

Drug Trade in Colombia

The Illegal drug business and Colombian society

According to the Colombian Mission for the Reduction of Poverty and Inequality, the Colombian poverty rate for 2005 was at approximately 49.2 percent for poverty and 14.7 percent for extreme poverty. Rural poverty increased from 67.5 percent in 2004 to 68.2 percent in 2005. That year, the poverty in Colombia exceeded the Latin American average and the country was among the ones in the region with the biggest social and economic inequality.

With a 100 equaling the worst quality of life, the Index of Livelihood Conditions (ICV) lists Colombia at 77 points. The Pacific region doesn't meet the required index level in education, public services and housing.

It is clear that the social, along with the economic situation in the country are relevant for the illegal drug business and that this business at the same time has had a huge influence on Colombian society and social changes. Nevertheless, developments are always under the influence of other interrelated factors such as the internal conflict and political instability in general.

Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, marginalization, unequal distribution of wealth and income as well as a lack of alternatives and respect for law are explanations for the rising growth of illicit drug-related activities in Colombia. Other factors include the absence of a strong state, the armed conflict and the geographical characteristics of the country. The illicit drug business is highly profitable and the areas in which it is most prevalent are economically precarious. In many cases, small farmers are forced by drug lords to face the choice between cultivating coca or leaving their territory.

A study by the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) asserts that although production costs are high, coca cultivation yields higher incomes than any other licit legal crops or even poppy. While the cultivation of illicit crops does not significantly increase low-income earnings, it can improve basic subsistence level when other income-generating activities are lacking. The great majority of the benefits go to intermediaries and drug traffickers, not to the coca farmers themselves. A 2003 study by the [International Narcotics Control Board](#) (INCB) shows that small farmers who grow coca only earn about one percent of the money spent by drug users in the US.

On the trafficking level, the high unemployment rate in cities, which was at almost 13 percent in 2006, the low wages and the myth of a fast and easy way to make money, leads many to look for new income prospects in the drug business.

Like the basic causes for the growth of the illegal drug industry in Colombia, its direct consequences are not easily identified. In 2006, the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) stated that there are 2 million [internally displaced persons](#) (IDPs) in Colombia. CODHES, an authoritative non-governmental source, has registered more than 3.5 million IDPs since 1985 out of the country's 43 million people, whereas the Colombian authorities only report 1.8 million, mainly because they only started systematic registration of IDPs in 2000.

Internal displacement and the consequences of aerial eradication

Forced displacement in Colombia mainly happens in rural areas and is a preferential strategy used by the armed groups to seize agricultural land from peasants. Thus, the internal conflict is seen as the principal reason for internal displacement. Further, there are national and international commercial interests and Colombia's drug lords also have many strategies to evict villagers from their territories in order to turn them into new drug cultivation areas.

The campaign to eradicate coca crops by aerial spraying is one of the most heavily used instruments in the war on drugs and is another element that contributes to internal displacement. As sprayed areas can rarely be cultivated the following year, drug lords are constantly expanding into new zones, cutting down forests and displacing the rural population.

The Colombian urban population has constantly increased from 28 percent in 1938 to 76 percent in 2005. This move to urban areas reflects a shift away from rural life and agriculture but also a flight from often drug-related left- and right-wing movements' violence. However, no statistically significant correlation has so far been established between the number of IDPs and coca cultivation.

In recent years, a further consequence of aerial spraying has been discussed. Between late 2001 and 2002, more than 6,500 small farmers filed complaints, stating that fumigation had destroyed their legal crops, but in the next two years only five people received compensation. Moreover, various health problems have been attributed to aerial spraying. In the border region between Colombia and Ecuador, where the Colombian government has fumigated frequently since the beginning of [Plan Colombia](#), abnormally high rates of allergies, cancer, respiratory diseases as well as eye and skin afflictions have been reported by the resident population.

Studies conducted at two universities in Ecuador have shown that glyphosate (a non-selective systemic herbicide used to kill weeds and other perennials) even may affect the genetic material of humans and plants. The results show that 15 percent of those affected by glyphosate have permanent and irreversible damage in cells, with those not permanently affected having an 85 percent chance of recovery if there is no further contact with the toxin. The genetic damage implies a high risk of cancer, premature birth or stillbirth and malformations in the fetus.

Drug trafficking along with the interrelated factors of delinquency, the armed conflict and corruption are estimated to be among the primary causes of the 30,000 homicides and disappearances per year in Colombia.

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