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## **Plan Colombia and the Neoliberalisation of Life**

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# PLAN COLOMBIA AND THE NEOLIBERALISATION OF LIFE



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Master's Thesis

MA in International Relations: Global Conflict in the Modern Era

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When we take a look at Colombia's recent history, we get the impression that the only constant has always been violence. One can easily trace this pattern if one goes back to the conquest of America by Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Indigenous peoples were massacred and practically wiped off the map and out of history. Unfortunately, violence did not end there, as more turbulent episodes would continuously take place in the country, until we reach the present time, where an internal conflict that started in the 1960s continues to claim thousands of innocent lives to this day.

Therefore, reflecting on Colombia in 2022 remains particularly relevant; not only because the armed conflict persists, or because human right violations continue to be the order of the day, but also because, in a globalised world, what transpires in Bogotá, resonates strongly in the rest of the region, and even the rest of the globe. Moreover, after the new President Gustavo Petro recently took office on 7 August 2022, all eyes are, once again, on the Andean country, as the left-wing candidate could bring a great deal of changes with him. While it is still too soon to forecast what will be the course of the War on Drugs in Colombia under Petro's mandate, we can surely conclude that he maintains a firm stance against it. Proof of this is his first intervention before the United Nations General Assembly on 20 September of this year, where he expressed some controversial opinions – compared to former Colombian Presidents - about the topic.

On the one hand, he alluded to the hidden interests behind the War on Drugs, when he stated that “behind cocaine and drug addiction, behind oil and coal addiction, there is the true addiction of this phase of human history: the addiction to irrational power, profit, and money. That is the huge deadly machinery that can extinguish humanity<sup>1</sup>.”

Similarly, he resolutely criticized the violent approach that has been taken when he denounced that “reducing drug use does not require wars, it needs us all to build a

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations News (20 September 2022). “Irrational war on drugs, destruction of the Amazon, expose humanity's failures, Colombia's Petro tells UN”. Accessed 21 October 2022. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127151>

better society: a more supportive, more affectionate society, where the meaning of life saves us from addictions<sup>2</sup>.”

There are many reasons to explain why Colombia is still shaken by violence, and one of them – perhaps the most compelling one – is the fact that the country is one of the richest in terms of natural resources and biodiversity. This makes foreign actors, such as the United States of America (hereinafter referred to as U.S) or international multinational companies eager to get a share of Colombia’s wealth.

By the same token, the fact that Colombia has historically been the largest producer of cocaine in the Andean region and in the world, does not help at all to alleviate this violent state of affairs, as the guerrillas and paramilitary groups that were formed around the traffic of illicit drugs, as well as the launching of the U.S’ War on Drugs, exacerbated the situation.

The bulk of our research will be oriented precisely towards the decades-long U.S interventionism in the Latin American country, more specifically, towards the implementation and outcomes of Plan Colombia, a bilateral agreement between both countries aimed at helping Colombia combat its guerrilla warfare.

Similarly, our main goal in this thesis will be to analyse how the neoliberal policies implemented by different Colombian presidents, and most importantly, Plan Colombia in specific, have affected the living conditions of Colombians. By this we mean how their lifestyle has changed; how they have been re-distributed throughout the country due to their migration movements; in which conditions they live now; how Colombia’s national economic indicators have evolved - for instance, the unemployment rate, levels of poverty, levels of inequality....-. For that purpose, our research question will be: How did the neoliberal approach of the governments of Colombia and the U.S affect the situation in the Latin American country, especially after the entry into force of Plan Colombia (1998-2005)?

In order to give an answer to our research question, this paper will be divided into four sections. The following chapter will consist of a literature review, where we will be analysing the state-of-the-art academic literature on Plan Colombia and neoliberalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Humayun, H. (20 September 2022). “Colombia’s President slams ‘addiction to irrational power’ and calls to end war on drugs in fiery first UNGA speech”. *CNN*. Accessed 21 October. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/20/americas/unga-colombia-petro-speech-intl-latam/index.html>

This will be followed by a subsequent chapter, where we will address the methodology used for this thesis, and after that, we will start with the discussion, where we will go over the study of Plan Colombia; the role played by the Colombian Government, the paramilitaries, and the guerrillas in the confrontation; the use of Private Military and Security Companies (herein after referred to as PMSCs) by the Pentagon and how the Colombian population is affected by all of these factors. Finally, we will close by drawing some brief conclusions from our study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The internal armed conflict in Colombia is a subject that has always attracted numerous researchers to study it from different perspectives. Some of them have tended to focus on the use of PMSCs in the region<sup>3</sup>; others have put the spotlight on the creation of leftist guerrillas and their impact on the conflict, as well as how Colombia's serious drug trafficking problem came to be woven together<sup>4</sup>; some others have done their research on the outcomes of Plan Colombia<sup>5</sup>; a big part of the authors have carried out their investigation on the U.S interests in Colombia and their bilateral relation; and some other scholars have paid more attention to the condemnation of the abuses and human rights violations<sup>6</sup> that the parties involved in the conflict have perpetrated over the time.

When it comes to the debate around the use of PMSCs, the majority of scholars have dedicated an extensive analysis to the effects these actors are having on the health of Colombians and on their environment through the spraying of glyphosate and other harmful chemicals on crops, animals, rivers, and soil<sup>7</sup>. Other voices<sup>8</sup> have focused on what exactly these private military firms do in Colombia, which companies are involved, how much money they receive, how Plan Colombia is funding them...And finally, some other authors<sup>9</sup> are paying more attention to why the U.S is using these private actors in Colombia.

Extensive work has been written on how the paramilitaries and the leftist guerrillas came to existence, and how they have changed the fate of the country by worsening the problem with the narco-trafficking of cocaine in Bogotá. For this purpose, the work of Molano will be of especial interest, since he gives a thorough understanding of the

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<sup>3</sup> Richani, N. (2005). "Multinational Corporations, Rentier Capitalism, and the War System in Colombia". University of Miami, *Latin American Politics & Society*, Vol. 47, No. 3. pp. 113-144.

<sup>4</sup> Garivaltis, L. (2011). "Reconstructing the Concept of Terrorism After 9/11: The Case of FARC-EP in Colombia" *Honors Theses*, 979.

<sup>5</sup> Hylton, F. (2010). "Plan Colombia: The Measure of Success". *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1. pp. 99-116.

<sup>6</sup> Mugge, Z.P. (2004). "Plan Colombia: The Environmental Effects and Social Costs of the United States' Failing War on Drugs". *Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy*, Vol. 15, no. 2. pp. 309-340.

<sup>7</sup> Oldham, J. and Massey, R. (2002). "Health and environmental effects of herbicide spray campaigns in Colombia". *The Institute for Science & Interdisciplinary Studies*.

<sup>8</sup> Boysen, M. (2007). "Private Military Firms As Instruments of U.S Foreign Policy: The Case of Colombia". *Naval Postgraduate School*. Monterrey, California.

<sup>9</sup> Barry, J. (2002). "From Drug War to Dirty War: Plan Colombia and the U.S Role in Human Rights Violations in Colombia." *Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems*. Vol. 12, no.1.

history of the guerrillas and their (low moral) modes of financing<sup>10</sup>. Opposite to that, different authors have contributed to the debate by clarifying how the guerrillas are not directly involved in the trafficking of illicit drugs, contrary to what the so-called “U.S propaganda” – a term that some scholars in this other side of the debate often use - intends to imply, by labelling them as narco-terrorists<sup>11</sup>.

Numerous scholars have also carried out a far-reaching investigation on the human rights violations and abuses that have been committed in the country during the conflict. Inside this debate, we find voices that strongly condemn the fact that the Colombian state, together with the paramilitary, have been the biggest perpetrators of human rights violations<sup>12</sup>, whilst on the other side, we find other contributions that are not as harsh on these actors, and instead place more part of the blame on the guerrillas, who are accused of using children to commit their attacks and are usually referred to as “terrorists”<sup>13</sup>.

Moving on to the core of our thesis: the study on the U.S-Colombia bilateral relations, alongside the research on Plan Colombia, we also find an interesting debate. In the following pages, we will study the different views on both topics, thus trying to give a voice to both its detractors and supporters in order to arrive at the most objective possible answer to our research question. For instance, we will go through the work of authors such as Jasmin Hristov<sup>14</sup> or Dermot O’Connor and Juan Pablo Bohórquez Montoya<sup>15</sup>, who took a critical approach to neoliberalism in the case of Colombia. Opposite to that, we will explore other voices, such as Rocío Pachón<sup>16</sup>, who presented some of the positive aspects of Plan Colombia, and especially, official evaluations<sup>17</sup> that showed the outcomes of the implementation of the Plan; how the budget was

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<sup>10</sup> Molano, A. (2000) "The evolution of the FARC: A guerrilla group's long history," *NACLA Report on the Americas* Vol. 34, no. 2

<sup>11</sup> Gutiérrez, T. (2003). “Demonizing resistance” in Toledo, R. et al. (Eds.). “War in Colombia: Made in U.S.A”. *International Action Centre New York*

<sup>12</sup> Brittain, J. J. “Revolutionary Social Change In Colombia. The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP”. *Pluto Press*. New York

<sup>13</sup> Higgs, J. (2020). “Militarized Youth. The Children of the FARC”. *Palgrave Macmillan*. Australia

<sup>14</sup> Hristov, J. (2014). “Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism. Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond”. *Pluto Press*. London.

<sup>15</sup> O’Connor, D. and Bohórquez Montoya, J.P. (2010). “Neoliberal Transformation in Colombia’s Goldfields: Development Strategy or Capitalist Imperialism?”. *LABOUR, Capital and Society*. Vol. 43, no. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Pachón, R. (2008). “Plan Colombia: Exploring some myths and effects on Colombian foreign policy 1998-2006”. *Análisis político* no.65. Bogotá. pp. 127-145.

<sup>17</sup> Puentes Lozano, M. et al. (2006). “Evaluación Programa Plan Colombia 2000-2005”. *Contraloría General de la República*.

distributed; who benefited from the initiatives; what were its strengths and weaknesses...<sup>18</sup>

Hristov's point of view is of particular interest because she takes a Marxist approach to establish a nexus between the paramilitary groups, capital, and the state. She explains how paramilitary groups – created and funded by the wealthy and backed by Plan Colombia – helped the oligarchy to extend their land holdings, by dispossessing poor peasants of their land, therefore provoking forced migrations. Additionally, by reviewing the neoliberal policies implemented by different presidents, as well as the close U.S-Colombia bilateral relations, this scholar provides a quite complete overview of the changes the country has gone through before and after Plan Colombia<sup>19</sup>.

On the other hand, Bohórquez Montoya, presents a similar argument by making a clear link between the entry into force of certain neoliberal measures and the massive, forced displacement of millions of people, as well as the widespread human rights violations and the pauperisation of Colombians. Furthermore, these authors also contribute to the study of how extractive multinational companies have contributed to the worsening of the situation in the country. Both of these standpoints constitute a strong critical view of Plan Colombia, which must be taken into account in order to be critical of the views of other authors, who instead, highlight the achievements of Plan Colombia.

Contrary to that, Pachón presents Plan Colombia from the opposite perspective, as she highlights that it helped Colombia – at that moment, a very weak state, almost incapable of solving its internal conflict – to ameliorate the situation. In the same vein, various official evaluations of the Plan tried to show that its backbone was the defence of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law; as well as a commitment to strengthen the social and economic situation of Colombians.

All of the above-mentioned approaches – and many more – will help us to materialise a comprehensive understanding of the topic. However, we find that their standpoints are usually inconsistent, as they tend to rely on rather “simplistic” justifications that do not give the reader a complete understanding of the matter. For instance, a wide range of

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<sup>18</sup> Departamento Nacional de Planeación (2006). “Balance Plan Colombia (1999-2005)”. Bogotá, Colombia.

<sup>19</sup> Hristov, J. (2014). “Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia”. *ProQuest Ebook Central*. Ohio University Press.

them highlight corruption<sup>20</sup> and lack of government presence<sup>21</sup> as the main causes for the deterioration of the life conditions of the Colombian population, and although these are totally valid variables to be taken into account, they do not provide sufficient justification for a problem of such magnitude; they only represent a part of the problem.

Therefore, after reviewing the existing literature we are faced with a quandary: firstly, we failed to find a piece of research that categorises Plan Colombia as a neoliberal policy, responsible for much of the worsening of the situation in the country; and secondly, we seldom found positions that consider neoliberalism as an overarching force that encompasses many of the problems that Colombians face; that is, critical stances on how neoliberalism can have a negative impact on the living conditions of the population.

Thus, although we do encounter plenty of critical stances on Plan Colombia, the internal conflict, the human rights situation, or the U.S-Colombia bilateral relations, we miss a critical point of view that categorises Plan Colombia as a neoliberal strategy and that interacts with the literature from a critique of neoliberalism. Thus, here we find a gap in the literature that we will attempt to fill by answering our research question.

Finally, we also need to be critical of the literature that we encounter regarding neoliberalism. When we examine it, we are aware that this term, which we will be working with throughout the rest of the thesis, is a frequently invoked but ill-defined term in the social sciences<sup>22</sup>. Scholars define it in different ways, and sometimes even misinterpret its true meaning, even using the term as a bone of contention or as a pejorative term during political debates. Nevertheless, Campbell and Pedersen's interpretation of the concept seems to provide a useful starting point for our research. In broad terms, and although their definition lacks historicity – which we do not really need, as it does not have a direct bearing on our investigation –, neoliberalism can be understood as “the superiority of individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Stone, H. (2019). “Corruption and Plan Colombia. The Missing Link”. *Transparency International. Defence & Security*.

<sup>21</sup> Isacson, A. (2010). “Don't Call it a Model. On Plan Colombia's tenth anniversary, claims of “success” don't stand up to scrutiny”. *Washington Office on Latin America*.

<sup>22</sup> Mudge, S. (2008). “What is Neo-Liberalism?” *Socio-Economic Review*. Vol. 6, no. 4. pp. 703-731. p. 703

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 706 and 707.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In this thesis, we will be analysing a particular issue - Plan Colombia and its effects on the Colombian population -, in a particular place – Colombia -, in a particular period of time - 1998-2005 -, which means that we are dealing with a qualitative case study analysis. This method “explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system - a case - or multiple bounded systems – cases - over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information... and reports a case description and case themes”.<sup>24</sup> We chose a case study analysis in order to capture the complexity of the issue we are dealing with, since it is the most flexible among the rest of qualitative approaches.<sup>25</sup>

The purpose of this case study is to explore Plan Colombia and its effects on the living conditions of Colombians, that is, how the socio-economic parameters of the country - like the unemployment rate, levels of poverty, and so on - have changed before and after the implementation of the Plan; how their lifestyle has changed; how they have been re-distributed throughout the country due to migration; or in which conditions they live now.

By going through all these components, we aim to give the reader a nuanced understanding of what Plan Colombia meant for the population, and to this end, we will be looking at opinions and official data both supportive and critical of the Plan. In order to give an answer to our research question, we will divide the following chapter into three subchapters:

1. The first subchapter is aimed at understanding the complexity of the Colombian context prior to the implementation of Plan Colombia. That is, how the problem with cocaine trafficking came about; how this factor increased the already existing violence in Bogotá; how peasants were forced to move to the Southern regions of the country; and finally, a brief review of the human rights violations that take place every day in Colombia.

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<sup>24</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2013). “Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches” (3rd ed). *Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage*. p. 97.

<sup>25</sup> Hyett, N., Kenny, A., and Dickson-Swift, V. (2014). “Methodology or method? A critical review of qualitative case study reports”. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*. Vol. 9, no. 1. p. 1

2. In subchapter 4.2 we will study the neoliberalisation of the Latin American country. Here, we will analyse who influenced the neoliberal restructuring; what type of measures were implemented; and most importantly, what is Plan Colombia and why it is a neoliberal measure.
3. The final subchapter will go through the consequences of the Plan. We will examine the positive and negative results of Plan Colombia and how it affected the population.

Our central argument is that Plan Colombia is a neoliberal agreement between the U.S and Colombia's governments, and since we are using a critical approach to the neoliberal theory, our main hypothesis is that the overarching factor that encompasses many of the problems that Colombians suffer, is the implementation of neoliberal measures by the Colombian government. Therefore, although the main topic of study is Plan Colombia, we will also comment on previous neoliberal measures enforced by different Colombian presidents, because, in one way or another, they led to the creation of the Plan.

On the other hand, the central theoretical component of our thesis is a critical assessment of the neoliberal theory applied to the case of Colombia. The critical theory, originated in the Frankfurt School, is characterised by its reflexive and critical capacity when studying society and human sciences. It does not simply ask what something means or how it works, but instead it questions what is, for starters, the interest behind asking such questions. In his work, Max Horkheimer holds that critical theory is a self-conscious, self-critical and non-objectifying system that “never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery”.<sup>26</sup>

To that end, our definition of neoliberalism will be borrowed from Campbell and Pedersen<sup>27</sup>, who define the concept as follows:

Neoliberalism is itself a heterogeneous set of institutions consisting of various ideas, social and economic policies, and ways of organizing political and economic activity that are quite different from others. Ideally, it includes formal institutions, such as minimalist welfare-

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<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer, M. (1972) “Critical Theory: Selected Essays”. New York. *Seabury Press*. p. 246

<sup>27</sup> Campbell, J. L. and Pedersen, O. K. (2001) “The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis” Princeton, NJ, *Princeton University Press*. p. 5

state, taxation, and business-regulation programs; flexible labour markets and decentralized capital-labour relations unencumbered by strong unions and collective bargaining; and the absence of barriers to international capital mobility. It includes institutionalized normative principles favouring free-market solutions to economic problems, rather than bargaining or indicative planning, and a dedication to controlling inflation even at the expense of full employment. It includes institutionalized cognitive principles, notably a deep, taken-for-granted belief in neoclassical economics.

In the previous chapter, we mentioned that neoliberalism is an overused and ill-defined concept. Thus, we chose this definition because it is a clear and concise starting point to understand the basics of neoliberalism. Although it is true that Campbell and Pedersen's interpretation lacks historicity and parsimony, those are two things that are not really needed for our analysis. We do not require to put neoliberalism in historical terms, because it does not add any valuable information to our analysis. Instead, it is enough for the reader to understand that, in broad terms, this theory's core is the reduction of the government's intervention in society and the economy, in favour of an increase on the influence of private sector.

We chose a critical stance on neoliberalism as our theoretical focus because we aim to be analytical of the reality in the Latin American country in the run-up to the implementation of the Plan, in order to reach a better understanding of why it was signed in the first place. Besides, it is through a critical perspective on neoliberalism that we can objectively analyse the successes and failures of such measures.

Therefore, by categorising Plan Colombia as a neoliberal doctrine and critically assessing it as such, we are filling an existing gap in the literature that will give an innovative vision to it, since the majority of authors fail to illustrate the Plan as the neoliberal strategy it is.

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1. The Colombian conflict: how did we get here?

Colombia is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world; it is the second most populous country in South America, with 51.2 million people<sup>28</sup>; three-fifths of its lands lie in the basin of the Amazon rainforest; it has one of the largest coal deposits in South America and millions of barrels of oil are extracted every year from its land<sup>29</sup>. However, these data are punctuated by a grievous social situation provoked by an internal conflict that started more than sixty years ago and that, according to the Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory<sup>30</sup>, has caused the death of approximately 220.000 people; 81.5 per cent of whom were civilians and only 18.5 per cent were combatants. Consequently, this has raised questions among the international community concerning serious human rights violations by the involved parties.

The Colombian conflict is a very complex one, where very different actors are actively involved, turning it into an asymmetrical warfare<sup>31</sup> in which the parties are using different strategies and tactics, which means that their responses cannot be matched to one another because certain parties are stronger and have more and better resources than others. There are three main parties: the paramilitaries (unified under the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*; AUC), the Colombian army and the guerrilla movements (primarily, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*; FARC-EP; and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; ELN).

The conflict began to be woven during the 1940s, when a prolonged period of political violence between the Liberal and the Conservative parties, known as *La Violencia* broke out. Even though violence was not a new feature to the country, this period announced the start of a more brutal political violence, together with the beginning of the politization of the army and the police<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> The World Bank (2021) "Total population, Colombia". Retrieved 18 October from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2021&locations=CO&start=1960&view=chart>

<sup>29</sup> Clark, R. (2003). "The Future of Latin America", in Toledo, R. et al. (Eds.). "War in Colombia: Made in U.S.A". *International Action Center New York*. pp. 23 and 24

<sup>30</sup> Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2013) "¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad". Bogotá, Imprenta Nacional. p. 32

<sup>31</sup> Schroefl, J. and Kaufman, S.J. (2014). "Hybrid Actors, Tactical Variety: Rethinking Asymmetric and Hybrid War" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. p. 4

<sup>32</sup> Cardona, C.M (2008). "Politicians, soldiers, and cops: Colombia's 'La Violencia' in comparative perspective". Ph.D. dissertation. University of California, Berkeley. p. 1. Retrieved 2 October from:

As we mentioned above, civilians were the most affected by the conflict, especially peasants. In an attempt to escape this brutal situation, they moved to unpopulated, remote regions of the Amazon basin, laying South of Colombia. There, they lacked government support, since no basic services or infrastructures were available. This pushed them to start planting illegal crops, such as coca and opium poppy, as legal crops were not profitable at all.<sup>33</sup>

Along with this forced displacement came a struggle for land, as for the exploited class, land ownership meant freedom and a way out of violence. However, a marked social inequality characterised *La Violencia*, since the landless peasants remained landless and the powerful became even more influential due to their vast land holdings and connections in politics. Nonetheless, the struggle for land was nothing new to Colombians, since according to Richani<sup>34</sup>, the country suffered three different waves of colonization that caused this struggle: the first one took place during the mid-nineteenth century, when landless peasants were forced to escape the *haciendas* – a system of colonial exploitation - in order to search for lands; the second wave came with *La Violencia*, when peasants were escaping the brutal violence between Liberals and Conservatives; finally, the third wave took place in the 1970s, coinciding with the rise of the plantation of illegal crops and the discoveries of oil and gold.

Peasants found in cocaine a way out of their pauperisation since it was a very lucrative business, opposite to the plantation of legal crops. During the 1990s, coca cultivation sharply increased in the Southern region of Colombia, where peasants were protected by the guerrillas, who taxed the cultivation of this crop to strengthen themselves and continue with the armed struggle against the state. Colombia would quickly surpass Perú and Bolivia, the two other main cultivators of coca, and become the leading coca producer in the Andean region and in the world. By 1990, it held 73 per cent of the total regional cultivation<sup>35</sup>. Some authors argue<sup>36</sup> that this massive increase can be explained

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<https://login.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/politicians-soldiers-cops-colombias-la-violencia/docview/304696345/se-2?accountid=12045>

<sup>33</sup> Boysen, M. (2007). "Private Military Firms As Instruments of U.S Foreign Policy: The Case of Colombia". p. 24

<sup>34</sup> Richani, N. (2013). "Systems of Violence, Second Edition: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia." *SUNY Press*. Vol. 2. pp. 63 and 64

<sup>35</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2005), "Colombia Coca Cultivation Survey" New York. p. 9

because of the dismantling of the cartels – mainly the Cali and the Medellin cartel, which had their heyday in the 1980s -, and the aggressive coca eradication campaigns backed by the U.S in the neighbouring countries.

However, together with this extraordinary increase in coca cultivation, a “narcobourgeoisie” quickly emerged during the 1980s, intensifying the conflict with the use of paramilitary death squads to protect their interests<sup>37</sup>. These were armed groups initially created in the 1960s as a part of U.S-Colombia counter-insurgency projects, that saw a great expansion during the “cocaine decade”. They were created and financed by the wealthy and supported logistically by the Colombian state, with the goal of eliminating those that constituted an obstacle to the economic and political interest of the wealthy<sup>38</sup>.

Almost simultaneously, the far-left guerrillas appeared on the scene too. The FARC-EP – one of the most prominent guerrillas - is an organization formed by peasants, originally created in 1966 with the aim of supporting the population of the countryside that suffered from the lack of land reform and the constraints of the Conservative party of 1946<sup>39</sup>. Between 1970 and 1982 they saw a great increase in their numbers, since they started with a small army of 500 people to a bigger army of 3.000, with a centralized hierarchy, military code, training school and a political program<sup>40</sup>. From that moment on, those numbers would continue to rise.

During the last decades, the guerrillas’ goal has been to try and take over the state and control as much territory as possible, and their means to do so have not been ethical at all, as they have been largely funded by the kidnappings of business executives and politicians, extortions, and thefts that they regularly commit. Moreover, they have conducted numerous attacks on oil pipelines and gas cylinders; they have planted car

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<sup>36</sup> Dion, M.L and Russler, C. (2008). “Eradication Efforts, the State, Displacement and Poverty: Explaining Coca Cultivation in Colombia during Plan Colombia”. *J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* Vol 40. United Kingdom. pp. 399-421. p. 400

<sup>37</sup> Villar, O. (2009). “Inside the “Crystal Triangle”: The US ‘War on Narcoterrorism’ in Colombia”. *International Review of Business Research Papers.* Vol. 5, No. 4. pp. 1-10. p. 3

<sup>38</sup> Hristov, J. (2014). “Introduction: The Spectre of Paramilitarism” in Hristov, J. “Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism. Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond”. *Pluto Press.* London. p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Garivaltis, L. (2011). “Reconstructing the Concept of Terrorism After 9/11: The Case of FARC-EP in Colombia” *Honors Theses*, 979. p. 1

<sup>40</sup> Molano, A. (2000) "The evolution of the FARC: A guerrilla group's long history," *NACLA Report on the Americas* Vol. 34, no. 2. p. 27.

bombs; and have been heavily involved in protecting coca crops and drug refining installations<sup>41</sup> – although not in export, shipment, or marketing tasks-.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, all the actors involved in the warfare have blood on their hands. On the one hand, the AUC, supported by the state, have a very serious record of human rights violations, as together they have been responsible for the majority of murders, tortures, forced disappearances, forced displacement and threats against the local population. Some argue that more than 140.000 victims of these actors had been identified by 2008. According to official figures, the combined state/paramilitary forces were responsible for 90 or 95 per cent of all violations.<sup>42</sup>

One of their most widespread techniques – which became a worldwide scandal - was the killing of civilians, who then would be dressed in guerrilla uniforms in order to be counted as killed in battle. This extrajudicial killing of civilians would be known as “false positives” and several human rights groups have allegedly documented more than 5.700 of these cases by Colombian armed forces between 2000 and 2010.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, the FARC-EP and ELN, although in a smaller percentage compared to the above-mentioned actors, also contributed to the killing, kidnapping, and positioning of landmines - among other abuses -. For instance, in 2002 the guerrilla killed over 450 Colombian military and police personnel.<sup>44</sup>

Some of the strongest criticisms against the FARC-EP and the ELN is the fact that they usually recruit children for their armed struggle. A study from the University of Externado in Bogotá<sup>45</sup>, shows that there are 15.000 children involved with them – 9.000 of whom belong to the FARC-EP, 3.000 to the ELN and another 3.000 to other criminal bands and groups in Colombia -, and that over 50 per cent of the FARC-EP members are recruited when they are under 18.

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<sup>41</sup> Cynthia, J. and Franco, A. (1998). “U.S-Colombian Relations: Recent Developments”. *Woodrow Wilson Centre*. p. 32

<sup>42</sup> Brittain, J. J. “Revolutionary Social Change In Colombia. The Origin and Direction of the FARC-EP”. *Pluto Press*. New York. p. 132

<sup>43</sup> Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and Coordinación Colombia-Europa-Estados Unidos (CCEEU). (2014). “The Rise and Fall of ‘False Positive’ Killings in Colombia: The Role of U.S Military Assistance, 2000-2010.” New York. p. 9

<sup>44</sup> Haugaard, L., Isacson, A. and Johnson, J. (2011). “A Cautionary Tale: Plan Colombia’s Lessons for U.S Policy Toward Mexico and Beyond”. *Latin America Working Group Education Found, Centre For International Policy, and the Washington Office on Latin America*. p. 9

<sup>45</sup> Higgs, J. (2020). “Militarized Youth. The Children of the FARC”. *Palgrave Macmillan*. Australia. p. 24

Albeit the situation slightly improved after Plan Colombia, compared to the levels of the 1990s, conflict-related violence still continued to kill a thousand people each year and displace hundreds of thousands from their homes. Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities were disproportionately affected by both factors over the years, resulting on the almost extinction of thirty-two indigenous groups.<sup>46</sup>

Now that we have a clearer picture of how Colombia's problem with cocaine trafficking originated, we can move on to study the process of neoliberalisation in the country, how Plan Colombia was introduced and the role of the U.S in Bogotá.

#### **4.2. Colombia's neoliberal transformation.**

Presidents Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) and César Gaviria (1990-1994) began the process of neoliberalisation of the country in order to attract foreign capital. Soon, Ernesto Samper (1994-1998) would continue the same path, with the privatisation of numerous state-entities such as airports or banks. Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) would arrange Plan Colombia, which privatised the conflict, and finally, with Álvaro Uribe's mandate (2002-2010), the Plan would continue to develop, as well as the rest of neoliberal policies. It is precisely Uribe that is often singled out as the strongest advocate of such measures.

While it is true that Gaviria was responsible for the economic opening, Uribe oversaw the largest number of neoliberal policies in the country. During his mandate, he privatized numerous public resources and service providers, such as Bancafé – one of the most important national banks -, Telecom – the public telecommunications company – and Minercol – a state-owned entity in charge of administering the extraction of several primary resources -. Besides, ECOPETROL – a state-owned oil company – was liquidated, education and healthcare were privatised, the Union of Colombian Mine Workers was abolished, the number of public-sector workers was dramatically reduced, and the pension program was reformed<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibidem.* p. 8

<sup>47</sup> Hristov, J. (2014). "From Colonialism to Neoliberalism: A History of Dispossession" in Hristov, J. "Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism. Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond". *Pluto Press*. London. p. 83

The beginning of the neoliberal restructuring under Gaviria's mandate, was promoted by the Colombian elite, the U.S government, and multinational corporations<sup>48</sup>, who were interested in the reduction of import tariffs, government subsidies, government control over direct foreign investment, and the establishment of a new set of labour laws that increased the flexibility in hiring and terminating workers, as well as receiving U.S military aid to combat the guerrillas<sup>49</sup>.

This economic opening was deeply influenced by the Washington Consensus, a concept coined by the economist John Williamson in 1989 which consists of a set of ten economic policy reforms to be implemented in Latin America. The core of this neoliberal agenda consisted of fiscal policy discipline, removal of public subsidies, tax reforms, market-based interest rates, competitive exchange rates, trade liberalization, liberalization of foreign direct investment, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, deregulation, and the defence of private property rights.<sup>50</sup>

To get all these measures in place, Colombia needed to borrow money from international entities such as the World Bank (WB) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), since the country was going through a bad economic situation and did not have the means to accomplish a neoliberal restructuring by its own. However, at the same time the IMF also linked its loans to market reforms, which induced Colombia into a vicious cycle, where Bogotá reached a national debt of USD 21,890 million in June 2001, which added to the total private debt, it rose to USD 35,723 million, double the figure in 1991.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, another important reason why the U.S has a strong presence in the Latin American country is the drug trafficking situation in Colombia. The U.S strategy to reduce the illegal drug trade in its soil was the launching of the War on Drugs in the 1970s. It consisted of a global campaign of drug prohibition and military intervention which, by the late 1980s, resulted in the targeting of Colombia and many other South

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<sup>48</sup> Leech, G. (20 January 2003). "Colombia's Neoliberal Madness". *Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt*. Accessed 17 October 2022, available at: <http://www.cadm.org/Colombia-s-Neoliberal-Madness>

<sup>49</sup> Hristov, J. (2014). "Neoliberalism or Neopoverty? The promises and the Reality of the Neoliberal Agenda" in Hristov, J. "Blood and Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia". p. 16

<sup>50</sup> Williamson, J. and Kuczynski, P. (2003). "After the Washington Consensus – Restarting Growth and Reform in Latin America". Washington, DC: *Institute for International Economics*. p. 133

<sup>51</sup> Yepes, A. (2002). "Adjustment produced redistribution that favours the financial sector". *Social Watch Annual Report: Colombia*. Accessed 26 October. Available at: [http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informeImpreso/pdfs/colombia2002\\_eng.pdf](http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informeImpreso/pdfs/colombia2002_eng.pdf)

American countries as “problem” nations<sup>52</sup>, due to their contribution to the U.S drug consumption problem through narcotrafficking. In particular, Colombia would become ground zero in the War on Drugs because it was responsible of the 90 per cent of the world’s production of cocaine<sup>53</sup>. However, despite countless efforts to reverse this situation, the U.S continues to be the largest consumer of Colombian cocaine to this day.<sup>54</sup>

This anti-drug initiative, together with a strong U.S lobbying for the implementation of neoliberal policies in Colombia, led to the creation in 1999 of a U.S – Colombia bilateral agreement called Plan Colombia. During his electoral campaign, President Pastrana presented this initiative as a “Plan Marshall” to reconstruct Colombia, and he later presented it to the Clinton government in August 1998 for approval. Plan Colombia displayed a negative diagnosis of the turbulent situation in the country, together with a positive perspective on the international community, showing confidence in a cooperating world.<sup>55</sup> Thanks to Plan Colombia, the internal conflict attracted the attention of NGOs and the international community, who showed their will to help to ameliorate the human rights situation in the country.

The Plan came in a moment where the conflict was devastating a government that proved to be incapable of solving its socio-political, economic, security and drugs crisis. Insurgent groups were growing fast, and the state was incapable of successfully fighting them back due to its severe fiscal deficit and its weak military force and institutions<sup>56</sup>. Already during Samper’s government, several sectors of the Colombian society called for the international intervention in the conflict. Government officials, political parties, academics, social organisations, and the armed actors had been calling for an international intervention for years.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Bullington, B. (1990) “A Trojan horse: Anti-Communism and the war on drugs”. *Crime, Law and Social Change*. Vol. 14 no. 1. pp. 39-55. p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> Crandall, R. (2002) “Driven by drugs. U.S policy toward Colombia”. *Lynne Rienner Publishers*. Colorado, USA. p. 2

<sup>54</sup> McDermott, J. et al. (2021). “The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe”. *Insight Crime. Analysis and investigation of organized crime*. p. 4

<sup>55</sup> Pachón, R. (2008). “Plan Colombia: Exploring some myths and effects on Colombian foreign policy 1998-2006”. *Análisis político* no.65. Bogotá. pp. 127-145. p. 130

<sup>56</sup> Restrepo, L.A. (2001). “El Plan Colombia: Una estrategia fatal para una ayuda necesaria”. In Restrepo, L.A. et al. (eds). “El Plan Colombia y la internacionalización del conflicto”. *Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales, Universidad Nacional de Colombia*. Bogotá. pp. 208, 209

<sup>57</sup> Ramírez, S. (2001) “La internacionalización del conflicto y la paz en Colombia”. In Restrepo, L.A. et al. (eds). “El Plan Colombia y la internacionalización del conflicto”. p. 25

If we take a look at the official document, we will find that it clearly explains this situation. It encapsulates the problem with the state weakness and incapability to solve its internal problems when it states that:

There is no question that Colombia suffers from the problems of a state yet to consolidate its power: a lack of confidence in the capacity of the armed forces, the police, and the judicial system to guarantee order and security; a credibility crisis at different levels and in different agencies of government; and corrupt practices in the public and the private sectors.<sup>58</sup>

Plan Colombia would primarily act on three fronts: substitution and eradication of illicit crops, and attention to displaced civilians. And at the same time, four core objectives were set: strengthening the state, reforming institutions – especially the armed forces –, the fight against narcotics and economic recovery<sup>59</sup>. Initially, President Pastrana envisioned a plan whose main objective was helping small farmers to substitute illicit crops for legal ones, as well as to allocate state subsidies to social programs and education. The original Plan did not focus on drug trafficking, military aid, or fumigation of the illegal crops. Rather, Pastrana supported the idea of manual eradication of coca crops and maintaining conversations with the guerrilla in order to arrive to a consensus.

However, and due to the pressure exercised by Washington, - eager to continue with their War on Drugs campaign in the Andean Region - the Plan changed into a policy that would adapt to U.S concerns and interests, that is, the fight against the FARC-EP insurgency and drug trafficking, and the strengthening of Colombia's military.

Bill Clinton funded Plan Colombia with a \$1.3 billion package, which included military assistance in the form of helicopters, planes, training, massive chemical and biological warfare effort and surveillance technology and support. The total spending plan was \$7.5 billion, which was divided into \$4 billion from Colombia; \$1.3 billion from the

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<sup>58</sup> Presidency of the Republic (1999). "Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity and Strengthening of the State". Bogotá, Colombia. p. 1

<sup>59</sup> Vásquez Melo, M.T. (2010). "El Plan Colombia como estrategia de formación de Estado". *Universidad EAFIT*. p. 46

U.S; and \$2.2 billion from the European Union and other countries<sup>60</sup>. Ultimately, more than three-quarters of the total budget were destined to the military and the police, which showed a clear military character, that some parties in the treaty, such as the EU, criticized and rejected.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the War on Drugs evolved into the War on Terror, which meant that the armed campaign against the FARC-EP – now labelled as a terrorist organization by the US - was intensified. From that moment onwards, the U.S funding of Plan Colombia increased almost every year under the pretext of the war against “narco-terrorism” – a concept coined by the U.S<sup>61</sup> -. So much so that, after 1999, Colombia became the world’s leading recipient of Washington’s military aid, only behind Israel and Egypt<sup>62</sup>.

Now that the reader has a comprehensive context, with explanations of how the problem with drug trafficking in Colombia came about, what kind of neoliberal measures were supported by the different Colombian presidents, and what exactly is Plan Colombia, we can continue to defend why we consider that the Plan is neoliberal in its nature.

To begin with, it is pivotal to understand that Plan Colombia represents one more step in the process of neoliberalisation that had been going on since the presidencies of Barco and Gaviria, and that is why we dedicated an important space in this thesis to its study. All the privatisation measures mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter show that Colombia was increasingly mired in an internal crisis and had no choice but to turn to external forces in order to try to survive, given that the government was incapable of solving its internal problems. This, coupled with the interest of these forces in having a strong presence in the country to satisfy their own interests and needs, made the entry into Bogotá easier.

This meant that the arrival of the Plan was not seen as strange, but as entirely necessary. The neoliberalisation process had to continue, as the country was caught in a vicious circle of IMF loans directly conditional on the implementation of further privatisation

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<sup>60</sup> Villar, O. (2009). “Inside the “Crystal Triangle”: The US ‘War on Narcoterrorism’ in Colombia”. p. 107.

<sup>61</sup> Garivaltis, L. (2011). “Reconstructing the Concept of Terrorism After 9/11: The Case of FARC-EP in Colombia” p. 44

<sup>62</sup> Chomsky, N. (2000). “The Colombia Plan: April 2000”. *Chomsky.info*. Retrieved 27 November from: [https://chomsky.info/200006\\_\\_/](https://chomsky.info/200006__/)

processes. Thus, the privatisation of state-owned banks and companies went ahead without a shadow of doubt.

In fact, if we come back to the official document<sup>63</sup> again, we will see that the Plan itself called for the privatisation of these sectors, too. It encouraged further support for the private sector and argued that “state-owned companies and banks are to be privatised in order to increase productivity and help finance the fiscal adjustment”, and at the same time it recognised that “the government is closely coordinating its activities with the international financial institutions”. Additionally, it mentioned that the government “is currently in discussions with the IMF regarding a three-year assistance program to support the government’s plan for fiscal and structural reform”.

But the privatisation of these entities were not the only measures in pursuit of further privatisation of life. One of the clearest pieces of evidence of this neoliberalisation was the privatisation of war with the entry of numerous PMSCs into the conflict on the part of both the US and Colombia’s governments; multinational companies present in Colombia, such as the oil company Occidental Petroleum – Oxy – or the oil and gas company BP; the guerrillas; and paramilitary groups. In broad terms, the goal of these actors is to “directly provide protective military or security-related services for profit, whether domestically or internationally”<sup>64</sup>.

Companies such as DynCorp, AirScan, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, ITT or ARINC were the most present in Colombian soil since the late 1980s, incrementing their activity in the late 1990s and early 2000s<sup>65</sup> with the entry into force of Plan Colombia. They were involved in many different tasks, including: spraying chemicals on coca fields, repairing airplanes, assessing intelligence and advising the Colombian Defence Ministry, training the Army and National Police, operating eavesdropping devices, and so forth.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Presidency of the Republic (1999). “Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity and Strengthening of the State”. p. 10

<sup>64</sup> Schulz, S. and Yeung, C. (2008). “Private Military and Security Companies and Gender”. *Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)*. p. 2

<sup>65</sup> McCOy, K. (2010). “Ready, Aim, Hire: The Socio-political Dynamics of Military Outsourcing”. PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison. p. 10

<sup>66</sup> Hobson, C. (2014). “Privatising the war on drugs”. *Third World Quarterly*. Vol 35 no. 8. pp. 1441-1456. p. 1443

The budget destined to the contracting of these actors was enormous. For instance, in 2002, \$499 million<sup>67</sup> were provided for counterdrug efforts, and approximately 30 per cent of that money was destined to the hiring of PMSCs. The company that benefited the most from this budget was DynCorp, as it received a 53 per cent of the total amount spent for these private actors.

As we have seen, the international arena openly promoted a global market and laissez-faire capitalism, which, together with the increasing contracting of PMSCs, further reinforced a symbiotic relationship between states and businesses. Thus, the state played a major role in protecting the capitalist system, as well as the private companies' interests<sup>68</sup>, which explains why the process of neoliberalisation in Colombia went so smoothly.

Nonetheless, the use of these private forces has certain connotations that we need to be aware of. As Ettinger claims, the privatization of military functions “represent an incursion of the logic of capitalism into the logic of security policy”<sup>69</sup>, and their presence inevitably transforms the conflict. Similarly, the contracting of these companies can pose a series of problems that are worth highlighting, especially when they are deployed in a highly sensitive moment and in a rather unstable country like Colombia. These actors can bring further problems to the state and its stability, as the development of PMSCs in an international context compromises the state sovereignty and the conception of the monopoly of state power<sup>70</sup>.

Finally, after understanding what Plan Colombia is and why it is a neoliberal measure, we will dedicate the last section of this thesis to the discussion of the outcomes and results of the Plan, as well as to the study of how Colombians have seen their lives affected by it.

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<sup>67</sup> Boysen, M. (2007). “Private Military Firms As Instruments of U.S Foreign Policy: The Case of Colombia”. p. 30

<sup>68</sup> Rothe, D.L. and Ross, J.I. (2010). “Private Military Contractors, Crime, and the Terrain of Unaccountability” *Justice Quarterly*. Vol. 27, no. 4. pp. 593-617. p. 594

<sup>69</sup> Ettinger, A. (2011). “Neoliberalism and the rise of the private military industry”. *International Journal*. Vol.66, no. 3. pp. 743-764. p. 764

<sup>70</sup> López López, N. (2016). “La privatización de la guerra en Colombia”. *Inciso*. Vol. 18, no. 1. pp. 47-53, p. 52

### 4.3 Plan Colombia: What was it good for?

More than two decades have passed since Plan Colombia came into existence, but what lessons has it taught us?; what consequences did it bring?; how was the Colombian population affected by it?; how did the conflict change after its implementation?

As we previously mentioned above, until the mid-1980s, the Colombian conflict was virtually ignored both abroad and in Colombia itself, and therefore, there were practically no resources destined to curb the internal warfare. Nevertheless, that changed with the worsening of the narco-trafficking situation, as the Colombian institutions were losing more and more strength and credibility, and the international community started to show concern for the situation<sup>71</sup>. Thus, the entry into force of Plan Colombia meant one of the first serious attempts to put a solution to the conflict, as well as an effective way to attract the attention of numerous international NGOs, which showed consternation for the horrible human rights situation in the country.

However, the international community's will to intervene in the Latin American country also had its dark side, as more often than not, these actors would only look out for their own interests, completely ignoring the necessities of the most vulnerable sectors of the Colombian society. Ultimately, Colombian rulers limited themselves to complying with the WB, the IMF and other large international economic groups' mandate<sup>72</sup>. The voice of the Colombian people was not heard at all, and instead, they had to suffer a number of consequences which these international actors did not have to face. While it is true that multiple Plan Colombia's goals were met, and that it had its rights and wrongs, the bottom line for the majority of researchers that we will cite in the following paragraphs is that, in reality, the Plan did not benefit the local population as much as it did benefit the wealthy.

Even though the Plan called for a stronger protection and promotion of Human Rights and the International Humanitarian Law<sup>73</sup>, and NGOs worldwide took action, Colombians saw almost no change in their situation. Since 1997, there has been a gradual increase in the number of Colombians killed for socio-political reasons, and

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<sup>71</sup> Ramírez, S. (2001) "La internacionalización del conflicto y la paz en Colombia". In Restrepo, L.A. et al. (eds). "El Plan Colombia y la internacionalización del conflicto". pp. 9-10

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, p.62

<sup>73</sup> Departamento Nacional de Planeación (2006). "Balance Plan Colombia (1999-2005)". Bogotá, Colombia. p. 10

since the year 2000, that figure has remained at more than 6,300 victims each year<sup>74</sup>. Between 2002 and 2006, more than 20,102 people were killed or disappeared, with the guerrillas accounting for a 24.8 per cent of the total number of victims, and the government, allied with the paramilitaries, being held responsible for the majority of these deaths.

Additionally, more than 3.9 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes between 1985 and 2007, which means that Colombia is the second country in the world to suffer a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude, after Sudan.<sup>75</sup> Although the international community constantly denounces this situation and calls the Colombian government to comply with the recommendations of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the government continues to hide and justify their actions. As a result, these data show that the violence related to the internal armed conflict did not improve over the years, and that Colombia was no closer to peace after betting on neoliberalism.

As we have been pointing out, the neoliberal measures imposed by Pastrana and his predecessors, sought to open up the Colombian economy to the world market as well as bring more prosperity to the country. However, the result of this economic openness created an even greater internal crisis in the country, as numerous scholars have argued that this package of measures brought more inequalities to the population. As Leech puts it, this set of neoliberal policies, which the Colombian government was forced to implement because of the IMF's stringencies, "benefit the Colombian economic elite and multinational corporations" whilst at the same time "cuts government social spending"<sup>76</sup>.

After decades of neoliberal policies, the capital of large industries grew, their profits increased, and GDP rose. Nevertheless, the income levels of the working population

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<sup>74</sup> Comisión Colombiana de Juristas (2004). "Colombia: En contravía de las recomendaciones internacionales sobre Derechos Humanos. Seguridad democrática, derechos humanos y derecho humanitario en Colombia: agosto de 2002 a agosto de 2004". *Comisión Colombiana de Juristas*. Bogotá. p. 16

<sup>75</sup> Colectivo Maloka (ed.) (2010). "Plan Colombia II. Guerra y Derechos Humanos". *Oficina de Promoción de la Paz y de los Derechos Humanos*. Barcelona, Spain. pp. 17-18

<sup>76</sup> Leech, G. (2000). "Plan Colombia: A Closer Look". Retrieved 29 November from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/plan-colombia-closer-look>

remained the same and consequently, their purchasing power decreased dramatically<sup>77</sup>. Essentially, GDP grew, but the distribution of wealth became more and more concentrated in a few wealthy hands, which were already interested in the implementation of these reforms in the first place, as they knew they were directed to them. Proof of this is the aforementioned Washington consensus agenda, supported by the US and the Colombian oligarchy.

The Plan's economic strategy was to execute neoliberal policies as a solution to narcotrafficking and its related violence, and even though different authors warned about the high probability that the mentioned strategy would fail, the government decided to continue along this path, without even taking the time to consider its own people's opinion. These voices<sup>78</sup> cited the experiences of Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, or El Salvador as examples of countries in South and Central America where these policies were put into effect and resulted in job loss and a rise in the levels of poverty and violence. Eventually, the same would happen in Colombia.

The government's push for neoliberal measures did not translate into prosperity for the lower social classes. Unemployment reached 20 per cent in 2000, compared to 7'5 per cent in 1994<sup>79</sup>; between 1995 and 2000, Colombia's overall poverty increased from 55 per cent to 60 per cent, and that figure did not stop rising after the following years, as in 2003, the population living in poverty reached the 64'2 per cent<sup>80</sup>.

As we have discussed before, the Plan's negative effects have not been proportional, since the rural areas and the most vulnerable sectors of society have been the most affected by them. As a consequence, the percentage of poor people in rural areas continued to increase over the time, going from 82'6 per cent in 2000 to 85'3 per cent in 2003<sup>81</sup>. Official documents blame neoliberalism for this situation, as the origin of this problem can be found in "the abrupt opening of trade, whose policy decisions

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<sup>77</sup> Castaño Zapata, R.A. (2002) "Colombia y el modelo neoliberal". PhD Dissertation, University of Caldas, Colombia. p. 68

<sup>78</sup> Leech, G. (2000). "Plan Colombia: A Closer Look".

<sup>79</sup> Holmes, J. S., Gutiérrez de Pineres, S. A. and Curtin, K. M. (2008). "Guns, Drugs, and Development in Colombia". Austin. *University of Texas Press*. p.44

<sup>80</sup> Comisión Colombiana de Juristas (2004). "Colombia: En contravía de las recomendaciones internacionales sobre Derechos Humanos. Seguridad democrática, derechos humanos y derecho humanitario en Colombia: agosto de 2002 a agosto de 2004". p. 115

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem* p. 116

overlooked both the productive structure of the agriculture sector and its degree of technological development to face international competition”<sup>82</sup>.

In 2005, Doug Stokes<sup>83</sup> concluded that Colombia had “one of the most unequal divisions of the world”, as 10 per cent of the rich had a 46.1 per cent share of national income, whilst the poorest 10 per cent had 1.1 per cent.

Notwithstanding, even if violence continued to increase, and narco-trafficking persisted, Colombia became a benchmark in the fight against narco-trafficking, and received a lot of attention from the rest of the countries in the region, as well as the international community, who showed their will to learn from the Latin American country. The international arena started to recognize that no country had ever fought harder against narco-trafficking than Colombia. Year after year, Bogotá achieved records in different areas, such as: extraditions of drug traffickers and drug seizures; eradication, fumigation, or destruction of crops; the fight against large and small traffickers; and the military pursuit of growers with elite or anti-narcotic battalions.<sup>84</sup>

In our first subchapter, we argued that the Colombian government lost control over significant parts of its Southern territory to the guerrillas, who controlled the region as well as its coca production. Nevertheless, after the implementation of the Plan, the empowerment of the national security forces was reinforced, and at the same time, the Colombian state regained access and control in some of these difficult-to-intervene territories.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, even though the strong militaristic character of the Plan was heavily criticised by some parties, it ultimately helped Colombia to restore its credibility as a strong state.

After Plan Colombia, we observe a transition from an almost failed state, seriously weakened and unable to solve its internal problems, to a state with a strengthened public force and a broad knowledge and expertise on how to fight drug trafficking. So much so that Colombia begins to sign cooperation agreements with other countries from inside and outside the Andean region who were experiencing similar issues and who sought to

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<sup>82</sup> Contraloría General de la República (2004). “Evaluación de la política social 2003”. Retrieved 2 December from: <https://www.contraloria.gov.co/>

<sup>83</sup> Stokes, D. (2005). “America’s Other War: Terrorizing Colombia”. London, *Zed Books*. p. 4

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.11-12

<sup>85</sup> López Bastidas, M.M. (2016). “Colombia como referente en la lucha contra las drogas: perspectivas de la cooperación con África Occidental”. PhD Dissertation. International Relations Faculty, Colegio Mayor de Nuestra Señora del Rosario University. Colombia. p. 7

learn from Bogotá<sup>86</sup>. An example of this situation is the signing of the Operational and Strategic Cooperation Agreement between Colombia and EUROPOL in 2010<sup>87</sup>, whose aim was to regulate the cooperation between Bogotá and the Member States of the European Union in the fight against serious forms of international crime.

Plan Colombia's supporters often deem it as a great accomplishment, especially when it comes to reducing the total area of coca plantation in the country, given that, for example, in 2001 there existed 144,800 ha occupied with coca plants, and in 2005 the number was reduced to 86,000 ha<sup>88</sup> thanks to the fumigation of the crops. Interdiction is another area of the Plan which showed considerable progress. Between 1999 and 2005, a total of 716 tons of cocaine – worth approximately US\$17.294 -were seized in Colombia. Apart from that, 185 aircrafts, 8214 motor vehicles and 1799 vessels were seized, and 9231 laboratories were destroyed<sup>89</sup>.

On the other hand, different researchers critical of the Plan have contended that these sprayings are not eradicating, but diffusing coca production to other parts of the country. Rincón-Ruiz and Kallis<sup>90</sup> have explained that “in the municipalities where fumigations increased, the extent of land covered by coca declined in the subsequent period”. However, there was an increase in the extent of the cultivated area in the municipalities neighbouring the areas fumigated”. The result is a dispersion and reconstitution of coca-growing areas within rural areas of the country, as for instance, some authors denounce that “44 per cent of the fields where coca was detected in 2005 had never before been identified as coca-producing fields”<sup>91</sup>. This phenomenon where there is a downsizing of coca production in a given zone, followed by the expanding of

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16

<sup>87</sup> Republic of Colombia and European Police Bureau (2010). “Acuerdo de Cooperación Operativa y Estratégica entre la República de Colombia y la Oficina Europea de Policía”. Retrieved 1st December from: [https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/Normograma/docs/decreto\\_1066\\_2014.htm](https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/Normograma/docs/decreto_1066_2014.htm)

<sup>88</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC (2010) “World Drug Report 2010” Vienna, Austria. p. 263

<sup>89</sup> Departamento Nacional de Planeación (2006). “Balance Plan Colombia (1999-2005)”. Bogotá, Colombia. p. 15

<sup>90</sup> Rincón-Ruiz, A. and Kallis, G. (2013). “Caught in the middle, Colombia's War on Drugs and its effects on forest and people”. *Elsevier*. pp. 60-78. p. 65

<sup>91</sup> Dion, M.L and Russler, C. (2008). “Eradication Efforts, the State, Displacement and Poverty: Explaining Coca Cultivation in Colombia during Plan Colombia”. *J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* Vol 40. United Kingdom. pp. 399-421, p. 401

the production in another territory, is known as “balloon effect”<sup>92</sup>, and it has been denounced as one of the biggest failures of Plan Colombia.

The private military contractor DynCorp was responsible for the spraying of chemicals on coca fields, which is often reported as one of the most detrimental actions among the list of tasks that PMSCs undertook in Colombia. Supporters of this tactic explain that the spraying of herbicides by plane is a key element to get rid of coca plants and opium poppies planted by large producers<sup>93</sup>. However, this mixture of water, herbicide glyphosate and surfactant Cosmo-Flux 411f, is not only being sprayed on coca and opium fields, but also on legal crops, humans, animals, rivers, and rainforests<sup>94</sup>. Besides, these aerial fumigations are not only affecting industrial cultivation areas, but also small farmers’ cultivations.

Countless adverse effects of the use of chemicals have been denounced by different voices, including NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)<sup>95</sup>. For starters, the use of Cosmo-Flux 411 – which is classified as toxic<sup>96</sup> - is causing several illnesses, like respiratory, skin, and gastrointestinal problems, dermal and ocular irritation, intoxication, fever, diarrhoea<sup>97</sup>... These diseases are affecting children, adults and animals in the Southern departments of Putumayo and Caquetá -where FARC-EP presence is believed to be stronger -, and doctors had claimed to lack the necessary medicines to treat their patients.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, glyphosate – classified as toxic, too - can also cause severe health problems, such as tumours in the thyroid, pancreas, and testicles<sup>99</sup>. Besides, when it comes into

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<sup>92</sup> Davalos, E. and Morales, L.F. (2019). “Is there a balloon effect? Coca crops and forced eradication in Colombia”. *Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Financieras (CIEF)*, EAFIT University. p. 2

<sup>93</sup> Oldham, J. and Massey, R. (2002). “Health and Environmental Effects of Herbicide Spray Campaigns in Colombia”. *Institute for Science and Interdisciplinary Studies*. p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Mugge, Z.P. (2004). “Plan Colombia: The Environmental Effects and Social Costs of the United States’ Failing War on Drugs”. p.319

<sup>95</sup> Garivaltis, L. (2011). “Reconstructing the Concept of Terrorism After 9/11: The Case of FARC-EP in Colombia” *Honors Theses*, 979. p. 60

<sup>96</sup> US Department of State (2001) “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report” *Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs*.

<sup>97</sup> Oldham, J. and Massey, R. (2002). “Health and Environmental Effects of Herbicide Spray Campaigns in Colombia”. p. 3

<sup>98</sup> Mugge, Z.P. (2004). “Plan Colombia: The Environmental Effects and Social Costs of the United States’ Failing War on Drugs”. p.323

<sup>99</sup> Garivaltis, L. (2011). “Reconstructing the Concept of Terrorism After 9/11: The Case of FARC-EP in Colombia” p. 62

contact with water, it contaminates it and kills animals, soil organisms, and natural vegetation<sup>100</sup>.

These indiscriminate fumigations are causing a deep negative social impact in the form of forced migrations, too, especially from vulnerable sectors of society. The Colombian Council for Human Rights and Displacement estimates that only in 2001 and 2002, more than 75.000 people were displaced due to the sprayings<sup>101</sup>. The new areas where coca is being planted after fumigation, tend to be those populated by indigenous people and Afro-Colombians, who then are also disproportionately affected by the negative effects of this practice<sup>102</sup>.

The Plan announced that it would introduce an innovation with respect to the treatment of crops. It pledged that it would differentiate between large illicit crops of a “business” nature, and small plantations intended to sustain vulnerable peasant families<sup>103</sup>. The former would be eradicated without compensation and the latter would be assisted by Plan Colombia. The goal was to give farmers an alternative to illicit crops, introduce social and cultural programs and contribute to the creation of employment.<sup>104</sup> However, the spraying of herbicides on legal and illegal crops, as well as large and small plantations, shows that the strategy failed and had no consideration for vulnerable families.

Similarly, the Plan intended to provide funding for alternative crops to those peasants who had to resort to the plantation of coca to survive<sup>105</sup>. But this initiative was to no avail in a country where the neoliberal doctrine prevailed. Even if the government were to finance the plantation of yucca, bananas, or coffee, farmers did not have the means to transport their crops, and ultimately they would not be able to compete in any way with the international agricultural market, as its prices were extremely low and were favoured by the Colombian government itself<sup>106</sup>. Thus, since the government did not

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<sup>100</sup> Rhodes, T. et al. (2021). “Ecologies of drug war and more-than-human health: The case of a chemical at war with a plant” *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, 89. p. 5

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 404.

<sup>102</sup> Rincón-Ruiz, A. and Kallis, G. (2013). “Caught in the middle, Colombia’s War on Drugs and its effects on forest and people”. p. 73

<sup>103</sup> Vásquez Melo, M.T. (2010). “El Plan Colombia como estrategia de formación de Estado”. *Universidad EAFIT*. p. 45

<sup>104</sup> Puentes Lozano, M. et al. (2006). “Evaluación Programa Plan Colombia 2000-2005”. p. 16

<sup>105</sup> Leech, G. (2000). “Plan Colombia: A Closer Look”.

<sup>106</sup> Garivaltis, L. (2011). “Reconstructing the Concept of Terrorism After 9/11: The Case of FARC-EP in Colombia”. p. 61

offer any realistic options, peasants had no alternative but to continue planting illicit crops and working with the guerrillas, even if that meant taking high risks, such as ending up assassinated or being forcibly displaced from their homes.

All in all, even though the Plan has its flaws, its supporters insist that it has also showed some improvements in Colombian's lives. From 1999 until 2005, there was a decrease in violence, security was restored up to some extent, an increase in territorial control was experienced, there was a reduction in coca cultivation, a 5 per cent annual economic growth was experienced, and there was a greater commitment to the respect for human rights and international humanitarian law<sup>107</sup>. Nevertheless, when we put these improvements in perspective, after examining the Plan's negative effects, we see that they are minimal. The Plan not only fails to eliminate the production of coca, but it also fails to provide peasants with other viable alternative crops to survive, while at the same time it causes environmental and health damage to Colombians through the fumigations.

Neoliberal initiatives like Plan Colombia, not only concentrated the political and economic power in a few hands and transferred resources from the public to the private domain<sup>108</sup>, it also made Colombia subordinate to the global hierarchy of global power by inducing it into huge external debts that unstable countries like Colombia cannot assume<sup>109</sup>. Consequently, the Plan not only forced low-income Colombians to obey to the wealthy's interest, but it also left the country without any power to decide its own destiny, as it was in the hands of external actors.

Neoliberalism weakened Colombia considerably, as it made it almost completely dependent on the US and other external forces like the WB and the IMF. The former dictated how Plan Colombia should be implemented and introduced the necessary changes according to its interests; and the latter forced Colombia to continue with its economic openness by conditionally linking its loans to further economic reforms.

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<sup>107</sup> Vásquez Melo, M.T. (2010). "El Plan Colombia como estrategia de formación de Estado". *Universidad EAFIT*. p. 48-49

<sup>108</sup> Lefebvre, L. (2003). "Problems of contemporary development" in L. North and J. Cameron (eds.) "Rural progress, rural decay: neoliberal adjustment policies and local initiatives". Bloomfield. *Kumarian Press*. pp. 25-45. p. 31

<sup>109</sup> Hristov, J. (2014). "Paramilitarism and Neoliberalism. Violent Systems of Capital Accumulation in Colombia and Beyond". *Pluto Press*. London. pp. 84-85

## 5. CONCLUSION

More than twenty years have passed since the implementation of Plan Colombia, and its effects – for better and for worse – are still strongly echoed in Colombian society today. Even though many things have changed over the course of the years, Colombia still suffers from some of the same endemic problems that have plagued it for decades, such as narcotrafficking and the violence linked to it.

Throughout these pages, we have aimed at giving the most objective possible answer to our research question, namely, “how did the neoliberal approach of the governments of Colombia and the U.S affect the situation in the Latin American country, especially after the entry into force of Plan Colombia (1998-2005)?”. To do so, we have immersed ourselves into the study of the recent history of Colombia, as well as the analysis of Plan Colombia and its effects on the population.

To give an answer to our research question, we firstly categorised the Plan as a neoliberal policy that continued with the “economic openness” agenda of presidents prior to Andrés Pastrana. The reasons to label the Plan as a neoliberal measure are simple: it aimed at the further privatisation of life by turning basic needs, such as health, education, or security, into commodities that the low-income sections of society could not afford. Moreover, it reinforced the Colombian state’s role in the international sphere as subordinate to the IMF, the US and the WB’s demands, leaving Colombians completely powerless.

On the other hand, the answer to our research question can be found in subchapter 4.3, where we discussed the Plan’s consequences. Fundamentally, we presented the Plan’s outcomes when it comes to the changes in coca production, the eradication of coca crops, the change in national economic indicators, and so on. It is fair to admit that Plan Colombia - as one of the first serious attempts to solve the internal conflict -, brought a few improvements, such as the increase of the GDP, the empowerment of the national security forces, the downsizing of the total area of coca plantation, the weakening of the insurgencies, and the regaining of control over the mentioned Southern territories previously controlled by the guerrillas.

In contrast, when we address one of the most important aspects to be covered by the Plan, which is the issue of coca plantation, we find that it was somehow discouraged –

although the means to do so might not be the most appropriate due to the long list of negative effects it brings -, but production did not stop growing, as Colombia continued to be the world's largest producer of cocaine.

In conclusion, we observed that the Plan brought even more difficulties to Colombians, especially to those belonging to the lower social classes. It did not offer realistic alternatives to those peasants that planted coca to survive; it damaged their health and their environment and forced them to flee their homes due to the aerial spraying of toxic chemicals over their lands; it worsened the unemployment, inequality, and poverty levels; and it further impoverished rural areas by failing to stimulate and care for them.

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