

To Rid the World of the Drug Scourge: A Human Security Perspective on the War on Drugs in Colombia and Mexico

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When then U.S. president Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs in 1971, Colombia and Mexico became the first countries to experience American-led crop eradication campaigns. This was the beginning of 40 years of warfare against drug trafficking organizations in Latin America. Since then, prohibitive drug policies have been responsible for widespread human rights violations and the displacement and deaths of thousands of individuals, while persistently ignoring many of the fundamental social, economic, and political roots of the drug trade. This article explores the human security implications of the War on Drugs in Colombia and Mexico, as carried out under Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative. By applying a human security perspective to the War on Drugs, it highlights the ways the War on Drugs adversely affects the populations of Colombia and Mexico and seeks to challenge traditional notions of security that dominate current drug policies and debates. It reiterates the need to adopt more progressive drug policies in Colombia and Mexico and concludes with a reflection on alternative policy proposals as both countries try to move forward from their lengthy drug wars.

Introduction

The War on Drugs has undercut civil liberties and human rights, strengthened the armed forces in countries with a history of harsh military rule, supported militarization of local police forces, spread the use of torture by law enforcement, provided support to powerful leaders who are themselves heavily implicated in the drug trade, contributed to a significant social conflict and political instability, and undercut the native means of making a living. (Singer 2008, 83)

When then U.S. president Richard Nixon declared the “War on Drugs” on Mexican drug traffickers in 1971, he argued that drug abuse had become the country’s “public enemy No. 1” and drugs presented a lethal threat to the United States (Jelsma 2011, 6). From the beginning, the War on Drugs¹ had

the ambitious goal to “rid the world of the drug scourge,” specifically aiming at the eradication of cannabis, heroin, and cocaine (Seccombe 1997, 287). U.S. anti-drug policies have since served to justify widespread crop eradication campaigns and military interventions in several countries.

Forty years later, it has become increasingly clear that the War on Drugs has failed in numerous ways. As journalist Charles Bowden notes, it is not difficult to see that all of the drugs that were available in 1971 are still available today in larger quantities, of better quality, and for much cheaper (Bowden 2010). Despite reductions in drug cultivation consumption, and the capture of cartel leaders and drug shipments, as cited by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the U.S. government, the War on Drugs has been unable to prevent the growth of complex transnational drug trafficking networks and protect millions of individuals from harm (UNODC 2010c). With over 50,000 casualties from the drug war in Mexico since 2007 (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, 1) and over 200,000 individuals fleeing their homes every year because of drug-related violence in Colombia (IDMC 2010a), it has become clear to a growing number of policy-makers, scholars, and civil society actors that the War on Drugs has been lost. Yet, despite growing attention to its harmful human security implications, the War on Drugs continues to compromise the security of countless individuals worldwide.

The questions that guide this article are: What are the human security implications of the War on Drugs in Colombia and Mexico? And in which ways can a human security perspective influence policies to better address these implications? To answer these questions, it is necessary to first define human security and identify the main debates on this concept to provide a comprehensive framework for the research that follows. Second, a brief overview of the War on Drugs outlines the important role played by the United States in the Colombian and Mexican drug conflicts through its controversial military assistance agreements, Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative. Subsequently, by drawing on examples from both countries, this article analyzes the impacts and consequences of the War on Drugs with respect to human security. The article concludes with a reflection on policy implications and reiterates the need for the U.S. to adopt policies better geared to address consumption within its borders and to reduce violence and adverse impacts of the War on Drugs in Colombia and Mexico.

To achieve these objectives, this article draws from an array of relevant research, including media sources because of the current and dynamic nature of the topic. Reports from civil society organizations and international organizations, mainly the UNODC, help support the arguments with relevant data. Recent reviews by American, Colombian, and Mexican scholars complemented with older analyses provide a comprehensive analysis of the War on Drugs in Colombia and Mexico.

Overall, this article argues that the very policies put in place to ensure security for Colombian and Mexican populations have not only failed but have exacerbated certain forms of human insecurity, thus highlighting

the need to challenge conventional notions of security that drive the War on Drugs and adopt more progressive drug policies. A human security approach can complement traditional notions of security and contribute to the development of the policies needed to overcome some of the most blatant failures of the War on Drugs in Colombia and Mexico. Current policies focus on law enforcement and combating drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), but face powerful, wealthy cartels and an expansive transnational drug market, leading to minimal, if any, progress. Rather, drug policies should focus above all on reducing violence and addressing the underlying conditions that allow narcotrafficking to persist.²

Human Security: A Contested Concept

The highly regarded Global Commission on Drug Policy (2011, 2) recently stated that “[t]he war on drugs has failed,” echoing what numerous politicians, including former presidents Vicente Fox (Mexico, 2000–06), Ernesto Zedillo (Mexico, 1994–2000), and César Gaviria (Colombia, 1990–94), activists, such as Javier Sicilia of the *Movimiento por la Paz* in Mexico, academics, and thousands of concerned citizens have been affirming for years. The commission (*ibid.*), made up of 19 high-level individuals, including former presidents Zedillo and Gaviria, notes that “[v]ast expenditures on criminalization and repressive measures directed at producers, traffickers and consumers of illegal drugs have clearly failed to effectively curtail supply or consumption. Apparent victories in eliminating one source or trafficking organization are negated almost instantly by the emergence of other sources and traffickers.” Despite these failures, American-backed anti-drug policies in Colombia and Mexico continue to ignore how these policies impact human security. By challenging this security focus, this article builds on the growing acknowledgement of the failures of the War on Drugs and demonstrates how the narrow notion of security that steers current drug policies is counter-productive for addressing the complex security issues in drug conflicts and aggravates problems of human insecurity.

The concept of human security emerged in the 1990s from the roots of human rights, humanitarian relief, human development, and conflict resolution discourse (Owen 2004, 377). The concept extends beyond these realms to challenge traditional notions of state security that dominate international relations. Human security has been widely contested; there is still no consensus on a comprehensive definition of the term and its policy applications (Balzacq 2003–2004; Duffield and Waddell 2006; Paris 2001). In its broadest form, human security is defined as “prioritizing the security of people, especially their welfare and well-being, rather than that of state . . . [and] implies a broadening and re-prioritization of determinants of security” (Duffield and Waddell 2006, 1). Evidently, the comprehensiveness of the term leads to ambiguity. Roland Paris (2001, 90) notes that, being one of the earliest prominent documents to define the concept, the definition of human security in the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) *Human*

Development Report 1994 remains the most cited and “authoritative.”³ In its report, the UNDP (1994, 24) broadly defines the concept as freedom from fear and freedom from want. It identifies seven specific components of human security which this article uses to assess the breadth of human security implications of the War on Drugs: economic, political, environmental, health, food, personal, and community security.

The ambiguous definition has left policy-makers divided on how best to apply human security principles to policy. As Fen Hampson notes (2004, 350), while many human security problems are caused by specific actors, such as drug cartels or military officials in the context of the War on Drugs, there are larger political and social structures that impede policy effectiveness. In other words, changing the behaviour of actors may improve human security conditions, but may not be sufficient. In fact, Hampson (*ibid.*) adds, “there are [other] conditions for change that need to be met: the restructuring of legal and political institutions, the reconstruction of the economic basis for livelihoods, and the redefinition of prevailing social norms. Only in this way is it possible to create a sustainable basis for human security.”

This article will demonstrate how the War on Drugs has focused almost exclusively on combating DTOs, which is a legitimate endeavour supported by both policy-makers and citizens (Ai Camp 2010), but, because of its narrow focus on state security, has failed to address significant underlying conditions. Better human security can only be achieved by broadening the focus of security.

From the U.S. War on Drugs to the Colombian and Mexican Drug Wars: A Brief Overview of American Anti-drug Policies

The rapid expansion of drug use in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s threatened U.S. conservative doctrine and moral society (Carpenter 2003, 11–15). With thousands of heroin addicts returning from Vietnam, drug abuse became the U.S. government’s top priority, and if it could not curtail demand, its solution was to eradicate the supply (*ibid.*). Nixon first declared a “war” on drugs in 1971 and targeted Mexico, which supplied over 80 per cent of the U.S. heroin market at the time (Smith 1999, 194), and became the first country where aerial crop spraying was applied in 1976 (Ai Camp 2010, 298). In 1983, the first U.S. anti-drug military deployment took place under the Ronald Reagan administration in the Andean region, where most of the cocaine that reached the United States originated (Carpenter 2003, 18–22). Despite these efforts to eradicate the illicit drug trade, the industry quickly developed into a complex multi-billion dollar transnational market; by the 1980s, the U.S. drug market was valued at US\$80 billion (*ibid.*, 20). The implementation of drug-related policies in both Mexico and Colombia has since been largely intertwined because of the complex interrelation of drug production and DTOs between these two countries (Jelsma 2011; Smith 1999;

Carpenter 2003).⁴ Two recent policy agreements are analyzed in this article: (1) Plan Colombia, a US\$7.5 billion bilateral assistance package adopted in 2000 by then Colombian president Andrés Pastraña Arango and then U.S. president Bill Clinton; and (2) the Mérida Initiative, a US\$1.5 billion assistance package agreed upon by then U.S. president George W. Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderón in 2007 (Olson and Wilson 2010, 3).

*Plan Colombia*⁵

Colombia witnessed a boom in its lucrative cocaine industry throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with various guerrilla groups and paramilitaries exploiting the drug trade to obtain more power and control (Leech 2002, 13–18). Colombia's largest guerrilla groups include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army. The paramilitaries, such as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), are responsible for much of Colombia's political tensions and the growth of the narcotics industry, accountable for an estimated 76 per cent of the country's political and drug-related homicides between 1995 and 2001 (Colombian Commission of Jurists data cited in Livingstone 2003, 6). To this day, guerrilla groups and paramilitaries control large areas of the country including much of the south-eastern highlands and portions of its Pacific coast. As of 2009, Colombian coca cultivation spread over approximately 62,000 hectares and cocaine trafficking to the United States alone is estimated to be worth nearly US\$500 million annually (UNODC 2011b, 245).

The Colombian government has unsuccessfully attempted to contain the narcotics industry by proposing peace accords, capturing lead DTO members, destroying coca plantations, and engaging in direct military action against DTOs (Leech 2002, 41–44). Sarah Peterson (2002, 431) notes that Plan Colombia was a response to years of "scant success" and the government's commitment to "get serious about coca eradication." The Plan's primary objective was to "push into Southern Colombia" and gain control of the drug-producing regions within the country (ibid.; Ramírez 2011, 216). According to Martin Jelsma (2011, 7), Plan Colombia was essentially a "combined counterdrug and counterinsurgency strategy, including the highly controversial policy of mass aerial herbicidal spraying of coca and poppy fields." In addition, María Clemencia Ramírez (2011, 215) stresses that "the plan became a military strategy to break up alliances that were said to be destabilizing the state and threatening continental security." Only 26 per cent of Plan Colombia's budget was reserved for socio-economic programs, such as alternative development and human rights promotion (ibid., 216). The remaining funds were primarily invested in military and police activities and aerial spraying campaigns (ibid., 432). Furthermore, although clauses within Plan Colombia existed to ensure that the military and police respected human rights, the result remains deplorable: an estimated three million to five million individuals have been forcibly displaced by the drug war in the past 25 years (Amnesty International 2011).

Plan Colombia came to an end in 2007 with mixed results. For instance, the Uribe government managed to shrink the FARC to around 9,000 insurgents and push them out of the most populated areas, and the AUC was demobilized (Isacson and Poe 2009). As a result, the rates of extortion, violence, and kidnappings were greatly reduced. However, the environmental and humanitarian damage of the campaign left thousands frustrated and in dire socio-economic conditions, and Colombia is now facing new generations of insurgency groups ranging from 4,000 to 9,000 individuals in different regions of the country (*ibid.*). Finally, Plan Colombia only led to a slight drop in coca cultivation in the Andes. Upon realizing that military action alone could not address Colombia's narcotics trade and insurgencies, the U.S. and Colombian governments shifted toward more integrated actions and broader consultation with the public, including more investment in human rights protection and humanitarian aid (*ibid.*). These are significant improvements and align with the human security approach described in this article. However, security intervention, drug-related crimes, and widespread violence and displacements still occur in rural Colombia ensuring that the conflict continues to be very relevant today. In addition, Colombia's policy shift has failed to moderate Mexico's approach, as explained in the following section, where military intervention still prevails.

*Mérida Initiative*⁶

The drug trade in Mexico grew steadily from the 1930s to 1970s, prompting aggressive crop eradication campaigns by the U.S. and Mexican governments, which led to plummeting supplies of illicit drugs. However, despite the apparent success of these operations, crop eradication in Mexico was matched with a boost in drug production in Colombia (Smith 1999, 195). The growth of the Colombian cocaine industry quickly turned Mexican territory into the most important trafficking route to the United States and strengthened connections between Mexican and Colombian DTOs. This new role for Mexican DTOs as cocaine traffickers increased the stakes of territorial control, leading to violent tensions among cartels and today's gruesome drug war (*ibid.*; Carpenter 2003). The moment Calderón took office in December 2006, he was explicit about one of his highest priorities: to confront the cartels and end their control over much of Mexico's landscape.

Calderón's strategy was to mobilize the country's army and security forces with the goal of dismantling the cartels. Within months of assuming his presidency, he deployed 45,000 troops in the most affected states, including Chihuahua, Michoacán, and Sinaloa (Olson and Wilson 2010, 3). Instead of reducing crime and violence, increased tensions among DTOs and government officials led to an explosion of drug-related deaths, the number of which has grown dramatically since the Mérida Initiative was launched. Since 2007, there have been over 50,000 drug related deaths in Mexico, mostly along northern border towns (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, 1). This violence represents a direct threat to state security and U.S.–Mexican relations. Eric

Olson and Christopher Wilson (2010, 3) explain that “as violence increased, so did U.S. concern about its neighbor and most important trading partner, as well as trepidation about the impact of violence on communities along the U.S. side of the border.” This fear led Bush and Calderón to develop the Mérida Initiative to combat drug trafficking. This commitment provides military and law enforcement equipment, training, and assistance in technical operations, among other things, over a three-year period. Since entering office in January 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama has expanded the discussion into what is called “Beyond Mérida,” which continues the initial strategy and includes four pillars: disrupting and dismantling DTOs; institutionalizing the rule of law; building a 21st-century border; and building strong and resilient communities (*ibid.*, 4–5).

In essence, despite improvements aspired to in “Beyond Mérida,” both of these agreements still suggest a prioritization of state security over human security. In both instances, the majority of funds are directed toward military assistance, crop eradication, and narcotics control, whereas only a small percentage is dedicated to social programs and assistance. By increasing the role of the military in anti-drug missions, both Colombia and Mexico have created militarized societies in which the security of civilians is compromised. As Simon Wells (2006, 52) argues: “Not only did the dealers not fear the war on drugs, but they positively counted on it in order to increase market prices and weed out smaller rivals. We therefore have a classic example of how excessive militarization of security is counterproductive both relative to its stated objectives and in that it makes the safety of individuals ever more precarious.” He (*ibid.*) elaborates that this militaristic approach to illicit drugs continues to ignore the mobility and flexibility of drug cultivation illustrated by the interconnectedness of the drug trade between Colombia, Mexico, and their neighbours. Contrary to its goals, the War on Drugs has contributed to the development of more decentralized, complex, and ruthless DTOs, rendering the role of identifying and confronting them all the more difficult and dangerous for military officials and civilians.

A Failed War: Human Security Implications of the War on Drugs

The drug trade in both Colombia and Mexico is linked to a complex web of factors that have allowed the industry to grow and fester as a violent and debilitating war, including issues of underdevelopment and weak institutions. As Ralph Secombe (1997, 288) writes, “[T]he illegality of crops like coca, opium poppy and marijuana tends to push their production into territories where law enforcement is weak. This generally means developing countries – typically poor countries which have significant internal security problems.” Echoing Hampson’s above-mentioned “other conditions” argument, it can therefore be deduced that the insecurity, which has led to thousands of casualties in Colombia and Mexico, is exacerbated by these

countries' underlying socio-economic and political conditions.⁷ The policies of the War on Drugs have failed to address the underlying factors of the drug trade, instead focusing on combating DTOs, a worthy though incomplete approach. By adopting a human security approach to the War on Drugs and drawing on the categories described by the UNDP report, the following section questions the effectiveness of the current policies and highlights the ways they have failed to ensure human security in Colombia and Mexico by inadequately addressing the countries' underlying conditions that allow the drug industry to grow.

Economic and political security

Both Colombia and Mexico bear high levels of poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality. These socio-economic conditions, along with weak political and judicial institutions, foster an environment in which drug cultivation and trafficking are not only possible, but for many have become attractive or necessary options to meet basic needs. It is estimated that over 80,000 Colombian families rely on illicit crop cultivation for their livelihoods (UNODC 2011a). The economic incentive is clear: "[A]s long as the price for coca leaves is ten times as high as that for cocoa, coffee, and rice for Andean farmers, they will continue to cultivate it" (Diego Garcia Savan in Wells 2006, 60). In this sense, drug trafficking effectively provides economic security, simply defined in the UNDP report as "assured basic income" (UNDP 1994, 25). Those without economic security often accept any work they can find, including informal work, badly paid, or unproductive work. Informal employment could be as high as 50 per cent in Colombia and 30 per cent in Mexico (World Bank 2012), which undoubtedly leads to increased economic insecurity and related problems such as criminal activity and migration.

In its effort to eradicate drug trafficking, the War on Drugs threatens the economic security of thousands of individuals in Colombia and Mexico who depend on the illegal but profitable drug industry for their livelihoods. As Peterson (2002, 437) explains, attempts to implement crop substitution programs through alternative development initiatives in Colombia have been met with numerous geographical, ecological, and climate-related obstacles. Many villages are too far removed from market access points, a situation made worse by the mountainous topography, making it difficult to sell alternative crops, and there are few profitable types of legal crops that can grow in the rocky soil of the Andes. Conversely, coca plants can grow very easily—they become productive within two years—and the expertly established drug trafficking channels allow products to move very quickly (ibid., 428, 437). Plan Colombia failed to take these factors into account in its crop eradication campaigns and many drug-producing regions in Mexico continue to lack sufficient funding for alternative development initiatives. As such, the cultivation of illicit crops and the salaries of *sicarios* (cartel hit men) continue to be very attractive in the face of unemployment and poverty (Kelly, Maghan, and Serio 2005; Hill 2010). However, as Wells (2006, 57) indicates,

"this does not necessarily imply that the US should support these industries . . . [rather,] they should be aware of the extent to which people's economic security is linked to drug cultivation and . . . the importance of offering them [viable] alternative economic opportunities."

In this light, it is clear that drug policies should focus more on economic security by addressing problems of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. By maintaining a narrow perspective on the drug industry as a threat to state security, rather than a problem related to underdevelopment or socio-economic conditions, the War on Drugs continues to neglect the roots of the drug industry. Writing about the Mexican context, Vanda Felbab-Brown (2010, 7) supports this reconceptualization of security: "Addressing the socio-economic needs of the marginalized areas of both the northern urban belt as well as southern rural areas is critical for reducing the recruitment pool for the DTOs, severing the bonds between marginalized communities and criminal elements, and resurrecting the hope of many Mexican citizens that the Mexican State and legal behavior can best advance their future." Felbab-Brown also underscores one of the most important factors in Mexico's strategy: the bulk of the anti-drug activities are taking place in northern Mexico's troubled states, but little action is being addressed in the southern states or poorer communities of the country. A similar situation occurred in Colombia, where security conditions improved in major cities, but rural communities—particularly in the Puntomayo region—have seen little progress.

Much like economic insecurity, political insecurity contributes to the drug trade and is exacerbated as a consequence of the War on Drugs. Political security is defined as a person's ability to "live in a society that honours their basic rights" (UNDP 1994, 32), meaning the protection of human rights and the absence of political repression. According to UNDP (*ibid.*, 33), one of the most important indicators of political insecurity is the "priority the government accords military strength." Both Colombia and Mexico opted to address the drug war with military intervention, resulting in the emergence of a range of issues such as corruption and human rights violations. The report also adds that political insecurity is most common in periods of unrest (*ibid.*, 32). Colombia faced decades of political violence and instability until the 1980s, while in Mexico the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* dominated Mexican politics for 71 years until the election of Fox in 2000. Both countries experienced an unstable transition to democracy, which allowed space for crime to grow (Carpenter 2003; Melo 1998). Secombe (1997, 291) argues that it is common for fragile democracies to experience "significant conflict between the illegal drug industry's goals and behaviours and . . . government's attempts to democratize the political and social systems, leading to violence and increased ungovernability." Upon democratization, both Colombia and Mexico had no choice but to confront DTOs and in both cases the countries entered into conflicts that have increased instability. This argument is echoed by James Fearon and David Laitin (2003, 76), who hypothesize that "financially, organizationally, and politically weak central governments render insurgency more feasible and attractive due to weak local policing

or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices.” Aggressive policies implemented by both countries, then, are actually a reflection of structural weaknesses in the face of powerful DTOs and popular discontent (Felbab-Brown 2010, 6, 21). In this sense, military intervention, as a reflection of political insecurity, is contributing to the very existence of the narcotics industry by bolstering political discontent within its borders, further weakening the state. Conversely, a human security approach built on prioritizing basic rights and strengthening government institutions could help address some of the issues associated with political insecurity.

It is impossible to deny that DTOs are the first cause of political insecurity in this context. Their presence and the violent conflicts they provoke greatly impede government functions while also aggravating persistent problems of transparency and impunity in relation to crime, human rights abuses, and corruption. Despite efforts by the Colombian and Mexican governments to reduce corruption, numerous government officials, police officers, and military personnel continue to collaborate with DTOs. Governments have not sufficiently focused on the problem of corruption and its role in exacerbating the drug trade (Secombe 1997, 28). Corruption has tremendous impacts on a population’s domestic political security and severely infringes upon Colombia and Mexico’s civil rights by rendering the political system tainted and undemocratic as individuals affiliated with the drug trade could enter into politics through threats, money laundering, or even meddling with electoral campaigns. Furthermore, it undermines confidence in the state judicial system and aggravates impunity as a growing number of crimes and human rights abuses go unaddressed (Amnesty International 2009). Corruption also threatens the population’s right to information when journalists face either censorship by the government or bribes by cartels to alter information about drug-related crimes in favour of their respective interests (Estévez 2010, 6–7). The seriousness of corruption leads Ted Carpenter (2003, 180) to argue that “the degree of penetration of law enforcement by [DTOs renders] supposed antidrug efforts in Mexico farcical.”

Like corruption, drug trafficking permeates national borders and impacts Colombia and Mexico’s relations with other countries. As Secombe (1997, 292–93) argues, in addition to the harm done by conflict, U.S. anti-drug policies can have international ramifications through impacts on economic, political, and strategic affairs. For instance, Roderic Ai Camp (2010) and Carpenter (2003) discuss the formidable challenge of reconciling U.S. demands with Mexican interests in the War on Drugs due to the complex and tense history between the two countries. The authors note that this history, distinguished by the supremacy of U.S. interests over Mexican interests, results in mistrust and animosity between the Mexican and U.S. militaries, and that many Mexicans perceive the War on Drugs to be an American war against drug consumption being fought in Mexico with Mexican resources and against the Mexican people. The same can be argued about Colombians (*ibid.*, 22). In effect, the War on Drugs also has severe domestic policy implications by eroding state funds and shifting focus away from

social services and programs, including rural development policies, toward increased militarization of the country. This constitutes one of the main paradoxes of current anti-drug policies: they demand sacrifices to the human component, including human rights, when these problems are at the root of the drug war. The human security approach, on the other hand, complements national security policies with social policies by taking into account the human component of the drug war.

The War on Drugs is compromising economic security through its crop eradication campaigns, high security costs, and underfunded alternative development programs. In addition, corruption, national and international political tensions, and the neglect of larger social and political conditions are eroding political security in both Colombia and Mexico. It is crucial for the governments of both countries to collaborate with the United States to address their weaknesses by strengthening institutions and re-evaluating the alternative development component of their drug policies. In doing so, they could better target deeper issues that allow the drug trade to succeed within their borders.

Environmental, health, and food security

Environmental, health, and food security are inextricably linked to economic, personal, and community security as each inherently feeds into healthy living and sustainable livelihoods. Crop eradication campaigns not only compromise the economic security of crop cultivators and small-scale farmers in Colombia and Mexico, but also have widespread ramifications that severely undermine these three forms of human security by causing forced displacement of farming communities, environmental damage, and disruption of traditional livelihoods. Since aerial crop spraying is not a component of the Mérida Initiative in Mexico, this section will focus on the devastating environmental and social impacts of crop eradication campaigns in Colombia.

Environmental security means having access to a “healthy physical environment” (UNDP 1994, 28). The biggest threats to environmental security, presented by crop eradication, include water scarcity, environmental degradation, contamination, deforestation, and access to land. Peterson (2002, 433) provides extensive details on the environmental impacts of a non-selective toxic herbicide called glyphosate, commonly known as Monsanto’s Roundup, used in aerial crop spraying under Plan Colombia (UNODC 2008, 101). Targeting illicit crops when sprayed, the herbicide is often carried by wind and water streams, destroying thousands of hectares of legal crops along the way. For example, officials in the Colombian state of Puntomayo note that more than 30,000 hectares of legal crops were destroyed within six weeks of aerial spraying in 2001 (Peterson 2002, 431). The destruction of both legal and illicit crops forces farmers to seek new, uncontaminated land. In the case of illicit plants like coca, the displacement of crops often leads DTOs to seek more distant and hidden spaces in forests and isolated areas of the country. David Olsen, director of the World Wildlife Fund conservation

science program, states that “for every hectare of forest sprayed, another is lost to pesticide drift and another to additional clearing to compensate for displaced crops” (cited in *ibid.*, 433). It is estimated that over 81,000 hectares of land are dedicated to coca cultivation in Colombia alone (UNODC 2010b, 228), potentially infringing on one of the world’s most beautiful landscapes endowed with rich and varied biodiversity among the Amazon Forest, Andes mountains, and Caribbean and Pacific coastlines. This displacement threatens wildlife and the livelihoods of more individuals, and hinders other, more productive uses of the land such as agriculture and tourism. A human security approach would eliminate harmful crop eradication techniques and could include greater environmental protection policies.

In addition to deforestation and contamination, toxic herbicides such as glyphosate have damaging effects on human health security, defined as a life free from disease and access to good nutrition, health services, and a safe environment (UNDP 1994, 27). Human exposure to the spray can cause “headaches and dizziness as well as eye, respiratory, skin and digestive problems . . . and ingestion may cause diarrhea, shortness of breath, vomiting, and weakness” (Peterson 2002, 433). People are undoubtedly exposed to this herbicide through soil and water contamination and food sources such as dairy products. The Colombian government downplayed these damaging impacts on health and, despite evidence of glyphosate’s toxicity, continued to use the product throughout Plan Colombia with the highest concentration of aerial spraying campaigns occurring in the Puntomayo region between 1998 and 2007 (UNODC 2008). According to UNODC’s *World Drug Report 2011*, over 100,000 hectares of Colombian coca fields are still sprayed every year (UNODC 2011b, 245). In addition, other means of crop eradication in both Colombia and Mexico, including field burning, persist and continue to jeopardize the economic security of those who depend on these crops. Crop spraying should never have been part of the plan, as it was an expensive and harmful initiative with trivial impacts on the global drug trade.

Aside from water and land contamination and widespread deforestation, crop eradication also negatively impacts food security (Peterson 2002, 430; Ramírez 2011, 222; Wells 2006, 55). Food security is understood here as “all people at all times [having] both physical and economic access to food” (UNDP 1994, 27). Crop eradication destroys some of the Andean region’s most important food sources, including fish, livestock, and plants valuable to surrounding communities. For instance, the coca plant is nutritionally, medicinally, and spiritually important for Andean indigenous communities who consume it by chewing the leaves or ingesting it in the form of tea (Peterson 2002, 430; Ramírez 2011, 55).⁸ The dangers of the drug conflicts have compromised many regions’ access to health care, markets, and stable employment, forcing populations to rely on indigenous traditions and local food supplies for their health and well-being. As mentioned above, many profitable legal crops cannot grow in the rocky soil of mountainous terrain. Furthermore, accessing markets to sell crops is complicated by distance and inadequate infrastructure, such as a lack of communications technology

and poor road conditions. Rather than investing in crop eradication, the government should increase investment in infrastructure development that facilitates access to markets and health care, as well as increase investment in social safety nets, alternative development programs, and local agriculture that together enhance economic, environmental, health, and food security.

By threatening environmental, health, and food security, the War on Drugs threatens livelihoods and exacerbates problems of poor market access, poverty, and internal displacement. Therefore, crop eradication as promoted by the War on Drugs cannot be divorced from economic security. By stopping crop eradication policies, particularly with toxic herbicides such as glyphosate, governments can support these essential forms of security and ensure a healthier environment for various communities. By prioritizing these forms of human security over the unsustainable destruction of illicit crops, governments can focus on developing real, long-term alternatives based on licit crop cultivation and better market access. By improving livelihoods, countries would have fewer families relying on or turning to the drug trade for subsistence, thus abating the intensity of the drug conflicts. To this day, the state security approach has failed to generate such results.

Personal and community security

Over 50,000 people have lost their lives in Mexico since 2007 (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk 2012, 1) and an estimated 230,000 individuals have fled the gun-ridden northern border towns (IDMC 2010a). In Colombia, approximately 16,000 lives were lost in 2008 because of drug-related violence (UNODC 2010a, 10), the lowest tally in over two decades—still far too many—and over 200,000 individuals are leaving their homes every year, with total estimates ranging from three million to five million people in the past 25 years (IDMC 2010b). The primary cause of these casualties and displacements is the violence brought on by the drug wars, yet the impact of crop eradication and the failure of the War on Drugs to improve personal and community security in Colombia and Mexico are also to blame. This section will focus mainly on Mexico due to the contemporary nature of the conflict, but it should be noted that Colombia continues to deal with human rights violations, displacements, and violence to this day.

Personal security refers to freedom from physical harm, including political violence and human rights abuses, while community security is defined as the freedom of association to a group that can provide cultural identity, support, and protection (UNDP 1994, 30–31). A report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2010a) demonstrates how the War on Drugs can impact these forms of security by arguing that Mexican authorities are failing to “acknowledge, assess or document the needs of the people displaced, instead focusing their efforts on fighting the drug cartels.” These displacements present severe threats to personal and community security since violence tears apart or destroys entire families and communities. Governments’ inability to provide for their needs and to prevent

displacements further jeopardizes these forms of human security. As Peterson (2002, 435) argues, the “destabilization of Colombian [and Mexican] society and culture through the escalation of civil war and the inflation of an already enormous internal refugee population are further consequences of drug war policy.” The human security approach would aim to reduce the number of displacements through less militarized and more socio-economically aimed policies and bolster state institutions to embody programs that help and protect the displaced.

The main actors responsible for a climate of personal insecurity in this context are undoubtedly DTOs; however, this insecurity is worsened by the militarization of civic affairs. Recent reports by Human Rights Watch (2011) and Amnesty International (2009) denounce the rise in human rights violations by the Mexican military participating in the fight against DTOs, echoing similar concerns earlier in Colombia.⁹ According to Amnesty International (*ibid.*, 5), “there are increasing reports of serious human rights violations, such as enforced disappearance, unlawful and extrajudicial killings, torture, other ill-treatment and arbitrary detention being committed by members of the Mexican military.” These abuses are committed against citizens across Mexico believed to be directly involved or linked to the narcotics industry; unfortunately, innocent civilians are often also victims. The report explains that a growing number of complaints have been filed in Ciudad Juárez and that “[t]hese new reports of human rights violations by the military . . . occurred in the context of military law enforcement activities to support civilian efforts to combat organized crime and drug cartels” (*ibid.*, 6).

Similarly, Secombe (1997, 291) reiterates that human rights are frequent casualties of the War on Drugs, adding that, “the cultivation of the illicit crop [like coca] may bring the farmers [who cultivate the crops] into conflict with the authorities, who are under pressure to eradicate it. Human rights abuses can then occur.” While security forces face some of the most ruthless drug cartels in Latin America, working in dangerous conditions in order to protect the Colombian and Mexican populations and integrity of the state, they are also responsible for perpetuating abuses and overlooking their investigations. A longstanding culture of impunity and the weakness of state judicial systems mean that abuses are rarely investigated and perpetrators seldom convicted. This leads to the continuation of criminality and growing frustration against the government, thus fuelling the drug trade. A human security approach would prioritize human rights protection and justice for crimes committed.

The presence of military forces in the drug wars has also intensified tensions between cartels and government officials. Increasing pressure from the security forces and rival cartels has made DTOs more ruthless, violent, and willing to resort to kidnappings, torture, and terrorism across Mexico, such as the 2011 bomb attack in Monterrey, in order to create an environment of fear and to gain territorial control. Furthermore, pressures in certain areas of the country have resulted in DTOs invading other, more peaceful areas such as Aguascalientes (Kellner and Pipitone 2010). The military may not be

directly responsible for these crimes, but its presence provokes conflict by inviting more frequent and aggressive confrontations with DTOs. In the end, civilians continue to suffer the burden of the War on Drugs.

Many individuals, including government officials, police officers, farmers and ordinary civilians, tend to face dual pressures in this battle for information and power. As Seccombe (1997, 292) writes, they face “the threat of assassination or other violence, coupled with the offer of financial reward for a favourable decision [in favour of cartel demands].” As a result, Colombia and Mexico are left with corrupt, weak, untrusted governments and societies paralyzed by impunity, crime, and associated social problems, all of which compromise the security and well-being of individuals and communities. A growing sense of fear, frustration, and mistrust is felt by Colombians and Mexicans. The inability of the War on Drugs to assuage such feelings results in personal and community insecurity. The current approach is so focused on military action that it has failed to ensure these forms of security and has actually led to human rights abuses, displacements, and deaths. A human security approach in Colombia and Mexico would prioritize the safety of populations and address socio-economic concerns and violence first.

Conclusion: Alternative Policy Options and the Need to Admit Defeat

This article challenged common conceptions of security that guide the War on Drugs as encapsulated in the two bilateral U.S. military assistance packages, Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative. Anti-drug policies, which are qualitatively very different but inexorably linked, need to be reconsidered in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States, and there are countless suggestions coming from every direction as to what the governments of these countries should do. Organizations such as the International Narcotics Control Board and many politicians in the United States have argued for more aggressive military action and the enforcement of prohibition laws (Seccombe 1997, 295). Others like the Netherlands, Australia, Portugal, and human rights organizations are increasingly promoting more progressive policies ranging from the “conventional” harm reduction policies and alternative development programs (Obokata 2007; Peterson 2002) to the “radical” free trade and full legalization of all illicit drugs (Wells 2006). There are logical rationales for each alternative, yet there is no clear solution to this complex transnational problem. A limiting factor in the development of alternative policies is that prohibition is deeply rooted in U.S. public discourse dating back over a century (Jelsma 2011). Consequently, it will be difficult to promote any momentous changes in policy, and whatever progress takes place will certainly happen gradually.

In spite of this, and given the urgent nature of drug-related violence, a growing number of experts, academics, and concerned individuals are promoting accelerated policy changes. As seen in the June 2011 *War on Drugs: Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy*, recent attempts by U.S. states

such as California to legalize cannabis (McKinley 2010), and the emergence of organizations like the *Red por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad*¹⁰ in Mexico and Common Sense for Drug Policy in Colombia, demand for an end to the War on Drugs and the adoption of alternative anti-drug policies is increasing. While the Obama administration continues to advance a prohibitionist and militaristic approach on drugs, there have been significant steps forward in drug policy approaches in both Colombia and Mexico (Jelsma 2011). Recently, for example, Calderón adopted an anti-corruption initiative that the Colombian government initiated in 2000 by dismissing hundreds of allegedly corrupt individuals and increasing police officers' salaries to minimize the incentives of corruption (ibid.; Kellner and Pipitone 2010). Numerous media reports show that government officials are beginning to acknowledge the weaknesses of the War on Drugs and are engaging more with civil society and experts to explore alternative policies. Although these are important developments, they are incomplete, mostly rhetorical, and insufficient.

Daily media coverage of drug-related violence, especially in Mexico, means that anti-drug policies have become a leading political issue and were undoubtedly a deciding factor in the July 2012 Mexican and will be, though to a lesser degree, in the U.S. elections. Anti-drug policies certainly played a pivotal role in the 2010 Colombian presidential election, when Colombians elected Juan Manuel Santos, former president Alvaro Uribe's minister of national defense, as president with 69 per cent of the vote. Much like his predecessor, Santos will continue taking a hard-line approach against rebels and DTOs (McDermott 2010), demonstrating that this approach still appeals to a large portion of the population. This is explained by the fact that crime rates in Colombian cities have fallen drastically since Uribe's entry into office because of increased military presence in those cities (UNODC 2010a). However, crime reduction in cities does not translate into crime reduction in rural parts of Colombia, such as the still violent Puntomayo region, and much less into a victory over crime, violence, and other factors such as poverty and corruption nationwide. In addition, the UNODC notes that despite a 58 per cent reduction in Colombian coca production between 2000 and 2009, production has increased by 112 per cent in Bolivia and 38 per cent in Peru, negating much of the progress in Colombia (UNODC 2010c, 20). This example demonstrates the need for better coordinated regional strategies.

To effectively combat drug crime within their borders, Colombia and Mexico also need to broaden and diversify their national strategies. Given the success in reducing crime in Colombian cities, a continuation of multifaceted action, including the establishment of a national research, analysis, and strategic bodies, such as the Government of Colombia's *Dirección de Justicia, Seguridad y Gobierno*, to better understand DTOs and the drug trade, could contribute to safer cities in Mexico and be replicated in different settings in Latin America. To avoid the balloon effect, whereby drug production and violence are merely displaced to other territories, military efforts must be matched with national socio-economic policies along the lines of improvements in education, economic productivity, small-scale agriculture, and employment

opportunities, all well-known concerns in Mexican society. By addressing issues of economic and food security and improving standards of living and capacity building in rural communities, there will be fewer incentives to be or get involved in criminal activities, and personal and community security will improve. For instance, investments in crop substitution, small-scale farming, and the elimination of aerial spraying campaigns could help prevent the future growth of the drug trade. Moreover, the Colombian and Mexican governments need to continue their efforts to combat corruption and better address problems of impunity and human rights violations by adopting a human security approach to drug policies. The establishment of effective judicial reforms¹¹ to bring crimes to justice create a stronger sense of confidence, trust, and security across those countries.

It has become increasingly clear that the United States and other consuming countries need to acknowledge their pivotal role in the drug trade. As long as demand remains high, supply will continue to flow to these markets and the violence will not stop (Wells 2006; Global Commission on Drug Policy 2011). As Zedillo argued at the 20th Special Session of the UN General Assembly in 1998: "The human, social, and institutional costs in meeting [demands for illicit drugs] are paid for by the producing and transit countries. It is our men and women who die first in combating drug trafficking. It is our communities that are first to suffer from violence, our institutions that are first to be undermined by corruption. It is our governments that are the first bulwark in this war" (Carpenter 2003, 213). Indeed, the United States accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the global demand for cocaine, worth approximately US\$37 billion (UNODC 2010c, 20). If the U.S. government is going to wage war against DTOs across its border, it is imperative that efforts be matched with initiatives on U.S. soil. Programs such as Hope, adopted in a number of states, including Hawaii, Alaska, Arizona, California, and Washington, have delivered positive outcomes and shown proven reductions in drug use, criminal activity and incarceration (Kleiman 2011, 97).¹² Mark Kleiman (*ibid.*) argues that "if Hope were to be [systematically] implemented . . . the resulting reduction in drug use could shrink the market—and thus the revenue of Mexico's [DTOs]—by as much as 40 percent." The United States could reduce demand at home through such evidence-based treatment and engage more freely with the decriminalization and legalization debates and policy alternatives, looking at Europe for inspiration, where Portugal and the Netherlands have successfully implemented drug decriminalization policies. Since decriminalizing drugs, Portugal has effectively solved its problem of overcrowded prisons and dramatically reduced the country's drug consumption levels (Jelsma 2011, 9). Unfortunately, legalization is not on the political agenda due to a range of social conventions and security concerns that dominate the U.S. Congress. However, what the United States could feasibly do, according to Kleiman, is better focus its security efforts on the most violent cartel, largely agreed to be the Zetas, or violence players within the cartels. In other words, promote differential law enforcement. Kleiman (2011, 98) argues that "[b]y focusing drug-dealing arrests, prosecutions, and

prison terms on the most violent individuals and groups, governments can achieve the double benefit of incapacitating the worst actors and deterring the rest—not from drug dealing (an incarcerated or deterred dealer will merely be replaced) but from violence, or from the flagrant dealing practices that give rise to violence and disorder.” These are two valid examples of how the United States can act as a world leader on drug policies that other countries around the world could emulate. The United States should collaborate with a greater number of countries and civil society organizations to find the best combination of military, economic, political, and social policies. At the core of the drug trade are profound social, economic, and political issues that are beyond the range of crop spraying or soldiers in the streets of Ciudad Juárez. The United States has been fighting the War on Drugs for 40 years and for 40 years it has failed. It is time to implement new policies rooted in human security principles and geared above all to end the brutal violence suffered across Colombia and Mexico.

Notes

1. The “War on Drugs” refers to the specific U.S. anti-drug policies carried out in Colombia and Mexico, while “drug war” refers to the battle between cartels for power and control in these countries, encapsulating all the violence, terrorism, and criminal activities associated with “turf wars.”
2. By focusing on U.S. policies, this article seeks to emphasize the powerful role of the United States as the main proponent of prohibition and author of the War on Drugs. It also focuses on Colombia and Mexico because they have been the main theatre of the War on Drugs. Their experiences and policies are deeply interlinked, and they both serve to demonstrate the adverse effects of aggressive policies originating from the War on Drugs. However, it is important to note that the War on Drugs expands beyond these three countries. Since the 1970s, the United States has pressured countries around the world such as Jamaica, Nigeria, Burma, Haiti, and Venezuela. U.S. anti-drug policies have included military missions, efforts to tighten drug laws, increasing arrest quotas, and applying sanctions to countries which have adopted more relaxed policies. Currently, the country is implementing similarly aggressive policies against poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. Europe, Canada, and Australia were all reluctant to join the War on Drugs and have generally more relaxed policies, particularly in recent years (Jelsma 2011).
3. Other key documents include former UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 report *An Agenda for Peace*, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty’s 2001 report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, and the Commission on Human Security’s 2003 report *Human Security Now*.
4. Carpenter (2003, 114–18) refers to “push-down, pop up” policies, also known as the “balloon effect,” whereby declines in Mexican marijuana production during the 1980s were matched with an increase in Colombian production of marijuana. In other words, no matter how efficient policies are in one region, the production of drugs tends to relocate elsewhere. Following this logic, many are sceptical about the Mérida Initiative’s success in Mexico.
5. Plan Colombia’s breakdown in 2001: US\$1.02 billion for bilateral economic assistance; US\$184 million for defense operations; US\$180 million for assistance to Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador; US\$70 million for the regional operations of the U.S. Treasury Department and U.S. Customs and Border Protection; approximately 75 per cent of the rest of the aid was directed toward the Colombian military and police, including US\$330 million in aid allocations; the remaining 25 per cent was earmarked for alternative development, refugee aid, human rights protection, judicial reform, law enforcement, and the peace process (Peterson 2002, 431).
6. The 2011 Mérida Initiative budget requested US\$346 million in foreign assistance to Mexico. Its breakdown is as follows: US\$26.3 million for development assistance; US\$10 million in economic support; US\$8 million in military financing; US\$3.5 million in global health and child survival; US\$1.1 million in military education and training; US\$292 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement programs; and US\$5.7 million for

non-proliferation, antiterrorism, demining, and related programs (Olson and Wilson 2010, 4).

7. It is important to note that drug production does not only take place in developing countries and there are high rates of drug cultivation and production in developed countries. For example, Canada is the world leader in methamphetamine production (UNODC 2008, 127).

8. Peterson (2002, 430) highlights some of the important nutritional values of the coca plant: "It contains an abundance of certain vitamins and minerals, including calcium, and its mastication provides an important supplement to many local diets, which may be deficient of vital nutrients . . . Chewing the coca leaves also suppresses the appetite, which is important in societies with unstable food supplies, and helps to mitigate the deleterious effects of high altitude on the human body. [Many] indigenous societies have also recognized and utilized its psychotropic qualities in medicinal and religious activities."

9. According to Amnesty International's (2011) report, in 2008 there were 1,230 official complaints of human rights abuses by the military filed to the National Human Rights Commission, a significant rise from 367 complaints in 2007 and 182 complaints in 2006. Countless more abuses go unreported. Also, the number of complaints that have been investigated and individuals that have been convicted remains alarmingly low.

10. The *Red por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* is a Mexican civil society organization, which includes concerned individuals like Javier Sicilia, a renowned Mexican poet who works to raise awareness about human security implications of the War on Drugs and advocates for alternative drug policies. The movement's motto is "*No Mas Sangre*" ("No More Blood").

12. Judicial reforms are currently under way in Mexico, being carried through with the assistance of the United States, Canada, and the European Union and in collaboration with the Organization of American States. There has been some progress in training judges and lawyers, but real change remains a much deeper cultural and long-term challenge.

13. The Hope program involves random drug testing with guaranteed short jail sentences (a few days) for detected use and includes positive incentives (reduction in testing frequency) for those with repeatedly clean tests. Those who test positive are forced to stop using drugs or face longer incarceration periods. In Hawaii, the program succeeded in getting 80 per cent its long-term methamphetamine users clean and out of confinement in one year. By reducing incarceration rates, the program effectively pays for itself (Kleiman 2011).

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