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FORUM ON ILLICIT DRUG CROP ECONOMIES

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The political economy of illicit drug crops: forum introduction

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ABSTRACT

This article and the forum it introduces examine illicit drug crop (IDC) economies from agrarian perspectives. Examining IDCs as a group implies analysing how prohibition distinguishes them from other (licit) crops. We identify seven mechanisms through which prohibition shapes the agrarian political economy of IDCs and explore how these mechanisms and their effects generate distinctive patterns of development and political action amongst 'illicit peasantries'. We also examine connections between illicit and licit crops, including how licit crop crises and illicit crop booms intertwine. We argue that IDC economies provide a bulwark for smallholders but are by no means peasant idylls.

KEYWORDS

Illicit economies; drug crops; coca/cocaine; opium; cannabis; counternarcotics

Introduction

Coca, opium-poppy and cannabis are vital agrarian subsectors with wider economic and political importance (see e.g. Gutierrez 2020; Jelsma et al. 2021). Opium production has, in recent history, generated more export earnings in Afghanistan than any other activity (Mansfield 2018b, 157). Current estimates indicate that circa 200,000 Colombian households, or at least half a million people, generate(d) some or all their income from coca production (Portafolio 2020), making coca the third most important agricultural sector in the country, after coffee and panela sugar cane, as a provider of rural employment (Agronet 2019; FINAGRO 2014). In Morocco, hashish production generated more income than tourism in 2016 (Jelsma et al. 2021, 43). And in Bolivia, the importance of coca cultivation is such that the coca-growers' unions propelled a *cocalero* peasant leader, Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president, to power in 2006 (see Grisaffi 2019).

Despite the vitality of these smallholder cash crops, what little we know of cannabis and especially coca and opium-poppy is mostly scattered in publications focused on drug policy, state failure/fragility, armed conflict, and organised crime. This article and the collection it ties together, whilst being informed by these perspectives, prioritises an agrarian political economy lens. This leads to an interest in the land, labour, credit and exchange relations surrounding illicit drug crop (IDC) economies, as well as the materiality of the crops themselves. We also investigate how agrarian change has contributed

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to the emergence, resurgence and expansion of IDC economies and, in turn, the broader impacts of these subsectors on agrarian change. Thus, we ask questions about upstream and downstream linkages; the distribution of profits along the value chains these crops are part of; their effects on social differentiation, moral economies and rural life-worlds; and the forms of collective action and politics that have been pursued by 'illicit peasantries'.

These questions are addressed with reference to our own empirical research and that of the contributors to this collection, in Colombia, Peru, Zimbabwe, Myanmar and Afghanistan. We also draw upon the wider literature on illicit crops within these and other countries. In the case of cannabis production, which is more geographically dispersed than coca and opium-poppy, we focus on what is sometimes called 'traditional' cultivation, mostly by small-scale farmers in the Global South, rather than the 'new' urban and indoor cultivation that has expanded across the Global North in the last 20–30 years (see Potter, Bouchard, and Decorte 2016).

Cannabis, coca and opium-poppy share several traits. They are all fairly hardy plants that may be grown on poor quality lands where other crops do not thrive (on cannabis, see Afsahi 2016, 48; Carrier and Klantschnig 2016, 7; Polson and Petersen-Rockney 2019, 190; on coca, see Dest 2021, 3; Thomson, Parada-Hernández, and Acero 2022, 15). Opium-poppy, for example, survives in Afghanistan's arid zones (Ingalls and Mansfield 2017, 133), Myanmar's steep upland hillsides where soils are thin (Meehan 2016, 309–310), and Mexico's cold highlands where even native maize struggles (Tamariz 2022, 8). All three crops also provide relatively quick returns. The cannabis crop cycle is about 5–6 months (Afsahi 2016, 46). Opium-poppy generates a harvest within 3–4 months (Meehan 2022). And while coca doesn't provide returns until circa 18 months after planting (Thomson, Parada-Hernández, and Acero 2022), it's still faster growing than many alternatives, like most tree crops. Furthermore, opium resin, coca paste and hashish are non-perishable, while dried herbal cannabis can retain potency for 6–12 months if stored properly. This has benefits for farmers. For example, they aren't ruined if they cannot get their produce to market immediately and may sometimes even deliberately delay while holding out for a price rise (Allan 2004, 144; Goodhand 2005; Meehan 2016, 327; Thomson 2023). Finally, opium resin, coca paste and hashish are all comparatively compact, making them easier and cheaper to store and transport (and also conceal).

Ultimately, however, most similarities between these crops derive from their illegal status. Otherwise, as well as being grown in different contexts, they are quite distinct crops/crop economies (see also Potter, Bouchard, and Decorte 2016). The perennial coca shrub can live for over a decade, while cannabis and opium-poppy are annuals. Cannabis can be grown almost anywhere with the right equipment and knowhow and is now cultivated in more than 170 countries; opium-poppy and coca crops are much more geographically concentrated. Smallholder opium harvesting is quite intricate, as incisions into flower bulbs release a resin, which must be scraped from the bulb hours later – a process that may be repeated several times; coca leaves, in contrast, are stripped from the bush until it is practically bare. Markets for coca leaves are currently very small outside Peru and Bolivia, so most are processed before being sold, whilst there is a huge global market for both processed cannabis products *and* herbal cannabis, which undergoes minimal post-harvest procedures. Many cannabis growers are not full-time farmers but rather people who taught themselves to cultivate the plant for personal consumption and sharing

with friends; while opium-poppy and coca are now predominantly grown by smallholders who treat them as cash crops. (Some commercial growers consume their own coca leaves and opium-resin. Also, there are indigenous/traditional producers for whom the use-value of these crops is primary. But those motivated chiefly by consumption are no longer the majority in the case of opium and coca.)

So it is prohibition that ties cannabis, coca and opium-poppy together. Characterising IDC economies and studying them as a group necessarily involves thinking about how proscription shapes the agrarian political economy of these crops and how this distinguishes them from other (licit) crops. Of course, counternarcotics policies are applied unevenly. For example, social acceptance and official tolerance of cannabis have grown in some contexts, including places where it remains illegal, which creates differences between this crop sector and the other two (Potter, Bouchard, and Decorte 2016). But prohibition still creates sufficient commonalities to merit studying them together as IDCs.

In emphasising the impacts of prohibition and what makes IDC economies distinctive, we are aware of the dangers of 'fetishizing' drugs and underplaying the continuities and connections between illicit and licit economies. Fortunately, these continuities and connections become more evident when situating IDCs within a broader agrarian literature rather than drug and crime studies. As discussed below, most IDC cultivators in the Global South grow both licit and illicit crops; licit crop crises and illicit crop booms are often linked; illicit crop production may subsidise licit crop production; and many attributes assigned to IDCs, such as their association with violence and organised crime, are not unique to them. Notwithstanding these caveats, it is possible to identify an agrarian political economy specific to illicit drug crops; and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to do so in a comprehensive way.

The paper is structured into five sections. First, we identify seven mechanisms through which prohibition shapes the political economy of drug crops, by: (i) engendering superprofits, (ii) placing limits on the involvement of corporate capital, and (iii) constraining certain forms of state intervention, while (iv) compelling and providing justification for other types of intervention, (v) opening opportunities for armed organisations to fill governance voids, (vi) pushing the crops into frontier spaces, and (vii) creating 'illicit peasantries'. The rest of the paper details how these mechanisms operate, their knock-on effects and contextual interactions. In section two, we examine the links between agrarian crises and the emergence, growth or revival of illicit drug crop economies. Largely because of their unique characteristics, these economies have flourished amidst the rubble left by crises rooted in capitalist development processes and associated policies, such as modernisation programs and the mechanisation of agriculture or the deregulation and financialisation of commodity markets. Third, we explore how the mechanisms described in section one have turned illicit drug crops into *the* alternative development for smallholders. Focusing on the four Ls – land, labour, linkages, and livelihoods (see Hall, Scoones, and Tsikata 2017), we analyse what makes drug-fuelled development distinctive. We argue that IDCs can provide a bulwark for smallholder agriculture, but are by no means peasant idylls. Section four examines some of the vulnerabilities associated with IDC cultivation in more detail: we highlight how involvement in the drug trade may expose producer communities to heightened violence; a (perceived) breakdown of social values and moral economies; and increasingly exploitative social relations and growing social differentiation. Fifth, we consider illicit peasantries' politics and collective

mobilisation, how this influences the trade-offs they confront, and how involvement in IDC economies affects their political aims and strategies. We conclude by reflecting on the uncertain future IDC farmers face, highlighting how the growth of synthetic drug markets and drug legalisation threaten the bulwark that these crops have long provided.

In terms of the scope of this article and corresponding special forum, we focus on the contemporary dynamics of illicit drug *crop* economies – production, producers, and the places in which they are concentrated. Although there are clear advantages to examining global value chains in their entirety, this would have meant sacrificing much of the depth and detail that make this special forum unique. Furthermore, while several articles (e.g. Dávila et al. 2021), books (e.g. Arias and Grisaffi 2021; Ramírez 2014 (2003)) and special issues (e.g. Sauls, Dest, and McSweeney 2022) unite studies on different drug chain segments, there has been much less work that brings together different illicit drug crops. The implication of our chosen focus is that we do not take on important related topics, such as the impacts of drug trafficking and money laundering on agrarian change outside spaces of production (see e.g. Ballvé 2019; ICG 2019; McSweeney 2020), including narco-fuelled land accumulation (see e.g. Ballvé 2012; McSweeney et al. 2017; Reyes Posada 2009; Richani 2002).

The agrarian impacts of prohibition

Prohibition has manifold impacts. As outlined in the rest of this section, illegality shapes the agrarian political economy of drug crops through seven interrelated mechanisms (see Table 1).

The prohibition premium

First, prohibition engenders super-profits. In the case of opium/heroin and cocaine, most of these profits accrue to those involved in trafficking and wholesale activities (Arias and Grisaffi 2021; Dávila et al. 2021; Gutierrez 2023; Morris 2020a; Meehan 2016, 327–329). As such, there is little incentive for drug-trafficking organisations (DTOs) – the equivalent of lead firms – to expend significant resources (in)directly controlling production.[1] A contrast can be drawn here with many licit agro-export commodity chains in which lead firms obligate producers/suppliers to re-organise production to ensure profits higher up (see e.g. Amanor 2012; Julia and White 2012; Selwyn 2007; Thiers 2019). This does not mean there is no drive to increase productivity within IDC production, but competitive pressures do not function the way they do in many other agricultural commodity chains/markets (Pain 2023; Thomson 2023).

The distribution of profits along illegal cannabis chains appears to be quite different (data is limited) given that intercontinental trafficking of herbal cannabis has declined since the 1980s. The crop is now cultivated mostly for domestic and neighbouring-country markets. In fact, a significant amount of production is undertaken by cannabis users themselves (Chouvy 2019; Leggett and Pietschmann 2008; Potter, Bouchard, and

[1]There are exceptions to this pattern. According to Morris, increasing fragmentation of DTOs in Mexico, especially since 2006 due to the drug war, reduced profit margins, making these smaller and more localised organisations 'ever more aggressive in their attempts to establish direct (and more profitable) control over autonomous opium producers' (2020a, 66; see also Tamariz 2022).

Table 1. The agrarian impacts of prohibition.

Mechanism	Description	Typical Outcomes
1. The prohibition premium	Illicit drug economies generate super profits (because of the risk attached) that are mostly captured by traffickers but impact the entire supply chain.	Reduces lead firms' interest in squeezing producers; Higher incomes from illicit crops compared to licit crops; Illicit drug crop cultivators can live from small plots of land; Transport costs from remote areas are covered
2. Constraints on state policies and regulations	Illegality prevents state authorities from formally engaging with, regulating, or supporting, illicit drug crop economies.	IDC cultivators lack official recourse and often seek it elsewhere; Lower barriers to entry due to lack of rules and regulations; Cultivators do not compete with state-backed agribusinesses
3. Criminalisation of IDCs and enforcement of counternarcotics policies	Prohibition compels – and provides a rationale for – state interventions to criminalise and suppress illicit drug crop economies.	IDC cultivators subjected to additional forms of state violence; Shapes production decisions about when, where and how to grow; Can deliberately or inadvertently overturn land tenure relations
4. Constraints on corporate capital	Illegality prevents corporate capital and agribusinesses from certain forms of involvement.	Smallholders are not being driven out of these sectors; Compared to other global agri-chains, IDC cultivators have greater decision-making autonomy over production practices
5. Supply chains organised and governed by armed organisations	Constraints on state and corporate involvement enable armed organisations to organise drug supply chains and – sometimes – govern/fill regulatory voids.	Cultivators are often subjected to violence; Some cultivators support armed organisations that govern IDC economies, influencing illicit peasant politics and relations with the state; IDC politics are often about resisting or negotiating with armed organisations, rather than agribusinesses as in other crop economies
6. Drug crop frontiers	Prohibition contributes to the concentration of illicit drug crop economies in borderland and frontier regions where state authority is fitful and contested.	Frontier locations define many IDC economies and producers (e.g. reliance on community – institutions and illicit incomes to self-provision services); Frontier/borderland and IDC politics intertwine, with IDCs often used as an additional rationale for stigmatising inhabitants of these regions; Shapes IDCs' role in agrarian change (e.g. as 'pushers' attracting populations and investors and commodifying land and labour)
7. Illicit peasantries	Illegality converts IDC cultivators and workers into illicit peasantries.	Collective identity formation and social mobilisation over shared experiences of repression and stigmatisation, ways of life, and resistance to counter-narcotics

Decorte 2016). In short, it is unclear what proportion of cannabis profits are captured by – mostly regional and local – traffickers, and how this has changed since what some observers call 'import substitution', but it may be lower than for coca and opium-poppy.

In any case, whatever the cut taken by other actors, the prohibition premium is still significant for cultivators. As Gutiérrez-Sanín (2021) highlights, IDC farmers 'choose among the real options they have at hand. They are not comparing their situation with what would happen if the coca [cannabis or opium] market[s] were more just, but with what they can get in other types of agriculture – or forms of making a living.' And incomes from opium, coca and cannabis are usually, though not always, higher than for other

crops. IDC prices fluctuate and relative income or profitability is not the only rationale for IDC cultivation (E. Dávalos, Bejarano, and Correa 2009; Gutierrez 2023; Mansfield 2018a). Still, in some contexts, drug-crops have allowed growers to earn 3, 5, 10 or even 20 times more than alternative crops (for data see: Afsahi 2016, 50; Allan 2004, 147; Bradley and Millington 2008, 7; Carrier and Klantschnig 2016, 11; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2019, 77; Jelsma et al. 2021, 41; Khun Moe Htun 2018, 91–92; Luong 2022, 110).

This prohibition premium, in turn, enables growers to live from small plots of land. For example, in land-scarce Argelia (Cauca, Colombia) *cocaleros* survive with less than half a hectare. According to Gutiérrez-Sanín et al. (2021), no other crop would enable them to do so. In Bolivia's land-frontier, coca substitution programs were associated with higher deforestation rates precisely because more land is required to earn the equivalent with legal crops. Bradley and Millington (2008, 7) estimated that 14 hectares of palm were required to generate the same income as one hectare of coca. Generally, some farming activities require less land than others. But it is the prohibition premium that enables illicit crop cultivators to scrape by on such tiny areas. Take away or reduce this premium and they would need to cultivate larger plots to earn the same amount. The environmental benefits of these 'land savings' are partially offset by counternarcotics policies that displace illicit crops and their cultivators to new areas.[2] Nevertheless, IDCs have been a lifeline for many land-poor who otherwise may have been forced out of agriculture due to a lack of access to the larger areas required for other farming activities. This is especially – but not only – true in places with no nearby open land frontiers.

The prohibition premium also enables farmers to survive and even thrive in frontier areas (see mechanism vi, below) – often the only places they can access land and where other cash crops are not profitable. In Afghanistan, for example, opium-poppy crops funded the installation of tube wells and solar-powered pumps for irrigation in desert areas and thus helped bring additional land into production, albeit temporarily, given the rapid depletion of groundwater (Mansfield 2018b; 2020). In Colombia, Peru, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, buyers travel to remote villages – some only accessible by boat, mule, motorbike, or foot – to purchase cocaine paste or opium resin. The prohibition premium funds these efforts; legal produce often does not have a high-enough value-to-weight ratio to cover transport costs from such areas (Grisaffi and Ledebur 2016; Ingalls and Mansfield 2017; Meehan 2022; Thomson, Parada-Hernández, and Acero 2022; Young 2004, 260).

[2]There is some disagreement as to whether, in the aggregate, illicit crops result in land savings or not (see Dávalos, Bejarano and Correa 2009, 382–383). Any calculations would have to consider multiple factors that vary between and within countries, such as whether the growers relocate only their illicit crops or their entire farms, whether they relocate to forest land or, say, pastures and fallows, and what 'alternative' is used as a comparison. For example, during a period of 'normal' prices, a coca-growing family in the Colombian Amazon with a farm of 2 hectares (total) who are forced to relocate fully ten times would still not use as much land as a family earning the equivalent from cattle ranching. A land-use comparison with coffee would not be so dramatic, but for many it is not a viable alternative (see Thomson 2023). Continuing with examples from Colombia, data from the government (GOC) and UNODC indicates that, as of 2020, the vast majority of coca was grown on lands with at least 10 years history of 'permanent' (124,724 ha) or 'intermittent' (17,099 ha) illicit crop cultivation; just 1% or 960 hectares was grown on recently cleared lands (UNODC and GOC 2021, 29). So, it seems dynamics changed over time. This is the type of data that would need to be considered to calculate whether or not IDCs represent 'land savings'.

Criminalisation of IDCs and enforcement of counter-narcotics policies

Second, whilst prohibition bars certain forms of state intervention (see below), it compels – and provides a rationale for – other forms, in particular counternarcotics policies that criminalise and suppress the production of opium-poppy, coca and cannabis.

As detailed in section 4, forced eradication, both manual and aerial, is often accompanied by physical violence and is itself a form of violence that further impoverishes already marginalised communities. These operations can also have significant distributive effects within drug-growing populations. For example, in Afghanistan and Myanmar, eradication (in the latter case, imposed by ethnic armed organisations as well as State forces) has tended to reinforce and widen class differences, as producers with power and wealth evade law enforcement (Goodhand 2005, 212; Mansfield 2019; Meehan 2021). Conversely, and notwithstanding reports of bribery (Acero and Thomson 2022), eradication in Colombia's lower Putumayo appears to slow processes of capital accumulation and thereby social differentiation among coca farmers by obliging them to reduce the size of their plots (Thomson 2023).

Those who lack the wealth and connections to avoid eradication deploy evasive coping strategies. In this way, illegality shapes even the most basic production decisions. In Myanmar, Mexico and Colombia, growers plant smaller dispersed plots to avoid detection and spread risks. In Myanmar, growers also spread risks by staggering planting and thus harvesting times (Meehan 2021). In Mexico, some use intercropping as a form of camouflage (Tamariz 2022). And in Colombia, growers may harvest early if they suspect eradication is imminent (UNODC and Minjusticia 2011, 44). In the case of cannabis, Chouvy argues, law enforcement encouraged the localisation of production and forced producers into smaller areas (indoors and outdoors), which they compensated for by developing more potent hybrids (2019, 5).

Forced eradication may or may not be accompanied by Alternative Development (AD) or crop substitution programs. These programs often unsettle, or even overturn, existing land tenure – whether deliberately or inadvertently – with detrimental impacts (see also Grisaffi and Ledebur 2016). The Helmand Food Zone in Afghanistan, for example, had the effect of displacing sharecroppers and tenant farmers (because wheat and other substitute crops are less labour-intensive than poppy), who migrated to newly settled sites of opium-poppy cultivation, where opportunities for sharecropping and tenant farming were available, albeit on less favourable terms (Mansfield 2018a; 2019; Fishstein 2014). In the case of the Royal Thai AD program, one of its declared goals was to end shifting cultivation and so transform highland communities' relationship with the land (Anderson 2017; 2018, 7). And in Myanmar, dispossession of peasant farmers has been part and parcel of the Opium Substitution Policy (OSP) policy sponsored by the Chinese government (Jones and Hameiri 2021, 133–158; Kramer and Woods 2012; Meehan and Dan 2023; Woods 2018; see also Lu 2017 on the OSP in Laos).

As argued by Gutiérrez-Sanín, Castillo, and Cristancho-Bohada (2023), successful substitution programs – by definition – involve a massive and rapid change in land use, which typically impacts on the distribution of wealth and power. They show that most programs in Colombia have not actually achieved their stated land-use change goals. Those that have were built through 'long coalitions' that provided benefits to local, regional and national elites (operating in licit and illicit sectors) and international actors too. Like studies on Thailand, Myanmar, Laos (cited above) and other regions of Colombia (Ballvé 2013; Tenthoff

2008; Vélez-Torres and Lugo-Vivas 2021), their case studies illustrate how prohibition provides authorities with another means of advancing a particular model of development (see also Sanabria 2004 on Bolivia pre-Morales).

Constraints on state policies and regulation

Third, though government actors commonly regulate IDC economies unofficially (Gutierrez 2023; Meehan 2011; Morris 2020a; Tamariz 2022), prohibition places limits on states' formal involvement. This makes it difficult for IDC cultivators, for example, to request state protection from a threatening buyer or to denounce theft of their crops to the authorities. In many contexts, the lack of access to legal recourse applies to licit crop sectors as well, but illegality tends to heighten these difficulties. Prohibition also prevents the state from formally taxing IDC production and trade, even though these activities may represent a substantial part of the local economy. This weakens the state's tax base – revenue that could be channelled into providing education, health care and other services. In these ways, the policy constraints created by prohibition may further weaken the state's legitimacy in regions where it is already challenged. And, as discussed below, non-state organisations often end up filling these governance voids.

Their illegality also means that governments cannot openly foster and fashion opium poppy, coca and cannabis cultivation via subsidies, tax breaks, land concessions, publicly funded research, or phytosanitary norms. This marks an important difference with other agrarian subsectors, which are often defined by such policies (see e.g. Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010; Oliveira and Hecht 2016; White and Dasgupta 2010). And it is one reason smallholders remain dominant within illicit economies: they are not forced to compete with state-backed agribusinesses or to comply with costly rules and regulations. In some cases, such rules and regulations helped push peasants into drug-crop cultivation in the first place (Torres 2021), and they are often a hindrance to their participation in legal markets (Acero and Thomson 2022).

The importance of these constraints on state involvement becomes evident when considering how regulations surrounding licit cannabis markets have thus far tended to exclude small producers. In some places, growers without land titles and with criminal records (for drug production and related offenses) are unable to obtain licences. Licences themselves are often prohibitively expensive. And even when they are not, compliance with their terms usually implies large costs, like testing to ensure maximum THC levels are not breached, which itself requires complicated cultivation, harvesting and storage methods, for which training and funding are rarely offered. Barriers to entry are particularly high in the case of medicinal cannabis. But strict rules may also apply in recreational markets (Jelsma et al. 2021, 31, 57, 79, 38; see also Chouvy 2019; Rusenga et al. 2024). Some governments have sought to protect and promote small-scale and traditional cultivation (e.g. with reduced licence fees, legal exceptions, investment partnership rules, training programs, etc.); however, these efforts are often too timid to ensure equity in practice (Jelsma et al. 2021).

Constraints on corporate capital

The fourth mechanism or channel through which illegality shapes the agrarian political economy of drug crops and drug-producing territories is the constraints it places on

corporate capital and specifically agribusinesses' involvement in the production segment of the drug chain.

The financial system is overflowing with dirty money and narcotraffickers frequently invest their proceeds in farmland and licit agriculture. In this sense, corporate agribusiness and the illicit drug trade are closely interlinked in many contexts (E. Ballvé 2013; 2019; Gutierrez 2020; McSweeney et al. 2017; Meehan 2011; Meehan and Dan 2023; Torres 2018; 2021; Woods 2018). But large investors do not typically get involved in the *cultivation* of cannabis, opium-poppy or coca, apart from those with a legal licence to do so. So long as coca and opium-poppy remain mostly illegal, agroindustrial firms are not going to drive smallholders out of these sectors. However, where legalisation is occurring, as in the cannabis sector, 'corporate capture' is already taking place (Chouvy 2019; Jelsma et al. 2021; but cf. Rusenga et al. 2024).

The constraints placed on corporate capital in relation to IDCs affects both *who* produces these crops and *how* they are produced. In legal (especially export-oriented) agriculture, even where small and medium sized producers dominate, farmers' decisions – about what seeds they plant, whether or not to intercrop, which chemicals they apply, how and when they harvest, etc. – are often dictated by corporations both upstream and downstream from the production process (see e.g. Amanor 2012; Julia and White 2012; Selwyn 2007; Thiers 2019). IDC growers tend to have more latitude in this regard. However, their autonomy should not be exaggerated; lenders, buyers and regulators within IDC economies can and do influence production decisions, though perhaps to a lesser degree than their legal counterparts.

Supply-chains organised and governed by para – and non-state armed organisations

Fifth, partly because of prohibition, especially the constraints on corporate capital and governments described above, drug-crop supply chains are frequently organised by interconnecting (and sometimes conflicting) illegal or informal armed organisations, which may or may not also fill regulatory voids. The most-obvious knock-on effect is that drug-crop farmers (although this is not unique to IDC economies) are regularly subjected to violence by criminal groups, paramilitaries or pro-state militias, insurgents, and by state forces working with or against these organisations. At the same time, these organisations often gain a measure of civilian support, especially if they perform regulatory roles and/or provide protection from others, including the state (Goodhand 2008; Gutiérrez Danton and Thomson 2020; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021; Idler 2021; Ingalls and Mansfield 2017; Kay 1999; Mason and Campany 1995; Ramírez 2011; Taylor 2017).

The role of armed organisations varies within and between different IDC supply chains. They are absent from many of the worlds' local/regional cannabis economies. And in relation to opium-poppy and coca, there are exceptions to the broader pattern. In Chapare (Bolivia), the coca economy is controlled by settler-formed unions, which act as the authorities in the region, and keep out armed organisations (including those that organise the supply chain they participate in), resulting in a comparatively peaceful regional cocaine economy (Grisaffi 2021; Mortensen and Gutierrez 2019). In some areas of Mexico, local governments have informally regulated illicit crop economies (both opium

and cannabis) and helped organised and well-armed communities to keep drug-trafficking organisations out of their territories, reducing (though not eliminating) violence and exploitation (Tamariz 2022, 6).

Where armed groups do govern production, this is typically light touch, at least in part because of their status as informal or illegal actors. They mostly focus on taxing production, organising purchases, transport, and security. Some offer loans to growers and occasionally supply inputs as well. Groups seeking legitimacy as political actors may also attempt to regulate prices to the advantage of producers and/or impose environmental and labour standards (Ramírez 2011; Taylor 2017; E. Gutierrez 2020; Gutiérrez Danton and Thomson 2020).

Drug-crop frontiers

Sixth, a significant proportion of opium-poppy, coca and – albeit to a lesser and shrinking degree – cannabis is grown in borderlands and frontier regions that have a 'comparative advantage in illegality' (Goodhand 2021). The distinct characteristics of these zones, then, define and shape many illicit drug crop economies.

Frontiers and borderlands are characteristically spaces where state authority and legitimacy are contested. This contestation, often combined with physical inaccessibility, makes it more difficult for state forces to suppress illicit crop cultivation or can be used as an excuse for not doing so. In addition, narcotraffickers may encourage production in such spaces to facilitate their processing and transport operations (Dávila et al. 2021). Finally, frontiers are typically sites of extractive and enclave economies with enhanced boom and bust cycles, which often feed into the emergence and expansion of IDC cultivation (Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2023; Meehan and Dan 2023).

Counternarcotics policies tend to reinforce the spatial concentration of drug-crops by pushing cultivation further into the most marginal environments, including protected areas and spaces of high ecological value. The so-called 'balloon effect' (Buxton 2015, 12–14; Chouvy 2013) in which counternarcotics policies displace rather than bring down aggregate drug production is demonstrated in northern Thailand where ostensibly successful alternative development pushed cultivation across the border to neighbouring regions of Shan State, Myanmar.

The location of IDC economies in frontiers and borderlands profoundly shapes what forms they take and how they interrelate with agrarian change. Importantly, as discussed in section 5, it influences drug crop cultivators' relations with states that are either unable or unwilling to provide services in these regions and tend to treat frontier/borderland inhabitants as second-class citizens. Antagonism arises from: racism towards, and mistrust of, indigenous or ethnic groups whose lives often straddle two or more countries and whose political loyalties may be ambiguous; the fact that frontier zones are often places of sanctuary for armed organisations; and the subjection of these zones to repeated cycles of extractivist development, in which land and people are treated as expendable resources (Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2023; Meehan and Dan 2023). Drug-crop economies tend to intensify this antagonism.

The transformational roles of illicit drug crops are also shaped by their frontier locations. As explained by Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan (2023) they often act as

'pushers' into un- or under- commodified spaces and in so doing contribute to the commodification of land and labour, the monetisation of exchange and the formation of a local consumer market (for examples, see Dest 2021; Molano Bravo 1987; Paredes and Pastor 2023; Peñaranda Currie, Otero-Bahamon, and Uribe 2021). In other cases, they act as 'followers', emerging in the wake of extractivist frontier development, enabling those dispossessed and displaced by these processes to survive on the margins of those same frontiers (Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2023; for examples, see Meehan and Dan 2023; Torres 2018; 2021).

The emergence of illicit peasantries

Finally, the mechanisms laid out above, interact with one another to produce and mark out what has been called an 'illicit peasantry' (Ramírez-Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2023; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021; Tobón 1996).[3] They are growers and labourers who rely – to varying degrees – on illicit crops for their livelihoods, tend to be stigmatised and criminalised for doing so, and face significant risks linked to law enforcement and high levels of violence. Notwithstanding these risks, the mechanisms described above tend to sustain this way of life and peasant identity. The prohibition premium enables them to keep a foothold on the land. States stigmatise and target IDC cultivators, generating a collective – and inter-generational – experience of state repression. Counternarcotics policies increasingly displace and concentrate such groups within marginal frontier zones – further intensified by uneven and exclusionary development processes. Non-state armed organisations reinforce the identity of such groups by standing as the protectors of the peasantry against state violence. As IDCs become established and pervasive within a region they become an important political bargaining chip for frontier communities, vis-à-vis the state and armed groups, as well as shaping frontier life worlds and moral economies, as explored further below.

However, the boundary between 'licit' and 'illicit' peasantries is rarely clear and fixed. And many drug cultivators do not self-identify as an illicit peasantry. This varies across IDCs, time and space. Where drug crops are grown alongside other cash crops and they supplement other livelihoods strategies, including off-farm employment, as in parts of Afghanistan and Myanmar, then farmers appear less likely to self-identify as an illicit peasantry – and other forms of identity linked to tribal or ethnic loyalties may be more salient.

Illicit peasantries are more likely to emerge in contexts, firstly, where drug crops are central to local livelihoods; secondly, there is a long history of counter-narcotics policies and stigmatisation, generating a sense of belonging and commitment to the idea of being part of an illicit peasantry; and thirdly, these dynamics tend to be reinforced in frontier zones, linked to a common experience of state repression or neglect, and connectedly to the forms of self-help and organisational innovation that spring up in such conditions (Goodhand, Ballvé, and Meehan 2023). As explored further in section five, the confluence of these factors may give rise to particular political subjectivities and forms of collective action amongst illicit peasantries.

[3]It is recognized that this term is open to challenge, however we use it to signal how prohibition impacts on IDC producers.

Growing out of the rubble of agrarian crises

Due to their illegality, cannabis, coca, and opium-poppy have, to some extent, been sheltered from the processes and policies that created or contributed to smallholder crises in other agricultural subsectors. As one farmer told Ciro (2016): 'there is no free trade agreement for coca'. Drawing on Tsing (2015), illicit crops have a rhythm of their own; they tend to offer the 'the possibility of life in capitalist ruins'.

In sub-Saharan Africa, these 'ruins' were the result of structural adjustment policies and related increases in imports of produce like maize and rice, declining terms of trade for cocoa and coffee exports, plus droughts and other environmental hazards from the 1980s onwards. Cannabis flourished amidst the ruins (Carrier and Klantschnig 2016, 6; Jelsma et al. 2021, 76).

In the Caribbean, growth in illicit cannabis cultivation has been attributed to the regional banana industry crisis. Small-scale family-run banana farms that dominated in some islands were protected by a preferential trade agreement with the European Union. The undoing of this agreement devastated farmers who could not compete with the agro-industrial plantations of central and south America. They turned to illicit crop cultivation to survive, as predicted in a European Commission report in the late 1990s (Jelsma et al. 2021, 62; see also Klein 2016, 32).

Similarly, in Shan State, Myanmar, an expansion of illicit opium cultivation (also during the 1990s and 2000s) was linked to a fall in real prices for traditional cash crops, namely tea and thanatphet leaves (used to roll cheroots), following growing imports of tea and cigarettes from China under economic liberalisation (Meehan 2021).

In Latin America, cannabis, coca and opium-poppy have acted as shock absorbers during recurring coffee price crashes and plagues, have served as a safety-net for smallholders affected by protracted coffee crises, and have even subsidise(d) coffee production. In Colombia, the spread of coca to new areas in the 1990s is closely linked to coffee crises; unemployed coffee pickers took-up coca harvesting work and brought knowledge of the illicit crop back home with them, facilitating its expansion (Acero 2016; Dest 2021; Gutierrez 2020). In Guerrero, Mexico, farmers replaced devalued coffee with opium poppy as recently as the 2000s and 2010s (Le Cour Grandmaison, Morris, and Smith 2019, 6). And, according to Farthing and Grisaffi (2021), low coffee prices have driven the recent resurgence of illicit coca in Peru.

Ironically, coffee is often promoted as a substitute crop in drug control programs, based on the assumption that exclusion from legal markets drives peoples' involvement in IDC cultivation. But the relationship between coffee crises and drug crops shows that markets themselves are part of the problem – in particular the financialised and heavily concentrated markets of the late 20th and early 21st centuries that have led to extreme price volatility and increasing inequality of income and power within global commodity chains (on coffee specifically see Newman 2009; Ponte 2001; on cocoa, see Purcell 2018; in general, see Amanor 2012).

Agrarian crises and related drug-crop developments often originate in political decisions; for example, cuts to subsidies and the simultaneous signing of free-trade agreements that force competition with subsidised imports, disinvestment in rural extension and other services, the privatisation of state-owned trading and processing companies, or the rollback of schemes aimed at preventing large price fluctuations. Numerous

studies draw links between neoliberal reforms, agrarian crises and the expansion of illicit crops (e.g. Bernstein 1999, 29; Carrier and Klantschnig 2016, 6; Curry 2021; Grisaffi 2021, 47–48; Jelsma et al. 2021, 62; Le Cour Grandmaison, Morris, and Smith 2019, 6; Mercille 2011; Morris 2020a; Ortiz 2003; Salgado Ruíz 2003, 262–266; Tamariz 2022).

A smaller number of detailed case studies elucidate how agrarian crises came about, played out, and combined with other factors to revive, establish or expand illicit drug crop economies in particular contexts. These case studies show that in many places neoliberal reforms reinforced illicit economies that first emerged in the era of state-led development, which was not necessarily a golden age for small-scale farming, as often suggested. They also underscore the importance of *specific* policy decisions made within a broader neoliberal framework. For example, many governments continued to support agriculture throughout the neoliberal era but chose to favour certain subsectors or types of producers. These case studies also reveal how ecological factors – such as pests, fungal plagues, droughts, floods and soil erosion – interrelate with socio-economic and political factors. Finally, they show how factors commonly associated with the presence of illicit drugs crops – e.g. the quantity and quality of state presence and the pre-existence or arrival of rebels, paramilitaries and criminal groups in the area – interact (ed) with neoliberal globalisation to produce a said outcome (see Acero 2016 on Samaná in Colombia; Paredes and Manrique 2018 on the Upper Huallaga Valley of Peru; Farfán-Mendez and Porter 2020 on pre-neoliberal Sinaloa in Mexico; Porter 2020 on pre-neoliberal Guerrero in Mexico; Meehan 2021 on the recent history of opium in Shan State, Myanmar).

María-Clara Torres' analyses of different 'paths to coca' in Colombia are a rare example of local/regional agrarian-centred drug economy histories. Torres (2018; 2021) shows how engagement in coca production in the Ariari was partly a response to demand, but also to the smallholder-displacing and land-concentrating agricultural modernisation occurring there, especially within the rice sector. In the 1970s, the government began to impose new quality standards, pressuring producers to grow certain varieties of rice and use expensive agrochemicals. Narcotraffickers, who started buying up land in the 1980s, invested their drug money in new infrastructures and technologies, accelerating transformation of the rice sector in the Ariari. Peasant settlers had neither enough land nor enough investment capital to keep up. Some became wage labourers on the emerging industrial farms. Others moved further into the land frontier and began to grow coca. The imposition of neoliberal policies in the early 1990s contributed to a further expansion of coca. The rice industry was one of several subsectors that suffered due to the lowering of tariff barriers and the withdrawal of state support. Even the large producers had difficulty competing with subsidised imports. The total area under rice cultivation fell by more than a quarter in just five years. Many of those who lost their jobs found new livelihoods within the illicit economy (Torres 2021).

While many peasants in Colombia's Ariari region already had experience with cash crop production when they started growing coca, the illicit crop was at the heart of the indigenous Asháninka's incorporation into capitalist markets in Peru. As described by Maritza Paredes and Álvaro Pastor (2023), this is a relatively recent process, but can only properly be understood by tracing the conversion of Peru's broader VRAEM region into a capitalist frontier space, starting in the 1960s. The Peruvian state actively encouraged settlement of the VRAEM as a way of avoiding redistributive agrarian reform, as well as 'integrating' the

Amazon into the modern nation and its economy. When the promised prosperity failed to materialise, settlers took advantage of rising global demand for cocaine and turned to coca to survive. The illicit economy stimulated further expansion of the frontier, especially from the 1990s onwards as Andean smallholders suffered the impacts of economic liberalisation (see also Paredes and Manrique 2018). The crisis that led Asháninka communities to participate in illicit crop economies was quite different to those that drove the participation of settlers. It originated in the loss of large areas of forest on which they depended for hunting, gathering, fishing and rotational cultivation. This obliged a shift to more intensive agriculture and engagement in monetised markets. In addition to subsistence and licit commercial crops, like banana and cacao, they began to grow coca. Some also rented out small plots to settlers to do the same. As Paredes and Pastor stress, ultimately, the forest loss the Asháninka suffered was caused by the booms and busts constructed 'from above' that pushed bankrupted and land-poor Andean farmers to seek a living in the Amazon, driving the process 'from below'.

The above vignettes, from Colombia and Peru respectively, show how development processes and policies produced crises, which, combined with other factors, stimulated illicit drug crop production. They include stories of project failures *and* of successful agricultural modernisation and neoliberal triumphs that had adverse consequences for smallholders. Hence, drug crop producers may be excluded from, and become the orphans of, development (Gootenberg 2018). But their predicaments can also arise from *how* they are included in development processes – many agrarian drug histories tell stories of 'adverse incorporation' (Hickey and Du Toit 2013).

Evidently, the significance of agricultural modernisation or neoliberal deregulation to smallholder crises and a growing reliance on IDCs varies across contexts. Many accounts of the links between livelihood crises and opium-poppy expansion in Afghanistan, for example, focus on the role of protracted armed conflict, repeated droughts, and land scarcity (Allan 2004, 143; Goodhand 2000; Ingalls and Mansfield 2017; Mansfield 2018b; Pain and Huot 2018; Pain 2023). However, historians also point to the deeper roots of the Afghan drug economy in pre-war modernisation programmes such as the Helmand Valley Authority (HVA) of the 1950s and '60s. Although the programme failed to achieve its goal of transforming pastoralists into farmers, it played a role in creating the physical and social infrastructure that integrated Helmand into the surrounding region and made participants more market dependent. The drug economy started to grow on the back of a collapse of cotton and wheat prices and was both a beneficiary and accelerant of the integrative processes set in train by the HVA (Bradford 2019; Cullather 2002).

It is important to emphasize that livelihood crises and related drug-crop development can also originate outside of agriculture. In Bolivia, for example, many of those who migrated to the Chapare to grow coca were unemployed miners (Grisaffi 2019; Sanabria 2004). Similarly, in Lesotho, increased cannabis cultivation is linked to the collapse in demand for mine workers in neighbouring South Africa, with drug crop revenues compensating for the loss of remittances (Bloomer 2009). Moreover, while IDC economies tend to flourish in the rubble of agrarian crises, they themselves are not exempt from shocks due to short-term price drops, rising production costs, plagues, and especially counternarcotics operations. Coca growers in Colombia, for example, have been

suffering extremely low prices for their produce and/or difficulty finding buyers since at least 2022, and in some areas since 2020. Some blame overproduction, others a reorganisation of the supply chains. Whatever the cause of the crisis, the consequences have been dire (author interviews; Collins 2023). Finally, as discussed in the conclusion, smallholder IDC economies are also at risk of longer-term structural problems due to the introduction of synthetic substitutes and, potentially, legalisation.

Illicit drug crop economies as *the* alternative development

Illicit drug crop economies have integrated smallholders into global markets and are driving processes of accumulation and commercialisation. But they have done so in ways that provide some protection from the processes – dispossession, displacement and depeasantisation – that have marked agrarian change associated with mainstream agriculture. For this reason, in many parts of the world, illicit drug crops have become *the* alternative development; a source of relatively well-paid employment in rural areas, and a means to offset the 'reproduction squeeze', allowing smallholders to reproduce themselves and in some cases experience modest advancement (see e.g. Molano 1987, 2017; Ciro 2016; Goodhand, Meehan and Pérez-Niño 2014; Drugs & (dis)order 2020; Meehan 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021). Drawing on the framework developed by Hall et al (2017), we examine the 4 'Ls' – land, labour, linkages, and livelihoods – to draw out what makes drug-fuelled development distinctive, and more specifically how and why IDCs have become *the* alternative development and a bulwark for smallholder agriculture.

Land

Processes of agricultural commercialisation typically trigger upheavals in land tenure, especially in frontier regions where customary systems prevail but are not officially recognised. Peasant smallholders who are directly dispossessed or cannot compete with newly emerging or incoming agribusinesses, are expected to become wage labourers or leave agriculture entirely, enabling the further concentration of land. Overall, drug economies have aggravated and accelerated these upheavals. Narcotraffickers frequently invest their proceeds in farmland and licit agriculture, while DTOs and other drug-funded armed organisations have contributed to the displacement of peasant populations and sometimes participated in their dispossession (see e.g. Ballvé 2012, 2019; Grandia 2013; McSweeney et al. 2017; Thomson 2019). However, the land dynamics associated with the production segment of drug value chains are generally quite different. Illicit drug crops, when compared to many licit crop economies, have enabled relatively peasant-friendly land-based social relations.

As explained in section 1, IDCs can generate sufficient revenue to reproduce livelihoods on very small plots of land. Indeed, most drug-crop cultivators in Colombia (UNODC and GOC 2018, 23), Mexico (Le Cour Grandmaison et al. 2019, 319) Myanmar (UNODC 2023), and Afghanistan (Pain 2023) have plots of coca or opium-poppy of less than a hectare. In this way, IDCs enable smallholder agriculture to continue even in contexts of extreme land poverty and inequality. IDCs have also enabled (previously) landless or land-poor farmers to make use of areas that are ecologically and/or economically

unsuitable for other crops, which for some has meant survival as independent producers. This is partly because the prohibition premium funds transport from remote areas and because of the physical hardiness of these crops, which tend to tolerate poor-quality soils (see introduction).

Drug crop economies are also less likely to fuel land accumulation, compared to many licit agricultural sectors, for three reasons. First, as already noted, large companies do not typically get involved in IDC cultivation precisely because of prohibition, which means production is left to criminalised smallholders. This mitigates against land consolidation for plantation modes of production. Furthermore, in the case of heroin and cocaine, drug refining, cross-border trafficking and wholesale are more important to profit margins than monopolising cultivation and maximising economies of scale in production. These characteristics have made instances of 'dispossession from above' to make way for drug-crops rare. Second, the fact that opium, coca and cannabis can all generate significant revenue from small plots means there is less pressure on farmers to concentrate land holdings in order to return a profit. This sustains a more egalitarian land distribution and has checked processes of dispossession 'from below'.[4] Third, counternarcotics policies encourage or even obligate cultivators to keep plots small, again discouraging land accumulation for illicit drug crop cultivation (Meehan 2021; Tamariz 2022; Thomson 2023).

In some contexts, the labour dynamics surrounding drug crops (see below) have provided a pathway for impoverished populations to gain access to land. Thomson (2023) shows how casual wage labour in the coca economy of southern Colombia permitted the landless to save up for their own plot. Likewise, in Afghanistan some households purchased land for the first time with incomes from the opium economy (Fishstein 2014, 38, 45; Kantor and Pain 2012, 348). The drug economy also facilitated access to land via tenant farming and sharecropping arrangements. Families with relatively large farms (and/or few working-age members) may loan portions of their land specifically for opium-poppy, which unlike other crops, typically requires more labour than can be provided by the household. Opium-based sharecropping and tenancy agreements have often included use of borrowed land for food crops as well, adding to the importance of this form of land access in Afghanistan, which was often lost during drug ban enforcement periods (Byrd and Ward 2004; Fishstein 2014; Goodhand 2005; Mansfield 2018b).

Finally, drug crop revenues have helped smallholders to pay-off debts and thus keep hold of their lands when/where distress sales are otherwise common (Molano 2017; Pain 2023; Thomson 2023). Conversely, drug bans and eradication may contribute to land concentration, as farmers are forced to sell assets, including land, to cope with the livelihood shocks caused (see e.g. Jelsma and Kramer 2005; Windle 2012, 432).

[4]This is not to say that there are no examples of 'dispossession from below' linked to IDCs. Several studies document cases in Peru and Colombia, for example, in which mestizo smallholder settlers (*colonos*) occupied plots in collective ethnic territories de-facto or after acquiring them through rental or sales agreements that were not authorised by the community as a whole or the corresponding indigenous/Afro authorities (Velasco 2011; Dest 2021; Drugs & disorder 2022; Paredes and Pastor 2023). Nevertheless, these forms of 'dispossession from below' are not driven by a systemic compulsion to compete and do not typically lead to large-scale land accumulation (our main interest in the paragraph above); the settlers behind these cases are typically peasants who have been pushed out of their home regions due to violence, counternarcotic operations and/or land poverty and they tend to occupy or acquire small areas, which nevertheless add up when combined, often with severe impacts on the affected indigenous and Afro communities.

Labour

Drug crops also tend to be associated with a distinct set of labour dynamics with several positive attributes. Although there are examples of extreme exploitation (including forced labour) within IDC economies (Silva Iulianelli et al. 2004, 12–13; Tamariz 2022, 6) and many more cases in which they have exacerbated inequalities, for example, between workers and landowners (see section 4.3), IDC economies have also helped sustain populations amidst agrarian crises and/or protracted conflict and, in some places, enabled social mobility.

IDCs are typically cultivated by family-farmers and most labour is done by household members or through reciprocal arrangements between households. However, they also generate significant waged employment, almost always temporary and informal, but often better paid than similar manual work in legal sectors (Afsahi 2016, 47–48; Grisaffi 2021, 47; Grisaffi et al. 2021, 6; Goodhand and Pain 2022, 10; Tamariz 2022, 5). In Myanmar, for example, opium labourers reported daily wages almost double that of the construction sector (Khun Moe Htun 2018; Meehan 2022; Nyo Oo 2011). Coca harvesters in Colombia are paid piece-rate but can earn double or triple, minimum wage, if they are skilled (Thomson 2023). Some farmers even complain that IDC economies push rural wages upwards and make it less affordable to hire help for work in other crops (fieldwork interviews; Espinosa 2004, 124–125; see also Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021, 5 and Pain 2012, 7 on IDC economies pushing-up wages more generally in Colombia and Afghanistan).

IDCs are especially labour-intensive at harvest-time, when even those with small plots may rely on hired help. For this reason, they tend to generate more jobs than many legal agrarian sectors. Coca, for instance, is said to employ 18%-58% more workers than alternative crops such as banana and pepper (Dávalos, Bejarano and Correa 2009, 382). In Afghanistan, cultivating one hectare of opium is estimated to require as much as 350 person days of labour, compared to 41 for wheat (Goodhand 2005, 207; Mansfield 2001, 9).

Illicit crop economies are characteristically labour absorbing (see e.g. Polson 2017, 147 on cannabis in the USA; Grisaffi 2019, 48 on coca in Bolivia; Pain 2010, on opium in Afghanistan; Bloomer 2009 on cannabis in Lesotho). For example, they have absorbed laid-off labourers that used to be employed in the tea and rice sectors in northern Myanmar and Colombia respectively (Meehan 2022; Torres 2021). Indeed, Hough calls coca/cocaine one of the 'great absorbers of rural surplus labour' and, comparing it to labour-shedding sectors such as cattle-ranching, argues (against mainstream discourses) that in this way the drug economy has contributed to stability in Colombia (2011; 2022).

In generating labour opportunities both directly and indirectly (on the latter see the linkages subsection below) and enabling households to continue living from farming, IDC economies have slowed out-migration from rural areas, and stimulated in-migration (Ciro 2016; Tamariz 2022). This effects not only domestic urbanisation, but also international movements. For example, hashish production in Morocco's Rif Valley and opium production in Mexico have helped slow migration from these countries to Europe and the USA respectively (Afsahi 2016, 51; Chouvy and Laniel 2007; Le Cour Grandmaison et al., 2019). The fact that sustained eradication and crop bans have caused mass forced migrations is indicative of the role IDC economies play in absorbing labour and stemming rural exodus (Ceballos 2003; Cohen 2009; Dion and Russler 2008; Mansfield 2018b, 343–344; Pain 2008; Rincón-Ruiz and Kallis 2013; Salisbury and Fagan 2013, 57).

Linkages

Illicit drug crop economies generate economic linkages and multiplier effects that have wider developmental impacts. These can be particularly significant in frontier regions where extractivist models of 'development' often dominate, meaning the extraction of natural wealth generates limited employment and little demand or investment in local economies (Chagnon et al., 2022; Goodhand et al., 2023; Meehan and Dan 2023; Ye et al. 2020).

In terms of upstream and downstream linkages, the constraints on corporate capital and state regulation posed by illegality, discussed earlier, ensure lower barriers to entry and hamper monopolisation of these activities, ensuring income opportunities are more dispersed. In Colombia, for example, unencumbered by phytosanitary norms and certification procedures, diverse actors have tried to make money selling coca seeds/cuttings (though these are also saved and gifted) and establishing coca plant nurseries (author fieldwork interviews). In Colombia and Bolivia, the first stages of processing – from coca leaves into paste – are done locally, by farmers themselves, wage labourers or self-employed contractors (Ciro 2016, 106–109; Espinosa 2004, 130–132; Grisaffi 2021, 50–51). These activities generate demand for other services, such as the smuggling of inputs like gasoline and chalk. Just the trade in toilet paper, which was 'used for filtering and drying cocaine paste', is said to have provided work for circa 2,000 people in the Chapare (Bolivia) during the coca boom of the 1980s (Painter 1994 cited in Grisaffi 2021, 47).

In some places, trading networks that expanded into remote areas to purchase drug crops also connected rural populations to other markets. For example, in southern Shan State, Myanmar, farmers recounted how opium traders would also purchase chilli from them (Meehan 2022, 268). While in Laos, at one time, the traders who travelled into the high mountains to purchase opium were the same as those who brought consumption goods to these areas to sell (Westermeyer 2004, 121–122).

More generally, illicit drug crop economies improve the purchasing power of local populations, creating markets for consumption that help drive local economic growth (Drugs & (dis)order 2020; Grisaffi 2021; Pain 2012; Fishstein 2014; Torres 2012; Zellers-León 2021). Few farmers get rich from cultivating illicit drug crops; yet because these economies support large populations even small increases in household income means that cumulatively more money circulates in the local economy. Drug crops, compared to other crops, also tend to create greater liquidity in local markets due to their association with a willingness to lend and borrow for productive investments (see next subsection) and consumption.

José Antonio Gutiérrez D's (2021) account of village life in Argelia, southwest Colombia, captures the dynamism generated by the coca economy, mirrored in many drug-producing regions:

> These 'villages', are no small bucolic hamlets – they are buzzing places where motorbikes dart recklessly through the streets non-stop; the sound of the choppers in the coca laboratories is constant; there are busy shops of all kinds and a flourishing commerce; crowded cock-fight pits, nightclubs and bars play music loud … People are far from rich, but compared to the sluggish pace of rural villages in the central cordillera, you can see that coca does that little bit more in terms of the purchasing power of the local population.

Similarly, Goodhand and Pain (2022) capture the transformational impacts that booming poppy cultivation had in Badakhshan (Afghanistan), in the early 2000s. Opium provided – if only for a few years – an 'emancipatory moment' during which households could pay off debts, escape food insecurity, and afford the dowries required for marriage. This created more employment for livestock farmers, traders, construction workers, wedding services and so forth (see also Mansfield 2015 on Helmand Province).

Earnings from drug crops have enabled households not only to acquire consumption goods, but also to invest in improving their farms and community infrastructure/services, and in other income-generating activities (see e.g. Grisaffi 2021; Gutiérrez D 2021; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021; Mansfield 2018b; Meehan 2021; Thomson et al. 2022). In one coastal area of Morocco, for example, 'revenue from cannabis has modernized fishing through the purchase of motors and nets [… boosting] employment in this sector'; in other areas, farmers invested their cannabis incomes in cattle-rearing, modern farming equipment, wells, and irrigation pumps (Afsahi 2016, 48). Accounts from *cocaleros* in Bolivia (Grisaffi 2021) and Colombia (Drugs & (dis)order 2020), cannabis growers in the USA (Polson 2017, 147), and poppy farmers in Myanmar (Khun Moe Htun 2018) all draw attention to how communities pooled modest incomes derived from drug crops to build schools and roads. These investments have buttressed local development and are especially important where state provision is minimal.

Livelihoods

Illicit drug crop economies engender distinctive options and pathways for smallholders, often offering more sustainable means of securing rural livelihoods compared to licit commercial agriculture. As discussed in section 1, because of the prohibition premium, drug cultivation typically provides higher incomes than can be obtained from licit crops using the same land and inputs. For example, in Lesotho, in the early 2000s, profits from a hectare of cannabis were up to 20-times higher than from maize (Bloomer 2009). And in Peru, even low black-market coca prices generate monthly incomes more than double the minimum wage (Grisaffi et al. 2021).

Farmers also report that demand for drug crops and/or their prices tend to be more stable than for other agricultural commodities (Bradley and Millington 2008; Dávalos et al 2009; Meehan 2021; UNODC and Acción Social 2011, 72–73). As noted by Eric Gutierrez (2023), the reliability of IDC markets and the facility of finding a buyer is often more important to growers than high returns (see also Thomson et al. 2022).

Higher incomes and relatively stable demand and prices, in turn, improve smallholders' access to credit, given that creditors consider their involvement in IDC cultivation to be a good guarantee of repayment. Indeed, growers often list access to credit as a key advantage of drug-crop cultivation (Afsahi 2016, 49; Goodhand 2005; Gutierrez 2020; Mansfield 2018b; Meehan 2021; Pain 2008; Thomson 2023).

Furthermore, the previous subsection discussed how households have invested IDC incomes in other ventures, which implies the diversification and thus strengthening of their livelihoods. Examples from Myanmar include animal husbandry, small-scale businesses in nearby towns, family members' migration, or the cultivation of other crops (Meehan 2021, 270).

As highlighted earlier, participation in IDCs can also facilitate access to land. In some contexts, this has played an important role in improving livelihood security by giving otherwise landless or land-poor households the possibility of producing other cash crops or food crops for their own consumption (Mansfield 2018a).

Drug crops are often blamed for heightening food insecurity. Whilst there is some evidence to support such claims (Afsahi 2016, 50; Velasco 2011, 417; Zellers-León 2021, 105), multiple studies show that IDCs are typically integrated into existing smallholder production systems and rather than displacing food crops, they complement and sometimes even subsidise them (Steinberg 2004; Drugs & (dis)order 2020, 24; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021; Tamariz 2022; Pain 2008; Allan 2004; Mansfield 2018b, 161–163). In Myanmar, for example, opium is primarily cultivated in the winter months after food crops are harvested as part of an annual food crop and opium-poppy cycle (Meehan 2021). In Lesotho (Bloomer 2009) and Madagascar (Gezon 2012), cannabis and khat are cultivated on marginal and non-irrigated lands, while food and other crop production continues on more fertile lands (see also Carrier 2007, 35; Carrier and Klantschnig 2016, 184). Furthermore, the cash generated from drug crops – often from otherwise unproductive land and/or very small areas – allows households to purchase food goods, which might otherwise be out of reach. This is especially important for the land-poor who cannot produce enough to feed their families (Mansfield 2018b, 163; Westermeyer 2004, 120). In most cases, it is responses to drug crops that have exacerbated food insecurity: forced eradication destroys subsistence intercrops and nearby cultivations and the income stream with which people purchase necessities.

Finally, in some cases, illicit drug crop economies have provided specific opportunities for women to secure or even improve their livelihoods (in addition to the texts cited below, see: Bloomer 2009; Diarisso and Goredema 2014). According to Parada-Hernández and Marín-Jaramillo, in Colombia, the coca economy 'empowers' women by giving them 'access to productive resources and to the agricultural labour market, in conditions that are very similar to those of men and far superior to those of other rural women' (2021, 3). Women work as cooks, harvesters and growers and can earn more than male agricultural workers not involved in the coca economy (2021). In Morocco, the participation of women in cannabis production varies from village to village. In some, men exclude them from certain types of work, but in others they are involved in weeding and harvesting, and in a few villages 'have taken on full responsibility for cultivating cannabis and are even involved in selling it' (Afsahi 2016, 44). Afsahi notes that this has given them 'recognition' within the village, 'their own purchasing power', 'access to places that until then had only been reserved for men', and the chance to 'make their own decisions' (2011, 48–49). In Afghanistan, the opium economy has been particularly important to women-headed households, since high demands for labour have enabled women to navigate religious practices of 'purdah' that typically confine them to social reproductive tasks (Fleetwood and Leban 2023; Mansfield 2020). Still, it is important to note that women's involvement and experiences within illicit drug economies vary, and the benefits they have obtained often simply alleviate broader gender-based structural inequalities, rather than providing emancipation from these structures (Fleetwood and Leban 2023; Olivera et al. 2020).

Life in the ruins: no peasant idyll

Whilst illicit drug crop economies can provide a bulwark for smallholder agriculture, this does not mean that they are, in any way, peasant idylls. Many studies highlight the risks and trade-offs that come with involvement in the drug trade (e.g. Carrier and Klantschnig 2016; Gutierrez-Sanin 2021; Meehan 2021). The threat of incarceration and the emotional and financial costs of legal processes are perhaps the most apparent (Ciro 2016; Tamariz 2022; Tribhuvan 2018, 510–511). Notwithstanding the financial benefits of cultivation described earlier, there are also drawbacks in this regard, such as localised inflation driven by higher wages, improved purchasing power and, in some cases, the need to 'import' basic food goods from other areas due to IDC monocropping (De Franco and Godoy 1992, 391; Felbab-Brown 2011, 138; Meehan 2022, 255). Similarly, while IDC economies can facilitate access to land and more equitable land tenure, they can also hinder formalisation of land rights (as growers seek to hide from the state or as the state itself denies access to these as a form of punishment), which in many contexts is an important protection against dispossession. Here we focus on three broad downsides to IDCs commonly highlighted by cultivators themselves: exposure to heightened violence; the (perceived) breakdown of social values and moral economies; and the dependence of marginalised cultivators on exploitative social relations and related processes of social differentiation.

Heightened exposure to violence

The most egregious trade-off is the heightened risk of violence. Of course, extreme violence can also surround legal economies, especially in frontiers (Goodhand et al., 2023). Indeed, because drug economies often emerge/expand in contexts affected by armed conflict or organised crime, it may be difficult to separate out the violence related specifically to IDC economies. Caveats notwithstanding, particular forms of violence are often associated with IDC cultivation. As explained earlier, prohibition pressures states to eradicate drug-crops and punish those who cultivate them, *and* prevents them from regulating these economies, which leaves a void, often (but not always) filled by other armed actors.

Local populations get caught in the crossfire between different organisations vying for control over the drug trade and may also be targeted directly for challenging their authority or rules (Dest 2021; Idler 2021; Drugs & (dis)order 2022). As Paredes and Pastor (2023) highlight in their account of coca expansion in the Peruvian Amazon, participation in the drug economy draws cultivators into 'interdependencies' with violent actors. The same is true in Myanmar, where opium has increased households' reliance on often exploitative systems of authority (Meehan 2021). Sometimes, violence surrounding drug economies is so severe that farmers look for ways to exit illicit crop cultivation altogether, despite its importance to their livelihoods (Drugs & (dis)order 2020; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021).

The violence enacted by the state is often greater than the drug-related violence it claims to be combatting (Keen and Anderson 2018; Mercille 2011). An unknown number of farmers have been killed during forced eradication and other counternarcotics campaigns. These militarized interventions have been particularly prevalent in Peru, Mexico, Colombia and Afghanistan, as national governments sought to strengthen ties with the US and access aid by demonstrating their anti-drug credentials. This approach

was also prevalent in Bolivia until a drug-control policy shift, which led to a reduction in related deaths, as well as rising political tensions with the US (Acero and Machuca 2021; Grisaffi et al 2021; Grisaffi and Ledebur 2016; Machuca and Marín-Jaramillo 2020; Sanabria 2004; Tamariz 2022).

Even when it does not involve deaths or injuries, forced eradication itself can be considered a form of violence. Aerial fumigations are a particularly devastating form of eradication as they impact all crops (including those grown for food), not just illicit ones, pollute water supplies and cause serious health effects. But manual forced eradication may also leave households hungry, as some – especially land-poor – households depend on drug-crop earnings to buy food and eradicators may also destroy intercrops (Acero and Thomson 2022; Grisaffi and Ledebur 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín et al. 2021; Lyons 2016; Mansfield 2019; Pain 2008; Rhodes et al. 2021; Rincón-Ruiz and Kallis 2013; Steinberg 2004; Tamariz 2022; Windle 2012). In addition to food insecurity, the destruction of IDC incomes may also translate into reduced access to health care and education (Drugs & (dis)order 2020). Eradication or drug bans have caused wider humanitarian crises when consistently enforced in areas reliant upon IDC economies (E. Ceballos 2003; Cohen 2009; Gutierrez 2023), generating what Gutiérrez-Sanín (2022) has characterized as 'institutionalised calamity'. This may also be true of ostensibly more benign crop substitution or AD programs, which, as already noted, often upend livelihoods and land relations. As Vélez-Torres and Lugo-Vivas argue, such programs 'have resulted in peasant families experiencing both slow violence [due to their socio-ecological impacts] and existential threats to their survival' (2021, 59).

Governments have also deployed counter-narcotics discourses to justify or camouflage repression. In Laos, for example, opium became a marker of 'backwardness', justifying the forced resettlement and cultural assimilation of highland minorities into the lowlands, and the use of their land for large-scale rubber plantations (Cohen 2013). In Colombia, many peasants claim the War on Drugs is a smokescreen for land grabbing. Whatever the intention, counternarcotics operations have caused displacement and destitution that weakens people's ability to resist extractivist projects (Acero and Thomson 2022; Lyons 2016; Thomson 2019), part of a wider process that Dawn Paley (2014) calls 'Drug War Capitalism' (see also Bartilow 2019; Mercille 2011).

Finally, illicit crop cultivators can also be subjected to more localised forms of anti-drug violence. For example, in northern Myanmar, the sense of existential crisis created by rising levels of drug use harms, especially amongst youth, has inspired local anti-drug movements. At times, these movements have exerted violent pressure on farmers to stop cultivating opium (Dan et al. 2021). Although such actions have done little to stop drug production and use, they represent a means through which local people exert agency in a context where the structural drivers of the drug trade are very difficult to address (Sadan et al., 2021).

Disruptive social and ecological change and community conflicts

Pervasive violence may be a symptom and a driver of a wider social breakdown caused by the expansion of illicit drug crops. This can be most pronounced when a drug-fuelled frontier dynamic drives inflows of settlers – themselves often fleeing eradication or other forms of violence – who come into conflict with local communities and ways of

life. This is also often associated with the arrival of armed organisations, and new cash infusions into local economies that are blamed for the erosion of longstanding social values and norms.

Dest (2021) argues that the expansion of coca cultivation into northern Cauca, Colombia, is viewed by black and indigenous communities as a form of 'internal colonialism'. Coca has damaged communal and subsistence-oriented economies by commodifying social life and unleashing an extractive relationship with the land. Settler populations are blamed for spreading an 'anti-culture of coca', characterized by gambling, prostitution, drug use, alcoholism, and growing materialism and individualism. Coca is also said to have further subjected communities to the colonial forces of the Colombian state through violent counter-narcotics policies.

Zellers-León (2021) similarly highlights an indigenous discourse which blames opium-poppy, coca and cannabis for 'cultural loss' and 'social breakdown' in another part of Cauca. She recognises the disruptions brought by these crops, but also stresses that the communities in question were integrated into other cash-based market economies long-ago and that these led to similarly disruptive social changes. In addition to 'romanticising' the past, she argues, some activists brush over the views of those who value the 'social mobility' illicit crops have afforded and associated disagreements between members of the same communities.

Paredes and Pastor (2023) also highlight how coca has become a 'frictional commodity' amongst Peru's indigenous Asháninka communities. Coca has generated significant disputes, which weakened indigenous federations find difficult to manage. These organisations have become increasingly marginalised as the number of settlers and the presence of illegal armed actors has grown. They have also been fractured by internal tensions between those wanting to expel coca settlers and lobby the government for eradication, and those now calling for coca cultivation to be protected (see also Young 2004 on the disruptive effects of commercial coca within Peru).

Though the above examples focus on recent disruptions caused by commercial coca in Colombia and Peru, they reflect a broader and older pattern. The influx of large amounts of cash associated with the 1980s cannabis boom in Belize, for example, is said to have further undermined customary Mayan norms and authority (Steinberg 2004). In this case, social disarray was caused primarily by drug-money; there were no rebels or government-backed militias, and there was no mass in-migration. In Morocco, high incomes from cannabis exports are blamed for the abandonment of 'traditional crop practices', the 'loss of social and family ties, and solidarity', conflicts between neighbours, and a disinterest in schooling (Afsahi 2016, 41, 50).

In some contexts, the social disruption caused by IDCs is closely associated with their ecological impacts due to, for example, monocropping (Ingalls and Mansfield 2017, 134; Lyons 2016), and overuse of agrochemicals (Afsahi 2016, 50; Le Cour Grandmaison et al. 2019, 32). IDCs have also contributed to forest loss and fragmentation, with particularly severe impacts on indigenous communities (Paredes and Pastor 2023; Velasco 2011; Young 2004). However, the environmental impacts of IDCs – especially their links with deforestation – are often overstated (Dávalos 2018) for political reasons (Ciro 2019; Lu, Dev and Petersen-Rockney 2022). And much of the deforestation that is linked to IDCs is driven by forced eradication, which pushes growers to relocate (Dávalos, Bejarano and Correa 2009; Klein 2016, 33; Rincón and Kallis 2013). Still, from the perspective of

those impacted, counternarcotics are part and parcel of the environmental ills brought by IDCs. As one Afro leader from Colombia explained simply: 'Coca brought [aerial] fumigations to our territory' (Don Tito in Drugs & (dis)order 2022, 46).

Notwithstanding stories of loss and destructive social change, as highlighted below, drug crop economies have also helped communities maintain cultural traditions and ways of life and strengthen community organisation. Furthermore, in some contexts, IDCs have a long history and were/are already deeply embedded in local cultures. Even production for global commodity markets can be part of an embedded moral economy, as argued by Grisaffi (2021) in relation to the Chapare region of Bolivia (see also Arias and Grisaffi 2021). Also, behaviours may change - for the better – over time; many Colombian coca growers reflected on how they no longer engage in conspicuous consumption but instead prioritise investing in their children's education and their homes and farms (Drugs & (dis)order 2020; Gutiérrez-Sanín 2021).

Exploitation and social differentiation

A third tension surrounding drug-fuelled development lies in how it can exacerbate exploitative social relations and inequalities. These dynamics appear to be particularly pronounced in contexts where farmers struggle to access land and credit. Drug crops often provide a way to access these resources but may also lock producers into usurious relations.

For example, opium-based tenancy and sharecropping agreements have provided some of the poorest families in Afghanistan access to land, while taking advantage of and deepening rural inequality. In areas of greater landlessness, landowners retain(ed) as much as two-thirds of the crop. At the same time, sharecroppers have been compelled to sell their opium harvests in advance at below market prices. In contrast, landowners who hold their produce to sell in the winter gain much higher prices. So, the opium economy in Afghanistan provides 'disproportionate gains to those with land and capital' (Goodhand 2005, 207–208).

Similarly, in Myanmar, opium cultivation enables farmers to access credit, in a context where it is difficult to borrow against other devalued farming activities. However, these loans entail high interest rates and often lock farmers into selling their harvest at below-market prices. Although the mechanisms surrounding licit agriculture are frequently similar, the fact that farmers are borrowing against an illicit crop magnifies unequal power relations (Meehan 2022, 272).

While access to buyers is often listed as an advantage of IDCs, exchange relations can also be highly exploitative (even when not linked to borrowing), especially when a single group or small number of people control local/regional markets (see e.g. Idler 2021; Meehan 2022; Tamariz 2022). In Morocco, for example, limited buyers encourage competition between farmers and sometimes use 'rumours of possible eradications or arrests' to push down prices and even obligate 'farmers to sell their goods at a loss' (Afsahi 2016, 47).

Still, as noted by Pain (2023), powerful traders manipulate prices to their advantage in most agricultural markets, not just illicit ones. More generally, extreme exploitation and social differentiation are neither specific, nor inherent to IDC economies. As with legal economies, this depends on the context in which they operate. For example: neither super-usurious loans nor lopsided sharecropping arrangements are prevalent in

Putumayo (Colombia) where different forms of non-interest-bearing debts are common and access to land is relatively fluid (Thomson 2023); and in Chapare (Bolivia), cultural norms have tended to slow social differentiation; '[g]etting ahead is viewed negatively as it is thought to come at the expense of others' (Grisaffi et al. 2021, 5; see also Grisaffi 2021).

The politics of illicit peasantries

The nature and size of the trade-offs discussed in this article are shaped, not only by pre-existing social institutions or the contexts in which IDC economies develop (as mentioned above), but also by the forms of politics and collective mobilisation of IDC cultivators.

It might be assumed that the default position of IDC farmers is to follow the James Scott (2010) rulebook – to 'stay out of the archives', remain illegible, beyond the gaze, and the extractive ambitions, of the state – or to be what Idler (2021) characterizes as 'shadow citizens'. Several characteristics of IDC economies may reinforce such world-views, survival strategies and constrained forms of political agency. These include: the violence surrounding IDC economies, especially the purposive targeting of civic/social leaders; stigmatisation and criminalisation of the peasantry by the state and international actors; lack of formal mechanisms for making claims; fluid and fugitive of qualities of drug cultivator communities; and their marginal frontier location.

Perhaps for this reason, collective action tends to be a lacuna in research on IDCs. However, there is scattered evidence that challenges the above picture, and hints at the different ways in which IDC cultivators can and do assert their political agency, despite (or perhaps because of) their collective experiences of precarity and adversity. This is illustrated by studies on coca-growers' unions in Bolivia (Grisaffi 2021); the political bargaining around drug bans in Afghanistan (Mansfield 2015); the *cocalero* mobilisations to challenge eradication policies (Ramírez 2011) and the political culture and forms of solidarity surrounding the marijuana boom (Britto 2020) in southern and northern Colombia respectively; and the informal food markets and neighbourhood watch schemes that emerged amongst Hmong-American cannabis growers in rural upstate California (Polson and Petersen-Rockney 2019).

Broadly, illicit peasantries' political engagement and public action has taken two interrelated forms, one internal and the other external. Internal political actions are focused on investment in local social infrastructure and public goods, and building social cohesion and solidarity. External ones aim to enhance the political voice and bargaining power of illicit peasantries in their encounters with state actors (or non-state equivalents). Both forms of political agency are in turn infused with, and patterned by, three complex sets of issues.

Firstly, there is the dual nature of 'resistance'. On the one hand, illicit drugs are a 'resistance crop' that enables peasant communities to 'hang on' and build a life 'in the ruins'. On the other hand, amongst some communities, drug crops are actively resisted and experienced less as a bulwark than an accelerant that turbo-charges processes of dispossession and differentiation. Each position generates different goals and modalities of political organisation amongst groups directly affected by IDCs. That said, specific cases do not neatly divide between contexts where IDCs are a 'resistance crop' and those where they are a 'crop to be resisted'. Paredes and Pastor (2023) and Dest (2021), for example,

point to the complex and ambivalent relationship between ethnic communities and coca (see also Vélez and Lobo 2019).

Secondly, the identities of IDC farmers, are not only shaped by the fact that they grow drugs; other sources of identity may be more or less salient, and these intersect with and shape the forms of mobilisation around protecting or resisting illicit drug crops. When/where cultivators self-identify as a distinct group, or an 'illicit peasantry', their politics take on very specific forms, as explored further below.

Thirdly, there is the challenge of how to navigate illegality. Decriminalisation may reduce violence and end forced eradication and legal persecution, but it will also take away the risk premiums that underpin the bulwark that illicit drug economies provide for smallholder agriculture. This raises difficult questions around how best to confront destructive counternarcotics narratives and interventions, whilst simultaneously seeking to protect precarious livelihoods. Efforts to align these demands often focus on calls for legal crop alternatives. But, as many of the papers in this special issue demonstrate, it is precisely the fact that farmers can no longer survive in licit agriculture that pushes them into IDCs in the first place.

In relation to the internal dimensions of public action, there are numerous examples of self-help and solidarity amongst drug-producers. In Colombia, frontier settlers had to provision their own infrastructure and services and resolve their own disputes, which led to strong community-level institutions that then shaped the subsequent development of the local/regional drug economy. There are many parallels between the Community Action Committees or JACs in Colombia and the *sindicatos* or unions in Bolivia in this regard. Both responded to frontier conditions in which the state could not be relied upon to solve problems, nor provide services and both now play a role in the coca economy. For example, in parts of Colombia, the JACs, like the unions in Bolivia, are called upon to resolve land disputes and provide some degree of tenure security to coca-growers and non-coca growers alike. That said, the Bolivian unions are evidently much stronger, as demonstrated by their capacity to limit disruptive social change and explosions of violence in their communities (Grisaffi 2021; Thomson, Parada-Hernández and Acero 2022).

Many internal political actions are aimed at channelling drug revenues to social and cultural infrastructure. For example, in the mountains of Nayarit, Mexico, communities used opium and marijuana incomes to finance 'the indigenous rituals that are central both to local religious life and communal political organization' (Le Cour Grandmaison, Morris, and Smith 2019; see also Morris 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, in Myanmar, incomes derived from poppy farming were pooled to fund the upkeep/construction of churches, pagodas and religious events (Khun Moe Htun 2018).

Vélez and Lobo (2019) find significant subnational differences amongst Colombian peasant organisations' responses to the coca/cocaine economy and counternarcotics policies; variation in organisational capacities, leadership, social capital and synergies between different levels of grass roots organisations, help explain the emergence of different strategies and their efficacy in achieving particular goals.

In relation to the external dimension of exercising political agency, drug farmers across different contexts have leveraged their status as an illicit peasantry. They are positioned at the sharp end of a wider bargaining game involving domestic governments and international agencies, with much at stake, including recognition, livelihoods, military

support and aid programmes. In Afghanistan, for example, this bargaining power was deployed repeatedly by tribal leaders and farmers in negotiations to stop or moderate drug bans, and/or attract aid funding (Mansfield 2015).

The political mobilisation of illicit peasantries takes on different forms across contexts. Whereas in Colombia, *cocaleros* draw upon class-based repertoires of mobilisation, in Afghanistan and Myanmar, political demands are channelled through tribal or ethnic structures. In contexts like upland Southeast Asia, where drug crop cultivators span many ethnic groups, such structures can preclude cultivators from identifying as illicit peasantries or advancing common goals. This may be due to practical challenges – for example, the lack of lingua franca – but is often rooted in how identity formation and claims-making work through ethnic markers that amplify divisions and provide little foundation for collective grievances and mobilisation, despite shared experiences of poverty, precarity, and repression.

Drug crops, their cultivation and use, may also have an ideational role, that shapes wider (sometimes ethnic) identities and politics. For example, Klein highlights the connection between ganja and anti-colonial politics in Jamaica, arguing that for 'islanders robbed of their own history and self-knowledge, cannabis presented a tool free from any European association, from which a new identity could be fashioned' (2016, 27). Similarly, in Bolivia, coca leaf has been explicitly tied by to a discourse of indigeneity, and has become a leitmotiv of decolonisation (Grisaffi 2021).

Drug wars too are often ethnically patterned; they may be 'wars against people', but they are wars against *certain kinds* of people (Koram 2019). Counternarcotics policies may be pursued to further other political agendas – a war against insurgents in Afghanistan and Colombia, the sedentarisation of highland populations in Thailand and Laos, the search for political capital and votes by targeting minority groups, such as Hmong-American cannabis growers in the US (Polson and Petersen-Rockney 2019). Such policies may politicize illicit peasantries and galvanise them into action.

Whilst state repression is one factor that helps forge political identities amongst growers, it is not the only one. In Bolivia, decriminalisation of coca growing opened space for forms of collective action that are difficult amongst illicit peasantries. Another example is 'Living Forces', a collective of indigenous Yanacona people, struggling to survive coca-related violence, and part of a broader movement to assert local autonomy against extractivism, by attempting to delink coca production from drug trafficking and forge a regional market for coca-based products (Valencia and Courtheyn 2023).

Summing up, the strength and character of IDC cultivators' collective action(s) influence the trade-offs engendered by prohibition. Well-organised groups with support and authority may be able to partially counteract the downsides of IDC cultivation, for example, by keeping armed actors at bay or introducing rules, say obligating community members to maintain food production and forested lands, that reduce associated disruptive changes. Depending on their strength vis-à-vis external state actors, collectives may also be able to reduce the damage caused by counternarcotics, for example, by negotiating with soldiers so that they allow for harvest prior to eradication, or even by shifting drug-control policies at the national level. At the same time, involvement in IDC economies significantly influences peasant communities' politics, not only their agendas, but also their methods and narratives; for example, they may take advantage of counternarcotics goals to secure funding for their

communities. More broadly, illicit peasants are *not* seeking to evade and remain illegible to the state or are only doing so in certain limited ways. Instead, their demands can be understood as attempts to be recognized, so that they can make claims on the state or on other (more legitimate) forms of authority.

Conclusion

Prohibition and the War on Drugs have imbued the coca, cannabis and opium-poppy economies with certain characteristics that unite what are otherwise quite distinct crops and distinguish them from other licit crop economies. As discussed above, these characteristics make them ideal cash crops for impoverished farmers in marginal frontier zones and have turned these economies into bulwarks for smallholder farming. Indeed, the crisis (an amalgam of different crises) of smallholder agriculture created perfect enabling conditions for the growth of illicit drug crop economies in the mid to late 20th and early 21st centuries, just as global demand swelled. Illicit crop economies have not generated peasant idylls, but they have allowed significant numbers of people to keep working the land and, in some cases, to invest in improved futures for themselves or their children – within or outside agriculture. Recently, however, the IDC bulwark itself has started to show cracks due to blows from two different directions.

The growth of synthetic drug markets poses a substantial threat to illicit crop cultivators. For opium-poppy growers in Mexico, the threat has already materialised. The rise in fentanyl use in the United States and associated decline in demand and prices for Mexican opium has devastated entire villages in Nayarit, Oaxaca and Guerrero (Le Cour Grandmaison et al. 2019; Tamariz 2022). Whether or not synthetic opioids will completely undermine illicit poppy cultivation in the long run is unclear. It is equally difficult to predict the future of synthetic substitutes for cocaine; those that exist at present are not economical to produce and/or are not very popular among consumers, but this could change.

The other potential threat to illicit crop cultivators is – ironically – legalisation. Again, this threat has already materialised for some. In California, the price received by cannabis growers reportedly fell between 55%-85% after (partial) legalisation (Polson 2017, 150). Legalisation in parts of the USA also led to falls in cannabis farmgate prices in Mexico (Chouvy 2019, 12). Increased competition is not just about prices but changing consumer preferences; in Mexico there is growing demand for marijuana products from the USA, which are perceived as novelties and/or to be of higher quality. As stressed by Chouvy (2019), additional cannabis legalisation is likely to fuel further adoption of high-yielding and more potent modern hybrids (as well as energy-intensive indoor cultivation) at the expense of landraces, which will increase barriers to entry for farmers without resources.

The extent to which legalisation presents a threat to IDC producers will depend, in part, on how it is carried out. Illicit peasantries in low-income and politically fragile countries who depend on the 'prohibition premium', as well as many small growers within the Global North, will likely be put out of business if a so-called 'free-market' model is pursued. In view of this, Kay et al (2020) argue for 'fair trade' or 'fairer trade' cannabis, to ensure legalisation meets 'the socioeconomic needs and interests of small and

traditional growers'. Practically, this involves, for example: supporting growers' organisations, introducing production quotas or licencing systems that favour smallholders, minimum pricing, training programs to help growers meet new regulations/standards, and the creation of development funds for investment in producer communities affected by the War on Drugs. Similar principles and policies might also be considered in relation to the regulation of coca leaf, cocaine and natural opiates, although the political and institutional barriers to such an approach are huge.

Three concluding points flow from our analysis. First, a single model of legalisation/regulation is unrealistic and unlikely to be successful given the diversity of contexts and varying agrarian dynamics surrounding IDCs. This suggests the need for greater experimentation, contextualisation, and localisation of drug policies.

Second, the debates on drug reform have been dominated by 'northern' concerns and interests, and their impacts on drug growing (particularly borderland) regions and illicit peasantries in the Global South, though recognized, have not been prioritized in policy discussions. Any 'solutions' to the 'drug problem' need to be worked out with, and build on, the forms of solidarity and political voice that have emerged from the margins, learning perhaps from the wider experience of agrarian social movements – in terms of both their potential and limitations as agents of transformation.

Third, addressing the challenges that IDC cultivators face ultimately does not lie in the enactment of drug policies, though of course this is important. IDC economies are an inherent feature of contemporary capitalism. We have argued in this article that the development models on offer are less an antidote to IDC economies, than a driver of the forms of marginalisation and dispossession that push rural populations into drug crop cultivation. Standalone alternative development or crop substitution programmes do not address these systemic factors and do not come close to providing an alternative 'bulwark' for illicit peasantries. Something similar can be said of legalisation policies, even those that are perfectly tailored to context and to meet small farmers' needs. A legal bulwark is better than an illegal one, but in an ideal situation no bulwark would be needed. Hence the importance of thinking more ambitiously about the restructuring of agrarian systems.

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