



The Legacy of Plan Colombia

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Plan Colombia was an initiative aimed at combating drug cartels and left-wing insurgent groups and fostering economic development in Colombia. How effective was Plan Colombia in terms of decreasing drug production, generating economic development and reducing violence?

In November 2016, the Colombian government signed and ratified a peace agreement with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC), which officially brought an end to Colombia's 53-year-long civil war. With this historic step towards peace, it is advisable to analyse and learn from some of the security policies Colombia implemented in the past. In a context where truth, justice and reconciliation are central aspects to achieving a sustainable and durable peace, it is particularly pertinent to look at the country's largest, most extensive and controversial security, military and development policy programme: *Plan Colombia*.

The plan

The US \$7.5 billion policy programme of *Plan Colombia*, which was implemented between 2000 and 2006, was an initiative to eliminate the production of illegal drugs, end violence, foster economic development and achieve social justice. Backed and financed by the United States and implemented largely during the presidency of the far-right populist Álvaro Uribe, *Plan Colombia* went well beyond being just a mere national security strategy. It was also an extensive programme borne out of the strong political conviction held by certain policymakers and leaders that Colombia's security problems could only be solved through increased militarisation and attacks

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against FARC leaders and commandos (even if it meant risking the violation of international law).

But what were the exact impacts of this militarised security and development initiative? What effects did the *Plan* have on reducing violence and illicit drug production in order to achieve development? And what lessons can be learned from the programme for building a society in which peace can be durably sustained?

Plan Colombia had three main objectives: a) to diminish the cultivation, production and trafficking of illicit drugs by 50%; b) to bring an end to the violent conflict; and c) to spur economic growth and development in rural parts of Colombia that have been historically marginalised.

The effects

The policy programme largely failed in all of its three objectives. Despite the allocated US \$3.8 billion to eradication efforts, *Plan Colombia* was only effective in reducing the *cultivation* coca crops from 160,000 hectares in 2000 to 74,000 in 2006. The intensified aerial spraying, however, did not have any significant effects on cocaine production, which only decreased by 5.3% in the period of implementation. Innovative production processes increased the productivity of coca per hectare and the increased coca supply from Bolivia and Peru provided input-substitutes for Colombian producers of illicit drugs.

Plan Colombia's effects on violence reduction were also rather ambiguous: the increased militarisation meant that violence from illegal armed groups decreased substantially over the time of implementation. FARC violence decreased from 489 cases of human rights violations in 2000 to 168 in 2006,

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similar to paramilitary violence, which went down from 1,191 cases to 510 in the same time span. These decreases in human rights violations by the illegal armed groups, as well as **dramatic decreases** in some of the main violence indicators, such as the homicide rate (43% decrease), the number of kidnappings (95% decrease) and the number of massacres (71.4% decrease) are arguments for the Colombian and the US governments to call *Plan Colombia* a success in reducing violence. However, human rights violations of the public forces (military and police) increased substantially from 270 cases in 2000 to 758 cases in 2006. For example, between 2004 and 2008, army troops **extrajudicially executed** more than 3,000 peasants, farmers, activists and community leaders to dress them in FARC uniforms and claimed they were killed in battle.

Furthermore and linked to the aerial spraying and the increased human rights violations of the public forces, *Plan Colombia* caused various **unintended costs** as it directly led to an intensification of social and economic problems. While the **GINI index** stagnated at a high 0.59 between 2000 and 2006, the **concentration of land ownership increased**. In 2000 3.7% of the Colombian population possessed 40.7% of land, whereas in 2009 3.8% owned 41.1%. This is inter alia a result of as well as a factor for continued forced displacement in Colombia, which has increased by an estimated 300,000 **internally displaced** people per year since the beginning of the implementation of *Plan Colombia* in 2000. Rural poverty remains a major barrier for development and security with 65% of rural households **living in poverty** and 33% in extreme poverty without access to viable public services. These continued high levels of inequality, displacement, and poverty in agricultural regions are a major barrier for Colombia's rural population to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty, dependence on drug income, and violence

Despite these facts, during his tenure as Minister of National Defence (or “*señor de la guerra*”) Juan Manuel Santos was one of the main architects of this militarised initiative for peace, security and development, and his policy approach changed dramatically once he was elected president in 2010. His decision to embark on peace negotiations with the FARC also reflects a political realisation that effective security in Colombia cannot be achieved and sustained with a militarised approach à la *Plan Colombia*. However, while the strategy of the Santos government reflects a major shift in the country’s security strategy, there are many lessons yet to be learnt from the failures of *Plan Colombia* for the building of a peaceful future Colombia.

Lessons learned

Through its aerial spraying and the militarisation strategy, *Plan Colombia* had its most disastrous effects in geopolitically strategic areas of the country, many of which have been at the epicentre of the decades-long conflict such as the structurally marginalized regions of Cauca, Chocó and Urabá in the west and Putumayo and Nariño in the south. FARC commandos who controlled some of these areas for many years are now demobilising.

Rather than witnessing a decrease in violence, these areas have experienced a recent spike in assassinations and forced disappearances, as paramilitary groups move in to fill the vacuum left behind by the demobilised FARC. This recent increase in violence is also linked to the historically weak state presence in rural Colombia. And the killings of community leaders, peasants and civil rights activists (35 since the beginning of the [implementation process](#)) are significantly diminishing chances of a secure and durable peace for Colombia.

However, a call for a stronger presence of the state is oversimplified and misleading, as it disregards the lessons that need to be learnt from the failures of *Plan Colombia* – which after all was a state-driven strengthening of the military and its presence in these areas. Human rights violations of the military and the **continued close ties** between sections of the public armed forces and paramilitary groups make those who have been at the receiving end of violence suspicious of the state-backed security measures.

Instead, security policy efforts should focus on supporting community organisations that for years have been building demilitarised spaces, such as **Peace Communities** or *Comunidades de Paz*, in which peasants, social leaders, indigenous communities, female and LGBT+ activists protect themselves from state, guerrilla, and paramilitary violence. As such, the current government faces the great challenge to go from fighting an enemy to protecting its most marginalised citizens who have turned away from the state in the search for security and peace.

However, the challenge to achieve a sustained peace goes beyond the state's capacity to provide protection. Much of the past failures to achieve increased security and peace (including *Plan Colombia*) are linked with structural failures to achieve wider socio-economic changes in Colombia. For too long, illegal armed groups, marginalised communities and peasants have relied and continue to rely on incomes of the illicit drug industry. Particularly in rural parts of the country where *Plan Colombia's* aerial spraying of coca and poppy plants also heavily affected farmland for licit crops, the illicit economy remains the only viable option. This is particularly true given that the monthly minimum wage in Colombia is only 737,717 pesos (US \$250), which is less than half of

the average income of farmers working for the drug cartels and paramilitary groups (which is [estimated](#) at 1.8 million pesos/US \$620 per month).

And while the current peace treaty to some extent focuses on creating new markets and supporting farmers in marginalised areas, these plans for investments in many cases have been nothing but empty promises. The failure to commit to investment in farmland, fisheries, and infrastructure and to provide basic services of water, healthcare and education has [recently resulted](#) in new tensions between state forces and striking citizens.

Conclusion

Amid various [struggles](#) for a swift and thorough implementation, the current peace treaty truly represents a positive shift away from past militarised strategies for peace and security. However, the current situation following the ratification of the peace deal shows that the disastrous militarisation strategy *Plan Colombia* has left the country a painful aftermath. In order to break out of the vicious cycle of underdevelopment, dependence on drug income, and violence, Colombia needs a structural economic and social development plan that commits to long-term investments in infrastructure and basic services, that creates decent and well-paid jobs in the licit economy, and that provides security for communities and farmers who are being persecuted and killed by paramilitary groups.

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