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Illicit crops substitution and rural prosperity in armed conflict areas: A conceptual proposal based on the *Working With People* model in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The methods of substituting illicit crops in conflict areas have been debated at an international level in various studies. However, not many studies have focused on the effects of substituting illicit crops with regards to the concept of rural prosperity. The paper presents a new methodological focus for substituting illicit crops in conflict areas, based on the "Working with People" (WWP) model. It incorporates expert knowledge relating to planning activities for substituting illicit crops, and links between prosperity and rural development. The study is based on a region of Colombia called La Macarena. The social base consists of 2503 families affected by the historic conflict involving illegal armed groups (FARC) for more than 50 years. We present the different phases and historic milestones that have occurred in relation to Alternative Development policies in Colombia (1964–2016). The empirical evidence presented indicates that WWP model provides process of social learning, and can be effective for substituting illicit crops, to alternative development projects by the public and private sectors. Establishing trust by working with people was the main condition, which facilitated the creation of prosperity and rural development with a sustainability vision.

1. Introduction

The problem of illicit crops has generated global interest for many years (Vargas, 2002), leading to many governments adopting anti-drug policies (Steven, 2000; Singer, 2008; Ritter, 2009; Gootenberg, 2012). As with other armed conflicts (ONU, 2013), the problem is closely linked to the desire to control the natural resource of land (Clemencia et al., 2005; FAO, 2012; Gómez and Soto, 2013). The problem is also related to the global context (Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016) and some authors (Gootenberg, 2014) refer to the so-called "balloon effect", so that the successes of a country's illicit crop policies can shift illicit production to other borders. In the face of these conflicts and in light of the need to improve land ownership governance, the FAO implements *the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security* (FAO, 2012).

Despite the increasing international recognition of the need to implement strategies and political measures against illicit crops with resources financed by governments, in many countries the results achieved have been scarce (DeBecka et al., 2009; Gootenberg, 2012). For over two decades the US has funded repressive forced coca eradication in Peru, Colombia and Bolivia to reduce the illegal cocaine trade. According to some research (Thoumi, 2002; Lupu, 2004; Peceny and Durnan, 2006; Gootenberg, 2012; Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016) these policies have never met their stated goals and have generated violence and poverty. Some research argues that the strengthening of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) during the 1990s was an unintended consequence of U.S. antidrug policies (Peceny and Durnan, 2006). As a result, Peru, Colombia and Bolivia suffered a criminalization of coca farmers and failed development initiatives (Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016). Although these actions have gone through various stages, they have always been characterized by centralized planning models, which have represented the dominant principles of economic development of the 1950s and 1960s (Etzioni, 1968; Lindblom, 1977). These models, along with science and techniques, appear to be infallible tools for the rational development of society based on a common cause which has become known as "modernity" (Cazorla et al., 2013; Philo, 1993). With this same rational focus, actions to solve the drug problem are considered to be inseparable from political power (Schumacher, 1976), based on engineering, scientific reason and a predominantly *top-down* approach (Bond and Hulme, 1999; Friedmann, 1987, 2005). In

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Peru and Colombia there has been a lack of meaningful consultation with peasants' organizations, poor sequencing of development assistance, a lack of long-term planning and the promotion of crops aimed at the export market, which have proven to be unsuitable as there were often no markets for them (Buxton 2015; UNODC 2005; Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016.). However, not all policies have been designed from a *top-down* approach and not all evaluations have been negative, however. The European Union's experience has been very positive in Bolivia; in 2014 the EU Ambassador to Bolivia explained, '*our efforts have been a success; you can also see the impact in the effective and sustained reduction of coca production*". The Organization of American States (OAS) cited Bolivia's coca policy (Bolivia's community coca control program) as an example of best practices for implementation and replication; initiatives that enrich dialogue and can inspire each country to understand how it can successfully manage the various challenges posed by drugs within its particular context and economic, political and social circumstances (Briones et al., 2013: 6).

At a geographic level, the drug problem started in the valleys and jungle areas of the Andean region (Dion and Russler, 2008; Moreno et al., 2003). Colombia, Peru and Bolivia are the countries with the largest production of coca and cultivated land, representing nearly 98 percent of the global crop. Despite efforts to eradicate and substitute illicit crops, Colombia continues to be the main producer of coca leaves in the world (UNODC, 2016), with approximately 80% of the world's cocaine hydrochloride trade coming from rural and indigenous production systems. In recent years cocaine production has increased, going from 442 t in 2015–646 tons in 2016 with approximately 96,000 ha of crops (UNODC, 2016). Other large producers of coca leaves in Latin America include Peru and Bolivia, with approximately 60,000 ha supplying the largest consumption markets in North America and Europe (Vargas, 2005).

The lack of institutional presence in parts of Colombia has led to many regions of the country being less developed. Not only have small farmer settlers taken advantage of this by occupying public lands, but also the illegal armed groups have for producing illicit crops. These armed groups were formed in the 1950s and since the 1970s they expanded and became stronger thanks to the income they received from the trade in illicit crops (Dion and Catherine, 2008). Guerillas and paramilitaries stripped all types of landowners of vast areas of land in Colombia as part of their activities to illegally control strategic areas (Balcázar and Rodríguez, 2013). In the affected areas this process created a breakdown of the social fabric, deterioration of ethical and moral values, family disintegration, lack of trust, land ownership conflicts, an increase in criminal activity and general violence in the rural communities (Bromley, 2008; Perfetti et al., 2013; Holmes et al., 2006).

Another problem caused by the production of illicit crops is environmental damage, as a result of felling and burning forests, and the subsequent depletion of water sources and destruction of biodiversity (Vargas, 2002; Dávalos et al., 2011). Deforestation and land use conflicts were frequent impacts in both conflict and post-conflict countries, and the infectiveness of land use planning were frequent drivers of environmental damages (Suarez et al., 2017). For each hectare of coca or opium poppies, between two and three hectares of forest is destroyed. It is estimated that in a 15-year period, more than 608,000 ha of tropical moist forest have been destroyed (UNODC, 2016). Furthermore, the production of illicit crops is very harmful due to the use of fertilizers, pesticides and chemical products whose residues spill into rivers and are absorbed by the soil (Housego, 2005). Studies (Etter et al., 2006; Armenteras et al., 2006) have also shown that illicit crops and drug trafficking directly cause deforestation due to the construction of infrastructure such as illegal runways and roads, as well indirectly through the privatization of public land to create "narco ranches". Therefore, coca crops continue to pose a threat for biological and cultural diversity in Colombia (UNODC, 2016), limiting the large potential for growth in agriculture and in the rural economy (Norton and Balcázar, 2003). But according to other research, the geography of place plays an important role in determining deforestation rates (Suarez et al., 2017). In opposition to the previous research, some studies in Bolivia (Bradley and Millington, 2008) provides weak support for the argument that low deforestation rates are typical of a coca regime and stronger support that after coca is abandoned, deforestation rates increase due to farmers would clear large areas of forest after abandoning coca to maintain household incomes. Internationally financed eradication campaigns force traffickers and growers to constantly relocate, making drug-related activities a principal cause of forest loss (Fjeldså et al., 2005).

These processes of expanding illicit crops in Colombia have coincided with the implementation of plans supported by the United States for eradicating coca and destroying the cartels who export out of Colombia (Coletta, 2005). Although these intervention methods have been applied in Colombia for many years, the problem still exists. At a national level, the Colombian Government has promoted various policies and programs for fighting the production of illicit crops and creating new legitimate employment and income opportunities for the rural communities (Moreno et al., 2003; Balcázar and Rodríguez, 2013). The Government's first programs for fighting illicit crops were "Campo en Acción" (1990–1994) and "Plante y 'Pa-lante' (1994–1998). Based on the experiences with the previous programs, there was a move towards a phase in which integrated strategies were adopted involving bilateral cooperation between the Governments of Colombia and the United States of America. This led to the implementation of "Plan Colombia" in 1999. This agreement emphasized the international responsibility for the fight against drugs (Veillette, 2005).

These programs from the Colombian Government were designed based on the "International Conventions on Narcotic Drugs", 1961, 1971 and 1988, and were known as Alternative Development (Mansfield, 1999; Balcázar, 2008). As a result, Alternative Development became a policy for fighting illicit crops, initially promoted and executed with international cooperation, especially through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programs. A particular emphasis is placed on economic aspects to promote the substitution of illicit crops for legitimate ones (Vargas, 2005) and its impact is primarily measured by the evolution of eradicated hectares (Moreno et al., 2003). Fig. 1 shows the change in cultivated land, according to the latest report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); although there has been a decline since 2001, the strategy has stalled in the last three years, and since 2013 the total area of illicit crops has increased to 96,084 ha by 2015. Whilst 'alternative development' approaches have changed over the years, however, with few exceptions, these programs have not offered poor farmers realistic alternatives to growing coca (Farthing and Kohl, 2005; Mansfield 2011; Buxton 2015; Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016).

Although this alternative development policy in Colombia has had significant changes of direction (Mansfield, 1999; Ortiz, 2003; Balcázar, 2008), all of these eradication programs have been promoted and managed by the National Government, in line with a classic model of so-called Social Reform (Friedmann, 1987). Its actions are characterized by their "bottom-up" approach, with a technical vision and actions designed by planners in the public sector and program directors (Ávila Cerón and De los Ríos-Carmenado, 2017). The results have generally

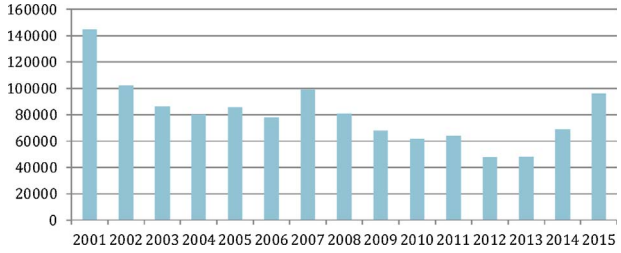

Fig. 1. Evolution of coca crops in Colombia (hectare/year).