DRUG WARS IN LATIN AMERICA: THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Marissa Ayala

Abstract:
The history of Inter-American relations involves frequent United States intervention into Latin American political affairs. This paper explores the history of the drug trade between Latin America and the United States, the failure of both local and United States policy to address drug production and trafficking operations, and the detriment to the natural environment of Latin America as a result. In addition, the paper details the similarities between United States policies in other regions of the world, with particular attention to poppy production in rural Afghanistan. Lastly it explores potential solutions to the worsening crisis of drug production and trafficking between Latin America and the United States.

Keywords: Latin America: Policy: Drug: Trafficking: Environment: Ecological: Colombia: Peru: Afghanistan: Intervention

1. Introduction

The history of Inter-American relations has included numerous instances of United States intervention into Latin American affairs. These have ranged from CIA led overthrows of democratically elected leaders to the funding of pro-US regimes, and more recently has included harsh military intervention into the ongoing drug trade. This intervention has only exacerbated the ongoing problem and caused unnecessary harm to both the citizens and natural environment of Latin American nations. In this paper, I will address in what ways U.S. policy and intervention have harmed the natural environment in Latin America, refute claims that seek to portray these policies as successful, explore potential solutions to the problem, and finally relate the situation to another ongoing global conflict.

Background: Violence as a Result of Drug-Trafficking

In 2007, the United States began its direct involvement in the drug trade through what was called the “Merida Initiative”. This initiative, signed into law during the Bush administration, involves the U.S. and Mexico, and provides U.S. training to drug enforcement efforts within Mexico (Department of State). Since this initiative began, violence in Mexico as well as the rest of Latin America has skyrocketed. The efforts were primarily military-based and focused on supply-side policies, which aim to eliminate the availability of drugs through dismantling cartels and destroying drug crops. Estimates of the number of Mexican citizens killed as a result of the war on drugs range as high a 120,000 (Tico Times). However, this count is difficult to keep track of as violence continues to escalate and mass graves continue to be uncovered. While the
drug trade has certainly been bloody since its inception, highly militarized interactions with the United States have contributed to a growing cascade of violence.

One example of this interaction can be seen through the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), more commonly known as the School of the Americas, where the Mexican government was pressured to send roughly 2,000 military members. The impact of this U.S. training school has manifested itself through countless acts of corruption and violence toward Mexican citizens. Since its creation in 1946, the School of the Americas has trained tens of thousands of Latin American soldiers in counterinsurgency techniques, psychological warfare, interrogation tactics and more. These skills are frequently used against union organizers, educators, and student leaders who have been killed or forced to flee their homes in response to violence. Years after the beginning of United States intervention, violence remains rampant, and as of 2014 Mexico remains the U.S. market’s largest source of heroin, marijuana and cocaine (Seattle Times).

Since the crackdown in Mexico began, drug-related violence also began to spread and plague Central American nations such as Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, as it becomes increasingly difficult to traffic drugs through Mexico. This increased violence has led to some of the highest homicide rates in the world, with shocking numbers, such as 92 homicides per 100,000 people in Honduras during 2011 (United Nations). Additionally, conflict at the border remains a threat to human safety, as citizens attempt to flee north to escape the bloodshed.

2. Environmental Degradation: The Result of Failure to Curb Drug-Trafficking

However, escalating violence is far from the only negative impact of U.S. intervention in the drug trade. Rather, patterns of environmental destruction in Latin America are extremely consistent with the course of violence explained above. While the drug trade on its own is certainly harmful to the natural environment, U.S. policies and intervention have only worsened the problem by pushing the damage into more ecologically valuable areas. Ecological damage due to the drug trade can be separated by the two main causes: production and trafficking. Drug production takes place almost exclusively in the Andes region of South America, whereas trafficking takes route through Central America and has particularly destructive effects in Mexico. The continued presence of United States military force in Latin America has resulted in worsening the environmental damage caused by both factors.

Previously, Mexico was the main site of environmental destruction caused by drug trafficking. Rather than easing this destruction, U.S. intervention in the form of harsh crackdowns on the drug trade has only pushed the destruction south and intensified environmental degradation in other regions of Latin America. The vast majority of the world’s coca, the raw ingredient in cocaine, is produced in Colombia, Bolivia and Peru, as the climate and geography of the Andes allows for ideal growing conditions. Harsh military crackdowns in countries like Colombia have succeeded only in pushing the growth of coca and other drug crops into neighboring countries such as Peru, spreading the damage to the natural environment of the Andes. During 2013, it was confirmed by the United Nations that Peru had officially overtaken Colombia as the
world’s largest coca and cocaine producer. The reasoning behind this shift has little to do with the nature of the drug trade, and instead more to do with enormous efforts by the U.S. to fumigate coca fields in Colombia. This phenomenon, of drug production being geographically shifted rather than eradicated, has become commonly known as the “balloon effect” by researchers studying drug production in South American and other parts of the world (Insight Crime).

The strain on the environment due to drug trafficking has also not been eliminated, but rather has only spread farther south. It is extremely important to note the specific role of the U.S.’s harsh crackdown in all of this destruction. Harsh anti-trafficking policies in Mexico, championed by the U.S., have pushed drug cartels into the most premier and bio-diverse rainforest areas in Central America, largely because they are isolated and offer the highest amount of cover from the outside. For drug cartels, the importance of areas in Central America has increased rapidly in the past decade and rainforests have become the primary areas for trafficking. In Honduras and Guatemala this has resulted in mass deforestation in order to create landing strips to allow for the air transportation of narcotics. In the years since 2000, these countries held a deforestation rate of 1.19% annually, over eight times higher than the average deforestation rate of the rest of the globe (United Nations). This effect has recently been coined as “narco-deforestation”, a term used in many articles and journal to describe the rapid clearing of Central American rainforests. As stated by a top geographer at Ohio State University, Kendra McSweeney "Drug trafficking is causing an ecological disaster in Central America." It is important to note that the environmental impacts of failed drug policies go beyond deforestation. For instance, chemicals used to manufacture drugs are typically dumped illegally by producers. In Peru, containing the second largest portion of Amazon rainforest, this translates into over 15 million liters of chemicals dumped into the Amazon River each year. Similarly, the spraying of coca plants in Colombia, in an effort to curb heroin production, has led to reductions in biodiversity that ecosystems are unable to recover from (World Wildlife fund). It is difficult to quantify to what degree U.S. drug policies have worsened environmental destruction throughout Latin America. However, the point remains that it has certainly intensified the issue, and that any future tactics to combat the drug trade must take the valuable landscapes of these nations into account.

3. Alternative Arguments

Despite these negative externalities, proponents of harsh anti-drug policies have claimed that military and financial intervention are successful means of defeating drug production and trafficking in Latin America. However, overwhelming evidence suggests otherwise. For instance, United States Commissioner of U.S. customs and Border Protection, Gil Kerlikowske, praised the decline in violence and cocaine production in Colombia as a result of United States action. However, as described above, a more careful look at the situation shows that the drug industry, rather than dying down, simply moved into Peru, where production of cocoa has increased by roughly 40% since 2000 (The Economist).

Potential Solutions

Criticism of U.S. intervention has naturally led to the proposal of an array of alternative solutions to the devastation
caused by the illegal drug trade. Current policies that attempt to suppress drug flows and violently attack cartels and drug trade leaders miss the complexity of the drug trade, and are thus ineffective at suppressing the thriving drug trade. Prominent officials like Kasia Malinowska, the director of the Global Drug Policy Program, have advocated for reform in drug policy and acknowledged that “the current state of affairs is not acceptable” (Christian Science Monitor). The most prominent solutions that have been proposed to deescalate and ideally end the illegal drug trade in Latin America are drug legalization, decriminalization, and reducing drug demand, rather than focusing solely on drug supply.

The most prominent proposed solution, drug legalization, is common, and is one that has been endorsed by analysts and government officials alike. Ted Galen Carpenter, author of *Bad Neighbor Policy: Washington’s Futile War on Drugs in Latin America*, makes a case for this solution. He asserts that drug legalization, and the end of all prohibitionist policies, is the only realistic solution to the current problem. Legalization would not only eliminate the market for illegal drugs, but would allow the government to tax and bring in revenue from the sale. In recent years, a number of Latin American leaders, including former presidents Otto Perez Molina of Guatemala, and Jose Mujica of Uruguay have come out publicly in support of the legalization and government control of marijuana.

In 2014, Uruguay became the first country in the world to completely legalize and decriminalize the sale and use of marijuana. As Julio Calzada, Secretary-General of the National Drug Council, stated, “The U.S. thought it could pulverize drugs with an iron fist. But the only thing it achieved was to spread organized crime across the entire continent. After half a century of disastrous results we’re choosing to embark on a different path.” Since then, Uruguay has begun to see successes, namely in the lowered price of cannabis bought on the illegal market (Global Post). This means less revenue for cartels, and while the product may remain cheaper illegally, buyers are now incentivized to purchase legal marijuana without any of the potential repercussions.

Another proposed solution is to focus on the demand side of the drug trade though instituting increased health and drug rehabilitation programs in the U.S., in order to curb dependence on imported drugs. However, the effects of this method so far remains largely untested, as the U.S. has instead focused on supply-side policies throughout its history of fighting the drug trade.

4. Impacts of Drug Production in Other Parts of the World

The relatively disastrous results of U.S. intervention, however, are certainly not isolated to Latin America’s surging drug trade. In fact, a similar course of events has unfolded in the country of Afghanistan, where the U.S. has held military and political presence since 2001.

The booming poppy production throughout the nation provides a strong parallel to what is currently unfolding in Latin America. Supporters of U.S presence in Afghanistan have cited areas like the Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan, which was declared a “poppy-free” region in 2008 by the United Nations (CNN). However, since this declaration, the province has fallen back into the control of the opium trade, reaching an all-time high opium production rate in 2013 (NPR).
Similarly, U.S. attempts to cease the opium trade have resulted in epidemics of violence and ecological destruction. Since the 2001 intervention, opium production has risen to encompass 92% of all illegal opium production worldwide, compared to 70% prior to 2001. In the province of Nargarhar in 2005, after the U.S. temporary ceased opium production, peasant farmers who relied on the crop were left destitute. During 2006, poverty became so extreme that local farmers were forced to surrender their own children to local opium dealers as the only means to pay off their debts (World Heritage Encyclopedia). In particular, because the Taliban is the largest beneficiary of drug sales, the flourishing drug trade only strengthens the organization and allows it to relentlessly carry out terror attacks on the Afghan people. Between 2009 and 2011, Taliban insurgents were behind approximately 80% of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan (United Nations), and their attacks are made possible by revenue from the opium trade.

In a country that was once known for its forests, environmental destruction has also been a major impact of policies aimed at the local drug trade. The spraying of poppy fields to destroy the crop has caused both environmental and human health hazards (Washington Post). In addition, the Taliban’s second largest source of income is timber, meaning that poppy cultivation, the Taliban’s strength, and deforestation all create a positive feedback loop, accelerating the rate of environmental disorganization in the country as the Taliban continues to grow.

Potential solutions to the devastation caused by the drug trade also mirror the potential solutions in Latin America. Some proponents advocate legalization, and turning Afghan opium into a source for the opiates industry, which would bring in mass revenue for the government. Others advocate for the election of a legitimate government and a complete eradication of the Taliban in order to create stability and provide citizens with dependable income. Although proposed solutions to the Afghan opium trade vary, the current status of the nation overwhelmingly points to the failure of U.S. drug policies. Despite the $7.6 billion (as of 2014) that the U.S. has spent on counternarcotic efforts, Afghanistan has become yet another example of the failure of U.S. intervention into a foreign drug trade.

5. Conclusion

These parallels between Afghanistan and Latin America are by no means a coincidence, but point to the larger issue of failed drug policies across the globe. While the proposed alternatives to the war on drugs may be relatively untested, an examination of the ecological and social environments in Mexico, Afghanistan, and throughout Latin America make a clear case substantially changing, if not ending, U.S. policies which affect the region.
Bibliography


Part 1: Introduction


Part 2: The Natural Environment


Part 3: Alternatives


Part 4: Afghanistan


