum production potential in Colombia was greatly reduced, dropping from 485 metric tons of pure cocaine to 295 metric tons, which represents a reduction of 39 percent”.<sup>5</sup>

This official statement allows us to see that with respect to the areas of coca and the yield of cocaine per hectare there continues to exist a disparity between the US data and that of UNODC. The level of inconsistency of the US data officialized by the Embassy is significant. The statistics for planted areas compared to the yields of cocaine per hectare show their weakness when for example they give averages of 2.90 kilos per hectare for 2007 or 2.47 kilos for 2008. (See Table No. 3)

As we can see, the possibility of creating a solid database starts to become seriously affected, especially if the aim is to establish an evaluation of the anti-drug decisions and to project a forward thinking policy.<sup>6</sup> The average yields given by the Embassy’s figures are inconsistent which ever way you look at them.

This scene of confusion gets worse if we take the official figures from the Department of State as a base; as we will see by analyzing certain points from the Venezuela study undertaken by the Government

**Table No. 3**  
**Comparison of areas of coca and cocaine yields 2007 and 2008 in Colombia between UNODC and US Embassy**

Year	Coca figures UNODC		Coca figures US Embassy	
	2007	2008	2007	2008
Areas	99,000	81,000	167,000	119,000
Cocaine Prod.	600	430	485	295
Yield. Kilos/Ha	6.1	5.3	2.90	2.47

Accountability Office GAO in July 2009.<sup>7</sup>

**GAO SURVEY ON DRUG TRAFFICKING FROM COLOMBIA**

The GAO states that 260 tons of cocaine coming out of Colombia travel through Venezuela. According to the document, the flow of cocaine through Venezuela has significantly increased. According to the GAO:

*“In 2008, the Office of National Drug Control Policy ONDCP reported a more than fourfold increase of the estimated cocaine flow travelling through Venezuela to the US, West Africa and Europe, rising from 60 metric tons in 2004 to nearly 260 tons in 2007”.*<sup>8</sup>

This would mean that in light of the Embassy figures, 53.6% of cocaine produced in Colombia travels through Venezuela if we

**Table No. 4**  
**Calculations by the Dpt. of State of potential pure cocaine production in Colombia**

2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997
ND	535	550*	545	430	460	571	839	580	520	435	350

Source: International Narcotics Control Strategy Report by the Dept. of State 2009. (Frequent recalculations appear in the Department of State’s surveys. Whilst in the 2008 survey 610 tons appears for 2006, in the 2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, there appears a potential 550 tons for the same year).

base our calculations on the 2007 figures, or 88.1% if we base them on the 2008 figures. These figures once again confirm the seriousness of the problems surrounding the calculations for the illegal drugs economy presented by the official documents of the US.

Given the above, we have used the figures of the Department of State as a base, these show a different –though not necessarily more solid- behaviour than that analyzed by the Embassy. We can see these figures in Table No. 4

According to the Department of State's figures for the potential production of pure cocaine the percentage of transit through Venezuela would be approximately 48.6%. However this figure remains doubtful if you take into account the fact that the GAO survey makes the serious mistake of making a calculation for a transit country such as Venezuela, without taking on board the corresponding percentages of the many and various routes used from Colombia.

This massive mistake leaves the GAO document practically without foundation, whilst at the same time giving us an insight into the significant lack of coordination between the different agencies working with the drug problem. It also leaves us with many doubts as to whether it has been carried out with the analytical rigor appropriate for a policy assessment that has had such a substantial budget.

### **THE NATIONAL POLICE'S DIAGNOSIS OF THE DRUG TRAFFICKING SITUATION IN COLOMBIA TODAY**

To this panorama, which comes from the leading country for counter-narcotics activities, we can add the apparition of a “new paradigm”, the diagnosis of the problem made by the principle authorities involved in drug control in Colombia.

In a recent interview with the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, the head of police

General Naranjo declared that there are no longer major drug lords in Colombia but that consumption is encouraged by setting up ‘pockets of vice’ and promoting drug dealers.<sup>9</sup> *“From 2002 until now the government has authorized one thousand extraditions, of which around 900 have been carried out. This means that the old cartels have been left without leaders and power, and the life expectancy of the ringleaders is increasingly shorter. The country can be sure that we will not tolerate an organised drug trafficking structure. We are in the best position to destroy it”.*

When asked whether there already exists a major drugs structure General Naranjo replied that, *“... In the past, the drug trafficking hub was largely concentrated outside the country. Prohibition capacity has improved and as a result, in order to adapt and survive, drug traffickers have encouraged cocaine consumption within Colombia by subsidising it, creating pockets of vice and drug selling and promoting the dealers. This micro-trafficking is creating violence in the cities. This is the priority of the police.”*<sup>10</sup>

This interpretation of the drugs business represents a “Copernican change” in the reading of the Colombian drug-trafficking scene: the anti-drugs policy has been so successful that it has practically managed to block export and as a consequence the drug dealers find themselves forced to develop the internal drugs market.

This new interpretation should lead to a policy framework different from the focus that has prevailed for the last three decades. According to this new diagnosis by General Naranjo, the main police activity should be focused on dismantling the local urban markets that represent the heart of the problem and the most significant explanation for the increase of violence in Colombia's main cities.

The underlying problem with this interpretation is that it conceals the fact that drug trafficking is a transnational phenomenon

at its peak and in its place produces a new social imaginary that reduces it to domestic spheres.

A new paradigm of the illegal drug economy in Colombia should be corroborated in light of the new international dynamics and in particular of the changing geopolitics of drugs in Colombia. Amongst the dynamics that characterise the new transnational scene we highlight:

- the fluctuating interaction of Colombian groups with Mexican organisations;
- the growing importance of Central America in the new geopolitics of drugs;
- the huge increase and diversification over the last ten years of areas of international trafficking from Colombia. These areas are associated with territorial control by armed groups who offer their security services to drug trafficking;
- the growing diversification of the use of frontier routes, a fact which has considerably developed the geopolitics of drugs arriving from Colombia and that is corroborated by the growing involvement of Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama. However, countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay have also ended up becoming involved, either as markets or as a bridge to Europe via Africa.
- the symbiosis between drug trafficking groups, local and regional elites and private armed groups who have renewed the old paramilitary dynamic of social pressure.

The dimensions of problems related to the production, traffic and consumption of controlled substances are seriously affected by the statistics and diagnoses which prevail in Colombia today, producing this scene of confusion, extremely misleading information and absence of rigor in the treatment of the key elements which are the basis for policy making.

Reducing the new dynamic of drug trafficking to the domestic stage leads us to consider the problem in a purely national context. This goes against the real dynamic of the illegal drug economy that tends to be characterised by a more significant regional involvement and transnationalization. A regional overview of the problem would facilitate the development of policies that are in keeping with this situation.

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## NOTES

1. Senior fellow with the Transnational Institute TNI.
2. Thus for example there has been much speculation on the operation *Fronteras* that brought about the capture of 21 members of an illegal network. But this network is a part of the organisation of new drug trafficking leaders in Colombia, which continue to run smoothly. The cost of the operation has not been revealed. According to newspaper articles it involved 35 investigating teams, two years of monitoring, infiltration and interceptions. There has also been speculation on the importance of the relationship of this network with the Mexican drug lord Chapo Guzmán.
3. UNODC 2009, *Colombia, Coca Cultivation Survey*, June 2009.
4. These figures appear regularly in the *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, by the US Department of State, Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.
5. Information presented on November 6th 2009 see <http://Spanish.bogota.usembassy.gov>. Translation is our.
6. The statistics issue has for years been the object of debate between observers. Tom Blickman says that, "If we calculate the potential cocaine production in Colombia using the most recent North American cultivation estimations, based on the UN's latest discoveries concerning areas under cultivation and the new estimations of yield per hectare, the total resulting figure would rise to 1.126 MT, nearly double the official estimation by the US and UN in 2006. See "What do we know about the dimensions of the

*cocaine market?*”, Tom Blickman, Transnational Institute (TNI), November 2007, in: Colectivo Maloka (ed.), *The illegal drugs economy. Conflict and human rights scenarios, y derechos humanos*, 11; [http://www10.gencat.cat/drep/binaris/Mat\\_Pau\\_Cas\\_11\\_def\\_web\\_tcm112-112952.pdf](http://www10.gencat.cat/drep/binaris/Mat_Pau_Cas_11_def_web_tcm112-112952.pdf).

7. Government Accountability Office, GAO, “Drug Control - U.S. Counternarcotics Cooperation with Venezuela Has Declined”, July 2009.

8. GAO 2009, *ibid.*

9. See *El Tiempo*, August 24 2009, “Traffickers devote themselves to micro-trafficking which produces violence in the cities: general Óscar Naranjo”.

10. *El Tiempo*, *Ibid.*

## TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activists and researchers committed to critically analysing current and future global problems. Its goal is to provide intellectual support to grassroots movements concerned about creating a more democratic, equitable and sustainable world.

Since 1996, TNI’s Drugs and Democracy Programme has been analyzing trends in the illegal drug economy and global drug policy, causes and effects on the economy, peace and democracy.

The programme does field research, fosters political debate, provides information to officials and journalists, coordinates international campaigns and conferences, produces analytical articles and documents, and maintains an electronic information service on the topic.

The goal of the programme and the Drug Policy Briefing series is to encourage a reevaluation of current policies and advocate policies based on the principles of harm reduction, fair trade, development, democracy, human rights, protection of health and the environment, and conflict prevention.



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