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How Have Illicit Drug Trade Networks Undermined Colombia's Development?

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The coca trail of Colombia continues to be the main supplier of cocaine to both the USA and Europe. Colombia, unlike many other regions involved in the drugs trade, displays the unique mixture of a middle-income state that has endured a sustained, low-level civil conflict for over half a century. Although Colombia is arguably one of the most stable regions in Latin America, “beneath this veneer lie deep wounds in the national society” (Smith and Thongtham, 1992, p. 63) that continue to pose challenges to development. The deep-rooted drugs trade in Colombia has simultaneously “heightened the need for control, while making it considerably more difficult” (Thoumi, 2005, p. 156). Whilst some have argued that the drugs trade has enabled social mobility, it is to be suggested that any gains in partaking in the trade are riddled with risks that outweigh any short term economic gain.

By understanding what development actually means for Colombia, subsequent development strategies can then be moulded in order to respond to the challenges it faces. As Antonio Gramsci has argued, the “*state* does not mean only the apparatus of government… but also the ‘private’ apparatus of hegemony or civil society” (Ballvé, 2012, pp. 605-606), alluding to a dual responsibility and commitment in development strategy. Development therefore applies to both political institutions as well as social and cultural understandings; a combination often overlooked by policy makers.

Mapping Colombia’s Drugs Industry

Through historicising the roots of the coca trade in Colombia, important historical and cultural traditions are apparent and are therefore critical in understanding the link between the drugs industry and the challenges to development. Originally the production of coca paste came from rural regions in neighbouring states which was then transported and produced within urban cities of Colombia. Until the 1980s, the economic prosperity that came with the drugs trade was relished with cartels both cultivating and manufacturing coca locally in Colombia; however this was soon to become a major challenge.

Unlike opium, coca remained a subdued market until the 1980s. In response to demand, cartels began to increase within Colombia, and throughout the 1980s smuggling “grew tenfold” (Gootenberg, 2012, p. 160). The García Meza regime and surrounding drug-tolerant states further spurred the Colombian drugs trade and precipitated an international militarised response by the USA. Efforts to negotiate with rebel groups began in the 1990s, however was abandoned 4 years later with a new focus on state building and protecting populations from the drugs trade. In 1999 Clinton instilled *Plan Colombia* in which USAID encouraged the decentralisation of the state in order to gain control. Through this decentralised strategy, the World Bank stated that during 2002-2008 they had considerable success in “restoring confidence through security, private sector job creation, and social cohesion” (World Bank, 2011, p. 113). However, this underplayed the fact that “more than 5 million Colombians have been internally displaced, and upward of 150,000 continue to flee their homes each year” (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 1) by the drugs trade.

Currently President Juan Manuel Santos has stated his commitment to the eradication of coca plantations through negotiation of agreements made with FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) guerilla groups.

However, the validity of these claims has been scrutinized due to the upcoming elections in May 2014 in which there have been doubts over Santos' commitment to follow through in talks. Much of this scepticism is due to Colombia's history in the intertwining of drug and political affairs. The *war on drugs* has amounted to an increasingly diversified and dispersed illicit trade network that has gone underground in an expanding drugs market. The current "carrot and stick" (Ibanez and Martinsson, 2013, p. 1) approach employed by the Colombian Government aims to eradicate coca plantations through fumigation, whilst also aiming to promote legal crops through monetary subsidies; however the effectiveness of this approach is questionable. Worryingly, alongside other drug cultivating states such as Afghanistan, an increasing "blurring of the distinction- previously fairly clear- between producing and consuming countries" (Beng and Bargain, 2005, p. 121) has become apparent. This trend indicates the unsuccessful nature of both Colombia and international anti-narcotics policies, whilst also demonstrating the limited effectiveness of current development strategies.

Colombia's Dual Economy

Development at a basic level is usually equated to the economic growth of states. By the 1970s coca cultivation had replaced cattle ranching in rural areas through FARC gaining de facto control of such regions. Attempts have been made to transition some local economies into the production of legal commodities like dry milk and palm oil through a "neoliberal model aimed at promoting export production and foreign direct investment" (Hough, 2011, p. 1018). For many, coca cultivation was to supplement profits alongside legal crops such as these when narco-traffickers were present. The establishment of FARC control and eventual backing of coca cultivation allowed finance for the "expansion of their organisational structure, strengthen[ing] their war-making capacities… and provid[ing] greater protection to the locals" (Hough, 2011, p. 1024) allowing them to gain increased local influence.

On a national level this has created a double economy, where the legal and illegal mix in causing corruption, shattering confidence in investment and generating "both high levels of impunity within the justice system and a lack of social investment" (Poveda, 2012, p. 361). It is therefore clear why foreign investment remains unattractive, limiting economic development prospects for Colombia's economy. As Gideon (1998, p.310) states, "it is necessary for governments to appeal to the demands of international capital and to impress foreign governments with their democratic credentials" in order to receive investment. This double economy also has contributed to money laundering in nearby Venezuela and Ecuador. The lack of trust in government also encourages social acceptance of tax avoidance and a general disengagement from the national economy as the government are perceived to be failing in providing sufficient support for rural communities; communities who have the potential to grow the economy through internationally competitive legal markets such as coffee.

A study carried out by the charity Citisam in Caquetá that helps to support families grow alternative crops to coca found that "legal products made a loss of 49.25%" (Livingstone, 2004, p. 102). With FARC also regulating the price of coca by "establishing a 'price floor' that guarantees a sales price" (Hough, 2011, p. 1024), crops can be sure to be profitable. This has also attracted urban workers to rural regions, which, whilst at first glance appears to have strengthened legal agricultural production, and reduced unemployment levels, such observations cannot be interpreted as an improving long-term economy. Guerrilla groups are supported and therefore cemented into the local economy through large profit margins, and although profits are made by cultivators, these remain minimal.

Like many other drug cultivating states, the processing and manufacturing of drugs has increasingly moved towards source countries providing opportunities for added value on coca production. Not only has this enforced and made the drugs trade more efficient for traffickers, but it has also increased profit margins for cultivators. However, the local economy has suffered as a result, as populations have become "less reliant on subsistence farmers" (Smith and Thongtham, 1992, p. 26) that help maintain rural commodity trading and communication networks, but also driving up costs of products. Legitimate farmers are pushed out of the local economy, making it increasingly difficult to partake in the legal farming. Whilst some legitimate trade appears to operate, these are often set up by traffickers as "front companies as covers for their operations or as loss leaders" (Smith and Thongtham, 1992, p. 26). Furthermore, with fumigation destroying both legal and illegal crops, development policies have ironically failed to note that land after fumigation is fertile enough to grow coca quicker than legal commodities. Legal farmers have therefore suffered at the hands of fumigation, whilst also being provided an incentive for illegal crop cultivation.

Whilst the Colombian government has initiated numerous incentives to promote legal crops, this has been ineffective in penetrating the most rural communities who remain out of reach of the government. The drugs trade has further isolated these rural populations from development by fragmenting the economy and increasing reliance on traffickers whilst also distancing them from government policies. Least accessible areas susceptible to cultivation require national efforts to encourage them into the economy, whilst desecuritsing coca cultivation which will enable economic reform to become more transparent and therefore appealing. This is especially important for a population who feel simultaneously marginalised and criminalised by governments.

Political Dislocation

This distancing from national policies proves a critical issue undermining development. Much emphasis has been put on “decentralisation of the state” (Gideon, 1998, p. 305), forming a tighter relationship between rural people and local politics. However, development strategy built on this premise has had a tendency to “essentialise and romanticise ‘the local’” (Mohan and Stokke, 2000, p. 249), underplaying local complexities. Community action boards called Juntas de Acción Communal (JAC) have to some extent provided a platform for locals to be recognised on a national level, encompassing Gramsci’s idea of civil and political societies being important tools of a functioning society. However, often a focus on the ‘local’ in development discourse “revolves around the binary opposition between the state and civil society” (Mohan and Stokke, 2000, p. 264), proving damaging to communities that already feel isolated from national politics. Depoliticised NGOs working in Colombia carrying out decentralised tasks suggests that actual political empowerment is limited in state-building value. The FARC have been able to take advantage of this dislocation of civil and political society “in a hegemonic, rather than coercive manner” (Hough, 2011, p. 1032), appealing to rural populations. Although local governance allows cultivators to become active in development programmes that promote small scale empowerment, the current work of NGOs can only assist in meaningful development if the state accepts responsibility and takes hold of the political vacuum consumed by FARC at a local level.

Corruption in Colombia has both enabled the drugs trade to flourish, whilst also posing a major barrier to development. Much of the drugs trade is intertwined in politics and government undermining both domestic and international legitimacy of the state. The political institutions have been developed by the paramilitary who have tapped into “state reforms aimed at political, fiscal, and administrative territorial restructuring” (Ballvé, 2012, p. 611) that have both normalised and instilled drug trafficking. The constitution of 1991 that was supposed to make processes more democratic has been scrutinized as it “increased costs and made the political system more dependent on those with vast financial assets” (Thoumi. 2005, p. 156) such as traffickers and corporations, making fear and violence a part of politics. An example of the nature of corruption in Colombia was uncovered in 2006 where “more than 55 current and former members of Congress [were] convicted for conspiring with paramilitaries” (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 2), causing further distrust between citizens and politicians.

The decentralisation of society in part can be seen as a combination of instilled fear tactics involved in politics, as well as a government wishing to distance itself from domestic failures. The use of NGOs as welfare provision has only contributed to doubts of accountability and lack of responsibility demonstrated by government. However, promising research has been conducted to suggest that a real attempt to eradicate violence in Colombia has results. Poveda (2012, pp. 352-353) has shown that “effectiveness of the control of violence is on average 73% for departments with a high level of violence, 80% for departments with a middle level of violence and 72% for departments with a low level of violence”. Results also indicate that regions with high political violence, unsatisfied basic needs and land cultivated for coca demonstrate lower effectiveness for controlling violence. Such findings allude to linkages between these three issues, all of which need to be tackled simultaneously in order to overcome the cycle of challenges to development. Violence that is restricting and instilling the dual economy has resulted in increased reliance on foreign aid, and as a result has prioritised international interests. Whilst the Colombian government has shown a preference to engage in talks with cartels, “these interests conflicted with the interests of the United States” (Crandall, 2002, p. 81). Additionally the military presence of the US has prevented a “professional police force developing expertise and leadership” (Smith and Thongtham, 1992, p. 32) so crucial in seizing and maintaining control by the state in coca cultivating regions.

It is therefore clear that a culture of fear and corruption has formed due to illicit trade networks, undermining the ability for democratic governance. As Gideon (1998, p. 314) has accurately described, “Latin American democracies are not socio-economic democracies, but democracies without citizenship”. In terms of development, NGOs are unable to help secure effective citizenship with the “creation of political clients rather than political citizens” (Gideon, 1998, p. 318), calling for increased state involvement. Although some scholars have denied states like Colombia “any positivity and de-privilege them as sites of political struggle” (Mohan and Stokke, 2000, p. 260), Gramsci displays how the state plays a critical role in enabling and promoting social capital and behavioural norms. Whilst JACs have been effective in linking local and national political structures, they have been limited in terms of representation, and response from the national government has been minimal. In order to overcome fear and illegitimacy issues on a national level, “a more gradual approach is advisable so that national governments can demonstrate their capacity to execute and achieve realistic goals” (Smith and Thongtham, 1992, p. 110). This in turn will enable strengthening of the civil and political society in Colombia on both a local and national level.

Social Structures

A breakdown of local and national has occurred in which Colombia is now becoming increasingly reliant on agencies to provide the tools of a democratic state. Empowerment has become a “convenient concept to use in dry international reports” (Moore, 2001, p. 322) with little being done to bridge the local and national social values that have continuously drifted apart. FARC and paramilitary groups have been successful in helping to “(re)constitute and extend the social relations of the state spatially” (Ballvé, 2012, p. 611) whilst unpoliticised international agencies are relied on to support rural communities. As a result, “traditional social norms have become increasingly elusive” (Thoumi, 2005, p. 163). Whilst NGOs have had relative success in bonding social capital in rural areas which has strengthened loyalty, this has also spurred scepticism of outsiders, undermining the states bond to its residents.

Within development discourse “*empowerment* is closely coupled with the concept of *community*” (Moore, 2001, p. 322), however the breakup of traditional community ties is apparent. This is particularly true in the case of Colombia as internationally displaced people (IDPs) are a significant challenge to development, caused both by speculative profits of drug cultivation and fumigation. Although NGOs have called for the precautionary principle in regards to US and Colombian fumigation policy due to the unknown effects of chemicals, there has been a distinct disregard to this. People no longer believe the state will respond to complaints made about fumigation, explaining why “a total of 2,559 claims in 2003 were reduced to 781 in 2008” (Rincon-Ruiz and Kallis, 2013, p. 71). Outrage and dissatisfaction on a social level has caused many to denounce the “crime perpetrated against them with national-level protests and communiqués” (Rincon-Ruiz and Kallis, 2013, p. 71). Although official data displays a decreasing trend in coca farming allegedly due to fumigation, the diffusion of cultivation across Colombia, bringing with it challenges like violence, have made development increasingly more complex and widespread across both rural and urban areas. Whilst much of this discussion has focused on remote populations, drug related issues have transcended rural and urban boundaries. Whilst some prominent individuals have been known to have communications across different social sections of Colombian society, “Catholic Church workers and human rights activists… have become targets of the paramilitaries who view them as apologists for the guerrillas” (Crandall, 2002, p. 87), also dislocating the social abilities of those who have proved mediatory in influencing and communicating through the web of drug networks.

A key issue is many anti-drug policies are “formulated on the implicit assumption that social institutions and values do not determine or have scant bearing on policy effectiveness” (Thoumi, 2005, p. 173). However what needs to be addressed is how policies ought to be shaped by social context in order for them to be responsive to societal needs. In the case of Colombia, fumigation programmes are one example of how policies have degraded chances of establishing a framework for more inclusive and therefore democratic development. Coca cultivation has locked populations into local economies that do not allow participation in national society, whilst simultaneously putting them in a perilous position of losing land and being criminalised by the state.

Colombian Culture and the Drugs Industry

Traditional and historical factors in relation to the drugs trade are often overlooked by policy makers. Like Afghanistan and the opium trade, the coca leaf has important cultural ties. The coca leaf is used in the day-to-day life

of indigenous populations throughout Colombia, giving it a certain "medicinal, cultural and social legitimacy within the rural societies" (Smith and Thongtham, 1992, p. 17). The Western view of securitising drugs dominates development strategies, creating anti-narcotics efforts that are insensitive to cultural heritage. Whilst Colombia luckily displays little evidence of ethnic and religious hostilities, there is certainly a lack of understanding of campesinos (Spanish peasants). The mixing of urban market demand and traditional medicinal uses of coca has made it difficult to successfully employ development strategies sensitive to these traditional uses.

Cultural ties to land have also been overlooked in anti-narcotics strategy that has encouraged mass displacement and a disregard for fertile lands. The actions of traffickers through deforestation and government response of fumigation have both undermined spiritual ties to land and destroyed biodiversity. Both Colombian and USA government discourse "links fumigation and sustainability, in the sense that more fumigation means less coca production and hence less deforestation" (Rincon-Ruiz and Kallis, 2013, p. 70), however it overlooks the realities of using such a blanket approach. Instead, the spread of cultivation through the balloon effect is destroying more land, whilst also displacing more of the population. Rincon-Ruiz and Kallis (2013, p. 70) argue due to such impacts, the destroying of coca crops "should not be read as an argument in favour of fumigation". Although promises have been made by President Santos to return land to displaced Colombians, with the Agricultural Ministry estimating that by the end of 2014 "there would be judicial rulings in nearly 80,000 restitution cases under the Victims Law" (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 5), by September 2013 the government had only obtained "rulings ordering restitution for 666 of the more than 45,000 land claims it had received" (Human Rights Watch, 2014, p. 5). There exists a need for recognising traditional uses of coca in Colombia, whilst also addressing ideas of sacred and rightful ownership of land. Targeting exploitative actors can then take place, without incorporating rural populations within the bracket of criminals. In doing so Colombia's environment and ecology will also be protected from oversimplified fumigation policies, argued to be insensitive to cultural and traditional values.

Adapting Response: Implications for Development Strategy

The dislocation between Gramsci's political and civil state with regards to the drugs trade has been argued to have made development in Colombia limited. Although the World Bank (2011, p. 120) has identified that "building national and provincial support for change simultaneously can be important", not enough has been done. Dislocation has allowed the drugs trade to flourish, whilst also making a society responsive to development increasingly challenging. Whilst neoliberal development has began to understand the need to go beyond local participation with a focus on a "more positive role for the state and… an awareness that development is a social process whose cultural underpinnings need to be understood" (Mohan and Stokke, 2000, p. 255), this needs to be increasingly applied within development strategy. It is therefore crucial that whilst Colombia welcomes support by NGOs, they recognise they cannot replace government and state responsibility. The use of NGOs will become increasingly important as the state accepts such responsibilities, providing important critique and contributions for guiding development strategies. Whilst it may appear that paramilitary groups have provided structures for rural populations, they "could easily turn towards the unravelling of such territory" (Ballvé, 2012, p. 619), making it critical that the state takes a more proactive role in development. In a state where "political governance generally shows a heavy short-term bias that favours quick results" (Thoumi, 2005, p. 176), long term strategy of the state as opposed to government needs to be established.

Efforts are also required by regional and international actors without international strategies being tainted by previous USA action. Promising signs in Havana, Cuba currently could provide the means of negotiation with FARC and gaining control of the region. President Santos has stressed the importance of international backing of any deal made, with the need to "move quickly or frustration, old animosities and the logic of the drug business would erode trust and goodwill" (Watts and Brodzinsky, 2014). There would need to be international assistance in guiding and implementing any deal made to make it both domestically and internationally legitimate. However, there is also a need to recognise the drugs trade as an international issue undermining development. States need to address drug taking in order to curb the trade, understanding how demand for drugs both undermines development domestically and internationally. A consciousness at both ends of the chain of how workers are exploited, but also the damaging effects of drugs, has been explored by Ibanez and Martinsson (2013, p. 9) and showed that "given the important role that moral costs play on deterring coca cultivation", a heightened awareness of the effects of drugs could curtail

production. Such evidence should not be downplayed in developing strategies for antinarcotics awareness in promoting education and social responsibility.

Conceptions of political and civil society are therefore useful in exploring ways to engage with populations in regards to drugs and development issues. Currently, measurements and aims of participation have been limited with Mosse (1995, p. 573) highlighting that "physical presence of absence is… only a crude measure of 'participation'". Generalisation and sweeping analysis goes into formulating development strategy that often talks of 'representation' of communities where "people may express their equality and unity of opinion to outsiders through generalized expressions'" (Mosse, 1995, p. 573). In Colombia where there are such high levels of IDPs, such opinions cannot be deemed representative. Rather than assuming community structures, policies need to understand that where local economies have been essentially destroyed and restructured and where locals are no longer reliant on each other, such discourse is redundant.

This discussion has provided an analysis of how the drugs trade in Colombia has undermined development through the disjointed context of civil and political society. It is clear that the issue is far reaching, beyond that of the drugs trade, and also much more than a national issue. Colombia and international actors need to recognise that "the decision to commit a crime is based on the criminal's evaluation of the operations costs, benefits and risks" (Thoumi, 2005, p. 161), focusing on how to outweigh the positives of being involved in the illicit trade. Whilst economic development is vital, there is also a need to promote the benefits of social investment to cultivate legal crops. In being able to achieve this, the government needs to invest in bridging Gramsci's civil and political society through simple actions that could prove critical and laying out the foundations for long term development. The development of roads and basic infrastructure is one, as besides the fact that they represent a territorial presence, they also "symbolise the state's material 'reach' into once 'uncharted' terrain" (Ballvé, 2012, pp. 612-613). Reaching out to these populations through real action will begin a process of reconciliation, trust and legitimacy which will strengthen development opportunities. Whilst such a strategy is long-term, by making real visible change, the drugs trade will decline and the state will be evidently more democratic by tapping into a development policy that recognises the need to bridge political and civil society.

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