

## Briefing Paper

# Lessons Learned from Alternative Development in Latin America

*This paper is directed at the participants of the workshop “Development in a Drugs Environment – Beyond Alternative Development?”. It aims at providing an overview of experiences and lessons learned with Alternative Development (AD) in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. It is not a comprehensive analysis, but does raise certain key issues for Latin America drawn from the existing literature, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Thematic Evaluation (2005), GTZ publications and others.*

AD projects often fail to take sufficient account of the social, political, economic and cultural milieu and conditions in the country in question. Integrated solutions are needed to address the structural problems underlying the drug menace. Drug crop cultivation both in Latin America and in Asia usually takes place in regions that suffer from widespread poverty, poor accessibility and infrastructure, fragile ecological conditions, limited state presence and often violent conflict. In Latin America, the poorest strata of society are involved in drug crop cultivation, and counter-strategies therefore need to focus on reducing poverty and increasing access to markets; in South-East Asia, by contrast, ethnic and cultural minorities are the primary target group, and AD therefore needs to focus not only on economic alternatives, but also on improving the relationship between the target group on the one hand and the state and mainstream society on the other.

### I. Framework and Political Conditions

- *Political commitment should be extended to marginalised citizens. They need to be treated as fully fledged members of society and as candidates for development, not as criminals.*

AD in Latin America operates in *mestizo* peasant environments which are characterised by their specifically local outlook, a high illiteracy rate and a weak social structure. AD clients are often the victims of social exclusion due to rigid class lines and ethnicity. Migrants constitute a particularly vulnerable group, triggered by land shortages, drought, political violence and the illusory promise of colonisation schemes. Projects should therefore also seek to address impoverished groups in migration zones. One potential danger would be to fall into working only with the resource-favoured.

The cultivation and consumption of coca has traditional roots in Latin America, and coca leaves have been used for medical and ritual purposes for around 5,000 years. Therefore, it is often hard to persuade small farmers that coca is illegal, especially when they are faced with few viable market opportunities and have often experienced failed AD programmes, which has a dangerous multiplier effect as they may create mistrust among farmers towards future projects.

### II. Economic Aspects

- *The lack of sustainable markets is a major constraint in Latin America. To be successful, AD projects need to identify reliable markets and technologies for the production and promotion of alternative crops.*

The income issue is crucial, as coca cultivation is much more profitable than many alternative crops, for which there is a lack of international as well as local markets. Farmers earn far more by selling coca leaves than in other branches of agriculture, where they encounter a variety of constraints such as high production costs (pineapple), low market prices (palm cabbage, citrus fruit) and failed or lack of markets (rice, yute). Furthermore, with a worsening economic situation, it is dangerous to rely too much on alternative crops destined for the market at the expense of local food security.

Positive AD experiences have been made with integrated approaches that go beyond mere crop substitution. This includes improved organisation, financing, infrastructure, processing and marketing as well as social development. An oft-cited example relates to oil palm cultivation and processing. Off-farm opportunities, such as processing plants, have had an important multiplier effect with regard to increased employment opportunities. The economic success increased people’s voice in regional affairs as well as their political standing.

Farmers also cited improved security as an important contribution to their environment, which is characterised by violence and criminality that follow in the wake of traffickers. The value-added of AD projects thus goes beyond that of mere economic alternatives.

### III. Conflict and Drugs

- *Fostering state stability, state control and improving governance structures – which will require a costly, long-term political effort – is key to a sustainable reduction in coca crops.*

The presence of insurgent groups adds to the violence brought by traffickers. This aggravates fear and mistrust towards “outsiders” including the state, but this mistrust can also turn in on itself and may lead to social decomposition of the community. Many areas in Colombia are characterised by extremely unstable living and working conditions which may lead to internal displacement of people. The majority of coca-growing regions can be found in areas that are no longer under state control. This situation can only be solved by establishing government presence and a legal economy, by creating a strong civil society in order to restore the social fabric, and to engage in nation-building.

#### IV. Integration of Drug Control Objectives

- *Coordination should be improved among international as well as national stakeholders, and drug control objectives need to be integrated into national development plans.*

National drug control agencies may better respond to the special situation and manage donor resources. However, their mandate and capacity is often limited, as well as their coordination with line development agencies. It is therefore necessary to mainstream drug-related issues and place them in the hands of national line development agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Transport, Health, etc. Furthermore, major donors have different policies and priorities and, as a consequence, national governments may act inconsistently. In Peru, for example, DEVIDA, which depends on US funds and the conditions that this implies, disregarded an agreement with *cocalero* leaders.

#### V. Community Participation

- *Projects need to adapt to particular regions, accommodating local knowledge, skills and culture. Constructive dialogue with and empowerment of targeted communities is vital. Decentralisation and good governance are essential to make participatory approaches work and to address the demands of farmers’ movements.*

Well-organised farmers’ movements with social and political significance may promote radicalisation and confrontation, especially when faced with the slow pace of real structural economic improvement and parallel international pressure to reduce coca production. Their full participation and consensus in the selection of strategies and the negotiating of collective agreements is important. However, some projects have instead worked with individual farmers and bypassed local leaders, or failed to take into account local wishes and traditions, leading to a lack of confidence, especially when newly created associations did not yield the expected results or when promises were not kept and rules changed after the signing of agreements.

#### VI. AD in Relation to Law Enforcement

- *The specific conditions of illicit crop cultivation need to be explicitly addressed in order to be successful with regard to development aims as well as drug control, and international drug control policy should not be under pressure to produce fast results. AD needs to be carefully coordinated with law enforcement, as viable alternatives should exist prior to eradication.*

The strategy of many AD projects falls between a strategy focusing on the reduction of illicit crops and a development-led strategy. Often, unrealistic projects are promoted, characterised by haste and a lack of coordination between AD and law enforcement. Such projects undermine sound development and confidence and may lead to a militant rejection of their values. Particularly in the Andes, small farmers are disproportionately targeted by drug control measures compared to the widespread corruption that goes unpunished, including drug trafficking among the elites.

Eradication in cultivation zones with no other economic alternatives is not conducive to sustainable development. Spraying campaigns or manual eradication, coupled with poverty and violent activity by insurgent groups, have led to unrest, violence and displacement. This undermines development and long-term nation-building. Farmers have expressed considerable discontent at being left with economic uncertainty instead of the long-term strategies they had asked for. The wrong sequencing of AD and eradication may undermine development efforts and damage the building of trust. Often eradication has happened too early when viable alternative crops were not yet producing a harvest and thus could not generate an adequate income. Positive examples, by contrast, relate to farmers who were able to retain small plots of coca, and whose parallel income allowed them to make successfully the transition into palm production and to give up coca cultivation.

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