

Alternative development from the perspective of Colombian farmers

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Alternative Development programmes have been widely discussed from the point of view of experts, technocrats, politicians and academics, with advocates and detractors debating whether such programmes contribute to decreasing the cultivation of illegal crops. However, little is known about the opinions of the people targeted by these programmes and the implications that they have for their daily lives.

This analysis hopes to play a role in correcting this imbalance by analysing alternative development programmes carried out in Colombia during the government of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) from the perspective of Colombian farmers. This document is based on the data obtained in public meetings and round tables with the leaders of producer organizations, and from my experience of working with farmers and civil servants during three years of work as a consultant at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Bogota. The intention of this paper is to offer a global vision of the programmes; it does not attempt to examine the various local and regional dynamics that resulted from the implementation of the programmes during that period, nor to focus on the whole complex subject of Alternative Development as a public policy.

Between 2003-2010, two alternative development programmes were implemented: the Forest Warden Families Programme and the Productive Projects Programme, as part of the Presidential Programme Against Illicit Crops (PACIC). The goals of these programmes were to consolidate the eradi-

Conclusions & Recommendations

- The farmers need to have permanent access to the state institutions that would allow them to fully develop their rights as citizens in areas of rural and environmental development, road infrastructure, education, and health. The state must be consistent in its implementation of rural development programmes that cover the whole country, and must stop giving paternalistic handouts.
- There must be an end to the imposition of projects drawn up in the offices of those in power and by the international aid community, that do not take into account local knowledge and needs. The call for effective and real participation by farming communities must be taken into account in the drawing up of rural development projects.
- Work with the communities must be based on their skills and traditions, and must be supported by their social networks. In this way the communities will be empowered and will be able to carry out projects that have a positive impact.

cation of illicit crops, offer alternative stable income to communities, generate state legitimacy and strengthen social capital through the participation of society.²

The Forest Warden Families Programme (PFGB in Spanish) was targeted at families located in areas of illicit plantations or those that were at risk of becoming involved. These families signed a contract

with the government in which they committed themselves to “prior eradication, not sowing or re-sowing illicit crops, and the implementation of alternative production of legal crops and/or environmental projects aimed at the sustainable management of forests.”³ In turn the government agreed to offer “comprehensive (technical, environmental and social) accompaniment as well as temporary economic incentives.”⁴

The Productive Projects Programme (PPP) worked with farmer organisations within the agricultural sector with the objective of establishing a local economic base, which could then provide stable and legal sources of work and income through the sustainable use of natural resources.⁵ While funds for the PFGB came directly from the state, the PPP also received resources from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These resources were managed by those running the programme who then transferred them to the so called ‘executive entities’ in charge of developing the projects in pre-determined areas: mid to long term farming and agro-forestry projects focused on production of cacao, rubber tree, palm oil, quality coffee and forestry (timber yielding and others).

In order to ensure eradication of crops intended for illicit use, alternative development programmes must first address the reasons why the farmers began cultivating them in the first place and offer solutions to the problems they have created. We will therefore examine, from the farmers’ point of view, the achievements and deficiencies of the PFGB and the PPP in the process of achieving their objective.

THE SITUATION OF FARMERS WITH ILLICIT CROPS

Farmers who had illicit crops explained that one of their reasons for cultivating them was that their commercialisation was assured and free from transport expenses. This second reason is particularly significant for people who in remote areas who

are not able to cover transportation expenses for sales of their produce. The income obtained from illicit cultivation, although not large, was sufficient to cover their needs as well as provide income to improve their homes, send their children to study, cover health emergencies and carry out certain recreational activities.

Problems associated with the cultivation of coca

Farmers who lived in coca farming areas noted five main problems linked to its cultivation:

First, both the farmers who grew coca and those who didn’t were treated as criminals. This justified the presence of the army, enforced eradication and fumigations. Farmers maintain that they are not criminals and that state abandonment and lack of other sources of income was what led them to become involved in the illicit activity.

Second, due to the presence of the crops, foreign nationals had arrived in the regions and caused violence including threats, forced displacements and murders.

Third, this violence broke down social networks, which play a hugely important role in farming communities as they facilitate actions of solidarity that allow them to solve everyday problems, such as the difficulty of hiring labour, dealing with health emergencies, overcoming problems caused by natural disasters and facing financial crises.

Fourth, the eradication of illicit crops created a serious problem of food security in the regions, as these farmer production was now redirected towards exportation. Farmers began producing fewer products for self-consumption and local exchange to focus exclusively on the production of coca for exportation. As a result, farmers began consuming products brought from other regions and even canned goods from other countries. When the government suddenly enforced the eradication of illicit crops,

farmers were left without money to buy food and also without food crops in their fields. This situation was worse in the areas that were subject to aerial spraying of coca.

Fifth, coca production caused environmental degradation and negative effects on health. Water sources become polluted by the chemicals used to process coca. Many of the laboratories were located above ravines, and the chemical spillages caused health problems for the families who lived further down the river as well as a decreased supply of fish. Farmers suffered health problems and skin allergies due to the chemical pesticides and herbicides used in coca production.

Understanding this background of state abandonment, violence, weakening of community bonds, food insecurity and environmental degradation is critical for any good analysis of alternative development programmes in Colombia. It raises important questions: Were the alternative development programmes considered in this paper able to compensate for the problems that encouraged farmers to begin sowing illicit crops in the first place? Were the alternative products able to respond to the basic needs of the farmers? Were these programmes able to solve the problems associated with the production of illicit crops?

SITUATION OF PARTICIPANTS IN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

We will now examine the situation of the farmers who took part in the alternative development programmes within the context of the five topics highlighted above:

The relationship of the farmer with the state – According to the farmers, one of the most important benefits of these programmes was that they were now recognized by the state as citizens with rights, rather than treated as criminals. The formalization of the relationship between the state and the farmers brought them out of a situation of illegality and entitled them to training and economic resources, as long

they complied with the law that forbids the sowing of illegal crops. At the same time, the state's recognition of these farmers allowed them to establish connections with public and private entities, as well as with international cooperative organisations, something they were not previously able to do when they were stigmatised as criminals.

However, according to data from UNODC, although more than 90 per cent of those who participated in PFGB established contact with the bodies that carry out the social and environmental accompaniment, the follow-up contact between state and farmers was much weaker. Only 40 per cent received training from the state run SENA (National Training Service), while less than 28 per cent had contact with the Colombian Institute for Rural Development (INCODER), and less than 56 per cent with the local council.⁶

Moreover little was done to build longer term relationships with local and national government. The families linked to the PFGB only took part in the training courses offered by the programme, which were of a transitory nature. The temporary provision of economical and technical resources, by the state based on the hope it would legalise their status it was not accompanied by the full development of their social rights. Consequently farmers are still demanding public and social services, such as transportation routes, agro-fishing support, aqueducts, education and health. In the case of farmers linked to the PPP, their access to benefits was also limited.

The impact of the PFGB was also affected by the failure of the government or executive entities to fulfil some of their commitments to farmers. In the first phase of PFGB, the government had promised 833,000 pesos (US\$460) bi-monthly over a three-year period (the PFGB was made up of five phases in total), yet this was lowered to 600,000 pesos (US\$334) in the middle of the project. Although the state unilaterally changed the rules of the game without a satisfactory explanation, it continued de-

manding the same level of commitment from the farmers. This generated great dissatisfaction amongst the communities, who felt deceived by the state. In the last two phases the duration of the programme was cut to just 18 months, and the payments were reduced to 408,000 pesos (US\$227). What followed was a drastic decrease in the participation of farmers who had previously cultivated illicit crops. Almost 80 per cent of the families who joined during the last two phases of the project had never grown illicit crops.

In the case of the PPP, there were failures to comply with agreed accompaniment and established time-scales. Farmers did not have formal channels to demand state compliance with their prior agreements, especially since the management of resources remained in state hands. The lack of guarantees created a feeling of impotence and frustration amongst the farmers.

The short length of the programmes and the limited areas they covered also hampered the sustainability of the projects. As many farmers affirmed, two or three years of accompaniment is not a sufficient period of time to ensure the sustainability of productive projects in the long term. More time is required in order for the organisations to have the necessary knowledge and resources to be able to continue the projects independently.

As to whether the projects succeeded in replacing illicit crop production, farmers stated that a great number of those who participated in the PPP did not have crops of either coca or poppies, although in some cases there were illicit crops growing near to their fields. According to those same farmers, this situation meant that those who joined the PFGB were at risk of returning to the farming of crops for illicit use, thereby undermining the whole alternative production strategy of the region.

Farmers and conflict – The general opinion of farmers is that the violence generated by the trade of coca and poppy crops was

reduced with the arrival of these programmes. However, although they are now able to live and work in a safer environment, they also acknowledge that many of their productive projects face problems linked to the presence of armed groups and the existence of crops for illicit use in neighbouring fields.

The army does not allow organic or chemical fertilizers to reach certain zones in order to combat guerrilla activity by stopping them accessing supplies for cocaine production or simply by limiting their food provision. Farmers who live in these areas do not have access to the supplies necessary to make their crops productive and in many cases have difficulty covering their own basic needs.

In other areas, organisations have to pay extortion fees or are threatened by illegal armed groups. One of these threats was carried out in 2008. Miguel Daza, leader of Aprocasur (Association of Cocoa Producers of Bolivar South) was allegedly murdered by criminal gangs associated with narco-trafficking.

The breakdown of farmers' social networks

– Families comment that one of the benefits of participating in the PFGB was re-establishing the practice of community work. The social and environmental accompaniment encouraged these practices and, as part of the programme, the owners of the land or a member of their family had to take part in a training course that included community work. If they did not comply with this prerequisite, then the government didn't comply with its commitment of economic resources. At first, farmers were reluctant to participate in compulsory community work, and complained that this type of activity took up the time they needed to sustain their families.

However, accompaniment continued to promote activities which included planting trees, improving community infrastructures, such as schools, community centres and fixing local paths. This helped commu-

nities remember their old tradition of community work, in some regions known as *minga* and in others *vuelta de mano*. As time went by, the initial rejection of these practices turned into a desire to develop other areas of collective work. Spontaneous organisational experiments began to appear, such as those aimed at helping those most in need in the communities—displaced people or victims of violence. More formal organisations geared towards productive activities began to take appear.

In this sense the community work promoted by the PFGB not only contributed to the improvement of the community environment (schools, local tracks, watersheds, etc.) but most importantly empowered the communities themselves. In the first place, because it reminded them that collective work could resolve certain community needs and provide mutual support for their individual productive activities. Secondly and even more importantly, it showed that collective work could be carried out in an entertaining and cheerful manner. As a result, the community work based on pre-existing traditions managed to reconstruct social networks that had been lost due to violence, and generated trust and solidarity amongst members of the community.

However, the benefits that collective work brought to the communities as a whole, did not benefit the alternative productive organisations promoted by the programmes. One cause was the inflexibility of the PFGB programme, which initially restricted incentives for productive activities to a limited number of products: coffee, rubber tree, cacao, palm and forestry. While later on a few other projects were added: apiculture [bee-keeping], pisciculture [fish farming], *panela* sugarcane, rural tourism and handicrafts; technical training was still limited to only these productive lines and people were pressured to organise themselves around them. In many regions these products were not a part of the traditions or interests of the populations.

Examining PPP, some of the farmers who organized themselves around the productive activities defined by the state and international cooperation were able to access economic and technical resource, that were otherwise impossible to access. In this way they established relationships with national, regional and local government agencies and with private companies and cooperative agencies that would not otherwise have paid them any attention had they operated as individual entities. The farmers learnt that the way to relate to institutions is through organisations.

However farmers also noted difficulties in maintaining the coherence of their organisations. It was very difficult to sustain members' commitment to the organisations. Many members did not participate in meetings, because they were not sufficiently educated and did not have the economic means to get to them or the time to attend them. Some members sold their products outside of the organisations to external intermediaries who paid a little more for their products.

It is difficult to guarantee loyalty to an organisation when the only binding factor is profit. Many members did not have strong social links prior to the formation of the organisation. What mattered to them was not a collective interest in working for the collective good but individual interest in accessing state resources and international aid. In the absence of strong social networks, the organisation was dependent on the achievements of the productive project alone to ensure the loyalty of its members.

The lack of strong social networks could have been compensated by a conscious strategy that promoted participation and solidarity: I'm taking part because you are taking part. However the organisations and spaces for participation tied to the programme proved to be far too formal with little relation to traditional organisational forms. Consequently rather than encouraging participation they ended up discouraging it.

Another weakness in the programme was that the productive organisations required their leaders to dedicate a great deal of their time without financial compensation. The leaders therefore ended up being either virtuous people motivated to support the wellbeing of the community, those with greater economic resources, or those determined to use collective resources for their personal benefit. All three situations had negative consequences. In the first case a loss of income for the leaders' families, in the second case growing inequality in the community and in the third case the growth of corruption, leading to social mistrust.

The projects didn't start by considering the skills of the communities; instead they focused on the failings of its members, in particular their lack of formal education and money to invest in the projects. Leaders constantly pointed out that one of the limitations of their organisations is the lack of education of its members. This was profoundly disempowering. It is therefore hardly surprising that members did not attend meetings at which their skills, the product of their farming heritage and of years of experience working the land, were not valued.

Whilst one of the successes of the PFGB was the way it used community traditions as a starting point for its work, the PPP failed because it implemented schemes that bore no relation to the reality of the communities.

Meeting farmers' subsistence needs – The money given by the PFGB was very important for the subsistence of the families that eradicated their illicit crops. But the obligation to have “rural districts free from illicit crops”, in some cases created problems in a particular district between the people who joined the programme and those who did not. In some instances those that joined compensated those that didn't in order to ensure district-wide eradication, thus partially resolving the problem caused by the programme.

However, whether families joined PFGB or not, once it was finished it was far from clear how families could maintain their subsistence. Given that many alternative licit products were not supported by the PPP, the risk remained that there would be a return to the production of crops for illicit use.

One of the limitations to developing productive projects is that the majority of farmers do not have land ownership. This meant PPP as a result had reservations in supporting them as they feared that any investments might benefit other people. Without land there was also no guarantee for bank loans. Another limitation of PPP was its requirement for programme applicants to have a minimum of three hectares. Yet 54 per cent of the families said they have less than three hectares. In order to overcome this barrier, many of the farmers invested the programme's resources into buying land, although this was not something promoted by the programme.

The farmers that joined the PPP came up against other kinds of problems in terms of financial viability. Farmers cited the absence of a road infrastructure as a major weakness, particularly given that the productive projects were designed for the national and international market. Also, although the communities involved received resources, these were not sufficient to cover all the requirements of the projects and were not flexible enough to cover changing circumstances. The absence of economic resources was not compensated for by greater access to credit.

Another of the PPP's great weaknesses was the lack of participation by organisations in the productive projects. Although all the projects emphasise participation, in practice this was limited to the socialisation of the projects, in other words to sharing information of activities and available training. But there wasn't any real participation in designing or carrying out the project nor exchange of traditional and

technical knowledge. The farmers were simply expected to carry out the guidelines drawn up without their participation and often irrelevant to their local reality.

In the case of the PFGB this situation worsened to such an extent that the farmers were infantilised. During meetings with the President they had to call him “Daddy Uribe” and the head of the programme “Mummy María Vicky”, who in turn signed documents: “With my love, sincerely Mummy Vicky.”⁷

The limited participation of organisations in decision-making on productive projects was a major weakness given that most financial and technical interventions were short lived and often ended before the crops started to produce. This situation was exacerbated by delays in financial payments and loans, which held up planned activities. When this was combined with other problems such as pest infestations, it is easy to understand how difficult it was for organisations leaders to maintain their members commitment to productive projects.

The farmers’ engagement with productive projects was also weak as for them it was not clear whether it would guarantee them sufficient resources for their families’ survival. The farmers are conscious of the risks linked to cultivating monocrops, from the prevalence of diseases to market restrictions. What is more, some of them had already experienced food insecurity following the eradication of their illicit crops. In the case of rubber tree production, for example, there was no established trading chain and lack of advice on trading rubber that limited participation.

The organisations that received income from agroforestral crops confirmed that these were not sufficient to sustain families, as it only covered part of the costs of the crops and food. Concerning market restrictions, farming leaders mentioned that large-scale traders sometimes benefited more from these projects than their small organisations. Many of the productive pro-

jects were designed around business interests and not around the farmers’ needs.

Farmers and environmental problems

One of the positive elements of the programme according to farmers was that it re-established or maintained traditional care of the environment. According to data collected by UNODC, farmers carried out some good farming practices, like use of straw stubble, sowing of trees, crop rotation and the use of organic fertilizers and pesticides. However, harmful practices such as slash and burn have also increased. Most of the organisations that make up PPP say that they carry out Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and some of them have Environmental Management Plans (EMP). The organisations’ leaders blame any weaknesses on poor teaching of these “environmental techniques” to farmers, who do not understand their benefits and prefer to continue using traditional practices.

Once again we observe how the executors of the projects failed to promote effective participation by communities, and did not consider the relationship farmers already have with the environment. Taking care of the environment becomes a purely technical question that has nothing to do with the life of the communities.

Despite the fact that the environmental question was a major focus of the programmes (it is emphasised in all policy documents), in practice it never amounted to more than a series of mitigation activities for the environmental impact of the productive projects. There was no serious collaboration with national or local environmental entities that will ensure long-term action with real beneficial environmental impact.

CONCLUSIONS

For farmers it was important to be part of the alternative development programmes as it gave them certain recognition as citizens; They were no longer perceived as criminals and allowed access to technical and econo-

mical resources from the state and international aid, which they did not have previously. However the unilateral changing of the rules of the game by the state and the time-limited and transitory nature of the support, meant that this new found citizenship was partial and temporary, based on being a beneficiary of state help, as in the case of the PFGB, or as economic actors, in the case of the PPP.

What the farmers want is permanent access to state institutions that would allow them to fully develop their rights as citizens in areas of rural and environmental development, road infrastructure, education, and health. Alternative development projects are instead characterized by limited territorial coverage and short intervention periods (a maximum of three years), which makes the sustainability of the projects very difficult and the goal of eradication of illicit crops practically impossible.

The alternative development programmes are superficially putting a plaster over the wound of a deeply rooted problem: the continual abandonment of impoverished farming classes, and a political strategy that reeks of clientelism. The state should instead develop a planned, reliable participatory programme of rural development that covers the whole country and must stop giving paternalistic handouts.

Guaranteeing the rights of farmers must mean an end to the imposition of projects designed in the offices of political elites and the international aid community, that ignore local knowledge and needs. This is why the farmers demand real participation in designing the projects. Real participation means more than just informative meetings and training programmes; it must override the arrogance of technicians and politicians' knowledge, and open up a space for collective discussion and construction of the rural development projects in conjunction with communities.

Work with the communities must be based on their skills and traditions, and must be

supported by their social networks. In this way the communities will be empowered and able to carry out projects that have a positive impact, as the experience of PFGB to a certain extent testified. It is of utmost importance to avoid the imposition of models that - as in the case of the PPP - far from empowering their communities, cause negative impacts and devalue communities' cultural identity.

NOTES

Susana Ojeda (Colombia) was a student of the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague in 2010 who studied peasant responses to alternative development programs in Colombia. She continued to work on this issue as an intern for 3 months in TNI. This report is a condensed version of a larger document (only in Spanish) with the same title produced by Ojeda for TNI.

2. National Planning Department. CONPES document 3218: Alternative Development Programme 2003-2006. Bogota: DNP, 2003.

3. Forest Warden Families Programme: <http://www.accionsocial.gov.co/contenido/contenido.aspx?catID=217&conID=167>

4. Op Cit.

5. Ibid. National Department For Planning 2003. p. 8.

6. National Conference on Alternative Development, Santa Marta, 12 November 2008.

7. UNODC – Social Action. Forests: Publication by the Presidential Management against Illicit Crops. Colombia, 2010. No. 17, p. 2



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