

The Poppy and the Coca Leaf: Lessons from Colombia's Experiences in Tackling Drug Economies for Transitional Justice and Sustainable Peace in Myanmar

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Abstract

Colombia has three decades of pioneering innovations in peacebuilding and transitional justice (TJ) to tackle its six-decade conflict between the central government and various non-state armed groups (NSAGs) while facing an ongoing dilemma as the world's top producer and trafficker of illicit cocaine. This paper examines two generations of Colombian policies on peacebuilding and TJ that provides a wealth of normative and practical lessons for Myanmar as it aspires to transition towards becoming a peaceful, federal and democratic state with licit economies.

The landmark 2016 peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and FARC guerilla group treats drug prohibition as a root cause of conflict, shifting approaches from militarized repression and punitive measures to community-based rural development and restorative justice. However, the peace process is facing shortcomings in dampening the illicit drug trade, delivering justice and protecting communities from violence. The gaps in peace implementation in Colombia are worth examining by Myanmar's policymakers, peace practitioners and stakeholders, who aim to forge a sustainable peace with justice after the civil war. Politically nuanced and sequenced interventions are required to engage with complex hybrid actors such as NSAGs, who often combine political agendas with illicit economic activities, to incentivize them to join a peace process and sustainably reintegrate back into society, as well as to provide alternative livelihoods and restorative justice for opium farmers and violence-afflicted communities.

Inspired by the challenges, opportunities and trade-offs of the Colombian experience, the paper examines the possibility of implementation of Colombia's peacebuilding and TJ policies in Shan State, Myanmar, the epicenter of illicit drug production and trafficking, as a cross-country comparative analysis. Policy recommendations are provided for the effective crafting and implementation of comprehensive drug measures in peace agreements that addresses illicit plant-based drug economies that prioritizes human rights, restorative justice and rural development.