An in-depth examination of PASO Colombia and its coca reduction program.
Coca-growing campesinos, or peasant farmers known as the “cocaleros,” have suffered greatly during the two generations of armed conflict in Colombia. Caught between the Colombian government, paramilitary guerrillas and narco-traffickers, the cocaleros had little choice but to grow coca to provide livelihoods for their families.

Because coca is an easy-to-grow and profitable crop, and because “customers” come to pick up the coca, campesinos have lost both their knowledge of farming and their understanding of commercial markets.

Billions of dollars and decades of effort by the Colombian government, the United States and the international community have failed to eradicate coca. The successful elimination of coca depends on the development of legal and sustainable economic alternatives for the cocaleros and effective governance in rural areas.
At the University of Notre Dame, the Business on the Frontlines (BOTFL) program examines the impact of business in societies suffering deep poverty and conflict. Graduate students and faculty from the Mendoza College of Business partner with local organizations including NGOs and businesses to harness the dynamism of business to promote stability and economic opportunity.

BOTFL projects focus on a range of industries including agriculture, infrastructure and mining. Others have extended to micro-finance, youth unemployment, post-civil war reconciliation, business incubators, health and nutrition, human trafficking and disaster preparedness. BOTFL teams have worked on in excess of 55 projects in more than 25 countries. Since 2017, BOTFL faculty and student teams have made seven field visits to Colombia, visiting 21 municipalities in seven departments.
Paz Sostenible para Colombia (PASO Colombia) was established in 2015 under the parent NGO One Earth Future. One Earth Future focuses on creating a more peaceful world through collaborative, data-driven initiatives.

Beginning in 2019, PASO Colombia focused on the economic and social reincorporation of FARC ex-combatants through its 20 innovative Rural Alternative Schools (ERAs) and associated Collaborative Commercial Partnerships (CCPs). More than 1,800 ex-combatants and roughly an equal number of neighbors from the surrounding communities participated in these programs. Of those ex-combatants, very few have rearmed.

In 2019, PASO extended its programs to support cocaleros enrolled in the government’s National Comprehensive Program for the Substitution of Illicit Crops (PNIS) program. PASO focuses on alternative livelihood creation as the means of coca reduction, a departure from the “eradication first, alternative livelihoods second” model that Colombia has pursued unsuccessfully for the past 20 years.
WHY ARE COCA ERADICATION PROGRAMS FAILING?

Program Sequencing
While many campesinos would prefer not to grow coca, and most are even willing to make less money growing an alternative crop, eradication programs typically fail to account for the time, financial support and training needed to move away from coca and transition to new crops. While programs such as PNIS offer payments to not grow coca, the support ends before campesinos can fully earn livelihoods with new legal crops. Without a stable livelihood to provide for their families, the campesino is much more likely to return to producing illicit crops.

Market Access
For many of the campesinos currently dependent on coca, the lack of roads or the poor condition of existing roads limits their ability to reach existing markets for legal crops. In other areas, no such markets currently exist. Furthermore, many campesinos lack the necessary business skills to commercialize their products. Coca production did not require skills such as marketplace price negotiation or basic business finance and accounting. This knowledge will be essential in the legal economy. These farmers require education on fundamental business basics before they can succeed on their own.

Governance
The presence of armed groups, narco-traffickers and other criminal organizations is a constant challenge to sustainable peace. Given the incredible financial incentives of cocaine for the narco-traffickers and cartels, weak spots in Colombian governance allow for exploitation through both economic and physical means. In some areas, production is still “encouraged” by these actors, inducing fear in the local campesino communities. Furthermore, the conflict is often intermittent, provoking uncertainty. A community may be making progress only to find that everything they have worked for has been sabotaged by an intensification of the conflict in their area.
HOW PASO WORKS

Extensionistas
The extensionistas act as the embodiment of a locally based, market-driven approach. Take Carlos, the extensionista in Bolívar. Carlos listened not only to the cocaleros’ problems but also to their ideas and dreams. He did not enforce his ideas of what the community should grow and sell. At the launch of the program, he quickly built trust by keeping his promises. Together, the community and Carlos developed a detailed work plan for building the needed communal agricultural infrastructure, learning commercialization skills, and then selling their products to local markets.

The first day that the campesinos took their products to market, they sold everything before noon. Carlos’ patient efforts unlocked the potential already present in the community. No matter how successful the back-office planning or goal of the program, PASO’s success depends on the extensionistas’ work and engagement on the frontlines with the community.

Sustainable Economic Alternatives
Economic alternatives are largely dictated by the accessibility of markets (big or small) and the level of market participation. The people in local campesino communities serve as an incredible resource in developing innovative solutions, and PASO has been quick to realize it cannot underestimate them. For example, one participant used plants growing around her farm to create organic fertilizer, which she then sold for profit. She learned how to create this fertilizer thanks to one of PASO’s trainings.

Expectations about the long-term viability of economic alternatives are also important. PASO’s approach to development incorporates geographic considerations to be successful. In some sites, PASO helps organize markets for participants called “campesino markets.” After trying the campesino markets, participants quickly recognized the long-term viability of cultivating legitimate crops or livestock, which in turn limited their temptation to resort to illicit activities for survival.
PASO plays an incredibly important role in all of these developments. It helps create the social fabric necessary to boost confidence and spark a mindset that allows failure while providing an economic cushion in which the consequences of those failures have far less impact than they used to. While failure isn’t the goal, allowing space for participants to fail is critical so that they can be empowered to take risks and adopt a growth mindset.

“After this program, we are not only sure we can do a campesino market, but we are taking the steps to reach bigger markets, such as the one in Cali. The payments help, but what we really need is the support and training from PASO.”

**Integration**
A motivated community partnered with a PASO extensionista and supported by PASO staff likely would still not develop a path toward other legal economic alternatives on its own. To further support these critical efforts, PASO acts as the coordinator of multiple initiatives within a geography. On behalf of the cocaleros, PASO communicates and coordinates the activities of the local and national governments, NGOs and for-profit companies that may become the customers for the campesinos’ crops until leaders emerge from the campesino communities who can take on this responsibility for themselves. PASO excels at bringing together partners who can contribute to the common goal of sustainable peace. Associations, local governmental institutions and other community actors come together when PASO is involved, increasing the likelihood of success.

**Organizational Strengthening**
Through its Rural Alternative School (Escuela Rural Alternativa or ERA) program, PASO learned that participants’ increased levels of trust in PASO led to increased levels of trust for the national government, military and other organizations not explicitly involved in the programming. PASO earns the community’s trust by rebuilding relationships that were lost either in the conflict or due to the nature of the coca trade. By working on collaborative activities, participants are motivated to get to know and trust each other. Building accountability is also a strong component of PASO’s approach.

PASO provides an environment in which participants create their own institutions. Through meetings, where deliberation and democratization in the decision-making process are the drivers, participants

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**EX-COMBATANTS**

- PASO ERAs work with 1,829 ex-combatants

**COCALEROS**

- PASO programs work with 1,967 cocaleros
collaborate with PASO and other organizations to decide the next steps in their economic lives. This sense of ownership of the institutions increases participation and gives them agency in the decision-making that affects their everyday life.

Community Governance
When PASO surveyed one of its ERA locations after completing the program, only 3 percent of all respondents felt that PASO was the entity making most of the big decisions. The majority of those surveyed felt that their group could make decisions as a collective, a promising statistic for a population that has been conditioned not to trust others. A community that can govern itself may be the strongest defense rural communities have against coercive armed groups. When armed groups arrive at a rural town with little to no government presence, it is easier to persuade individuals to participate in the illicit crop trade. When acting as a community, these individuals recognize they are part of a larger body and their decisions will impact everyone.

Security
PASO’s strategy does not attempt to combat violence with violence, but rather focuses on providing viable economic alternatives and rebuilding the community using its own network’s strengths. PASO contributes to the overall security of the area in which it operates by focusing on developing the communal relationships and economic alternatives necessary to build security in the absence of more concrete safety measures.

After building a strong sense of community and developing alternatives to coca, the participants have legitimate businesses to protect and are less likely to be influenced by guerrillas, narco-traffickers or other perpetrators of violence.
THE PASO MAGIC

PASO’s unique approach embodies partnership, collaboration and support. At its core, all PASO staff and extensionistas respect the dignity and fellow humanity of all those they serve. By acknowledging the inherent worth of each person and their contributions, PASO builds trust. Furthermore, it builds agency among program participants as they see PASO support their ideas, thereby fostering true collaboration toward better solutions.

A focus on humanity and hope is essential, yet PASO also emphasizes a local approach. The social and economic starting point for each community is fundamentally different. Moreover, the geography of Colombia would prevent a single solution in the quest to eradicate coca, as the mountainous areas produce vastly different agricultural crops than the jungles of Putumayo. PASO invests the time to understand the complexities that make each community unique before making attempts at solutions.

A further key to PASO’s success is its embrace of the market. Not every community can produce coffee, but each community must produce something of value. The integration of relevant market information into production decisions helps create the opportunities for campesinos to produce something that will allow them to support themselves. PASO’s collaboration with the community in determining what works best through providing market information leads to buy-in, and even enthusiasm, among the community members.

Another key to PASO’s success is its communal approach — working across campesinos, cocaleros and ex-combatants. While the scale needed to reach larger markets is a key benefit of a communal approach, it also allows individuals to support each other and build bonds beyond transactional relationships. These bonds serve as more than business relationships; they act as a social fabric.
that brings communities back together after years of isolation and mistrust resulting from armed conflict and participation in the illicit economy.

The final piece of PASO’s magic is the end goal. While many organizations serve their beneficiaries for an extended time, PASO looks to create graduates who remain part of a family but do not constantly rely on PASO for livelihoods and success. The process of working with PASO and then graduating from its programs instills confidence in the community members and allows them to tap into their own self-sufficiency rather than depend on unending external support.

“By focusing on building community and economic alternatives, we also improve the environment around security. When people have less incentives to go back to illicit activities, the security of Dagua improves substantially.”

For more information: https://pasocolombia.org/ pasocolombia@oneearthfuture.org
OUR IMPRESSIONS OF PASO

“It is truly rare to find an organization that combines the pragmatism of market-driven solutions, the vision of a unified society and the compassion to look past the consequences of impossible choices in order to see human beings. PASO combines these elements with hard work and resilience to serve the present and the future of Colombia.”

JOE SWEENEY
Mendoza College of Business
University of Notre Dame, BOTFL Instructor

“PASO symbolizes courage, audacity and creativity in a context of confusion and distrust. Time will tell, but meeting PASO Colombia makes me believe there is a chance to end the human catastrophe of the Colombian conflict.”

JUAN CARLOS MARTIN GONZALEZ
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Learn more

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