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How the 'War on Drugs' failed

Since its launch, 50 years ago, the 'War on Drugs' caused violence and environmental destruction. Colombia's President urges to rethink this policy

Once again, Colombian President Gustavo Petro has succeeded in provoking and infuriating his bitter opponents at home and abroad while getting his supporters to break out in cheers. This time, his 20-minute speech to the plenary session of the 77th United Nations General Debate in New York aroused excitement, enthusiasm, rejection, and diverse interpretations both in Colombia and other countries.

No head of state from the world's largest cocaine-growing country has ever outlined the connection between comprehensive nature and climate protection and a new, different drug policy to the global community as clearly as Petro did on 20 September 2022. This is how, Gustavo Petro, who was sworn into office just a few weeks ago, created a link between Colombia's home-grown challenges and the need for regional and international cooperation to address both of these major issues in a sustainable manner. The speech also drew much attention because Petro called oil and coal mining a greater threat to humanity than coca cultivation.

Petro's opponents from the right wing and conservative camp describe his statements as demagogic and dangerous, and brand them as populist. They accuse him of wanting to turn Colombia into a 'narcoestado' (a 'drug state'), in which Petro allegedly wants to unilaterally legalise cocaine. Meanwhile they disregard the fact that despite the billions of dollars that the United States has invested in Colombia's special police forces, there has been little success in the fight against the organised drug trafficking groups and their ability to penetrate and corrupt politics, the economy, and society.

Ending the 'War on Drugs'

More clearly than his predecessor, Nobel Peace Prize winner Juan Manuel Santos (in office from 2010 to 2018), Petro described the 'War

on Drugs' declared by then US President Richard Nixon in 1972 - more than 50 years - as a failure. The Colombian President also held the international community, under the leadership of the US government, responsible for this disaster: more than a million Latin American women killed and more than two million African Americans imprisoned are clear signs of the madness of a destructive capitalism, whose only strategy in the face of drug use is prohibition, said Petro.

What Petro does not elaborate on here, but what many experts and representatives of non-governmental organisations agree on, is that there is no human society without the use of intoxicants. Moreover, it is hardly conceivable that this will be the case in the future. Therefore, according to the results of numerous studies, less importance should be placed on prohibiting and criminalising the consumption of substances previously classified as illegal, and more on their safe and regulated use.

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Even if the road to a new drug policy respecting the human rights of farmers, producers and consumers will be neither easy nor quick, the fact that the discussion started by Petro in Colombia is moving in this direction makes the importance and scope of his words explicit: only through clear state regulation (and not through legalisation!) can the power of criminal drug trafficking organisations be limited, the violence associated with drug trafficking be reduced, and problem drug use placed at the centre of public health.

In his speech, Petro also showed how much the war on drugs is also preventing climate protection. Addressing the UN, he called for a halt to the widespread use of the pathogenic pesticide glyphosate against coca plants and marijuana as soon as possible. Its continued use would only contribute to further environmental degradation, continued biodiversity loss, and the perpetuation of violence in Colombia. The failed policies of the past decades have had a negative impact on the livelihoods of millions of farmers.

As a solution, the President proposed an international pact to save the unique ecosystem of the Amazon. To do this, the foreign debts of Latin American countries would have to be reduced, and Colombia and the other Amazon countries should receive USD 1 bn annually over the next 20 years via an internationally controlled fund. The funds would be used to protect the rainforest from further deforestation and illegal mining and thus make an important contribution to global climate security.

According to observers, this sum seems entirely justified and by no means too high: between 2000 and 2016 the United States alone pumped around USD 10 bn into strengthening the Colombian security apparatus – again, without any significant success.

Reassessing drug policy

After this speech, it is clear that Gustavo Petro is aiming for a fundamental change in the current impasse: only if the drug trade is decoupled from the dynamics of violence can Colombia and Latin America become stable and their communities develop peacefully. This requires alliances both within society and between countries. However, Petro or Colombia will not be able to achieve this alone.

The Colombian President is relying on well-known studies by the scientific community and non-governmental organisations, as well as the representatives of indigenous communities. For decades they have emphasised that prohibition measures neither prevent the cultivation and trafficking nor reduce the consumption of substances or intoxicants classified as illegal. In fact, the opposite has been the case for more than 50 years: today, more cocaine is grown, trafficked, and used in Colombia and around the world than ever before. Although the peace treaty signed in 2016 with the guerrilla organisation FARC has made a significant contribution to pacifying large parts of the country, violence, displacement, murder, environmental destruction, and illegal overexploitation are still the order of the day in Colombia.

The President must now show that his unctuous words do not amount to just an up-to-date analysis: they must also be followed by concrete actions. Will Gustavo Petro succeed in harmonising the debates at the regional and international levels with the recognition of insight at the national level? Will he find allies – beyond Bolivia – and convince the international forums and decision-making bodies of the validity of his approach?

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Here, too, there are doubts: conservative forces continue to determine politics in Latin America. The previous government under President Santos already tried to address the failed strategies of the past with innovative and scientifically based support. Petro must now try to advance the debate about an international drug control system, not so much with the aim of bringing about immediate changes as preparing them for the medium term – so that

they have even a chance of international support in around 10 to 15 years' time.

In addition, Gustavo Petro would have to reconcile his international discourse with other domestic political decisions. In many places, this discrepancy between what he says and what he does is constantly pointed out. For example, despite all the announcements, he is unable to stop the use of glyphosate in Colombia.

And coca and marijuana growing communities have no choice but to take social action against the criminalisation of growing the crops, through strikes and other measures. Progress is also slow in filling important positions that could promote a new agenda. Although Gloria Miranda was appointed as the new director for drug policy in the Colombian Ministry of Justice at the end of September, a new appointment for the implementation of the Comprehensive National Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops has yet to be made.

International support is needed

Without clear and competent contacts at the national level, without locally adapted and integral development prospects, such as infrastructure measures in the provinces, the provision of goods and services, and a stronger state presence, the people in the regions affected by coca cultivation are left on their own. They remain without guarantees of their own safety, without job opportunities, and without access to education and health care – and ultimately no alternatives.

Without an attempt to resolve the complex situation that has arisen as a result of the drug policy based on prohibition and criminalisation thus far, it will be impossible to bring about change. There is reason to fear that without a comprehensive political strategy, armed, illegal criminal groups will continue to kill and displace people, and that the already difficult economic and social situation will continue to worsen in many areas, with nothing being done to stop illegal drug cultivation and trafficking.

Such a strategy could include decriminalisation of producers, safety guarantees for communities, and a development strategy for regions of cultivation. At the same time, consumers should be educated and sensitised with campaigns about the safe and regulated use of intoxicants.

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alternative livelihoods for communities that currently live from and with coca and marijuana: Many of the communities have great potential for sustainable tourism; they could make a necessary contribution to sustainable value chains and support peace through innovative approaches to the use of traditional plants.

Gustavo Petro will not be able to do this alone and not just within Colombia – in this policy area he also needs progressive counterparts in the region, and in Europe. It is to be hoped that by taking decisive action in Colombia, the United States will also rethink its current approach and join Latin America's most important ally in reassessing drug policy.

If the international political actors refuse to engage in debate, there is a risk that the misguided 'War on Drugs' and the accompanying environmental destruction in large parts of the Andean countries, as well as murder of and violence against their inhabitants, will continue for another 50 years. Today there is still some hope of making a difference.



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