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### **A Drug Policy Reform for Social Justice**

The drug policy reform movement has won numerous battles against the ‘war on drugs’ at international seminars, forums and workshops, but, in many places around the world, such as Colombia, it has not been able to win the majority of the public opinion, nor large segments of the population including various of the very communities that number among the past and current victims of that war. Without a wider ideological consensus, a drug policy reform is doomed to fail.

In Colombia, during the last two decades, drug policy reform activism has been centered mainly on public health issues and human rights concerns. These issues were relegated to the domain of experts and technical solutions. This has been related to a particular view of drug policy reform aimed at drug users as its main beneficiary. This is partly explained, in my opinion, because the priorities of drug policy reform have been largely inspired by the innovative experiences of countries of the global north, which of course answer to their needs as user countries. These needs are not the same as those of producer countries.

Though not incompatible neither mutually exclusive, these two approaches have different objectives: on the one hand there is an emphasis on the market and the ways of accessing goods without violence, while minimizing public health perils. On the other, the emphasis is put on the need of a different international drug policy regime, out of the premise that production, commercialization, and use of drugs have produced dispossession and privilege relations in producer countries and regions. The production of coca, marihuana, and poppy in our countries has caused social, economic, cultural and political impacts similar to the ones effected by sugar cane, cacao, rubber, coffee, among other commodities. The latter approach poses the challenge of thinking about the links between drug policy and the broader discussions about development models in the global south.

In part, this was one of the goals of the drug policy item in the peace accords signed in 2016 between the former government and the FARC guerilla, which contained a vision of drug policy reform as inseparable from political and rural reforms.

The peace accords opened an opportunity to discuss some structural problems of Colombian society. The link between drug reform and the development model was again made evident in two key figures created by the agreement, namely, the development plans with territorial emphasis and the integral plan for the substitution of illicit crops. This gave rise to a renewal of political participation and social mobilization in rural areas historically characterized by the presence of violence. Suárez, at the Cauca department, was one of the municipalities that in this context enjoined a moderate but significant transformation in its political landscape.

Supported by the Trenza Foundation and the Latin American Thinking Center Raizal, the three main social organizations of Suarez (Cabildo Indígena Nasa Cerro Tijeras, Asociación de consejos afrocolombianos de Suárez y la asociación de campesinos Asocordilleras) created the Intercultural Peace School Benicio Flor, named after a social leader killed in 2015. This was projected to be an intercultural space to build a Common Good Living Plan in order to structure and canalize the Suarez rural communities' struggles. Throughout different discussions on the illicit crops in the region, it was clear the link between the development model imposed upon those communities and the growth of illicit economies. Thus the strategy implemented to reduce illicit crops was based on policies such as national plans to build rural infrastructure (roads, electric plants, aqueducts), subsidies to peasant, afro and indigenous communities, as well as communitarian strategies for voluntary substitution of illicit crops.

It would be a lie to say that all rural communities in Colombia are for a drug reform policy. As I said before there are large segments of the population that still don't feel represented and recognized in progressive agendas. Nonetheless, it is true that all communities do want to take part in the peace building processes in their territories.

Colombia's current far-right government is not committed to the defense and implementation of the peace accords in all its components: political participation guarantees, rural reform, transitional justice, let alone the problem of drugs and illicit crops. Although there have been significant responses from civil society in defense of the peace accords and other related progressive reforms, social majorities remain in favor of reactionary agendas. We cannot overlook the fact that just in the last three years we lost a plebiscite for peace and a citizen consultation against corruption.

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In spite of the scientific and technical evidence showing the need of overcoming the current 'war against drugs' paradigm; in spite of the clinical research, pilots and innovative experiences on different fields of public health and citizen security, we, the progressive sectors, haven't been able to persuade the core of public opinion, let alone win an electoral majority. This is the case not only for Colombia. All around the world authoritative and neo-fascist movements are on the rise, in some cases even getting hold over political power. This has been accompanied by the systematic assault against different populations and demands, such as the LGBTI movement, women's rights, ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, migrants, climate change and environmentalist measures, among others.

Those of us who are campaigning for a drug policy reform must stop and think. We must evaluate the sort of activism that we are doing. Why is it that we are failing?

In my opinion this question takes us again into the distinction between a liberal approach to drug policy reform focused on the drug market and its externalities; and a more comprehensive one that emphasizes social justice, primarily for the most affected communities and countries. The predominance of the technical view in the former leads to a depolitization of the drug policy field: the kingdom of experts has no room for common and ordinary citizens. It also, and very importantly, isolates this debate from other agendas.

On the contrary, the reactionary camp has understood the importance of articulating their opposition to drug reform with other agendas informed by anti-immigrant platforms, climate change denial, assaults on minority rights, anti-feminism, so on so forth.

It's a whole cultural block that we are disputing over: a new hegemony, not a particular reform aiming at legalizing some substances and delivering them to the market. It may even be that the liberal approach ends up being compatible with the maintenance of neo-liberal politics and the rise of neofascism. The Colombian example, again, is illustrative on this aspect. While the government promotes the fumigation of illicit crops and rural communities' territories, we are witnessing an increasing presence of international investments from the pharmaceutical cannabis industry, within a context of exclusion of small producers.

We must realize that we are fighting in favor of a practice of freedom much deeper than the freedom of consumption and the freedom of entrepreneurship that lies behind the capitalist liberal approach. We are fighting for the freedom of self-determination of individuals, but also of communities. Hence the crucial importance of restorative measures for the communities that have suffered the most violent effects of the war against drugs. A market-led reform is certainly not sufficient to respond to the expectations and needs of these communities.

In our times, with the rise of the Trumps, the Bolsonaros and the Duques everywhere, we need a more diverse, colorful and active civil society, beyond the dynamics and the restrictions imposed by the budgetary schemes and bureaucracy of international cooperation agencies and institutions. We have to go back to the streets, neighborhoods, towns, and countryside areas where ordinary people live, hope and fear.

They are the majorities that must mobilize in the search of a new and more just horizons.