

Drug trafficking in Colombia undermines the foundations of Indigenous autonomy

Drug trafficking penetrates Indigenous communities, persecuting their leaders, and co-opting the youngest members. Through violence, illegal armed groups increase the illegal cultivation of coca leaf, marijuana, and poppy. The damage to the social fabric undermines sustainable development, harmonious living, and the culture of solidarity. While illegality maximizes profits and creates incentives for drug trafficking, the government does not respect political agreements that could favor the fulfillment of Indigenous rights.

By Marcela Velasco - April 1st, 2022

For many years, Colombia's Indigenous peoples confronted the phenomenon of drug trafficking by exercising a certain level of territorial control that allowed them to shield their territories and economies from the most pernicious effects of this scourge. However, the illegal drug business is gaining strength through increased violence. The persecution and assassination of leaders who oppose illicit activities is a clear strategy to penetrate and co-opt local institutions and Indigenous leadership.

Alarmingly, drug trafficking presents itself with promises of profits never seen before in these communities, which are mired in poverty and in many cases unconfident of their own ability to meet their economic needs. The advance of this economy is a serious affront to the social fabric that underpins Indigenous governance and undermines the foundations of sustainable development based on the essential values of forest and water conservation. Drug trafficking destroys the harmony of communities and their territories.

Why is drug trafficking growing?

Several factors have intensified the impact of drug trafficking. First, the repressive nature of global drug policy means, in practice, that illicit substances become immensely lucrative. Thus, maximizing profits creates incentives for illegal armed groups to control, through violence, the territories where coca, marijuana or poppy are produced. This is compounded by the persecution of social leaders who defend the resources and livelihoods of their communities.

Second, the characteristics of the illegal drug business in Colombia and globally have changed. Today it is made up of dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), self-defense groups, and drug cartels that are much more fragmented and able to withstand the impact of enemy cartels and government repression. The signing of the [Final Peace Agreement](#) in 2016 also changed local power dynamics: the withdrawal of the FARC allowed the entry of illegal groups that began to exert political and economic control in strategic locations to traffic drugs, weapons, and lootable minerals.

Finally, the Colombian government has not regulated all the provisions in the Constitution related to Indigenous rights and tends to stall the implementation of important political agreements, such as the [Indigenous Territorial Entities](#), the mandates of the Constitutional Court ([Auto 004 of 2009](#)), or [the ethnic chapter of the Final Agreement](#). This lack of political will has prevented Indigenous peoples from empowering themselves as authorities in their territories unless they insist on contentious strategies of territorial control.

In short, Indigenous peoples have not been fully incorporated either politically or economically into the Colombian state. Given their weaknesses in local governance and the violent pressure from illegal groups, some members of the communities find themselves in a situation of vulnerability that facilitates co-optation by cartels and illegal armed groups. This situation poses a greater risk for young people.

Drug trafficking in numbers

In 2001, the United Nations [Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#) began collecting information from Colombia's Indigenous communities and recorded 11,791 hectares of coca leaf in the *resguardos* (territories that are of collective ownership and autonomously organized by Indigenous communities). The following year, this was reduced to 7,739 and, until 2014, ranged between 4,000 and 6,000 hectares. From 2015, the cultivated area increased to about 12,000 hectares and in 2017 reached its highest point: 17,672 hectares. In 2021, the UNODC recorded 11,575 hectares.

The reduction observed between 2002 and 2014 is due to the efforts of Indigenous authorities to eradicate coca cultivation as part of their territorial control policies. The growth in areas dedicated to coca production observed since 2015 is correlated with the loss of Indigenous governance. Finally, the UNODC also notes that in 2020, 148 of the 767 existing *resguardos* in Colombia had illegal coca crops.

A UNODC study conducted with the Inga and Awá indigenous peoples in the department of Putumayo allows us to understand what may be happening elsewhere in the country. In this Amazonian region located in the south of the country, illicit crops increased by 60% between 2015 and 2019, while illegal armed groups induced new rules of social behavior.

Illegal armed groups began to modify the community value of solidarity and the economic structure itself, with adverse effects on food security and environmental quality. But the impact does not end there. Indigenous institutions not only began to lose autonomy over their territories, they also lost trust. According to the UNODC, [this situation undermines "the articulated work between the Indigenous government and the municipal, departmental and national governments."](#)

The failure of prohibitionist policies

In its tours of the communities, the [Jenzerá work collective](#) has observed with great alarm how Indigenous peoples participate in the drug trafficking business to find income to survive. But their participation is limited to the lowest part of the production chain: cheap labor, especially as [coca leaf scrapers](#). Supported by armed groups, settlers have aggressively entered into Indigenous territories to clear large tracts of forest.

As a result, drug cartels make huge profits, while some communities are left with the problems, such as brothels and trinket traders. [On the Pacific coast, armed groups restrict the passage of boats transporting agricultural inputs, food, or humanitarian aid](#). The situation is so serious that the bishops of Tumaco, Buenaventura, Quibdó, and Istmina had to advocate that they be allowed to pass so they could verify what is happening in the communities.

We agree with many of the assertions of the UNDOC study in Putumayo, but we disagree with the idea that drug trafficking is deteriorating "the articulated work" that exists between different levels of local, regional, and national government. This assertion does not stand up to serious scrutiny. Relations between the State and Indigenous peoples are not characterized by being articulated. On the contrary, they are marked by the lack of harmonization of different institutions and by the breaking of multiple public policy agreements reached over the last thirty years between the government and the spokespersons of the Indigenous communities. On the other hand, the Colombian government has not been a serious representative of the interests of these communities at the international level either. Guaranteeing the life, culture, and territorial integrity of Indigenous peoples at all levels not only advances a historic agenda of social justice, but also helps to comply with climate change mitigation and adaptation agreements.

Once again, it is necessary to remember that coca has been a sacred plant for Indigenous Colombians. Violence and illegal trafficking demonstrate that prohibitionist policies have not yielded good results in terms of governance, economic development, and environmental

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protection. Understanding the cultural and economic importance of this crop, the only viable solution is to legalize its production and trade.

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