Mexico’s War on Drugs as a Policy of Social Reorganization

Despite its biodiversity, cultural richness and strategic geographic location, the "war on drugs" has stained Mexico's streets with violence. The normalization of violence is exacerbated by the penetration of drug cartels into State structures. The conflict particularly affects Indigenous communities who suffer criminalization by police and military, as well as from forced displacement due to encroachment on their territories.

By Ana Esther Ceceña and David Barrios - April 1st 2022

We were displaced by organized crime.
We are 58 families, and among those 58 families we have 27 dead and 3 missing.
We were attacked in our homes. They came 5 times to attack us in our houses.
An 8-year-old girl saw how they killed her mother and brother.
It was in 2012. They wanted the timber, the minerals that are there, and to plant drugs.
Testimony of the community of Sierra de Totolapan, Guerrero, compiled by the IACHR

Mexico is a megadiverse country. It has more than 5,000 endemic plant species, a variety of ecosystems (including marine) and harbors more than 70% of the known species on the planet. This abundance of natural life is accompanied by its cultural diversity, which has survived 530 years of colonization. The most recent surge of colonization appears in the form of megaprojects such as the Mayan Train and the Interoceanic Corridor. In addition, there are 68 linguistic cultures and around 26 million Indigenous people distributed throughout the territory, especially in the southeastern region.
Rich in strategic materials such as oil and silver, and with considerable reserves of lithium and uranium, Mexico’s geographic location gives it a series of particular characteristics: it is the country that connects with the United States, the largest market in the world; it is bordered by wide coasts that make it accessible to marine trade (80% of world trade transits by sea); and, the porosity of its borders and its control systems favor the creation of clandestine routes, which are suitable for the transfer of drugs, people, weapons and other highly profitable illegal “merchandise”.

Paradoxically, these advantages have turned Mexico into one of the most violent and dangerous countries in the world. Since 2006 the country, whose territory has always been coveted and used by its neighbor to the north, has been caught up in the so-called "war on drugs", which led to the militarization of internal security and the normalization of the use of weapons to settle conflicts. Instead of decreasing, illicit activities grew and the big business of drug trafficking merged with extortion and kidnapping activities – even under the complicity of military, police and common criminals.

**Security and social redesign**

The so-called “war on drugs” conceals a policy of social reordering that covers the entire national territory and was designed, to a large extent, based on the security policies of the United States. Its keys are to be found in the reorganization of the use of territories, the new conditions of the world market, the competition for the extraction of resources, and the disciplining and relocation of its inhabitants.

Violence became the multifaceted axis around which new social patterns were defined: homicide, femicide, disappearance and forced displacement rates exploded. The hierarchical structures of criminal groups were dislocated and under the conditions of uncontrolled violence ensued land grabbing, loss of rights, changes in the agents of production, the breakdown of rules of coexistence and the rupture of the social fabric – both in the urban spectrum, on a more individualized base, as well as in the community of rural areas.

Since then, security policies (undertaken in conjunction with the United States) have only strengthened the causes of organized crime and deepened its damage. In this way, violence has become the privileged tool for change and the quickest and most effective method for
social and productive redesign. While the causes of violence are to be found in the availability of "resources" and criminal businesses (such as amphetamine production and human trafficking), the damages are related to forced displacements, massacres, threats to populations and control of territories.

Throughout this process, the activities of the criminal economy have been diversifying. They are no longer limited to the production, transfer and marketing of illegal stimulants, but have expanded into other activities considered "legal" or "licit" (although they employ slave or forced labor). These range from extractive activities to the creation of monopolies over branches of the formal economy. Often, the victims of these activities are Indigenous peoples who live in harmony with nature and conserve biodiversity, as opposed to engaging in predatory practices.

The scope and starkness of the process can be explained from a territorial and geostrategic perspective: The United States is the main consumer of illegal stimulants worldwide. Simultaneously, the fragmentation of illegal groups by the "war on drugs" has led to disputes over production spaces, infrastructure, transportation and internal markets that have grown along with the trafficking to the north. These power struggles have only intensified the violence.

**The Impact of drug trafficking on Indigenous Peoples**

As Mexico is the country with the largest Indigenous population on the continent, it is necessary to show how this social reordering affects them. Given the colonial and colonizing mentality, abuses by the State and criminal economic structures are multiple and chronic. In the Mexican case, the high level of complicity between the different state institutions and the three levels of government with criminal groups stands out.

In the Indigenous regions of the country where plants are grown for manufacturing into illegal stimulants, forced recruitment of adults, children and young people is a common practice. In these regions, military and police operations criminalize communities that sometimes lose part of their patrimony and resources as a result of crop eradication operations.
To the predatory and discriminatory logic implied in the process of material, cultural and symbolic dispossession, we must also add the corporate powers that seek to establish themselves in Indigenous territories. As in the rest of Latin America, conflicts related to extractive activities (both due to the intensive use of water and the pollution generated by mineral extraction) are common in or near Indigenous territories. With respect to mining, it is estimated that 10 percent of national production is illegally exploited.

Forced displacements

As an underlying dynamic, one of the most disruptive impacts for Indigenous peoples is the deterritorialization caused by the processes of forced internal displacement. It is important to note that this problem is unquantifiable given that it occurs both on a small scale and on a massive scale, which is much more visible. However, the records of the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights estimates that, since 2017 (not counting 2019), more than 41% of the displaced population has been Indigenous.

The violence of displacement is combined with another phenomenon: the constant attacks on land defenders, who are often Indigenous. In recent years, Mexico has emerged as one of the most high-risk countries in the world. In 2019, 18 rights defenders were murdered and in 2020 the figure climbed to 30 people, placing it in second place behind Colombia. The limitation of reducing the problem to "drug trafficking" is corroborated by the fact that nine of the murders in 2020 resulted from illegal logging and deforestation, partly perpetrated by drug trafficking groups.

In these crimes one can observe the overlap between the economic interests of the companies, the local powers, and the cells and hired assassins of the criminal economy. This situation, highlighted during the visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is corroborated by the systematic attack against the Yaqui Tribe for their opposition to the Independence Aqueduct. Their defense of water and territory has led to the murder and forced disappearance of several members of the community.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, 52.2% of the Indigenous population lives in cities. In Mexico, the trend is similar due to increased labor supply, the provision of basic services that do not exist in their communities, and forced displacement as a result of violence, especially
in cities such as Guerrero, Chiapas and Chihuahua. In urban centers where the criminal economy includes extortion, drug selling points in peripheral areas and recruitment for illegal activities, the Indigenous population is more vulnerable.

**Violated life practices**

Mexico is the world’s third largest producer of poppy, the raw material for opium gum. This production is concentrated in the so-called “Golden Triangle” (the mountain range shared by Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua), as well as in Michoacán, Guerrero and Oaxaca. In the latter two states, which combine a larger Indigenous population and higher levels of exclusion, poppy cultivation has been an alternative for family subsistence. Ultimately, this implies constant criminalization by the state and repressive forces.

Faced with this situation, Indigenous peoples have reactivated traditional forms of vigilance and community justice to respond to the challenge posed by criminal economic groups. As a result, since the 1990s, the first community police forces have been created in Guerrero and, in 2011 community patrols were established in Cherán, the Meseta Purépecha and the Nahua Coast. The reaction of the extractive industries and the criminal economy has entailed the loss of dozens of community members’ lives.

The situation in the Southeast is particularly worrisome due to the construction of the Mayan Train and the Transisthmus Corridor. In this region of particular Indigenous cultural density, the megaprojects are generating processes that could be exploited by criminal economy groups. Among these are the creation of communications and transportation infrastructure, the promotion of large-scale tourism, and the urbanization of rural areas. In addition, this is a key region for the transit of migrants to the United States, which will boost human smuggling and trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation.

The outlook is not promising. Militarization is accelerating, harassing the Indigenous communities and advancing to the point of placing armed soldiers on tourist-crowded beaches. The main impact can be felt in the daily life and according to the Indigenous communities, the day-to-day changes such as not being able to walk freely down the street or walk around at night, having to change schools, not being able to go to the market and
having to keep the windows closed has meant a modifying of life practices and the incorporation of fear as a pattern of behavior.

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