

DRUG POLICY IN THE ANDES:

SEEKING HUMANE AND EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES

Written by Socorro Ramírez and Coletta Youngers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Andean-United States Dialogue Forum, which is supported by the Carter Center and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), met in 2010 and 2011 with the participation of 35 prominent citizens who are involved in diverse social processes and the shaping of public opinion and dialogue with governments. Participants came from a variety of sectors in six countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, the United States and Venezuela). The working group on drug policy and organized crime was established at the first meeting of the Forum and implemented a plan for national consultations through meetings, events and interviews in the five Andean countries, to analyze drug policy successes, failures and alternatives. Two members of the working group, Socorro Ramírez and Coletta Youngers, were asked to develop a report as a contribution to the current discussion of the issue and efforts to develop effective, humane policies.

Fifty years after signing the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and 40 years after the U.S. government declared a “war on drugs,” many obstacles remain despite the partial successes of efforts to counter the problem.

Organized crime tied to drug trafficking continues to rise, aggravating violence that involves gangs and hired assassins, murders and arms trafficking. These criminal organizations take advantage of all forms of illicit interaction with the state: corruption, impunity and infiltration. They also try to block action by police and the courts by co-opting or assassinating public officials, legislators and prosecutors. A growing symbiosis between the state and organized crime spreads insecurity and weakens democratic institutions.

The election of Barack Obama raised expectations that Washington would acknowledge the urgent need for a change in drug policy. It is fair to highlight a shift in language and tone under the Obama administration, which has stopped using the term “war on drugs” and has acknowledged the need to treat drug use as a public health problem. It is also noteworthy that the White House is taking a less interventionist stance in response to alternatives emerging in the region. Specific policy reforms have yet to be defined, however.

The regional dynamic has changed with the “left turn” that has occurred in the majority of South American countries, as well as the diversification in these countries’ international relations. Countries are seeking their own platform, such as the Andean Community (CAN) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), to discuss policies and respond to priority issues on the international agenda.

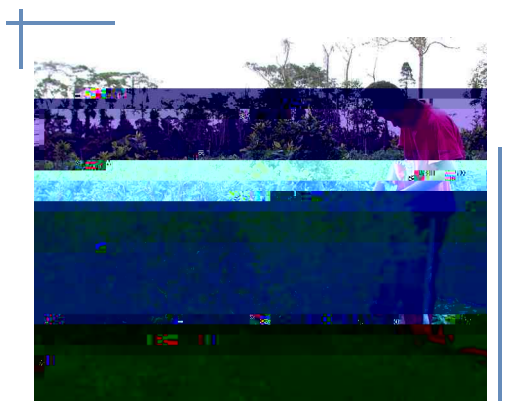
The limitations of the current drug policy is causing increasing frustration within and between countries and is leading policy makers, experts and activists in the region to seek new strategies to contain the escalation of illicit markets and

minimize the harm done to people, communities and states by drug production and use.

The work of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy and of the Global Commission on Drug Policy has begun to break the taboo that has blocked progress in discussions of policy assessment and alternatives. In the present report, the authors describe a series of alternatives being considered and, in some cases, implemented in Latin America. These alternative policies are reflected in the following recommendations.

The authors recommend that governments, shapers of public opinion and civil society in the Andean countries:

- Take the proposals of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy and the Global Commission on Drug Policy as points of departure when formulating drug policy and launch an educational and media campaign to help remove ideological biases from the debate while promoting a more evidence-based and regional approach to drug policy.
- Include additional state institutions (not just those related to police or military activities) in this shared task, along with the widest possible range of eminent individuals, communications media, health experts, non-governmental organizations, civil society and community organizations, churches and academics.
- Support the Global Commission on Drug Policy’s call for a deeper debate on new approaches that focus on reducing the harm caused to the most vulnerable sectors



Young boy in Putumayo, Colombia harvesting coca to afford going to school.
Photo credit: Sanho Tree

of society affected by the production,