
Illegal crops in Colombia: when the solution is worse than the problem

Aerial spraying to control and eradicate illegal crops in Colombia are creating severe problems to rural communities and forests, similar to those provoked by the crops themselves and by the chemicals used in drug production.

Coca and poppy crops in Colombia have increased in forests despite the eradication policy that began to be applied against marihuana cultivation in 1978. In 1980 an operation to combat marihuana crops at Guajira and the aerial spraying with glyphosate resulted in the worst ecological and sanitary disaster ever experienced in the region.

Unlike marihuana, coca cultivation has existed for centuries. Coca has been used by indigenous communities in the Andes, the southern region and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. It was not until the mid 70s that the production of cocaine started, and nowadays Colombia is the first producer in the world. Poppy crops began in the 90s, and the area cultivated jumped from 700 hectares during the first years of the decade to 20,000 hectares in 1995. In Colombia, the destruction of tropical forests linked to cocaine production has been estimated in 240,000 hectares, while that of the Andean forest due to poppy crops to obtain heroine has reached between 70,000 and 100,000 hectares.

The environmental effects of such crops begin with the clearcutting and burning of primary forests, so that water sources are exhausted and biodiversity is affected. Pesticides, fertilizers and other chemicals used wantonly modify the physical and chemical status of soils, deteriorate water courses and cause negative effects on human life, as well as the decrease and impoverishment of traditional agricultural activities.

The policy implemented by the Colombian state and by the US government to combat drug production and trade has been based on the eradication of crops through massive herbicide spraying, the destruction of laboratories and landing strips and the persecution of drug traffickers. The Alternative Programme PLANTE, implemented by the government presided by Ernesto Samper, was aimed at generating alternatives to those offered to peasants by drug trafficking. This programme, even though not having achieved the expected results, has had at least better environmental and social effects. The constraints to its development were due to the lack of effective marketing for substitute legal crops, which could have made sustainability possible for rural families, and to the fact that it was only geared to small peasants.

Nevertheless, the eradication policy has been mainly focused on aerial spraying of herbicides. The Colombian Drugs Agency considers that up to now there is no evidence of damages caused to human beings or to crops other than coca and poppy by aerial spraying with glyphosate. But scientific assessments performed in the last years contradict this assumption and show that the impact of this kind of aerial spraying is very significant. Chemicals used together with glyphosate -such as phosphorates- poison different species of animals, beginning with insects, amphibians and fish.

Monsanto has promoted the use of Roundup -whose active ingredient is glyphosate- as

environmentally sound. However, most products containing this product are made or used with an additional substance to enable glyphosate to enter the plant tissues, which give the commercial product different toxicological characteristics to those of glyphosate itself. Being a broad-spectrum herbicide, glyphosate has got toxic effects on most plant species, included those useful to human beings.

In June 1999, the Yanacona indigenous people, that inhabit the region of the Macizo Colombiano in the Department of Cauca suffered from damages caused by spraying with glyphosate in plots that were not cultivated with poppy. In consequence, negotiations are now taking place between the government and the Yanacona to implement a so called Life Plan (Plan Vida). At that time, many children got sick affected by lung diseases, migraine, vomits, diarrhea, fever and conjunctivitis. Something alike happened at the Departments of Putumayo, Caquetá and Amazonas a few weeks ago, when banana, yuca and corn crops were destroyed by glyphosate aerial spraying. The Amazonas Regional Corporation had to suspend such operations. Pollution and damages that have affected rural and indigenous communities in those areas are apparent, as well as the high level of pollution in water courses and in the rainforest.

Eradication using herbicides provokes an immediate side effect as well: illegal crops move to areas deep inside the forest. Peasants are forced to enter the forest and clear new areas, so that destruction expands. The American Embassy itself admitted that even though in 1998 spraying against coca and poppy crops by the Colombian Police had reached a record figure, an increase of the cultivated area in other places provoked a rise of 18% in the total area cultivated in the country, which passed from 67,200 hectares to 79,500 hectares. This means that the solution was worse than the problem and the only visible result was the further destruction of forests.

Finally, according to the Plan Colombia -recently approved by the US Congress- the Colombian government will receive U\$S 1,700 million to fight drug traffic in order to eradicate illegal crops in a period of five years. This plan not only promotes the use of aerial spraying with chemicals, but also introduces the use of biological agents. A research is taking place to use the fungus *Fusarium oxysporum*, which is said would only affect coca plants. Nevertheless, national research centres have expressed many doubts in relation to that and other characteristics of this fungus, and have communicated their concern to the Ministry of the Environment and to the People's Attorney. There are evidences showing that this fungus can attack several plant species and that it has got the capacity to vary genetically once it is freed in the forest ecosystem, so that it can even affect soil microorganisms. In such case, the proposed solution would be even much worse than the problem, because it could unleash irreversible processes entailing devastating effects on people, their crops and native ecosystems.

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