



Cooperation Programme between
Latin America, the Caribbean
and the European Union on
Drug Policies



COP  LAD

The Silent Destruction:

Environmental
impacts of drug
production and
trafficking and
State responses
in Latin America
and the Caribbean





The Silent Destruction:

Environmental impacts of drug production and trafficking and State responses in Latin America and the Caribbean.

CREDITS

This document has been prepared within the framework of COPOLAD III Cooperation Programme between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union on drug policies.

CONTENT EDITING AND COORDINATION: FIIAPP / COPOLAD III

AUTHOR: Juan Carlos Garzón Vergara, Expert Researcher.

GUIDANCE AND REVIEW, by COPOLAD III: Víctor Martínez González, Programme Task Force and development and rights specialist; Mercedes Alonso Segoviano, Programme Manager.

June 2024.

Cover photo: Access path to plots. V. Martínez (COPOLAD, 2024).

This publication is funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its content is the sole responsibility of FIIAPP and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the European Union.

COPOLAD III is a consortium formed by:



Collaborating partners:





The Silent Destruction:

Environmental impacts of drug production and trafficking and State responses in Latin America and the Caribbean¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last decade, interest in the environment and climate change has increased significantly in development and government agendas at the global, national and subnational levels. What was once considered a marginal issue has become as important as the economy and the welfare of the people, making it a public policy priority. In terms of drug policies, the close relationship between the illicit drug trade and environmental impacts has become evident, as have the negative effects that, in some cases, can also result from the measures taken to reduce supply and respond to the problem of drug trafficking.

This report, which focuses on Latin America and the Caribbean, aims to identify the environmental impacts associated with illegal drug production and trafficking, as well as those associated with State responses within the framework of drug control enforcement. Its content offers a strategic perspective that analyses and proposes alternatives in order to avoid, reduce or compensate for these environmental impacts. Through this study, COPOLAD III seeks to continue strengthening the development of public policies on drugs, identifying challenges, options and possible solutions.

Based on *Strategic Environmental Assessment*, with a systemic approach and a broad review of the available evidence, this report shows that the illegal drug trade has multiple and significant environmental impacts, especially when considering its convergence with other illegal economies and environmental crimes, as well as its impact in the life

¹. COPOLAD III. Cooperation Programme between Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union on Drug Policy. *Study on the environmental impacts of illicit drug production and trafficking activities and drug supply reduction interventions in LAC*. (GARZÓN V., Juan C. et al), April 2024.



of communities and the impact on their rights. This not only affects the countries where illegal drugs are produced, but also an increasing number of transit countries.

At the same time, this report shows that, in some cases, the actions taken by States to contain and reduce the supply of illegal drugs, through forced eradication, interdiction and alternative development, among other responses, have also had direct and collateral impacts in the environment.

The good news is that there are multiple opportunities and mechanisms for change that can enable drug policies to mitigate these environmental impacts and contribute to the restoration and conservation of the ecosystems that have been affected.

The report is accompanied by a Methodological Guide, whose main objective is to provide conceptual and instrumental guidelines and tools that can be preliminary inputs for the National Drug Observatories in Latin American and Caribbean countries in designing and implementing research and analyses that are more specific to this topic.

Main findings and conclusions:

1. The environmental impacts of the illegal drug trade are significant, especially when considering its connections to other illegal economies and environmental crimes. Its convergence with environmental crimes and the laundering of the proceeds from drug trafficking amplifies its negative consequences in the regions affected. Acknowledging the scale of the impacts of illegal drug production and trafficking should not obscure the significance of the acknowledged causes of deforestation and loss of diversity, such as the extraction of natural resources, the expansion of the agricultural frontier and livestock farming.
2. The direct and indirect environmental impacts of drug production and trafficking on deforestation are notable and in some cases have been underestimated. Although the establishment of illicit crop plantations has not been identified as a major driver of deforestation at the regional level, local research shows that its direct and indirect impacts on forest loss are locally significant.
3. The environmental impacts of the production and trafficking of illegal drugs, as well as the measures to address them, do not occur in an isolated manner, but rather, they occur within the framework of the system for controlling psychoactive substances. The starting point for addressing these environmental impacts is the existence of a massive illegal market for prohibited substances fuelled by the incentives of profitability and the existence of growing national and international demand.
4. The environmental impacts are occurring in an increasing number of transit countries. The evidence shows the negative consequences of the creation and maintenance of these clandestine routes and landing strips, with the loss of forest and impact on fauna in the biological corridors and protected areas of the Central American countries, as well as in Amazonia.



-
5. The evidence on environmental impacts is asymmetrical: it focuses on one psychoactive substance – cocaine – and on a limited number of countries. Most of the information refers to cocaine production and trafficking, while research and studies on the environmental impacts of cannabis, opium poppies and synthetic drugs are very limited.
-
6. The burden of responsibility for the environmental impacts must not be placed on vulnerable small producers and native communities, but on stakeholders with economic resources and the capacity for coercion. The environmental impacts are driven by criminal networks and stakeholders who operate “legally” in circumstances affected by corruption, the low regulatory capacity of the State and the difficult economic and social conditions that affect inhabitants.
-
7. Drug trafficking can serve as a gateway for the entry of other illegal economies, it can direct financial flows towards other illicit activities and create a backdrop of impunity within which different criminal networks can operate. In addition, it is associated with coercion and violence against the public officials, institutions and communities who oppose their interests and resist their influence.
-
8. The laundering of the profits from drug trafficking has negative consequences for forests, environmental corridors and protected areas. A portion of the profits obtained is laundered through the conventional financial system, while another part is reinvested in other illegal economic activities, the purchase and exploitation of land, extensive livestock farming and industrial agriculture, in addition to the consolidation of transit routes serving various purposes.
-
9. Environmental leaders and Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities continue to be at risk, with significant consequences for environmental protection. The growing influence of the criminal networks within their territories against a backdrop of limited institutional capacities, and aggravated by corruption, exposes them to violence and intimidation. In most cases, these events remain unpunished, with significant consequences for environmental governance, forest protection and development.
-
10. Within the framework of drug policy, control measures taken by the State have environmental impacts that, if not assessed, mitigated and managed, can aggravate and be more significant than those caused by the production and trafficking of the psychoactive substances themselves. The final disposal of precursors and waste, in highly ecologically sensitive contexts, is one of the most critical aspects faced.



Environmental impacts in figures

- **Increase in coca crops in protected areas:** According to UNODC, in 2022 in Colombia, the presence of crops was identified in 13 of the 59 nature reserves declared in the country, with a total of 10,626 ha, which is equivalent to 3.2 times higher than the figure recorded in 2010 (UNODC, 2023). In Peru, according to DEVIDA, since 2018, the upward trend has been maintained in the size of cultivated areas in Protected Natural Areas, going from 192 ha in 2018 to 439 ha in 2022, an increase of 128% (DEVIDA, 2023).
- **Effects on Indigenous communities:** In 2022, in Colombia, 208 of the 710 indigenous reservations had coca bush crops, covering an area of 23,794 hectares, which is equivalent to a year-on-year increase of 18% (UNODC, 2023). In Peru, the trend of an increasing area under coca bush production continues in the territories inhabited by native communities or Indigenous peoples. By 2022, the amount of land under coca production had gone from the 2018 figure of 7,963 hectares to 18,076 hectares, an increase of 127% (DEVIDA, 2023).
- **Deforestation:** The analysis carried out by UNODC in the regions of Catatumbo and Amazonia in Colombia between 2005 and 2014 indicates that the establishment of coca crops was linked in a direct and associated way - the latter being the most severely affected with 42% of the estimated new deforestation (UNODC, 2018). In the department of Ucayali in the Peruvian Amazon, estimates indicate that more than 50% of the new coca crops analysed between 2003 and 2022 were established in areas deforested especially for this purpose (USAID & UNODC, 2023). In Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, it is estimated that between 15% and 30% of forest loss is associated with the expansion of pasture areas financed by the proceeds of drug trafficking (Sesnie and others, 2017).
- **Impact of the illegal drug production process:** In Colombia, UNODC estimated that to process the potential production of coca leaf in 2022, around 148,500 tonnes of solid substances and 762.3 million litres of liquid substances were required, which are freely discarded in the natural environment in large quantities after use (UNODC, 2023). In the case of Mexico, *Insight Crime* estimates that the clandestine production of methamphetamines in Mexico could generate between 3,102 and 3,942 tonnes of chemical waste (Insight Crime, 2024).
- **Effects on transit areas:** In Peru, the Ministry for the Environment and Regional Forest Management has identified more than 50 landing strips in the tropical rainforests of the departments in its Amazonian region (Farman, 2021). In Central America, evidence shows that between 2007 and 2018, following the peak of suppression, areas with lower population densities and greater proximity to international borders became more vulnerable to drug trafficking, and Indigenous territories were disproportionately used as regular transport routes and corridors (Magliocca, Summers, Curtin, McSweeney, & Price, 2022).



- **Convergence with other environmental crimes:** In Colombia, according to monitoring carried out by UNODC, of the 101 municipalities with alluvial gold exploitation in 2021, 70 of them also had planted coca crops (UNODC, 2022).

Recommendations: mechanisms for change to correct and mitigate environmental impacts

1. Improve information, increase monitoring and gain further knowledge regarding environmental impacts. To mitigate and correct the environmental impacts, the first step is to be able to identify them, measure them when possible, as well as to observe their geographical distribution and dynamics over time. The use of technology offers opportunities to advance this goal.
2. Progress towards green drug policies. In Latin America and the Caribbean -with large and sensitive natural areas- there is an opportunity for drug policies to integrate an environmental dimension that permits the mitigation of the negative consequences of the illegal production and marketing of psychoactive substances. It is also important to anticipate and mitigate the environmental impacts of State interventions.
3. Incorporate the environmental Damage Reduction approach into drug policy. As occurs in other areas, in the case of drug policy, the internalisation of environmental costs would involve, at the very least, analysing whether the intervention to be carried out is more or less harmful than the problem it seeks to address or mitigate and prioritising those interventions that might generate fewer negative impacts.
4. Protect environmental activists in areas of illegal drug production and trafficking. It is important for the designers of drug policies to recognise the risk to which local leaders, their families and their communities are exposed. This requires not only coordinating with security institutions, but also with local stakeholders, with interventions that are tailored to the different territorial realities, which identify sources of risk in a timely manner and that take into account the dynamics of violence.
5. Protect Indigenous territories and Afro-descendent communities and strengthen their governance. As a whole, the areas occupied by Indigenous communities represent 35% of the forest area of Latin America. These areas concentrate almost 30% of the carbon in the region's forests and 14% of the carbon in tropical forests worldwide. Drug policy in the areas affected by the production and trafficking of psychoactive substances, as well as the laundering of drug trafficking proceeds, must be aimed at protecting local communities with measures that strengthen territorial governance, ensure communication and early warning systems, generate economic opportunities and provide public utilities, thus contributing to the protection of their leadership, guided by the damage-free action approach.



6. Alternative, Comprehensive and Sustainable Development aimed at protecting the environment. Alternative Development can contribute directly or indirectly to the protection of the environment, biodiversity and the mitigation of climate change. It is a priority that the interventions in this area have environmental impact assessments that make it possible to anticipate risks, prevent impacts and guide decision-making, in addition to incorporating other dimensions and opportunities for local development.

7. Recognition and participation of local communities. The evidence shows that their organisational capacity, the ownership of their land, the role played by their leaders, as well as the regulations established collectively, make a difference in the protection and management of biodiverse areas. It is essential to re-establish the relationship of trust and cooperation with State institutions to avoid the criminalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable populations with considerable unsatisfied basic needs. Reducing the environmental impacts of the illegal drug trade requires collaboration with communities and their leaders to identify and expand knowledge regarding the impacts, identify sustainable alternatives that respond to local conditions, advance restoration mechanisms and promote sustainable development.

8. Detect and interrupt illicit flows and preventing money laundering. Academic and journalistic investigations have revealed the link between drug trafficking, the appropriation of land and natural resources and investment in livestock farming and agribusiness. More knowledge is required regarding the magnitude of the flows and the nature of the money laundering coming from these activities. Together with other experts, the Financial Action Task Force affirms that serious obstacles exist at the legal, information exchange and capacity level that make it difficult to investigate and prosecute crimes that impact the environment. The Financial Intelligence Units of the countries directly affected play an important role in this by identifying the risks associated with money laundering and adopting measures to increase the surveillance of transactions.

9. The regulation of psychoactive substances via environmental standards that are connected to climate justice as part of the debate on alternatives to respond to the illegal drugs phenomenon. Regulation for medical or scientific purposes, as well as regulation of recreational cannabis use, as has occurred in some countries and jurisdictions, could open opportunities for the reduction of environmental impacts if certain standards are included and met, in particular within the climate justice framework.

Protecting the planet and climate change requires effective and urgent measures. Drug policy offers an opportunity to bring together agendas and intentions, taking into account the lessons learned, while aiming at a common goal: the well-being of our planet and all the beings that inhabit it.



The Silent Destruction: Environmental impacts of drug production and trafficking and State responses in Latin America and the Caribbean



Funded by
the European Union

COP  LAD