

Cocaine, Cannabis, and Politics in Colombia (2022–2025)

Replacing Armed Regulations

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Introduction

The government of Colombian President Gustavo Petro has attracted global attention by calling for a shift away from the prohibitionist approach to drugs. However, it advocates for moving beyond merely replacing illegal crops with legal ones and for transforming illegal economies into legitimate ones. This contradiction faces theoretical difficulties regarding the concept of illegal markets, as well as political challenges in understanding these markets and their relationship with violence. This text aims to introduce the concept of the armed regulation of the cocaine and cannabis markets into the analysis of the situation in Colombia. These markets are at the heart of the current drug policy, which has deepened processes of militarization. The text also proposes an alternative scenario for academia and politics to open the debate: the substitution of regulations. To this end, it is divided into four parts. First, it describes the main characteristics of the cocaine and cannabis markets under prohibitionist regulation. Second, it analyses the government's current proposals on drug policy. Third, it studies the territorial expressions that prohibitionism cultivated between 2022 and 2025. Finally, it offers concluding remarks on the alternatives.

Prohibitionist regulation of cocaine and cannabis markets

There are two approaches to illegal markets. One approach assumes that these markets are anomalies in the dynamics of wealth production that must be eliminated, and that persecuting and outlawing them will lead to their destruction (UNODC, 2011; 2023a). Another perspective emphasizes the political economy of these markets, assuming that prohibitionist policies are one way of regulating them – particularly their profits and participants (Ciro, 2023; Granados et al., 2024). Thus, drug policy stimulates the market and, in turn, drives internal negotiations over revenues, while also promoting armed regulations.

Regarding psychoactive substances, the main economies in Colombia are the production of cocaine and cannabis.¹ There are several characteristics of these markets. First, they are still dynamic: if we talk about the cocaine market, in 2022, the number of users in the world amounted to 23 million, provided by a market that produced 2,700 tons, extracted from 353,900 hectares cultivated throughout Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.² The demand is primarily located in North America, Europe, Latin America, parts of Africa, and Oceania, with expansion scenarios in Western and Central Europe (UNODC, 2022). In Colombia, 1,738 tons of cocaine were produced on 230,000 hectares in 2022. The market is currently thriving and experiencing growth. After 40 years of “war on drugs”, it shows no signs of slowing down, contrary to what President Gustavo Petro himself stated in a newspaper interview in 2023 (El Colombiano, 2023).

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- 1 Cannabis has two main components, CBD and THC. The medicinal component is CBD, which is the one that comprises the legal market for medicinal use, while THC is the one that has a component that is recognized as illegal in Colombia, although the “recreational use” of this has been dynamically legalized in several countries, mainly in the United States and recently in Germany. In Colombia, this kind of cannabis is known as “creepy”, characterized by its high THC content.
 - 2 In 2020, this number was 1,900 tons of cocaine. Colombia was the main producer (61%) followed by Peru in 2020. There were 228 million cannabis users in the world, followed by 60 million opioid users and 30 million amphetamine users in 2022 (UNODC, 2023b)

Second, the cultivation of coca is part of the national agricultural economy. In 2021, according to the National Federation of Coffee Growers, the area planted with coffee was 844,744 hectares. Colombia has 40 million hectares within the agricultural frontier, which is 35% of the continental territory, of which only 30% is cultivated (7.6 million hectares). In 2018, about 232,000 hectares were estimated for cocoa, 132,000 hectares for potatoes, and 232,000 hectares for forestry (Aguirre et al., 2019). The data contradict the idea that we are “drowning in coca” and that it is the main cause of deforestation. Currently, the market is becoming increasingly concentrated, coexisting with both legal and illegal dynamics that contribute to ecosystem destruction in these territories.³

Third, the coca market is a critically asymmetric market between leaf collectors and cultivators, those who process coca paste, and those who control the conversion into cocaine. Land is just one factor in an economic process involving several actors across three stages. The first stage is cultivation, collection, and transformation into cocaine base paste; the second stage is the “crystallization” (cristalización) of this base paste into cocaine; and the third stage is trafficking to direct consumers. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in 2021, the production value of coca leaf sales reached \$288 million, that of cocaine base paste was \$930 million, and that of crystallization was \$2,005 million (UNODC, 2022).

The reported values of a kilogram of coca leaf (less than \$1) and a kilogram of coca paste (\$500–700) reflect price asymmetry (Ibid.). According to field studies (Ciro, 2023), when leaving for Europe and the United States, a kilo of cocaine starts at \$5,000. The same kilo on the streets of major cities around the world starts at \$30,000. This creates enormous

3 In 2001 a total of 135,119 hectares were deforested in the country, according to official forest monitoring and deforestation figures, this figure reached 1 million hectares in 2007, 2 million in 2015, and 3 million in 2020. MADS-IDEAM. In the same period, coca plantations ranged from 50 to 200 thousand hectares, according to official data from SIMCI, ONUDC.

inequalities between the bargaining power of farmers, collectors, and tenants and that of cocaine producers and traffickers.

Fourth, it is a very efficient market in terms of profits and land. A comparative exercise that allows us to understand the size of the markets and the weight of this economy is, for example, to calculate that the value of cocaine production in Colombia in 2021, according to the UN-ODC, amounts to 9 billion Colombian pesos, which makes sense if we compare it with the value of the coffee harvest in the same year, reported by the National Federation of Coffee Growers at 10.8 billion. Both the coffee and coca markets, examples of the country's economic development, have not been exempt from the dynamics of violence. However, they have also been consolidated as markets based on small landholdings, which in one way or another have been important for small landless peasants.

Photo 1: Southwest mountains, Nariño



Photo by the author.

Fifth, it is not an isolated economy but is connected to a network of commercialisation of inputs and, in addition, to other consumer and real estate markets, from peasant plots and livestock farming to expensive apartments in the cities.

Several examples can illustrate these links between the legal and the illegal. For example, some 33 of the chemicals used in the processing of coca leaves into cocaine, such as sulphuric acid and hydrochloric acid, have only been placed under special control since 2015. These chemicals are subject to international networks of legal production and sales. Others, such as cement, agrochemicals, herbicides, urea, and gasoline, which are also essential for production, have a dynamic market throughout the country. For example, it is common to see gas stations or suppliers of herbicides along the main rivers.

Photo 2: Pacific region, Nariño



Photo by the author.

The circulation of this money significantly mobilizes the commercial and transport sectors in the regions, as well as rural workers and gatherers, and boosts the economic dynamism of the villages.

Cocaine market earnings acquire value when they enter the legal market; one of the most emblematic examples is a network of drug shops that has survived since the Cali cartel era. They formed a comprehensive network for moving money, employing armored cars and planes.⁴ This business was a significant employer with branches nationwide and successfully established generic factories that provided the population with access to medicines at lower prices. The closure had a negative impact on many links, prompting the government to give the property to the workers. Another example was the movement of capital. A former paramilitary in charge of finances explained how their group received the money from trafficking between Mexico and Colombia through an oil company, involving the money exchange desk of one of the main banks in the country (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022). Contrary to the myths of Pablo Escobar's time, since the 1990s, the market has been dominated by low-profile actors that mobilize money through multiple strategies and with diverse interests and involvements (Unidad de Inteligencia de Análisis Financiero, 2014).

The Truth Commission conducted an econometric analysis revealing the negative impact of the destruction of laboratories and coca crops on the local economy of a small coca-growing town, as evidenced by decreasing bank transactions of less than \$150. The history of drug policy in the country has shown the deterioration of regional economies, causing farmers to move in search of economic opportunities in coca, fleeing the countryside and aerial eradication and repression in general, known as the “balloon effect”. For this reason, it is not so easy to accept the idea of replacing coca, or the cocaine economy. It is more complex because the disappearance of the coca leaf can create a vacuum not measured by the number of cocoa, banana, or yucca plants planted, but by the size, de-

4 Interview with a former employee at the National Narcotics Directorate. Florencia, Caquetá, August 2024.

pendencies, transactions, networks, and links of an economy that would replace the illegal one.

A sixth characteristic is that the prohibitionist policy, as expressed in seizures, appears to be an exercise in market regulation rather than eradication. In 2022, 2,700 tons of cocaine were produced and 2,026 tons seized, feeding a market of 23 million users with only 700 tons (UNODC, 2024). In 2021, a similar exercise carried out by the UNODC concluded that, despite record production, the final market was supplied with only 600 tons. The economic impact of this policy on prices still needs to be studied in greater depth, but it shows the inefficiency of the prohibitionist policy. It may also serve as an incentive to produce more and maintain an oversupply of crops.

Regarding seizures, in historical terms, there has been a change in the trend in cocaine seizures in the world since 2014. Data show that between 2010 and 2014, it was between 100 and 150 thousand kilos; from 2015 to 2021, seizures tripled. The break in the cocaine market occurred mainly in 2015 (hectares of coca, tons of cocaine, seizures) when seizures increased in the context of the signing of the Peace Agreement in Colombia and the suspension of glyphosate aerial eradication in the country.

There is less data on cannabis, partly because there is no systematic and consolidated methodology for measuring cannabis cultivation in Colombia. In global terms, it is known that it is the most consumed drug in 2022 (228 million) and that 6,168 tons of cannabis were seized in that same year. In Colombia, there are two primary sources of production, on the one hand, self-cultivation, mainly urban and peri-urban, and in the north of Cauca, a production triangle that is the center of the armed dispute between a wing of an armed group – *Estado Mayor Central* (EMC), post-FARC dissidents – and the government, but which also shows a sui generis case of community regulation of the market. In May 2023, the price of a pound of creepy in Cauca was \$20. By January 2024, the price had plummeted to approximately \$3. The same pound costs between \$250 and \$1,000 (1 and 4 million Colombian pesos) depending on the quality in the main cities of Colombia, with the most significant price differential occurring in the trafficking link.

Two recent studies conducted in Colombia offer insight into the current state of the cannabis market in the country (INDEPAZ, 2024; Granados et al., 2024). Both explain one of the most radical transformations of recent years in this region: the community regulation of cannabis production in northern Cauca, which for some moments managed to sustain prices in an aggressive anti-farmer and indigenous market (see Britto in this volume). However, armed presences are interwoven with those regulations that ultimately buried community proposals in the maelstrom of war.

The prohibitionist view is based on the idea of an efficient market that determines prices through supply and demand, assuming that if supply is attacked, demand will decrease. However, this argument lacks a clear empirical or theoretical basis. From a neoclassical perspective, Gary Becker has argued that this market has two options: to be legal and taxed, or to be illegal, with the social costs borne by the lower classes. In other words, those who benefit from illegality and non-payment of taxes are the upper classes, who prefer it to remain illegal (Becker et al., 2004). Beyond the question of market optimization, prohibitionist regulatory structures shape income flows, labor exploitation, and resource allocation, and particularly the use of violence, in a heterodox analysis (Polanyi, 2000).

What Does Change in Drug Policy Mean? Analyzing Recent Colombian Experiences

In terms of drug policy, we can generalize that there are two paths: one that tends towards the destruction of the market — the prohibitionist view — and another that proposes the legal regulation of the market, the path of less repressive coexistence with these markets. The first approach aims to destroy the cocaine and cannabis supply through forced aerial and terrestrial eradication, extradition, coca substitution, seizures, and alternative development. The second approach involves integrating these markets into the legal economy, aiming to reduce violence and exploitation of peasants, as well as redistribute profits.

Following the demobilization of the FARC-EP, the cocaine market suffered from the concentration of production in areas where it was more efficient. Its new armed regulation went hand in hand with an intensification of the struggle for territorial control between the various post-FARC groups and their expansionist project, which is evident in the production enclaves of southern and south-western Colombia in Putumayo, Nariño, Catatumbo, and Cauca (UNODC, 2023b). At the same time, the cannabis market in northern Cauca has become the epicenter of one of the most important theatres of war today.

After 20 years of Plan Colombia, a counterinsurgency initiative with an anti-narcotics strategy, discussions about what to do in 2022 have sparked new debates. Globally, the legal regulation of cannabis markets has advanced, and there is a consensus that prohibitionist policies have run their course. This is important not only because it has raised the question of legalization *per se*, but also because it has forced many actors, like governments, NGOs, think tanks and social movements, to think about what kind of legal regulation of substances can be applied and how to move forward with these processes, as has happened in the different models used in the United States, Canada and Uruguay.⁵ Cannabis was reclassified as a controlled substance in 2023 and was recognized for its medicinal and therapeutic potential, even though recreational use is still illegal (ONU, 2020).

The debate on policy in Colombia in 2022 proposed two paths. The first was based on the drug policy outlined in Chapter 4 of the Peace Agreement signed with the FARC-EP, entitled “The solution to the problem of illegal drugs”. This document has three sections: one on drug production, another on the treatment of consumption under the premise of public health, and a final section on prioritizing the attack on organized trafficking groups.

5 38 states, 3 territories, and the District of Columbia in the United States by January 2024. In 2013, the government of Uruguay approved this legalization. 69,000 people in Uruguay have obtained a license for the non-medical use of cannabis from 39 licensed pharmacies.

In terms of production, the document put forward four key ideas: for the first time, it recognized that coca production is a result of rural poverty, that the key was territorial transformation, and that it was necessary to create the conditions for them to participate in the development of their territory. Finally, there was a commitment to change the law and treat them with non-punitive rules. These compromises were a very valuable approach to alleviating the burden of decades of drug policy violence on the peasantry, even though the focus remained on substitution, eradication with glyphosate, and alternative development, as in Plan Colombia. These commitments led to the creation of the National Program for Integral Substitution (*Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución*, PNIS), which enrolled 100,000 coca-growing families that received only \$8,000–\$ 9,000 each over two years.

This drug policy was mandated by the Congress of the Republic of Colombia in 2017. It was underpinned, and in turn fueled, by the ‘holistic policy’ discussion that originated in the U.S. Congress in a landmark report titled “Charting a New Path Forward” formulated by the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission (2020) at the end of Donald Trump’s first administration. In this report, the commission laid out the broad outlines of the drug policy in the United States and, of course, the drug-producing and drug-consuming nations. Both documents, Chapter 4 of the Peace Agreement and the U.S. Congressional Report, complemented each other in the “alternative development” proposal. However, the new presidency of Iván Duque (2018–2022) brought the agenda to a halt, cutting the budget for fulfilling the Peace Agreement. He then tried unsuccessfully to activate the policy of aerial spraying with glyphosate.

During these years, other perspectives have been promoted by several NGOs and the Truth Commission on the relation between cocaine and cannabis markets and the armed conflict, which condensed a long-standing discussion and decanted it into three factors in the persistence of the conflict: the prohibitionist regime, the armed regulation of the markets, and the narrative of “el narco.”⁶ The recommendations of the

6 The “narco” narrative constructs a hegemonic discourse about what is illegal, and what is criminal. As several authors in sociology have suggested, crime is

Truth Commission revealed the need to move towards the strict legal regulation of all drug markets by showing three key aspects: First, that prohibitionist policies had violated the human rights of the population, for example, through the persecution of small farmers, coca eradication, and non-compliance. Second, prohibitionism fosters the armed regulation of drug markets, and third, the narco-hegemonic discourse limits the political voice and organizational capacities of producers. The report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023) included the recommendations of the Truth Commission, which sparked an international discussion on the impact of prohibitionist drug policies on human rights violations. The topic also served as the opening address of the High Commissioner at the Drug Reform Conference in October 2023 in Phoenix. This document states that

[r]egarding “alternative development”, Colombia has stated its aim to develop a new drug policy. At the same time, it advocates for inverting the logic of exclusively repressive and security measures and placing human rights and development at the core of drug policies. The Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace includes a chapter devoted to the “solution to the problem of illicit drugs,” and the Truth Commission has issued recommendations to guarantee non-repetition, stressing that drug policies have been a perpetuating factor of the internal armed conflict, and drug policy reform should be part of peacebuilding efforts. The Truth Commission has recommended the regulation of all drugs, the demilitarization of drug policies regarding crops, the establishment of spaces for dialogue on the impact of drug policies, and a change of indicators to measure the impact of drug policies. Noting that strategies should also be tailored

not a natural fact, but a way in which power and capital express themselves in what they deem “good” for their purposes. Considering psychoactive substances as ‘bad’ is not something natural – substances have been consumed throughout human history – but rather they are considered this way after a process of narrative construction of the “narco” as what holds all the evil in society. Its impact on the history of violence in the country is to reduce the armed conflict to a “struggle for the profits of the drug trade”, justifying the human rights violations of Plan Colombia. (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022)

to the needs of the Global South, Colombia has called for international cooperation efforts to focus on rural and urban development to improve the living conditions of communities that depend on the drug economy.⁷

The discussion on legal regulation had already gone a long way, relevant debates had taken place, such as the suspension of aerial spraying with glyphosate in 2014 and the regulation of the medical cannabis market by the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), the attempts to regulate coca, cocaine, and cannabis in the congress led by congressman Iván Marulanda and Feliciano Valencia, and by extensive debates on regulation in different national and regional bodies.⁸ These were historic moments that had aligned multiple, previously irreconcilable actors, such as the peasant and the indigenous, in the face of the tension between coca leaves and cocaine. Thus, Petro's arrival offered hope for clear steps — at least pilot ones — toward a change in the drug policy paradigm. One of the key insights from the Truth Commission was the need for regional studies of the armed regulations governing the markets for substances, which would enable the design of more effective public policies.

In this complex intersection of armed conflict and drugs in Colombia, the concept of 'organized crime' failed to capture the fragmentation of the social movement, state power, and armed actors. One of the strongest messages for the government of Gustavo Petro on his arrival in

7 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g23/156/03/pdf/g2315603.pdf>

8 Markets do not work through the invisible hand of price equilibrium, but rather through rules, agreements, tensions, contradictions, coercion, violence, and repression, so that profits flow from one place to another, and exploitation is possible. Regulation is how the functioning of a market is constructed, and among other things it can range from illegalization to legalization. In this case, illegalization creates incentives for the regular use of violence in that market — although this does not always happen — and is expressed in armed regulation. The challenge is not to legalese, but to find a way to regulate that reduces violence, and the aim is not to end the market (Ciro, 2023).

2022 was the need to articulate drug policy with peace policy. Three institutions played a central role in articulating the paradigm shift that Gustavo Petro sought: the Drug Policy Office (*Dirección de Política de Drogas*, DPO), which designs and articulates drug policy; the Substitution Office (*Dirección de Sustitución*, DSO), which directed the program for implementing the Peace Agreement on this issue; and the Peace Office Commissioner. The main characteristic of the work of the three entities was their disconnection, and particularly their confrontation.

The National Development Plan 2022–2024 introduced “Drug regulation: from prohibitionism to the dignification of people, communities, territories, and the environment” based on the principles of the Peace Agreement under the strategy of coca substitution (Presidencia de la República, 2023a). The policy of territorial transformation is accompanied by what is called the dismantling of multi-crime structures, the foreign policy strategy of changing the paradigm of the drug phenomenon, and the reduction of substance-related vulnerabilities.⁹ Chapter 4 of the Peace Agreement was granted 1.4 billion Colombian pesos out of the 50 billion Colombian pesos that finance the total commitments (Presidencia de la República, 2023b).

The design of the drug policy for 2023–2030 reflected this rupture, the task of the DPO, in an exercise that different officials interviewed from state agencies have pointed out as closed and exclusive, which failed to involve all state institutions (Ministries of Health, Defense, Agriculture, and other offices) coherently. Other government offices were not part of the elaboration. Its *raison d’être* was to integrate them into the work because it was an exercise in public policy design and was launched a year after the beginning of government in September 2023. Throughout this process, the office organized territorial meetings marked by civil society fractures, reflecting a similarly fragmented armed scenario in cocalero regions.

9 This is commonly known as harm reduction, but also with a class perspective. That is, addressing the safety of the drug user’s life in an illicit market and linking that to the intersections of the user who is homeless, in poverty, racialized, or discriminated against for a variety of reasons.

The substitution leadership encountered a divided coca growers' movement that contested its voice and participation in the government. It is also important to highlight the decision to dismantle the consortiums and administrative/budget structures created during Iván Duque's administration. These structures served as intermediaries between government resources and those of the coca growers and had received significant complaints from the peasants. It shows the delay in implementing the assembly spaces that the law stipulated for the relationship between the coca growers' organizations and the government, and two controversial decisions: First, to advance a direct payment as part of the strategy "Zero Hunger" (*Hambre Cero*) for attention to the coca crisis, and second, direct money transfers to the farmers.¹⁰ Both policies transformed a pact of territorial change into conditional compensations, contrasting in progress and purpose with the speeches of their director and president, Gustavo Petro, who advocated for the industrialization of the countryside and replacing the cocaine economy with another.

In September 2023, thirteen months after Gustavo Petro became president, the new drug policy was officially presented during the Latin American and Caribbean Drug Policy Conference.¹¹ In the internal plenary session of the countries' chancelleries, the preponderance of prohibitionism was demonstrated by both progressive governments and on the right. Only Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia raised the idea of changing the prohibitionist paradigm, while Cuba and Mexico vehemently defended all their drug control strategies.

10 The Coca Substitution Directorate is responsible for the implementation of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP in Chapter 4, "Solving the drug problem". In the decree, a strategy was designed that ended up paying \$36 million (\$9,000) divided into three parts: direct payment of \$3,000 to farmers for one year after eradication, \$800 for technical assistance, \$450 for food security, \$2,250 for a short-term productive project and \$2,500 for a long-term productive project.

11 Latin American and Caribbean Drug Conference. September 2023, Alternative Development Panel, Attention to Primary Causes and Substitution. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs-7Q8lHpkw>

This document was entitled “Sowing Life We Banish Drug Trafficking” (Presidencia de la República, 2023c). Along with the Peace Agreement and the report of the United States Congress, it formalized a policy in line with what the Democrats in the U.S. Congress had outlined. It was based on the “holistic policy” of “suffocating drug trafficking and giving oxygen to the peasants”, increasing the number of seizures, reducing violence against peasants, and proposing to implement alternative development and harm reduction policies for users. It was a policy aligned with what previous governments had proposed, at least until Juan Manuel Santos took office. However, it opens the possibility of forced eradication of coca crops.

The total peace policy of Gustavo Petro’s government initiated dialogues with various armed actors, including the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN) and the Central General Staff of the FARC-EP (*Estado Mayor Central*, EMC). A ceasefire was declared in December 2022. A year later, the EMC split into two wings: one that broke off the talks and another that remained at the table. In July 2024, dialogue began with the Second Marquetalia Bolivarian Army (*Segunda Marquetalia Ejército Bolivariano*, SM-EB), present in Nariño, Cauca, and Caquetá, along the borders with Venezuela and Putumayo, also interacts with Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*, AGC), an actor considered to be a “drug trafficker.” All these groups control the cocaine economy in their territories, and the wing that left the table has enormous influence over cannabis markets in Cauca. Much of the rearmament and its reception in the communities reflects the failure to fulfill commitments on substitution and comprehensive rural reform signed in the Havana Peace Agreement in 2016. The national government’s peace negotiations with the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN), *Segunda Marquetalia Ejército Bolivariano* (SM-EB), and the *Estado Mayor Central* of the FARC-EP (EMC FARC) – the latter of which is present on the borders of the Colombian, Venezuelan, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian Amazon – were connected with anti-narcotics drug policy, implementing substitution, cocaine seizures, and laboratory destruction. Nevertheless, there was no budget to invest in Rural Reform and rural modernization. Particu-

larly, cannabis production was ignored in peace talks even though the EMC had significant interest and armed influence in the cocaine and cannabis market, which explains the dynamics of peace and violence in northern Cauca, and the configuration of actions throughout the national territory, such as transit corridors from northern Cauca to Brazil or from the Micay Canyon to the Pacific.¹²

The anti-drug policy is to destroy laboratories and seize cocaine and marijuana, and rural modernization is suspended or underfunded. It is important to highlight that, for the first time, the Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*, AGC) and the government inaugurated socio-legal negotiations.¹³ This armed group is a cocaine trafficker and has significant territorial, political, and economic influence in the country.

Over the past three years, several elements have come together to form a continuum of prohibitionist policies in the cocaine and cannabis markets, which have been discussed at peace negotiation tables. These policies aim to reduce the amount of land cultivated, but not to diminish violence resulting from prohibitive market regulations. The initial suggestion to change paradigms at the start of the government's term, along with the global discussions that were underway, was abandoned and failed to yield concrete policies, programs, and budgets.

Territorial Expressions of Prohibitive Regulations

Drug policy is not a single strategy, but rather a multiplicity of strategies and discourses based on the idea of “combating drug trafficking”. One line of action is alternative development. At the public hearing in the

12 During the second half of 2024, the EMC split in two. Only one side continued to negotiate peace.

13 Congreso de la República (2024). Intervention by director PNIS in the Congress of the Republic. Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4KZYCyGaOw>

Congress of the Republic in February 2024, the director of the Substitution Office (DSO) listed several achievements but insisted that the national government had not replaced a single hectare of coca. Nor did he mention the progress made in industrializing the crop. Over the past seven years, the Colombian government has allocated \$448,634,174.61. During the Gustavo Petro administration, up to the beginning of 2024, approximately half a billion Colombian pesos have been spent. The former director claimed that the *Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución* (PNIS) did not encompass many new territories and that rural modernization required new investments, which the National Planning Department, responsible for planning investments, had not allocated.

The “new” drug policy promised a 43% reduction in cocaine produced in the country by 2026, but it has not made any progress towards this objective (Ministerio de Justicia, 2023). So far, there have been two highly publicized actions, one in Tumaco, where they agreed with Nutresa – one of the largest food production conglomerates in Latin America – to commercialize cocoa, and another with *Almacenes Éxito*, for the merchandise of agricultural products in communities to replace coca cultivation (El Tiempo, 2018; Infobae, 2024).

However, it is essential to highlight other scenarios that extend beyond the policy of total peace, specifically the environmental policy embedded within the anti-drug agenda. One of the conclusions of the Truth Commission and works such as Dawn Paley’s (2018) is that the anti-drug policy is an imperial and counter-insurgency agenda with geopolitical objectives of strategic control of resources and populations. There are two key examples of this: The Cauca mission and the emphasis on building up the Amazon as a region of organized crime.

The Cauca mission follows the breakup of the FARC-EP’s *Estado Mayor Central* (EMC), which divided a sector still under discussion, located mainly in the El Yarí region between Caquetá, Guaviare, and Meta. Another armed sector remains in the southwest, between Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño, in open confrontation with the Colombian state, and is one of the largest producers of cocaine. One of the protagonist territories in this confrontation is the Micay Canyon, an enclave of

cocaine production due to its crops, crystallization infrastructure, and proximity to the Pacific Ocean.

The Cauca Mission was initially conceived as an axis of territorial transformation within the framework of negotiations with these actors. Following the breakup, it was later developed as a counter-insurgency strategy, inaugurated in the presence of the Colombian government, with the support of USAID, the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) of the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. anti-drug agency (U.S. Department of State, 2023), and the country's military attaché (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2024; *El Espectador*, 2024), and designed as a civil-military action with American advice (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 2024a; 2024b). The program began with the supply of beans and coffee seeds. This is a classic intervention formula from Plan Colombia, which has proved to be a failure.

On the other hand, the agenda for the protection of the Colombian Amazon has been strengthened from the beginning, since Gustavo Petro's speeches in which he proposed "a NATO" for the Amazon and received support from the United States for its protection, for example, with the use of helicopters called "macaws" (*CNN Español*, 2023). Iván Duque's term (2018–2022) was characterized by a change in the approach to the Amazon, from the fight against drugs to the fight against deforestation, using the same mechanisms of criminalization of peasants and the disproportionate use of force, denounced by various scientific and human rights groups (Ciro, 2019). At the same time, the Law on Environmental Crimes was drafted and approved by the Congress of the Republic (Ministerio de Ambiente, 2021).

The most important support for the Amazon agenda from the anti-narcotics agenda has come from the UNODC, which published a special annex on the Amazon in its 2023 report entitled "The nexus between drugs and crimes that affect the environment and the convergence of crime in the Amazon basin" (UNODC, 2023a), in which to configure the idea of the Amazon as a place where organized crime rules. Using 'crime' twice in one title, the authors argue that drug trafficking exacerbates and amplifies other criminal economies in the Amazon basin, including ille-

gal land occupation, illegal timber exploitation, illegal mining, wildlife trafficking, and other environmental crimes. It also concludes that coca cultivation is a catalyst for deforestation through land speculation and cattle ranching; that crimes such as extortion and money laundering exist in the tri-border region; and that there is a disproportionate impact on the lives of indigenous people.

It is undeniable that the new dynamics of coca cultivation are beginning to spread in the Peruvian Amazon, where its presence has doubled in the last five years (DEVIDA, 2021). However, the prohibitionist regimen constructs an “immateriality” strategy, that is, their capacity to construct discourses of “the good ones”, “the bad guys”, “the other”, “the criminalizable other”, the margins or the territories in need of intervention, to use Margarita Serje’s (2005) term. This recent construction of the Amazon as a place of crime, or almost as “narco-Amazonia”, is accompanied by repeated UNODC meetings in Colombia, in which the INL and the embassies of the United States and the United Kingdom participate, and by the funding of various actors, for example, the Environmental Crime Policy, in which the British embassy participates (Ideas para la Paz, 2024). Also, they finance journalistic reports for several years, allowing us to insist on the narrative of the Amazon as an underworld (“Amazon underworld”¹⁴), where this face of a place taken over by crime sets the stage to justify police and military interventions, as the experience of Plan Colombia or the growing presence and attention of the Southern Command of the United States to the problems of the Amazon basin have taught us (Southern Command United States, 2022).

The continuation of prohibitionist policies in coca-producing territories produces territorialities marked by militarization and marginalization. One expression of prohibitionist regulations is the establishment of regions where new forms of legal and illegal armed sovereignties reproduce markets that benefit from capital extraction and the exploitation of labor and land.

14 <https://amazonunderworld.org>, o Amazonia “territorio narco”: <https://ojo-publico.com/5569/territorio-narco-el-70-las-fronteras-amazonicas>

Final Comments: Substitution of Prohibitive Regulation

Recent years in Colombia show how prohibitionist policies are related to market dynamics, and vice versa. Beyond being economies governed by simple supply and demand, the illegality of cocaine and cannabis markets is reinforced by the violence of anti-drug policy and the regulatory bodies that emerge in its wake. While neoclassical perspectives have failed to explain violence, the Colombian experience demonstrates the persistence of violent regulatory orders in these markets.

At this point, the concept of armed market regulation emerges as a fundamental characteristic of the war, as well as of the production of cocaine and cannabis. It relates to the military-industrial anti-drug apparatus, the conventions that govern the regime, the presence of the armed forces in Colombia, and the current official anti-narcotics policy. The continuum of this prohibitionist policy highlights the deepening conflict in the country. Despite announcements of a new approach, the reality is that the same state interests continue to govern the substitution and attack on supply, primarily due to pressure from the United States.

We should consider that the anti-narcotics, militarization, and marginalization triad continued to be employed with great conviction. Examples include the Mission Cauca exercise, the new substitution program implemented in conflict zones, and the negotiation objectives based on peace talks. In all cases, the primary goal is to encourage the adoption of alternative crops.

In mid-2025, a scandal erupted over the publication of a preliminary study for a contract to purchase glyphosate for ground spraying to eradicate coca crops, also known in Colombia as the Program for the Eradication of Illicit Crops through Ground Spraying (PECAT).¹⁵ Colombia's Minister of Defense announced that this was a more effective strategy for eradicating crops and suggested that glyphosate would

15 Programa de erradicación de cultivos ilícitos mediante aspersión terrestre. Pares, 11 April. <https://www.pares.com.co/post/erradicaci%C3%B3n-y-sustituci%C3%B3n-duplas-por-superar>

be distributed to farmers so that they could carry out the eradication themselves, as agreed in the context of substitution and negotiations with armed groups.¹⁶ This contradicts President Gustavo Petro's electoral promise never to use glyphosate again for eradication in Colombia. This is an example of the constraints, limitations, and challenges facing the possibility of a new drug policy worldwide. The current government has not been able to move away from the proposal of substitution-eradication or oxígeno-asfixia, the heart of prohibitionism, despite the rhetoric of “change” in drug policy.

The danger is that failure will undermine future proposals for real change, because opponents will assume that “change” has failed. Amid the possibility of new ways of thinking about our relationship with the cocaine and cannabis markets, these monsters emerge, as a kind of Frankenstein that seems less harmful. For example, they claim, “We don't spray glyphosate from the air, which is dangerous”. However, this approach leaves the core of prohibitionism intact: the destruction of crops while the state “replaces the economy”. It represents a symbolic defeat for the victims of anti-drug policy who are struggling for reparations. All of this takes place in the context of increased pressure from the United States government, led by Donald Trump, in which the decertification of Colombia becomes a card not only to maintain influence in the country, but also in the worst political scenario in which this pressure can occur: the 2026 electoral campaign, which will decide whether the leftist project is re-elected or the country radicalizes to the right. The last three years have been a window of opportunity that has not been utilized, and we have regressed 25 years in the discussion to a point in history where we never thought any government would take us back.

16 Infobae (2025). “Ministro de Defensa insistió en que habrá erradicación de cultivos ilícitos con glifosato, pero con condiciones: ‘Si se concreta con la comunidad’”. 10 April. <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/04/10/ministro-de-defensa-aseguro-que-la-erradicacion-de-cultivos-ilicitos-con-glifosato-se-haria-solo-si-el-campesinado-esta-de-acuerdo-se-haria-es-si-se-concreta-con-la-comunidad/>

This experience shows that neoclassical perspectives are insufficient for understanding the armed apparatus – militarization and marginalization – that prohibitionism cultivates in cocaine and marijuana production territories. Conversely, drug policy must recognize that it is not combating the replacement of crops or economies, as the current government claims. Still, rather the goal should be to reduce violence, not supply. In conclusion, the aim is to amend prohibitive regulations so that they promote fair trade and peace in production areas.

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