

Alternative Development Won't End Colombia's War

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Washington's contribution to Plan Colombia has been widely criticized for its emphasis on interdiction and aerial eradication at the expense of alternative development in the areas where coca and opium poppy are grown. Alternative development, as conceived in Plan Colombia, is offered to small farmers (those with less than three hectares of coca) who voluntarily eradicate their illegal plants within twelve months in exchange for credit, technical advice, and marketing assistance as they switch exclusively to legal crops or the care of livestock. Although the bulk of alternative development funds go to crop substitution, infrastructure improvements in roads, potable water, sewerage, electricity, education, and health services are also planned for the long term. Critics of Plan Colombia, such as the European Parliament, have called for increased spending on rural infrastructure and social programs as an alternative to the military buildup currently underway. The Bush administration seems to be responding positively to these critiques, and has proposed more spending on alternative development in the Andean region.

Yet, it would be unwise to bet on such schemes as a way of bringing peace to Colombia or stopping the flow of drugs to the United States. Even if the U.S. and Colombian governments were to take alternative development seriously, there are staggering obstacles to overcome.

Colombia consistently ranks as one of the world's most corrupt countries, and Colombians are particularly distrustful of agricultural institutions, which have long been used by political bosses to distribute pork. Even bureaucracies created and managed under the oversight of international financial institutions are notoriously corrupt and inefficient, and they have failed to earn the confidence of peasants, who constitute the vast majority of Colombian farmers.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is working closely with PLANTE, the Colombian government's alternative development agency. PLANTE was created in 1996 to work on issues of crop substitution and productive infrastructure in remote areas where coca is grown. However, it has been understaffed and underfunded since its inception, it has done very little for coca growers, and it is now suffering severe financial difficulties. It also lacks the technical expertise necessary for the ambitious undertaking that USAID envisions.

There has been no meaningful coordination between PLANTE personnel and the pilots spraying pesticides on coca fields during the past several months. At times, they seem to be in direct conflict. Many agricultural projects (such as rubber, cacao, and plantain trees as well as yucca, corn, vegetable gardens, livestock, and fish ponds) sponsored by international development organizations have been affected by aerial spraying. Peasants participating in PLANTE's own projects have seen thousands of acres of their crops destroyed, and many have reverted to coca cultivation. Their confidence in legal markets, tenuous to begin with, has been severely undermined.

Furthermore, the money designated for alternative development has not yet materialized, after eight months of assurances to hundreds of peasants who have signed pacts. By failing to deliver on early promises, PLANTE and USAID are compromising the entire long-term effort and will face diminishing cooperation in the future.

Unfortunately, even if fumigation were to end and the money for alternative development were to arrive, many of the underlying causes of the war would remain. Living among competing armed actors, peasants' planting decisions are often determined more by intimidation than by free will or economic rationality. For similar rea-



sons, many are reluctant to participate in local government and community decisionmaking, which USAID claims is critical for positive results. The designers of alternative development have not sufficiently recognized the constraints posed by the hostilities into which their projects are inserted. In particular, they have not addressed the ways in which those hostilities limit the freedom of unarmed peasants.

Unlike Peru and Bolivia, which enjoyed limited success with alternative development in the 1990s, Colombia is in the midst of a complex, forty-year-old civil war driven by intense battles over land and raw materials (such as gold, emeralds, coal, forest products, biological resources, and most ominously, oil). Colombia is also challenged by decentralized drug mafias, new international rules governing trade, and deep structural problems in agriculture: most notably, the concentration of underutilized, but farmable, land in the hands of a few.

With Colombia's economic opening in the early 1990s, agriculture suffered one of its deepest slumps ever, a predicament from which it has yet to recover. Corn, cotton, soybeans, rice, wheat, and barley, among others, were unable to compete with cheaper, subsidized goods from abroad, and established commercial farmers throughout the country protested, demanding credit and markets for their goods. Nearly 700,000 hectares (of 3.7 million total) fell out of production, unemployment skyrocketed in some areas, and land became even more concentrated among livestock owners. Colombia experienced a five-fold increase in agricultural imports, and even in valleys and plains with sophisticated infrastructure and a long history of farming, there is little new investment in many crops. Pilot alternative development programs sponsored by PLANTE and USAID

in these very areas have enjoyed only moderate success. It is unrealistic to expect positive results in violent frontier areas, where most of the coca is grown, basic services are lacking, and government presence is ephemeral.

USAID gives food security projects, such as fish ponds, only one-tenth of the funding assigned to commercial activities. Apparently, both governments believe that it is more important for peasants to produce for the market, irrespective of international prices, than to produce for their own sustenance. Hence, any new crops introduced to the coca growing regions must have clear potential for success at the international level to ensure a steady income for small farmers. USAID is supporting cattle raising most heavily, followed by enterprises in African palm, rubber, and cacao. Some of these crops will require years of unproductive growth to reach maturity, and private producer associations with political clout and marketing know-how have expressed little interest in assisting PLANTE. Government programs are therefore alone in trying to persuade coca growers to take up legal crops, and thus far, they have relied on the "stick" of fumigation rather than the "carrot" of alternative development.

Beyond the challenges unique to Colombia or the Andean region lingers the universal and permanent "balloon effect" of drug production. The prohibition of cocaine and heroin create breathtaking incentives for entrepreneurs, and there will always be small farmers willing to take the calculated risk of growing illegal plants, even if reliable markets for legal crops exist. Those farmers, often desperately poor, will simply move further into the jungle and across national borders if drugs are coveted by foreigners with money to burn.

Opponents of Plan Colombia's military excesses mean well in proposing humane scenarios, such as alternative development, as a means of alleviating conflict in Colombia and stemming the flow of drugs to the United States. However, they should recognize that alternative development, as currently designed by USAID, is unlikely to yield benefits in Colombia, even if it were better bankrolled. At its best, the U.S. program for alternative development is a high-minded but context-blind failure of foreign development policy. At its worst, it acts as a cover for a confused counterinsurgency debacle, crude military interests, and the preservation of one of the world's most unequal distributions of land and wealth.

Those concerned about illegal drugs entering the U.S. should focus on the U.S. demand for drugs. Through such an approach, positive results are more likely, and costs can be better controlled. Those who desire peace in Colombia should press for judicial reform, land redistribution, and respect for human rights. And we should all ask hard questions about U.S. interests in Colombia and determine who benefits from the militarized antidrug strategies that are, to many observers, an obvious failure and a national embarrassment.

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