

Advocates or Obstacles? NGOs and Plan Colombia

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Plan Colombia's original title was "Plan Colombia, Plan for Peace, Prosperity and the Strengthening of the State." [1] But even though "peace" was listed as the first of three elements to describe the plan's objectives, only \$3 million of the \$860.3 million in aid given to Colombia through Plan Colombia in 2000-2001 was allocated to promote peace. The "peace" funding was directed toward conflict-resolution training seminars to government negotiators. Meanwhile, \$642.3 million was allocated for military and police assistance (see Figure 1).[2]

The militaristic focus of Plan Colombia has led many large international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the International Red Cross and World Vision, to refuse aid money related to the program.[3] Not only have NGOs reacted to the ideological discrepancies between their missions and the official stance of the Plan Colombia funders, but many also declined involvement because they were concerned about the safety of their personnel in locations that would be increasingly armed and dangerous. Several NGOs were attacked by Colombian paramilitaries during the 1980s; these organizations therefore disapproved of Plan Colombia's funding of Colombian troops, some of whom have clear but unofficial ties to paramilitaries.

In October 2000, representatives of more than 100 NGOs produced a statement on Plan Colombia at the International Conference for Peace and Human Rights. The document states, "International organizations are fully convinced that Plan Colombia, as it is designed, will not contribute to peace but rather, we fear, will result in more deaths and despair for the Colombian people and will lead to a regionalization of the conflict." [4] Colombia-based human rights organizations and NGOs have also refused to accept funds from Plan Colombia. In August 2000, a coalition of 37 Colombian NGOs rejected funds from the plan due to "ethical and political difficulties," and urged the European Union to search for alternatives to Plan Colombia.[5]

The European Union designated some \$300 million in aid for social and economic development programs for Colombia in October 2000. To avoid being associated with the U.S. aid package and its militaristic slant, the European Union money was to be administered by NGOs working in human rights and economic development, rather than by the Colombia government. Once Plan Colombia was implemented and money began to enter the country, a virtual NGO explosion occurred, in which NGOs competed for the newly arrived funds. According to the Confederación Colombiana de Organizaciones no Gubernamentales (Colombian

NGO Confederation), 5,432 Colombia-based NGOs are now active in Colombia. Of those, 1,000 belong to the confederation, which receives a sizeable amount of grant money from Plan Colombia. The confederation has registered 720 separate NGOs participating in one project alone--Plan Colombia's Empleo en Acción (Employment in Action) program, a job-creating vehicle that aims to improve urban infrastructure.

Accepting Aid: A Financial Risk?

Although indigenous people make up less than two percent of the total population, Colombia's 1991 constitution grants them control of nearly a quarter of the country's land mass.[6] Great expanses of sparsely populated territories, many of which are located in the Amazon basin, are desired by both FARC and paramilitary troops who use revenues from coca crops there to finance their internal armed conflict. Since indigenous communities are often situated in the heart of these fertile lands, they are directly in the crossfire. As claimants to such sought-after and expansive resources, indigenous communities should be a central priority of Plan Colombia.

As of September 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had disbursed \$981,808 to nine organizations to carry out peace-related activities in Colombia. The third-largest grant, a total of \$112,394, was given to the Confederación Colombiana de ONGs to "provide institutional strengthening to member NGOs working with Plan Colombia on peace issues in the Chocó, Meta, Santander, Quindío, and Magdalena Medio departments." [7] In September 2001, USAID released a progress report on the implementation of activities supported by that money. It did not specifically mention indigenous communities, but it did mention a geographically specific plan, Plan Putumayo, which provides \$150.5 million over a period of five years. Plan Putumayo is largely devoted to social projects, including nutrition and school subsidies for 3,405 families, improvement of roads, electrification, potable water and sewage, health centers, and humanitarian assistance. Numerous indigenous communities in the Putumayo region (Figure 2) would seem to be among the beneficiaries of the funding. But in July 2002, leaders from those communities said they had received no money. While not specified in the USAID document, the Colombian Embassy indicates in a briefing paper how USAID money has benefited indigenous groups, and highlights an agreement with the Kofan tribe of Putumayo that gave \$864,000 for projects that provide aid and training to 487 Kofan families (\$1774 per family) in exchange for manual eradication of their coca plants.[8]

Compensation programs for manual eradication have been highly controversial. Coca crops may exist in many communities' territories against the will of community members. They are often planted under coercion from paramilitaries, guerillas, or drug dealers, raising several questions: Is manual eradication

possible in areas where FARC or paramilitaries have taken control? If the crops are eradicated in such areas, will they simply be planted again in the same locations? Would families who received funds to manually eradicate be penalized if such coca crops were later found on their land?

Simple economics is also a factor: \$1,774 per family may not be enough for farmers to justify destroying crops from which they receive a constant and steady flow of income to feed their families. That compensation also may not enable families to plant, maintain, and alternate crops and secure a share in the market. Accepting USAID grant money may imply more financial risk than gain for the average family. Manual eradication, however--even for minor remunerations--may be better than the alternative of forced eradication via aerial fumigations with herbicides that are reported to contaminate local subsistence crops and water resources and to cause illness and food shortages within communities.

Manual eradication agreements have already caused disputes. According to a memo prepared by four NGOs in April 2002, eight months after the last agreement was signed, only 30 percent of the families had received compensation money--and they had not received all of their promised money.[9] As a result, very little coca has actually been manually eradicated, leading USAID to conclude that manual eradication is inferior to eradication via aerial spraying.[10]

NGOs: The Bigger Picture

A number of NGO coalitions have formed to formally oppose U.S. military aid in Colombia:

- 38 U.S. NGOs drafted a letter to U.S. Congress on April 16, 2002, regarding a 2002 supplemental appropriations request that would provide millions of dollars in advance funding to train Colombian army troops guarding the Cano-Limon oil pipeline, which crosses an area where indigenous groups are presently engaged in a dispute over oil exploration and indigenous rights.

- Four NGOs wrote a memo dated April 10, 2002, regarding compliance with fumigation conditions of the Andean Regional Initiative, indicating the damaging effects fumigation would have on natural resources and communities.

- 62 U.S. NGOs wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell on December 7, 2001. They listed the effects fumigations had on inhabitants of the Putumayo region and addressed the manual eradication pacts that had been agreed to there, stating that six months after the agreements, residents had received no funds.

- Numerous U.S. NGOs wrote a statement on November 9, 2001, regarding President Andrés Pastrana's visit to the United States. They expressed concern for the slow pace of implementation of the economic and social components of U.S. assistance that would benefit communities.

- 33 U.S. NGOs drafted a press release and letter to then-U.S. President Bill Clinton on July 31, 2000, conveying opposition to U.S. aid to the Colombian military and the Colombian military's proven record of human rights violations and support for paramilitary groups.

- 24 Colombian NGOs issued a statement on July 1, 2000, which said that Plan Colombia neglected social objectives such as peace and human rights and was being reduced to a military plan, causing irreparable damages to the rainforest.

- 73 Colombian NGOs wrote a statement in June 2000 regarding Plan Colombia which denounced that the plan would only attack indigenous populations and destroy their cultures and lifestyles, while seriously harming the Amazon ecosystem.

In addition to these collective efforts, countless NGOs have issued statements, written press releases, and drafted letters to relevant government officials.

Indigenous Leaders Speak Out on NGO Involvement

When indigenous leaders from Putumayo talk about why Plan Colombia funds have failed to reach the communities they were intended to benefit, they explain how NGO involvement has complicated these matters for their communities. The following narration has been constructed from interviews with indigenous leaders of Putumayo and from a focus group at the International Forum on the Impacts of Fumigations on Crops Typified as "Illicit" and the Armed Conflicts in Quito, Ecuador:

Indigenous communities of Putumayo signed a mutual agreement called Raíz por Raíz (root for root) for manual eradication. Our members were given 12 months from the time of the disbursement of resources to eradicate their crops. However, as of yet, no money has been given to them, so the crops have not been eradicated. We would like to have this program reevaluated so that it can be implemented and what was agreed upon in the document can be fulfilled.

NGOs are in charge of disbursing the funds to the communities. According to the government, the funds were already disbursed. So they expect the crops to be eradicated. But the community members have not received any money, so how can they possibly eradicate their crops? The NGOs still have all of the money. But soon, since the time period allotted has lapsed, fumigations will start again because the crops have not been eradicated yet. While we realize that the NGOs'

intentions are noble, their bureaucracy and the slow process of disbursing the money only complicates our situation. Not only that, it makes our people look irresponsible, adding to a stereotype and suggesting the futility of working with Indians. It's as if we were a bunch of savages who cannot follow a written agreement. The fact of the matter is, we are willing to cooperate, but we cannot do so until the money actually reaches us. The funds have been disbursed, but only to the NGOs, not to us.

After Plan Colombia was approved, 3,200 NGOs were created in Bogotá and registered by the Chamber of Commerce. There was literally a race, with Plan Colombia funds being the coveted prize. So, the money never reaches the hands of the indigenous communities, but stays under NGO control. NGOs often use the money to their own advantage, to make sure that their organization survives. They are competing with other NGOs for Plan Colombia resources. Often, when the money finally does reach a community, in the few cases we have seen of that actually happening, there is hardly any left.

When 42 billion pesos were approved for OZIP [Organización Zonal Indígena de Putumayo, Putumayo Regional Indigenous Organization], NGOs told the community members that every individual would receive 2 million pesos. This was the expectation of the community members. We had to explain that, as leaders, our intention was to use the money collectively for programs and policies that would benefit the entire community. Now everyone is having a hard time understanding it and each wants their 2 million pesos. When the NGOs told our people that the money would be divided up equally among individuals, they disrupted our collective, traditional way of life. Now, it's taking us months to try to correct this. And people are still upset with us.

Often, different NGOs will come into our community. Each will try to find their own sector or niche in the "market" that we represent to them. This inevitably ends up dividing our community and destroying our unity.

Just handing over the money to the indigenous leaders is not a good idea. First, we simply don't have the human resources to be able to distribute the money. Second, putting so much money in the hands of only a few people could lead to corruption. But most importantly, if the money were given directly to us, the paramilitaries and guerillas would be likely to come in and take it from us. It would essentially make us a quick and easy target. Not only that, if the money were to be given to a specific community, this might make them susceptible to the guerillas coming in and saying that the community has directly accepted Plan Colombia money and is therefore with the government and against their cause. It might automatically make us seem like we are anti-FARC, when really, we don't want to be involved in this battle in any way. There is no way that we

would ever accept money directly at a community level. For this reason, we do need the NGOs right now, but we definitely need some changes to take place.

What we really need is for the money to enter the communities at the level of the cabildos indígenas [indigenous councils--each cabildo controls a separate resguardo, or communal property of an indigenous community[11]]. Each municipality has a governor and a treasurer, and funds could be distributed at that level and utilized in ways that would benefit the communities. The most important factor would be wide participation and communication between all of the community leaders and members, and leaders of indigenous organizations. Ideally, the role of NGOs would be to facilitate that communication process, to ensure that all parties benefit from the funds.

The greater lesson to be learned in the Putumayo region's NGOs appears to be two-fold: 1) NGOs must work to improve communication between staff members and indigenous leaders in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings, to channel communications with community members regarding funds, and to work jointly toward community objectives; and 2) NGOs must keep the appropriate national government officials apprised of funds-disbursement efforts to avoid misunderstandings about indigenous communities' willingness to hold up their end of manual eradication agreements.

NGOs appear to be doing their part to rally international attention and support for social issues that are largely neglected by Plan Colombia. Still, the importance of acting locally while thinking globally cannot be ignored, and local indigenous leaders agree. Key programs, such as Raíz por Raíz, must be reexamined and handled with care. Even though the management of an infinitesimally small portion of Plan Colombia funds may seem like an insignificant task, the lives and well-being of Colombia's Amazonian indigenous populations depend on it.

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