
POLICY COMMENTARY**Mitigating Crime and Violence in Coca-growing Areas**Thomas Mortensen¹ and Eric Gutierrez²¹ Christian Aid in Colombia, CO² Tackling Violence and Building Peace at Christian Aid, GB

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Puzzled about why and how coca-growing areas in Bolivia do not have the same levels of violence and criminality experienced in their communities, eight peasant leaders from various coca-growing areas of Colombia joined a study tour to investigate. Notwithstanding differences in histories of conflict, political economy, infrastructure, and state-society relations, two explanations stood out. First, the usually overlooked intermediation role of strong local, self-help, and typically non-state institutions in peasant communities that enables marginalised households to assert their interests in interactions with both state and market structures appear as a key factor in mitigating violence and criminal activity. Second, land tenure security, access to public services, and diversifying local economies that draw land and labour away from illicit coca production could address the factors that draw in poor subsistence farmers, including unemployed and under-employed rural workers, to the illicit trade. This paper presents a documentation of the study tour, elaborates on the thinking behind the two explanations, and flags signposts for possible use in improving public policy on drugs and development.¹

Keywords: violence; coca growing; peasant communities; state community relations; public policy; drugs and development; drug crop cultivation

Introduction

Contrary to common understanding, not all locations where the coca bush is grown – even where contentious politics abound – are hotbeds of violence and criminality. The best example perhaps are the coca-growing areas of Bolivia, where no armed insurgencies or drug cartels are found, unlike in similar areas of Colombia. This has puzzled land-poor, displaced, and seasonally migrating Colombian peasants increasingly reliant on coca cultivation for survival while being exposed to the violence and criminality typically associated with the crop. Hence, they have asked: *what mitigates violence and criminality in coca-producing areas?*² As the government tries to implement the comprehensive peace agreement negotiated with the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), they further ask: *what is the future of coca-growing and coca-growers in a 'post-conflict' Colombia?*³

In response, Christian Aid with the support of the Open Society Foundations organised in 2017 a study tour of eight Colombian peasant leaders to the coca-growing regions of Bolivia to find answers for

¹ This paper was originally intended only as an internal learning document for the development agency Christian Aid, but then revised and submitted to the April 2018 Illicit Economies Colloquium (www.illicit2018.org). The views and analyses here are from the authors alone and not necessarily reflective of Christian Aid's views. Thomas Mortensen is the Country Manager of Christian Aid in Colombia. Eric Gutierrez is the Senior Adviser on Tackling Violence and Building Peace, based in London and Dublin.

² Political reactions from Colombian peasants displaced by conflict are much more complex and varied than often assumed. Some have been displaced by corporate interests, others by the state, and still some more by other poor communities like themselves struggling for survival. For more, see Borrás and Franco (2013).

³ Since the 1980s Christian Aid has supported local partner organisations and households displaced by conflict in Colombia to claim their rights to land and territory, to hold state institutions accountable and actively protect human rights, and to fight impunity. See more on <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/colombia>. Since the 2016 signing of the peace agreement with FARC, these partners have also stepped up to get their voices heard, by making submissions and participating in processes for a longer-term political settlement. More challenges are now likely with the election of new president Ivan Duque, who has publicly expressed opposition to the peace agreement.

themselves. The participants represented ANZORC (*Asociación Nacional de Zonas de Reserva Campesina* or National Association of Peasant Reserve Zones), composed of peasant communities claiming access to land, and COCCAM (*Coordinadora Nacional de Cultivadores de Coca, Amapola y Marihuana* or National Coordination for Cultivators of Coca, Amapola, and Marijuana), a coordinating mechanism organised to give voice to cultivators of crops considered illicit and to promote more effective and humane public policies. Logistical support in Bolivia was provided by the Andean Information Network (AIN), which has also published its own version of the outcomes. The OCCDI (*Observatorio de Cultivos y Cultivadores Declarados Ilícitos*, or Observatory of Crops and Producers Declared Illicit) provided invaluable advice and connections. Christian Aid's Colombia Country Manager, Thomas Mortensen, joined the study tour.

The study tour's participants are not detached observers with bystander anxieties. ANZORC's membership are peasant communities, many of which were forced to abandon their land to avoid violence and conflict. The association was established in 2011 to provide organisational representation and support for communities that want to establish Peasant Reserve Zones managed by small-scale farmers. Peasant Reserve Zones are a means to serve the interests of those being left behind and displaced by the rapid commercialisation of Colombia's agriculture and its decades-old conflicts while at the same time protecting the forests and the environment. ANZORC aims to tackle Colombia's persistent agrarian crisis, fight the concentration of land under the control of large estates and multinational firms, and to look for real alternatives to illicit crop cultivation. Dozens of ANZORC and COCCAM representatives have been killed, jailed, and threatened with physical harm for their activism. As such, they are immersed in the messy politics of agrarian change, human rights enforcement, and alternative crop policies, and are well aware of the whole array of wider factors, including the cross-border roles of capital, that explain differing levels of violence, criminality, and state-society relations not just between countries like Colombia and Bolivia but within Colombia itself. To most of them, the still little-understood experiences in Bolivia offered hope, lessons, and pointers on how they can better reconstruct their lives, and the study tour was welcomed as an opportunity to examine what can be done differently. They went to Bolivia to find out not only what they may be missing in their advocacies and everyday struggles and to consolidate or affirm what else can be done with the challenges they face. They also sought to establish links with the cocaleros of Bolivia that they have heard much about.⁴

After the study tour, the participants held workshops with their grassroots memberships in the Colombian provinces of Antioquia, Nariño, Caqueta, and Guaviare, from which two key explanations stood out:

- The presence of strong, local, self-help, and typically non-state institutions in peasant communities – that give voice to marginalised households and allow them to assert their interests in interactions with both markets and state institutions – is likely a key among various factors that mitigate violence and criminal activity in coca-growing areas.
- The future of coca-growing areas may be better secured not by traditional crop substitution programmes alone, but by drawing land and labour *away* from illicit economies. Instead of narrowly focusing on the replacement of crops, it is necessary to ensure instead improved land tenure security to peasants displaced by conflict, who can then invest in more sustainable agriculture; to offer secure and longer-term income and employment opportunities; and most importantly, to provide access to public services to the pools of under- and unemployed young people, including seasonally-migrating agricultural workers dispersed across Colombia.

This paper provides a contribution to the wider literature on the relationships between violence, drugs, the state, and development. Though violence, whether in Colombia or Bolivia, is a complex and messy phenomenon that emerge in various manifestations and with many different structural and short-term drivers rooted in local contexts, various forms of agency can be mobilised in such contexts to tackle the violence.⁵ Furthermore, as study tour participants found out in their interaction with Bolivian cocaleros,

⁴ ANZORC and COCCAM leaders are seeking to understand how war and conflict transform and shape socio-economic relationships and the distinctive political economies in their communities. In many ways, this is a rejection of, or at least scepticism about, the 'temptation of the technical' – or "the belief that (development agencies) could help economically transform poor countries by providing timely doses of capital and technical knowledge while maintaining a comfortably clinical distance from these countries' internal political life" (Carothers and de Gramont, 2013: 3–4).

⁵ Note that our comparisons of violence are not based on quantitative measurements, such as incidents and intensity, but on the qualitative historical experience in Colombia and Bolivia. As Gutierrez et al. explained (August 2010), comparisons based on quantitative measurements often fail to reveal nuances in social contexts and are extreme simplifications of reality for purposes of isolation and data manipulation. What we examine in this paper is the wider and larger stories.

political mobilisation rather than market and public services reforms may play a more decisive role in the construction of choices to move out of the illicit economy.

This contribution – which presents a documentation of the study tour and elaborates on the thinking behind the two explanations – is an attempt to draw attention to the ways that development agencies may be able to support ways of mitigating violence in such contexts, in transforming local economies, and in enabling more sustainable peacebuilding.

A Historical Context of Contentious Coca Policies

The study tour's key conclusion is that it is possible to develop public policies that simultaneously remove criminal control of the commerce in coca leaves while reducing violent clashes between producers and law enforcers, through constructive engagement with all stakeholders. The underlying statement is that coca is not cocaine, i.e. coca growing is not the same as cocaine trafficking; its growers, therefore, are not necessarily criminals.⁶ The Colombian peasant leaders have been consistent in their restatement – that the public policy problem is not simply about tackling drug traffickers and cocaine producers, but instead should be about drawing more attention to rural marginalisation and addressing the conditions that draw survivors to the illicit trade.

Crafting such policies is difficult because of the intensely contentious politics over coca, where taking sides poses risks. For example, civil society groups opposing state-enforced crop eradication because it destroys livelihoods and violates human rights have been accused of siding with criminals. Similarly, public officials do not want to be seen as deviating from the 'official line' of eradication, especially when military and development aid are at stake. These tensions spilled into the study tour, when public discord heightened between ANZORC and the aid-funded National Agency for the Substitution of Illicit Crops. Colombian officials invited to observe the tour were initially open to the idea and subsequently decided not to take part.

ANZORC and COCCAM have long suggested that public policies around coca and other crops disregard the complexity of household decision making on whether to plant an illicit crop or not, or to abandon one crop in favour of another. Decisions are shaped not just by prices and opportunities, but by the daily realities of chronic land tenure insecurity; extreme indebtedness; or lack of access to credit, agricultural extension services, and insurance cover. Decisions will be different in locations where no paved road networks exist or are considered too dangerous and remote for state services and protection to reach. Protection, or the lack of it, impacts significantly on livelihoods and the control of assets like land, livestock, and transportation. Significant parts of Colombia are in reality controlled by non-state actors, and the level of killing of human rights defenders has become the highest in the world.⁷ Those killed include COCCAM members – a total of 38 by the end of August 2018 – promoting voluntary crop substitution. As such, poor farmers in most cases take the choice of the lesser evil – for example when seasonal migrant workers choose to work under slave conditions in the processing of coca to cocaine.

While Bolivia has not suffered from internal conflict and such high levels of drug-related violence, it has had its share of violent clashes between coca growers and state security forces. In the peasant mobilisations of 1988 prior to the enactment of Law 1008 on coca eradication, confrontations with the rural drug police known as the 'Leopards' left dozens dead, including in the infamous 'Villa Tunari massacre' of June 1988 (Leons & Sanabria 1997: 29). The coca growers responded by further organising *sindicatos* or coca workers' unions to respond to the violence and better protect their livelihoods. Soon, the identity of '*cocalero*' emerged. The *sindicatos* then reached out to allies as similarly affected campesinos (peasants) and indigenous people. They sought to legitimise their struggles to external audiences by raising issues wider than the coca (Durand-Ochoa 2012: 196).

It was in this context that the Bolivian slogan 'yes to coca, no to cocaine' emerged, calling on coca cultivation to be protected, while trying to prevent the coca from feeding into criminal markets to be transformed into cocaine. But this policy is most thoroughly misunderstood especially at the international stage, where coca-growing is mostly regarded as a criminal activity itself, and its growers automatically stigmatised as criminals. As such, in June 1998, when the *cocaleros* applied to speak at the first UN General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem to argue their case, they were denied visas to enter New York.

Realising, perhaps, that the only way to get their voices heard and be taken seriously is by demonstrating political strength, the *cocaleros* augmented their social movement building with the establishment of 'political instruments' – i.e. parties or organisations that directly entered the electoral arena. And in December

⁶ Some authors have suggested that the inclusion of coca in the list of banned products under the UN's 1961 Single Convention is a 'historical mistake'. See Henmaan and Metaal (2009).

⁷ See <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/annual-report-human-rights-defenders-risk-2017>.

2005, they scored a dramatic and major victory. One of the cocalero representatives denied a visa – Evo Morales – was elected President with the widest margin ever in Bolivia's election history (Forero, 2005).

With the cocalero's effective capture of formal state power, Bolivia then proceeded to reverse the simplifying fictions and historical mistakes of international drug control policy that had become tools for the cocaleros' repression. The central change came in 2009 when Bolivia adopted a new constitution which stated:

The State shall protect native and ancestral coca as cultural patrimony, a renewable natural resource of Bolivia's biodiversity, and as a factor of social unity. In its natural state coca is not a narcotic. It's revaluing, production, commercialization and industrialization shall be regulated by law (Article 384, Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia).⁸

The election victory of Morales signifies many things. It showed the transition of marginalised cocaleros stigmatised as criminal actors and peddlers of a 'social poison' to a resilient social movement and then to the core of a political coalition that captured formal power via elections. They can now engage the United Nations with their own voice as legal and legitimate players. Most importantly from a legal perspective, the coca plant has been officially recognised as legal and legitimate. In short, Bolivian cocaleros 'transformed themselves from producers of a good of questionable legitimacy to defenders of Bolivia's sovereignty, indigenous cultures, and the historically excluded', who turned the source of illegitimacy – the coca leaf – into a potent national symbol versus the economic elites, traditional political parties, and the United States (Durand-Ochoa 2012: 180–196).

General Findings of the Study Tour

The Colombians in the study tour confirmed the relative success of the Bolivian model. Overall, they came away with the impression that removing criminal control of coca-growing, improving livelihoods, and at the same time reducing human rights abuses by state forces is clearly possible.

The Colombians were impressed that relationships between Bolivian farmers and state authorities have been deeply transformed – something that is difficult for a Colombian farmer to even imagine. The delegation had accompanied a team of the Bolivian armed forces on an eradication exercise. Unlike the arbitrary and typically repressive enforcement of state authority that Colombians often experience, it was the Bolivian sindicatos themselves that identified the locations of excessive coca production, showing that to a certain extent, farmers have some form of control over the operations of the armed forces. Some pointed out that the Army colonel in charge of the exercise was friendly not just to the visitors but to the Bolivian farmers too – sharing a meal together and riding in the same vehicle as they did – something that would be extremely rare in Colombia.

But most significant was how the eradication operation took place without violence.⁹ Indeed, the Colombians recognise that problems exist by the mere fact that an eradication exercise still needed to be conducted, as they sympathized with the farmer whose crops were destroyed. However, the overriding concern of the sindicatos is to preserve coca-growing as a livelihood, and in order to do this, they would have to control production from feeding into the criminal market by identifying where over-production takes place. The decision is not without resistance but is overall deemed fair and well-managed, as shown by the relative absence of open rejection of the authority of the sindicatos.

Moreover, meeting the sindicatos and learning about how cocaleros are organised made it clear that the existence of strong and legitimate farmers' organisations is a prerequisite for controlling the production of coca leaves. The sindicatos were not only effective institutions representing the collective interests of cocaleros in negotiations with state and market actors; they also enforced agreements. Governmental authorities cannot by themselves deal with thousands of individual farmers on the ground. This was seen as a clear structural difference from the Colombian experience.

Hearing the Colombians' experiences of repression, the Bolivian hosts were keen to emphasize that before 2005, eradication operations in Bolivia were typically violent too. 'That is how it used to be,' one of them

⁸ The translation into English of Bolivia's 2009 Constitution has been published by the Oxford University Press and is available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bolivia_2009.pdf.

⁹ This validates the observation of Grisaffi and Ledebur (2016) that the launch of the cato policy (discussed in a later paragraph) led to sharp reductions in protests and violence almost immediately. See <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.440/>.

said, 'before the change in public policies and the introduction of the *cato*' – the system that allowed a farming household to legally grow a limited and regulated quantity of coca leaves in a *cato* (approximately one-third the size of a football field). The *sindicatos* then regulated production, effectively establishing social control, which moves coca away from typical markets that tend to be dominated by criminal interests over time. The system is not without faults, but the Bolivians confirm that it has decreased violence, increased citizen engagement, and limited corruption.¹⁰

Most importantly, the Bolivians affirm that the policy stabilised and diversified local economies, leading to a gradual but nonetheless marked reduction in coca cultivation over time. Coca cultivation, they said, peaked at 31,000 hectares in 2010, but has since gone down to 20,000–22,000 hectares, although critics attribute this reduction to more intensive and improved farming methods. Still, the Bolivian *cocaleros* believe that with more consistent evaluation, the system could be improved and better adapted to different local contexts.

The Colombians took notice of the higher profile of women in Bolivia, especially at the local level. Bolivia is known for its high electoral quotas for women, where political parties are now required to have at least 50% of their lists of candidates to be women. As a result, 69 out of 130 members (53%) in the Chamber of Deputies are women, while women occupy 47% of all positions in municipal councils across the country after the 2015 elections.¹¹ Within the *sindicatos*, though admittedly still dominated by men, women nevertheless have a bigger voice, aided by strong women *campesino* federations like the Bartolina Sisa confederation, named after an Aymara woman who led an uprising against Spain in 1781.

This does not mean, however, that there is already gender parity in Bolivia. Many problems remain, including women in elective posts and women anti-corruption campaigners being bullied by men whose power has now become threatened.¹² Nevertheless, to the Colombians, there is much to learn from women's empowerment in Bolivia. Although the study tour did not have a particular women's focus when it started, it became apparent to the visitors that this may be one of the important structural factors explaining differences in the Bolivian experience.

Despite their favourable impressions of the Bolivian approach, the Colombians were very much aware that tensions continue over coca policy. In fact, during their visit, they saw an anti-government demonstration in La Paz by coca growers from the Yungas region, whose coca leaves are perceived to have better quality. The legal market is said to be at 15,000 hectares, but due to pressure from growers has been increased to 20,000 hectares. With the Yungas protests, a further increase to 22,000 hectares was allowed. This creates, say critics, an oversupply that will feed into the criminal market. The fraught negotiations over national limits and reports of coca plantations within national parks¹³ confirm that there just is no 'silver bullet' to overcome the problem of coca production for drug trafficking. The important point, however, is that this model, despite its imperfections, appears critical in preventing violence.

The visitors expressed the opinion that it is important not to undermine this model, while seeking ways to tackle its imperfections. Colombia faces a tougher challenge as its area planted to coca is about 8 times larger than Bolivia. The most recent estimates by UNODC put Colombia's coca area at 171,000 hectares in 2017. Hence, it is regarded as the principal source of the world's cocaine supply.

To be clear, the Bolivian *cato* policy could not be expected to automatically produce targeted outcomes in what is after all a very contentious and complex issue in an essentially unpredictable context. When it was introduced, the policy did not immediately cause a reduction in the overall production, which peaked at 31,000 hectares before gradually decreasing alongside negotiations and review with Yungas producers. This demonstrates the importance of open and transparent negotiations, paying attention to political factors and ensuring that all voices are heard, and adapting the approach to local circumstances. It also shows that policy makers need to not only be pragmatic as there are no perfect solutions, but also open to learning and adapting policies to local contexts.

The Colombian visitors were also introduced to the agro-industrial potential of coca leaves. Since the 'golden years' of drug trafficking in Bolivia in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been talk of creating an indigenous state-supported agro-industry that would produce, process, and export products from coca leaves – i.e. coca

¹⁰ An extended discussion on social control in Bolivia comes from Ledebur and Youngers (2013).

¹¹ Source: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas>.

¹² A longer discussion is presented in a separate Christian Aid report 'Gender and Politics in Bolivia: Violent Repercussions for Women (2016)', see <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/gender-and-politics-bolivia-violent-repercussions-political>.

¹³ http://www.la-razon.com/nacional/UNODC-coca-ilegal-areas_protegidas-Poligono-Bolivia_0_2988301162.html.

tea, soap, shampoo, and skin lotions (Painter 1994: Chapter 1). Because of the criminalisation of the crop, no programmes have emerged. Thus, an agro-industry – whether in Bolivia or Colombia – will require a strong push, investments, and state leadership to reverse coca's stigmatisation and its limited regional and international markets.

Needless to say, the visitors are well aware of problems in replicating the Bolivian model in Colombia. Firstly, the legality of the *cato* is closely linked to the fact that there is a big legal market for coca leaves in Bolivia, unlike in Colombia. Coca-chewing is a deeply ingrained tradition, especially in the Bolivian highlands, whereas in Colombia the tradition only exists in some indigenous communities. Secondly, agro-projects seem to be relatively successful in Chapare, not only because of strong infrastructure (better roads, electricity, and access to public institutions), but also because of a lack of (unfair) competition from large-scale domestic and foreign agro-industries that capture land and public services at the expense of poor peasant households. As noted during the visit, Bolivia has no free-trade agreement with the US and European Union that allows the unrestricted entry of multinationals into the country. Thirdly, Colombia is a close US ally, while Bolivia openly defies US foreign and drug policy and cut relations in 2008.

UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) monitoring of coca production – from satellite photos, aerial observation, to field visits – has been criticised as expensive and excessive. Yet Bolivian *cocaleros* praise it for a positive technical role because it provides a very solid methodology for affirming production levels that can withstand US criticism and validate whether the Government of Bolivia is lying in its figures. According to Bolivia-based campaigning group Andean Information Network, the UNODC effectively prevents the US State Department from manipulating data to suit US policy. As such, this technical role, which now informs the European Union's programmes for coca-producing areas, may be indirectly supporting the Bolivian model altogether.

Finally, the farmers from Colombia were impressed by the capacity of the system to triangulate data on each *cato* and the owner of the land. This again may be a critical difference – it may be possible only because there is a more stable and reliable land registration and property security in Bolivia. In Colombia's remote peripheral rural areas where coca leaves tend to be grown, land registration is very weak.

Challenges for the Crop Substitution Policy

The study tour generated some important observations on the challenges ahead for a reformed crop substitution policy in Colombia. For example, the participants point out promising results from EU-supported crop substitution projects, such as performance-based budget support to Bolivia that, in general, enables wider and predictable access to essential public services by poor coca-growing households. In contrast, most of the US 'help' to Colombia appears to be singularly focused on law enforcement – i.e. to use crop substitution not as a means to reform the agrarian sector, but to enforce illicit crop eradication. US projects have also been criticised as providing business opportunities to American contractors.

The visitors are keen to explore replicating the *Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Integral* (FONADAL or the National Fund for Integrated Development) in Colombia. Fonadal is a specialised agency established by Bolivia's Ministry for Land and Rural Development that, among others, provide funding and technical support for the improvement of infrastructure that enable produce from agrarian communities to reach the markets. The Colombians were surprised to see that small farmers in Bolivia have actual access to roads and formal credit.

It was through such infrastructure projects that cost-benefit analyses were clarified. For example, a Fonadal official explained that from one *cato* (1600 square meters) of coca, a farmer can generate around 20,000 Bolivianos (approx. USD 2900 or GBP 2046) per year in profit. In comparison, one hectare (10,000 sq. metres) of pineapple generates around 50,000 Bolivianos (approx. USD 7259 or GBP 5116) in profit. Thus, for every square metre, growing coca delivers a profit of 12.5 Bolivianos, while for pineapples, it is 5 Bolivianos. But not only is coca more profitable, it also takes far less effort due to the limited size of the *cato* and because coca-growing requires less maintenance. This may be the reason why limited coca-growing in *catos*, along with smallholder access to public infrastructure, is apparently enabling more agricultural diversification in Bolivia's coca-growing areas.

Fonadal-funded projects and support, most importantly, are provided without any precondition to reduce coca leaf production. A Colombian participant noted a key point that rather than prioritising other goals like security or law enforcement, what is necessary as demonstrated in Bolivia are 'sound public policies on rural economic development'. The conclusions from the study tour, thus, provide clear inputs to the

peace process on how the issue of illicit crops could be addressed by a combination of integrated rural development reforms with voluntary crop substitution programmes.¹⁴

Still there is wide room for improvement. Fonadal's provision of full subsidies to the poorest households seems to have generally led to dependence, not resilience. Fonadal now wants to make credit and subsidies smarter by reducing it to 70–90%, depending on overall poverty conditions locally. Fonadal also recognises a further challenge – targeting is essential since the poorest tend to be crowded out of access to credit and subsidies by the better-educated and better-connected, especially when more conditions are applied.

Study tour participants met several trainers and agricultural extension experts during the visit, one of whom told the Colombians that he believes Bolivian cocaleros have shown a greater willingness to reduce coca production because of loyalty to Evo Morales. In other words, political mobilisation, rather than market and public services reforms, may play a more decisive role in the construction of choices to move out of the illicit economy. And there will also remain problems of political unity, such as the Yungas-Chapare divide. While projects in the mountainous Yungas have been generally less successful due to soil conditions, less land, and less infrastructure, compared to the flat, low-lying, and infrastructure-equipped Chapare, many Yungas farmers believe that the real reason is government bias for Chapare, which has benefitted from massive public investments on infrastructure projects. Evo Morales is from Chapare and is still the president of the Coca Growers Federation in Cochabamba and he also the candidate for the federation's upcoming elections in 2019.¹⁵ Another point fuelling tensions between the two coca growing regions is that the coca leaves from Yungas is known to be better for chewing because they are smaller, finer, and sweeter, which brings up the question of what happens to the surplus of leaves from the Chapare region.

Conclusion

While various lessons and conclusions can be drawn from the study tour, this paper limits its main deductions to the roles taken by three key actors in the story – local peasant organisations, state institutions, and external aid-providing agencies.

What is clear from the Bolivian experience, as observed by the Colombian peasant leaders, is that the presence of strong, local, self-help, and typically non-state institutions in peasant communities is a key factor that mitigates violence and criminal activity in coca-growing areas. The Bolivian sindicatos used to be criminalised and stigmatised actors that were denied their voice in policy making. Yet they were strong enough to partly weather the stigmatisation, construct wider identities, and then use or create political opportunities that eventually translated into real political strength.

However, it was not only their capture of political power in Bolivia that is historically significant. Also important were their efforts at reaching out to other marginalised actors, consolidating a social movement of the poor, making use of and creating their own political opportunities, and constructing a strategic development path that reclaimed legitimacy at the local, national, and international stages. The cato system enforced since 2005 took years to develop and still has many imperfections but is continually evolving. The cocaleros were not just a social movement; they became a sophisticated political force that claimed power and legitimacy and turned an outlawed commodity into 'a potent national symbol that signified opposition to the economic elites, the traditional political parties, and the United States' (Durand-Ochoa 2012).

There are of course stark differences in context between Bolivia and Colombia. But the bottom line is that political mobilisation appears as a pre-requisite for the enforcement of public policies favourable to the poor and marginalised, and which enables them to construct independence, autonomy, and the leverage necessary for successful negotiations with market players, both licit and illicit, as well as with state institutions. The possibilities of how the Colombian peasant leaders will transform their strategy and practice of political mobilisation at home, especially in the context of the peace process and given the new president's rightward turn combined with the strong pressure from the US, is something to watch.¹⁶

¹⁴ It should be noted that rural reforms face strong resistance in the Colombian Congress; the Government also tends to enforce crop substitution rather than making it voluntary. There may also be implications now that a politician who has expressed strong reservations with the peace agreement has been elected Colombian president.

¹⁵ http://www.la-razon.com/nacional/Cocaleros-ratifica-dirigente-Morales-binomio-Evo-Alvaro-2019_0_2972702736.html.

¹⁶ Colombia has had a long and varied history of political mobilisations, including the September 1996 'Cocalero Uprising' in its southern provinces, that as Ramirez explained, demonstrated how the identity of campesino-cocalero was politicised and shaped by the sense of exclusion and abandonment of poor peasants by the central state. See Ramirez (2011).

The ascendance of cocaleros to power in Bolivia deeply transformed relationships between poor peasant communities and state institutions, including the military. Though much of it remains contentious and fraught with problems, the role of the state appears to have changed from primarily being a law enforcer imposing its will on typically activist local groups to a platform for developing solutions to the problems in the first place. The cato system, despite its imperfections, appears to be working overall. State instruments, like Fonadal, are focused on real rural development. Land and property, comparatively speaking, have become more secure.

There seems to be a greater willingness to reduce overall coca production not just because of political loyalties to those in power, but more importantly because there has been a clear movement away from the chronic lack of income opportunities, poor infrastructure, inadequate or costly access to markets – that the criminal and the corrupt tend to exploit to their advantage over time, something which Colombian coca producers are well aware of. The challenges in Colombia appear far greater, not just because its coca areas are eight times larger than in Bolivia, but also because of the more intense repression of marginalised coca growers and the country's history of powerful and globalised drug cartels. But what has become clear in Bolivia is that conditions for stabilising and diversifying local economies are slowly being put in place. In other words, the state is playing a leading role in drawing land and labour away from the illicit economy and in moving away from the rather limited ambition of law enforcement–focused crop substitution.

The study tour also provides lessons for external actors wishing to support agrarian change, not just in Bolivia and Colombia, but elsewhere. Using crop eradication as a pre-condition for official development aid is clearly counter-productive. The risks to local and state actors posed by being perceived as pro-coca, and therefore 'pro-criminal', need to be eliminated. There is useful practice on the ground, such as the experience in EU-supported projects, as well as the technical role of the UNODC in Bolivia.

In conclusion, various forms of agency and political mobilisation are possible in Colombia. Along with policy innovations to draw land and labour away from the illicit economy and the continued building of links to facilitate learning across different local contexts, these can go a long way in addressing the different drivers of violence that development agencies and policy-makers could consider to support.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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