

We are farther than ever from the announced goal of eradicating drugs.

Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, 2009

The hundreds of millions of dollars we spend on crop eradication has not had any damage on the Taliban...On the contrary, it has helped them recruit. This is the least effective program ever

Richard Holbrook, US Special Envoy to Afghanistan, 2009

Historically, the main focus of international drug control efforts has been on supply side measures aimed at reducing the supply, and therefore availability, of drugs on the streets in consumer countries. This has long been criticized as developed nations imposing their problems on poorer developing countries. Supply reduction has taken the form of counter-narcotics law enforcement as well as forced crop eradication programs, particularly in Latin America, the so-called Golden Triangle in East Asia, and the Golden Crescent in the Middle East. Only in recent years have measures aimed at reducing demand come more to the fore.

Most states in the world have now ratified the relevant international conventions requiring the eradication of certain plants such as cannabis, opium poppy and coca. For example, article 14, paragraph 2 of the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances states: "Each Party shall take appropriate measures to prevent illicit cultivation of and to eradicate plants containing narcotic or psychotropic substances, such as opium poppy, coca bush and cannabis plants, cultivated illicitly in its territory." Article 14, paragraph 2 also states: "The measures adopted shall respect fundamental human rights and shall take due account of traditional licit uses...as well as the protection of the environment." In practice, however, human rights, traditional uses, and the environment have not been given due consideration in crop eradication campaigns.

Crop Eradication Measures

Aerial Spraying

The only country where aerial fumigation currently takes place is Colombia. The consequences have been disastrous, damaging health, food crops and the environment, and contributing to the massive internal human displacement in the country. There are now more than four million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Colombia, most of them displaced due to drug fueled civil conflict and many others as a direct result of anti-narcotic efforts, including aerial fumigation campaigns targeting coca. However, as people displaced by fumigation or other counter-narcotics efforts are not, under domestic law, considered displaced, the government of Colombia considers there to be closer to three million IDPs. The true number displaced by counter-narcotic efforts is extremely difficult to ascertain, due in no small part to the fact that those so displaced are not entitled to social welfare, and so often do not inform the authorities of the true reason.

Health complaints associated with aerial spraying with glyphosate (or "Roundup") include respiratory problems, skin rashes, diarrhea, eye problems and miscarriages. The negative health implications of glyphosate are disputed, but it is becoming increasingly clear that it is a mix of glyphosate and the surfactants with which it is combined that may cause the health problems. In May 2007, Professor Paul Hunt, then **Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health** said, following a visit to Ecuador, "there exists credible and trustworthy evidence that aerial fumigation with glyphosate along the Colombia-Ecuador border damages the physical health" of

the local population and that the activity “jeopardise[d] the enjoyment of the right to health in Ecuador.”¹ The potential effect of aerial spraying on children was noted by the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**, which argued in 2006: “[W]hile acknowledging the State party’s legitimate priority to combat narcotics, is concerned about environmental health problems arising from the usage of the substance glyphosate in aerial fumigation campaigns against coca plantations (which form part of Plan Colombia), as these affect the health of vulnerable groups, including children.”² The former UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people has also criticized this practice.³

Though the consequences to human health are a matter of some debate, the negative impacts of fumigation on food crops and the rainforest are beyond dispute. While coca can easily grow back, some types of food crops rarely do. It is a common sight to see a re-growing coca field surrounded by dead trees.

Forced Manual Eradication

Manual eradication involves teams of eradicators often accompanied by police or military who pull coca bushes from the ground. In the case of poppy, the stalks of opium plants are chopped and fields ploughed with tractors. In Peru, Bolivia and Colombia, as well as in Afghanistan, this has not proven to be effective. Moreover, the manner in which the programs are implemented has also involved human rights abuses. In Colombia, for example, many farmers report theft of food, livestock and other provisions by the eradication teams. There have also been reports of sexual violence, plunder and houses burnt to the ground.⁴

In Northern Laos, forced eradication campaigns were followed by rice shortages necessitating emergency aid.⁵ UNODC research in Burma conducted in 2002 and 2003 in the Kokang Special Region I revealed that crop eradication and strict enforcement of opium bans resulted in a 50 percent decrease in school enrollment and the closure of two-thirds of pharmacies and medical practitioners.⁶

Alternative Development

Alternative development programs are certainly the least problematic of the crop reduction measures and when implemented properly, have resulted in positive outcomes. They refer to initiatives to replace illicit crops with legal alternatives and are promoted by various UN agencies, notably the UN Office on Drugs and crime (the UN does not support forced eradication).

However even well-intentioned alternative development strategies have had disastrous consequences. They are often accompanied by or preceded by forced eradication. The main problem has been the wrong sequencing: In Laos and Burma “opium bans” were enforced before viable alternative livelihoods were in place.⁷ Development assistance was woefully insufficient and really only started after the bans were in place. Furthermore, rubber was promoted as a cash crop in Laos and the Wa region of Burma/Myanmar. However, it can take years for trees to produce rubber and lacking in the start-up capital, the farmers simply couldn’t wait for the harvest.⁸ This led to a humanitarian crisis requiring emergency food assistance.⁹

There have been various efforts aimed at reducing supply in Afghanistan, by far the world’s leading opium-producing country. The Afghan government wisely planned to “target areas where alternative livelihoods exist.”¹⁰ However, eradication in action was very different from the plan. It was ultimately poor farmers who “lack political support, are unable to pay bribes, and cannot otherwise protect themselves”¹¹ that bore the brunt of the eradication campaign.¹² This occurred without there being sufficient alternatives in place for people to make a living.¹³

In the eastern province of Nangarhar, bans on cultivation, forced eradication, imprisonment of farmers and threats of NATO bombing campaigns did lead to a reported decrease in production but it also resulted in a 90 percent drop in incomes for many, internal displacement and migration to Pakistan.¹⁴

In Colombia, alternative development programs have been hindered by lack of infrastructure. As one NGO expert put it, “We are expecting them to produce tons of fruit and vegetables to transport on trucks they do not have, on roads that literally do not exist, to sell in globalized markets against which they cannot compete.”¹⁵ Licit crops have also been sprayed and destroyed.

It is well recognized that for alternative development programs to succeed they need to be properly sequenced (alternatives must be in place before the illicit crops are removed); accompanied by investment in infrastructure; and supported by trade justice initiatives. Perhaps most importantly, they must have the consent and co-operation of local farming communities. Assistance for alternative development programs should also not be made conditional on illicit crop reductions.

Eradication has not worked

In all of the aforementioned examples, there have been negative consequences including subsequent food insecurity, denial of livelihood, displacement and other human rights concerns. It is also becoming increasingly clear that these measures have proven ineffective in limiting the production of illicit crops at all.

Since 2000, for example, the US congress has spent over half a billion dollars fumigating some 1.1 million hectares of Colombian land. However, the State Department estimates that there was a 6.4 percent increase in coca cultivation from 2006-2007 and a 22.6 percent overall increase since Plan Colombia began in 2000. According to UNODC, the number of Colombian households involved in coca cultivation increased from 67,000 in 2006 to 80,000 in 2007.¹⁶

Forced eradication has similarly failed to reduce opium poppy in Afghanistan. In June 2009, the United States announced plans to shift its policy in Afghanistan, recognizing, it seems, this failure. “*Spraying the crops just penalizes the farmer and they grow crops somewhere else,*” said Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. “*The hundreds of millions of dollars we spend on crop eradication has not had any damage on the Taliban...On the contrary, it has helped them recruit. This is the least effective program ever.*”¹⁷

Alternative development programs have certainly seen some successes, but without the basic infrastructure and market protections needed for the various programs, they are often doomed to fail. As noted by Flaviano Avila, a farmer in Guaviare, Colombia, “Until there is investment to change the foundation of our economy, people will continue to plant and replant coca, cutting down forests and doing what it takes to grow the only product that is easy to bring to market, always has a buyer, and generates an income to provide for a family.”¹⁸

Furthermore, in Afghanistan, efforts to curb opium production had the opposite effect from what was intended. As noted above, eradication campaigns ended up focusing on smaller, vulnerable farmers without the political clout or financial wherewithal to protect themselves. Once they were removed, “large traffickers with substantial political control only consolidated their control over the drug industry.”¹⁹ Eradication has contributed to conflict, stimulated corruption, has mainly targeted the poorest of the poor, and has further contributed to the breakdown of the relationship between the population and the state.²⁰

The lack of effectiveness of crop eradication is also evident in continued (and in some case increased) availability of cocaine, cannabis and heroin on the streets, as well as falling prices.

The balloon effect

Another illustration of the ineffectiveness of crop eradication efforts is the so-called “balloon effect.” It is now well recognized and documented that when crops are eradicated in one area or region, the demand is met by those crops being grown elsewhere. This has been recognized as a side effect of drug control by the Executive Director of the UNODC.²¹ The balloon effect has been seen across borders (for example opium poppy being significantly reduced in Burma only for the shortfall to be made up in Afghanistan) and within nations (for example, in Colombia, where since 1999 production has spread from 12 to 23 provinces²²).

- 1 P Hunt, Oral Remarks to the Press, Friday 21 September 2007, Bogota, Colombia (21 September 2007), <http://www.hchr.org.co/documentoseinformes/documentos/relatoresespeciales/2007/ruedadeprensaingles.pdf>.
- 2 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations, Colombia, 8 June 2006, UN Doc No CRC/C/COL/CO/3 para 72.
- 3 Rodolfo Stavenhagen, following his mission to Colombia, UN Doc No E/CN.4/2005/88/Add.2, para 106 "Except where expressly requested by an indigenous community which has been fully apprised of the implications, no aerial spraying of illicit crops should take place near indigenous settlements or sources of provisions."
- 4 Witness for Peace and Association Minga, "Forced manual eradication: The wrong solution to the failed US counter-narcotics policy in Colombia," September 2008.
- 5 Martin Jelsma and Tom Kramer, "Withdrawal Symptoms, Changes in the Southeast Asian drugs market," Transnational Institute, August 2008, p 19.
- 6 Damon Barrett, Rick Lines, Rebecca Schleifer, Richard Elliot and Dave Bewley-Taylor, "Recalibrating the Regime: The Need for a Human Rights-Based Approach to International Drug Policy," The Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme, March 2008, Sec. 1:5.
- 7 Martin Jelsma and Tom Kramer, "Withdrawal Symptoms, Changes in the Southeast Asian drugs market," Transnational Institute, August 2008 p 2.
- 8 "Withdrawal symptoms," p 18.
- 9 "Withdrawal Symptoms," p 19.
- 10 Transnational Institute, "Missing Targets, Counterproductive drug control efforts in Afghanistan," Drug Policy Briefing N. 24, September 2004 page 4.
- 11 D. Buddenberg and W.A. Byrd, "Afghanistan's Drug Industry," UNODC/World Bank, November 2006 .
- 12 Transnational Institute, "Missing Targets, Counterproductive drug control efforts in Afghanistan," Drug Policy Briefing N. 24, September 2007, page 4.
- 13 Transnational Institute, "Missing Targets, Counterproductive drug control efforts in Afghanistan," Drug Policy Briefing N. 24, September 2007 page 5.
- 14 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan," Testimony before the U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 21 October 2009.
- 15 Sanho Tree, Director of the presentation at Bogota University, September 2009.
- 16 "An exercise in futility: Nine years of fumigation in Colombia," Witness for Peace, Fundacion Minga and Institute for Policy Studies, 2007 p. 1.
- 17 "US changes course on Afghan opium," *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 June 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0628/p99s01-duts.html>.
- 18 "An exercise in futility," p. 5.
- 19 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan," Testimony before the U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 21 October 2009.
- 20 Transnational Institute, "Missing Targets, Counterproductive drug control efforts in Afghanistan," Drug Policy Briefing N. 24, September 2007, page 4.
- 21 "Making Drug Control Fit for Purpose: Building on the UNGASS Decade," UN Doc No E/CN.7/2008/CRP.17, March 7, 2008.
- 22 "An exercise in futility," p. 2.