



# Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia

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Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • [brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** Coca crops have set record yields in Colombia since the 2016 peace accord with FARC guerrillas, persuading the government to expand its forced eradication campaign with the backing of U.S. authorities. Bogotá claims that eliminating the plant will reduce rural violence.

**Why does it matter?** Insecurity in Colombia's countryside has steadily got worse in recent years as armed groups vie with one another and the military for supremacy. Enhanced eradication, and potentially aerial fumigation, could intensify violence by forcing farmers into the clutches of armed outfits, while failing to stop the replanting of coca.

**What should be done?** Colombia and the U.S., the lead outside backer of tough counter-narcotic policies in Latin America, should turn the page on using force against coca farmers in a bid to dent global cocaine supply. Boosting rural economies, forging ahead with crop substitution and avoiding clashes with cultivators would make for better policy.

## *Executive Summary*

Coca stands at the heart of a fierce debate over Colombia's worsening rural insecurity. The plant's leaves are the sole raw material from which cocaine, an illegal drug that generates outlandish profits and finances armed and criminal groups, can be manufactured. Colombian President Iván Duque argues that the whole narcotic supply chain – from coca cultivation to global cocaine trafficking – is the scourge behind rising massacres, forced displacement and assassinations of community leaders in Colombia. With cultivation hitting new highs in recent years, Bogotá has vastly expanded campaigns that involve sending in the army and police to pull up or otherwise eradicate coca crops. It also threatens to restart aerial fumigation. Yet an approach based on forceful eradication of coca, which the U.S. has stoutly backed, tends to worsen rural violence, while failing to reduce drug supply. A new strategy is needed that persuades coca farmers to abandon a plant that offers a stable income and an attractive alternative to other legal crops.

Dismantling the illicit drug economy was one of six main planks of the landmark 2016 peace accord between the state and the guerrilla Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). That accord promised to institute a nationwide crop substitution program enabling roughly 200,000 coca-growing families to pursue other legal businesses. It sought to sever links between the insurgency and drug trafficking, while establishing state authority in pockets of the country where criminal rule and poverty had long allowed cocaine production to thrive.

Four years later, few of those promises have been met. Coca cultivation began rising to historical highs during peace negotiations, driven in part by the expectation that any eventual accord would benefit coca farmers who pledged to substitute their crops. This trend worsened as the government struggled to meet the promises made to farmers. Bogotá has not been able to transform the economic fundamentals that make coca – fast-growing and destined for a loyal international market – such a reliable crop. New armed groups have swooped in to control the supply chain the FARC left behind. An array of hustlers, guerrillas and criminals vie for control over the purchase and refining of coca, as well as trafficking routes out of the country.

The Duque government's policies have not helped. Rather than redouble efforts to fulfil the 2016 accords, the government has placed coercive methods such as manual eradication at the centre of its push to bring order to Colombia's violent countryside. Little suggests this strategy will succeed, either in curbing coca supply or reducing violence. Eradication pushes farmers into unwilling alignment with armed groups, since the state's only service to them is perceived as a disservice that uproots their livelihoods. Vulnerable to traffickers' coercion yet also stigmatised as illegal collaborators by the military, farmers experience violence from both. Soldiers have also suffered casualties and psychological damage during manual eradication. Worse, the military and cultivators both know that these efforts will have only a partial effect, as replanting rates reach 40 to 50 per cent, or higher.

A strategy to reduce violence should focus on bringing coca farmers back under the state's protective umbrella while providing them with genuine licit alternatives to the crop. Given support, the vast majority of cultivators have already signalled that

they would willingly forsake the coca economy. Farmers need more systematic help to make that transition. Above all, this would entail major improvements to rural roads, access to credit and provision of formal land titles, as laid out in the transformative package of rural reforms promised in the 2016 peace accord. In the interim, Bogotá should de-emphasise forced eradication methods and abandon plans for a return to aerial fumigation. To salvage trust between farmers and the military and police, security forces should not be at the forefront of crop destruction if it does take place.

In support of these reforms, the new U.S. administration should turn the page on Washington's long history of backing tough yet in essence counterproductive measures to destroy drug supply. The administration should instead back comprehensive efforts to boost Colombia's rural economies. Together with the U.S. Congress, it should also review the merits of a requirement that the U.S. president certify key countries' compliance with U.S. counter-narcotic policy each year in order to receive foreign assistance. This process has placed great pressure on Colombia to focus its rural security policy on reducing coca supply in a way that is insensitive to local dynamics and exacerbates threats to civilians.

The past decades have demonstrated that Colombia is losing the battle against a plant that has been at the centre of a dangerous drug market, but whose cultivation has provided the poorest rural communities with a lifeline. It is time to take a hard look at a strategy that has focused too hard on destroying that lifeline, and not enough on replacing it with something better.

**Bogotá/New York/Washington/Brussels, 26 February 2021**

# Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia

## I. Introduction

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For half a century, coca and its derivative cocaine have been at the heart of violence in Colombia. In the 1980s, the cocaine trade nourished drug cartels in Medellín and Cali, criminal organisations whose vast resources allowed them to buy off and infiltrate the state. As they grew, some of these cartels unleashed a terrorist campaign killing thousands of people – from presidential candidates and ministers to police officers and innocent civilians.<sup>1</sup> Drug money later fed the leftist insurgencies of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), as well as the paramilitary groups that fought them. Repeated administrations in Bogotá have insisted that eliminating coca is vital to ending conflict. Former President Álvaro Uribe said in 2002: “If we do not defeat drugs, the drugs will destroy our liberty, our planet, and erase the dream of living in peace”.<sup>2</sup>

Bogotá is not alone in espousing this view. Since 1998, when the UN General Assembly Special Session declared its goal of achieving “a drug-free world”, a web of national and international institutions has upheld a global drug control regime focused on eradicating the production, exchange and use of narcotics.<sup>3</sup> For Colombia, this effort has entailed a 30-year war on coca cultivation, waged with financial backing, encouragement and pressure from the United States. Since the millennium began, the U.S. has spent \$11.6 billion on bilateral aid to Colombia, including the funding of aerial fumigation and manual eradication efforts.<sup>4</sup> During that time, Bogotá raised additional defence taxes and ordered its military to destroy crops and labs across the country’s treacherous terrain.

This enormous investment of financial and human resources has failed, however, to curtail coca growing. The number of hectares under cultivation, after dropping to an estimated low of 48,000 in 2012, rebounded to 154,000 in 2019, the third highest annual figure since 2000.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, estimated global cocaine production nearly doubled between 2014 and 2018, with the largest share of seizures – 35 per cent –

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrés López, *Conflicto interno y narcotráfico entre 1970 y 2005* (Bogotá, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> “Discurso de posesión del Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez”, *El Tiempo*, 8 August 2002.

<sup>3</sup> “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly: Political Resolution”, A/RES/S-20/2, 21 October 1998; Martin Jelsma, “The Unwritten History of the 1998 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs”, Transnational Institute, 1 April 2003.

<sup>4</sup> “Report of the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission”, U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, December 2020, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Both the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the U.S. Department of State maintain separate records of coca cultivation. This report relies on UN statistics; U.S. figures tend to be higher. For in-depth analysis of the feasibility of achieving the goal of a drug-free world and the unintended consequences of the drug control regime, see David Bewley-Taylor, *International Drug Control: Consensus Fractured* (Cambridge, 2012); “Taking Stock: A Decade of Drug Policy – A Civil Society Shadow Report”, International Drug Policy Consortium, 2018; and Francisco Thoumi, *Illegal Drugs, Economy and Society in the Andes* (Baltimore, 2003).

taking place in Colombia. An estimated 90 per cent of cocaine impounded in the U.S. originated in Colombia as of 2018.<sup>6</sup>

Coca's resilience compounds the insecurity that continues to wrack Colombia's countryside despite the landmark peace accord between the state and the FARC guerrillas that was signed in 2016.<sup>7</sup> For President Iván Duque, rural violence is rooted in the hardy plant's spread: "Where there is more coca, there is less peace".<sup>8</sup> To support this claim, his government points to the fact that coca crops are located in the country's most turbulent regions.<sup>9</sup> Trafficking profits fund a new generation of armed groups – dissident guerrillas, ex-paramilitaries and criminal outfits – that, while more fragmented than their predecessors, are equally adept at killing and intimidating civilians.

But the government's narrow focus on coca as the root of violence in Colombia both ignores evidence that suggests conflict is driven by a much wider array of factors and also leads it to take counterproductive steps in the service of its elimination.<sup>10</sup> Recent experience also suggests that attempts to eliminate the crop exacerbate insecurity in rural areas rather than reduce it. The prolonged counter-narcotic campaigns have transformed coca production, turning small-hold farmers into both the mainstays of the trade and its main victims.<sup>11</sup> Forced eradication has criminalised poor cultivators, pushed them to the very edges of Colombia's territory and driven them to take the side of local armed groups. Civilians tend to be in greatest peril when several drug-running rings as well as the military are battling for control over patches of turf.

This report examines the realities of violence surrounding coca in rural Colombia today. It does not focus on cocaine and its international trafficking, topics which a broad literature already covers.<sup>12</sup> Its conclusions are based on more than 80 interviews with coca-growing families, local and national officials, the military, diplomats, members of civil society organisations and academics. It draws on in-person fieldwork conducted in Antioquia, Cauca and Guaviare, as well as remote conversations with interlocutors based in Caquetá, Chocó, Córdoba and Norte de Santander.

<sup>6</sup> "World Drug Report 2020: Drug Supply", UNODC, June 2020, pp. 21-36.

<sup>7</sup> "Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace", November 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Tweet by Iván Duque, @IvanDuque, president of Colombia, 1:26pm, 1 September 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Colombian presidency, November 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Analysts have in fact argued that there is no clear causal link between coca crops and violence, noting that some municipalities with less coca see higher levels of violence, and vice versa. See Juan Carlos Garzón Vergara and Juan David Gelvez F., "¿Más coca, más homicidios? Mejor piénselo dos veces", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 13 February 2019; Óscar A. Alfonso O., "Homicidios y coca: ¿hay una relación?", Razón Pública, 12 August 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Coca cultivation is generally quantified using hectares under cultivation, though this measurement is inexact. On-the-ground verification of crop growing is rarely possible, forcing the measurements to rely on satellite and other data, and thus UN and U.S. figures from the same time period often vary significantly. Moreover, crop hectareage says little about the social impact of coca growing or how much cocaine the crops can produce, as efficiency varies. Numerous analysts have suggested relying on alternative metrics, such as numbers of families involved in cultivation, to capture coca's true impact. "Report of the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission", op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Peter Reuter, "Systemic Violence in Drug Markets", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2009), pp. 275-284; Peter Andreas and Joel Wallman, "Illicit Markets and Violence: What is the Relationship?", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2009), pp. 225-229; and Juan Camilo Castillo and Dorothy Kronick, "The Logic of Violence in Drug War", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 114, no. 3 (2020), pp. 874-887.

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## II. The Rise of Colombian Coca

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### A. *The Agricultural Frontier and Conflict*

Coca growth is in part the result of waves of internal migration throughout the twentieth century, during which Colombia's poor dispersed deep into the countryside hoping to establish profitable farms.<sup>13</sup> From the 1980s onward, coca – a product that grew easily and that traffickers collected and paid for farm by farm – was “the only opportunity to build a somewhat dignified life” for many destitute farmers.<sup>14</sup>

But Colombia's rural poor have experienced coca as both a blessing and a curse. Coca built farms and towns in uninhabited areas, and for many poor farming families it has provided social mobility, access to education and better health.<sup>15</sup> And yet growing coca provides for neither an easy life nor a safe one. As one former coca farmer explained: “Coca was better than any other livelihood, but it also brought war to our doorsteps”.<sup>16</sup> Because the crop is illicit, coca farmers often operate by the rules of the violent actors who control the trade. In many cases, farmers have no choice in whom they sell to and little redress if the transaction is unfair. Coca brings farmers into direct contact with armed groups, particularly at the moment of sale. Women report higher incidences of sexual and domestic violence, as well as child recruitment, in coca-growing areas.<sup>17</sup> In disputed lands, farmers risk retaliation if they sell to one group, as opposed to its rival. In the words of one local government official: “We always said, coca will kill us”.<sup>18</sup>

Drugs are nevertheless not the root of most violence in Colombia. Internal armed conflict predates the cocaine trade in the country by nearly twenty years, and the grievances associated with it shaped the drug business. Coca is native to parts of Colombia but had been a crop of marginal significance when compared to other Andean countries, where the plant has historically been revered by indigenous peoples, including as a means of warding off altitude sickness.<sup>19</sup> Businessmen from the emerald trade, later linked to the Cali and Medellín cartels, brought the crop to Colombia's south east around 1975 as a complement to coca imports from Peru and Bolivia that

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<sup>13</sup> Manuel Enrique Pérez Martínez, “La conformación territorial en Colombia: entre el conflicto, el desarrollo y el destierro”, *Cuadernos de Desarrollo Rural*, no. 51 (2003), pp. 61-90; Estefanía Ciro, *Levantados de la selva: Vidas y legitimidades en los territorios cocaleros* (Bogotá, 2020); Fernán Enrique González, “Espacio, conflicto y poder: las dimensiones territoriales de la violencia y la construcción del Estado en Colombia”, *Sociedad y Economía*, vol. 17 (2009), pp. 185-214.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, coca community ethnographer, December 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez, “Tensiones y Dilemas de la Producción Cocalera”, *Análisis Político*, no. 97 (2019), pp. 71-90.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca farmer, Las Aulas Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, female former coca growers, San José del Guaviare and Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, local government official, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Many indigenous people in Colombia also chew coca leaves, but its traditional use is less extensive than in Bolivia and Peru. See Miguel Elías Ramos Noguera, “El Consumo Ancestral de la Hoja de Coca en los Pueblos Indígenas de Colombia, Perú y Bolivia como Parte de su Identidad Cultural”, *Desbordes, Revista de Investigaciones de la Escuela de Ciencias Sociales, Artes y Humanidades*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2017), pp. 29, 38.



they refined in Colombia and shipped abroad.<sup>20</sup> FARC guerrillas, who emerged in the 1960s, stumbled into the coca business once they realised its usefulness in managing relations with rural communities and securing stable revenues.

The FARC initially treated coca as it did other economic activities – a business to be regulated and taxed. The guerrillas established working relationships with third-party buyers (*chichipatos*), who would collect harvests and deliver them to traffickers. In order to be able to tax these transactions, the guerrillas set a minimum price that included their cut and ensured that farmers would earn enough to make ends meet.<sup>21</sup> One former commander recalled: “The only way that a base price was possible was because the product is illegal. This means that the buyer is dependent on the raw material, so we can set an artificially high price”.<sup>22</sup> To prevent the new plant from causing major income disparities, the FARC in some areas limited how much coca any farmer could grow and mandated that the same families also plant food crops.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the advent of a lucrative new crop upended the social order in rural areas, causing disputes that the guerrillas had to mediate. The FARC carved out a reputation for harshness but effectiveness in regulating behaviour.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1980s, right-wing paramilitary groups emerged to spearhead the counter-insurgency working with large landowners and the state.<sup>25</sup> At first, these outfits maintained business ties with third-party traffickers. Within a few years, however, as the Medellín and Cali cartels fractured, the paramilitaries absorbed coca buyers and middlemen, giving rise to well-armed drug-running rings in direct competition with the FARC.<sup>26</sup> In response, the guerrillas ceased to allow *chichipatos* into their territory by the early 1990s, choosing to collect the harvest, refine the coca and sell the product themselves.<sup>27</sup> Nurturing alliances with smaller specialised groups in the supply chain, the FARC and the paramilitaries in effect built separate production lines that included cultivation, processing labs and trafficking networks.

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<sup>20</sup> María Clemencia Ramírez, *Entre el estado y la guerrilla: Identidad y ciudadanía en el movimiento de los campesinos cocaleros del Putumayo* (Bogotá, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, official, local coca monitoring group, November and December 2020. Susan Virginia Norman, “Narcotization as Security Dilemma: The FARC and Drug Trade in Colombia”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 41, no. 8 (2018), pp. 646, 648.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, former FARC commander in Arauca, Bogotá, January 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, official, local coca growers’ union in Caquetá, December 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, coca community ethnographer, December 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Paramilitary groups emerged in Colombia in the mid-1960s as right-wing self-defence cells sanctioned by the state through Decree 3398 of 1965 and Law 48 of 1968. Contemporary paramilitarism was born in 1981, when drug traffickers, landowners, cattle ranchers and members of the Colombian military formed an alliance to counter guerrilla kidnapping and extortion. As paramilitary groups dislodged the FARC from coca-growing areas, they absorbed the business. Drug trafficking grew increasingly important to sustaining the paramilitaries after they were outlawed in 1989. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, *Clientelistic Warfare: Paramilitary and the State in Colombia* (Oxford, 2019); Carlos Medina Gallego, “La economía de guerra paramilitar: una aproximación a sus fuentes de financiación”, *Análisis Político*, vol. 18, no. 53 (2005), pp. 77-87.

<sup>26</sup> Norman, “Narcotization as Security Dilemma”, op. cit., pp. 638-659.

<sup>27</sup> Francisco E. Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs in Colombia: From Illegal Economic Boom to Social Crisis”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 582, no. 1 (2002), p. 106.

## B. *Plan Colombia*

By 1999, Colombia was by far the largest coca producer in the Andes, with an estimated 160,000 hectares under cultivation. Conflict in the country was also at its peak.<sup>28</sup> Seeking to stop Colombia from becoming a “failed state” as well as halt the cocaine influx into the U.S., that year Washington and Bogotá launched Plan Colombia, a decade-long program costing over \$10 billion, which vastly expanded eradication and fumigation, while boosting military and law enforcement support to combat the FARC.<sup>29</sup> Over the next eight years, Colombia destroyed 1.15 million hectares of coca through aerial fumigation with the pesticide glyphosate.<sup>30</sup> The U.S. channelled much of its counter-narcotics support through the Colombian military, which enlarged its ranks by 150 per cent and received better weaponry and counter-insurgency training. Beginning in 2002, President Álvaro Uribe’s government deployed this bolstered force to broaden an air and ground campaign against the FARC, while dismantling labs and targeting guerrillas high up in the drug trade.<sup>31</sup>

U.S. policy circles have long regarded Plan Colombia’s military achievements as a success, but they came at a price. The Colombian government’s campaign against FARC rebels did reduce the guerrillas’ capabilities, as shown by the steep drop in kidnappings. Yet these tactics exacerbated human rights abuses committed by security forces, while sharpening rural dwellers’ distrust of the state.<sup>32</sup>

Plan Colombia’s impact on the drug market was also hedged with unintended consequences. Rather than disappearing after fumigation, coca production simply spread to more remote parts of the countryside, moving from the productive southern regions to the Pacific coast as well as pockets along the Venezuelan border.<sup>33</sup> Crops made their way into areas that are legally protected from most fumigation, such as natural parks and indigenous reserves. Other plots clustered in areas without a clear institutional presence, where armed groups and cartels could regulate the market and establish control.

## C. *The Peace Accord and Its Aftermath*

Acknowledging that the cocaine trade had “penetrated, fuelled and financed” the conflict, Colombia’s 2016 peace accord devoted one of its five points to disentangling the FARC from the illicit business.<sup>34</sup> In 2014, before the parties reached a final deal,

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<sup>28</sup> Juan Gabriel Tokatlán, “La construcción de un ‘Estado fallido’ en la política mundial: el caso de las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y Colombia”, *Análisis Político*, vol. 21, no. 64 (2008), pp. 67-104.

<sup>29</sup> Megan Alpert, “15 years and \$10 billion later, U.S. efforts to curb Colombia’s cocaine trade have failed”, *Foreign Policy*, 8 February 2016.

<sup>30</sup> “Report of the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission”, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Miklaucic and Juan Carlos Pinzón, “Partnership: The Colombia-U.S. Experience”, *Prism*, 20 November 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Isacson, “The Many Lessons of Plan Colombia”, Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), 4 February 2016; Adam Isacson, “Colombia: Don’t Call it a Model”, WOLA, 13 July 2010.

<sup>33</sup> For example, between 2010 and 2019, coca cultivation rose from just under 2,000 hectares to 41,710 in Norte de Santander – a 2,000 per cent increase. “Dinámica de cultivos de coca”, Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia; “Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2019”, UNODC, July 2020, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> “Final Agreement”, op. cit., Point 4.

the FARC announced that it would sever its links to drug trafficking, while the government committed to supporting alternative livelihoods for farmers.<sup>35</sup> A year later, the government's National Drug Council paused aerial fumigation, a move that court rulings later legally mandated, citing its harm to the environment and public health.<sup>36</sup>

The 2016 peace agreement promised to switch the emphasis of drug policy from punishing to supporting the two most vulnerable groups in the supply chain – poor farmers who grow coca leaf and a small but growing number of domestic drug consumers. It conceived a crop substitution program linked to rural reform and infrastructure development. The text also pledged that initiatives to replace coca would be humane, based on community consent and tailored to local conditions in each area where coca is grown.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, the agreement affirmed the state's right to eradicate coca, but only as a last resort if negotiations with farmers to replace their crops failed.<sup>38</sup> Differences between the sides in the peace talks reportedly flared over how soon the crop should be removed. Farmers had requested a gradual voluntary reduction in coca growing, while the government sought immediate removal. In the end, fearing that new armed groups would attempt to corner the market after their demobilisation, the FARC agreed that farmers should uproot their coca plants immediately.<sup>39</sup>

In late 2016, plans to implement these sections of the peace agreement took shape in the National Program for Integral Substitution (PNIS). With the FARC's initial involvement, and with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) undertaking verification, the program pledged a series of monetary and technical incentives to help farmers forsake coca. Farmers were asked to eradicate their crops in exchange for a year's worth of monthly food subsidies (totalling \$3,400 at the current exchange rate), an injection of cash for subsistence crops and livestock (\$500) and, lastly, short-term support for a new livelihood project (\$2,560) with technical assistance (\$900), followed up by a longer-term investment (up to \$2,900). Where farmers were sceptical as to the government's good faith, the FARC pledged to pressure Bogotá to honour its promises.<sup>40</sup>

The expectation throughout the peace talks that coca farmers would benefit materially from the accord contributed to what would soon become a widespread increase

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<sup>35</sup> "Colombia: Las FARC se comprometen a romper nexos con el narcotráfico", BBC Mundo, 16 May 2014.

<sup>36</sup> "Colombia suspende uso del polémico pesticida glifosato contra cultivos de coca", BBC Mundo, 15 May 2015; "Sentencia T-236/17", Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> "Final Agreement", op. cit., Point 4.1.

<sup>38</sup> "[In cases in which farmers] are unwilling to declare their decision to substitute crops used for illicit purposes or who, despite the absence of unforeseeable circumstances or force majeure, fail to honour commitments undertaken even though the program and the communities have tried to dissuade them, the Government will proceed, after informing and sharing the problem with the communities, to eradicate those crops manually". "Final Agreement", op. cit., Point 4.1.3.2.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, international observer monitoring PNIS, November 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, farmer in pilot project for PNIS, Briceño, December 2020; international expert involved in early PNIS monitoring, November 2020. Small-hold farmers in former FARC areas were accustomed to the guerrillas acting as brokers and arbiters in the coca market, and hence sought their assurances that the program would come to fruition.

in cultivation, as seen in Figure 1.<sup>41</sup> The Duque government has blamed this rise on the accord's allegedly perverse incentives, namely the promises of generous state support for coca growers in the initial agreement on drugs, as well as the halt in fumigation in 2015.<sup>42</sup> But other causes also played a part. In late 2015, the international price of gold – another important illicit product for many armed groups that forcefully occupy and run illegal mines – collapsed, reportedly pushing organised crime to invest more in cocaine.<sup>43</sup> International demand also expanded in 2015 and 2016 and remained stable through at least 2019.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, large seizures of cocaine under the government of President Juan Manuel Santos led traffickers to seek out more raw material to make up for lost supply.<sup>45</sup>

Once the peace accord was reached, the FARC's rapid withdrawal from drug trafficking left behind a chaotic but highly lucrative vacuum. Cartels and other armed groups not involved in the accord saw an opportunity to move into or expand across supply chains.<sup>46</sup> Third-party buyers linked to drug suppliers or other armed groups – many of whom, including Mexican cartels, had tense relationships with the FARC or were explicitly banned from their areas – suddenly had freer rein.<sup>47</sup> Rural violence that had fallen off in 2016, when the accord was signed, started to tick up only a year later.

#### *D. The Evolution of the Coca Market and Coca Policy*

Numerous armed and criminal groups in Colombia now compete to control the territories where coca is grown, turned into paste and trafficked. The largest remaining leftist insurgency, the National Liberation Army (ELN), has greatly expanded its territorial footprint and access to weapons since 2016, including along the key trafficking corridors of the Pacific coast, Venezuelan border and Bajo Cauca.<sup>48</sup> Groups that emerged from the remnants of the paramilitary forces are also prominent in trafficking, among them the Gaitanista drug cartel, the Caparros, the Rastrojos and dozens of smaller local groups. Finally, groups defining themselves as FARC dissidents – many in areas where former FARC fronts operated – control parts of the business, at times in competition with one another. Within this volatile mix, alliances form and quickly break,

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<sup>41</sup> "Instead of pausing coca production, PNIS actually generated more coca, as farmers sought the benefits of this process". Crisis Group interview, official, MAPP-OEA, November 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Tweet by Ivan Duque, president of Colombia, @IvanDuque, 5:16pm, 26 September 2020. Crisis Group interview, senior official, PNIS, Bogotá, November 2019.

<sup>43</sup> "El Tráfico de Cocaína de Colombia hacia el mundo", Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, April 2020, pp. 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> "World Drug Report 2020, Chapter 2: Drug Use and Health Consequences", UNODC, 2020, p. 10; "La cocaína universal", *El País*, 13 December 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, international drug policy expert, November 2020. Former President Santos is now a Crisis Group Trustee.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°63, *Colombia's Armed Groups Battle for the Spoils of Peace*, 19 October 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Truth Commission official, San José del Guaviare, November 2020. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°84, *Disorder on the Border: Keeping the Peace Between Colombia and Venezuela*, 14 December 2020.

<sup>48</sup> "¿Qué hacer con el ELN? Opciones para no cerrar la puerta a una salida negociada", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 28 January 2020.

including with international trafficking patrons in Mexico and Brazil.<sup>49</sup> So fluid is the drug trade's new architecture that in places such as Cauca and northern Antioquia, residents often say they are not sure which groups or how many of them are present.<sup>50</sup>

Rising insecurity in supposedly post-conflict areas, together with growing production, has shaped policy toward coca in the years since the peace accord. Arguing that coca is the cause of increasing numbers of massacres, selective homicides and displacement, Duque has vastly expanded manual eradication and vowed to restart aerial fumigation.<sup>51</sup> In 2020 and 2021, his government set annual goals of eradicating 130,000 hectares of coca, up from 80,000 in 2019.<sup>52</sup> Colombia today has nearly seven times the number of manual eradication teams than it did under the Santos administration.<sup>53</sup> Under former President Donald Trump, the U.S. encouraged eradication as a means of reducing cocaine supply, arguing that the “number one, two and three issues for the U.S. in Colombia are counter-narcotics”.<sup>54</sup> Meeting in 2019, the countries jointly agreed to work toward the goal of reducing coca and cocaine production by 50 per cent by 2023.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Trafficking routes evolve constantly but generally follow several exits from the country. Coca from Putumayo and Nariño moves to the Pacific coastline, where much of it is exported via Tumaco or Buenaventura. A smaller amount of coca grown in Cauca moves across that department toward Timbiqui and Guapi. Coca grown near Venezuela, as well as some from the south, is exported across the border to that country. Coca from southern Córdoba and northern Antioquia can move either west to the Pacific via Chocó or east toward Venezuela, with some also departing northward to the Atlantic coastline. Coca from Guaviare, Caquetá and elsewhere in the country's southern departments moves largely toward the border with Brazil. Officials report that labs to refine base paste into cocaine, increasingly small and mobile, are mostly located close to the sites of export. Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior official, Colombian presidency, November 2020; senior official, MAPP-OEA, November 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local community members, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

<sup>51</sup> In 2020, the defence ministry documented 162 victims of collective homicides (in which four or more were killed), a number that has risen consistently since a low of 38 in 2016. “Logros de la política de defensa y seguridad”, Defence Ministry, December 2020; “Presidente Duque rechaza vil asesinato de policías en Norosí, Bolívar”, Colombian Presidency, 17 September 2020.

<sup>52</sup> “En un 62 % se incrementó la meta de erradicación forzada para este año”, *El Tiempo*, 10 February 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, international security source, November 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, November 2020.

<sup>55</sup> “U.S.-Colombia High Level Dialogue Joint Communiqué”, press release, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 9 October 2019.

### III. Coca at the Grassroots

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There are four essential steps in turning coca leaf into cocaine for the global market: cultivation, processing to base paste, refining to cocaine hydrochloride and trafficking. Although the make-up of groups along the supply chain has fluctuated over time, small-hold farmers' role in cultivation has remained relatively constant.<sup>56</sup>

#### A. *Who Grows Coca?*

The government, military and coca growers describe two types of cultivation sites in Colombia today: small-hold farms of less than three hectares and large industrial-style operations.<sup>57</sup> UNODC estimates that the average plot size per coca-growing family in Colombia is roughly one hectare, though this does not preclude a minority of growers possessing larger plots.<sup>58</sup> Colombian and international officials say they do not have robust data showing which type of plot predominates or produces the largest part of supply.<sup>59</sup> What is not in dispute, however, is that both types involve poor farmers, either as growers or labourers. As of 2016, an estimated 215,000 families were considered to be involved in growing coca.<sup>60</sup>

The government believes that the most profitable coca is grown on larger plots of between 30 to 40 hectares, some of them tucked into land that is legally off limits to eradication.<sup>61</sup> Officials point to major plots in indigenous areas of Nariño, as well as on the edge of the Amazon jungle in southern regions such as Putumayo and Guaviare. The relationships between these large growers and armed groups are murky and vary by region. The Colombian military believes armed groups are in direct control of some plots, while others are private businesses subject to illicit taxation by these outfits. Cultivators also describe a range of different labour arrangements. While many workers move willingly to large plots to earn a wage, at times up to 70,000 or 80,000 pesos per day (\$20 to \$23), in other areas such as southern Córdoba, farmers have reported coerced recruitment of labourers to work on coca fields near natural parks or other protected areas.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> As the illustration in Appendix D shows, these farmers often gain little economically from their involvement in the product while facing the most significant risk of violence.

<sup>57</sup> In the mid-1990s, Colombia's coca policy distinguished between industrial producers and small-scale growers with less than three hectares, with larger growers targeted for eradication and fumigation. This distinction was eliminated after 2002, but most coca growers' advocates still refer to the three-hectare limit to define the community of subsistence growers. "Características Agrícolas de los Cultivos de Coca en Colombia", UNODC, 2006, p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2019", UNODC, July 2020, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> "It is hard to get any really accurate estimate of [how much is grown industrially and how much in small-hold farms]. Nor do we really think we can". Crisis Group telephone interview, international security official, November 2020. One reason is the lack of ground-level verification of the number of hectares under cultivation as well as the absence in many parts of Colombia of an up-to-date land registry.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior PNIS official, Bogotá, October 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, November 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca farmers, San José del Guaviare and Briceño, December 2020. In Bajo Cauca, "armed groups brought people to deforest and enter the national park". Crisis Group telephone interview, state ombudsman official, November 2020.

The FARC dissident group Frente 1 maintains “total control” over growing and processing in the state of Guaviare, according to the military. According to one senior military officer: “They have 30 to 40 fixed labourers living on these plots. They pay them to pick the coca leaf, then they also sell them food – and at the end, they subtract what the person has eaten and consumed from their wages”.<sup>63</sup> Others dispute this account, insisting that the dissidents do not run these farms but merely tax the cultivators.<sup>64</sup>

Farmers near these larger plots say that they work on these farms mainly to supplement their income from small-hold cultivation. Families who grow coca on their own land or rented plot, for example, might send one relative to work for day labour on the larger farms.<sup>65</sup> Simultaneously, these families maintain their small plots of less than three hectares, often without formal property deeds.

Overall, coca farmers tend to be either young – one study found 40 per cent were under age nineteen – or economically disadvantaged, for example women-headed households or the elderly.<sup>66</sup> As a group, coca farmers are more likely to be migrants to the areas they are cultivating and include among them a large group of conflict victims who have suffered internal displacement.<sup>67</sup>

## **B. *Why Grow Coca?***

Coca is the only agricultural product in Colombia with a market that affords minimum prices and guarantees that the entire harvest will have a buyer. Although illegal, these guarantees have made the coca economy remarkably stable for small-hold farmers, and they help explain why cultivation is so resilient.

Throughout the crop’s commercial history in Colombia, traffickers or armed groups have set a de facto buying price that varies, depending on the international market, but is never so low as to undercut production costs.<sup>68</sup> This pre-determined profit allows farmers without access to the banking system, and often without land titles, to take out credit from local merchants and grocers for inputs such as fertiliser but also food staples they might need while waiting for harvest.<sup>69</sup> Uniquely for coca, the headache of transportation across Colombia is also solved: whereas farmers of legal goods must independently ship them to market, often at a great cost along poor roads or by boat, coca buyers collect the harvest house to house. As one community leader said: “Coca is the only product you can get out of the area where it is grown. With other products

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<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, November 2020.

<sup>64</sup> According to this version, growers sell their crops to third-party traffickers, who operate under the protection of the Frente 1. In the process, they hand over a significant sum – roughly \$175 per kg by one account – in tax to the dissidents. “It is a lie to say these are FARC dissident plots. They are just people who have permission to operate and pay the tax”. Crisis Group interview, official, government ombudsman, San José de Guaviare, December 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca growing family, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Ángela Penagos, Juan Quiñones and Lilia Sánchez, “Juventud rural en entornos complejos: compartiendo el territorio con la coca”, Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural, January 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, academic studying sociology of coca growing, November 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Colombian coca market expert, November 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca growers, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

you can have good harvests, but transportation to market is so costly it means you make a loss”.<sup>70</sup>

Coca is quick to yield and grows year-round, providing more frequent harvests than other crops. One former grower told Crisis Group: “Coca requires just six to seven months to grow for the first time. Pineapple takes sixteen months and rubber trees take nine years. And coca you harvest every three months”.<sup>71</sup> The leaf is also one of the few products to which small-hold farmers are able to add value before it is sold.<sup>72</sup> About half of all growers transform the raw leaf into base paste themselves, a relatively simple process using common inputs such as gasoline, cement and ammonium.<sup>73</sup>

The regular cash flow from coca, with payments arriving four or more times a year, has allowed many farmers to support their families and invest for the future.<sup>74</sup> Such investments include expanding into other sorts of produce and sending children to school and university. Some women farmers describe their plots as the only means of achieving financial security, particularly if they are heads of household.<sup>75</sup> “With coca, one hectare sustains a family of three”, says one cultivator. “But other plants on the same plot won’t. Coca paid to educate our children”.<sup>76</sup>

### C. Violence toward Cultivators

Despite coca’s economic benefits, every farmer involved knows, in the words of a farmers’ association leader, “that they are growing an illegal crop, and that they are going to be exposed to violence”.<sup>77</sup> Sitting at the beginning of the supply chain, farmers are caught between two hostile forces: the armed groups or traffickers who control the trade, and the military and police who seek to end it.

As coca has moved further into Colombia’s periphery, where the state’s civil institutions have limited capacity, farmers increasingly grow in areas where illegal armed groups hold de facto authority. These outfits seek territorial control in part to facilitate the safe collection and transport of coca. Dominating a particular territory is also

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, local farmer representative, San José del Guaviare, November 2020. For more on the challenges of agricultural development in Colombia, see Andres García, *Peace and Rural Development in Colombia: The Window for Distributive Change in Negotiated Transitions* (Abingdon, 2020); Angela María Penagos, Santiago Tobón, Nicolás Pérez, Claudia Ospina and Lilia Sánchez, “Nota de lineamientos estratégicos para la agricultura en Colombia desde una perspectiva territorial”, Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca farmer, San José del Guaviare, November 2020. In some regions such as Putumayo and Caquetá, coca grows even faster, providing harvests every 90 days.

<sup>72</sup> “What earns money for farmers is the possibility of adding value to the leaf, in other words, transforming it into base paste. Farmers cannot move 50 bushels of yucca or plantain [to market] – this costs an enormous amount in transport given the roads are in such poor condition. Nothing can compete with a kilo of base paste”. “Diez puntos clave para conocer más a fondo la historia del Caquetá: Entrevista con Estefanía Ciro”, *Diario de Paz Colombiana*, 25 March 2018.

<sup>73</sup> “Informe de Monitoreo de Territorios Afectados por Cultivos Ilícitos en Colombia (2019): Resumen Ejecutivo”, UNODC, 2019, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> One national survey found that more than half of coca growers invested their profits primarily in education. Gutiérrez, “Tensiones y Dilemas de la Producción Cocalera”, op. cit., pp. 71-90.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, former female coca grower, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca grower, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, farmers’ association leader, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.



lucrative because it often enables a group to tax all economic activity in the area it controls.<sup>78</sup> One female farmer said:

This is the big problem of coca – it brings all the bad things. It is the precursor of everything bad – armed groups in our areas, recruitment, the lure of fast money, prostitution, forced labour.<sup>79</sup>

Seizing control over an area often involves violence – or the threat of it – and subjects all inhabitants to the needs of the new overlords. In one area living under a FARC dissident faction, residents described a sense of general terror: “You are subject to the rules that the [armed groups] put in place, with no guarantees and no rights. Your land could be expropriated, you could be killed, you could be accused of being an informant, robbed”.<sup>80</sup> Members of armed groups are often mixed within the community, living with their families and children. This constant presence means that the whole civilian population comes under surveillance.<sup>81</sup> One female farmer described living in “a communal *ley de silencio* (law of silence)” in which few will speak out. “We are unprotected, and we have had to learn how to survive”.<sup>82</sup>

Armed groups often impose rules on the entire local population – not just coca cultivators – to ensure that illegal activity can take place unimpeded. They may pressure residents to inform on one another, pointing out alleged collaborators with the military or other groups.<sup>83</sup> In the Pacific coastal state of Chocó, where the ELN and Gaitanista cartel are active, one female civil society organiser explained: “Armed groups are imposing their laws, making it very hard to move freely. There is no freedom of expression. They control the economy; they control the availability of food. They are able to do this because of the lack of public order”.<sup>84</sup>

Individuals in these communities who have had direct interaction with state officials describe feeling at acute risk.<sup>85</sup> Residents who resist growing coca may be accused of disloyalty. Several FARC dissident fronts, for example, reportedly provide incentives for farmers to plant coca, such as low-cost inputs or seeds. The enticement comes with an implicit threat. “If I want to stop growing coca, I have to leave the area entirely or face the consequences”, said one former cultivator.<sup>86</sup>

The moment of sale also appears to be highly risky for cultivators, particularly in areas where two or more groups are in dispute. As one former coca farmer put it: “Coca brought armed groups directly to my farm. At any given moment, we could be at risk”.<sup>87</sup> Farmers described episodes in which either their coca harvest or the money they were paid for it attracted vandals and thieves.<sup>88</sup> One group may attempt to steal

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<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Colombian senator, Green Party, November 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interview, female former coca grower, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Truth Commission official, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, religious official in Cauca, November 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, female former coca grower, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca farmer, Las Aulas Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2020.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society monitor, November 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca farmer, Vereda Las Americas Briceño, December 2020; Afro-Colombian social leader, Santander de Quilichao, February 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca farmer, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, farmers' association leader, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

a rival's product or retaliate against farmers who sell to other outfits.<sup>89</sup> Security officers working with the national substitution program have found that violence toward former cultivators, many of whom live alongside current growers, is also highest during the harvest, perhaps because of the presence of armed groups in the area to purchase the crops.<sup>90</sup>

Women and girls are especially vulnerable during the brief but frequent interactions with buyers. Female growers report cases of sexual violence and the danger that young girls could be seized from their homes.<sup>91</sup> After the coca is paid for, at least some male farmers spend their earnings on alcohol, and women say rates of domestic violence rise as a result.<sup>92</sup> In the words of one resident: "Coca ruptures social bonds. It makes some rich, the men drink the money, they fight with one another. It ruins the family. You go to meetings in these areas and you see that most of those who want out of coca are women".<sup>93</sup>

Risks to cultivators continue after an armed group purchases the coca or base paste. In the most overt cases, traffickers coerce farmers and rural residents into helping move the purchased product out of their area. The initial transport of purchased base paste, for example, might use a system of "mobile corridors" reliant on civilians. A security officer explained how this arrangement worked in northern Cauca:

The main roads are insecure for [armed groups] because of police controls. So, what they do is build networks to move goods and people from house to house, by land, canals, rivers. Their relationship with the people in these areas ranges from coercion and intimidation to collaboration.<sup>94</sup>

While the relationship between coca growers and armed factions is inherently unequal, farmers strongly resist government and military suggestions that they are members or allies of these groups.<sup>95</sup> This assertion, they say, stigmatises farmers and intensifies the risks that they face. Indeed, farmers often express more fear of the military than those running the coca trade. Growing the crop puts cultivators at the risk of eviction from their plots, arrest and jail time, or large fines.<sup>96</sup> Growers say the military broadly assumes they are civilian members of armed groups, leading to cases of maltreatment

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<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca farmer and youth leader, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, official, PNIS, November 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, female former coca farmer, Briceño, December 2020; civil society leader from Catatumbo, November 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, female former coca grower, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society official, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bogotá, October 2020.

<sup>95</sup> "Many [farmers' association members] grew up under the FARC and were part of the structure and remain so". Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>96</sup> The penalties for being caught growing coca are laid out in Article 32 of the "Ley 30 de 1986: Por la cual se adopta el Estatuto Nacional de Estupefacientes y se dictan otras disposiciones", 31 January 1986. Since the peace accord was signed, security forces have focused less on arresting farmers for growing coca. But some cultivators are still apprehended, including when they are involved in refining coca in base paste, which carries a heavier sentence linked to drug trafficking.

by security officers.<sup>97</sup> One farmer described the frustration of having two powerful enemies and no friends in the coca trade:

The military is always saying that we are guerrillas. How can we not feel afraid? When you say we are guerrillas, it means we are in the middle of crossfire between the guerrillas and the military. We are always accused from all sides.<sup>98</sup>

#### D. *Violence against Children in the Pandemic*

Just as coca provides cash for schooling and even university, education in turn offers a refuge for children of cultivating families, protecting adolescents in particular from the risks of interacting with armed groups. Many rural areas rely on boarding schools for protection. Children live, eat and study on campus, coming home every fifteen or 30 days for the weekend.<sup>99</sup> For young boys, the time away might prevent or delay recruitment into armed activity. For girls, it is also a way to protect themselves from gender-based violence.

Since COVID-19 arrived in Colombia in March 2020, however, this safe space has disappeared. As of February 2021, the vast majority of public education remained remote, leaving rural children in particular at a disadvantage.<sup>100</sup> Many children live in areas without internet connections; some even in places without phone service. Collecting assignments in person can mean walking for several hours. As a result, a number of cultivators and civil society activists are reporting two alarming trends. First, children are leaving school to grow coca or work as day labourers on larger plots. Secondly, armed groups are recruiting significantly more children. Children as young as ten are viewed as entering “the optimum age” to carry arms.<sup>101</sup> As one mother explained: “Many young people are returning to coca. My son is saying he will go to grow and work collecting coca leaf. What can I say to him if I have nothing to offer? Others are joining the armed groups because they pay them”.<sup>102</sup>

More than 80 children were reported forcibly recruited between 17 March and 30 September, three quarters of them in rural areas.<sup>103</sup> Officials and educational charities tracking recruitment say these numbers are likely a significant undercount.<sup>104</sup> Teachers, who usually have regular interactions with young people, are often the first to raise concerns if a child fails to come to school; this safeguard has evaporated without in-person instruction.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, representative, farmers’ association of Guayabero, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca grower, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>99</sup> There are roughly 550 public boarding schools in rural areas in Colombia, with a student population of 35,000. “Mejoras a internados escolares”, *El Tiempo*, 22 December 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Some public schools have gradually returned to part-time in-person classes since the end of 2020. Most, however, remain closed or are operating with limited capacity. Regulations vary by municipality based on the health situation.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, female social leader in Catatumbo, November 2020.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interview, female former coca cultivator, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>103</sup> “Reclutamiento forzado de menores en Colombia aumentó durante la pandemia”, Radio Nacional de Colombia, December 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, San José del Guaviare, December 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

In addition to the pandemic's impact, some research indicates that eradication and its economic impact on cultivators' families may also reduce school attendance and affect educational performance, increasing the risks of recruitment into armed groups.<sup>106</sup> Youth leaders in the areas that have faced past eradication efforts say their peers are not so much recruited as lured by the prospect of earning easy money and exercising local authority, particularly if their families lose their livelihoods.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Claudia Rodriguez, "The Effects of Aerial Spraying of Coca Crops on Child Labour, School Attendance and Educational Lag in Colombia, 2008-2012", *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (October 2020), pp. 84-117.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, youth leader, Las Aulas Briceño, December 2020.

## IV. Substitution Struggles

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Given the chance to abandon coca growing after the 2016 peace accord, the vast majority of coca farmers willingly agreed. At first, the substitution program PNIS signed community-level agreements, in which all residents of a given area committed to substitution. These accords included roughly 188,000 families, around 80 per cent of all farmers believed to be involved in growing.<sup>108</sup> As of December 2019, they had collectively eradicated roughly 40,000 hectares.<sup>109</sup>

### A. *Flawed Design and Implementation*

The PNIS approach's flaws became clear to the government and to farmers almost immediately. PNIS promised farmers initial monthly payments and subsistence agriculture support, followed by funding for a new livelihood project. The program also pledged community development plans to build roads and supply health services in rural areas. Yet the state capacity and resources to achieve these ambitious goals were lacking. Just a handful of officials worked in the program when it started, with few based outside Bogotá. The program's estimated cost was four trillion pesos, or \$1.14 billion – significantly more than the agricultural ministry's budget for all other rural programs.<sup>110</sup> Almost all those funds had to come from Colombia's national budget, as foreign donors have stayed away from the program, citing its daunting price tag and over-reliance on subsidies to individual farmers rather than development for communities. Persistent U.S. sanctions against the FARC also impede U.S. engagement with or aid to demobilised combatants, a number of whom were initially involved in conceiving and carrying out the program.<sup>111</sup>

Some coca growers who destroyed their own crops expecting to then receive support from the government were subsequently shut out of the program. When the Duque government came into office, it argued that financial constraints required capping participation in the program at 99,000 families, about half of those who had originally expressed interest.<sup>112</sup> Rather than honouring collective accords signed with entire

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<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Office of the Inspector General, November 2020. "Segundo Informe al Congreso sobre el estado de Avance de la Implementación del Acuerdo de Paz", Office of the Inspector General, September 2020, p. 311.

<sup>109</sup> "Informe No. 19: Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos PNIS", UNODC and Presidential Commission for Stabilisation and Consolidation, 12 November 2019.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior PNIS official, November 2020. "Presupuesto del MinAgricultura y sus entidades será de \$2,4 billones", *CONtextoganadero*, 4 December 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior PNIS official, November 2020; Bogotá-based diplomat, January 2021. Since 1997, the U.S. Department of State has designated the FARC a Foreign Terrorist Organization, forbidding any U.S. citizen or entity from legally providing material support. It was also classified as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224 in 2001. These designations have not been revoked, despite the group's demobilisation, and have prevented U.S. foreign assistance from being used for any programs including demobilised FARC combatants. "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, n.d.; "Executive Order 13224", U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, 23 September 2001.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior PNIS official, November 2020. Some 87,182 families party to collective accords were unable to enter the program. "Segundo Informe al Congreso sobre el estado de Avance de la Implementación del Acuerdo de Paz", op. cit., p. 288.

communities, the government sought individual agreements with farmers. But many of those excluded from the program's benefits had already pulled up their crops. For example, the government signed five collective accords in the Pacific region of Chocó between February 2017 and April 2018, and many families voluntarily uprooted their plants.<sup>113</sup> But no households were later included in the substitution program. Civil society groups say some communities have since refused interaction with all state agencies out of frustration.<sup>114</sup>

For those who did qualify for the program, the timelines for payments and support proved over-optimistic. Payments intended to arrive monthly for the first year rolled out slowly, with 92 per cent of families having received them only by the end of 2020. As of 1 December 2020, just 3 per cent of PNIS families had received seed money to support a new livelihood project, for which they were supposed to obtain up to \$2,900.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, payments to individuals and families are only part of the picture. Even if the government provides more support for new farming activities this year, their viability will depend on broader rural development. Producers will still face poor roads, fluctuating prices and inaccessible credit – problems that affect licit crops more than they do coca.

## **B. *Threats, Tensions and Backlash***

Both the program's design and its flawed implementation have endangered beneficiaries. Fearful of armed groups' presence, some farmers consulted local combatants before signing up. In southern Córdoba, the Gaitanista cartel told farmers they could join but later blackmailed them for a portion of state aid.<sup>116</sup> One person in Guaviare recounted an effort to secure support from FARC dissident faction Frente 1, which never agreed to demobilise:

At the beginning in 2017, the Commission of Farmers went and spoke to the commander and asked if they could join the program. The commander said: "You can do what you want", but also warned that it would be a waste of time; the government would not comply. ... Now that it has not worked out as expected, the dissidents are reminding people – didn't we tell you?

At first, Frente 1 did not threaten PNIS participants but sought a degree of control over the program. Several pamphlets circulated warning individuals, who had allegedly made false claims about growing coca in order to receive subsidies, to leave the area.<sup>117</sup> When the government's promised payments and support were delayed, some farmers who had signed up felt they had been handed back into the dissidents' arms. Allegedly in protest at the government's failure to honour its pledges to farmers, Frente 1

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<sup>113</sup> "Informe de Gestión PNIS 2019", Presidential Commission for Stabilisation and Consolidation, 31 December 2019, p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society official working on PNIS monitoring, November 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior PNIS official, November 2020.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, state ombudsman official, Montería, October 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

restricted access to areas that the UNODC needed to monitor in order to check compliance with the program.<sup>118</sup>

Nationwide, community leaders who advocated substitution as well as beneficiaries in the program have suffered increasing threats and violence.<sup>119</sup> According to one study, killings of social leaders in areas committed to substitution rose 546 per cent.<sup>120</sup> Communities attribute this violence partly to armed groups opposing substitution, but also to local tensions over the program's failure to honour its promises. A UN official told Crisis Group: "The lack of follow-up means that community leaders are carrying the entire political cost".<sup>121</sup> The deaths may also be due to a broader effort from new or expanding armed groups to consolidate their territorial control by eliminating outspoken civilian voices.<sup>122</sup> PNIS officials also report that third-party operators contracted to provide technical assistance and design livelihood projects have received threats, and at times have been unable to gain access to some communities.<sup>123</sup>

The substitution program's slow implementation has also exacerbated tensions between neighbours, particularly in areas where not all coca growers signed onto the initiative. Recipients fearful of being expelled from the program worry about neighbours' crops, especially in areas where there are no clear land titles to demarcate properties.<sup>124</sup>

### C. *The Risks of Returning to Coca*

The substitution program's effectiveness has varied significantly across regions. Substitution appears to work best in areas where armed groups have a limited presence and where a large part of the community has signed up. Local officials say mass participation has been vital to the success of PNIS's initial pilot program in Briceño, Antioquia, where entire communities abandoned coca to avoid conflict between neighbours.<sup>125</sup>

In other areas, PNIS beneficiaries say a number of growers are looking to return to coca out of economic necessity. As one participant in the program said: "If there is no change, [armed groups] could easily convince farmers to grow coca again". PNIS participants have reported annual income losses of roughly 50 per cent.<sup>126</sup> Families in the program say some of their neighbours have rented out patches of their land for others to grow coca or sent family members to work as day labourers on large planta-

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<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Roughly 65 per cent of reported threats are targeted at program beneficiaries, while 35 per cent are against leaders. Crisis Group telephone interview, PNIS official, November 2020.

<sup>120</sup> Lucas Marín Llanes, "Unintended Consequences of Alternative Development Programs: Evidence from Colombia's Illegal Crop Substitution", Universidad de los Andes, October 2020. Crisis Group Report, *Leaders Under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, op. cit.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, San José del Guaviare, December 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, international drug policy expert, November 2020.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local and senior PNIS officials, November 2020.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local PNIS official and former coca growers, San José del Guaviare, November and December 2020.

<sup>125</sup> Farmers in Briceño also felt secure agreeing to grow substitute crops because the peace process had removed the dominant armed group in the area, the FARC. Crisis Group interview, leader of victims' organisation, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Gutiérrez, "Tensiones y Dilemas de la Producción Cocalera", op. cit., p. 77.

tions.<sup>127</sup> Officials in the substitution program echo these concerns, arguing that replanting is significantly more prevalent than the UNODC figure of 0.2 per cent would suggest, as cultivators move their crops to different plots that are not subject to verification.<sup>128</sup>

To the extent the authorities believe that they discover program participants replanting, they are suspended or expelled from the program. As it seeks to increase forced eradication, the military says that it shares coordinates of detected coca plots with PNIS, where they are cross-checked.<sup>129</sup> In a bid to prevent anyone from double-dipping into government support programs, Bogotá has also suspended families who were discovered to have enrolled in past coca substitution programs, who receive other state benefits such as poverty assistance for the elderly, or whose registration details do not correspond with their official state ID.<sup>130</sup> If a PNIS beneficiary is hired as a salaried employee, they are also considered ineligible for further aid. By the end of 2019, around 11,000 families had been suspended from the program. That number fell to roughly 700 in early 2020, as PNIS either sought to resolve concerns or definitively remove participants.<sup>131</sup>

The government acknowledges many of the concerns but blames a lack of funding and the previous administration's allegedly poor program design, particularly its focus on paying families to change crops without altering the fundamentals of the local economy. Without abandoning the program, officials say their objective is to roll out new initiatives aimed at entire communities and assure farmers that their new crops will have guaranteed markets.<sup>132</sup> These new projects are not part of PNIS and will work "in tune with available resources", they say, largely depending on contributions from foreign donors.<sup>133</sup> So far, they have included agreements with specific communities aimed at substituting coca in exchange for infrastructure improvements and providing formal property deeds.<sup>134</sup>

While any efforts in this direction are likely to have limited impact without broader agricultural and rural reform, as outlined in the 2016 peace accord, the government's approach to rural areas is decidedly ambivalent.<sup>135</sup> Officials argue that it is logistically and financially impossible to create functioning markets for farm goods in coca-growing areas; instead, they advocate projects closer to town. "Instead of moving the state to

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<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca growers, Briceño and San José del Guaviare, November and December 2020.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior PNIS official, senior official in the Colombian Presidency, November 2020. "Segundo Informe al Congreso sobre el estado de Avance de la Implementación del Acuerdo de Paz", op. cit., p. 285.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, November 2020.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local government officials, civil society monitors, legal aid organisations, November and December 2020. "Acción de Tutela: Vulneración de los derechos fundamentales al debido proceso, el mínimo vital y la igualdad material de familias cocalleras vinculadas al Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito", Tribunal Superior del Distrito Judicial de Bogotá, 28 February 2020.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, official, Office of the Inspector General, November 2020.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, December 2020.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, December 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior PNIS official, November 2020.

<sup>135</sup> Point 1 of the 2016 peace accord envisions a "structural transformation of rural areas". "Final Agreement", op. cit.



the territory, we should bring people to where the state is”, as one senator from the governing party put it.<sup>136</sup>

The substitution program does envisage some improvements to rural infrastructure, though by mid-2020 these had begun in just eight municipalities.<sup>137</sup> In addition, a series of sixteen Territorially Focused Development Programs, also mandated in the accord, fund various local projects in former conflict zones. International donors have also stepped in to fund rural reform, including the World Bank’s \$100 million credit to help update Colombia’s land registry.<sup>138</sup> But these are still far from the state-led plan to redress rural inequality outlined in the 2016 peace accord, which included 36 legal reforms – 21 of which are still pending.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview, senator, Democratic Centre party, Bogotá, January 2020.

<sup>137</sup> These projects come under the umbrella of the Integral Municipal and Community Substitution and Alternative Development Plans. “Gobierno Nacional pone en marcha el Pisda, otra herramienta para combatir economías ilegales y cultivos ilícitos en los territorios”, Colombian Presidency, 31 July 2020.

<sup>138</sup> “¿Catastro multipropósito resolverá el problema de la tierra en Colombia?”, *Semana Rural*, 19 January 2021.

<sup>139</sup> “¿En qué va la paz a 2 años del gobierno Duque?”, Colombian Congress, August 2020.

## V. Coercive Strategies: Eradication, Fumigation and the Use of Force

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While the government sees substitution as one part of its goal of reducing coca, officials raise doubts as to whether farmers are able or willing to abandon coca voluntarily, largely because of its economic allure as well as the coercive role armed actors play in perpetuating its cultivation.<sup>140</sup> Although coca growers reject these arguments, authorities increasingly rely on coercive measures.

### A. Eradication

President Duque entered office in August 2018 vowing to crack down on the “supply chains that feed drug trafficking”, beginning with eradicating coca in the countryside.<sup>141</sup> Since an order from the Constitutional Court in 2017 had blocked aerial fumigation, his administration chose to rapidly expand mobile army and police eradication units, from just 32 in 2018 up to 200 in 2020.<sup>142</sup> These groups pull up crops and spray pesticides manually and at close range. In 2019, the Duque government set a goal of eradicating 80,000 hectares out of an estimated total coca crop of 154,500 hectares that year. In 2020 and 2021, the target rose to 130,000 hectares.<sup>143</sup> The defence ministry gives many of the country’s 31 regional military brigades a quota of hectares to eliminate.<sup>144</sup>

Together, these efforts mark the most significant escalation in manual eradication ever attempted in Colombia.<sup>145</sup> Ground forces attempting to meet these ambitious targets nevertheless continue to find huge obstacles in their path.<sup>146</sup> Colombian courts have ruled that eradication should not take place in areas that are a part of the substitution program, in protected areas such as national parks, or in indigenous reserves without prior consultation.<sup>147</sup> Other plots have been blocked off with anti-personnel mines laid by armed groups. As a result, security forces are eradicating in areas where they have not done so before. For example, in 2020 numerous communities that had signed collective crop substitution accords – but that were not allowed to

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<sup>140</sup> Farmers are “human shields” for armed groups and large-scale growers. Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, November 2020.

<sup>141</sup> “El Pacto por COLOMBIA / Discurso de Posesión del Presidente de la República, Iván Duque Márquez”, Colombian Presidency, 7 August 2018.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, international security source, November 2020. “Esto dice la jurisprudencia sobre la fumigación con glifosato”, *Ámbito Jurídico*, 13 September 2018.

<sup>143</sup> “Colombia cerrará 2020 con récords en erradicación de hoja de coca y confiscación de cocaína”, *Asuntos Legales*, 23 November 2020.

<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior military officers, October and November 2020.

<sup>145</sup> See Appendix C, based on “Erradicación”, Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia, 2020.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, October 2020.

<sup>147</sup> National parks are protected areas under Law 99 of 1993, which courts have subsequently used to prevent fumigation. For indigenous reserves, the Constitutional Court has mandated that fumigation requires prior consultation with and agreement from local communities; only in rare cases have communities allowed fumigation or eradication. Eradication and fumigation are permitted in forest reserves, protected by Law 2 of 1959. As of 2017, the Colombian government estimated that 79,000 hectares of coca were grown in protected areas. “ABC – Ruta Futuro: Política integral para enfrentar el Problema de las Drogas”, Colombian Presidency, 2018.

enter the program after the state capped enrolment – reported that they had suffered forced eradication.<sup>148</sup>

Manual eradication creates dangerous local dynamics because it brings the military and police into direct confrontation with coca growers. As one official put it: “Eradication puts the government on one side and the farmer and armed groups on the other side”.<sup>149</sup> For farmers in remote areas without access to public services, the military’s effort to uproot their livelihood is their sole experience of the state. According to one farmer: “The only investment that we have seen is the investment of the armed forces, who have only brought us pain and sadness. ... They have turned our communities into a war”.<sup>150</sup>

Farmers and military officers outline a number of strategies that coca growers adopt in response to eradication. Some growers, particularly in isolated areas, flee the land while soldiers are pulling out their plants, fearful of being arrested.<sup>151</sup> Others directly oppose eradication. In a growing number of instances, numbering over a thousand in 2020, farmers’ associations and neighbourhood councils confront or resist military incursions.<sup>152</sup> Security forces claim that these councils pay and transport farmers to join large-scale protests; those who do not join may have to pay a fine.<sup>153</sup> These sources say farmers have confronted the military with thrown acid, sniper rifles and landmines. Women and children also participate as “human shields”, according to these accounts. Citing this high level of defensive organisation, the military argues that armed groups are behind the resistance, in many cases coercing civilians into taking part:

Armed groups found a powerful weapon against eradication, which is the community, because the military will not fire on civilians. The community can approach the military and confront them without fear.<sup>154</sup>

Accounts from farmers’ associations tell a markedly different story about the role of coercion in their mobilisations. Community associations do organise defensive actions, they say, but act out of shared self-interest and a strong dislike for military operations.<sup>155</sup> Farmers argue that they would agree to eradication if they received help to establish another economic lifeline.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, officials, Office of the Inspector General, November 2020; congressional adviser working on coca, November 2020.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, MAPP-OEA, November 2020.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, farmers’ association, Guayaquero, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca growers, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, international security source, November 2020. Between the end of June and the end of September, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia reported fierce clashes in Nariño, Norte de Santander and the border zone between Meta and Guaviare. “Report of the Secretary-General”, 25 September 2020, p. 11.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, international security source, November 2020.

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, October 2020.

<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group interview, state ombudsman office, San José del Guaviare, December 2020.

<sup>156</sup> Jerson Ortiz, “En Putumayo no golpea tanto el virus del covid, como el de los armados”, *La Silla Vacía*, 28 October 2020.

Instead of engaging in direct clashes with the military and police, certain communities look to de-escalate.<sup>157</sup> They might agree to partial eradication, for instance, followed by the military's departure from the area.<sup>158</sup> Communities have in the past also asked for infrastructure or farming equipment in exchange for eradication.<sup>159</sup>

In general, however, manual eradication can trigger waves of violence. Direct clashes have left both farmers and soldiers wounded. In 2020, the defence ministry reported sixteen dead and more than 100 wounded during 1,862 confrontations.<sup>160</sup> Farmers can be permanently displaced from their fields and those whom an armed group or community council perceive as mere bystanders may face retaliation or forced displacement for their alleged ambivalence.<sup>161</sup> In cases where the population manages to expel the military from a territory, it is left all the more vulnerable to armed groups.<sup>162</sup> Tensions among farmers can also spike, particularly in areas with mixed coca and non-coca cultivation:

Eradication is putting neighbours in conflict with one another. If there is eradication, the farmer with coca will blame his neighbour for informing on him. Then that person will have to leave. The word *sapo* (informant) is dangerous here.<sup>163</sup>

The military and police have also faced enormous risks while eradicating, with the use of landmines a particular concern. The FARC, ELN and post-paramilitary groups plant mines around coca plots to deter military incursions. Roughly 40 members of the armed forces were wounded as a result in 2020.<sup>164</sup> Eradication teams are among the least popular units among soldiers, who reportedly desert at high rates.<sup>165</sup>

Meanwhile, soldiers and cultivators both express frustration that forced manual eradication has only an ephemeral effect on crops. The military rarely stays in rural areas to ensure that no replanting occurs. Since coca is quick to replant and harvest, eradication may take a plot out of service for a matter of no more than months, with

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<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interviews, regional representative of national coca growers' union, December 2020; expert on coca economy, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>158</sup> In February 2021, local media reported on alleged instances of fabricated eradication, in which the military reported removing coca from areas that were left wholly or partially untouched. In many such cases, the military reportedly agreed with communities not to eradicate in full so as to avoid conflict. "Denuncian falsos positivos en erradicación de cultivos ilícitos", *Noticias Caracol*, 1 February 2021.

<sup>159</sup> Crisis Group interview, local government official, Tarazá, Las Aulas Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>160</sup> "Denuncian falsos positivos en erradicación de cultivos ilícitos", op. cit. A civil society count found at least twelve farmers died during eradication operations between 2017 and July 2020. Pedro Arenas and Ricardo Vargas, "Forced Eradication of Crops for Illicit Use and Human Rights", *Viso Mutop*, 20 July 2020.

<sup>161</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, social leader in Catatumbo, November 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Communities in southern Cauca suffered a series of assassinations after expelling the military due to confrontations between two armed groups – the ELN and the FARC dissident Front Carlos Patiño. Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Bogotá, October 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group interview, local community organiser, Guayaberos, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>164</sup> "Situación Víctimas Minas Antipersonal en Colombia", Departamento Administrativo de la Presidencia de Colombia, 30 November 2020.

<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group interview, international security official, Bogotá, October 2019.

replanting rates estimated by national and UN offices at between 40 and 50 per cent.<sup>166</sup> One military estimate put the rate even higher, at 85 to 90 per cent for replanting after manual eradication, while humanitarian aid officials believe replanting is close to 70 per cent.<sup>167</sup>

## B. *Aerial Fumigation*

Duque's administration signalled in 2019 it would begin work to meet court-mandated conditions to restart spraying. Citing health and environmental impact studies, including from the World Health Organization, the Constitutional Court in its 2017 and 2018 rulings set strict limits on where and how spraying could take place, requiring stronger complaint and redress mechanisms.<sup>168</sup> As of January 2020, the government had completed some requirements for reinitiating fumigation, though a number of court challenges look set to delay spraying at least into mid-2021.<sup>169</sup>

The government argues that aerial fumigation can reach larger areas and more distant regions than manual eradication at a lower human cost. Some in the military support fumigation as a means of lessening the danger to soldiers.<sup>170</sup> The Trump administration's calls for spraying also weighed heavily on Bogotá's thinking.<sup>171</sup> Washington in 2018 explicitly pushed for fumigation and threatened to decertify Colombia as a country cooperating with counter-narcotic efforts – a move that could have cut off significant foreign aid.<sup>172</sup> Despite a slight softening in rhetoric advocating eradication since the Biden administration took office in January 2021, at least some U.S. officials continue to argue that fumigation is vital to reducing coca supply.<sup>173</sup> As one official

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<sup>166</sup> The UNODC has put replanting rates at 50 per cent after one year, while the justice ministry's estimate is 37 per cent. "La ONU ofrece auditar el proceso para reiniciar la aspersión aérea", *El Tiempo*, 21 June 2020; "Erradicación manual forzosa y aspersión aérea", Ministry of Justice, 2019.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior military official, February 2021; international aid official working on coca, November 2020.

<sup>168</sup> The six conditions are: establish independent regulation; include risk analysis of environmental and health impact in decisions to use fumigation; ensure that the local community, as well as the health ministry and the Inspector General's Office, are included in decisions to fumigate; conduct an independent study of health and environmental risks; allow for an independent complaint process; and base decisions to fumigate on these conclusions. "Sentencia T-236/17", Constitutional Court, 2017. In addition, the Court in 2020 ruled in favour of a civil society request to compel the police and the National Authority for Environmental Licences to hold public consultations prior to spraying. That audience took place on 19 and 20 December. "Glifosato: ¿qué viene ahora tras la audiencia pública sobre fumigación aérea?", *Semana Sostenible*, 22 December 2020.

<sup>169</sup> Sebastián Forero Rueda, "Decisión judicial retrasaría, de nuevo, objetivo del gobierno de reanudar fumigación con glifosato", *El Espectador*, 14 January 2021. Crisis Group interview, lawyer involved in challenges to aerial spraying, Cali, February 2021.

<sup>170</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>171</sup> "You're going to have to spray. If you don't spray, you're not going to get rid of them". "Remarks by President Trump and President Duque of Colombia Before Bilateral Meeting", press release, White House, 2 March 2020.

<sup>172</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act for FY2003 (H.R. 1646/P.L. 107-228) requires the U.S. president to designate and withhold aid from countries who have "failed demonstrably" to comply with counter-narcotics agreements. "Drug Certification/Designation Procedures for Illicit Narcotics Producing and Transit Countries", Congressional Research Service, 20 September 2005.

<sup>173</sup> "Vamos a conversar con el Gobierno para aumentar el apoyo a la paz", *El Tiempo*, 21 January 2021.

put it: “We want to try to get back to success – to where we were in 2012”, before spraying was paused.<sup>174</sup>

If aerial fumigation is reactivated, the impact on violence will likely mirror that seen in the past. Glyphosate use has a major effect on all agriculture – not just coca fields – and can raise tensions between neighbours.<sup>175</sup> The pesticide seeps into the soil and water supply.<sup>176</sup> Farmers who have lived through spraying describe how entire sections of land are damaged, even if only some in the area grow coca: “If my neighbour has coca, it affects me”.<sup>177</sup> Particularly in areas with plots of a hectare or less, past spraying has appeared largely indiscriminate.<sup>178</sup>

The impact on public health can also be alarming. Women can suffer spontaneous abortions; children get diarrhoea; and researchers have documented skin lesions and respiratory infections.<sup>179</sup> Over the long term, the World Health Organization considers glyphosate a probable carcinogen.<sup>180</sup>

These adverse effects, together with the devastating loss of food crops and livelihoods, can trigger a humanitarian crisis affecting many farmers not involved in coca. “A fumigation plane can eradicate maybe 1,000 hectares, but behind those hectares are 10,000 farmers and their families”, one cultivator said.<sup>181</sup> Fumigation has in the past caused displacement, with families finding it impossible to grow food crops in affected soil. Anecdotally, cultivators report that soil can take five or more years to recover after spraying.<sup>182</sup> A number of local mayors vocally oppose spraying for these reasons.<sup>183</sup> All but four of 104 mayors from municipalities that would be at risk of fumigation boycotted a 19 December public meeting hosted by the national environmental licencing agency that was intended to pave the way for renewed spraying.<sup>184</sup>

Civil society groups argue that fumigation also risks exacerbating deforestation.<sup>185</sup> Most coca in Colombia today sits on the “agricultural frontier” – at the boundary

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<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, November 2020.

<sup>175</sup> Fumigation has in the past exacerbated tensions with regional neighbors. In 2008, for example, Ecuador brought a case against Colombia to the International Court of Justice alleging environmental damage along its border from spraying. Ángela Meléndez, “Ecuador-Colombia settlement won’t end spraying”, Inter Press Service, 28 October 2013.

<sup>176</sup> Crisis Group interviews, farmers and civil society in Guaviare, Putumayo, Caquetá, Norte de Santander, November and December 2020.

<sup>177</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca cultivator, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interviews, coca farmers, San José del Guaviare and Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>179</sup> María Juliana Rubiano L., María Alejandra Vélez, David Restrepo and Beatriz Irene Ramos T., “¿Reanudar la fumigación aérea de cultivos ilícitos en Colombia? Un resumen de la literatura científica”, Centro de Estudios sobre Seguridad y Drogas, Universidad de los Andes, 2020.

<sup>180</sup> “Some Organophosphate Insecticides and Herbicides: IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans, Volume 112”, International Agency for Research on Cancer, World Health Organization, March 2015.

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca farmer, Vereda las Americas, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca farmers, San José de Guaviare and Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>183</sup> “Alcaldes del Pacífico Nariñense ratifican apoyo al acuerdo de paz y rechazan fumigación”, Blue Radio, 2 December 2020.

<sup>184</sup> Crisis Group correspondence, civil society monitor, December 2020.

<sup>185</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Catholic Church official, Cauca, November 2020; farmers’ association representative, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

between productive farmland and forested or protected zones.<sup>186</sup> At least some of those displaced due to fumigation are likely to seek new land, including in national parks. Residents of areas that have suffered fumigation in the past say that glyphosate sprayed adjacent to parks and forests destroyed these protected lands.<sup>187</sup>

Ironically, cultivators say fumigation at times has the effect of encouraging more farmers to grow coca. Farmers have developed artisanal methods to leech pesticide out of coca plants and save the roots of the crop. Coca, a resilient leaf, may recover better in fumigated soil than other crops: “Farmers have learned to fight back against fumigation. They cut the tops off the plant so it can regrow, or they put molasses on it. But what we cannot recover after fumigation is the land for other crops”.<sup>188</sup>

### C. *Combating Armed Groups*

At the same time as it pursued eradication, the Duque administration in 2018 announced five intensive military operations – the so-called Zonas Futuro, or Future Zones – to “pacify” high-conflict areas and lay the groundwork for their economic development.<sup>189</sup> According to a senior government official: “We have to combat armed groups because the last thing they want is to have a state presence. The Future Zones [aim] to accelerate development and link it with security”.<sup>190</sup>

Tying future economic development and state building to military operations against armed groups is a risky strategy, particularly in places where farmers depend on illegal crops. The government focus on capturing high-ranking members of armed groups and trafficking networks can often produce as much violence as it averts in rural areas. As one military officer explained:

When we kill or capture a commander, it generates a power vacuum. Someone new enters into this role, and they have to consolidate their control. They do this through purges. They purge internally – killing anyone perceived to have been close to the previous leader. They purge in the community to demonstrate authority and to show they are in charge. They also attempt to show strength against the military. Each operation generates more violence.<sup>191</sup>

The danger to civilians grows when the armed forces publicly thank them for intelligence leading to operations. “When they capture an [armed group] commander, the military will say that they are grateful for the information that the community gave them, which puts the community at grave risk. If one of our community leaders is

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<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, expert in agricultural industry, November 2020.

<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former coca growers, San José del Guaviare, November 2020.

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interview, council member, Guaviare, San José del Guaviare, November 2020. Analysis of past fumigation has found that every hectare of spraying reduces coca by just 0.022 to 0.03 hectares, meaning that to eradicate one hectare of coca, between 30 and 45 hectares would need to be sprayed. Daniel Mejía, Pascual Restrepo and Sandra V. Roza, “On the Effects of Enforcement on Illegal Markets: Evidence from a Quasi-experiment in Colombia”, working paper, 2015.

<sup>189</sup> “Zonas Futuro: Zonas Estratégicas de intervención Integral”, Colombian Presidency, 2018. The Zones are located in areas featuring one of the sixteen Territorially Focused Development Projects mandated by the 2016 peace accord.

<sup>190</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, senior official, Colombian Presidency, November 2020.

<sup>191</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military official, Bogotá, October 2020.

killed, we are clear that the first one responsible is the military, because they were stigmatising them as informants”.<sup>192</sup>

In light of these dilemmas, Bogotá should reconsider how it measures the success of military operations and reconfigure its strategy accordingly. The current approach is effective in increasing the numbers of local criminal leaders apprehended or killed – the government’s metrics of choice. But it does not serve to reduce levels of conflict that disproportionately affect civilians. Rather than focusing on apprehending individual criminals when it develops potential operations, military planners should also gauge the potential fallout for communities, the likelihood that police can be deployed to the area on a permanent basis and the risks of worsening violence as armed groups compete for control. Military pressure will remain essential to pushing back against armed groups. But without better planning to mitigate the harmful effects on communities, these operations risk entrenching mistrust of security forces.

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<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group interview, local civil society monitor from Guayaberos, San José de Guaviare, November 2020.



## VI. A Different Approach

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Colombia's approach to coca corrals farmers into a hostile stance toward the state. Eradication and supply-side reduction too easily alienate or criminalise the rural population, rather than seeking to bring them back into the fold of lawful activity and state protection. A policy aimed at reducing violence should centre on recasting this relationship. Despite intending the opposite, the current strategy complicates state building in the periphery. Security operations that pay far greater heed to the need to protect civilians and invigorate rural reforms would be more effective in weakening the illicit economy and the groups that feed off of it.

### A. *Fixing the Rural Economy*

Economic initiatives should start with an understanding that the vast majority of growers would choose to abandon coca if given viable alternatives – as they signalled when signing up for substitution after the peace accord. Farmers cannot be expected to uproot their crops in areas where it is clear that no other agricultural goods can sustain their livelihoods, while forced eradication in these places only leaves cultivators poorer and more wary of the state. Bogotá must link its efforts to curtail the drug economy with broader efforts to revitalise the rural economy. Long-term rural reforms can improve the competitiveness of licit agricultural products, enabling farmers to earn a reliable income in the same way that they have with coca. Building roads, expanding land-titling programs and widening credit access, as well as improving the distribution of farm products, are all essential.<sup>193</sup> Point 1 of Colombia's 2016 peace accord includes many of these proposals, but as of mid-2020 Colombia had completed just 4 per cent of the planned rural reforms.<sup>194</sup>

Despite the program's flaws, Bogotá should do what it can to save the PNIS substitution initiative, since the credibility of future efforts to support cultivators abandoning coca will depend on meeting existing pledges to farmers. Success will depend on changing not only the crop but also the overall market for what farmers produce. Bogotá should focus on commercialisation, for example by encouraging families to choose suitable products or helping construct direct agreements with buyers in advance. Where rural agriculture is simply not viable because of a paucity of transport links and storage infrastructure, substitution efforts could expand into other sectors. At the moment, the program only supports alternative livelihoods in farming and rearing animals, but not in commerce, tourism, small-scale energy generation or other potential rural industries.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, agricultural market expert, November 2020. See also Andrés García Trujillo, *Peace and Rural Development in Colombia* (London, 2020).

<sup>194</sup> "Tres años después de la firma del Acuerdo Final de Colombia: hacia la transformación territorial", Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, June 2020, p. 45.

<sup>195</sup> Bilateral donors and international NGOs are among those who have worked to expand labour opportunities outside agriculture. For example, USAID supports a program aimed at paying farmers to protect national parks, while eradicating coca inside these areas.

## **B. Security**

Colombia should distinguish between the cocaine business and the civilians who grow coca. Since 1994, the Constitutional Court has defined drug traffickers as those seeking profit from the industry; small-hold farmers and day labourers do not meet this definition.<sup>196</sup> According to one former grower, cultivators earn relatively little and “know about coca only to the point of sale – nothing about cocaine”.<sup>197</sup> Rather than seeking to antagonise and criminalise farmers, the goal should be to ensure they are no longer vulnerable to violence and can shift to other productive activities.

Crop eradication should be a last resort, and as the peace agreement declares, the government should offer coca growers viable alternatives first.<sup>198</sup> If eradication does proceed, the military and police should not be in the lead. Civilian eradicators with agricultural expertise should fill this role instead, with a preference for negotiated and gradual crop removal. Placing the military and police at the forefront of eradication undermines rural dwellers’ trust in the state’s role as a protector and guarantor of security. Security forces should be present only to ensure the safety of eradicators and coca farmers. While even this limited role could still stoke tensions, it would at least remove the military from direct involvement in destroying crops. Only when farmers see that the military is an ally in ensuring their safety – rather than a threat to their well-being – can the troubled relationship between these two sides improve.

Bogotá and its allies in Washington, meanwhile, should assess the high costs of eradication compared with its ineffective and even counterproductive long-term results. Pulling up coca can temporarily reduce the crop yields in Colombia but, given the high replanting rates, eradication would have to be relentless to achieve a lasting reduction. Non-stop crop destruction could entail perpetual conflict in certain rural areas. Fumigation, which would exacerbate this damage with a similarly ephemeral impact on crops, should be kept entirely off the table.

## **C. Women and Children**

Children and young people in coca-growing areas need support from the state. Rural dormitory schools are a unique resource for these children and should reopen as a top priority, despite the pandemic. Many dormitory facilities are located in climates that would permit classes to be held partly or entirely outside or with constant ventilation, potentially reducing the risk of COVID-19’s spread. Lodgings could also have near constant ventilation. Failure to reopen schools could exacerbate the recruitment of minors by armed groups. It may also push families to send children as day labourers to pick coca.

Bogotá should also reconsider its approach toward female coca cultivators, who are at high risk of violence and have few safety nets. The substitution program’s insist-

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<sup>196</sup> “Sentencia No. C-221/94”, Constitutional Court, 5 May 1994.

<sup>197</sup> Crisis Group interview, former coca grower, Briceño, December 2020.

<sup>198</sup> “In cases in which ... there are farmers who are unwilling to declare their decision to substitute crops used for illicit purposes or who, despite the absence of unforeseeable circumstances or force majeure, fail to honour commitments ... the Government will proceed, after informing and sharing the problem with the communities, to eradicate those crops manually”. “Final Agreement”, op. cit., Point 4.1.3.2.

ence on signing agreements with heads of household – usually men – has exacerbated domestic and gender-based violence. Economic research indicates that women are more likely to allocate resources toward spending on the family and savings, yet many have been cut out of government support.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, the government could consider supporting congressional proposals to end or significantly reduce penalties such as jail time for small-hold coca growers, or those caught with small amounts of base paste – particularly women heads of household who are the guardians of minors or elderly people.

#### D. *Colombia's Allies*

International pressure has shaped Colombia's approach to coca and will be central to charting an alternative policy. Allies in the U.S. and Europe should begin by acknowledging that uprooting or spraying coca may temporarily reduce supply, but it militates against other goals, including ending violent conflict, expanding state capacity in far-flung areas and reducing rural poverty.

The strong incentives Colombia faces today, above all from the U.S., to maintain and intensify eradication push the country's leaders in the wrong direction. In particular, the U.S. certification process for counter-narcotic cooperation prioritises the elimination of coca leaf and threatens to withhold aid from countries deemed not to be cooperating. The threat of U.S. decertification in 2018 was instrumental to the Duque administration's decision to expand manual eradication and reopen the debate over fumigation.<sup>200</sup> As a recent House Foreign Affairs Committee review of drug policy suggested, the certification process is outdated and counterproductive. Eliminating this punitive mechanism would set the stage for a fresh policy debate about how to align drug policy and post-conflict priorities in Colombia.

Separately, the Biden administration should consider rescinding FARC's status (and that of its successor group Comunes) as a terrorist organisation, while placing individual sanctions on those combatants and commanders who have returned to fighting and criminal activity. As it stands, the designation hinders Washington's ability to engage with some of the main coordination mechanisms of the 2016 accord, as well as to support coca substitution and other rural reform programs that include ex-combatants.

European allies, who play a key role in supporting the 2016 peace agreement, should review the effects of the government's approach to coca on consolidating peace. The experience of other successful crop substitution efforts – for example, a 30-year campaign that eliminated poppy from Thailand – could be used by the EU to help Colombia design a more effective model for rural transformation.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Joanne Yoong, Lila Rabinovich and Stephanie Diepeveen, "The Impact of Economic Resource Transfers to Women versus Men: A Systematic Review", EPPI-Centre, University of London, 2012.

<sup>200</sup> "Es eficaz la erradicación forzosa de cultivos de coca?", Centro de Estudios de Seguridad sobre las Drogas, 19 November 2019.

<sup>201</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, "What Colombia Can Learn from Thailand on Drug Policy", Brookings Institution, 4 May 2017.

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## **VII. Conclusion**

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Four decades of targeted destruction of coca crops have had no lasting effect on drug supply. This policy has, however, come at a high human cost. Even at the height of eradication and fumigation campaigns eight years ago, crop-growing areas grew smaller but never came close to disappearing from Colombia's countryside. With coca cultivation reaching new peaks in recent years and competition between armed groups also on the rise, the pressure from Bogotá and Washington to eradicate has returned. The assumption is that uprooting or poisoning coca plants will erase the sources of criminal greed and violence. In practice, however, official efforts to destroy the crops impoverish rural Colombians and entrench their resentment of a state whose most prominent manifestation is punitive. Caught between the authorities, traffickers and violent outfits, farmers – the most vulnerable link of the supply chain – suffer for any perceived non-compliance.

Although intended by the Colombian government and its U.S. allies as a means of reducing global drug supply and removing a main cause of rural insecurity, eradication of coca has become a fuel for violence. Judging from past experience, a return to aerial fumigation would make matters even worse, potentially igniting conflicts between neighbours and increasing the humanitarian toll of displacement in rural areas. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn, farmers may conclude that they have no option but to continue cultivating coca.

There is no easy way to reduce the economic incentives around growing a plant that can later be processed into a light, portable and very expensive illegal product for users in rich countries. But the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC guerrillas set forth an alternative route to weaning Colombia's countryside off the plant, resting on voluntary consent from coca farmers and including ambitious proposals to boost rural economies, connect them to urban markets, curb inequality and protect coca farmers while they switch to other crops. Despite the high financial cost of these measures, which must be rolled out over the course of years with the support of various governments, they remain the blueprint for getting farmers to switch from coca without plunging into economic ruin.

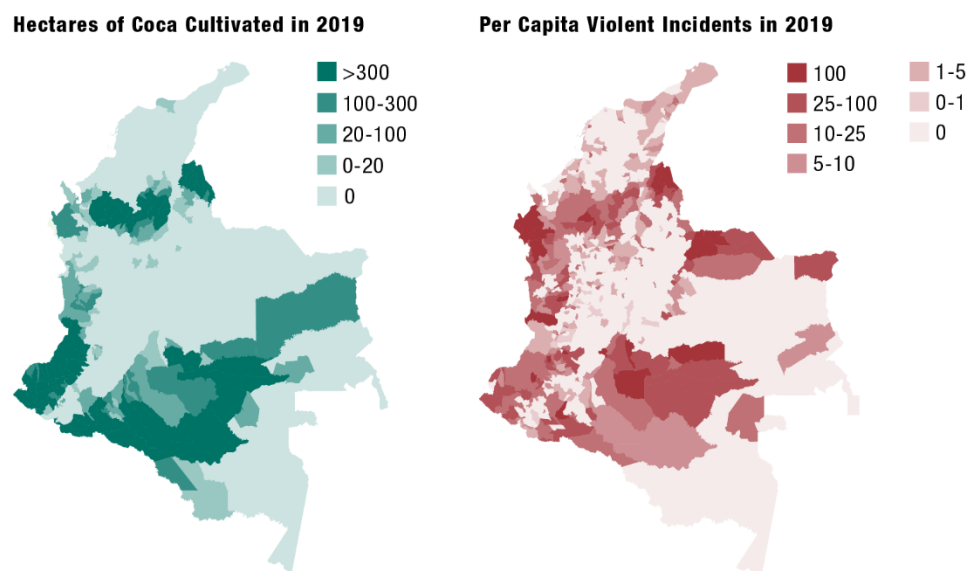
Force, threat and pesticide have grown ever more ineffective at the grassroots of the global cocaine supply chain. Focusing the punitive power of the state on one illicit crop is destined to founder until farmers are given a better option.

**Bogotá/New York/Washington/Brussels, 26 February 2021**

## Appendix A: Map of Colombia

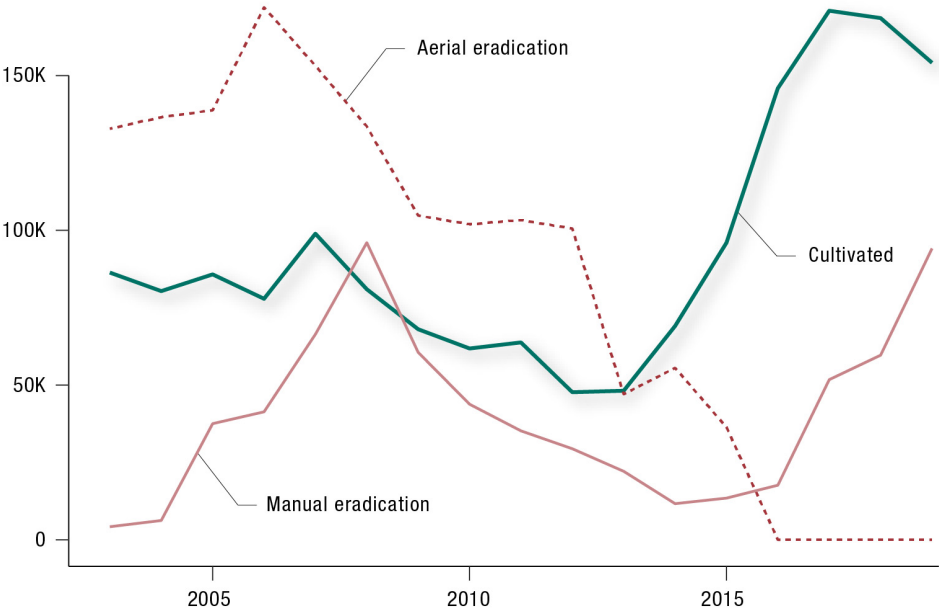


## Appendix B: Coca Cultivation and Violent Incidents, 2019



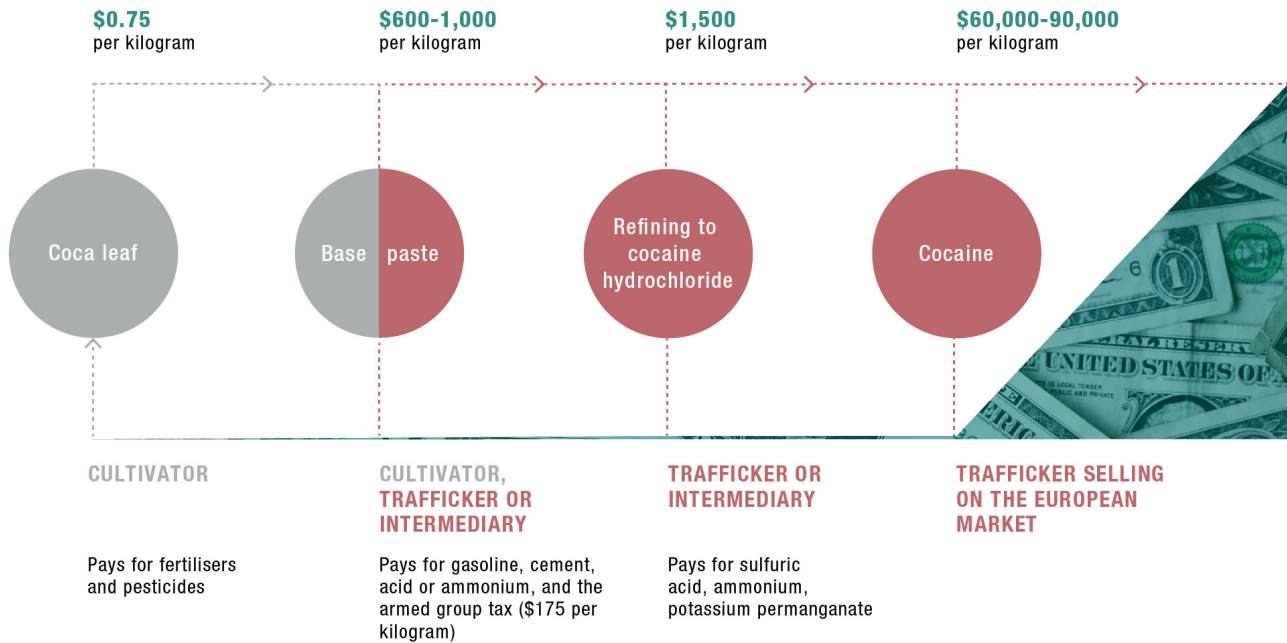
Source: (Left): Sistema de Información de Drogas de Colombia. (Right): United Nations. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G.

Appendix C: Hectares of Coca Cultivated and Eradicated, 2013-2019



Source: Sistema de Información de Drogas de Colombia. CRISIS GROUP / JE / CB-G.

## Appendix D: Colombia's Coca Supply Chain



Note: prices and values differ by region and are approximations from January 2021.  
Data source: Crisis Group research, UNODC, European Drug Report.  
CRISIS GROUP / CB-G.



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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

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