




Colombia and Mexico: The Wrong Lessons from the War on Drugs

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26 June 2014

As activists around the world participate in a [Global Day of Action](#) against criminalisation of drug use, evidence from the multi-billion dollar War on Drugs in Colombia suggests that militarized suppression of production and supply has displaced millions of people as well as the problem, not least to Mexico. The wrong lessons are being exported to Central America and beyond, but a groundswell of expert and popular opinion internationally is calling for alternative approaches to regulating the use and trade in drugs.

The arrest of the Mexican drug kingpin Joaquin ‘El Chapo’ Guzman on 22 February was cheered by US and Mexican officials as [the most important success against narco-trafficking](#) since the killing of Pablo Escobar two decades earlier. Designated in 2013 by the Chicago Crime Commission as the ‘public enemy number one’ and featured among the ‘most powerful’ by [Forbes](#), he was the leader of the Sinaloa Federation. This is considered the most powerful drug trafficking group worldwide, responsible for around 25% of the cocaine that enters the US market and enjoying connections in various continents.

 UH-60 Black Hawk fotografiado después del desfile militar del 15 de septiembre de 2009 en la ciudad de México

Mexican UH-60 Black Hawk lands in the Zocalo, Mexico City’s main square, 15 September 2009. (Source: Wikipedia)

If the ‘War on Drugs’ logic is followed, the event should mark the beginning of the end of drug-related violence in Mexico. But the lessons from the elimination of Pablo Escobar and the defeat of the Medellín (and later Cali) cartels in Colombia suggest otherwise. Whether El Chapo continues to run operations

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from jail, full leadership is assumed by the remaining commander, or the group breaks into smaller factions, the drug business is likely to survive.

What could be reinforced is the trend to fragmentation already in place, which does not necessarily means less violence, at least in the short and medium term, and could give birth to a decentralized and networked drug business. In this sense, Mexico could well be now where Colombia was 15-20 years ago.

Colombia's success narrative

Despite their different insertion into the global political economy of drugs, both countries are remarkable examples of militarized approaches to the drug war promoted by the US in Latin America (and beyond). The focus is almost entirely on the supply side: criminalization, eradication and aggressive enforcement with the aim to put a halt to the global supply of illegal drugs. The burden is mostly assumed by countries of production and transit that are evaluated on an annual basis against compliance with those prescriptions.

The terms of the debate about this issue have until recently been limited and based on partial evidence in at least two aspects. Success is measured by the figures of crops eradication, detentions and seizures of drugs, not by net impact on the trade (drug availability and market prices). And the consequences in violence, violations of human rights, marginalization, corruption and institutional failure, have been exclusively attributed to illegal drugs and organized crime and not to the war on drugs itself. Fortunately, those terms are changing and a range of new voices, including at highest political levels, are joining a necessary and urgent discussion.

Colombia has undertaken an amazing journey in this regard. Once criminalized in the international arena through its identification with the drug trade, in

Cartels

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recent years it has been promoted as the brightest example of success in the drug war. The narrative of success is based on two main elements: the defeat of the big cartels in the 1990s and Plan Colombia in the 2000s.

However, the story has critical under-reported angles. What followed the demise of Medellin and Cali was not elimination of the drug trade but the decentralization and fragmentation of the market into around 300 smaller, flatter and networked groups. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) – and, to a lesser extent, National Liberation Army (ELN) insurgents and United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitaries – furthered their involvement in the drug business and provided the armed ‘muscle’ in order to finance their nation-wide expansions.

Moreover, the biggest cocaine profits shifted from Colombia to Mexico, contributing to the financial and armed power of its drug trafficking groups as the smaller rings and armed actors in Colombia lacked the power, contacts and/or will to control international logistics and operations, not to mention distribution in the US. The vacuum was filled by the Mexican cartels that established a direct buying presence in Colombia (and later Peru), logistic bases in the Caribbean and Central America for transportation, and distribution networks in the US market.

Plan Colombia

The largest counter-drugs programme ever launched, [Plan Colombia](#) was funded by the US with more than \$7 billion to conduct massive aerial spraying of illicit crops and provide equipment and training to the Colombian armed forces.

The focus of Plan Colombia was counter-insurgency against the FARC, particularly after the US Congress unblocked in 2002 the use of counter-drug funds for counter-terrorism. [The group was weakened](#) by increased state military power and mobility, and is currently involved in peace talks with the government. But it retains 8,000 combatants and has increasingly relied on urban militias. More importantly, despite the propaganda, the FARC was never the only (nor main) group involved in drug trafficking.

The AUC paramilitaries had a mixed criminal-political character from their beginnings. Born out of an array of self-defence groups and narco-trafficking interests, these two 'souls' coexisted for years but the drug trade eventually prevailed. [The demobilization of more than 31,000 AUC combatants in 2006](#) was immediately followed by the emergence of 30 new criminal groups that drew membership from former AUC members and mid-level commanders and sought (and eventually won) control of cultivation and trade in areas and routes formerly under paramilitary control.

With an estimated initial membership of 4,000 members, these new criminal groups later expanded throughout the territory and are now present in 17 out of 32 departments. Those groups have never been a unified project but an array of decentralized criminal networks. Infighting and shifting alliances are the norm among them and with sectors of the FARC and the ELN also involved in drug trafficking. [According to the Colombian police](#), they were responsible for half the total murders committed in 2010.

Uncounted costs

The Colombian success in the war on drugs has been partial at best and come at a high price. Taking the accumulated figures of the US [International](#)


Narcotics Control Strategy Report, around 2 million hectares have been fumigated to eradicate crops since 2000. Massive herbicide spraying destroyed coca, but also livelihoods and protected natural areas, and impacted food security, health and the environment. The complex marginalization problems of rural communities that resort to coca as a livelihood strategy were addressed through securitization and criminalization (coca farmers have often been identified with the FARC). The result, for many, was forced displacement and further vulnerability. Cultivation expanded to new areas and departments, and fragmented as a result.

The levels of violence have decreased slightly nowadays, but the homicide rate stayed at 32 for 100,000 in 2013, well above Mexico in its worst year of violence (2011, with 24 for 100,000). Also in 2013, between 140,000 and 219,000 persons (depending on the sources) were forcibly displaced in Colombia. Those figures are lower than in the past but nonetheless immense and add to a total of 6 million people forcibly displaced since 1985. The specialized agency Insight Crime interprets the current high incidence of this phenomenon in the Pacific regions and intra-urban settings as an indicator of displacement by criminal –not political- violence.

Mexico's War on Drugs

Regardless of the real situation on the ground, those policies (and apparently, the high levels of popular support enjoyed by then Colombian president Alvaro Uribe) inspired President Felipe Calderón to launch an all-out war against drugs in Mexico in 2007. Around 100,000 soldiers and thousands of marines were deployed to fight the cartels in an effort to overcome the problems of corruption and ineffectiveness of the police forces, a policy later backed by the US under the Merida Initiative. The strategy got results, with relevant high and mid-level

commanders of drug trafficking groups captured or killed, and seizures of illegal drugs soaring amidst the crackdown.

 Mexican Special Forces with Barrett M82 sniper rifles.

Mexican Special Forces with Barrett M82 sniper rifles. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

But the destabilization of the drug market triggered an escalation of violence. Violent competition for power erupted within the groups and coalitions as leaders were eliminated, coupled with fierce battles for territorial control among groups. The response against the state scaled up with the cartels creating militarized wings and using sophisticated military weaponry and tactics to fight the military and the police. The process of fragmentation and decentralization accelerated and the six big cartels of 2006 have split into around 15 today, coupled with a diversification of transnational criminal activities and soaring incidences of kidnapping and extortion. The Sinaloa Federation and the Zetas remain the most powerful cartels but have also suffered splits and setbacks.

More than 60,000 people have died and 26,000 ‘disappeared’ in just six years. The formerly respected military have been accused of grave human rights violations including extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances. [More than 4,000 complaints for human rights violations by military personnel were filed in 2006-2010](#) This was more than the total figure for the previous 15 years.

Mexico has come under close scrutiny by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights and other international institutions. On June 12, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions [warned about unacceptable levels of violations to the right to life and impunity](#). Although recognizing some positive steps by the government of Enrique Peña Nieto, he warned that “a heavy-handed military approach is unlikely to improve the

situation” and what is needed is “systematic, holistic and comprehensive strengthening of the rule of law”.

As in Colombia, the Mexican victims of violence face further victimization as the government and sectors of the media dismiss them as criminals. Families and civil society groups claiming for justice may become targeted themselves.

Unabated violence and institutional failure are the factors behind the emergence of armed self-defence groups, first in Michoacán and Guerrero and currently in around 10 states, as civilians take up arms to face lawlessness and fight the cartels (and sometimes corrupt authorities). This adds a new layer of armed actors whose evolution may not be easily put under control.

Challenging the Colombian success narrative

In Colombia, and later in Mexico, the militarized drug wars have proved ineffective in halting the drug trade but their impact is hugely negative on security and human rights, development and governance. While marginalization feeds the illegal economy, the securitized responses criminalize communities and add abuses and institutional failure to the problem of exclusion. The focus on the military also delays the hugely needed efforts to establish functioning justice systems and effective rule of law. Meanwhile, the drug business learns and adapts, moving from strict hierarchies to networked configurations.

Despite those evidences, growing international debates about drug policies and a shifting internal public opinion, the US continues to promote a securitized approach to drugs that is most evident now in Central America. The use of Colombia as a symbol of success for Mexico and others, and as an actual ‘proxy’ to provide support in counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency to third

parties including West Africa, should raise some basic questions about the premises, effectiveness and potential consequences of those policies.

This month, the West African Commission on Drugs – an expert panel convened by Kofi Annan and chaired by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo – has called for decriminalization of drug use and to “avoid militarisation of drug policy and related counter-trafficking measures, of the kind that some Latin American countries have applied at great cost without reducing supply.”

This potentially brings West Africa into line with the Organisation of American States, which in a report of May 2013 proposed “alternative legal and regulatory regimes” for tackling drugs, starting with cannabis”. Uruguay has already decriminalized cannabis and Colombia’s President Juan Manuel Santos, re-elected this month, has at times advocated drug policy reform. Enrique Peña Nieto has recently called on the US to start an open debate and a revision of ‘failed’ hemispheric policies whose outcome has been the rise of drug production and consumption.

There are growing calls internationally to open a global debate over drug use and the policies needed to address it, including addressing demand in consumer countries. No less a figure than Sir William Patey, British Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012, has called for legalization of the heroin trade as the war on drugs in Afghanistan fails to address the complex problems at the roots of opium cultivation. Dozens of high profile British individuals and organisations, including the Prison Governors Association, have also called for decriminalization of drug use.

The debate seems to be reaching a tipping point as the numbers and diversity of the sceptical and critical voices grow worldwide. Now it is the turn of policy makers to listen and act.

Mabel González Bustelo is a journalist, researcher and international consultant specialized in international peace and security, with a focus on non-state actors in world politics, organized violence, conflict and peacebuilding. You can follow her at her blog [The Making of War and Peace](#), her [webpage](#), and Twitter ([@MabelBustelo](#)).

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