

**POLICY COMMENTARY**

# Challenges of Organised Community Resistance in the Context of Illicit Economies and Drug War Policies: Insights from Colombia

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The voice and role of communities, particularly their capacity to organise and resist, has been understudied in the specialised literature on illicit crops and largely ignored in policy debates. Based on ongoing research in Colombia, this policy paper explores the capacity of communities to organise and resist – as a manifestation of cultural and social capital – in the context of illicit economies. The paper argues that in the context of weak states, the effectiveness of drug policies could be enhanced by drawing upon and investing in communities' organisational capacity and active local leadership to increase the non-monetary benefits of eradication and substitution. Acknowledging how resistance reflects the experiences of communities and responds to their different needs, the paper offers relevant insights for policy that can inform drug policy formulation in Colombia and similar contexts.

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**Keywords:** Resistance; coca cultivation; cultural and social capital; drug policy formulation

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## 1. Introduction

Colombia continues to be one of the most important coca producers in the world despite the ongoing fight against drugs funded mainly by the US government since the 1980s (Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016). In the last years, prominent voices have called for a redefinition of drug war policies.<sup>1</sup> These growing concerns about the ineffectiveness of prevailing drug policies and programmes and the recent peace accord with former rebel group FARC-EP have led some to believe that Colombia is facing a historical opportunity to revitalise the local debate and rethink policy for illicit crops in the context of rural development.

Recent indicators, however, cast a shadow over those expectations. According to UNODC's Annual Illicit Crop Monitoring System, acreage of coca crops in Colombia in 2016 reached its highest level since 2001 (UNODC 2017). For some, this recent peak is the consequence of a combined effect of the policy shift from forced aerial spraying to manual eradication and precarious local development alternatives. Others argue that the peak responds to the expectation of obtaining government subsidies and financial aid on an eventual substitution programme (see Zuleta 2017 for a discussion on these hypotheses). Equally plausible, the increase in coca crops may well just be the accumulated result of decades of ineffective drug policies. International pressure – mainly from the US government – has mounted, and Colombia is now returning to coercive measures to fight coca crops that the previous government had already abandoned due to their ineffectiveness, which makes opportunities for the reorientation of policy look dimmer.

In fact, academic literature suggests that repressive policies to eradicate illicit crops have very limited long-term effects (Ibanez & Martinsson 2013; Riley 1993; Zuleta 2017). Aerial spraying, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> See the reports of the London School of Economics Experts Group on the Economics of Drug Policy, 'Ending the Drug Wars' (2014) and 'After the Drug Wars' (2016) both published by LSE Ideas. See also the report of the Comisión Latinoamericana sobre Drogas y Democracia (Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy) 'Drogas y Democracia: hacia un cambio de paradigma', available at: [http://www.cicad.oas.org/fortalecimiento\\_institucional/planesNacionales/docs/Drogas%20y%20Democracia.%20Hacia%20un%20cambio%20de%20paradigma.pdf](http://www.cicad.oas.org/fortalecimiento_institucional/planesNacionales/docs/Drogas%20y%20Democracia.%20Hacia%20un%20cambio%20de%20paradigma.pdf).

does not reduce total coca production; instead, it diffuses production into surrounding territories displacing it to important ecosystems, including areas inhabited by ethnic minorities (Rincón-Ruiz & Kallis 2013; Rincón-Ruiz et al. 2016). Aerial spraying with glyphosate creates unintended consequences such as the so-called 'balloon effect': the expansion of coca crops frontiers from damaged sprayed land to new areas that overlap with forests and other fragile ecosystems (Mora 1996; Dávalos 2011). In a cyclic pattern, after crops settle in other areas they eventually return to the places formerly affected by fumigation (Rincón-Ruiz & Kallis 2013). Moreover, some literature reports that after some years of intense fumigation, total cultivated area increases as a result of growers' decision to expand their crops in order to diversify the risk of destruction (Moreno-Sánchez et al. 2003).

Literature also suggests that coca is widely spread in the peasant economy because it is more profitable than legal alternatives. Marginality and the impossibility of making a living out of legal activities is a strong predictor for coca cultivation (Ibáñez 2010). Coca crops are less intensive in areas with significant state presence, and they do not expand to developed regions (Dávalos 2011; Dion & Russler 2008). Some argue that coca crops are most intensive in regions of moderate poverty, where peasants can afford the initial shifting costs. Minimum access to local infrastructure significantly increases the chances for the settlement of illegal economies (Dion & Russler 2008). Importantly, historical concentration of illicit crops in certain municipalities is highly correlated with the presence of two or more illegal armed actors (Zuleta 2017). Moreover, in this context pressure from armed actors on local communities to force them into joining coca cultivation is very likely.

The voice and role of communities is often understudied in the specialised literature on illicit crops. Communities are generally understood as rational actors who respond to economic incentives and passively react to policy. Some communities, however, divert from this view. Not only do they take higher risks to gain voice and visibility but also they are willing to engage in social mobilisation that relies on their organisational capacity as a critical resource and asset (cf. Bebbington 1999; Goodwin & Jasper 2015; McCarthy & Zald 1977). Such mobilisation seems to serve two interrelated purposes. The first one is seeking *alternatives for economic development*. The other is deploying *community resistance* manifested in at least three different forms: resistance to criminalisation/forced eradication, penetration and expansion of crops. Mainly focused on the last two forms, this paper explores the role of organised community resistance in the context of illicit economies.

Contrary to pervasive policy assumptions, the effectiveness of the so-called war against coca production does not depend exclusively on monitored state enforcement or alternative development projects (Mansfield et al. 2016). In fact, some argue that – at least for the Colombian case – the effect of aerial spraying is small compared to the effect of social investment (Dávalos 2016). According to Dávalos (2016) an additional USD 5.55 per capita spending in social programmes (i.e. human capital and infrastructure) significantly prevents the appearance of a new hectare of coca. Acknowledging the importance of social investments to provide public goods and other social welfare enhancing mechanisms (Reyes 2014), this paper argues that in the context of weak states (where under-provision of public goods is common), the effectiveness of drug policies can be enhanced by drawing upon and investing in organised communities and active local leadership as a way to increase the accumulated social capital of communities. This, in turn, increases the non-monetary benefits of eradication and substitution and helps communities prevent (or reverse) the deterioration of social relations brought about by the transit to illegality.

Following this introduction, section two explores the forms and challenges of organised community resistance, particularly focusing on (a) the different forms in which resistance is manifested and (b) the risks communities face associated with exposure to violent threats and internal fragmentation. Section three discusses the role of community resistance for the design and implementation of policies for the eradication of illicit crops. Although this article draws on the exploratory phase of a research project conducted in Colombia, it seeks to provide valuable policy insights for similar contexts.

## 2. Organised community resistance

To understand the phenomenon of organised community resistance in the context of illicit economies and its implications for policy, it is important to clarify first the definition of community. For the purpose of this paper, communities are understood as the set of non-governmental actors who share a close network of relationships and identities, are directly related – symbolically and/or materially – with the territory where coca is produced and (a) directly participate in coca production and/or (b) are somehow affected by the presence of illicit crops and the policies to counteract them. When communities participate directly in production, they generally do so as small coca growers who exhibit three interrelated attributes: peasant economies,

high poverty rates and precarious access to public goods. These attributes pose significant challenges for policy design and implementation. For small coca growers, production decisions primarily obey subsistence needs.<sup>2</sup> Although their illegal activity should unequivocally differentiate growers from non-growers, in reality they coexist within permeable frontiers.<sup>3</sup> Since the benefits of illicit economies are not only shared by those who directly participate, many members of the community may also end up depending on yields from illicit activities. Consequently, social sanction against growers is often imperfect or non-existent.

In the case of Colombia, besides mestizo peasants two other groups are particularly relevant to understand the phenomenon of community resistance: Indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic minorities. A few decades ago, they were the focus of special institutional designs that granted them ownership and administrative autonomy over their collective territories in the form of *resguardos* and *consejos comunitarios*, respectively. A large part of those collective territories is located in frontier zones that coincide with the areas of historical influence and recent expansion of illicit crops. This inevitably overexposes these groups to the conflicts associated with illicit crops and drug trafficking.

## 2.1 Forms of resistance

Resistance manifests in at least three different forms: resistance to **criminalisation/eradication**, **penetration** and **expansion** of crops. Although analytically separable, in reality these forms are often juxtaposed. Also, no specific community or ethnic group exhibits one single form of resistance, which can mingle and change according to specific circumstances.

**Resistance to criminalisation/eradication** is most visibly illustrated in the case of 'cocalero protests' or mass mobilisations of small coca growers ('cocaleros') that are common in Colombia and other producing countries.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this type of protest is twofold: (a) resisting criminalisation of coca production and non-concerted eradication mechanisms (e.g. aerial spraying or forced manual eradication) and (b) eliciting responses from the state to the multiple needs of growers. Abandoning their illicit activities has been the offer from growers so that, in return, the state commits to improve their economic conditions. In Colombia, these protests emerged in the mid-1990s and have repeated sporadically ever since, which attests to the difficulty of the state to effectively respond to these demands.

This form of resistance is particularly complicated. While it responds to the legitimate interests of growers not to be indiscriminately treated as criminals and to avoid the collateral damages of eradication mechanisms, it is also a form of political pressure to obtain benefits from the state and achieve related claims (Ramírez 2001). Some have questioned the legitimacy of these mobilisations, claiming that they are co-opted by illegal armed groups interested in using them as a vehicle of violence and a strategy for social destabilisation. For others, these criticisms are examples of the stigmatisation that has historically affected social protest in Colombia. Both positions are substantiated. Responses from the state – which range from repressive measures to short-term negotiated agreements – depend on which of those positions predominate among policy makers. Subject to electoral cycles, budgetary constraints and geopolitical pressures, those responses lack strategic coherence and long-term sustainability. Decades of failed experiences, contradictory policies and the incapacity of the state to honour commitments have exacerbated mistrust and lack of confidence from communities, making subsequent programmes even harder to implement.

**Resistance to penetration** and **expansion** have been, in general, much less frequent (or less conspicuous). An obvious reason are the risks incurred by a community that confronts groups interested in the proliferation of crops in a territory. Efforts to resist the penetration of crops are rare for they require acting preventively on perceived risks. Resisting the expansion is more likely. The Afro-Colombian community of the Yurumanguí river basin, in the rural area of the municipality of Buenaventura in the Department of Valle, is a notable case. In 2004, the body that represents all communities of the river decided to take a stance against the penetration of coca crops in their territory. From this, an explicit mandate for all members

<sup>2</sup> Both the category of 'small' and the assumptions about the motivations of their production decisions are matters of technical and political debate. These difficulties were evidenced in the heated debate generated in Colombia by a bill proposal to grant legal benefits for small coca growers, as part of the legislative measures adopted by the government to tackle the increase of illicit crops. Source (in Spanish only): <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/choque-fiscal-y-presidente-por-beneficios-penales-a-cultivadores-de-coca/545093> Accessed 9 November 2017.

<sup>3</sup> These frontiers are harder to define when certain cultural aspects are considered. For many Andean indigenous communities, for instance, growing coca plants for medicinal and spiritual purposes is an ancestral activity that long predates the so-called 'war against drugs'.

<sup>4</sup> An illustrative comparison of the history and development of the 'cocalero' movements in Colombia and Bolivia is presented in Pinto (2004).

of the community ensued. A couple of years later, however, leaders were alerted by the presence of illicit crops in the territory. They called an extraordinary meeting and the decision was made to advance direct collective action to eradicate the crops before they expanded.

In 2007 the community organised a 'minga' (the traditional name given to collective mobilisation) that gathered around 250 people in order to eradicate manually 25 hectares of coca planted in the lower part of the river. The firmness of leaders and the volume of the mobilisation dissuaded owners of the crops and set a precedent that continues to influence the community to this day. As attested by another 'minga' – albeit a smaller one – set up in 2018 to eradicate new sprouts of coca in the territory, resistance to penetration remains as resolute today as it has been since the beginning. In fact, resistance became part and parcel of a set of political and environmental principles portrayed by the community as one of its defining characteristics (see those principles, as publicly advertised, in **Figure 1** below). Those principles have spread to other domains, helping communities resist the entrance of mechanised illegal mining. Notably, this trajectory of resistance has motivated leaders to focus on finding viable economic opportunities more eagerly, not least because of the explicit dissatisfaction expressed by some community members who still see coca crops as an economic alternative.<sup>5</sup>

A similar case occurred in the Inga indigenous community in the Department of Nariño. In the 1990s, poppy crops – a precursor to heroin – spread across their territory drastically altering their traditional productive practices and demographics. Despite significant income increases for poppy growers, the community began to suffer the violence of armed groups and what they identified as the breakdown of their cultural values. After assessing the social costs brought about by the crops, in 2003 the leaders began a concerted work with all the families in their *resguardo*. As a result, the community decided to eradicate all 1,500 hectares of poppy in the territory manually. Threats and assassination attempts ensued. According to leaders, direct and permanent protection from members of the community became necessary. At one point,



**Figure 1:** Banner in the Community Council of Yurumanguí setting out a clear injunction against coca and oil palm cultivation in the collective territory.

The banner reads as follows: 'Because we don't want: the government to spray, pollute, bomb, or deprive us of our living space; violence to increase and leave our land in the hands of multinationals; our black political-organisational project to be jeopardised, we the people of Yurumanguí say, united in one voice: NO TO COCA CROPS and NO TO OIL PALM MONOCULTURE in our collective territory.' Source: Authors.

<sup>5</sup> This case is further described (in Spanish only) in the following Colombian news site: <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/medio-ambiente/el-desarrollo-se-debe-medir-felicidad-interna-bruta-articulo-621346>. Accessed 3 November 2017.



as one leader put it, ‘we couldn’t walk alone anymore.’ In some cases, massive pressure from the community persuaded armed groups to free leaders that were held captive as a form of intensified threat. Supported by their community, leaders were able to eradicate the crops but also to commit to avoid their resurgence based on the restitution of traditional agricultural practices, the adoption of new economic activities (like coffee, beans and trout) and community strengthening. This commitment and the newly agreed rules of coexistence associated with it were explicitly included in the enactment of their ‘Integral Mandate of Life’.<sup>6</sup>

These cases are exceptional in that they rely heavily on the capacity of communities to exert and maintain collective action, an often laborious endeavour. Although any rigorous comparison between Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities must necessarily take into account the profound cultural differences between them, from the cases just described it is possible to abstract basic attributes of all three forms of resistance. Only resistance to penetration is preventive in nature for it is the only one that responds to the perceived risk of crops before they enter a territory. The other two, reactive in nature, emerge in response to the presence of crops and/or forced eradication mechanisms already in place. In all three forms, two different strategies may be advanced: *direct action* – part of the repertoire of revolutionary politics (Epstein 1991) – and *negotiation*. When crops are not yet present, strategies aim at educating the community about potential risks and, eventually, reinforcing previously agreed collective values. When crops are already present, direct action (e.g. de facto activities, collective manual eradication) and negotiation with growers – either internal or external to the community – are combined. **Figure 2** below summarises these attributes.

As means of political expression, all forms of resistance described in this section exhibit ideological elements that are intersected by categories of ethnicity, race and class. They also embrace direct action as a legitimate channel to express concerns. The cases of resistance to penetration and expansion, however, have two distinctive features. First, they show that when the state fails to respond adequately to the materialisation of demands (as has been the case with many illicit crops substitution programmes in Colombia), seeking viable economic alternatives for communities becomes a concomitant (and legitimising) component of resistance. Second, they show that these forms of resistance are particularly exposed to external threats and pressures and hence more vulnerable to internal fractures, as the next section will explain.

## 2.2 The challenges of resistance

The importance of community organisation cannot be emphasised enough. In the case of Yurumanguí, direct collective action to eradicate was preceded by a collectively concerted stance to reject illicit crops. Arriving to this stance and materialising it into direct action were only possible because of this community’s comparatively strong organisational capacity. In contrast, lacking this prior collective commitment the Inga community was not able to stop the penetration of poppy crops. It was only until they realised how damag-

Object of resistance	Nature	Antecedents / Triggers	Main strategy	
			<i>Direct action</i>	<i>Negotiation</i>
Eradication of crops	Reactive	Presence of eradication mechanisms (e.g. aerial spraying, forced manual eradication).	De facto activities (e.g. strikes, demonstrations, blockades).	
Penetration of crops	Preventive	Perceived risk of presence of crops.		Concerted education efforts.
Expansion of crops	Reactive	Incipient presence of crops / Presence of eradication mechanisms (e.g. aerial spraying, forced manual eradication).	Collective manual eradication.	Concerted persuasion efforts.

**Figure 2:** Forms of organised community resistance.

<sup>6</sup> This case is described in detail (in Spanish only) in the Colombian news website La Silla Vacía: <http://lasillavacia.com/historia/la-resistencia-de-los-ingas-la-amapola-45982> Accessed 3 November 2017.

ing the expansion of those crops had become that they decided to strengthen their organisational capacity and put it to work for social reconstruction.

Fully deploying the community's capacity to organise, however, comes at a price. While all three forms of resistance synthesised in **Figure 2** must incur the expected transaction costs associated with collective action, resistance to **penetration** and **expansion** incur additional costs. First, the natural antagonists to whom these two forms of resistance oppose – i.e. illegal actors interested in the proliferation of coca crops – pose higher risks for the communities for they willingly resort to violence as a coercive mechanism.<sup>7</sup> Second, negotiated strategies to talk members of the community into the need to either prevent the presence or stop the expansion of crops demand sustained costly efforts.

Those costs can hardly be overstated. Since leaders are the most visible members of the community, risks fall primarily on their shoulders, as recent events in Colombia dramatically show. Caught up in the struggle of illegal armed groups that dispute the control of the territories formerly occupied by the FARC-EP and their associated trafficking routes, community leaders have been subjected to intimidation, coercion and murder. According to the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia, from 1 January 2016 to 5 July 2017, 186 social and community leaders were killed and more than 500 threats were denounced.<sup>8</sup>

All this configures a paradoxical scenario for communities. Mobilising to resist depends on the level of organisational capacity; communities with a higher capacity to organise will likely be more apt to resist. But effectively deploying this capacity significantly increases the costs for the communities and, particularly, for its leaders. If those costs are too high, members of the community may feel increasingly discouraged to resist or even find incentives to oppose resistance outright (a form of endogenous 'counter-resistance'). This in turn creates internal fractures that debilitate community organisation.

There is more to this 'counter-resistance' than meets the eye. There are cases where members of the community who are willing to cultivate illicit crops overtly challenge leadership for promoting resistance. A strong leadership and the ability to enforce collective commitments – both of which are correlated with strong community organisation – explain why in some cases those challenges have been effectively kept at bay. However, when dissatisfaction remains it creates tensions within the community that, if neglected, may irreversibly deteriorate social capital and collective achievements. In short, the benefits of community organisation and effective leadership can be compromised when the costs of resistance rise too high. The next section examines how the phenomenon of community resistance can inform policy design and implementation.

### 3. Closing remarks: Insights for policy

The role of communities, particularly community organisations as manifested in different forms of resistance, has been largely overlooked in the literature of illicit economies, let alone policy design and implementation.<sup>9</sup> This is hardly surprising. Cases of resistance that expose communities to higher risks – as is the case of resistance to penetration and expansion of illicit crops – are not only rare but they tend to go unnoticed. When present, however, much can be learnt from them.

As argued by Bebbington (1999), rural communities have different types of assets at their disposal to design their livelihood strategies. Those assets include produced, human, natural, cultural and social capitals. Generally speaking, drug policy and related social interventions have prioritised investment in produced capital as a way to dissuade communities from growing illicit crops through economic incentives: the search for the 'silver bullet' or the single crop than can economically compete with illicit crops (Mansfield et al. 2016). The cases we have analysed in this paper show, however, that the spectre of community involvement in the problem of illicit crops – and its potential solutions – can be much wider than both literature and policy acknowledge.

The analysis presented in the previous sections offers key insights for policy. First, it shows that, as a multifaceted phenomenon, resistance comes in different flavours. It thus demands differentiated attention from policymakers beyond simplistic views whereby resistance is ignored, seen as a heroic effort or overtly repressed. If policy is to be more accurately targeted, acknowledging how resistance *reflects* the diverse experiences of communities with illicit crops and *responds* to the communities' different needs and social

<sup>7</sup> In the case of resistance to eradication, state actors may resort to violence as a way to tame protesters, as shown in the following press report: <http://www.contagioradio.com/9-personas-erradicacion-forzada-tumaco-articulo-47606/> Accessed 20 December 2017.

<sup>8</sup> [http://caracol.com.co/radio/2017/07/13/nacional/1499969113\\_783056.html](http://caracol.com.co/radio/2017/07/13/nacional/1499969113_783056.html) Accessed 13 November 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Not so in the literature of civil war and conflict where collective civil resistance – as a function of the quality of preexisting institutions – has been found to be central to explain the extent to which armed groups can expand their control and impose different forms of wartime social order (See Arjona 2016a, 2016b).

characteristics is a necessary condition. Second, the analysis illustrates that communities may not merely be passive receivers. Even in the face of adverse conditions of State abandonment – or, perhaps, *because* of such conditions – communities can effectively deploy their organisational capacity – as a manifestation of cultural and social capital – to resist penetration or expansion of illicit crops. Third, resistance comes at a price for it significantly increases the risks for the communities involved. This is why community resistance is more the exception than the norm. Only rarely are communities willing to incur the costs of resistance to compensate for the lack of support from the State. In fact, in the absence of effective efforts from the State to improve the sustainable development conditions and livelihood options for communities, transferring the costs of resistance to communities alone is not only counterproductive but also immoral.

Often ignored by policymakers, cultural and social capital help enhance efforts to prevent or reduce the influx of illicit economies. Investing in the organisational capacity of communities and the strength of local leadership is one way to reorient policy interventions. This should translate into more effective and tailored policies with expected spillovers for economic and productive opportunities. In the particular case of Colombia, including community organisation and resistance into policy debates implies reformulating alternative development programmes to respond better to local realities and expectations. Moreover, this investment may also stimulate the development of other forms of capital. This is the case for interventions such as Payment for Environmental Services (PES) that are currently thought of as part of the strategy to fight illicit crops.<sup>10</sup> While it is unlikely that PES alone can cover forgone earnings from illicit crops, they can help strengthen community organisation conditioned on environmental outcomes, thus contributing to enhance both social and natural capital assets. However, while giving voice to communities in the planning, implementation and evaluation of interventions such as PES is a necessary condition for those interventions to be more effective, a wider set of elements need to be put in place if long-term sustainable economic development is to be pursued. Community organisation can only partially compensate for the lack of investment in public goods and social services that have long ailed the region.

Communities do have an active role in anti-drug policy design and implementation. Their capacity to organise, manifested in different forms of resistance, reveals the importance of cultural and social capital as means to diversify the scope of policy interventions. In light of the opportunities that Colombia is facing and the proven ineffectiveness of conventional policy, there is ample room for promising change.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Centro de Estudios sobre Seguridad y Drogas CESED (Center for Studies on Security and Drugs) of the School of Economics at Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia for their support in carrying out the research project on which this policy paper is based.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>10</sup> The President of Colombia signed Decree 870 of 2017 whereby PES are formally recognised as an environmental conservation strategy.

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**How to cite this article:** Vélez, MA and Lobo, I. 2019. Challenges of Organised Community Resistance in the Context of Illicit Economies and Drug War Policies: Insights from Colombia. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 1(1), pp. 72–79. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.15>

**Submitted:** 17 December 2017    **Accepted:** 05 October 2018    **Published:** 14 January 2019

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