

## **Rebels-turned-narcos?**

### **The FARC-EP's *political* involvement in Colombia's cocaine economy**

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## ABSTRACT

According to the ‘rebels-turned-narcos’ premise, increasing involvement in the illicit drug industry causes insurgent groups to lose sight of their political aims, as they shift their focus to profit-making. The (former) Colombian rebel group, the FARC-EP, became a paragon for this idea. Drawing on primary research, we argue that the FARC-EP’s involvement in the illicit drug economy was *itself* political. Their involvement included governance activities, which are by their very nature political. Furthermore, these activities formed part of the FARC-EP’s political project, aimed at ensuring the reproduction of the peasant smallholder economy. Our argument challenges the rebels-turned-narcos premise more broadly by showing why involvement in the illicit drug economy, on its own, is insufficient evidence to posit the depoliticization of an insurgent group.

**Keywords-** illicit drugs; armed insurgency; Colombia; coca/cocaine; FARC-EP; rebel governance

## Introduction

The more involved a rebel group is in the illicit drug industry, the less political it becomes –or so the story goes. Academic and non-academic observers alike frequently applied this narrative to what was once Latin America’s largest and oldest rebel group: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, People’s Army (FARC-EP - *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Ejército del Pueblo*). For some time after its formation in the early 1960s, the FARC-EP was widely considered a *bona fide* revolutionary organization. However, this changed as they became increasingly reliant on the illicit drug industry for funding. Henceforth, a significant number of

commentators claimed that the FARC-EP had become little more than a well-organized drug gang. This claim, which became cliché despite the lack of evidence to support it, was deployed for different purposes, including by Colombian elites with vested interests in denying the root causes of armed conflict.

Indeed, opponents of the 2012-2016 peace process<sup>1</sup> between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP claimed that “Colombia has not lived a war” but rather “systematic narcoterrorism attack[s]” perpetrated by the “largest cocaine cartel in the world”. They argued, among other things, that narco-trafficking should not be treated as a political crime (*conexo al delito político*) under any circumstance.<sup>2</sup> The differential treatment of drug related crimes aimed at funding armed rebellion was vital to the peace agreement, which led to the disarmament of the FARC-EP and their transformation into a political party in 2017.

Multiple scholars have criticized the idea that insurgent groups involved in the illicit drug industry necessarily lose sight of their political ideals and aims. In the case of the FARC-EP, some point out that the group merely taxed cocaine production and trade, suggesting that political corrosion was minimized because their involvement in the drug economy was limited.<sup>3</sup> Others focus on distinguishing means from ends: while for criminal enterprise drug money is an end in itself, for armed insurgents it is simply a means of funding a political war.<sup>4</sup> The FARC-EP, specifically, is often said to have remained political *despite* its participation in the coca economy.<sup>5</sup> Finally, there are those who indicate that insurgents may benefit politically (as well as financially) from intervention in the illicit drug economy; the FARC-EP, in particular, gained support among segments of the population in coca-producing areas as a result of its coca-related regulation and protection activities.<sup>6</sup>

This article reframes the latter idea. We argue that the FARC-EP's involvement in the coca economy was *itself* political. The FARC-EP did not retain their ideals and aims because their participation in the illicit drug industry was limited –in many ways, it wasn't! Nor is it accurate to claim that they remained a political group *despite* their connections with this illicit economy. And though it is certainly true that the guerrillas' interventions in coca paste production and trade boosted support for the organization among some households and communities at certain periods in time, this was not always the case. Indeed, as discussed in section 4, on occasion, their role as regulators cost them politically. We propose that the FARC-EP's coca-related regulation and protection activities were -by their very nature- political, regardless of their popularity within the community they were aimed at. They were part and parcel of this group's rebel governance practices<sup>7</sup> and its broader project aimed at safeguarding the reproduction of the peasantry and the smallholder economy.

More broadly, we maintain that involvement in the illicit drug trade, on its own, is insufficient grounds on which to posit the depoliticization of an armed insurgency –this is a refutation of what we call the 'rebels-turned-narcos premise'. The relevant question is not *whether* a particular group is involved in the illicit drug economy but *why* and *how* -in this article we focus especially on how or in what ways (other than rent extraction, which has already been amply discussed by others) the FARC-EP participated in Colombia's cocaine economy.

Our arguments draw on: 1) more than thirty interviews, seven focus group discussions and countless informal conversations with coca farmers and pickers, conducted between 2014 and 2020, in three coca-growing municipalities in southern Colombia: Argelia (Cauca), Puerto Asís and Valle del Guamuez (Putumayo); 2) seven in-depth interviews with combatants and ex-combatants, conducted between 2016 and 2019 (i.e. before and after the FARC-EP's disarmament),

who refer to experiences in those general regions (Putumayo and Cauca), and occasionally to other parts of the country; and 3) circa 15 months of ethnographic research in guerrilla controlled/influenced coca-producing communities within the following rural districts (*corregimientos*): Piñuña Blanco (Puerto Asís); El Tigre (Valle del Guamuez); El Plateado and Sinaí (Argelia) –the majority of this work occurred before the FARC-EP’s disarmament and thus allowed for the observation of rebel governance in practice.

Our focus on a limited number of areas allows us to paint a detailed portrait of the FARC-EP’s governance of the coca economy. But it has its limitations. The FARC-EP had a strong influence and were relatively well received within the communities where we did our research; the dynamics were probably different in other areas of the country. To be sure, the guerrilla’s coca-related protection and regulation activities varied greatly across space and time; we do not, within the confines of this article, describe this variation. Nevertheless, other primary research, focused on different regions and time periods, broadly supports our core argument –that the FARC-EP’s involvement in the illicit drug economy was *itself* political.

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides some key examples of how the rebels-turned-narcos premise has been used and challenged in the literature on conflict, terrorism and organized crime. It contextualizes our argument and shows how it is different from existing critiques of this premise. Section two offers some very basic information about the historical dynamics of the coca/cocaine economy, insurgency/counterinsurgency, and the War on Drugs in Colombia. The third and fourth sections set out the empirical evidence on which our argument is built. The former discusses the FARC-EP’s protection of the *cocaleros* or coca producers as peasants, while the latter examines some examples of how the rebels regulated the coca economy.

We conclude that the rebels-turned-narcos premise is both logically flawed and politically dangerous.

### **1. The rebels-turned-narcos premise**

Academics, politicians, policymakers and journalists alike have characterized diverse armed insurgent groups as profit-seeking criminal outfits devoid of political ideals and aims. Involvement in the illicit drug industry is often utilized as primary evidence to support such characterizations. Indeed, many observers suggest there is an inverse relationship between insurgent groups' participation in the narcotics business and their political commitments. For example: "Beginning with tolerating and taxing the [drug] trade, insurgents tend to gradually shift to more lucrative self-involvement [... which,] in turn, generates a risk of affecting insurgent motivational structures, tending to weaken ideological motivations and strengthen economic ones".<sup>8</sup> We call this the 'rebels-turned-narcos premise'. Colombian guerrilla groups, and the FARC-EP especially, have become a paragon for this idea. The following statement is indicative of a widely held view:

Colombian FARC started out as a revolutionary Marxist organization. Over time, however, its reliance on drug trafficking and kidnappings to finance its activities overshadowed its original goals. Today, its lip service to Marxist rhetoric serves only as a cover for an essentially for-profit criminal organization.<sup>9</sup>

Similar claims have been made about other rebel/armed groups, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Al Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> For example, in an article tellingly entitled “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency”, the author claims: “Gone are the days of the puritanical ideological Islamic warriors who brandished a Robin Hood style of justice [...] the Talibs are conducting brisk business, not in the name of Allah but rather in the name of the almighty US dollar”.<sup>11</sup> Like in Colombia, this narrative has “serv[ed] particular functions within Afghanistan”, such as “legitimis[ing] particular interventions” and “shifting the focus away from links between actors within the Afghan state and the drugs industry”.<sup>12</sup>

The rebels-turned-narcos premise originates in counterinsurgency politics and continues to serve this and other purposes. But it has also become part of broader theories and arguments about the nature of armed conflict, including the ‘new wars thesis’, the ‘greed thesis’, and the ‘crime-terror nexus’ or ‘continuum’. A full examination of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we provide a few examples of how the rebels-turned-narcos premise has been used and challenged in academic discussions in order to contextualize our own argument, which we present in more detail at the end of this section.

The rebels-turned-narcos premise is often associated -incongruously- with the terms ‘narco-terrorist’ or ‘narco-guerrilla’. As explained by Acero, the latter “phrase was coined [in the early 1980s] by the United States ambassador in Colombia at the time -Lewis Tambs- and reproduced by different United States and Colombian authorities, to indicate [...] that the FARC’s link to the coca economy had completely transformed the organization [... which is said to have] set aside its political struggle”, to focus instead on extracting drug rents<sup>13</sup>. In addition to enhancing anti-rebel propaganda, the narco-guerrilla concept enabled Colombian and US officials to justify the channeling of War on Drugs funds into counterinsurgency.<sup>14</sup> The term ‘narco-terrorist’ emerged

around the same time. It was “first used to describe campaigns by drug traffickers [e.g. Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Cartel] using terrorist methods”.<sup>15</sup> But was quickly extended to describe insurgent groups funded by the illicit drugs industry and, like the narco-guerrilla slogan, is frequently used to denote depoliticization.<sup>16</sup> As hinted at above, this is incongruous given that both ‘terrorists’ and ‘guerrillas’ -by definition- use violence for political ends.<sup>17</sup> Regardless, these terms helped popularize the rebels-turned-narcos premise.

Even scholars who are critical of the ‘narco-terrorism’ concept reproduce the premise that insurgent groups incrementally lose their political/ideological identities as they get more immersed in the drug industry. Stepanova, for example, implies the need to distinguish between politically motivated violence funded by the drugs trade and profiteering criminal activities (a distinction that is obfuscated by the narco-terrorism concept) but does not critique the rebels-turned-narcos premise *per se*. Indeed, she identifies five “main stages” in the “relations” between “militant-terrorist groups” and the “illicit drugs business”. Notably, “[t]he final stage is the complete *criminalization and political/ideological degradation* of elements of what was originally a genuinely socio-political actor”.<sup>18</sup>

While the narco-guerrilla and narco-terrorist slogans helped popularize the rebels-turned-narcos premise, ‘the greed thesis’ gave it academic substance; Paul Collier is its best-known proponent. His multiple arguments essentially support one main conclusion: “[c]onflicts are far more likely to be caused by economic opportunities than by grievance”.<sup>19</sup> The participation of Colombia’s left-wing rebels in the global drugs industry is often used to illustrate how greed drives armed conflict.<sup>20</sup> Collier himself claims that: “in Colombia groups which began as grievance-based organizations [...] have evolved into drug baronies”.<sup>21</sup>

The rebels-turned-narcos premise is also common in the crime-terrorism nexus literature, which has pushed Kaldor's 'new wars theory' -in particular her claim that the lines dividing politically motivated warfare and organized crime have become increasingly blurred<sup>22</sup>- a step further. This is evident in Makarenko's 'crime-terror continuum'. As explained by the author:

[t]he final point occupying the crime–terror continuum is the 'convergence thesis', which refers explicitly to the idea that criminal and terrorist organisations could converge into a single entity that initially displays characteristics of both groups simultaneously; but has the potential to transform itself into an entity situated at the opposite end of the continuum from which it began.<sup>23</sup>

According to Makarenko, terrorist groups that move to the other side of the continuum "merely maintain their political rhetoric as a facade [... they are] [n]o longer driven by a political agenda, but by the proceeds of crime".<sup>24</sup> Once again, the FARC-EP are a favorite example - used by Makarenko herself,<sup>25</sup> as well as other authors who draw on her 'crime-terror continuum',<sup>26</sup> or write about the crime-terrorism nexus.<sup>27</sup> Note that this guerrilla group's involvement in the illicit drug industry is typically considered sufficient evidence, on its own, to support the claim that they became an a-political criminal organization motivated by profit rather than ideology.

A number of scholars have developed rich critical analyses of the concepts, arguments and theories mentioned above.<sup>28</sup> Here we focus on those counter-arguments most relevant to the rebels-turned-narcos premise and its application to the FARC-EP in particular.

Francisco Gutiérrez provides what is perhaps the most powerful questioning of this premise as part of a broader interrogation of the greed explanation of armed conflict or “criminal rebels thesis”. He sets out a number of facts about the organization and functioning of the FARC-EP that are “uncomfortable, to say the least, for any *homo economicus* story”.<sup>29</sup>

FARC-EP members did not receive a salary<sup>30</sup> and prohibitions on plunder and other forms of personal enrichment were strictly enforced. All ‘taxes’ collected by the rebels were considered property of the organization and theft of these resources was a capital offense. Thus, “even admitting the possibility that a handful of individuals actually g[ot] rich with the war, which until now has not been proved, the vast majority of the organization ha[d] no possibility whatsoever of doing so, *and kn[ew] it*”.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, membership implied enormous hardship. Here we complement the examples offered by Gutiérrez with some others drawn from our interviews: combatants rarely had contact with the family and friends they left behind; often had to ‘march’ for days-on-end across difficult terrain, carrying heavy packs; typically spent long periods ‘interned’ in the jungle, washing in streams and sleeping in makeshift tents; and, more generally, led very modest and regimented lifestyles.<sup>32</sup>

So while the FARC-EP -as an organization- benefitted financially from the illicit drug economy, as stressed by Gutiérrez, it is difficult to sustain the claim that they were mere profiteering criminals when the vast majority of their members (including commanders) patently did not ‘do well out of war’. In sum: the FARC-EP “need[ed] the rents to wage the (political) war, it’s true, but that doesn’t entail that it wage[d] the war for the purpose of gathering the rents”.<sup>33</sup>

Even some analysts who borrow heavily from the economic theory of conflict<sup>34</sup> and/or are fierce critics of the FARC-EP acknowledge this point. For example, Alfredo Rangel Suárez, former government security advisor and member of the right-wing *Centro Democrático* Party (whose

members typically perpetuate the rebels-turned-narcos premise) emphasized the need to isolate policy decisions from anti-guerrilla propaganda:

[The FARC-EP] utilize criminal means, but its objective is political, not personal enrichment. The fact that the guerrilla deals with drugs, doesn't turn it into a mafia, in the strict sense of the term [...] This is merely an objective assessment of the real nature of the adversary, a necessary condition to combat it effectively. The mistake is to design policies and strategies against [the guerrilla] based on erroneous assessments or on our own propaganda.<sup>35</sup>

For many authors, the discussion ends there, the basic idea being that the FARC-EP remained a political organization *despite* their involvement in the illicit drugs economy. However, Gutiérrez and others take the argument further, highlighting how this involvement actually benefited the rebels politically, as well as financially.

According to Gutiérrez, as the FARC-EP “started to play a regulatory role” in the coca and poppy economies, “the organization’s rootedness in certain peasant niches, and thus its political relevance, grew”. Nevertheless, the support the guerrillas acquired as regulators of local drug economies, he argues, was often lost as they imposed additional taxes on producers and traders.<sup>36</sup>

Ferro -drawing on primary evidence from the Bajo Caguán region- also argues that the FARC-EP gained support in coca-growing areas as a result of their regulation of this illicit economy, albeit with ups and downs depending on the forms of intervention. The implications, however, were different outside coca-growing areas, according to the author. At the national level,

he claims, the guerrillas' participation in the illicit drug economy was associated with a loss of political legitimacy.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein, Phelan maintains that the FARC-EP established “social contracts with an array of stakeholders”, including peasants who grow illicit crops. The rebels offered security and social services in its stronghold areas; in return, peasants and other “stakeholders” were expected to respect the rebels' rules and pay them taxes. According to the author, these “social contracts” were part of this guerrilla group's attempt to strengthen its “proto-state authority” through what she calls “eudaemonic legitimation” – a legitimacy based on “delivering the goods”. In this way, Phelan argues directly against the idea that the FARC-EP “lost sight of its overall ideological political agenda by engaging in organized crime”.<sup>38</sup>

A handful of other authors have made similar points in passing. For example, in his discussion of the FARC-EP's “adaptation [...] to the post-Cold War” scenario, Ortiz notes how involvement in the drug economy was not only financially advantageous for the organization, but also had “political consequences”. Specifically, the rebels gained “a substantial level of support from those sectors of the agricultural population involved in growing drug crops”, as a result of their “exercise of parallel government functions”.<sup>39</sup> Hough focuses on explaining increases in FARC-EP violence against civilians and challenging explanations that attribute this increase to ‘greed’ and the group's involvement in the cocaine business. In the process, he stresses that the FARC-EP's involvement in the illicit drug economy was comprised of regulation, as well as the extraction of rents.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, he claims that “the impact of coca on the FARC was primarily *quantitative* rather than qualitative [...] it changed the magnitude of the FARC's extraction activities, which in turn increased their capacities to engage in the other three state-like activities [i.e. war-making, state-making and protection]”.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, Norman argues that the FARC-EP's increased involvement in the cocaine economy was not driven by greed but rather "was a strategic response to threats from [right-wing] paramilitaries and narcotics traffickers".<sup>42</sup> According to the author, from 1982 to 1991, the FARC-EP focused on regulating and taxing the coca economy. However, in response to "the expansion of state-supported narco-paramilitaries", from 1991 onwards, "the FARC's relationship with the cocaine economy [changed] from a purely regulatory position to vertical integration in coca markets". Henceforth, for security reasons, the rebels started buying coca paste directly from the peasants, allegedly monopolized local trading systems. Some Fronts also started "carrying out small [local] drug trafficking operations". Norman maintains that this more direct participation in the trade did not lead the organization to abandon its political goals, which shaped the 2016 peace agreement. However, it did (alongside "organizational changes" such as "decentralization" of the "command structure"), she argues, increase the rebel group's "vulnerability to criminal influence". Norman assumes that this "criminal influence" is the main reason some Fronts and members refused to disarm in the context of the peace accords.<sup>43</sup> (Note that the author is meticulous about the use of evidence to support her arguments, except in the case of this final claim.)

This article contributes to existing critiques of the rebels-turned-narcos premise by introducing a novel framing of the issue. Our argument -that the FARC-EP's involvement in the illicit drug economy was *itself* political- is very different to the claim that this guerrilla group remained political *despite* its participation in the industry. It is also different to (though not incompatible with) the idea that the rebels gained political support among coca-growing communities as a result of their interventions. As indicated above, a number of authors recognize that the FARC-EP not only taxed the drug economy to finance its political war but also regulated this economy and provided protection to the peasants involved in it. Nevertheless, few have made

explicit the implications of this recognition. Regulation and protection are *political* activities, typically carried out by States. They are political by their very nature, regardless of whether they generate political support for the organization carrying them out and even when they generate opposition and detractors.

In this article we use the term ‘political’ in a narrow sense in order to engage with the rebels-turned-narcos premise, which we aim to critique, on its own terms. We certainly agree that processes often treated as belonging exclusively to the realm of the ‘economy’ are in fact ‘political’; for example, a stock market crash or struggles between labor unions and companies. More broadly, we sympathize with approaches that challenge “the separation of the economic and the political”.<sup>44</sup> However, for the purposes of this article, we focus on the politics of government and governance of the public - i.e. a community as a whole. The FARC-EP were political actors because they aimed to transform the way Colombian society is organized, according to a set of ideological principles, and because they themselves governed entire communities within their stronghold areas, again, according to the organization’s ideology. The same cannot be said of most commercial enterprises, including those involved in illicit drug economies. Although narco-firms may engage in governance practices, their *raison d’etre* is to obtain private profits; thus, the nature and scope of these practices will be quite different given precisely their limited aims.

So, in what ways was the FARC-EP’s involvement in the illicit drug economy -specifically- political? As explained below, the FARC-EP’s defense of families and communities involved in coca production should be understood as part of their broader political project, aimed at ensuring the reproduction of the peasantry and the smallholder economy. The guerrillas attempted to protect farmers and pickers from common crime, abuses by narco-traffickers, paramilitary violence and the State’s counter-narcotics operations. They also defended the *cocaleros* by supporting mass

mobilizations and strikes against militarized drug control policies, as well as by assisting them in negotiations surrounding illicit crop substitution. Finally, they imposed various regulations (including price floors, trading bans aimed at forcing prices up, norms to promote food security, environmental rules, policies on the reinvestment of coca incomes/taxes and the prohibition of drug use) within the coca-producing communities under their control/influence. Many of these regulations were clearly ideologically motivated and cannot easily be attributed to the guerrillas' financial interests.

Hence, involvement in the illicit drug industry, on its own, is insufficient grounds on which to posit the depoliticization of an armed insurgency. There may well be rebel groups who lost sight of their political aims and ideals as they became increasingly focused on enriching themselves through the drugs business; but the mere fact of participation in this illicit economy is not evidence of this. The question is not only whether a group participates in an illicit economy, but also *why* and *to what end*, as well as *how* or in *what ways* it is involved.

## **2. Coca, the FARC-EP and conflict: a very brief introduction**

Colombia's illicit drugs industry took off in the mid-1970s with the '*bonanza marimbera*' or marijuana boom. Shortly after, Colombian trafficking businesses started importing coca paste from Peru and Bolivia, which they then processed into cocaine for export. These same businesses soon started encouraging domestic production and by the late 1990s Colombia had more hectares of coca than any other country in the world.<sup>45</sup>

Coca cultivation proliferated, in particular, within ‘colonization zones’ characterized by inadequate infrastructure and public services. It offered a way into the market for thousands of peasant farmers who had settled in these ‘marginal’ areas due to violence and land concentration in their places of origin.<sup>46</sup> As explained by Molano, “[f]or the[se] *colonos* [or peasant settlers] illicit cultivations represented the incarnation of their dreams and the demands they had made to the State: access to markets, credit, roads, health, education, diversion”.<sup>47</sup> Though coca farmers’ and pickers’ incomes are modest, they are typically higher than those earned by other smallholders and rural laborers.<sup>48</sup> And so, the coca economy (plus ongoing displacement and dispossession) attracted further migration to Colombia’s colonization zones.

Many of these same zones were also strongholds of the FARC-EP, which at first opposed the illicit economy. In some areas, they tried to stop people from growing coca and even set cocaine laboratories alight. However, for many peasants living on the agrarian frontier, coca was the only viable commercial crop and the rebels soon came to appreciate that their initial opposition was politically unsustainable. They also realized that the coca economy could be utilized to fund the armed insurgency. Thus, the FARC-EP changed its position and started taxing and then regulating the drug trade.<sup>49</sup>

This was done gradually. During the organization’s seventh conference (May 1982), the FARC-EP identified the need to “carry out political work among coca growers, aiming at winning them over to the revolution”, which was a tacit recognition of how their previous policy towards coca may have alienated many. They insisted, however, that “a balance needs to be found between coca cultivation and the peasant family economy”. These conference proceedings also laid out their class-based taxation policies. Taxation had already started in some regions, but the leadership deplored that “a fixed amount” had been imposed indiscriminately on “small and medium

cultivators” alike.<sup>50</sup> The conference decreed that taxation was acceptable but according to class lines – the burden should be shifted to the “landlords” and the “mafia”. This principle was reiterated in a plenary the following year.<sup>51</sup>

The FARC-EP’s taxation and regulation of the coca economy interfered with drug barons’ profits and was one among a number of factors that led infamous narcos, such as Rodríguez Gacha, to join the counterinsurgency war against the guerrillas and their support base.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, the fragmentation and regionalization of Colombian party politics facilitated the co-optation of politicians and local authorities by the drug ‘cartels’. As Gutiérrez *et al.* put it: “When the drug economy hit the country by the mid ‘70s, these bosses were in the midst of a ferocious competition among them for scarce votes. They needed the fresh resources offered by the narcos and were not above getting them”.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Ernesto Samper is said to have won the 1994 presidential elections with a contribution of USD \$6 million from the Cali Cartel. Around that time, U.S. officials were calling Colombia a narco-democracy.<sup>54</sup>

The Colombian government’s almost open toleration of the illicit drug industry began to change due to pressure from the United States<sup>55</sup> and as drug-related violence exploded (partially as a result of this change), affecting even the middle and upper classes. The Medellín Cartel, in particular, led a deadly campaign against the policy of extradition that included bombings (in passenger aircrafts, press offices and State buildings) and the gunning down of journalists, judges, police and other government functionaries. Operations led by the US and Colombian governments broke up the big ‘cartels’ in the early 1990s. But hundreds of smaller narco-firms -many of them linked to right-wing paramilitary groups engaged in counterinsurgency warfare alongside government forces- took their place.<sup>56</sup>

It was in this context that the FARC-EP -during its eighth conference- decided to give the blocs<sup>57</sup> more autonomy to define their financial strategy, in order to fulfill their targets within the organization. According to some analysts, it was only then that the FARC-EP deepened their involvement in the drug industry –mostly because of the vacuum left by the break-up of the big cartels and because they were eager to keep the paramilitarized mafias out of the territories they controlled.<sup>58</sup>

As hinted at above, the ‘War on Drugs’ in Colombia has been fairly selective – especially given its intertwining with counterinsurgency objectives.<sup>59</sup> The main victims of this War have been the peasants who cultivate coca. Militarized counter-narcotic operations have led to mass forced displacement and destitution.<sup>60</sup> This State violence, alongside abuses perpetrated by narco-traffickers, enabled the FARC-EP to entrench and expand its role as ‘protectors’ of the peasantry, as discussed in the following section.

### **3. Rebel protection of the *cocaleros* as peasant farmers**

Protection, that is the neutralization or elimination of the enemies of a power-wielder’s constituency, is paramount to State-making activities,<sup>61</sup> and for any governance process more generally.<sup>62</sup> It also provides legitimacy to an armed organization claiming control of a given territory.<sup>63</sup> Here we use protection in an even broader sense to include other (non-military) activities aimed at safeguarding the constituents’ interests. This section describes the FARC-EP’s protection of Colombia’s *cocaleros* specifically, which was part of a broader political project aimed at defending smallholders as a collective.

As has been detailed elsewhere, the FARC-EP “offer[ed] protection to the dispossessed frontier peasantry by defending their land holdings against cattle rancher encroachment”<sup>64</sup> and more generally sought to ensure “the maintenance of the conditions which made possible the reproduction of the peasantry and of the smallholders’ economy”.<sup>65</sup> In zones of recent colonization, coca cultivation has been key to this reproduction. Goodhand *et al.* point out that illicit drug economies can facilitate the expansion and deepening of capitalist development but may also enable resistance to these processes. The coca economy in Colombia contributed to both these trends simultaneously. Using the authors’ phrasing, it “played a role in the commodification and economic integration of rural economies”, as well as “allowing some groups to resist or reverse dynamics of dispossession and proletarianisation”.<sup>66</sup> In terms of the latter, as highlighted by Molano, “coca cultivation retarded the cycle” of land clearance-dispossession-displacement-renewed land clearance that has marked the history of the peasantry in Colombia; it “allowed peasant settlers to conserve their *mejoras* [land improvements] and freed them from the forced sales of their plots”.<sup>67</sup> Tellingly, farmers in Argelia call coca *la mata de la resistencia* or ‘the resistance crop’. In this sense, the FARC-EP’s protection of coca growers was politically coherent – even if it was discordant with their ideology in other ways.

In coca-producing areas, the FARC-EP’s protection role had particular characteristics because of the illicit nature of the dominant economic activity. This precluded those involved in the coca economy from seeking support or reparations via State institutions when they suffered injustice at the hands of drug entrepreneurs and their thugs or other peasants. It also meant that the State itself was often their aggressor.

According to interviewees in Puerto Asís, violent disputes and theft were a common feature of the coca economy before the arrival of the rebels and have been on the rise again since the

FARC-EP's disarmament. For example, one farmer recounted how "sometimes they [the large farm owners] would get people to plant [offer a sharecropping agreement] and then when it [the coca] was ready, they would kill the worker to take the crop. [... That started to change] when the guerrilla came. [...] Now, without the FARC there is insecurity in the villages"<sup>68</sup>. Another man reported that before the FARC-EP arrived some farm owners would have *raspachines* (coca pickers) and other workers killed after the most insignificant of disagreements.<sup>69</sup> This is corroborated by Ramírez's field research in Putumayo:

large landowners and merchants had dealt with the colonos arbitrarily. The drug traffickers of the 1980s and 1990s simply continued this tradition [...] Guerrilla groups were accepted by the colonos due to their support for longstanding but unfulfilled demands on the state for protection.<sup>70</sup>

Similar dynamics -in which violence and theft related to the coca economy were brought under control by the guerrillas- have also been documented in other parts of the country, such as Guaviare and Caquetá.<sup>71</sup> In Argelia, the experience was different because the FARC-EP was already well-established when coca cultivation took off in the area in the early 1990s (following the 1989 coffee crisis); in other words, inhabitants never experienced the chaos of an uncontrolled drug economy because the rebels regulated production and trade from the very beginning.<sup>72</sup>

In some parts of Putumayo, the guerrilla's role as protectors was partially destabilized following the paramilitary incursion in the late 1990s.<sup>73</sup> Many inhabitants reported a decline in security conditions during this period.<sup>74</sup> Both groups prohibited sales to 'the enemy' and punished

those who disobeyed. One peasant explained: “there was a time that they were paying one price in one place and another elsewhere, and they [the guerrilla] would say that whoever takes their merchandise to Puerto Asís [the town] has to pay a fine, leave or we will kill them”.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, according to Jansson, who worked in Putumayo during the height of paramilitary power, the FARC-EP did not usually kill those who violated their rules, but rather forcibly displaced them. And, he writes: “there is a consensus between coca cultivators in the region that the forced displacements by the guerrilla [...] are rare compared to the number of assassinations of peasants committed by paramilitary units”.<sup>76</sup> In any case, the dispute with the paramilitaries led some to question the FARC-EP’s role as protectors.

That said, many of the coca growers and pickers we interviewed drew sharp contrasts between the rebels and the paramilitaries, among other reasons, precisely on the grounds that the former offered protection to the peasant population, while the latter represented a threat. This seems to derive precisely from political differences between the two groups: while the guerrillas’ project was aimed at guaranteeing the reproduction and the rights of the smallholder peasantry, the paramilitaries’ base of support were clearly landlords, cattle-ranchers and the mafia -all sectors of society with a clear antagonistic relationship with the peasantry.<sup>77</sup> One farmer justified the guerrilla’s involvement in the coca economy (also distinguishing between the FARC-EP and the *traquetos* or *mafiosos* - terms reserved for drug traffickers) in this way:

The FARC are no drug traffickers. What they do is some control. They control the trade in base paste in the region, and that’s for a reason. If they didn’t do that control, the paramilitaries would come into our territory to buy the paste and the

peasants would face a bigger threat, there would be even more dead people. The paramilitaries don't care if they have to kill to steal the product.<sup>78</sup>

The preceding paragraphs considered how the FARC-EP prevented theft and curtailed the use of violence in local coca-related disputes. As importantly, they also attempted to defend *cocaleros* from counter-narcotics operations. This was done through military activity, but also by encouraging *cocalero* communities to protest against forced eradication and aerial fumigation.

In guerrilla strongholds, any incursion by State forces was likely to be high-risk and, in this sense, the mere presence of the FARC-EP may have posed limits to government drug control. In terms of military activities specifically aimed at counter-narcotics operations, the FARC-EP set up minefields in and around coca crops to prevent manual eradication and opened fire on fumigation airplanes. The former was extremely controversial: though the guerrillas would warn inhabitants before mining and remove the mines after the eradicators had left the area, civilians sometimes ended up the victims of this strategy - for this reason many opposed it.<sup>79</sup> In terms of the latter, although some peasants we interviewed questioned the guerrillas' attacks on the planes on the grounds that they would suffer the reprisals from government forces, others expressed approval. As noted by Ramírez: "Since fumigation disproportionately targets campesino coca growers, this population sympathized with the guerrilla resistance to the government policy and benefited from any protection the guerrillas could offer against it".<sup>80</sup> One ex-fighter explained:

We were always opposed to fumigation. [... we would] go and shoot at the planes.

As soon as we heard them, we would look for cover and shoot at them. We didn't

let them fumigate. [...] The peasants would hide us in their houses. Of course, they felt we were defending not only their coca crops, which is what they lived from, but also their subsistence crops. The thing is, glyphosate finishes off with absolutely everything.<sup>81</sup>

The quote above hints at the devastation caused by aerial fumigations, which helped provoke some of the largest peasant protests in recent Colombian history.<sup>82</sup> The FARC-EP supported and, in some places, directly encouraged these and other mobilizations, often putting pressure on reluctant *cocaleros* to participate. This has been well documented in the case of the 1994-1996 *paro cocalero* or coca-growers' strikes, aimed -among other things- at forcing a policy shift towards alternative development, involving the strengthening of the peasant economy and -eventually- voluntary eradication/substitution of their coca crops. Ramírez, who provides an account of these strikes in Putumayo, stresses that they were born of peasant initiatives, and thus rejects representations of the strikers as the guerrilla's "puppets", but also recognizes the importance of the FARC-EP's support:

The guerrillas' daily activities in these border regions made them social actors who could intervene in the civic strikes, help the campesinos, and magnify the impact of the marches by organising the campesinos to stay mobilised for months at a time. By lending this logistical support to the cocalero movement, FARC helped strengthen the movement leaders' negotiating position vis-a-vis the state, and its own position vis-a-vis the campesinos as a defender of their rights.<sup>83</sup>

The skeptical reader may object that the FARC-EP were protecting their own financial interests rather than those of the coca-producing communities. At the time of the strikes, many commentators argued just that. For example, one Major General of the Colombian Army stated: the FARC-EP “have forced the campesinos to come out and protest [...] The campesinos don’t know why they’re in these protests [...] the only interest at stake here are those of the narco-guerrillas, and those interests are purely economic”.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, one of the main demands of the protestors was government support for development programs that would allow them to voluntarily eradicate their coca crops; the rebels’ support of these demands contradicted the Major General’s comments.<sup>85</sup>

In general, the FARC-EP were not opposed to coca eradication, so long as this was what the growers themselves wanted. Consider the following fragments from an account about a failed substitution program, as told by an ex-combatant who witnessed the process first-hand:

We weren’t opposed [to the substitution program]. It was up to the peasants to decide. But the civilians would seek us out, ask for advice: ‘what is your orientation’? [...] So, we said: ‘comrades, you take the decision, but make sure you know what they are offering, that you will benefit from it’. [...]

There were lots of problems because many signed up to participate but they [the people in charge of the program] started to breach the agreement. The food subsidy wasn’t enough [...] And the subsidy arrived one month and the next month it didn’t. [...] Many

had already eradicated, so they said: ‘what are we going to do now?’ [...] When it went wrong for them, they said it was our fault. [...]

They also started to eradicate arbitrarily, without the authorization of the peasants [...]

The people would block the roads and paths and throw stones at the machinery. [...]

We would tell them: ‘we support you and if the police come or there is aggression against you, we will be there. But you have to solve this’. [...] Finally, after so many violations of the agreement [...] then we intervened, and we removed them [the functionaries] from the area’.<sup>86</sup>

This was not an exceptional incident; the FARC-EP supported families/communities who wanted to substitute illicit crops for legal ones on a number of occasions. During different peace talks, the FARC-EP actually helped develop proposals for illicit crop substitution programs, working alongside peasant communities and organizations, as well as government functionaries.<sup>87</sup> For example, “[d]uring the Belisario Betancur government (1982-1986), State institutions, the community and the FARC elaborated what could be called the first consistent proposal for illicit crop substitution in the Caguán” region.<sup>88</sup> Thus, counterintuitive as it may sound, the FARC-EP did not defend coca *per se*, but rather the smallholder and the peasant economy; this protection extended from the battlefield to political negotiations with the government.

We do not suppose that *all* coca-growers viewed the FARC-EP as their protectors. Nevertheless, the rebels’ activities were more akin to those of a government (and governments of all sorts generate affection, aversion and indifference) than a profit-seeking company. For example: while one could imagine a well-organized narco-enterprise defending their rents by mining coca

fields and shooting down fumigation planes, one could not plausibly imagine them proposing and supporting illicit crop substitution programs.

#### **4. The FARC-EP's regulation of the coca economy: a political undertaking**

This section describes the rebels' regulation of the coca economy, which we organize into five main categories. As noted earlier, the FARC-EP's norms/rules and regulatory power varied significantly across space and time; so, the description presented below is not generalizable. Nevertheless, it offers a thorough depiction of the insurgents' regulatory practices in communities where they had a solid constituency. Most importantly, it further illustrates how the FARC-EP's involvement in the illicit drugs industry was *itself* political. As shown below, many of the guerrilla-imposed rules were ideologically motivated and devised to benefit their potential and actual smallholder support base. They were about much more than acquiring funds and, depending on circumstances, could take precedence over the rebels' financial interests.

##### ***Price floors and regulations***

The FARC-EP attempted to ensure farmers received secure and -on the whole- decent payments for their product, whether it was coca leaves or paste. At times and in some areas, the guerrillas also regulated coca pickers' wages, ensuring a minimum income for these day laborers;<sup>89</sup> however, for reasons of space, we focus on coca leaf and paste price regulations.

One inhabitant of Puerto Asís explained: the guerrillas acted as intermediaries on behalf of the people and would force the *narcos* to pay a higher price for coca.<sup>90</sup> As has been recognized elsewhere, this seems to have augmented peasant support for the insurgency, in particular in those parts of the country where people had experienced violent theft and/or coerced underpayment at the hands of drug gangs and/or paramilitaries.<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, as discussed below, the guerrillas were not always able to ensure good prices for farmers. And, in parts of Putumayo, their efforts to do so (via trading bans) occasionally generated financial problems for coca growers, which led some to criticize the FARC-EP's interventions. Furthermore, a number of coca farmers in the region -apparently- felt the benefits of the minimum price rule were counteracted by the guerrilla's taxes, which in certain instances affected producers directly and in others may have impacted them indirectly.<sup>92</sup>

The coca/cocaine trading system and hence method of price regulation varied from place to place and over time. In Piñuña Blanco and other parts of lower Putumayo, during the 2010s until late 2016, local traders called *comisionistas* would buy paste either directly from farmers who had their own processing facilities or from 'laboratories' specialized in producing paste using purchased leaves. The *comisionistas* would then sell on to other intermediaries or to the main narco-traffickers in the region, either of which were in charge of the crystallization facilities that convert the paste into cocaine. Often these *comisionistas* were themselves farmers from the area. As a man from Piñuña Blanco explained: "Those who buy the paste are not FARC members, they are ordinary peasants, it is they who collect it and they are under strict control, the FARC oversees them".<sup>93</sup> The *comisionistas* had to obtain authorization from the FARC-EP to trade and had to pay a minimum price (set by the guerrillas) for the leaves/paste they purchased. On occasion, the

*comisionistas* complained that minimum prices, as well as taxes, were set too high, making trading un-economical.<sup>94</sup>

[...] an order arrived that all coca [paste] should be paid at 1,800 per gram, or 1.8 million the kilo, and that the producer should be paid 28,000 pesos for each *arroba* [circa 12 kilos] of coca leaves [...] In addition, one had to pay them [the FARC] 1,000 pesos in taxes for each *arroba*. [... I went to talk with one of the commanders] and we spent half an hour doing calculations and it didn't add up. [...] I told him: 'one can pay 24,000 pesos [for each *arroba*], but since you organized a meeting and told everyone that the price of the leaves is 28,000, no one will sell at 24 – they'll say they're being robbed. And I don't want problems with you or with anyone, so its best I withdraw'.<sup>95</sup>

Though the FARC-EP exercised significant power within the coca leaf/paste trade in their stronghold areas, they did not have absolute control over prices, which they often tried to influence by negotiating with those higher up the chain.<sup>96</sup> One of the main tools they had to pressure narco-traffickers into paying more for the paste was to ban sales altogether. However, this method often alienated local farmers who depended on regular sales for their livelihoods. A former FARC-EP commander who operated in Putumayo reflected on the political costs of a three-month trading ban imposed at some point (as he defined it) during the pre-Uribe era:

the *mafiosos* were in a position to cope with this standoff, but some peasants got tired of this, and then they became counter-revolutionaries [...] those peasants

never knew what we were negotiating and that we were doing it in their favor!

And we lasted for three months in this situation, until the two parties gave in a bit and we agreed a price of \$2,000,000 [€600] for a kilo.<sup>97</sup>

A similar situation arose in 2015. Trading in the Piñuña Blanco area was paralyzed for at least a month due to a deadlock in negotiations between the guerrillas and regional narco-traffickers, causing an economic ‘crisis’ for *cocalero* communities. An inhabitant described the predicament:

the FARC has held meetings to explain to us that the mafia [*mafiosos*] come here and say: ‘I am buying the gram at such a price, we’ll pay \$1,000 [€0.3]’, but the FARC won’t accept that little. Because of all the costs involved in its production, it has to be \$1,500 [€0.4]... but then the mafia offers \$1,100 [€0.31] and if they accept, then the peasant is left with the debt, because it is not enough to pay for all of the inputs, salaries, work, the costs of a family’s basic necessities. This is why they do not [allow them to] buy that cheap - they are thinking of us. Many people, because of need, they say: ‘[let us sell], even if it is cheap, even if we are left indebted, so at least we can buy food’.<sup>98</sup>

At least for a time, the FARC-EP’s price regulations in lower Putumayo seem to have made a difference to farmers’ incomes. A number of people commented that the prices paid for coca paste in the 2000s were higher in guerrilla-controlled areas than in paramilitary-controlled areas. This is confirmed by Jansson, who conducted field research in the area between 2002 and 2006.<sup>99</sup> One man from El Tigre said he used to risk travelling to guerrilla-controlled areas to sell at a better

price, even though he could have been killed by paramilitaries.<sup>100</sup> Though there were also periods when the paramilitaries and their *comisionistas* offered higher prices for the peasants' coca paste.

Both paramilitaries and guerrillas prohibited sales to 'the enemy', placing civilians in a very difficult and often dangerous position, which led some to resent the latter as well as the former. One woman offered the following anecdote: she was on her way to town to sell what little coca paste she had (presumably to paramilitaries or their associates, who controlled urban areas) and was stopped at a guerrilla check-point -the rebels confiscated the packet she had hidden in her boot and threatened more severe punishment if she broke the rules again.<sup>101</sup>

In Argelia, the coca trading system under the FARC-EP was very different. There, the crystallizing facilities would purchase the paste directly from the producers, who were relatively well organized (as well as demographically concentrated – giving them extra bargaining power) and negotiated prices themselves as a collective. The FARC-EP taxed production and ensured compliance with the collective price agreements. The insurgents' role as enforcers of these agreements was evidently quite important, as a number of coca-growers reported a fall in the price of their 'merchandise' between 2008 and 2011 when the FARC-EP were driven out and a paramilitary group (the *Rastrojos*) took control of the area. Many inhabitants welcomed the return of the insurgents in 2011 for this reason, among others.<sup>102</sup>

In conclusion, while the FARC-EP, as an organization, clearly benefitted economically from control of the coca leaf and paste trade through taxation, its minimum price rules were evidently ideologically and politically motivated. The skeptical reader may argue that the guerrillas' price floors were a strategy for capturing market share by ensuring the loyalty of producers. However, as indicated above, the trading bans they imposed in order to push prices up were often criticized

and breached by producers who suffered their consequences; arguably, the guerrillas faced a *political* dilemma in this sense that cannot easily be explained by the narco-profiteer narrative.

### ***Food security***

In various parts of the country, the FARC-EP insisted that farmers plant subsistence crops to avoid food insecurity associated with coca mono-cropping.<sup>103</sup> As one inhabitant of Piñuña Blanco explained: “the decision to plant food [crops] was an orientation given by the social organizations and a plan that the 48<sup>th</sup> Front promoted [... they said] there shouldn’t be total dependence on coca because a crisis could come [...] Now on coca farms there is also yucca and plantain; it wasn’t like that before”.<sup>104</sup>

However, this policy too was subject to contextual conditions. In lower Putumayo, where many cultivators have more than 5 or even 10 hectares, the FARC-EP established a thirds ‘orientation’: up to one third of the farm could be used for coca, one third should be used to grow food, and another third was supposed to be left as forest.<sup>105</sup> In Argelia, such a policy would have been impossible given that land in the municipality is extremely scarce -most farmers have just a hectare or less. There, instead, the FARC-EP encouraged a collective food cultivation project, initiated by the local farmers’ association. One of the agrarian leaders involved in the project recounted: “Argelia was a municipality rich in plantain, oranges – we want to recover this culture, so it’s not all about coca”.<sup>106</sup> Though this is/was very much a local farmers’ initiative, as many members of the association recognize, the guerrillas provided inspiration for the project.

Those who claim that guerrillas were (or became) a non-political group, interested only in rents, would have a difficult time explaining the rationale behind these food security policies, as well as the environmental regulations presented in the next subsection.

### *Environmental regulations*

Environmental considerations became more prominent in the FARC-EP's political program from the 1990s onwards; as wider sectors of society became more ecologically aware, they incorporated some of these demands into their program. The rebels imposed limits on hunting and logging, devised various rules to ensure the protection of water sources, and promoted more humane treatment of domestic/farm animals.<sup>107</sup> A woman from Puerto Asís reflected that problems associated with mining and logging had increased since the disarmament of the FARC-EP, which used to control both these activities.<sup>108</sup> Other sources confirm the upsurge in deforestation in different parts of Colombia since the rebels handed over their weapons. An article in the journal *Nature* even proclaimed that “peace is destroying Colombia’s jungle”.<sup>109</sup>

The FARC-EP's rules on logging affected the illicit drug economy insofar as coca cultivation was/is *one among many* drivers of deforestation, but the group also established rules that specifically targeted coca paste production. For instance, Article 52 of the co-existence manual of Puerto Bello, which was devised by inhabitants but was very much influenced by FARC-EP ‘orientations’, stated that: coca paste “[l]aboratories should be at a minimum distance of 50 meters from water sources” and “[c]hemical and toxic [processing] residues should be deposited in a hole at least 50 meters from water sources”.<sup>110</sup> The Community Action Committee or JAC (*Junta de*

*Acción Comunal*) was in charge of administering these rules and related sanctions but would typically call upon the FARC-EP if the culprit disregarded the JAC's authority.<sup>111</sup>

The 50-metre laboratory rule mentioned above was apparently not applied in Argelia, where there were plenty of processing facilities very close to the river, since the whole valley is very narrow and runs alongside the San Juan river. But the FARC-EP did foment other environmental regulations in the municipality through the JACs, such as those surrounding the disposal of coca paste processing residues; for instance, like in Piñuña Blanco, left-over grease and petrol had to be deposited in a hole and could not be dumped into the river.

An evaluation of these coca specific environmental regulations -for example, how consistently they were applied and what impacts they had- is beyond the scope of this paper. Irrespective of their effectiveness, these rules are yet another example of the FARC-EP's intervention in the illicit drug economy that cannot easily be attributed to financial interests.

### ***Local public investments***

According to FARC-EP members, a significant proportion of the taxes collected from the drugs trade were reinvested in coca-producing communities. A Commander of the 48<sup>th</sup> Front, for example, commented that they “helped to pay the monthly income of over 30 rural teachers”<sup>112</sup> in the area of Teteyé (Puerto Asís) with taxes imposed on the coca paste trade and oil companies operating in the area. This Front had a policy that 50% of the *gramaje* or per-gram tax went back into the communities via investments in collective goods like roads, bridges and schools – this, it should be said, was corroborated by a number of civilian interviewees.

This also occurred in other parts of the country. Indeed, the inventory of assets the FARC-EP handed over to the government in the context of the peace agreements includes such investments. For example, one of the assets listed is 2,970 km of road between Caquetá and Meta; the report specifies that “[t]he community contributed 25% and the other 75% was contributed by the FARC-EP with resources received as taxes on the *coca base buyers*, shopkeepers and landowners”.<sup>113</sup>

The FARC-EP also encouraged inhabitants themselves to pool their coca incomes for collective investments -though, as with other issues, it is difficult to decipher where community initiatives started and where guerrilla influence ended in this regard. According to research participants, communities often made the decisions about what projects to implement and guerrillas helped enforce cooperation –i.e. contributions in money, labor and/or in kind. In El Plateado (Argelia), the community built their school through collective labor initiatives and with materials paid for by the coca laboratories. The coercive capacity of the FARC-EP is said to have been key: “the left-wing [ie. the guerrillas] had to put pressure on them [the owners of the laboratories]” to ensure the flow of resources for the school.<sup>114</sup> In Sinaí (Argelia) -too- the school was built with coca funds and labor provided by the community itself. One man reflected on the importance of social discipline to this system, which he claims was fomented by the guerrillas: “if they eradicate coca, do you think the government will invest in our schooling system? You see we are poor, but whatever dignity we have in our conditions of life, we owe it to the sense of discipline given to us by the FARC and to coca”.<sup>115</sup>

It should be noted that the self-provisioning of collective goods has a long history in Colombian peasant communities, particularly in ‘colonization zones’.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, many JACs continue to coordinate collective investments and labor initiatives in their rural sub-districts to this

day. In other words, this practice pre-dates and outlives the FARC-EP and is in no way exclusive to *cocalero* communities. Still, the fact that this guerrilla group was so adamant that proceeds from the illicit drug trade be reinvested in coca-producing areas (both via the spending of rebel tax funds and direct community contributions) is yet another illustration of how its involvement in this economy was itself political.

***Produce –don’t consume!***

Recreational drug consumption was strictly forbidden in FARC-EP strongholds for both moral and ‘public order’ reasons. The rebels were particularly emphatic about this rule in coca-producing communities, including those where we did our fieldwork. Countless people mentioned the issue during informal conversations and interviews. For example, one man from Puerto Asís commented: “The FARC was a clandestine government and now [after the disarmament] things are happening that never happened when the FARC were around. [...] They controlled consumption [...]. Now the lads are consuming cocaine and marijuana”.<sup>117</sup>

Here we cite the Puerto Bello community co-existence manual, devised by inhabitants with FARC-EP collaboration.<sup>118</sup> It serves as an example of how the consumption ban was applied and the normative framework of which it was part. Article 36 of the manual states that

the most powerful wealth in universe is life, therefore there is an individual and collective responsibility to preserve it and harmonize it, to create a healthy

environment in which to live. For this reason, we declare prohibited the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs.<sup>119</sup>

As laid out in the document, if someone is caught consuming drugs, in the first instance, they receive a verbal warning. If caught a second time, they have to plant 50 trees in the community. Those who infringe the prohibition a third or fourth time have to plant 100 or 150 trees and pay a fine of \$50,000 (circa €13.5) or \$100,000 (circa €27), respectively. The penalties for a fifth violation include: the planting of 200 trees, a fine of \$200,000, the loss all rights in the community, expulsion from the area and confiscation of immovable assets.<sup>120</sup>

Though the manner of dealing with drug use varied across space and time, prohibition seems to have been generalized across FARC-EP Fronts. An ex-combatant recalled that civilians often sought the organization's help in dealing with drug consumption and small-scale vendors:

[The guerrillas] were very, very, radical on this issue. I had that experience, cases where the JAC or someone from the population would come and complain to us: 'there is this guy who is selling drugs and he's screwing up our young men – they're consuming, we need you to help us'. [...] I had to go and tell a person: 'ok, you have to stop selling narcotics, that is strictly forbidden'. If the person didn't obey the orientation then, in a second instance, they had to leave or bear the consequences.<sup>121</sup>

Whatever one may think of prohibitionist policies and however one may feel about the apparent irony of this FARC-EP policy, it is not easily reconciled with the notion that the group was little more than a profit-seeking drug racket.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments and evidence presented in this article challenge the rebels-turned-narcos premise, which is commonly reproduced by government officials, politicians and mainstream media, as well as in the academic literature on armed conflict, terrorism and crime. Participation in the illicit drug industry does not necessarily erode a rebel group's political commitments and -in and of itself- is insufficient evidence of depoliticization. Furthermore, participation may -by its very nature- be political, depending on the forms it takes and the reasons behind it. It is the *why* and *how* questions that really count.

Initially, the FARC-EP opposed the establishment and expansion of the coca economy in its stronghold areas. The organization changed its policy because of the funding opportunities this economy represented not only for the armed insurgency but also for the smallholders who constituted the rebels' actual or potential support base. The FARC-EP's decision to accept and intervene in the illicit drug economy was driven by financial *and* political considerations.

Taxation of coca production and commerce became a key source of income for the FARC-EP, which allowed for an intensification and expansion of its armed insurgency. But there is no evidence that greed was the driving force behind this taxation, notwithstanding a few cases in which members ran away with the organization's money –a crime punishable by death. The FARC-EP

maintained a strong collectivist mentality; all money that passed through members' hands was considered to belong to the organization and was strictly controlled and managed by it. Personal enrichment was forbidden. Combatants were not even paid a wage –necessities were provided in kind.

The FARC-EP didn't just tax the illicit drug economy, they regulated it and offered protection to peasants who participated in it. As we have shown, these activities were ideologically and politically motivated, and were supposed to benefit coca-growing communities. Though, as with most forms of governance, the guerrilla's policies and actions engendered resentment and indifference, as well as loyalty and acceptance, among the populations they were aimed at. Regardless of their popularity, these were not the actions of an a-political profit-seeking criminal enterprise. A skeptical reader might seek and find financial reasons for some specific operations, such as the attacks on fumigation planes or the imposition of price floors, but such explanations are difficult to sustain when these activities are considered together with others, such as the promotion of crop diversification or the prohibition of recreational drug use. These practices were clearly part of the FARC-EP's broader governance practices and their wider political project. To reiterate: the FARC-EP's involvement in the drug industry was *itself* political.

The majority of the FARC-EP may have demobilized, but the rebels-turned-narcos premise is alive and kicking in Colombia and other places such as Afghanistan or Myanmar. This premise feeds into narratives that ignore or deny the political issues underlying armed conflict, making it easier for interested parties to rebuff calls for deep reform, which are often necessary for genuine and sustainable peace.

As we were writing this article, we heard and read countless comments such as this: “the ELN [rebels] too have passed from being the guerrilla they once were, a Marxist guerrilla,

ideological, to being simply a criminal organization that feeds itself on narco-trafficking”.<sup>122</sup> Groups claiming to be heirs of the FARC-EP, who rearmed or refused to participate in the peace process in the first place, have also been labelled ‘criminals without a political agenda’.<sup>123</sup> These assertions are made without evidence to back them up –the mere fact of involvement in the illicit drug industry is erroneously used as proof of depoliticization. We need to avoid this reductionism in order to fully grasp what’s going on in Colombia, as the country is entering into a new cycle of armed conflict.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1980s, the FARC-EP has been in and out of peace negotiations with the Colombian government. In 2012, after a decade of intensified armed confrontation (which coincided with increased US military assistance), both parties entered into negotiations once again, and finally reached an agreement in 2016. This agreement polarised society, mostly because of a campaign led by the right-wing party *Centro Democrático* under former president Álvaro Uribe, who staunchly opposed offering any concessions to the guerrillas.

<sup>2</sup> “Los 10 Duros Dardos de Uribe a la firma de la paz”, *Semana*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.semana.com>; Elyssa Pachico, “Colombia Court: Drug Trafficking is ‘Political Crime’”, *InSight Crime*, 22 September 2015, <https://www.insightcrime.org>.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. James Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia. The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Christopher Cramer and Jonathan Goodhand, “Hard Science or Waffly Crap? Evidence-Based Policy versus Policy-Based Evidence in the Field of Violent Conflict”, in *The Political Economy of Development. The World Bank, Neo-Liberalism and Development Research*, ed. Kate Bayliss, Ben Fine, and Elisa Van Waeyenberge (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 231; Francisco Gutiérrez, “Criminal Rebels? A Discussion of Civil War and Criminality from the Colombian Experience”, *Politics & Society* 32, no. 2 (2004): 279; Ekaterina Stepanova, “Beyond ‘Narcoterrorism’: Illicit Drugs Business and Terrorist Tactics in Armed Conflicts”, in *The Politics of Narcotic Drugs: A Survey*, ed. Julia Buxton, (London: Routledge, 2011), 121.

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<sup>5</sup> Brittain, *Revolutionary Social Change in Colombia*. Note that the FARC-EP themselves often made a similar argument – see FARC-EP, “Comunicado de las FARC-EP sobre los Cultivos de Coca”, September 2006, <http://cedema.org/ver.php?id=1532>; FARC-EP, *Marulanda y las FARC para Principiantes* (s/l, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Phillip A. Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime: Explaining the So-Called ‘Political Involution’ of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”, *Politics & Society* 39, no. 3 (2011): 379-414; Gutiérrez, “Criminal Rebels?”

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the rebel governance concept, see: Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, eds., *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Svante Cornell, “Narcotics and Armed Conflict: Interaction and Implications”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 3 (2007): 207-227, 208.

<sup>9</sup> Abdukadirov, Sherzod, “Terrorism: The Dark Side of Social Entrepreneurship”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33, no. 7 (2010): 603-617, 611.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Justine Rosenthal, “For-Profit Terrorism: The Rise of Armed Entrepreneurs”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (2008): 481-498.

<sup>11</sup> F. Schmidt, “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency”, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21 (2010): 76; for a critique of this narrative in the Afghan context, see: Cramer and Goodhand, “Hard Science or Waffly Crap?”

<sup>12</sup> Cramer and Goodhand, “Hard Science or Waffly Crap?”, 228, 230, 232.

<sup>13</sup> Camilo Acero, “Review of the Literature on Illicit Drugs in Colombia”, *Drugs & (Dis)order Working Paper* (London: SOAS, 2020), 25; see also Hernando Corral, “Guerrilleros o

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Narcotraficantes”, *El Tiempo*, 17 December 2000, <https://www.eltiempo.com>; María Clemencia Ramírez, *Between the Guerrillas and the State. The Cocalero Movement, Citizenship, and Identity in the Colombian Amazon*. (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 2011), 61.

<sup>14</sup> Garry Leech, *The FARC: The Longest Insurgency* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Doug Stokes, *America’s Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (London: Zed Books, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Emma Björnehed, “Narco-Terrorism: The Merger of the War on Drugs and the War on Terror”, *Global Crime* 6, no. 3–4 (1 August 2004): 305-324, 306. For an early critique of the “narco-terrorism” concept, see: Rensselaer Lee, “Terrorism: George Washington University Seminar Reports, 1988-1989”, *Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (1989): 435-438.

<sup>16</sup> As far back as 1985, some observers were already referring to Latin American insurgent groups, such as the FARC-EP, as ‘narco-terrorists’. See: Risk International, “Special Report: Significant Regional Developments, October-December 1984”, *Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (1985): 165-183, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Although nowadays ‘terrorism’ is mostly used as a term of insult, since the French Revolution it has been used to describe tactics aimed at producing terror among the enemies of a particular political project -see Mona Ozuf, “War and Terror in French Revolutionary Discourse (1792-1794)”, *The Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 4 (1984): 579-597; Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (London: Verso Books, 2007); Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror* (London: Verso Books, 2017). The term ‘guerrillas’ refers to non-State armed groups engaged in asymmetrical armed conflict with a more powerful native or foreign incumbent, while ‘guerrilla warfare’ is described as a mechanism to destabilise (and eventually overturn) a political system or regime -see Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1961); Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

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<sup>18</sup> Stepanova, “Beyond ‘Narcoterrorism’”, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Collier, “Doing Well out of War” (World Bank, April 1999), <http://web.worldbank.org>.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Rosenthal, “For-Profit Terrorism”.

<sup>21</sup> Collier, “Doing Well out of War”, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Tamara Makarenko, “The Crime-Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism”, *Global Crime* 6 (2004): 135.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Matthew Phillips and Emily Kamen, “Entering the Black Hole: The Taliban, Terrorism, and Organised Crime”, *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2014): 46.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. Chris Dishman, “Terrorism, Crime, and Transformation”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 24, no. 1 (2001): 43, 49. Even authors who develop a more nuanced perspective on the “crime-terrorism nexus”, single out the FARC as the example of a profit-seeking insurgency, see: Steven Hutchinson and Pat O’Malley, “A Crime–Terror Nexus? Thinking on Some of the Links between Terrorism and Criminality”, *Studies in Conflict Terrorism* 30, no. 12 (2007): 1095-1107, 1104.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview and critique of “neoclassical economic theories of violent conflict”, see: Christopher Cramer, “Homo Economicus Goes to War: Methodological Individualism, Rational Choice and the Political Economy of War”, *World Development* 30, no. 11 (2002): 1845-64. For a

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critique of the narco-terrorism concept, see: Lee, “Terrorism”; Stepanova, “Beyond Narcoterrorism”. For a critical analysis and adaptation of the “crime-terrorism nexus”, see: Hutchinson and O’Malley, “A Crime–Terror Nexus?”.

<sup>29</sup> Gutiérrez, “Criminal Rebels?”, 271.

<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding baseless claims to the contrary. See e.g. Dishman, “Terrorism, Crime, and Transformation”, 52; Rosenthal, “For-Profit Terrorism”, 487.

<sup>31</sup> Gutiérrez, “Criminal Rebels?”, 269, emphasis in original. See also: Susan Norman, “Narcotization as Security Dilemma: The FARC and Drug Trade in Colombia”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 8 (2018): 638-659, 648.

<sup>32</sup> Gutiérrez, 269-270.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 279.

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Martha Bottía, “La Presencia y Expansión Municipal de Las Farc: Es Avaricia y Contagio, más que Ausencia Estatal”, *Documentos CEDE* (Universidad de los Andes, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Alfredo Rangel, “Los Límites de la Extradición”, *El Tiempo*, 31 December 2004, <https://www.eltiempo.com>.

<sup>36</sup> Gutiérrez, 277.

<sup>37</sup> Juan Guillermo Ferro, “Las FARC y su Relación con la Economía de la Coca en el Sur de Colombia: Testimonios de Colonos y Guerrilleros”, *Mama Coca*, 2002, <http://www.mamacoca.org>.

<sup>38</sup> Alexandra Phelan, “FARC’s Pursuit of ‘Taking Power’: Insurgent Social Contracts, the Drug Trade and Appeals to Eudaemonic Legitimation”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, online (2019).

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<sup>39</sup> Román Ortiz, “Insurgent Strategies in the Post-Cold War: The Case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 25, no. 2 (2002): 127-143, 137.

<sup>40</sup> Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime”, 390.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 389.

<sup>42</sup> In Colombia, the term ‘paramilitaries’ is reserved for counter-insurgent armed groups, who have often received the tacit and/or active support of sectors within the State. During the second half of the 1990s, many paramilitary structures came together under the umbrella banner of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (Colombia’s United Self-Defences, AUC), which turned into the most lethal actor in the Colombian conflict. One of the best books about this phenomenon labelled the AUC paramilitaries ‘intra-systemic actors’, because of their extensive links to elites – see Francisco Gutiérrez, *Clientelistic Warfare* (Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd., 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Norman, “Narcotization as Security Dilemma”.

<sup>44</sup> See Ellen Wood, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism”, *New Left Review* 127, no. May-June (1981): 66-95.

<sup>45</sup> Acero, “Review of the Literature on Illicit Drugs in Colombia”; Francisco Thoumi, “Illegal Drugs in Colombia: From Illegal Economic Boom to Social Crisis”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 582 (2002): 102-116.

<sup>46</sup> César Ortiz, “Los Cultivos Ilícitos En Colombia: Evolución Histórica y Territorio”, in *Análisis Histórico Del Narcotráfico En Colombia, Cátedra Anual de Historia Ernesto Restrepo Tirado, VIII* (Bogotá: Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2003), 199–245; María Clemencia Ramírez, “Colonización, Coca y Movimiento Social: El Caso Del Putumayo”, in *Análisis Histórico Del Narcotráfico En Colombia, Cátedra Anual de Historia Ernesto Restrepo Tirado, VIII* (Bogotá:

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Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2003), 170–98; Henry Salgado, “Conflicto Agrario y Expansión de Los Cultivos Ilícitos En Colombia”, in *Análisis Histórico Del Narcotráfico En Colombia, Cátedra Anual de Historia Ernesto Restrepo Tirado, VIII* (Bogotá: Museo Nacional de Colombia, 2003), 246–72.

<sup>47</sup> Alfredo Molano, “Fragmentos de La Historia Del Conflicto Armado (1920-2010)”, in *Conflicto Social y Rebelión Armada En Colombia* (Bogotá: Gentes del Común, 2015), 193.

<sup>48</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez, “Tensiones y Dilemas de La Producción Cocalera”, *Análisis Político* 97, no. septiembre-diciembre (2019): 71-90.

<sup>49</sup> Ferro, “Las FARC y su Relación con la Economía de la Coca”; María Clara Torres, “The Making of a Coca Frontier: The Case of Ariari, Colombia”, in *The Origins of Cocaine. Colonization and Failed Development in the Amazon Andes*, ed. Paul Gootenberg and Liliana Dávalos (London: Routledge, 2018), 150–51; Norman, “Narcotization as Security Dilemma”, 645; Phelan, “FARC’s Pursuit of ‘Taking Power’”, 11.

<sup>50</sup> FARC-EP, “Conclusiones de Organización de la Séptima Conferencia Nacional de las FARC-EP”. Seemingly, some fronts did not apply the new rules immediately. For example, at the 1987 plenary, the 7<sup>th</sup> front (which operated in Meta and Guaviare) was accused of taxing the coca trade in ways that contravened the 1982 conference agreement –see FARC-EP “Pleno Ampliado Febrero 17-20 de 1987”. The proceedings of these and various other conferences and plenaries can be found at: [www.farc-ep.co](http://www.farc-ep.co) .

<sup>51</sup> FARC-EP, “Pleno Ampliado Octubre 6-20 de 1983”. At a 1984/1985 plenary, the leadership further insisted on the need to identify “new sources of funding” (quite possibly referring to coca), stating that “after a thorough study of these new sources, we will come up with a better and smarter policy in this aspect of our financial activity”. The organization was expanding rapidly at the time

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(the number of fronts had almost doubled in a space of less than two years) but many fronts were struggling to cover their basic expenses. This plenary was crucial to the FARC-EP's new financial policy; it centralized finances and created units specialized in acquiring funding for the military expansion of the guerrillas –see FARC-EP, “Pleno Ampliado Diciembre 27 de 1984-Enero 2 de 1985”. Later, the FARC-EP insisted once again that their policy needed to differentiate the paramilitarized mafias and the elites who enriched themselves with the drugs trade, from the peasantry who participated in the illicit economies because of the lack of other opportunities –see FARC-EP, “Pleno Ampliado Noviembre de 1997”.

<sup>52</sup> CNMH, “El Placer. Mujeres, Coca y Guerra en el Bajo Putumayo” (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2012); Oscar Jansson, “Tríadas Putumayenses: Relaciones Patrón-Cliente en la Economía de la Cocaína”, *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 42 (2006): 223-47; “La Guerra de ‘El Mexicano’. ¿Qué Lleva a Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha a Echarse Plomo con todo El Mundo?”, *Semana*, 28 August 1989, <http://www.semana.com>.

<sup>53</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez, Tatiana Acevedo and Juan Manuel Viatela, “Violent Liberalism? State, Conflict and Political Regime in Colombia, 1930-2006”, *Crisis States Research Centre Working Paper* (London: LSE, 2007), 23.

<sup>54</sup> Arlene Tickner, “Colombia: U.S. Subordinate, Autonomous Actor, or Something in Between?”, in *Latin American and Caribbean Foreign Policy*, ed. Frank O. Mora and Jeanne A.K. Hey (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003). Scandals such as this have plagued numerous other administrations, including the present one of president Iván Duque, currently under investigations for links to narco-traffickers and vote-buying. See “Los Escándalos que tocan al Gobierno de Iván Duque”, *Semana*, 17 June 2020, and “Vicepresidenta de Colombia, Envuelta en Escándalo por Condena a su Hermano”, *France 24.com*, 12 June 2020.

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<sup>55</sup> Alejandro Reyes, *Guerreros y Campesinos: el Despojo de la Tierra en Colombia* (Bogotá: Norma, 2009), 4–5; Eduardo Sáenz, “Historia del Narcotráfico en Colombia”, *El Espectador*, 14 May 2016, <https://www.elespectador.com>.

<sup>56</sup> Reyes, *Guerreros y Campesinos*, 5-6 and 87-88; Thoumi, ‘Illegal Drugs in Colombia’, 109-11.

<sup>57</sup> The FARC-EP was organised in fronts of around 100 combatants each, and fronts operating in a broad region were grouped in blocs (blocs were composed at least of 5 fronts –the Eastern bloc, for instance, had as many as 24 fronts). By the time of its demobilisation in 2016, the FARC-EP had seven blocs operating in the country.

<sup>58</sup> Ariel Ávila, “FARC: La Coca y el Narcotráfico”, in *FARC-EP. Temas y Problemas Nacionales, 1958-2008*, ed. Carlos Medina (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 2008); Norman, “Narcotization as Security Dilemma”.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example: Lee, “Terrorism”, 436-437; Stokes, “America’s Other War”.

<sup>60</sup> Countless interviewees stressed the impoverishment they suffered as a result of manual eradication and aerial fumigation -many relocated to the town and requested humanitarian assistance as a result; on displacement caused by the War on Drugs more broadly, see e.g. Codhes, “Víctimas Emergentes”, *Boletín Informativo de la Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento* (Bogotá: Codhes, April 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States. AD. 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn, “Rebels & Legitimacy; An Introduction”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no. 4-5 (2017): 669-685; Klaus Schlichte and Ulrich Schneckener, “Armed Groups and the Politics of Legitimacy”, *Civil Wars* 17, no. 4 (2015): 409-424.

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<sup>64</sup> Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime”, 389; see also e.g. Ramírez, “Colonización, Coca y Movimiento Social”, 181.

<sup>65</sup> José Antonio Gutiérrez, “Insurgent Institutions: Refractory Communities, Armed Insurgency and Institution-Building in the Colombian Conflict” (PhD Thesis, University College Dublin, 2019), 286.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Goodhand, Patrick Meehan, and Helena Pérez-Niño, “Drugs,(Dis)Order and Agrarian Change: The Political Economy of Drugs and its Relevance to International Drug Policy”, *NOREF* (2014), 2.

<sup>67</sup> Alfredo Molano, ‘Tierra y tierrita’, *El Espectador*, 8 July 2017, <https://www.elespectador.com>.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with coca farmer, 26/09/2019, Puerto Asís.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with *cocalero*, 01/07/17, Puerto Leguízamo.

<sup>70</sup> Ramírez, *Between the Guerrillas and the State*, 50, 44.

<sup>71</sup> On Guaviare, see Alfredo Molano, *Selva Adentro. Una Historia Oral de la Colonización del Guaviare* (Bogotá: Ancora Editores, 1987). On Caquetá, see Ferro, “Las FARC y su Relación con la Economía de La Coca”.

<sup>72</sup> On coca production and trade in Argelia, see José Antonio Gutiérrez, “‘Whatever we Have, we Owe it to Coca’. Insights on Armed Conflict and the Coca Economy from Argelia, Colombia”, *International Journal of Drug Policy* (forthcoming).

<sup>73</sup> Shortly after the formation of the AUC (see endnote 42 above), national paramilitary commanders -Carlos and Vicente Castaño- created the South Putumayo Block, with the aim of ridding the region of rebels and regaining control of the illicit drugs business. Groups of men trained in Urabá were flown to Puerto Asís, where they established their first bases in the town and

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surrounding rural areas. In 1999 the paramilitaries began their incursion into other municipalities, marking their route with massacres: El Tigre, El Placer, La Dorada. By 2001, they had taken control of most urban zones (i.e. towns and villages) and the main roads in Lower and Middle Putumayo, confining the FARC to more isolated rural areas. See e.g. CNMH, “El Placer. Mujeres, Coca y Guerra en el Bajo Putumayo”.

<sup>74</sup> Group interview with community leaders from various rural sub-districts, 31/03/2019, Puerto Asís; Group interview with various inhabitants of a single rural sub-district, 29/03/2019, Puerto Asís.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with coca farmer, 26/09/2019, Puerto Asís.

<sup>76</sup> Jansson, ‘Tríadas Putumayenses’, 241.

<sup>77</sup> Francisco Gutiérrez and Jennifer Vargas, “Agrarian Elite Participation in Colombia's Civil War”, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 17 (2017): 739-748.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with *cocalero*, 26/09/15, Puerto Asís. The FARC-EP emphasized this distance from the mafia even in aesthetical terms; in 1987 they banned guerrillas from wearing “mafia-like” rings and necklaces, declaring all such goods –often gifts from locals- to be property of the fronts to be sold. See FARC-EP, “Pleno Ampliado Febrero 17-20 de 1987”.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*; Interview with ex-combatant, 22/04/2019 and 03/06/2019; Interview with ex-coca grower and former local trader, 24/09/2019, Puerto Asís; Informal conversations during fieldwork.

<sup>80</sup> Ramírez, *Between the Guerrillas and the State*, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, 22/04/2019 and 03/06/2019.

<sup>82</sup> Molano, “Fragmentos de La Historia Del Conflicto Armado”, 198-99.

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<sup>83</sup> Ramírez, *Between the Guerrillas and the State*, 133, also pp. 127-128.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Ramírez, 119.

<sup>85</sup> Ramírez, *Between the Guerrillas and the State*. This statement is also supported by our own interviews with various people who participated in those protests.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, 22/04/2019 and 03/06/2019. This particular quote refers to an experience during the mid-2000s in an area of Meta controlled by the FARC-EP.

<sup>87</sup> Darío Fajardo and Henry Salgado, *El Acuerdo Agrario: Negociación Gobierno-FARC, Reforma Rural Integral, Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícitos, Textos Finales* (Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora, 2017); Carlos Medina, *Conflicto Armado y Procesos de Paz en Colombia: Memoria. Casos FARC-EP y ELN* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2009).

<sup>88</sup> Ferro, “Las FARC y su Relación con la Economía de la Coca”; see also Jaime Jaramillo, Leonidas Mora, and Fernando Cubides, *Colonización, coca y guerrilla* (Bogotá: Alianza Editorial, 1989).

<sup>89</sup> See e.g. Ferro Medina, “Las FARC y su Relación con la Economía de la Coca”; Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime”, 390.

<sup>90</sup> Group interview with community leaders from various rural sub-districts, 31/03/2019, Puerto Asís.

<sup>91</sup> See e.g. CNMH, *El Placer*, 38; Hough, “Guerrilla Insurgency as Organized Crime”, 390.

<sup>92</sup> At least three farmers we interviewed and/or spoke with informally in Puerto Asís expressed resentment about the FARC-EP’s coca taxes and how this affected their incomes. This idea was also expressed in the community of El Plateado.

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with *cocalero*, 26/09/15, Puerto Asís.

<sup>94</sup> See also Jansson, “Tríadas Putumayenses”.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with ex-coca grower and former local trader, 24/09/2019, Puerto Asís.

<sup>96</sup> see also Jansson, ‘Tríadas Putumayenses’, 240.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Pedro, 48<sup>th</sup> Front, 16/02/18, Puerto Asís.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with *cocalero*, 26/09/15, Puerto Asís.

<sup>99</sup> Jansson, “Tríadas Putumayenses”, 227, 237.

<sup>100</sup> Conversation with coca farmer, 14/09/2019, El Tigre.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with agrarian leader, 06/02/2020, Puerto Asís.

<sup>102</sup> The observations in this paragraph are based on extensive fieldwork in the region between 2015 and 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Ferro, “Las FARC y su Relación con la Economía de la Coca”; Torres, “The Making of a Coca Frontier”.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with two ex-coca growers, 02/07/2019, Puerto Asís.

<sup>105</sup> Both the 48<sup>th</sup> and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Fronts encouraged this policy. As such, it covered all FARC-EP stronghold areas in lower Putumayo. Nevertheless, this was an orientation, a recommendation, and not a rule.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with ASCAMTA leader, 15/08/2017, Argelia.

<sup>107</sup> Gutiérrez, “Insurgent Institutions”.

<sup>108</sup> Group interview with people from various rural sub-districts in Puerto Asís, 31/03/2019.

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<sup>109</sup> Sara Reardon, “FARC and the Forest: Peace Is Destroying Colombia’s Jungle -and Opening it to Science”, *Nature* 558, no. 7709 (2018): 169-170.

<sup>110</sup> “Normas de convivencia para el buen funcionamiento de las comunidades”, Puerto Bello - Putumayo

<sup>111</sup> Gutiérrez, “Insurgent Institutions”.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Manuel, 48<sup>th</sup> Front, 04/06/17, Puerto Asís.

<sup>113</sup> The PDFs of the inventory were published by *Semana* and are available here: <http://static.iris.net.co/semana/upload/documents/anexo-1.pdf>

<sup>114</sup> Interview with an agrarian leader, 15/05/16, El Plateado - Argelia.

<sup>115</sup> Conversation with a *cocalero*, 25/03/16, Sinaí - Argelia.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example: Catherine LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest in Colombia, 1850-1936* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986).

<sup>117</sup> Interview with an inhabitant of Piñuña Blanco, 30/03/2019.

<sup>118</sup> The FARC-EP actually had templates for community co-existence manuals that included a variety of rules/norms. These templates were meant to serve as a guide that communities could use to elaborate their own manuals. However, if inhabitants lacked the organizational capacity to write up and agree on their own set of rules, the FARC-EP would step in. According to one rebel, the latter scenario was a last resort: “in some places those norms were imposed, but that was not the idea within the organization, this was not convenient” (Interview with Wilson Saavedra, 21<sup>st</sup> Front, 27/06/17).

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<sup>119</sup> “Normas de convivencia para el buen funcionamiento de las comunidades”, Puerto Bello - Putumayo.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, chapter 5, article 36.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with ex-combatant, 22/04/2019 and 03/06/2019. Here she is referring to her experiences in Antioquia and Caldas.

<sup>122</sup> *Hora 20* (Caracol, 13 February 2020).

<sup>123</sup> José Antonio Gutiérrez, “Towards a New Phase of Guerrilla Warfare in Colombia? The Reformation of the FARC-EP in Perspective”, *Latin American Perspectives*, forthcoming (2020).