

Alternative Development Programs in the Andean Region

The antinarcotics war in the Andean region attacks every stage of the illegal drug business: cultivation, processing, the trade in precursor chemicals, national and international narcotics trafficking, consumption and laundering of the profits. Programs that focus on the cultivation stage use a combination of carrots (alternative development) and sticks (chemical spraying and criminal penalties). After years of experimentation, alternative development has produced some successes in Bolivia and, to a lesser extent, Peru. But concrete results have yet to emerge in Colombia, and in fact, the effects of Plan Colombia threaten the achievements of neighboring countries.

Alternative development initiatives are likely to continue in the near future, thanks to the financial support of the US and European Union and the inability of the governments of narcotics-producing countries to introduce more comprehensive development policies. The fiscal crisis and political shifts in the Andean countries have weakened domestically funded rural development programs, forcing reliance on external resources for crop substitution efforts. The success or failure of these efforts will itself be a source of stability or conflict.

How can we measure the success of alternative development programs? If the measure used is the eradication of coca and poppy crops, then such programs have succeeded in Bolivia, done fairly well in Peru, and failed in Colombia. Between 1992 and mid 2001, the amount of land devoted to narcotics cultivation fell from 48,000 to 13,500 hectares in Bolivia and from 129,000 to 34,000 hectares in Peru. In Colombia, the trend was reversed; the number of hectares under coca and opium cultivation increased, from 38,000 to 136,000 hectares.

If the measure used is the supply of illegal drugs in developed countries, then antinarcotics programs have been a total failure, as the quantity of drugs for sale has actually increased over the last decade.

According to many experts, however, a better measure of the success of antinarcotics policies and programs in the producing countries is the level of institutional stability, rule of law, state legitimacy and credibility, social capital, community well-being and empowerment, productive employment, functioning economic and sustainable development models, etc. [\[1\]](#) In the long term, eradication of illegal crops contributes to these goals, but short- and medium-term results are also critical and depend to a large extent on the social and political context.

The greater degree of success of alternative development programs in Bolivia undoubtedly has a lot to do with the existence of strong peasant and indigenous organizations, which function as valuable intermediaries in the implementation of state programs. Even so, the current unrest in Bolivia is evidence that unless

alternative development programs are deep and far-reaching, their effects can rapidly be reversed.

In Peru, the programs' relative success seems to owe to a greater reliance on aerial interdiction than on direct confrontations with peasant and indigenous producers.

The failure of alternative development in Colombia is the result of several factors. First, antinarcotics policy there has emphasized repression of peasant and indigenous producers over the other links in the productive chain. Second, Colombia's coca-growing peasants lack strong and autonomous representative organizations, one of many social effects of the country's ongoing internal conflict. Third, guerrillas and paramilitaries also benefit from the narcotics trade and respond to a different logic than peasant and indigenous producers. And fourth, "success" in the Bolivian and Peruvian cases may have had a lot to do with the economic strategies of the drug cartels, which simply shifted their production, processing and distribution networks to Colombia, where the level of institutional crisis offered a logistic advantage for their purposes. This explains the continuing and even increased supply of drugs on the world market.

Alternative development programs, by channeling state programs and subsidies to communities linked to illegal narcotics cultivation, penalize communities not tied to this trade. The net effect is to increase the appeal of narcotics cultivation. The subsidies offered under alternative development programs are difficult to sustain, and the environment and infrastructure of Colombia's coca-producing zones is already among the most precarious in the Andean region. In any case, the issue is not simply a matter of substituting one crop (coca, opium poppies) for another. The underlying problem is how to replace an entire culture that can be characterized as exploitative, speculative and violent for one based on productivity, solidarity and peace.

www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/index.cfm?docid=2925

www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/index.cfm?docid=1364

Thoumi, Francisco. 1994. Economía política y narcotráfico. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores.

^[1] Here I must thank Francisco Thoumi, Eduardo Gamarra and Carl Cira, although the statements in this article are my sole responsibility.