

CASE STUDY

COLOMBIA

A Progressive National Drug Policy

Summary

Colombia's 'war on drugs' has been disastrous for its citizens, especially for rural and marginalised communities in areas with coca plantations. By August 2023, more than 17,600 people were imprisoned for drug-related offences. The vast majority were growers, transporters, consumers and small-time dealers. The financial cost of this punitive approach was huge: Colombia spent around USD 883.7 million each year in the fight against drug trafficking. In a speech before the UN General Assembly, President Gustavo Petro, who was elected into office in 2022, stated that the war on drugs had failed and vowed to shift the approach to focus on regulating drug use and protecting small coca growers. As part of this new approach, over 2,000 people and community organisations, mostly small farmers, Indigenous communities and activists who have been directly affected by the war on drugs, were invited to contribute to developing a new national drug policy. The 2023-2033 National Drug Policy represents a genuine shift in Colombia's approach. The strategy focuses on protecting life and the environment. It prioritises the health and wellbeing of communities most affected by the war on drugs and promotes activities to reduce the risks, harm and stigmas associated with drug use. In December 2023, the decision was made to use USD 49.5 million of assets seized by law enforcement to strengthen the policy's implementation, while the police experienced a 53% reduction in the money it received from assets seized by law enforcement. Since the new drug policy was launched, the government has begun funding a small number of harm reduction and social inclusion projects. Plans are now underway to update comprehensive care guidelines for people who inject drugs to include the provision of sterile injecting equipment, opioid agonist therapy and community-based overdose prevention. Guidelines for drug consumption spaces are also under development. These changes will make a significant difference to individual lives, communities and public health.

Key statistics

17,670

In 2023, more than 17,500 people in Colombia were imprisoned for drug-related offenses.

\$883M

Colombia's annual spend on anti-drug trafficking approaches is around USD 883 million.

\$49.5M

In 2024, over USD 49 million in assets seized from criminal organisations were used to finance the implementation of the National Drug Policy.

53% ▼

Between 2023 and 2024, the National Police experienced a 53% reduction in the funds it was allocated from seized criminal assets, which were instead given to the Ministries of Agriculture and Health to implement the country's new, progressive drug policy.

The punitive approach

The decades-long 'war on drugs' in Colombia has had disastrous consequences for its citizens, especially in marginalised and rural communities. Widespread fumigations to eradicate coca plantations have severely impacted the health of rural and Indigenous communities.¹ Evidence shows that homicide rates in areas with coca plantations are much higher than in areas without them.

The criminalisation of drugs has also had an impact on incarceration rates in Colombia. By August 2023, 17,670 people were imprisoned for drug-related offences. The vast majority were growers, transporters, consumers and small-time dealers.²

The Observatory for Drugs of Colombia estimates that COP³ 3.8 billion was spent annually (around USD 883.7 million) in the fight against drug trafficking.⁴

Drug use is highly stigmatised in Colombia. One study found 40% of women who inject drugs avoided health services for fear of stigma and discrimination, and 25% of people who inject drugs had experienced stigma in healthcare settings.⁵

Challenging the punitive approach

Numerous civil society organisations, such as Corporación Viviendo, Teméride, Alpharero and Dejusticia, which are mostly composed of small farmers, Indigenous communities and activists, have long advocated for a harm reduction approach to drug use.⁶ Many of these organisations are directly affected by the consequences of the war on drugs and have been calling for a significant change in drug policy for years. These organisations are also implementing harm reduction activities where possible. For instance, Corporación Viviendo⁷ undertakes harm reduction activities in Cali, where it has supported over 500 people who inject drugs. It also functions as a training and research centre and is developing initiatives on community and social justice, including harm reduction, in partnership with local and national governmental institutions, such as the Ministry of Justice.

Dejusticia is a think-tank which conducts studies on drug use, advocates for policy reforms, monitors government actions and conducts strategic litigation actions. For instance, at the beginning of the current administration in August 2022, in partnership with other human rights organisations, Dejusticia published a report urging the newly elected president Gustavo Petro to develop a new drug policy to incorporate a series of recommendations, including the need to strengthen an approach to drug use based on harm reduction.⁸

During 2023, these organisations joined over 2,000 people and community organisations in consultations to define the goals and values of the new national drug policy.

Instigating change

In 2023, the government of Colombia presented its National Drug Policy for 2023-2033, *Sembrando vida, desterramos el narcotráfico*⁹ (By sowing life we eradicate drug trafficking). Drug-related issues have been a central focus for the first leftist administration in Colombia. In his speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations, President Petro stated that the war on drugs strategy had failed and vowed to shift the approach to regulate drug use and protect small coca growers in order to address the previous administration's failures regarding the treatment of coca leaf cultivation.¹⁰

This plan represents a shift in Colombia's drug policy, from a punitive approach to a strategy that focuses on protecting life and the environment. It prioritises the health and wellbeing of the communities most affected by the war on drugs and promotes actions to reduce the risks, harm and stigmas associated with the use of psychoactive substances.¹¹

"This plan represents a shift in Colombia's drug policy, from a punitive approach to a strategy that focuses on protecting life and the environment"

Investing in community, health and justice.

One of the main pillars of the National Drug Policy is the commitment to approach drug use from a health and human rights perspective. Among other measures, the policy seeks to establish diverse, flexible, low-threshold treatment and intervention services and reduce barriers to accessing treatment for HIV, viral hepatitis and tuberculosis. It also commits to providing naloxone and methadone for people who use drugs and installing community pharmacies and dispensing models.¹²

Over 30 public institutions are collectively responsible for implementing the policy and contributing to its financing. Funding sources include the Fund for Rehabilitation, Social Investment and Fight against Organized Crime (FRISCO, for its acronym in Spanish). In December 2023, the National Narcotics Council of Colombia issued a resolution permitting some resources obtained from assets seized from criminal organisations allocated to FRISCO to be used to strengthen the implementation of the National Drug Policy. This decision allowed for COP 215,355,000,000 (around USD 50 million) of seized criminal funds to be distributed between the ministries

responsible for co-implementing the National Drug Policy. In total, COP 85,640,000,000 (around USD 20 million) was allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture, and COP 24,391,000,000 (around USD 5.5 million) was allocated to the Ministry of Health. This was an increase of 22.5% for National Drug Policy implementation compared to the 2023 budget).¹³

Meanwhile, the National Police experienced a 53% budget reduction in 2024, compared with what it obtained from FRISCO for its 2023 budget.¹⁴ The authorities made this decision to prioritise investing these resources into supportive actions in territories most affected by criminal organisations and where the state has been historically absent.¹⁵

Impact

The National Drug Policy has only been operational since mid-2023. In 2024, the government continued to build an action plan for its implementation which will seek, among many other things, to update the guidelines on comprehensive care for people who inject drugs. These comprehensive guidelines will include the provision of sterile needles and syringes, opioid agonist therapy and community-based overdose prevention. It will also seek to reduce the coca cultivated in Colombia by 92,000 hectares.

With assistance from international organisations and civil society, the government is developing a Harm Reduction Action Plan. As part of this, the Ministry of Public Health is working on technical guidelines for the design, implementation and evaluation of drug consumption spaces. Additionally, the ministry has already supported projects in the neighbourhoods of Sucre and El Porvenir to reach people with harm reduction services and promote social inclusion through initiatives such as a community restaurant and community art projects.¹⁶

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Sources

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This is one in a series of case studies which captures the experiences of governments and donors around the world divesting from punitive approaches to drugs, and investing in programmes which prioritise community, health and justice. These case studies are not meant to be comprehensive but provide examples of effective divestment and investment, and related advocacy strategies.

**DIVEST FROM
THE UNJUST
DRUG WAR.**

**INVEST IN
JUSTICE.**