Colombia’s Program to Substitute Crops Used for Illegal Purposes: Its Impact on Security and Development

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between security and development in peacebuilding policies in post-accord Colombia. It focuses particularly on Colombia’s efforts to substitute crops used for illegal purposes with alternative forms of sustainable livelihood in order to curb what is perceived as one of the biggest threats to both security and development in the country. It argues that continued violence creates considerable obstacles for local peacebuilding actors trying to pursue security and development simultaneously. It significantly counteracts and undermines the successful outcomes of peacebuilding, turning security and development programmes against each other and blocking each other’s success.

Keywords

Peacebuilding; violence; drug substitution; Colombia; security-development nexus

Introduction

The policy community frames peacebuilding as the phase where the foundations for sustainable peace are laid. Dominant policy frameworks present security and development as core pillars of peacebuilding that are inextricably linked: low levels of security and development reinforce each other in a vicious cycle, while high levels influence each other positively. Hence, they call for integrated peacebuilding policies in which all peacebuilding actors, at the international, state and local level, cooperate and coordinate their activities on the ground to address both challenges in concert (World Bank 2011; DFID 2012; UN 2016). However, peacebuilding today is undertaken under conditions of increasing levels of violence, where peace accords often do not manage to include all armed actors or provide spaces for increasing violence (Steenkamp 2011).

This study argues that continued violence creates considerable obstacles for local peacebuilding actors trying to implement strategies that intend to pursue security and development in parallel. Violent peacebuilding environments can significantly counteract and undermine peacebuilding, turning security and development programmes against each other and blocking each other’s success, instead of forging cooperation between the local actors engaged in implementing them. The study contributes to the
understudied question how security and development objectives and activities are inter-connected when peacebuilding is conducted amidst continued violence. Focusing on local experiences, it looks at how security and development relate to each other in specific peacebuilding policies by analysing how communities who constitute the target group for these policies and the actors within those communities in charge of implementing them perceive the policies’ contributions to security and development levels within the local context.

The peacebuilding policy studied is Colombia’s new programme to substitute crops used for illegal purposes (PNIS), created to implement one of the five points of the Colombian peace agreement that ended five decades of protracted armed conflict in late 2016. The causes for Colombia’s long experience with social violence go back to a conflict over land ownership, uneven power distribution and state neglect of rural areas. Despite the peace accord between the government and the major guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC), the country continues to experience high levels of violence. Other armed actors, including guerrilla groups and criminal organizations that emerged in part a result of previous, somewhat unsuccessful disarmament and demobilization efforts and are fuelled by the production and trade with cocaine, continue to devastate parts of the country (FIP 2018a; Ferreira and Richmond 2021). Colombia’s efforts to substitute the cultivation of crops used for illegal purposes with alternative forms of sustainable livelihood are designed to curb the drug viewed to be threatening both security and development. The policy therefore constitutes a prime case to study the interconnection between development and security as core pillars of peacebuilding.

The following section conceptualizes security and violence and links the security-development nexus debate to the research on peacebuilding conducted in violent environments. The article then explains the methodology used and introduces its three focal areas. Thereafter the Colombian substitution programme and the challenges it faces during implementation are discussed, emphasizing the impact the country’s violent environment has on implementation. The article concludes with lessons learned from Colombia for peacebuilding amidst violence.

**Improving security and development in violent environments**

Security and development are contested concepts that have, in part as a result of the emergence of peacebuilding as a field of international engagement itself, undergone an evolutionary process during which they have become increasingly entangled and overlapping. Shifting their focus from state-centred, top-down to bottom-up approaches, the individual has taken centre stage in both concepts. Since the 1990s, a myriad of different understandings of security have considerably extended the concept of national security employed during the Cold War period which focused on the protection of a state from external threat. New concepts of security today include human security, where economic, health, personal, political, environmental, community and food security combine to add ‘freedom from want’ to the mere ‘freedom from fear’ (Gómez and Gasper 2013) and even embrace ontological security, a mental state derived from a sense of continuity, order and meaning (Rumelili 2015). Human development, on the other hand, grew out of global discussions on the links between economic growth and development.
Expanding beyond GDP measurements, income and wealth, human development aims to improve peoples’ lives rather than the national economy they live in. Human development includes social, economic and sustainable development, measuring indicators such as education, gender equality, the environment and human rights, rather than macro-economic indicators (UNDP 1994) and focuses on increasing individual opportunity and choices (Sen 2001).

As security and development are increasingly conceptually overlapping, the international community has united behind the idea of an inextricable nexus between security and development and that consensus continues even today (UN 2016). However, the kind of nexus(es) that exist between security and development as peacebuilding arenas has become the subject of much academic debate in recent years (Tschirgi, Lund, and Mancini 2010; Spear and Williams 2012). Stern and Öjendal (2010) argue that security and development can be reconfigured to fit particular stakeholders’ more specific agendas. Spear and Williams (2012) describe eight different links between them in global politics, ranging from interdependence to trade-off. Chandler (2007) criticizes that belief in a negatively reinforcing nexus provides a primacy of donor over recipient country interests, as wealthy nations cannot isolate themselves from the effects of poverty and therefore pursue development abroad in order to pursue security at home. Others warn that peacebuilding is becoming increasingly securitized, subordinating development objectives and activities to, and merging them with, security concerns; that the nexus legitimizes intervention by external actors in countries struggling with security and development challenges (Buur, Jensen, and Stepputat 2007; Duffield 2010; Newman 2010; Stilhoff-Sörensen and Söderbaum 2012).

Adding to these concerns, continued violence as a long-term condition to be reckoned with in post-accord environments contributes a new dimension and urgency to the discussion on security and development in peacebuilding. A violent environment requires the enlarged presence of state security actors and puts additional hurdles to the implementation of peacebuilding policies, particularly those related to rural development. A lack of development initiatives, in turn, fertilizes continued violence, particularly in terms of recruitment into illegally armed groups and illegal activities as the only way out of poverty. However, little research has actually looked into the ways violent environments affect the relationship between security and development when peacebuilding policies are implemented. Most studies focusing on the nexus in local peacebuilding underline that development and security policies emerge in isolation from each other, from practice and particularly from the actual needs on the ground and are enacted separately in local peacebuilding settings (Duffield 2001; Chandler 2007; Molier and Nieuwenhuys 2009; Jensen 2010; Nilsson and Taylor 2017). Few have so far attempted to link security and development with continued violence. Orjuela’s (2010) study on Sri Lanka found a trade-off in which security and development reinforce as much as undermine each other on the ground. Kühn (2010) argues that in Afghanistan the opium economy directly profits from violence and is the most solidly developing actor. Bouvier’s (2009) study of peace initiatives in Colombia underlines the difficulties to advance towards peace at the local level in societies permeated by violence. In his analysis of the merging of security and development in post-Apartheid South Africa’s war on gangs, Jensen (2010) concludes that their balance tipped increasingly towards security as violent gang wars continued.
This article contributes to this research. We argue that while the negative nexus seems to gain particular strength in violent peacebuilding environments, the latter might also prevent governments struggling with direct violence to incorporate into their peacebuilding strategies the shifts in meaning security and development have undergone. Furthermore, rather than strengthen cooperation, violent peacebuilding environments might intensify the trend to separate security and development arenas in peacebuilding. It has been argued elsewhere (Nilsson 2018) that Colombia represents an example of how post-accord environments with high levels of violence are particularly prone to favour exclusive, more short-term oriented security policies over inclusive, long-term development policies. An analysis of the Colombian state’s perception of the security-development nexus shows how continued violence pushes the security agenda ahead of the development agenda and continues to understand security as the narrow concept of national security. Analysing bottom-up how a specific post-accord peacebuilding policy designed to improve rural livelihoods in Colombia was perceived by local stakeholders living in violent environments, this article contributes to the understanding of how violence impacts the security-development level in local peacebuilding settings.

**Methodology**

Field research was conducted during the fall of 2017, mid-way through the policy’s two-year implementation period. It therefore does not offer an evaluation of the success of the entire policy but rather a reflection on obstacles it faced during its first year, as an example of peacebuilding policies that aim at improving security and development levels amid ongoing violence. While most of the data was collected during that research, a number of interviews with state authorities were conducted in Spring 2017 and 2018; a number of relevant government documents were consulted to triangulate data. Furthermore, contact was continued with many actors involved throughout 2018. Evaluations and reports from international and national actors in and outside Colombia that emerged during 2018, the second year of the policy, were consulted. This allowed to maintain an updated understanding of the development of the policy’s implementation right to the end of the estimated implementation period.

Local communities in three different regions (Meta, Cauca, Córdoba) were chosen due to a number of common characteristics: all three suffer from continued violence, constitute major coca production areas and were subject to the implementation of the policy to substitute crops used for illegal purposes. Thirty-nine individual and six group semi-structured interviews were conducted with two categories of informants: as actors in charge of the implementation of the drug substitution policy (interviews DS1-26), we identified and interviewed representatives of the Agency of Territorial Renovation (ART, after its Spanish initials) and the Direction of Substitution in the capital as well as in the different regions, FARC representatives, mayors of different villages, as well as members of the army and police forces at the state, regional and local level. We also included three interviews with international actors observing the implementation process from the United Nations and the Organization of American States. Emphasis was placed on actors involved in implementation on the ground. Interviews with actors at the national level, for example with representatives of the ART and the Direction of Substitution in Bogotá, were added to provide the context for understanding local conditions. A second category were
interviewees subject to or affected by the implementation of the policy. For this category (interviews C 1-19) we interviewed different actors at the local community level in all three localities, such as local indigenous authorities, social leaders, local experts and representatives of indigenous, peasant, coca grower, coffee producer and rubber producer associations, the latter two with regard to their history as coca growers, now providing an alternative to coca production. Selecting particular interviewees for each category was greatly facilitated by our local contact network. Included in this category are also six group interviews in smaller, more isolated villages. The villagers had been alerted to our coming by our local network and simply assembled and started a discussion that was facilitated rather than led by us and ended when discussions exhausted themselves and villagers began to walk away. This method proved to be useful in observing the local dynamics of creating consensus around specific statements, but left us without any control over the number of participants.

Through the interviews, we tried to capture different perceptions of actors in both categories concerning the programme’s impact on their daily security and development reality, as well as the perceived dilemmas and challenges of applying peacebuilding policies in violent environments. All interviews were conducted on-site, at locations selected by the interviewees. Even though not all interviewees explicitly requested anonymity, we un-identified all in order to protect the informants’ security, as their accounts were often of a sensitive nature. The sample size used for this study is obviously not sufficient to make claims on generalizations for larger parts of Colombia’s population. However, the diversity of the focus areas and interviewee categories allows for at least an initial understanding of the challenges posed by efforts to build peace amidst violence.

**The three focus areas: drug cultivation and violence**

The *Meta region* constitutes a prime focus of the programme to substitute crops used for illegal purposes outlined in point 4 of the peace agreement. The region was a major coca production area, particularly during the time it housed the FARC demilitarized zone during the previous peace negotiations that lasted from 1999 to 2002. Meta has always been FARC territory and family ties between local FARC units and the population were and still remain strong. After 2002, when the army returned, the region became a battlefield between guerrilla and state security actors allied with paramilitary forces. For a long time, coca production was the main economic activity and many were involved in the cultivation and further processing of coca leaves, including in the municipality of Vista Hermosa, the particular focus of this study together with the villages of Puerto Rico and Palestina. At times coca paste served as the local currency. The area around Vista Hermosa had also been the focus of a previous effort to replace coca production by alternative agricultural or livestock production, the *familias guardabosques* programmes (C1, DS13 and 14). In 2017, the region was the focus of forced eradication by the military despite the introduction of the PNIS programme, which has caused considerable and at times violent tensions with the local communities (FIP 2017; OCCDI/INDEPAZ 2017).

The *Cauca region*, home to several indigenous communities, was during many decades completely controlled by illegally armed groups (DS23 and 24). Apart from coca and marijuana plants, poppy flowers were farmed and the local population adjusted to price changes on the global market by simply switching the production back and forth from
one crop to another. As a consequence, large areas were deforested and locals recall that the air was saturated with the smell of chemicals. During the early years of the new millennium, crops sold as the base for the production of drugs had become the only livelihood in the area (C18). Today, it is estimated that one third of the population is still involved in the production of illegal drugs (C19). Jambaló, the particular focus for this investigation, is a mountain village governed since several decades by a collective indigenous government which consists of five authorities, called nejwex. It is linked with the Colombian state through several members of the indigenous community who exercise and represent state authority, such as the mayor and the police inspector (C16).

In the Córdoba region, a number of guerrilla and paramilitary groups have been fighting over control of its large agricultural areas for decades, as the region constitutes a critical corridor to Colombia’s pacific coast. Here, paramilitary groups first emerged in the 1980s to protect the conservative land owners, the political and economic elites in Colombia, against the left-wing guerrilla, in alliance with the state security actors (DS17, C15). Soon after traditional agriculture was in part replaced by the cultivation of crops for illicit drugs, which further fuelled the conflict. Southern Córdoba and the areas bordering the Paramillo national park have traditionally been neglected in terms of social investments, which facilitated crop cultivation for illegal drugs by large parts of the local communities (DS21). According to the UNODC’s most recent report, Córdoba has shown most growth in hectares of coca cultivated in its territory from 2016 to 2017 (SIMCI-UNODC 2018). Today, the municipality of Tierralta, one of the focus areas for this study, ranks highest in the risk and threat index in terms of coca plantations (UNODC 2017). In the Paramillo protected sanctuary mountain range in the Southern part of Córdoba, a strategic corridor for the drug trade, a wealth of illegally armed groups, including FARC, EPL, paramilitaries groups and criminal gangs such as the Paisas, the Rastrojos and the Urabeños, have traditionally fought for control (FIP, USAID and OIM 2014).

The PNIS³: legal alternative livelihoods for long-term development

Colombia’s programme to substitute crops used for illegal purposes (PNIS) is clearly conceived as a programme to improve human development. No security considerations are mentioned in the Presidential Decree that calls it into existence. It started in January 2017 as the practical outcome of point four of the peace agreement to put a definite end to the ‘problem of illicit drugs’, whose ‘socio-economic nature’ is explicitly acknowledged (Presidential Decree 896 2017, 3). The programme’s objective is ‘to generate material and immaterial conditions of wellbeing and buen vivir for the populations affected by the cultivation of drugs used for illicit purposes, particularly for impoverished peasant communities whose survival is currently based on those cultivations (ibid.). It focuses primarily on those 36 municipalities, a fifth of the total number of municipalities in Colombia, that are home to over half of the land on which coca leaves were cultivated for illegal purposes (FIP 2018a) and was designed as a two-year transitional, gradual and cooperative effort between the communities involved in the growth of those crops and the two actors who signed the peace agreement, the Colombian government and the FARC. In a first phase, representatives of both the government and the FARC engage in informing the local communities about the obligations and benefits of the programme and secure a
written agreement between all actors. Through this agreement, the communities commit themselves collectively to abandon all involvement in the cocaine production chain.

Learning from previous efforts to replace coca leave production by alternative livelihood,4 the current programme includes not only the peasants who cultivated the coca plants, but also those involved in the production steps of the coca paste, the base for cocaine, and in selling the paste to the drug cartels. For two years, all beneficiaries receive monthly financial subsidy payments and technical support to find appropriate alternative projects that provide them with a legal long-term livelihood. The single condition for this benefit is to eradicate all coca plantations immediately after the first subsidy payment. Those who refuse to be part of the programme or do not follow the call for voluntary eradication will inevitably be subject to forced eradication by the Colombian security actors. Both the armed forces as well as the police have special units charged with forced eradication (Republic of Colombia, Ruta Metodológica 2017; C1 and 3, DS11 and 14). Hence, even though the programme is presented as voluntary cooperation, the options open to community members who refuse to sign are rather limited.

Community reactions: the pitfalls of illegal livelihoods

When describing their experience with coca production, the entanglement of the security and development arenas in local perceptions becomes apparent. Most interviewees have agreed to return to legal crops, predominantly because they hope for a decrease in violence (C1, 3, 4, 7, 12 and 19). Coca was always associated not only with insecurity but also a lack of ownership: while peasants previously were the owners of their legally produced goods, they feel they never really owned the coca plantations or coca paste product they sold to the drug cartels, as they never had a choice to whom to sell and lived under permanent threat (C12; DS21). Furthermore, several interviewees argued that the shift from food to coca production resulted in a change in culture, where quick access to money led to a rise in the consumption of alcohol, wastefulness, greed, violence, anti-state sentiments and domestic and social fragmentation. They underlined that children were often tempted to forsake an education in favour of a career in the drug business (C1 and 5).

Interviewees in the indigenous community in the Cauca region emphasized that the cultivation of coca fractured social cohesion, endangered indigenous values of unity, harmony and buenvivir with nature through environmental destruction and therefore opposed the basic principles of their life development plan, their Plan de Vida. The cultivation of coca for illegal purposes is linked to violence and armed conflict, both of which the indigenous culture vehemently opposes (C16 and 18; DS24). Community members argue that they were never comfortable with this kind of cultivation and stress that they succeeded even in driving away five big drug processing laboratories that had entered the area around Jambaló in 2000, even though they paid a high price with violent retaliation. Indigenous authorities interviewed were eager to underline that they had already decided to disengage from the production chain of illegal drugs to follow the principles of their own life plan even before the governmental programme (C16). Thus, elements of both security and development were intertwined in all interviews, outlining elements of ontological security, food security, economic advancement, physical security concerns, and the right for options and opportunities.
The dilemmas of legal alternatives

However, all interviewees also expressed worries how this shift in economic activity might impact particularly their economic development levels, and those are shared by participants of the predecessor programme, familias guardabosques, which started in 2006 with the same objective of providing alternatives to cocaine. Participants in both programmes underline that there is a lack of diversity in production. In the Meta area, for example, most peasants have taken up the production of pineapple, a crop that initially seemed to show promising prospects and therefore was quickly adopted by many, which has led to an oversaturation of the pineapple market and consequently a fall in prices (DS25). A focus on coffee in Cauca has so far fared better, as the coffee market is much more extensive. However, coffee can only be harvested every thirteen months, while coca leaves were picked and sold three times a year (C17 and 19). Farmers who chose rubber as an alternative production project in the Córdoba region even have to wait seven years to collect their first harvest (C12). All participants agree that there is a lack of commercialization, infrastructure and market access, which prevents them from selling their products beyond the local area, a problem that has been voiced for many years by the participants of the familias guardabosques programme (C6-8, 15 and DS1).

Furthermore, decades of state neglect increase suspicions that the government might default on its benefit promises. The indigenous community in Jambaló, Cauca, had previously been promised a similar programme to replace illegal poppy plantations, but never received any benefits. Interviewees claim to have a list containing 1,200 agreements between the government and their indigenous community that were never followed up (C16 and DS23). All of the participants in a group interviewed in Puerto Chispas, an isolated community in the Vista Hermosa municipality in Meta, for example, signed the PNIS agreement but continue to depend on coca production until they receive assurance that the government will comply (C6). Added to this is the problem of land ownership. As the integral rural reform outlined in point one of the peace agreement is slow to take shape, lack of titles to their land keeps many peasants from advancing towards legal livelihoods. This is particularly apparent in communities bordering or extending into natural parks protected by special laws that do not allow for private ownership. Providing ample opportunity to hide the illegal crops, they are often used by the isolated peasant communities nearby to provide for the only livelihood available to them (C7 and 15).

Coca as a development agent

Furthermore, interviewees in all three regions agree that the legal alternatives do not allow for the standard of living coca production provided. Returns from coca production are on average five times higher than from alternative crops (DS19). Coca cultivation, in that sense, has been a development agent that allowed them to afford a certain lifestyle and constitutes even today an important part of the economy of some municipalities in rural Colombia, where the boundaries between the illegal and the legal have become blurred (C14). Coca prices remained relatively stable and it was bought by the drug cartels or the illegally armed groups directly from the peasants without the need to transport the goods to a marketplace (DS12 and 22). It was a common belief that ‘where coca ends, everyone will die of hunger’ (DS9).
Coca production constituted the only viable option and a possibility to actually advance in life and be able to provide one’s children with the education needed to no longer depend on an illegal livelihood (DS19). On the other hand, the alternative crops proposed by the PNIS, such as coffee, cacao, sugar cane, a number of fruits and vegetables, or rubber, have relatively low and unstable prices and limited opportunity to advance beyond the level of primary goods production (C3-5, 12, 13). While interviewees are willing to choose the legal option that provides prospects for long-term security, even when that means a lower income level, they demand that the state provide social investments, access to markets and infrastructure to guarantee developmental sustainability for these new livelihood alternatives. However, peasants and local civil servants alike suspect that the political elite has no real interest in developing the countryside by providing ways to industrialize those crops to add value to the primary product, for example in terms of sugar cane, coffee or rubber. The lack of help provided to organize and build cooperatives also supports that suspicion (DS19, 21; C3, 7, 10-12).

Implementation challenges

By the end of 2017, half-way through the process of executing the new PNIS programme, the time-consuming process of informing and engaging the communities to achieve collective agreements had been successfully concluded, but few benefits had been paid out yet and voluntary eradication had therefore come off to a slow start. In fact, more new coca plantation areas were reported since the PNIS started (FIP 2018a). Between 2013 and 2017, the total area used for the plantation of coca bushes had gone up from 43,000 ha to 171,000 ha (SIMCI-UNDOC 2018). This trend continued throughout 2018, the second and final year of the PNIS programme (FIP 2018b) as rural reform was delayed and peasants attempted to receive PNIS programme benefits by starting new coca plantations (C3).

This underlines the importance of addressing specific policies like substitution as part of a long-term development plan, in the Colombian case the integral rural reform. Implemented in isolation, and in a haste to get rid of the coca plantations as the perceived root of conflict in Colombia, the substitution programme fell prey to short-term planning (DS11). According to the Integrated System to Monitor Illicit Drug Cultivation (Sistema Integrado de Monitoreo de Cultivos Ilícitos, SIMCI), coca cultivation increased by 2 percent in Meta, 27 percent in Cauca, and staggering 79 percent in the Córdoba region, compared to the year 2016, before the onset of the substitution programme. This is confirmed by the most recent UN report and not only related to rising expectations from PNIS benefits, but also to an increasing domestic market, continued high cocaine prices on the global market and the elimination of coca fumigation as a strategy in 2015 (SIMCI/UNODC 2018).

The increase in coca cultivation is not the only challenge the programme is facing. There are structural problems as well. Outlined rather broadly in the peace agreement, programme parameters were essentially developed while first contacts with the communities were already being made, thereby ‘creating a methodology along the way’ (DS16; FIP 2018a). Long-term prospects were sidelined in favour of quick impact, short-term, result-oriented strategies (DS1 and 20). The ambitious programme also lacks the necessary financing. The 36 million Colombian pesos each family receives during the two years
of programme duration comes from the National Treasury with considerable international donor backing from Colombia’s Peace Fund. However, it does not reach the amount needed to accommodate all recipients, particularly if the programme expands beyond the initial two years (C1). Institutional coordination has been largely missing, particularly between the two civilian government agencies involved, the Direction for Substitution of Plantations Used for Illegal Purposes in charge of implementing the substitution programme following point 4 and the Agency for Territorial Renovation, in charge of implementing the rural reform following point 1 (DS10, 14 and 16).

**Colombia’s peacebuilding context: rising violence and the growth of armed actors**

Having to conduct the programme in the midst of ongoing violence makes the pronounced presence of security actors in all rural areas imperative and puts major obstacles to its success. Ever since the PNIS started to operate, levels of violence have gone up in the coca production areas. While the national homicide rate went down by a slight 0.6 percent, it rose in the rural areas and in 2017 reached 33 percent in the areas where substitution programmes were put into place, only to increase by another 48 percent in 2018 (FIP 2018b). Civilians working with the implementation of the PNIS are subject to abduction, forced displacement and threats. Until the end of 2018, 454 human rights defenders and social leaders and 85 former FARC-EP members have been murdered (UN 2018).

Disarmament and demobilization of the FARC has created growing dissident units and also spurred illegal economic activity, such as illegal mining and logging. Coca production areas have become a battleground for FARC dissidents, former paramilitary groups, the ELN and EPL guerrilla, as well as new criminal groups (Álvarez and Irina Cuesta 2017). Their presence puts major obstacles to peasants trying to work their land and continues to internally displace people. This situation forces the rural population to make an impossible choice: if they eradicate as part of the programme they face vengeance from those illegally armed groups; if they don’t eradicate they cannot receive the benefits of the programme and are subject to forced eradication by the military, thereby losing their livelihood (C8 and 9).

The illegally armed actors’ opposition to the drug cultivation substitution programme has been continuously growing. In the Meta region, for example, disgruntled FARC dissidents involved in the drug trade first tried to maintain control by convincing peasants in the more remote communities that the government would not comply with the promises of the programme (DS15, C1, 3 and 6). However, as the programme gained momentum, they started to threaten participating peasants, demanding a part of the benefit payments as a fee (El Colombiano 2018). In Córdoba, paramilitary groups continue to control areas they took from peasant communities during the many decades of the conflict, which prevents those peasants from joining the PNIS in the first place and condemns them to an unproductive life waiting for a land restitution that never seems to materialize (C7 and 8, DS19). Paramilitary presence in the Córdoba region seems permanent and influences every aspect of daily life. State actors who want to discuss PNIS implementation with local communities are often not even allowed to enter. Civilian state actors, and even military and police, have learned to accommodate to those illegal actors by avoiding getting in their way (DS19), which constitutes one of many examples of the side-by-side existence of the legal and the illegal in Colombia.
The FARC as a partner in implementing the substitution programme

The FARC plays a peculiar role in the substitution programme. The PNIS is the only programme created through the peace agreement where the group’s presence and active cooperation is needed, as the programme is implemented in areas formerly under FARC control. At the beginning of the PNIS, they used their now legal presence to promote anti-government discourses and propagate their own political programme (DS16). However, many communities rejected their presence, as for the first time since decades they saw the chance to free themselves of their (even un-armed) influence (FIP 2018a; C6). Others remember the negative impact of the FARC as an armed actor on the PNIS predecessor, the familias guardabosques programme, which ‘turned participating peasants into cannon fodder’ (C3 and 5). They now welcome the FARC in their role as an ally and important contributor to the current programme. Some also underline their gratitude to the FARC for having negotiated point 4 (and point 1) into the peace agreement (DS12; C4).

However, first accounts of foul play from FARC members in the PNIS are beginning to emerge. One interviewee intimately involved in the PNIS process made a number of accusations of corruption against the now disarmed group, among them that FARC members use the programme to continue their control over the rural areas; that they demand that participating peasants pay them a share of the programme’s benefit subsidies; that they, despite their public denial, keep in close contact with FARC dissident groups; and that they refuse to cooperate with the PNIS programme in areas crucial to maintaining the drug trade – in short, that the PNIS enables them to establish a legal shadow-government in their formerly controlled areas (DS16). That FARC groups already took ownership of the substitution programme when it was first discussed in the peace negotiations was confirmed by earlier studies. Apparently, FARC groups started to use their control over peasant communities to demand that they begin replacing coca cultivations by other crops even before the peace agreement was finalized. They even provided a short-list of alternative crops allowed, accompanied by a rather tight deadline to complete the transition (Idler, Garrido, and Mouly 2015).

Increasing security? The military’s forced eradication strategy

A large problem for the substitution programme is not produced by illegal groups but by legally armed actors: Colombia’s security forces. The Colombian military has always defined the cultivation of crops used for illegal purposes as the country’s number one security problem, responsible for fertilizing a continuous stream of criminal groups and activities and thus violent conflict. The peace agreement never replaced forced eradication, traditionally executed by either the military or specialized police units, with substitution, but instead placed both strategies side by side. The final goal, in terms of eliminating coca plantations, is that both voluntary substitution and forced eradication each reduce the amount of coca plantations by 50,000 hectares per year. The United States, the Colombian drug trade’s primary recipient state and the country’s most important donor for security programmes, continues to put considerable pressure on the Colombian government to generate quick results, particularly in terms of destroying existing coca plantations. Substitution is regarded as ineffective, slow, and counterproductive, a view shared with large segments of the political and economic elites in Colombia (DS1,
While the ministry of defence had no trouble reaching its 50,000-ha goal, the substitution programme only managed less than half, since its primary objective for the first year was to secure signed agreements and set the programme in motion (FIP 2018a). Security sector interviewees even admitted that they received instructions to ‘see to the failure of substitution’ as a strategy (DS17). Forced eradication is presented as a quick-impact strategy and precondition for development, since it is credited with reducing coca plantations between 2000 and 2013 by 70 percent (Ministry of Defence 2015). Continued forced eradication has caused considerable tensions with local communities. In the first eight months of 2017, twenty-four civilians had lost their lives to forced eradication (FIP 2018a). Furthermore, these contradictory government strategies also deepen the mistrust of the communities towards the level of commitment from the government side and result in a return to coca production, thereby strengthening the power of the illegally armed groups that feed off the drug trade (C3, DS7, 14 and 17). At times communities directly challenge security actors that come to eradicate. The villagers of Puerto Rico in the Meta region, for example, captured and disarmed a soldier in the spring of 2017 and only released him when the personaño arrived; similar incidents were shared via social media (DS4, 8, 12, 13). Among our three regional foci, only the Cauca region’s village of Jambaló has been spared. According to the Colombian constitution, security actors need to consult the indigenous authorities before entering the territory, including for forced eradication, which has therefore so far been successfully averted by the latter (DS10).

**Tensions between security and development actors**

Police and military actors blame these tensions on a lack of information. They argue that the chain of command for both police and military starts and ends with the ministry of defence and claim that their civilian counterparts do not properly inform them about regional progress of the PNIS (DS4 and 5). ART officials at the headquarters in Bogotá as well as representatives of the Direction of Substitution in the communities countered this claim by stressing that the security actors are informed in weekly meetings and written progress reports (C1; DS11). However, development actors in peacebuilding have for too long been standing in the shadow of security actors. For decades, the Colombian government’s security-first approach delegated development initiatives to second place. The peace process finally allowed for a gradual shift in focus from territorial recuperation through military action to territorial peace where communities no longer are just objects in a war game but play an important role in community development. Thus, development actors feel that they no longer have to subject themselves to the idea that security comes first and will be followed by development, but argue that long-term development strategies undermine the roots of insecurity (DS26).

Part of the problem is also the security actors’ general mistrust towards information from civilian actors. This mistrust extends to the peasant population, whom they suspect of cooperating with drug traffickers and not really being committed to the PNIS process (DS8). One military official complained about explosives that FARC dissident groups attached to the roots of coca bushes to prevent eradication and suspected the peasants of knowing, but not revealing, their precise location (DS7). Security actors also seem to lack understanding of how the PNIS works in its different phases. Most security actors see it as a softer strategy, but not a viable alternative, to eliminate the drug traffic
They are reinforced in that view by their central command, the Ministry of Defence, who defines the drug trade and its connection to international criminal networks as a military target, as well as conservative and political elites who emphasize the security aspect of the coca cultivation and trade (Ministry of Defence 2015).

**Top-down obstacles for implementation**

The governmental shift to the right following elections in October 2018 puts additional strains on the substitution programme. The peace agreement itself, and with it all decisions concerning forced eradication and substitution, have to remain untouched during the next three governmental periods. In practice, their implementation can well be blocked (see Colombian Constitutional Court decision 51 2017). A constitutional court ruling re-opened the door for the fumigation of coca plantations, abandoned in October 2015, under specific conditions (Constitutional Court decisions T-236/ 2017). Apparently, those conditions were fulfilled in the Putumayo region in September of 2018, where the government claims that the PNIS was prohibited from taking roots by strong FARC dissident group presence and the military was unable to penetrate to perform forced eradication (DS2), even though Putumayo has been the region most successful in voluntary eradication (FIP 2018b). In fact, voluntary substitution has led to a low 0.6 percent replanting rate, as opposed to 35 percent in areas where forced eradication programmes have taken place (Puerta and Chaparro 2019).

Further, the government does not seem committed to supply the funds needed to guarantee the successful conclusion of the PNIS and seems to emphasize quick results, thus forced eradication. It has called for a comparative evaluation of the three strategies, fumigation, forced eradication and voluntary substitution, to counter the drug cultivation problem (Puerta and Chaparro 2019). Overall, the new government’s policies seem to further security-first policies subordinating development objectives to security strategies, characterize the production of illegal drugs as a security rather than a development problem and argue that substitution is insufficient if it is unable to prevent the current increase in coca production (Presidency 2018; Ministry of Defence 2019).

**Conclusions: lessons learned for peacebuilding amidst violence**

A number of key lessons for peacebuilding undertaken amidst ongoing violence emerge from Colombia’s attempts to substitute the cultivation of crops used for illicit purposes by alternative livelihoods. Ongoing violence has a direct and significant negative impact on the success of peacebuilding endeavours. So far, the PNIS has produced more, not less violence (and coca plantations), as it was opposed violently by criminal groups. Rather, continued violence enabled and strengthened existing security policies, such as forced eradication, to procure short-term security results which counteracted the long-term development goals set for the substitution policy. The current Colombian government’s security-first policies enhance forced eradication and fumigation and re-establish the primacy of security over development initiatives. The communities welcomed the PNIS as a way out of a lucrative, but insecure and violent livelihood, but they found alternative crops to produce a lower income level than the cultivation of, and trade with, coca leaves. While threatening their physical and ontological security, coca had provided economic
security and served as a development agent. The continued presence of armed actors involved in the drug trade and the increased forced eradication policies alongside a substitution policy that enjoys decreasing government support therefore combine to offer the option of a return to coca and thus to prioritize economic over physical security.

Furthermore, this study shows that violent peacebuilding environments provide conditions where peacebuilding policies not only fail to achieve their goals, but even counteract each other. The development strategy, the PNIS, created more violence and increased insecurity, while the security strategy, forced eradication, blocked efforts to provide a gradual return to legal livelihoods. Both activities therefore contributed to preventing each other’s success, instead of improving each other’s chances to reach the desired outcome, as the positive/negative nexus debate might indicate. Instead of constituting a factor that allowed for pooling efforts and resources to deal with a shared problem, the cultivation of crops for illegal purposes, ongoing violence places obstacles in the way of collaboration between actors engaged in peacebuilding activities by pushing towards a separation of the two arenas of security and development in peacebuilding. The military’s security-first approach calls for short-term, top-down and imposed quick impact strategies, as the cultivation of crops used for illegal purposes is defined as a security problem, fertilizing criminal groups and enhancing violent conflict. The agencies in charge of implementing the PNIS, the ART and the Direction for Substitution, on the other hand, approach drug cultivation as a development problem, produced by years of state neglect of isolated rural areas, that needs bottom-up long-term strategies to address the problem’s roots, provide alternative and viable livelihoods and empower the local communities. Those strategies take time and do not show direct impact, at least not compared to the security actor strategies. Neither state actor sees the other’s strategies as viable, as they do not agree on the definition of the problem generating those strategies. However, for the communities subject to the PNIS as well as to forced eradication, drug substitution constitutes a problem that makes security and development issues inseparable, particularly in Colombia’s violent environment.

Much to their detriment, state actors do not agree. The Colombian case underlines that ongoing violence increases the importance of the state as the intermediator between development and security in what Tschirgi, Lund, and Mancini (2010, 12) call the ‘development-politics-security nexus’. High levels of violence increase the power and importance of security actors and make their presence inevitable. Without the pressure exerted by continued violence, the Colombian government’s decision to tie the success of the PNIS strategy to a quota and thereby placing it in competition with the security strategy might not have been taken. Discrepancies between peacebuilding goals, contradictory policies, and an unbalanced implementation of peace agreement points that are interlinked and can only function if implemented as a whole all point at the lack of coordination at the state level, aggravated by continued violence. Rebalancing security and development in the post-accord period, despite ongoing violence, will be one of Colombia’s biggest immediate challenges and a sine qua non to save the current peace process.

Notes

1. The vicious circle concept was first coined by Menkhaus (2004). See also Schmelzle and Stollenwerk (2018).
2. For more information of the causes of Colombia’s protracted social conflict, see Historical Memory Group 2016.

3. The program’s correct name is National Integral Program of Substitution of Crops Used for Illegal Purposes (Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito, PNIS). This formulation was used to underline that the coca leaves, or dyo, are sacred for many of the Colombian indigenous communities and their cultivation an integral part of their culture (C2). Henceforth, we will use either a short form, the programme or the substitution programme, or the abbreviated form, PNIS, to describe it. The PNIS is administered by the Direction of Substitution of Illegal Crops (Dirección de Sustitución de Cultivos Ilícitos) and is an integral part of the Development Program with Territorial Focus (Programa de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial, PDET) implementing the rural reform plans outlined in point one of the agreement (C1). For the full text of the PNIS, see Presidential Decree 896.

4. Between 2006 and 2010, Colombia conducted its first programme designed to substitute livelihoods based on the plantation of coca bushes for illegal purposes, called the familias guardianes programme.

5. The fact that coca has been a development option for many communities has even led to the suggestion that the Colombian government simply replace the drug cartels and act as buyers of the communities’ coca leaf production. Supporters of that option maintain that this might be cheaper than forced or voluntary eradication and would serve both, development and security objectives in peacebuilding (DS19).

6. See also US President Donald Trump’s Global Call to Action on the World Drug Problem, in IPSI 2018.

7. A personero is a local ombudsman appointed by municipal authorities to assure that authorities, including the police and the military, obey the law.

8. Nilsson and Taylor (2017) found similar results in their study on land restitution policies in Colombia.

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