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Trade agreements and drug trafficking in Colombia: analysis of their influence on illicit crop eradication and socio-economic development

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Angela Daniela Rey Vargas

Foreword:

I would like to thank my advisor, Jean Cristophe Defraigne, for his support throughout this process. He provided invaluable guide and recommendations for this thesis and also pursued me to find out the research topic. I would like to thank my parents, my friends such as Leidy Hernandez, Analise Schmidt, Itzy Valenzuela, Angela Oviedoi and Itzaz for helping me to discuss the research. Finally, I would like to thank God that he encourages me to finish this master.

I. Table of content

1. Introduction

Drug trafficking—particularly the trafficking of cocaine from Colombia to the European Union (EU) and the United States—constitutes a complex and multidimensional global challenge. This study seeks to advance a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and to propose effective strategies for its mitigation, with a clear definition of the research objectives, scope, and limitations. In the Colombian context, the impact of drug trafficking has been significant, though not necessarily beneficial to the country's economy. Urrutia (1990) estimates that in 1982, the net income from drug trafficking reached approximately US$3.839 billion, accounting for 9.6% of the national GDP. This substantial financial flow has enabled criminal organizations to fund their operations, consolidate their territorial control through money laundering, strengthen illegal armed groups, and maintain a stable financial infrastructure (Guaquetá, 2002).

This analysis will explore the role of key actors—particularly authorities from the European Union and the United States—in the implementation of interdiction policies and international cooperation programs aimed at combating illicit trafficking, notably through mechanisms such as free trade agreements. The research will examine two distinct periods: the first, from the 1990s to 2001, and the second, from 2002 to 2019—an essential timeframe for understanding the evolution of drug trafficking in terms of methods, involved actors, trafficking routes, and predominant markets. The study will concentrate on strategic regions within Colombia that exhibit high concentrations of coca cultivation and processing laboratories, as well as on major consumer markets in the European Union and the United States. Additionally, it will include an analysis of specific high-activity areas, such as ports used for trafficking and urban centers with elevated levels of drug consumption and drug-related crime.

The first period, 1990–2001, corresponds to Colombia's economic opening and is characterized by trade liberalization and the signing of agreements aimed at integrating the country into the global economy. The second period (2001–2019) is situated within a context of greater maturity in the country's trade relations, marked by the entry into force of treaties and agreements with the European Union. The selection of these periods enables an exploration of trade strategies and national policies, as well as how they have influenced the dynamics of illicit crops and socioeconomic conditions in the country.

With the United States being the world's largest drug consumer and European consumption rising significantly, from 63 to 124 tons between 1998 and 2008 (Pontón, 2013), the need to address these complex dynamics becomes increasingly evident. This study also considers the broader context of violence, corruption, and inequality that sustains the drug trafficking problem in Colombia (García Pulgarín, 2010). Moreover, it examines the extent to which money laundering, which began in the 1970s and 1980s, has infiltrated the country's economic, political, and social spheres (Lara, 2011).

Recent research, such as that of Montenegro et al. (2019), has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the stages of cocaine production, from cultivation to consumption. Nevertheless, the persistence of the drug war remains a major obstacle, exposing the fragility of state institutions and limiting progress in governance (Mahoney, 2020). Shifts in the activities of insurgent groups such as the FARC-EP—from ideologically driven agendas to profit-oriented operations rooted in drug trafficking—illustrate how the illicit drug economy has fueled Colombia's armed conflict, empowered illegal groups, and exacerbated national instability (Gutiérrez & Thomson, 2020; Pachón et al., 2015). Similarly, the link between paramilitarism and drug trafficking became increasingly evident during the 1980s. Under pressure from guerrilla groups, paramilitary forces began to finance their operations by protecting drug laboratories and trafficking routes, while also responding to guerrilla extortion. This dynamic intensified particularly after 1984, with a notable paramilitary presence in regions such as the Middle Magdalena (National Center for Historical Memory, 2018). This study aims to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of drug trafficking in Colombia, its regional implications, and the international responses it has generated, emphasizing the need for multidimensional and cooperative strategies to address this global challenge.

2. <u>Narcotrafic and the problematic</u>

Between 1990 and 2019, cocaine trafficking from Colombia to Europe—particularly through Spain and the Netherlands—evolved into a complex and multifaceted global challenge. This period reflects a profound crisis in Colombia, marked by the expansion of coca cultivation and escalating violence linked to armed groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) (Petcu, 2017). In response to the actions of guerrilla groups such as the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), the ELN, and the FARC, paramilitary organizations emerged and gained strength (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). The magnitude of this issue not only had far-reaching consequences within

Colombia but also drew the attention of key international actors, including the European Union and the United States, both of which implemented cooperation and assistance policies aimed at combating illicit activity and promoting regional stability.

The impact of drug trafficking on Colombian society has been profound and deeply damaging. Political and economic structures have been infiltrated and corrupted, leaving a lasting imprint on all spheres of social life (Ocampo, 2017). Furthermore, money laundering—linked to criminal activities since the 1970s and 1980s—has gradually and insidiously permeated the country's economic, political, and social systems (Lara, 2011). At the international level, drug trafficking has produced alarming dynamics: while the United States remains the world's largest consumer of illicit drugs, Europe has seen a significant rise in cocaine use, with consumption doubling from 63 to 124 tons between 1998 and 2008 (Pontón, 2013).

Policies implemented by the United States—most notably *Plan Colombia*, which combined military and economic assistance—have been widely criticized for their limited effectiveness and the negative collateral effects they have produced. In contrast, the European Union has prioritized diplomacy and trade agreements as instruments to improve socioeconomic conditions and promote sustainable development. However, the direct impact of these policies on the reduction of drug trafficking remains ambiguous and difficult to measure.

From an economic perspective, drug trafficking has significantly distorted both local and international markets. In Colombia, institutional weakness in certain regions—combined with the presence of armed groups and persistent social inequality—has facilitated the development of a vast smuggling network that sustains and expands the illicit drug economy (Ocampo, 2017). The war on drugs has perpetuated a cycle of violence, corruption, and inequality throughout the country (García Pulgarín, 2010). In Europe, the widespread use of cocaine—affecting approximately 1.3% of adults aged 15 to 64 (EMCDDA, 2023)—along with a notable increase in overall consumption, highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive and effective strategies to address this global challenge.

The European Union has strengthened its approach through the 2021–2025 Drug Agenda, which aims to disrupt drug markets and combat organized crime, while also promoting prevention and public awareness initiatives (Stempkowski, 2021). These efforts reflect a growing recognition that drug trafficking from Colombia to both Europe and the United States poses serious threats to public security, undermines the social fabric, distorts economic markets, and compromises the integrity of democratic institutions.

3. Research question and methodology

All of this underscores the urgency of implementing coordinated and effective strategies at the international level to address the drug trafficking problem. Accordingly, this study poses the following research question: How have international trade agreements signed by the European Union and the United States influenced the eradication of illicit drug production in Colombia during the periods 1990–2001 and 2002–2019, and what has been the impact of these policies on the reduction of illicit crops and on the country's socioeconomic conditions, considering indicators such as the Gini coefficient, GDP, poverty rates, and average wages?

Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed: International trade agreements implemented during the periods 1990–2001 and 2002–2019 have contributed to the reduction of illicit drug production in Colombia. Furthermore, these policies are expected to have had moderately positive effects on the country's socioeconomic conditions—improving GDP and average wages—while having a more limited impact on poverty reduction and income inequality, as reflected in the Gini coefficient. In addition, the role of trade agreements in promoting Colombia's exports will also be considered, as this dimension may offer insights into how international trade could support national development efforts. In light of the above, the following research objectives are established:

General Objective:

To evaluate the policies of the European Union and the United States regarding the eradication of illicit drug production in Colombia during the periods 1990-2001 and 2001-2019, and to analyze their impact on the reduction of illicit drug crops and on the socioeconomic conditions of the country.

Specific Objectives:

1. To analyze the methods and strategies of illicit drug crop eradication promoted by the international trade treaties of the European Union and the United States in Colombia, differentiating between the periods 1990-2001 and 2001-2019.
2. Evaluate the success of the strategies in reducing illicit crops, comparing data on drug production and hectares eradicated before and after the implementation of these treaties, and how they have varied between the two periods.
3. Investigate the socioeconomic impact of international trade agreements on rural Colombian communities, using the Gini coefficient, GDP, poverty and average wage as

key indicators to measure changes in inequality, the economy and foreign investment, and how these have influenced the socioeconomic situation of the country during the periods studied.

To this end, a mixed-methods approach will be employed to assess the impact of EU–US international trade agreements on the eradication of illicit drug production in Colombia between the periods 1990–2001 and 2002–2019. This approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods. Through qualitative analysis, non-numerical data—such as policy documents, reports, and other textual materials—will be examined to understand the perceptions and experiences related to eradication efforts and their implications within Colombia's social and political dynamics. This method will enable a descriptive exploration of the drug trafficking phenomenon, allowing for the identification of patterns and the development of conceptual insights regarding the relationship between trade policies and illicit drug production.

On the one hand, the qualitative component will adopt a correlational perspective to explore potential relationships between key variables, such as levels of foreign direct investment, eradication strategies, and outcomes related to the reduction of illicit crops. On the other hand, data will be carefully selected through purposive sampling, enabling an observational study in which no direct intervention is conducted, but rather associations among the selected variables are analyzed. Data will be drawn from both primary sources—such as official reports, government documents, and international agency data—and secondary sources, including academic articles, books, and critical studies. These materials will provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing trade agreements and crop eradication policies in Colombia.

Key search terms will include: *"policy impact," "international cooperation," "European Union," "United States," "illicit drugs," "cocaine production," "Colombia," "drug trafficking," "alternative development," "armed conflict," "humanitarian aid,"* and *"development aid."* Research will be conducted using databases such as JSTOR, Scielo, Dialnet, and Google Scholar, as well as reports from organizations including the OAS, World Bank, and IMF.

4. Literature review

The war on drugs has effectively pressured Colombia to combat drug trafficking through punitive measures and eradication strategies; however, it has largely failed to address the persistent demand for drugs in the United States (Bagley, 1988). In this context, the present research analyzes the existing literature on international cooperation policies implemented by the European Union and the United States in Colombia between 1990 and 2019, focusing on their influence on institutional strengthening and the country's socioeconomic development.

4.1. **U.S. Approach**

U.S. anti-drug policy toward Colombia has been marked by a strong emphasis on militarization, particularly through the implementation of various assistance programs. Beginning in 1997 under the Clinton administration, a plan with a budget of US$7.5 billion aimed to mitigate the effects of drug trafficking on Colombia's economy and social welfare, while also promoting alternative development initiatives (García, 2001). The foundations of this strategy were laid that same year, when U.S. military support intensified with the creation of three specialized counter-narcotics battalions—developments that would later evolve into *Plan Colombia* (Guaquetá, 2002). As a result, Colombia's foreign policy came to prioritize its relationship with the United States, focusing on a strategy that ultimately proved ineffective in reducing the price, purity, and availability of narcotics (Picon, 2006).

Fukumi (2008) explains that during the 1980s, a narcotics certification mechanism was established, serving as a tool to condition economic aid to Latin American countries. Subsequently, the Andean Initiative was launched, expanding U.S. assistance during the 1990s and strengthening countries such as Colombia in their efforts to combat drug trafficking. This approach was further intensified with the implementation of *Plan Patriota* in 2003, which reinforced U.S. military presence in Colombia and underscored a sustained offensive against armed groups (Tickner, 2008).

Rojas (2009) critical analysis of these interventions suggests that, although some success was achieved in reducing illicit crops, the overall effectiveness of such policies remains debatable—particularly due to their predominantly military focus and the resulting negative social and environmental impacts. Between 1998 and 2007, Colombia's military spending was considerable, yet it revealed significant shortcomings in the modernization of military equipment (Trucco, 2010). These policies not only influenced legal practices in Colombia but also reshaped social perceptions of drug trafficking, increasingly framing it as a criminal rather than structural issue (García Pulgarín, 2010). Gaviria and Mejía (2011) further describe how the U.S. zero-tolerance approach extended from coca leaf eradication to the extradition of drug traffickers.

Moreover, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has been viewed as an extension of *Plan Colombia*, aimed at manipulating the laws of supply and demand within the drug market by reducing the cultivation, processing, and distribution of narcotics by 50%. Ultimately, this strategy has been interpreted as a means of reinforcing U.S. economic hegemony under the pretext of combating drug trafficking (Barón, 2013). While the FTA functions primarily as a mechanism for reducing tariffs, in the context of anti-drug policy its negotiation has been closely linked to various commercial interests, particularly when considered alongside its predecessor and complement, the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) (Hernandez, 2014).

Consequently, it is evident that the United States has adopted an aggressive approach that has shaped the landscape of drug trafficking in Latin America and its connection to domestic drug demand (Kessler, 2015). This orientation can be traced back to the Monroe Doctrine, through which the U.S. consolidated its role as a hemispheric power. However, beginning in 2009, U.S. foreign policy began to show greater openness to multilateralism and human rights, particularly in the context of supporting peace negotiations with the FARC-EP (Taborda & Riccardi, 2019).

4.2. Perspective from the European Union

According to Pardo (1998), relations between the European Union and Latin America have traditionally been positive, beginning with cooperation between the Contadora Group and the European Economic Community (EEC) to resolve conflicts in Central America. This collaboration later expanded to include regional economic blocs such as Mercosur and the Andean Community. A key focus of these interactions has been the issue of drug trafficking, with the European Union advocating for multilateral solutions that address both the supply and demand dimensions of the narcotics trade.

The EU’s action plan promotes the principle of shared responsibility, seeking a coordinated strategy to tackle the problem of illicit drugs (Picón, 2006). However, the Union’s drug and human rights policies reveal notable internal diversity. For example, some member states, such as the Netherlands, have adopted drug normalization policies, while others, like Sweden, maintain a zero-tolerance stance (Chatwin, 2007). These divergences are reflected in European parliamentary debates, particularly those concerning Colombia and related human rights issues, as noted by Gómez Quintero (2007).

Drawing on the analysis of Fukumi (2008), the 2000s saw the implementation of an alternative development project in Bolivia’s Amazonian transitional valley. This initiative was followed by the establishment of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for Andean products, which allowed nearly 80% of industrial and agricultural goods from these countries to enter the

European Union duty-free. Framed as an anti-drug strategy, the GSP promoted commercial partnerships beginning in 2001 as part of broader efforts to combat narcotics trafficking.

Simultaneously, Fukumi (2008) notes the creation of AL-Partenariat, a platform designed to foster alliances between European and Andean corporations and promote cooperation. Between 1999 and 2002, international cooperation evolved from a period of uncertainty into a more robust regulatory framework, illustrated by growing European support for *Plan Colombia*—originally a U.S.-led initiative that did not receive significant EU funding until 2000 (Moreno, 2009).

Following the September 11 attacks and the Iraq War, the European Union adopted an approach centered on dialogue and negotiated solutions to the Colombian conflict. While the EU criticized aerial coca crop fumigation due to its environmental consequences, it nonetheless maintained financial support and technical assistance (Lillo & Santamaría, 2009).

In parallel, Ojog (2014) and Nayebyazdi (2017) examine the relationship between economic growth and crime, concluding that although no direct effect can be established, economic growth influences structural factors that may indirectly affect crime rates. During the administration of President Santos, the relationship between Colombia and the EU was renewed with an emphasis on civil society and human rights, culminating in the signing of a free trade agreement.

Programs such as the "Peace Laboratories" and demobilization initiatives were introduced to tackle the structural drivers of Colombia's internal conflict and promote long-term socioeconomic recovery (Pacho et al., 2015; Pachón et al., 2015). In this context, Colombia's classification in 2013 by the World Bank and the OECD as an upper-middle-income country enabled greater access to European Union support, particularly in the domains of drug policy and environmental protection (Duarte et al., 2017).

However, as Kishore (2017) points out, trade mechanisms like the Generalized System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) may fall short in addressing the broader developmental needs of participating countries. This critique calls into question whether such frameworks genuinely serve development objectives or instead reflect strategic foreign policy interests.

From 2013 to 2020, the European Union developed a comprehensive drug strategy aimed at addressing both the supply and demand sides of the issue, while also advancing international cooperation efforts. As part of this strategy, binding legislation was enacted to regulate emerging psychoactive substances, and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) played a central role in monitoring and coordination (Stempkowski, 2021).

Meanwhile, research by Achim et al. (2021) and Giommoni et al. (2022) underscores the importance of promoting both economic and human development as essential tools for curbing corruption and dismantling global cocaine trafficking routes. These criminal networks continue to operate transnationally, with key logistical nodes located in countries such as Ecuador and Venezuela, directly linked to the Andean region's illicit drug trade.

4.3. Discussion on the alternative development approach and its results in different contexts.

Within the broader academic discussion on drug policy in Latin America, there is a growing consensus on the need for a renewed strategy that emphasizes alternative development. This approach calls for an integrated framework within foreign policy—one that goes beyond repression and incorporates social, economic, and political dimensions to effectively address coca cultivation (Geldres, 1996). In this regard, Geldres (1996) proposes several key initiatives: the organization of a world conference on alternative development, the creation of an alternative development bank, and the establishment of a biotechnology center focused on alternative crops.

Collaboration between Europe and Latin America in drug policy should aim for a balanced strategy that addresses both supply and demand, while respecting the cultural, political, and economic particularities of each region (Meetal, 2005). Although two primary strategies—alternative development and forced eradication—have been employed, they have neither been treated as mutually exclusive nor effectively integrated. This has resulted in a lack of coherent sequencing at both national and international levels, producing fragmented and poorly articulated responses (Zorro Sánchez, 2005).

U.S. policy has largely focused on crop eradication and interdiction, yet these efforts have failed to significantly reduce drug production and trafficking. In light of this, Swanson (2006) advocates for a shift in trade policy to expand market access for legal agricultural products, promoting economic development instead of punishing drug-producing countries. Despite these shortcomings, certain positive outcomes have been identified, including increased environmental awareness, the reduction of illicit crops, and progress toward deeper integration and sustainable development in rural areas (Giraldo & Lozada, 2008). Other scholars, such as Schultze (2008), argue that current anti-drug policies in Latin America—largely driven by the United States—have proven ineffective, emphasizing the need for genuine international collaboration, particularly between the U.S. and the European Union, to adopt a more balanced and cooperative approach.

While the European Union promotes a more comprehensive strategy that integrates rural development and human rights, the United States continues to prioritize forced eradication through aerial spraying. Nonetheless, both actors tend to prioritize their own strategic interests rather than fostering meaningful development in the communities most affected by the drug economy (Molano, 2009a).

Cooperation between the European Union and Colombia through alternative development programs has been considered relatively strong and aligned with Colombia's Democratic Security Policy under the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez. This alignment reflected a complementarity between EU initiatives and national strategies (Molano, 2009b). However, the implementation of such programs must be understood within the broader framework of international conventions, which have often produced contradictory results. While alternative development seeks to offer sustainable solutions to coca cultivation, aerial fumigation has destroyed both illicit and licit crops, with severe consequences for soil quality, water sources, and public health (Loaiza, 2012).

Various scholars have criticized these strategies for failing to address the deeper structural causes of drug cultivation. Violence, corruption, and human rights violations have continued to rise in areas affected by the drug economy. In response, it has been proposed that drug policy should be reframed as a development issue rather than a security problem. This would imply shifting the focus toward improving socioeconomic conditions and adopting more humanitarian and sustainable approaches. Critics such as Buxton (2015) highlight the ineffectiveness of existing alternative development programs and call for a radical transformation in policy orientation.

Although *Plan Colombia* was presented as a cooperative effort to strengthen the Colombian state, in practice it has been accused of intensifying the armed conflict and undermining national sovereignty, with serious repercussions for human rights and social policy (Moreno, 2016).

Between 1998 and 2016, the United States pursued a militarized strategy that weakened the FARC but exacerbated violence without addressing the root causes of the conflict. In contrast, the European Union placed greater emphasis on social development and humanitarian aid, aiming for lasting peace by tackling Colombia's structural challenges. Nevertheless, the coherence of EU policy is often questioned, as it is sometimes undermined by the Union's own commercial interests (Agudelo & Riccardi, 2019).

Recent literature presents a nuanced perspective on alternative development programs. In a study covering the period from 2003 to 2021, Rebolledo-Castillo (2023) identifies several positive outcomes, including the strengthening of community-based socio-business initiatives and improved relationships with technical personnel. However, the study also highlights significant drawbacks, such as delays in the implementation of productive projects due to insufficient support in the marketing and commercialization of goods.

In a subsequent study, Rebolledo-Castillo (2024) points to another critical negative impact: an increase in forced displacement in the region of Tumaco, Nariño (Colombia). The attempted eradication of illicit crops and introduction of alternative development programs contributed to rising violence and conflicts between armed actors and the civilian population. These findings suggest that the broader social context in which such initiatives are implemented must be carefully considered to prevent unintended and adverse consequences.

4.4. Diplomatic tools

According to Feiling (2012), U.S. drug policy exerts pressure through three main mechanisms. First, decertification is used as a key tool to sanction countries deemed non-compliant; these nations may face economic penalties, the suspension of foreign aid, and opposition to international loans. Second, military and economic aid is conditioned on cooperation in drug control efforts, as exemplified by *Plan Colombia*. Third, the U.S. incorporates drug control clauses into bilateral treaties, aligning them with its national security priorities.

However, as Pachón (2009) notes, *Plan Colombia* contributed to the weakening of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Colombia, as foreign policy management became increasingly centralized in the Office of the Presidency and in entities such as the Ministry of Defense. This shift led to a fragmentation of Colombia's diplomatic functions and diminished the institutional balance in the formulation of foreign policy

Unlike the United States, the European Union has emphasized rural development and crop substitution programs as part of its drug policy strategy, without exerting the same level of political and economic pressure (Feiling, 2012). The EU also supports the fight against drug trafficking by financing agricultural cooperation projects and improving local infrastructure. In general, the European Union avoids direct military intervention, favoring sustainable development and the strengthening of local institutions. In contrast, drug-related diplomacy in the United States has often been used as a tool to advance broader political and commercial interests. As Buxton (2008) argues, U.S. drug diplomacy functions not only as a mechanism of interdiction and eradication, but also as a means of securing strategic objectives through bilateral and multilateral negotiations.

According to Selleslaghs (2017), European diplomacy has evolved through several distinct phases. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was primarily focused on economic and commercial objectives. However, from the 1980s and 1990s onward—coinciding with the democratic transitions in Latin America—the European Union began to expand its cooperation to include political and social dimensions. In the 2000s, the EU promoted sub-regional integration through partnerships with blocs such as Mercosur and SICA. More recently, it has adopted a hybrid approach, diversifying its cooperation strategies to engage both established regional blocs and new political groupings, adapting to the evolving needs of the region.

Despite its sustained involvement, the European Union's contribution to the Colombian peace process has been described as limited in scope, constrained by structural and political challenges within Colombia (Pérez de Armiño, 2023). Nevertheless, according to Polack (2024), EU support has remained consistent, combining political and diplomatic backing—particularly in drug policy—with efforts to promote a more holistic approach. This was notably reflected in President Gustavo Petro's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, where he called for an end to what he termed the "irrational war on drugs."

From this discussion, it becomes evident that much of the literature on international drug policy continues to emphasize a predominantly military approach, particularly among state actors. Programs such as *Plan Colombia* and the Andean Initiative are frequently cited as emblematic of this strategy, with a centralized focus on forced eradication, aerial spraying, and military operations. While some studies recognize measurable reductions in illicit crop production, the long-term social and economic impacts of these policies—particularly on rural communities affected by displacement and violence—remain underexplored. There is a notable gap in the literature regarding how such strategies have reshaped Colombia's social and economic structures at the local level.

The European Union has adopted a more holistic approach to drug policy, one that emphasizes rural development and human rights rather than focusing exclusively on eradication. Initiatives such as the "Peace Laboratories" and support for alternative development programs are central to this strategy. While EU policies are well documented in the literature, there remains a lack of in-depth analysis regarding the actual effectiveness of these programs, particularly in comparison to U.S. strategies. Moreover, both approaches have largely failed to provide viable and sustainable long-term alternatives for rural communities affected by illicit crop cultivation.

In summary, the proposed research question is highly relevant, as there are significant gaps in the literature regarding the impact of international cooperation policies—particularly those of the EU and the United States—on the eradication of illicit drug production in Colombia between 1990 and 2019. There is a clear need for a more comprehensive and holistic evaluation that not only assesses the strategies and policies themselves, but also examines their socioeconomic consequences. Furthermore, a detailed, comparative analysis of individual EU and U.S. policy initiatives remains lacking and would contribute meaningfully to the academic and policy discourse.

Gaps

The existing literature on international drug policy is predominantly shaped by a militarized perspective, particularly in the case of state-led strategies. Programs such as *Plan Colombia* and the Andean Initiative exemplify this trend, with a strong emphasis on forced eradication—mainly through aerial spraying—and military operations. Although these initiatives have reported reductions in illicit crop cultivation, scholarly analyses often fall short of addressing their long-term social and economic impacts, particularly in rural communities affected by displacement, violence, and structural marginalization.

In this context, several authors have drawn attention to the contradictions within both U.S. and European Union drug policies. While these actors claim to support development-oriented approaches, their strategies often prioritize geopolitical and commercial interests over the promotion of sustainable, community-based alternatives. The literature has yet to provide a comprehensive examination of how such inconsistencies and lack of policy coherence have influenced the implementation and outcomes of eradication programs in Colombia. Moreover, further analysis is needed to explore how overlapping political and economic agendas have shaped policy effectiveness.

In summary, the proposed research question is both timely and relevant, as it addresses critical gaps in the literature regarding the effects of international cooperation policies, on the eradication of illicit drug production in Colombia between 1990 and 2019. There is a clear need for a more comprehensive and comparative evaluation that considers not only the stated objectives and mechanisms of these policies, but also their socioeconomic consequences. A detailed, policy-by-policy analysis would significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of how international actors have shaped Colombia's drug control efforts, and what alternative models might offer more sustainable outcomes.

5. Theoretical Framework

The International Political Economy (IPE) model focuses on the interaction between international and transnational actors and global issues such as climate change, illicit markets, and international trade (Balaam & Dillman, 2018). This theoretical framework addresses three fundamental dimensions: political, economic, and social. Politically, it examines how states, international organizations, and transnational corporations exercise power and influence global governance. Economically, it analyzes the distribution of scarce resources and the behavior of individuals and institutions in response to these constraints. Socially, it considers how states and markets function within interdependent systems rather than in isolation.

Within the IPE tradition, mercantilism highlights the link between economic activity and the pursuit of state power. According to Oatley (2022), mercantilism is grounded in three core propositions: first, that national power is closely tied to the accumulation of wealth; second, that international trade should be used strategically to extract wealth from other countries; and third, that manufacturing is more valuable than agriculture, as it generates greater economic and geopolitical advantage.

In contrast to mercantilism, liberalism is rooted in classical economic theory and emphasizes the positive-sum nature of international trade. It focuses on how the efficient allocation of resources can enhance overall global welfare. According to Oatley (2022), liberalism advocates for a free trade system from which all countries can benefit, and promotes the establishment of international institutions that facilitate trade agreements and economic cooperation. Furthermore, Keohane (2003) highlights that liberalism also considers the role of bargaining power in shaping international economic outcomes, and seeks to promote an equitable distribution of income—contributing to a more open, stable, and prosperous world economy. Another interesting author is Moravcsik (1997), who states that the most important issue is how national preferences are formed within each state (by social actors, interest groups, the economy, and domestic politics), reflecting global interdependence, as national and international markets alter costs.

On the other hand, Marxism, as applied within the framework of International Political Economy (IPE), is grounded in the concept of class struggle. It asserts that distributive conflict exists not only between labor and capital within individual countries, but also between industrialized and developing nations on a global scale (Oatley, 2022). Drainville (1994) emphasizes that Marxist analysis focuses on the privileged position of capitalist elites and global patterns of accumulation as expressions of bourgeois domination. In this perspective, transnational elite networks are central to understanding the structural dynamics of global capitalism. Immanuel Wallerstein (2000) argues that capitalism must be analyzed as a historical world-system. It is a world-economy that functions beyond the boundaries of individual nation-states. Consequently, its development depends on a country's position within the system: countries with advanced technology, capital, and control over markets form the core; the periphery consists of raw material producers and cheap labor; and the semi-periphery occupies an intermediate position, mediating between the two. This exchange is inherently unequal.

More recently, the International Illicit Political Economy (IIPE) has emerged as a subfield of IPE that specifically examines the relationship between states and transnational illicit markets (Andreas, 2004). This approach highlights the capacity of illicit actors to operate across borders and evade state control, thereby posing significant challenges to national and international security (Andreas, 2015). Within this context, scholars have also explored how corruption operates within the broader political economy, identifying practices such as bribery in the distribution of subsidies and public benefits, as well as conflicts of interest when governments function simultaneously as buyers, contractors, or suppliers (Rose-Ackerman, 1997).

World War II marked a turning point in the evolution of international drug control, with the United States emerging as a dominant force in the establishment of global regulatory bodies (Buxton, 2008). According to Buxton, early instruments such as the 1931 Convention and the 1948 Paris Protocol required the participation of countries most affected by drug issues and focused on regulating substances like morphine and cocaine. These efforts culminated in the

1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the accompanying Opium Protocol, which consolidated control mechanisms over substances including coca and cannabis—again with strong U.S. leadership in their formulation.

The regulatory framework was further expanded with the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, which extended controls to a broader range of synthetic drugs. This was followed by the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which introduced stronger mechanisms for international cooperation in combating drug trafficking (Jelsma, 2018; Székely, 1989). As drug-related activities such as production and trafficking depend on a specific territorial base, these conventions have justified and necessitated state interventions in countries like Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, as well as in transit or secondary states such as Pakistan, Panama, and Thailand. Nevertheless, persistent dynamics of supply and demand have made it clear that the complete elimination of illicit drug activities remains unattainable (Buxton, 2008).

Finally, Buxton (2008) argues that prohibition itself contributes to the fragmentation of supply sources and distribution routes, thereby complicating efforts to monitor and eliminate them. Ironically, success in curbing supply can lead to shortages that inflate drug prices, ultimately incentivizing further production. These dynamics generate a host of unintended consequences, including an inadequate understanding of addiction and limited effectiveness of responses such as education, treatment, and alternative development programs. The international drug control system, in this view, has failed to sufficiently account for the contradictions and collateral effects produced by prohibition-based strategies.

6. Contextualizing the emergence of the fight against drug trafficking

To better understand Colombia's relationship with the United States and the European Union in the context of the fight against drug trafficking, it is useful to examine the periods 1990–2001 and 2002–2015. These two phases were marked by distinct approaches and varying levels of cooperation between Colombia and both international actors. However, despite these differences, both the United States and the European Union shared a common objective: the eradication of drug trafficking and the strengthening of national and regional security.

6.2. Period 1990-2001: economic opening and structural adjustment:

In the first period (1990–2001), Colombia initiated a process of economic liberalization and structural reform aimed at modernizing its economy and facilitating integration into global markets. Although the groundwork for economic opening had already been laid under the administration of Virgilio Barco (1986–1990), it was during the presidency of César Gaviria (1990–1994) that these reforms were significantly deepened. Key measures included the reduction of tariffs, the elimination of trade barriers, increased investment in technology, and efforts to attract foreign capital (Villar, 2000).

These policies were largely maintained during the administration of Ernesto Samper (1994–1998), which continued to promote trade liberalization, encourage foreign investment, reform social security, and decentralize social spending (Ocampo, 1998). However, the revaluation of the Colombian peso—particularly between 1991 and 1997—meant that the rise in imports was not financed by increased exports, but rather by credit inflows and foreign investment. As Villar (2000) notes, this financing model proved unsustainable in the long term.

During the Samper administration, drug trafficking exerted considerable influence over both the economy and the political sphere, most notably through the the *Proceso 8,000*[1] , a major political scandal involving allegations of campaign financing by drug cartels. This scandal severely undermined the government's political legitimacy and negatively affected foreign investment (Ocampo, 1998). In parallel, policies aimed at promoting trade liberalization were maintained, including the advancement of sectoral strategies to complement broader free trade objectives. These measures supported competitiveness and fostered the adoption of new technologies, particularly in sectors such as agriculture and industry.

In the historical context of Colombia's trade policies during the administration of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002), economic liberalization strategies continued despite a sharp increase in violence and insecurity, which complicated international negotiations (Urquijo, 2014). It was during this period that *Plan Colombia* was launched, reflecting a more aggressive and militarized approach to the fight against drug trafficking.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) initiative became increasingly associated with a broader militarization strategy, whereby military intervention was used to protect commercial interests. This approach exacerbated existing social conflicts and disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, particularly in a context where terrorism and internal armed violence were on the rise (CLACSO, 2005).

[1]Related to the financing of his presidential campaign with drug trafficking money (Ocampo, 1998).

From an economic policy perspective, this period was marked by tariff reductions, the removal of trade barriers, and the implementation of neoliberal reforms aligned with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These measures laid important groundwork for future trade negotiations. In parallel, Colombia advanced its integration efforts within the Andean Community. However, the persistence of drug trafficking continued to distort the economy. The implementation of *Plan Colombia*, backed by the United States, deepened bilateral cooperation while reinforcing a securitized approach to combating illicit activities.

In contrast to the United States, the European Union adopted a more human rights–oriented approach, with a focus on social development and peacebuilding in Colombia. During the 1990s, the EU provided both technical and financial support for rural development initiatives and illicit crop substitution programs. While the European Union, like the United States, expressed concern during the Proceso 8.000 scandal under President Samper's administration, it did not take direct punitive action such as decertification. Instead, its approach remained grounded in development cooperation, prioritizing institutional strengthening and long-term peace over coercive measures.

6.1. Period 2001-2019: after terrorism

In this second period, following the September 11 attacks in 2001 and the change in Colombia's leadership, President Álvaro Uribe Vélez forged a close alliance with the administration of George W. Bush. This alliance entailed strong U.S. support in key areas such as the Democratic Security policy, the continuation and expansion of *Plan Colombia*, and negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (González & Godoy, 2007).

Building on the efforts initiated under President Pastrana, Uribe's Democratic Security policy aimed to strengthen state control and combat illegal armed groups, with drug trafficking positioned as a central target in this broader security agenda (Ramírez Díaz, 2017). While the Free Trade Agreement primarily addressed economic issues, it also had indirect implications for anti-drug cooperation, as it was expected to generate benefits through the reduction of illicit crop cultivation by promoting legal economic alternatives.

Since 2001, Colombia experienced a decline in exports, prompting the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism to conduct an official visit in October 2003 to address the issue (Departamento Administrativo de la Presidencia de la República de Colombia, n.d.). The administrations of Álvaro Uribe and Juan Manuel Santos operated within presidential frameworks that ultimately led to the signing and implementation of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States (Urquijo, 2014).

During this same period, Colombia’s relationship with the European Union evolved toward a more comprehensive approach, encompassing not only trade cooperation but also joint efforts in combating drug trafficking, advancing peacebuilding, and promoting sustainable development. In line with this shift, under President Santos (2010–2018), Colombia's domestic and foreign policies underwent significant transformation. Central to this evolution was the peace process with the FARC, which marked a departure from previous militarized approaches. Rather than intensifying repression, the government prioritized dialogue, recognizing the FARC as a key actor in the drug trade and in the armed conflict.

As part of the post-conflict strategy, drug policy reform became a priority. The government increasingly advocated for a broader interpretation of international drug control conventions, arguing that the traditional war-on-drugs framework had failed. This new phase, known as Paz Colombia, emphasized peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, building upon the foundations laid by initiatives introduced in 2012.

7. Evolution of the policies implemented by the EU and the U.S. in Colombia towards the fight against drug trafficking.

The eradication of illicit crops has been a central element in the anti-drug strategies promoted by both the United States and the European Union since the 1990s. These international actors have developed distinct approaches to addressing drug production in Colombia, one of the world’s largest cocaine producers.

On the one hand, the United States has led a predominantly militarized strategy, emphasizing forced eradication through aerial fumigation and military operations. On the other hand, the European Union has adopted a more development-oriented and human rights–based approach, focusing on alternative development programs and institutional strengthening as a means to combat illicit drug production.

7.1. U.S. Strategies

During the 1990s, as the war on drugs intensified, the United States implemented a series of strategies aimed not only at eradicating illicit crops but also at strengthening Colombia’s military capacity to confront armed groups involved in drug trafficking. These strategies—examined in this analysis—reflect a dual approach that combined counternarcotics efforts with broader security objectives.

7.1.1. Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) (later as ATPDEA)

When reviewing the United States International Trade Commission (USITC) report entitled *Andean Trade Preference Act: Impact on U.S. Industries and Consumers and on Drug Crop Eradication and Crop Substitution* (2004), it becomes evident that the report evaluates the impact of the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) on U.S. industries and consumers, as well as on the eradication and substitution of drug crops in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

According to the USITC (2004), the ATPA was enacted in 1991 and renewed in 2002 as the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA). This legislation allowed duty-free entry of selected goods from Andean countries into the U.S. market, with the objective of promoting economic development and providing viable alternatives to coca cultivation. The report also references Plan Colombia, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

The document highlights the significance of anti-drug strategies in Colombia, particularly those supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)[2], These programs have encouraged the abandonment of illicit crops by supporting productive infrastructure and environmental management, including agroforestry initiatives and integrated pest control. Although the impact of the ATPA was indirect—since support did not always target coca-producing areas directly—industries such as Colombia's floriculture sector, which benefited from ATPA preferences, helped create legal employment opportunities that may have reduced incentives for coca cultivation (USITC, 2004, pp. 4–15).

Within the historical context of Colombia's trade policy under President Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002), economic liberalization efforts continued despite rising levels of violence and insecurity, which made international negotiations more difficult (Urquijo, 2014). During this period, *Plan Colombia* was launched with a more aggressive, militarized focus. The FTA initiative became increasingly linked to national security policies, with military intervention

2 USAID in 1999 promoted a three-year, $15 million alternative development pilot program, expanding it to an $80 million budget aimed at improving legitimate economic opportunities by promoting the production of legal permanent crops and the development of productive infrastructure (USITC, 2004).

used as a means of protecting commercial interests. According to CLACSO (2005), this alignment exacerbated social conflict and disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, particularly as terrorism and internal violence escalated.

7.1.2. <u>*Plan Colombia* (1999)</u>

The document *Plan Colombia: Plan for Peace, Prosperity and the Strengthening of the State* (Presidency of the Republic of Colombia, 1999) outlines a comprehensive strategy developed by the Colombian government in the late 1990s to address structural challenges, particularly those linked to drug trafficking and state fragility. The plan is divided into several key components that integrate security, institutional reform, and interdiction efforts. According to a later publication by the Presidency of the Republic of Colombia (2022), the strategy included five major pillars:

First, the armed forces and national police were strengthened through logistical, financial, and training support, aimed at modernizing and professionalizing the country's security apparatus. Second, systematic eradication operations targeting illicit crops were conducted using both manual methods and aerial spraying, with the objective of reducing the cultivated area of plants used for narcotics production. Third, drug interdiction capacities were enhanced, especially regarding the interception and destruction of chemical precursors and trafficking routes, thereby disrupting the drug production and distribution chain. Fourth, military control was established in strategic regions of southern Colombia—such as Putumayo—seeking to dismantle drug-related operations and facilitate crop eradication. Finally, coordinated operations were implemented to destroy drug processing infrastructure, including cocaine and heroin laboratories, in order to reduce the capacity for drug refinement and distribution.

7.1.3. <u>U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA)</u>

As noted, the ATPDEA consolidated the trade benefits Colombia had received under previous agreements until its expiration in 2006. In the same year, it was replaced by the U.S.–Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), according to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism (2006). This treaty aimed to strengthen Colombia's trade capacities while addressing drug-related challenges through mechanisms of trade cooperation and institutional support. In this context, the FTA promotes technical cooperation to enhance trade conditions and to foster economic opportunities for sustainable development in communities affected by illicit cultivation.

According to the same document, the FTA offers legal economic alternatives by facilitating market access and attracting foreign investment. These mechanisms are intended to reduce reliance on coca cultivation by encouraging legal agricultural production and other formal economic activities. Furthermore, the agreement includes provisions related to sustainable development, enabling the implementation of rural development projects designed to improve the quality of life in marginalized areas.

The FTA officially entered into force on May 15, 2012 (Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism of Colombia, n.d.). Its implementation was gradual, requiring regulatory alignment with the treaty's provisions, including the progressive elimination of tariffs and the promotion of bilateral investment and trade. The FTA has offered preferential access for Colombian products, particularly in sectors such as agribusiness and manufacturing, contributing to employment generation and increased investment flows.

An analysis of Colombia's illicit crop eradication policies from the 1990s to the early 2010s reveals a comprehensive framework primarily influenced by the United States through initiatives such as *Plan Colombia* and the ATPA/ATPDEA. The transition to a free trade model marked a shift toward an approach more closely aligned with economic development and sustainability, offering alternative livelihoods to deter illicit coca cultivation. The following section will examine the strategies adopted by the European Union in this context.

7.2. European Union Strategies

The European Union's strategies to combat illicit drug activity in Colombia have taken a markedly different path compared to those of other international actors, particularly the United States. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the EU gradually distanced itself from approaches centered on militarization and coercive repression. Instead, it prioritized sustainable development, institutional strengthening, and social investment as the core components of its drug policy framework.

7.2.1. Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)

The Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) was officially launched by the European Union in 1971 as an initiative aimed at eliminating import tariffs on products originating from vulnerable developing countries. According to the European Commission (n.d.), the GSP comprises three main arrangements: the standard GSP, the GSP+—which offers additional incentives for compliance with international human rights, labor, environmental, and good governance conventions—and the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, which provides duty-free access for all products except arms to least developed countries. Conditionality for Andean products under the GSP+ is closely tied to the beneficiary countries' commitment to combating drug trafficking. This includes efforts such as the eradication of illicit crops and the strengthening of national anti-drug policies. The preferential access thus serves as both an economic incentive and a policy tool to promote adherence to international norms and to support development-oriented drug control strategies.

As outlined in the European Commission's memorandum (1995), the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) has been employed as a policy instrument to support developing countries—such as Colombia—in their efforts to combat drug trafficking. The memorandum highlights special arrangements introduced in 1990, aimed at providing preferential trade conditions to encourage the export of alternative products. This initiative was intended to reduce economic dependence on drug-linked agricultural activities and to foster more sustainable and diversified economic development.

7.2.2. European Plan to Combat Drugs (1990)

The European Plan to Combat Drugs was introduced by the European Committee to Combat Drugs (CELAD) and submitted to the European Council in 1990, aiming to frame drug trafficking as a serious security threat. The plan emphasized the need for coordination among member states, including the establishment of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), with a focus on prevention and reducing demand. The CELAD report called for the harmonization of national laws to enforce stricter control over the production, distribution, and sale of illicit drugs. It also advocated enhanced border control and improved surveillance mechanisms. Moreover, the plan underscored the importance of scientific research to gain a better understanding of the patterns and dynamics of drug use and trafficking, asserting that reliable data collection is essential for the formulation of effective policies. This document represented a critical step toward the development of a unified European drug policy by highlighting the growing problem of drug abuse and trafficking. It promoted a balanced strategy that integrates prevention, law enforcement, and international cooperation (CELAD, 1990). CELAD recommended the use of commercial instruments to facilitate market access for alternative products and encouraged the establishment of direct links between producers in developing countries and investors within the European Community. The report also emphasized the importance of effective aid coordination in development programs—such as those implemented in Colombia—in order to enhance their impact and demonstrate solidarity with regions affected by illicit crop cultivation (CELAD, 1990, p. 21).

7.2.3. Framework Agreement on Political Dialogue and Cooperation (2003)

In 2003, the European Commission (2016) formalized a framework for political dialogue and cooperation between the European Community (EC) and the Andean Community (CAN), building upon the more informal arrangements set forth in the 1996 Rome Declaration. This agreement introduced new areas of collaboration, including human rights, conflict prevention, migration, and the fight against drugs and terrorism. Notably, the agreement focused exclusively on political and development cooperation, without incorporating trade-related components. However, its entry into force was delayed until after 2011 due to internal political and institutional challenges within the CAN, exacerbated by Venezuela's withdrawal from the bloc in 2006.

Continuing with the document in question of the European Commission (2016), in the annex of political dialogue and cooperation agreements, among the most relevant in relation to the issue of drugs, their prevention and combat, the following articles are included:

- **Article 6** outlines the general objectives of cooperation, which include the promotion of peace and security. It also emphasizes poverty reduction and the advancement of equitable development, recognizing these as fundamental to addressing the root causes of drug trafficking.
- **Article 9** focuses on conflict prevention, which is closely related to the prevention of drug trafficking by addressing the conditions of instability and insecurity that enable the proliferation of illicit activities.
- **Article 47** addresses the fight against drugs and organized crime, outlining specific measures such as cooperation in drug abuse prevention, the harmonization of legislation, and the promotion of alternative development strategies. A key element of this provision is the consolidation of alternative development initiatives with the active participation of affected communities.
- **Article 48** addresses cooperation in the fight against money laundering and related criminal activities.

It emphasizes the importance of joint efforts in both the prevention and control of money laundering, including the exchange of information, institutional coordination, and the adoption of appropriate international standards and best practices. Although the primary reference is the 2016 text, it is important to highlight other key milestones relevant to this study—such as the 1993 Framework Cooperation Agreement signed in Cartagena between the CAN and the European Community, the 1999 Rio Summit, and the 2022 Madrid Summit—which have shaped the broader trajectory of political dialogue and cooperation in the region.

7.2.4. European Anti-Drug Strategy (2005-2012)

Subsequently, in November 2004, the Council of the European Union adopted the *European Strategy on Drugs (2005–2012)*, as outlined in a note prepared by the General Secretariat of the Council. This strategy aimed to establish a comprehensive framework for addressing the drug problem in Europe during the 2005–2012 period. It was grounded in the core principles of Community law and reflected the fundamental values of the European Union, including human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and respect for human rights.

This policy framework promotes a coordinated and balanced approach to reducing both drug demand and supply, supported by international cooperation and a robust foundation of information and research. It is anchored in the broader context of United Nations drug control policies and the legal foundations established in the European Union Treaties.

Its structure revolves around several key components, including the enhancement of public safety, the reduction of drug-related health harms, and the promotion of international collaboration to combat drug trafficking.

Implementation was designed through two consecutive action plans, which focused on priority areas such as demand reduction, supply control, international cooperation, and the improvement of information and evaluation systems (Council of the European Union, 2014). Special emphasis was placed on enhancing coordination at the European level—particularly following the EU's enlargement—and on fostering cooperation both among Member States and with third countries. Alternative development, as part of the international cooperation approach within the strategy, reflects the recognition of the global nature of the drug problem. Such programs are essential in assisting local communities in drug-producing countries by creating income-generating opportunities through legal economic activities (Council of the European Union, 2014).

Two levels of action can be distinguished in the fight against drugs. At the international level, it is vital to adopt a balanced approach and actively engage in global forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). At the EU level, effective coordination is required to oversee the implementation of the strategy, primarily through the Horizontal Drugs Group (HDG), which ensures policy coherence, facilitates information sharing among Member States, and promotes the adoption of best practices (Council of the European Union, 2014).

Strengthening the understanding of the drug phenomenon also requires enhancing the knowledge infrastructure. This involves making full use of existing data systems, notably the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). In parallel, the European Commission, in collaboration with Member States and Europol, continuously monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of the strategy and its corresponding action plans (Council of the European Union, 2014).

7.2.5. Action Plans of the European Drug Strategy.

In response to growing concerns within the European Union about the impact of drug use on public safety and health, a comprehensive strategy was launched for the period 2005–2012 (European Union, 2008). Rooted in the EU's core values, this strategy aimed to prevent and reduce drug use across Member States and was operationalized through two consecutive action plans. The First Action Plan (2005–2008) recorded some achievements, such as stabilizing the consumption of certain substances. However, it also faced notable limitations, including insufficient data reliability and coordination challenges among Member States. To address these shortcomings, a Second Action Plan (2009–2012) was adopted. It emphasized enhanced coordination mechanisms, greater efforts to reduce both drug demand and supply, the promotion of international cooperation, and the advancement of knowledge and research on the drug phenomenon.

7.2.6. Trade agreement between Colombia, Peru and the European Union

Over the past decade, Colombia's foreign trade policy has concentrated on strengthening trade relations with the Andean Community (CAN) to enhance market access. A key agreement in this process was signed in 2012 and entered into force in 2013 for Colombia and Peru, and in 2017 for Ecuador (Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism of Colombia, n.d.). The official document outlines the approval and implementation procedures, as well as the regulatory decrees governing market liberalization and tariff reduction. It also evaluates the impact and advantages of the agreement for companies in strategic sectors such as agriculture, industry, and services. In the agricultural sector, preferential access to products such as fruits, flowers, coffee, and sugar is particularly emphasized. In the industrial sector, the agreement facilitated market entry for manufactured goods, including textiles and footwear.

According to the European Union (2016), the objective of the agreement is to provide uniform trade conditions to the participating Andean countries, thereby facilitating a broader and more consistent framework for trade and economic relations with the EU. It also aims to promote greater regional integration, strengthen political dialogue between the two regions, and expand cooperation across multiple sectors. A particular focus is placed on the liberalization of trade in goods and services, with the goal of ensuring fair and equitable market access.

8. Comparison between approaches

A closer examination reveals that, although the European Union and the United States adopt markedly different strategies, both actors ultimately converge in their efforts to combat the production and distribution of illicit drugs.

8.1. General approaches

The U.S. approach to illicit crop eradication in Colombia has been defined by a strong emphasis on militarization and state control. Since the 1990s, the United States has pursued a strategy that combines forced eradication—primarily through aerial spraying—with the enhancement of the Colombian Armed Forces' operational capacities. Initiatives such as Plan Colombia, the Andean Trade Preferences Act (ATPA/ATPDEA), and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) reflect a policy framework in which illicit crop eradication is treated as a national security concern, closely tied to efforts to dismantle armed groups involved in drug trafficking. *Plan Colombia*, a key example of this strategy, relied heavily on financial and logistical support from the United States. While the plan prioritized security and military assistance, it also included, albeit to a lesser extent, components aimed at social and economic development. One of its objectives was to promote legal alternatives for farmers dependent on coca cultivation, although the effectiveness of these alternatives has been the subject of considerable debate.

In contrast, the European Union has adopted an approach that prioritizes sustainable development and the protection of human rights. Since the 1990s, the EU has implemented policies that diverge from militarization and coercive repression, instead emphasizing the promotion of legal economic alternatives for communities involved in drug production. This development-oriented model has been advanced through several key initiatives, including the European Plan to Combat Drugs, the 2003 Framework Agreement on Political Dialogue and Cooperation, the Generalized System of Preferences (originally launched in 1971 and revised over time), the EU Drugs Strategy, and its corresponding Action Plans.

8.2. Eradication and Development Methods

The United States has employed methods such as aerial spraying and manual eradication, supported by military operations, to reduce the area under coca cultivation. Aerial herbicide application was used to disrupt and dismantle drug production infrastructure, while manual eradication and systematic military campaigns complemented these efforts.

In parallel, trade initiatives like the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) and its renewal under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) aimed to incentivize legal alternatives to coca production by fostering economic development. These agreements allowed Colombian products to enter the U.S. duty-free, promoting sectors such as floriculture as viable substitutes for illicit cultivation. The Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which eventually replaced the ATPDEA, continued this strategy by emphasizing sustainable and legal economic opportunities in regions affected by drug trafficking.

In contrast to the U.S.'s coercive and militarized approach, the European Union has relied on instruments such as the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) to promote sustainable development in producer countries. Established in 1971, the GSP eliminates tariffs on imports from developing nations, aiming to reduce their economic dependence on the drug trade and foster more stable, long-term development.

The European Union places strong emphasis on promoting sustainable alternatives for rural communities that rely on crops other than coca. Through international cooperation, the EU has facilitated the development of direct links between producers in developing countries and investors within the European Community, thereby improving market access for legal agricultural products.

Unlike the United States, the European Union does not pursue forced eradication. Instead, it focuses on prevention strategies through the establishment of institutions such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the Horizontal Working Party on Drugs (HDG), and the European Drug Monitoring Centre (EDMC). These institutions aim to improve the understanding of drug use and trafficking dynamics, thereby informing more effective and prevention-oriented policies.

Furthermore, the EU is actively working to harmonize drug-related legislation among its member states, focusing on the strict regulation of the production, distribution, and sale of illegal drugs. This includes the implementation of tighter border controls and enhanced surveillance mechanisms. This approach stands in clear contrast to that of the United States, which relies heavily on direct repression and militarized strategies—often concentrated within Colombian territory.

Forced eradication is not part of the European Union's approach. Instead, the EU emphasizes the prevention of drug trafficking through the establishment of institutions such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the European Drug Monitoring Centre (EDMC), and the Horizontal Working Party on Drugs (HDG). These bodies aim to deepen the understanding of drug use and trafficking dynamics, thereby informing more evidence-based and preventive policy responses.

The European Union also works actively to harmonize drug legislation among its member states in order to strictly regulate the production, distribution, and sale of illegal substances. This includes the implementation of stricter border controls and the enhancement of surveillance mechanisms. In this regard, the contrast with the United States becomes evident: while the EU prioritizes preventive and regulatory strategies within its borders and through development cooperation, the U.S. tends to rely on direct repression and militarization, often targeting Colombian territory.

8.3. International Cooperation and Institutional Strengthening

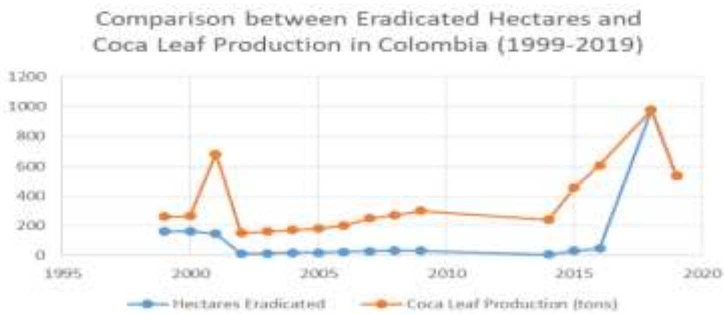
International cooperation is another area where clear differences exist between the two approaches. On the one hand, the United States has primarily focused on bilateral support, emphasizing military and financial assistance to combat drug trafficking and associated armed groups. This form of cooperation has been evident in key programs such as *Plan Colombia*, a major initiative in the 1990s aimed at modernizing Colombian security forces and strengthening institutional capacities to enhance drug interdiction efforts and dismantle trafficking networks. Although primarily security-focused, this comprehensive strategy was also intended to promote political stabilization in regions affected by drug trafficking through the reassertion of state control.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which replaced the ATPDEA in 2006, continued this trajectory by reinforcing institutional support, promoting technical cooperation, and enhancing Colombia's trade capacity. These agreements created a framework that addressed not only eradication efforts but also economic development and institutional strengthening.

In contrast, the European Union has adopted a markedly different approach to international cooperation and institution-building. The EU favors multilateral engagement and the negotiation of comprehensive agreements that emphasize sustainable development and the protection of human rights. A notable example is the 2003 Framework Agreement on Political Dialogue and Cooperation between the Andean Community and the European Community, which extended cooperation into areas such as human rights, conflict prevention, migration, and the fight against drugs and terrorism. As illustrated in Table 1 (see Annex).

9. <u>Analizing data</u>

9.1. <u>Graph 1: Effectiveness in the eradication of illicit crops</u>



Note: Own elaboration based on UNODC (199-2019)[3]

Analysis reveals that, by the late 1990s, eradication efforts were substantial, yet production levels remained high. In 1999, despite the eradication of over 196,000 hectares, coca production remained robust, indicating an ongoing expansion and the ability of producers to maintain output in unaffected areas. In 2000, both eradication and production experienced a slight increase, suggesting that crops were either being replanted or that eradication measures had not yet produced a measurable impact on production levels.

In 2001, a sharp decline in the number of eradicated hectares was observed, accompanied by a significant rise in production. Although 2002 saw some improvement in eradication figures, production remained relatively high. From 2002 to 2005, eradication efforts increased considerably. However, in 2006, while eradication reached a significant peak, production

[3] The primary criterion for analysis is the area cultivated with illicit crops, particularly coca. The main indicator employed is the number of hectares of illicit crops eradicated annually. The evaluation is based on statistical data provided by agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as illustrated in Graph 1 (1999–2019).

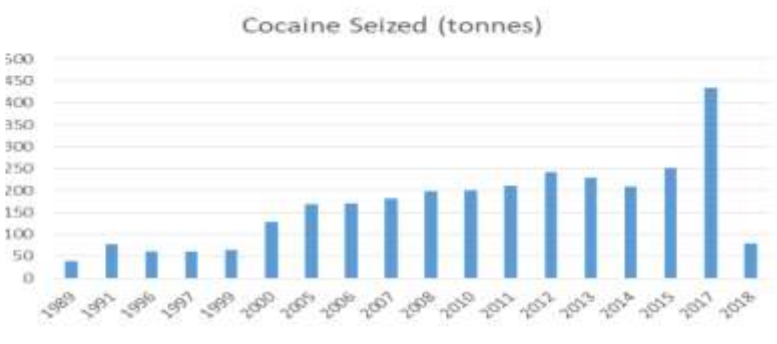
continued to rise—implying that farmers were adapting by relocating cultivation to areas not yet targeted by eradication measures.

By 2007, approximately 30,000 hectares were eradicated, yet coca leaf production still totaled 25,000 hectares. This suggests a substantial expansion into new cultivation areas. From that point onward, eradication efforts intensified, but production also continued to grow until 2014, indicating either widespread replanting or continued expansion into less accessible or less monitored regions. In 2015, eradication efforts were again significantly reinforced.

In 2016, aerial spraying with glyphosate to eradicate illicit crops became highly controversial. According to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (2016), the use of glyphosate was flagged by the World Health Organization (WHO) due to concerns regarding its potential health risks when applied to illicit crops. Despite these controversies, eradication efforts continued, although the persistence and adaptability of coca growers remained evident.

Between 2018 and 2019, both eradication and coca production experienced a significant increase. This trend may be linked to statements made by then-President Iván Duque, who, according to DW (2018), acknowledged the near-exponential growth of coca crops and announced a new comprehensive policy. This strategy included aerial, maritime, and land-based interventions, coupled with increased state investment and enhanced cooperation with international partners, particularly the United States. These developments suggest that although Colombian authorities have intensified their efforts to combat illicit crop cultivation, coca producers have continued to adapt and expand their operations.

9.2. **Graph 2: Evolution of Global Cocaine Seizures (1990-2009): An Indicator of the International Control of Drug Trafficking**



Note: own elaboration based on International Narcotics Control Board (1989-2018)

In order to conduct this analysis, it is necessary to examine drug seizure data over the stipulated period (1990–2019) to understand the evolution of drug trafficking and international efforts to combat it (see Graph 2)[4]. The data reveal a general upward trend in cocaine seizures between 1989 and 2018, albeit with some year-to-year fluctuations. From 1989 to 1999, seizures remained relatively stable. For instance, in 1989, authorities seized 39 tons of cocaine and 9 tons of coca base, dismantled 488 laboratories, and confiscated substantial quantities of precursor chemicals (International Narcotics Control Board, 1990). The 1990s marked a period of contrasts in the fight against drug trafficking. As the decade progressed, the volume of seizures increased significantly—doubling by 1997 with 60 tons seized and reaching 128 tons by the year 2000.

The year 2005 marked a critical milestone in Colombia's anti-drug operations. In May of that year, according to the International Narcotics Control Board (2005, p. 69), authorities near Tumaco made what was then the largest recorded seizure, confiscating over 15 tons of cocaine hydrochloride. This operation not only highlighted the scale of drug trafficking in the region but also revealed the sophistication of criminal networks, which employed speedboats, precursor chemicals, and a highly advanced logistical infrastructure. The coordinated dismantling of these networks represented a pivotal moment in Colombia's broader efforts against drug trafficking.

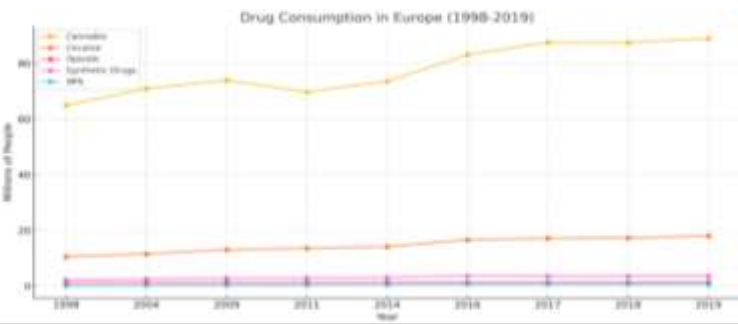
In 2006, Colombian authorities seized 170.1 tons of cocaine and cocaine base (International Narcotics Control Board, 2007, p. 78), a slight increase compared to previous years. This change was attributed to shifts in trafficking routes that complicated interdiction efforts and challenged government adaptability to evolving drug trafficking strategies. From 2010 to 2015, cocaine seizures followed a general upward trend, rising from 200 tons in 2010 to 252 tons in 2015. Notably, in 2012, seizures reached 243 tons, reflecting enhanced bilateral cooperation between Colombia and the United States, as well as the implementation of new surveillance technologies to detect and intercept traffickers.

[4] This study compiles data on cocaine seizures in Colombia—a major producer country—between 1989 and 2018. These data offer a comprehensive overview of how drug trafficking dynamics have evolved over the past two decades. The selected indicators include the quantity of cocaine seized, measured in tons during the aforementioned years. This data set is particularly relevant for assessing the effectiveness of drug interdiction policies and identifying trends in cocaine production.

A significant peak was recorded in 2017, with 435 tons seized. This dramatic increase may be associated with intensified anti-drug operations following the peace agreement with the FARC, an organization that had historically controlled key cocaine production and trafficking routes. The post-conflict environment allowed authorities to access previously inaccessible territories and deploy additional resources and monitoring technologies.

However, between January and March 2018, seizures declined by 31% compared to the same period in 2017 (International Narcotics Control Board, 2018). This decline may indicate that illegal armed groups adjusted their strategies or trafficking routes, reflecting the persistent adaptability of such organizations. These figures illustrate both the intensified efforts of Colombian authorities to curb cocaine exports and the increasing efficiency of drug traffickers in refining their production and distribution methods. The substantial volume of cocaine seized—most of it destined for North American and European markets—underscores that drug trafficking remains a transnational threat. As such, sustained international cooperation remains essential to addressing this ongoing challenge effectively.

9.3. Graph 3: Trends and Challenges in Drug Consumption in Europe (1998-2019): An Analytical Perspective



Note: own elaboration based on European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

This analysis, based on data from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), examines trends in the consumption of cannabis, cocaine, opioids, synthetic drugs, and new psychoactive substances (NPS). It also evaluates the effectiveness of public policy responses and the persistent challenges in managing these substances.

Cannabis remains the most widely consumed illicit drug in Europe, with the number of users increasing from 5 million in 1998 to 89 million in 2019. This growth is largely attributed to the normalization of cannabis use in society—particularly among young people—and its increasing perception as a therapeutic substance. More permissive national policies, such as decriminalization in Portugal and the coffeeshop model in the Netherlands, have reduced the stigma associated with cannabis use. However, this trend presents significant challenges for prevention and control, as broader access may exacerbate public health risks.

Cocaine use also rose steadily, from 10.5 million users in 1998 to 18 million in 2019. This increase is linked to factors such as reduced prices, higher purity levels, and improved trafficking routes from Latin America. Although its prevalence is lower than that of cannabis, the consequences of cocaine use—particularly on public health and the criminal justice system—are more severe. This trend underscores the need to strengthen international cooperation on trafficking control and to expand access to treatment services for users.

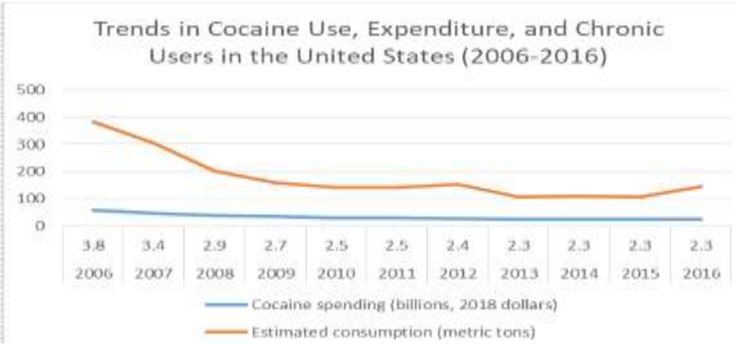
Opioid consumption, while lower than that of other substances, rose modestly from 1 million to 1.4 million users in 2019. In recent years, the rise of synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, has further complicated the opioid crisis. Initiatives such as methadone and buprenorphine substitution therapies, along with increased access to naloxone, have played a critical role in preventing overdoses, although considerable challenges remain.

The use of synthetic drugs—such as amphetamines and MDMA (ecstasy)—has grown moderately and fluctuated throughout the period, with a total increase of 2.2 million users. These substances are primarily used in recreational settings, such as festivals and nightclubs. The domestic production of synthetic drugs within Europe has improved availability, while technological innovations have led to higher potency compounds.

NPS use rose significantly between 2009 and 2016, peaking at 0.5 million users, but declined to 0.4 million after the implementation of legal restrictions to limit availability. Nevertheless, NPS continue to present regulatory challenges due to their constant evolution and the ability of producers to circumvent legal controls.

In conclusion, the evolution of drug use in Europe from 1998 to 2019 illustrates the complex interplay between policy, social norms, and market forces. While cannabis and cocaine continue to dominate consumption patterns, synthetic drugs and NPS represent emerging risks, and opioids remain the primary cause of drug-related mortality. Policy responses have increasingly adopted comprehensive frameworks that include prevention, harm reduction, and international cooperation. However, the rapidly shifting nature of drug use trends necessitates adaptive, evidence-based strategies to effectively respond to current and future public health challenges.

9.4. Graph 4: Trends in use, expenditure and number of chronic cocaine users in the United States (2006-2016)



Note: own elaboration based on RAND Corporation

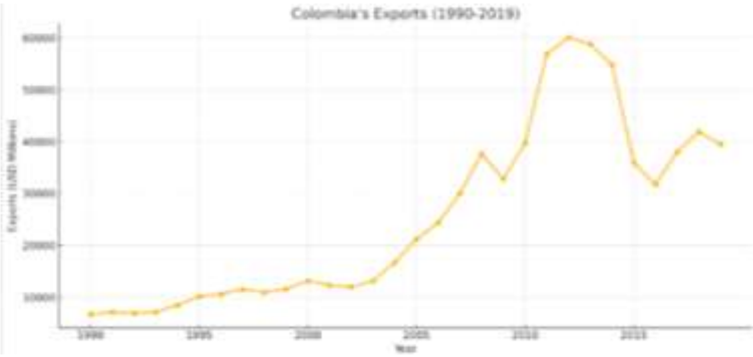
The data presented in this table provide an overview of trends in cocaine use, spending, and the number of chronic cocaine users in the United States between 2006 and 2016, in the United States between 2006 and 2016. This analysis comes from a report produced by the RAND Corporation, which uses several indicators to estimate the size and economic impact of the cocaine market (Midgette et al., 2019). These indicators are fundamental to synthesize data on drug use, admissions to drug treatment programs, detection, overdoses.

It can be noted that between 2006 and 2010, the number of chronic cocaine users fell from 3.8 million to 2.5 million, reflecting reduction efforts in cocaine supply or changes in users. As of 2010, the number of users is stabilizing and reaching a steady state. As of 2010, the number of users stabilized around 2.3 million, indicating that the decline stopped and reached a steady state.

Thus, it can be seen that between 2006 and 2010, the number of chronic cocaine users declined from 3.8 million to 2.5 million, reflecting efforts to reduce cocaine supply or changes in users. From 2010 onwards, the number of users stabilizes and reaches a steady state. From 2010 onwards, the number of users stabilized at around 2.3 million, indicating that the decline stopped and reached a stable state.

10. Socioeconomic impact

10.1. **Graph 1: Colombian exports: 1990-2019**



Note: Own elaboration based on:Imports: Euromonitor International from national statistics/OECD/International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Financial Statistics (IFS)

The behavior of Colombia's exports between 1990 and 2019 shows a significant upward trend, although it was marked by periods of both growth and economic contraction. During this time, the value of exports increased from USD 6.72 billion in 1990 to USD 39.49 billion in 2019, representing a total increase of 487.5%. However, this growth was not consistent year over year.

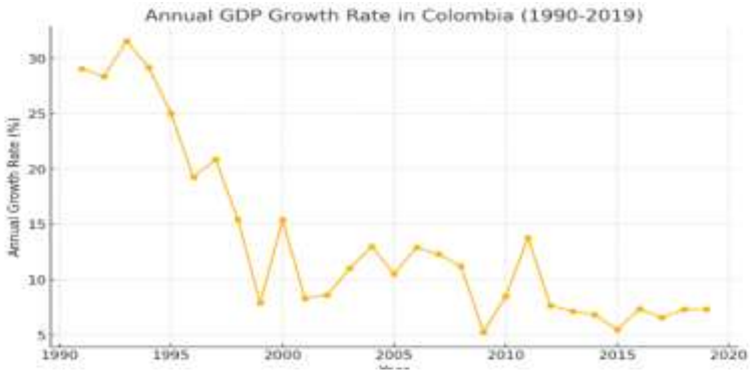
Among the main exported products, crude oil became particularly dominant in the 2000s, accounting for more than 50% of total exports in peak years like 2012. Similarly, coal remained one of Colombia's top export products. For much of the period, the export structure was heavily reliant on raw materials such as coffee, oil, bananas, and gold—reflecting an economy based on natural resources and low-skilled labor (Urrutia et al., 2000). In the 1990s, exports grew moderately, with a 72.3% increase, driven by agricultural products and the rising prominence of hydrocarbons, though the pace was influenced by internal and regional economic crises.

From 2000 to 2012, Colombia experienced a notable export boom. During these years, export values rose from USD 13.16 billion in 2000 to USD 60.13 billion in 2012, an increase of 357.0%. However, the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 caused a temporary decline due to falling commodity prices. By 2007, 47% of Colombia’s exports came from the mining-energy sector (Cárdenas et al., 2019).

After reaching a peak in 2012, Colombian exports experienced a sharp decline. By 2016, the value of exports had dropped to USD 31.77 billion—a 47.1% decrease compared to 2012. This downturn was largely due to the drop in oil prices, which significantly impacted Colombia’s export revenue and exposed the country’s dependence on natural resource exports (Cárdenas et al., 2019). From 2017 onward, exports began to recover, reaching USD 41.90 billion in 2018.

However, this rebound did not return to the levels of 2012, highlighting Colombia's structural reliance on commodity prices and the ongoing challenge of diversifying its export base.

10.2. **Graph 2: Colombia GDP Socio-economic indicators**



Note: Own elaboration based on: GDP: Euromonitor International from national statistics/Eurostat/OECD/UN/International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Financial Statistics (IFS)

In the case of Colombia, GDP[5] is essential for evaluating economic progress and the effectiveness of public policies—particularly Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the United States and the European Union—as well as for assessing the impact of internal and external events. An analysis of general GDP growth trends in the period from 1990 to 2019 shows that Colombia's annual GDP growth averaged approximately 13.56%. However, this growth was not uniform. During the first half of the 1990s, the country experienced several years of high growth, peaking at 31.56% in 1993. This increase is associated with the economic reforms of the time, which promoted market liberalization and strengthened the productive sector.

The sharp economic downturn in 1999 was largely due to the regional financial crisis that affected various economies in Latin America, particularly Brazil. This regional instability caused a contagion effect, leading foreign investors to withdraw and reduce capital inflows. Domestically, the escalation of the armed conflict and drug-related violence created a climate of uncertainty and risk, undermining both domestic and foreign investment. In response, the Colombian government implemented fiscal adjustment policies aimed at reducing the deficit and stabilizing public finances. At the same time, the international price of coffee—one of

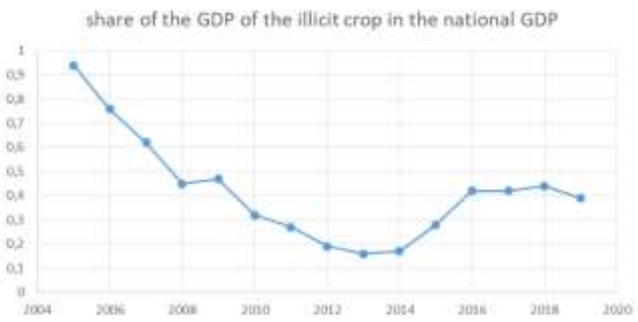
[5] **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** is one of the most widely used economic indicators to measure a country's economic activity. It represents the total value of goods and services produced within a country's borders over a specific period, typically one year. GDP is a fundamental measure because it reflects the size and health of the economy and allows for comparisons of economic growth over time

Colombia's principal exports—fell significantly, negatively impacting rural income and contributing to the overall economic slowdown.

In the early 2000s, Colombia's economy experienced moderate but sustained growth, with annual rates ranging between 5% and 15%. These fluctuations are attributable to changing global commodity prices and shifts in the international economic context. For example, the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 caused a decline in Colombia's GDP growth to 5.25% in 2009, primarily due to reduced exports and declining foreign investment, underscoring Colombia's vulnerability to external shocks. The implementation of formal FTAs with the United States (2012) and the European Union (2013) was expected to drive growth. However, average annual growth remained relatively stable, suggesting that although market access improved, the overall impact on GDP was limited by structural factors, such as the economy's ongoing dependence on raw material exports.

In subsequent years, growth slowed, falling below the historical average. Fiscal revenues remained constrained, exposing Colombia's continued vulnerability to external market fluctuations. Despite the FTAs, the economy remains highly dependent on oil exports, which limits broader economic development. In the final years of the period, GDP growth stabilized at moderate levels. While this reflects a degree of economic resilience, significant challenges persist—particularly the need for economic diversification and the development of sectors with higher added value.

10.3. <u>**Graph 5: Share of the GDP of the illicit crop in the national GDP**</u>

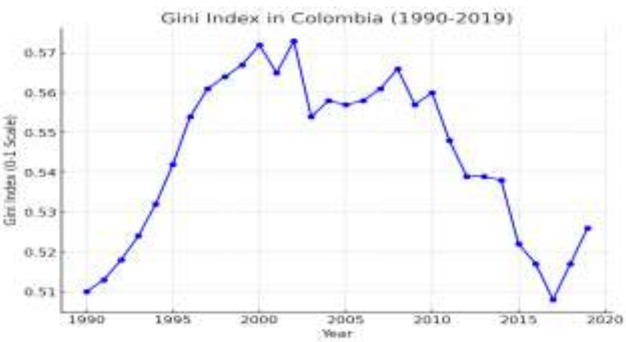


Note: own elaboration based on DANE (2004-2019)

The graph analyzes the contribution of the illicit crop[6] enclave to Colombia's national GDP between 2005 and 2019 (see Graph 5). Using data from the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE). The data reveal that the share of illicit crop activities in national GDP declined significantly, from 0.94% in 2005 to 0.39% in 2019. This steady decrease is primarily attributed to ongoing government efforts to eradicate illicit crops, especially through eradication and crop substitution policies. Despite this general downward trend, some years show a rebound in the enclave's contribution, such as in 2015 and 2016, when it accounted for 0.28% and 0.42% of GDP, respectively. These temporary increases may be attributed to a rise in illicit crop production and a decline in the effectiveness of eradication programs during those periods.

Between 2017 and 2019, the enclave's share of GDP remained relatively stable—approximately 0.42% in both 2017 and 2018—followed by a slight decrease to 0.39% in 2019. This stability suggests that although eradication strategies have produced some results, persistent levels of production continue due to social, economic, and geographical factors that complicate the total elimination of illicit crops.

10.4. **Graph 4: Gini Indicator**



Note: Own elaboration based on Gini Index: Euromonitor International from national statistics

In the case of Colombia, the Gini index has historically been high, reflecting persistent and significant income inequality. During the early 1990s, the index exhibited a steady increase, rising from 0.510 in 1990 to 0.532 in 1994. This trend may be attributed to economic challenges and limited redistributive policies during that period.

[6] The term *illicit crop enclave* refers to the set of economic activities associated with the production and processing of crops such as coca, marijuana, and poppy, whose final products are intended for both domestic consumption and illegal export. Although this sector is part of the informal economy due to its illicit nature, it is still integrated into national accounts because of its measurable macroeconomic impact.

Between 1995 and 1998, inequality continued to rise, with the index reaching 0.564 by 1998. The expansion of the informal labor market and restricted access to formal employment opportunities, particularly in rural and marginalized regions, contributed to this upward trend. From 1999 to 2002, the Gini index rose further, peaking at 0.573 in 2002. This was likely exacerbated by the internal armed conflict, displacement, and a growing urban poor population facing limited employment prospects.

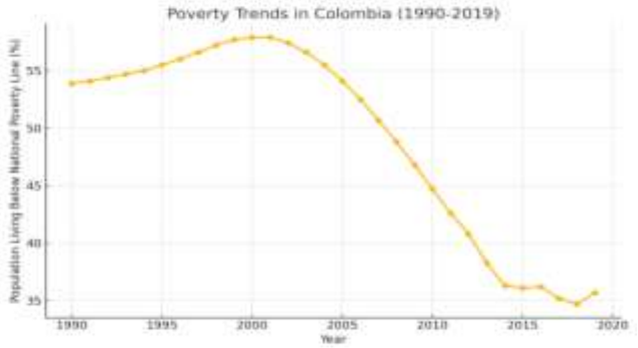
A notable decline occurred between 2002 and 2003, which may be partially linked to emerging social policies aimed at reducing inequality. This period also coincides with the beginning of negotiations for free trade agreements (FTAs), which marked a transitional phase in Colombia's development strategy. Although FTAs introduced opportunities for economic expansion, they also posed challenges to the agricultural sector, potentially reinforcing regional disparities.

Relative stability in the Gini index is observed between 2004 and 2007, with minor fluctuations suggesting limited but ongoing efforts to reduce inequality. A slight uptick occurred in 2009 (0.557) and 2010 (0.560), likely reflecting the global financial crisis's effects on vulnerable populations.

Between 2011 and 2014, a gradual decline is evident—from 0.548 to 0.538—suggesting some success from social programs implemented under President Juan Manuel Santos's administration, although progress remained modest. A more notable decrease occurred between 2015 (0.522) and 2017 (0.508), pointing to an improvement in income distribution. However, a slight increase is again noted from 0.517 in 2018 to 0.526 in 2019.

In summary, the Gini index provides essential insights into the dynamics of income inequality in Colombia. It reveals a period of sustained inequality growth during the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by modest improvements in the 2010s. Nonetheless, inequality remains a structural challenge, closely tied to disparities in education, opportunity, and investment between rural and urban areas. Importantly, economic growth alone does not guarantee reductions in inequality; sustained and inclusive policies are required to address these long-standing disparities.

10.5. Graph 5: Population Living Below National Poverty Line



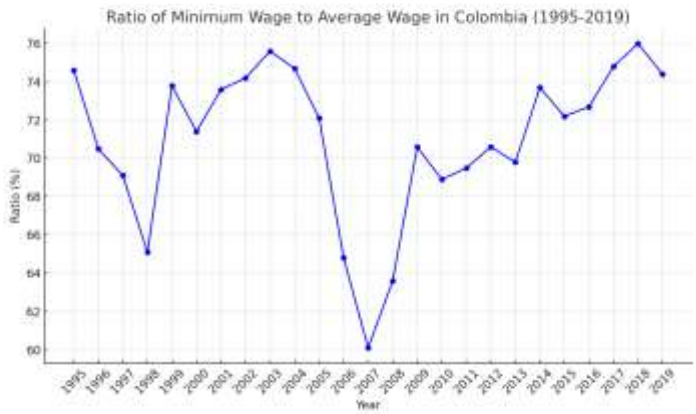
Note: own elaboration based on Population Living Below National Poverty Line: Euromonitor International from World Bank

In this context, Colombia serves as a case study to evaluate the effectiveness of social policies, identify vulnerable populations, and guide government interventions aimed at reducing poverty and improving living standardsassessment of socioeconomic progress, as well as the identification of both improvements and setbacks.. Monitoring the proportion of individuals living in poverty allows for annual

The analysis of poverty trends in Colombia from 1990 to 2019 provides a longitudinal perspective on how economic fluctuations, financial crises, and development policies have influenced the well-being of the population (see Graph 8). Between 1990 and 1996, the poverty rate experienced a gradual increase, with annual rises ranging from approximately 0.2% to 0.6%, indicating a relatively stable upward trend. In 1997 and 1998, the increases were more pronounced, culminating in a peak of 57.9% in 2000. This escalation reflects a period of economic distress, likely influenced by regional instability and internal challenges.

From 2000 onward, the poverty rate began to stabilize, showing a modest decline in the early 2000s before rising again slightly until 2003. A significant and sustained reduction began in 2004, likely linked to economic growth and the implementation of targeted social programs and structural reforms. This downward trend became more consistent between 2008 and 2017, during which poverty decreased from 50.7% in 2007 to 35.2% in 2017. This period of improvement coincides with a favorable global economic environment and strengthened domestic policies promoting social inclusion. However, by 2019, the poverty rate increased slightly from 34.7% to 35.7%, which may reflect a combination of economic deceleration and challenges in maintaining or expanding the scope of social welfare programs introduced in the early 2000s.

10.6. Graph 6: Ratio of minimum wage to average wage



Note: own elaboration based on Ratio of Minimum Wage to Average Wage: Euromonitor International from International Labour Organisation (ILO)/Eurostat/national statistics

As observed in Graph 9 [7], although there are no data available for the period 1990–1994, the trend beginning in 1995 reveals important dynamics. In that year, the minimum-to-average wage ratio stood at 74.6%, indicating a relatively balanced scenario in which the minimum wage allowed workers to cover a substantial portion of their basic needs. In 1996, the ratio declined by more than 4 percentage points to 70.5%, suggesting an increase in wage inequality during that year. By 2001, the ratio had risen again to 73.6%, reflecting a phase of stabilization. The stability continued in 2002, implying that governmental policies effectively aligned minimum wage increases with overall wage growth. The peak was reached in 2003, when the ratio climbed to 75.6%, indicating a particularly favorable position for minimum wage earners and a potential reduction in wage inequality.

A significant decline occurred between 2004 and 2007, with the ratio reaching its lowest point in 2007. This drop may be attributed to disproportionate growth in highly productive sectors of the economy, such as mining and exports, which may have contributed to growing wage disparity. However, starting in 2008, the ratio began to recover, suggesting a corrective adjustment in wage policies aimed at reducing inequality.

[7] This indicator evaluates the relationship between the minimum wage and the average income of workers within an economy. It is calculated by dividing the minimum wage by the average wage and multiplying the result by 100 to express it as a percentage. This metric serves several key analytical functions. First, it reflects the level of labor inclusion, suggesting that when the ratio is high, workers earning the minimum wage are more integrated into the labor market and experience a relatively better quality of life. Second, it enables an assessment of the effectiveness of policies related to the setting of minimum wages. Third, it provides insight into income distribution and its contribution to greater equity. Lastly, the ratio has implications for economic competitiveness; a high ratio may indicate that minimum wages are relatively high compared to the average, potentially affecting labor market dynamics.

From that point onward, the ratio maintained a relatively stable upward trend, reaching historical highs in 2017 and 2018. This pattern may reflect sustained efforts to align minimum wage policies with broader income trends and to enhance social equity in the labor market.

11. Conclusion

Colombia's recent history has been significantly shaped by drug trafficking and the production of illicit substances, a phenomenon that has deeply affected its political stability while reshaping its economic and social structures. Within this context, international trade agreements with the European Union and the United States were introduced as mechanisms to stimulate economic growth and offer sustainable alternatives for the eradication of illicit crops. However, the outcomes of these policies reveal a far more complex reality—one in which progress in certain areas has not consistently translated into meaningful improvements in the regions most affected by drug production.

Socioeconomic indicators used in this study—such as the Gini coefficient, GDP, average wage, and poverty levels—paint an ambiguous picture. Although certain gains have been made, inequality remains persistently high, especially in rural areas. The Gini coefficient has seen only modest declines and does not reflect substantial progress toward equitable wealth distribution. Similarly, although national poverty levels have decreased, communities dependent on coca cultivation continue to experience social exclusion and economic marginalization. From 2005 to 2019, the influence of the drug economy on GDP has been measurable. While illicit activities have generated income flows, stimulated consumption, and created jobs, they have also distorted macroeconomic indicators. In this sense, drug trafficking sustains an economy that benefits certain actors but fails to contribute to sustainable national development.

Although trade agreements have had a positive macroeconomic impact, their effectiveness in eliminating illicit crops remains constrained. Real progress requires not only international cooperation and crop substitution but a deep structural transformation of rural Colombia. This transformation must prioritize access to markets, infrastructure, security, and above all, the creation of legitimate economic opportunities capable of outcompeting illicit economies. If these efforts are not reinforced and expanded, the eradication of illicit crops will continue to be a persistent and deeply rooted challenge—closely tied to the structural inequalities of Colombia's formal economy.

Another major conclusion is that, upon analyzing Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the annex, a pattern can be identified in countries such as Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia between 1990 and 2019: the reduction in poverty and inequality was closely linked to commodity prices. For example, between 2000 and 2012, the commodity boom it is driven by demand from the Asian country, namely China, and the expansion of international trade, this coincided with a marked decline in both the Gini coefficient and poverty levels across the region.However, in 2013, when international prices started to fall, a stagnation or slowdown in social progress was observed, suggesting that global conditions had a greater impact than domestic policies.

Continuing with this line of analysis, beyond national policies or trade agreements such as Free Trade Agreements, the determining factor was South America's structural vulnerability to commodities. In this regard, although redistributive policies and social programs played an important role, their effectiveness depended on the extraordinary revenue generated by commodity exports. The lack of economic diversification continues to render the region vulnerable to external shocks.

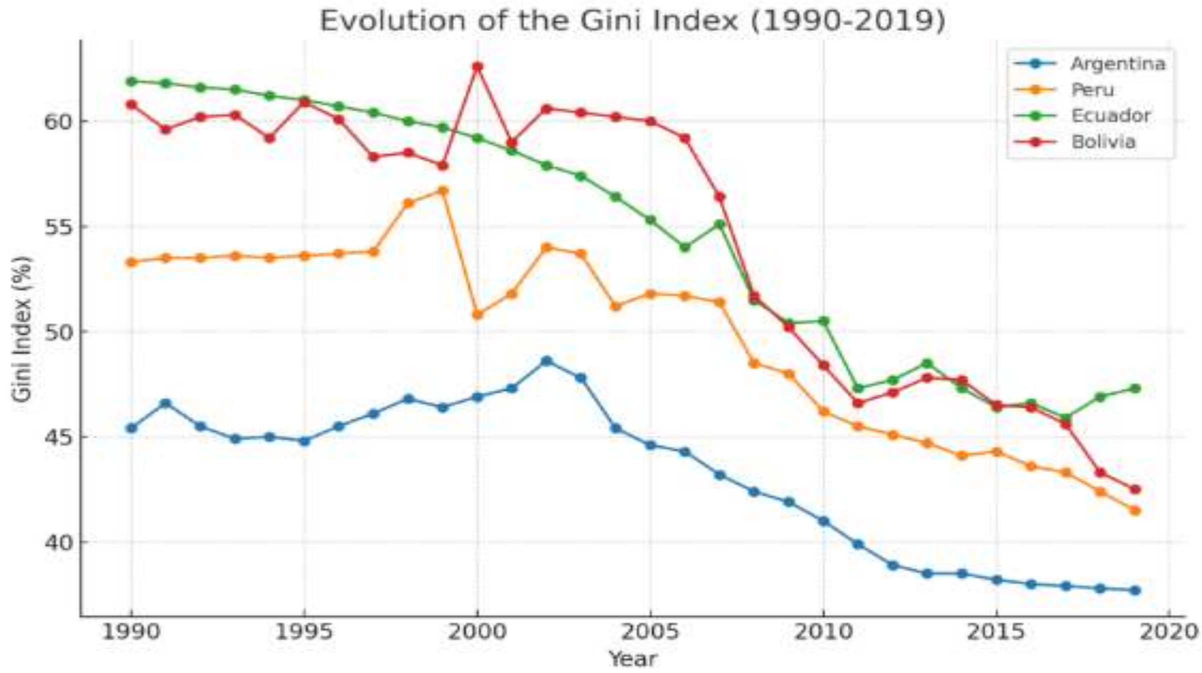
Annex

Table 1: Comparison of approaches to illicit crop eradication: United States vs. European Union.

Aspect	Estados Unidos	European Union
General Approaches	Militarization and control.	Sustainable development and respect for human rights.
Strategy	Strong orientation towards militarization, with military operations and aerial spraying as the main methods.	Promotion of legal economic alternatives to reduce dependence on drug trafficking.
Examples of Programs	Plan Colombia, Andean Trade Preferences Act (ATPA/ATPDEA), FTA.	European Plan to Combat Drug, Acuerdo Marco de Diálogo Político y Cooperación (2003), Sistema Generalizado de Preferencias.
Eradication Methods and Development	Aerial spraying, manual eradication, military support. Economic development through trade agreements.	Elimination of tariffs, promotion of sustainable development, support for alternative legal markets.
International Cooperation	Bilateral support with emphasis on military and financial assistance, focus on security and territorial control.	Multilateral cooperation, sustainable development, respect for human rights, conflict prevention.
Institutional Strengthening	Strengthening military and drug interdiction capabilities, institutional modernization in Colombia.	Strengthening technical cooperation, promoting harmonization of laws and monitoring mechanisms.

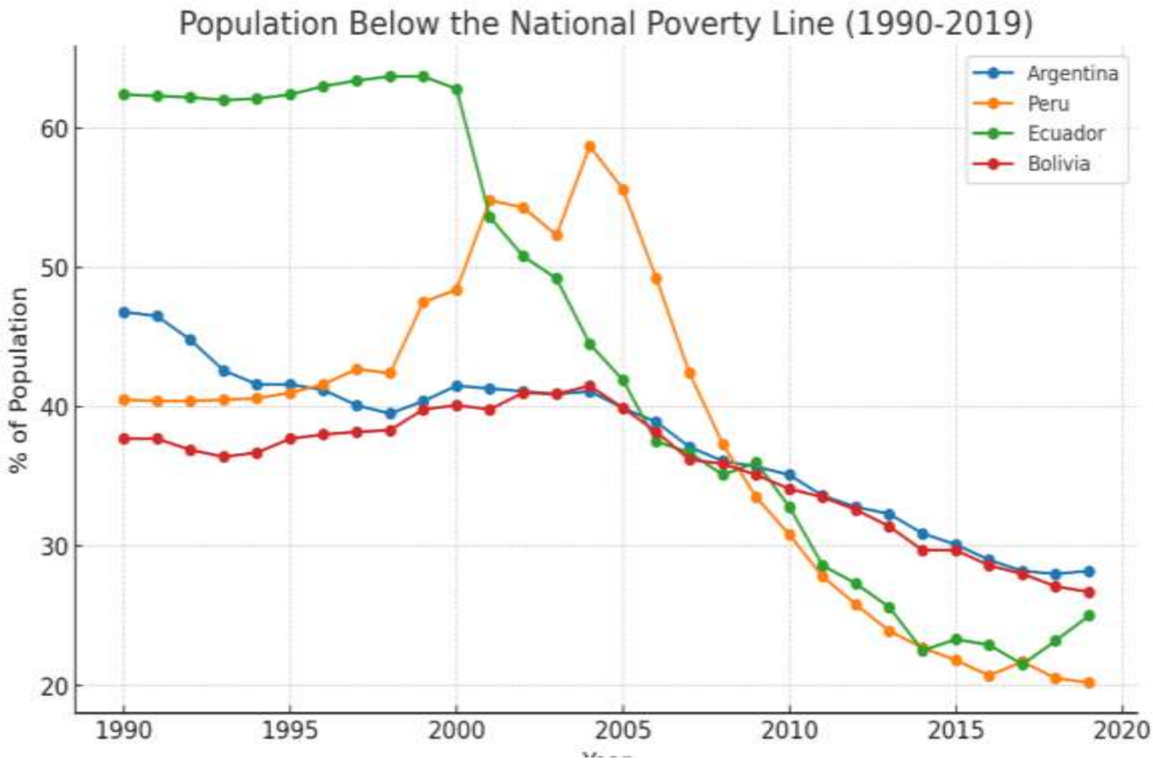
Note: Own elaboration.

<u>Graphic 1: Gini index</u>



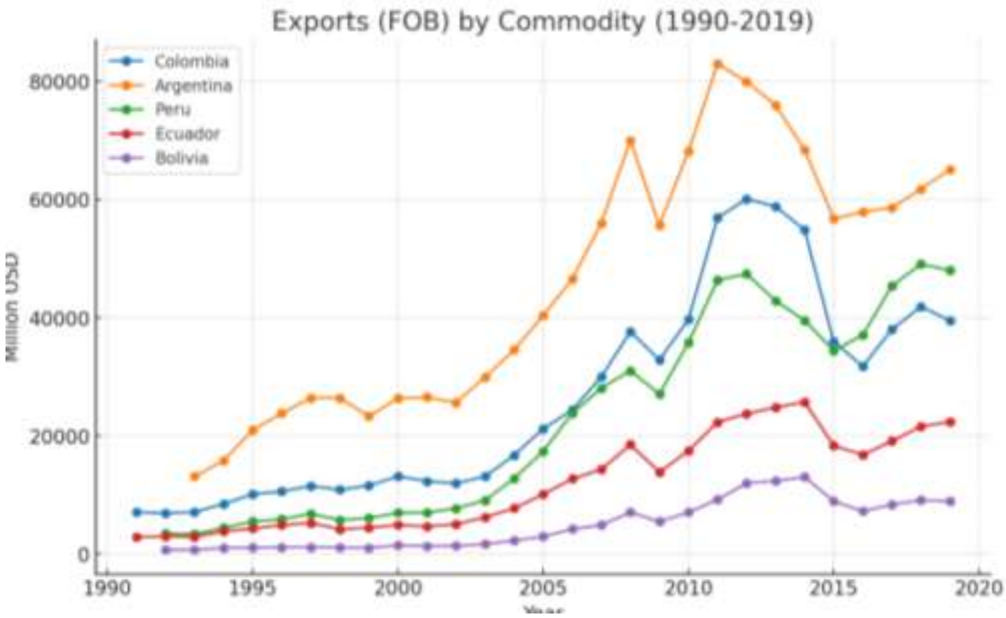
Note: Own elaboration based on Gini Index: Euromonitor International from national statistics.

<u>Graphic 2: Population below national poverty line</u>



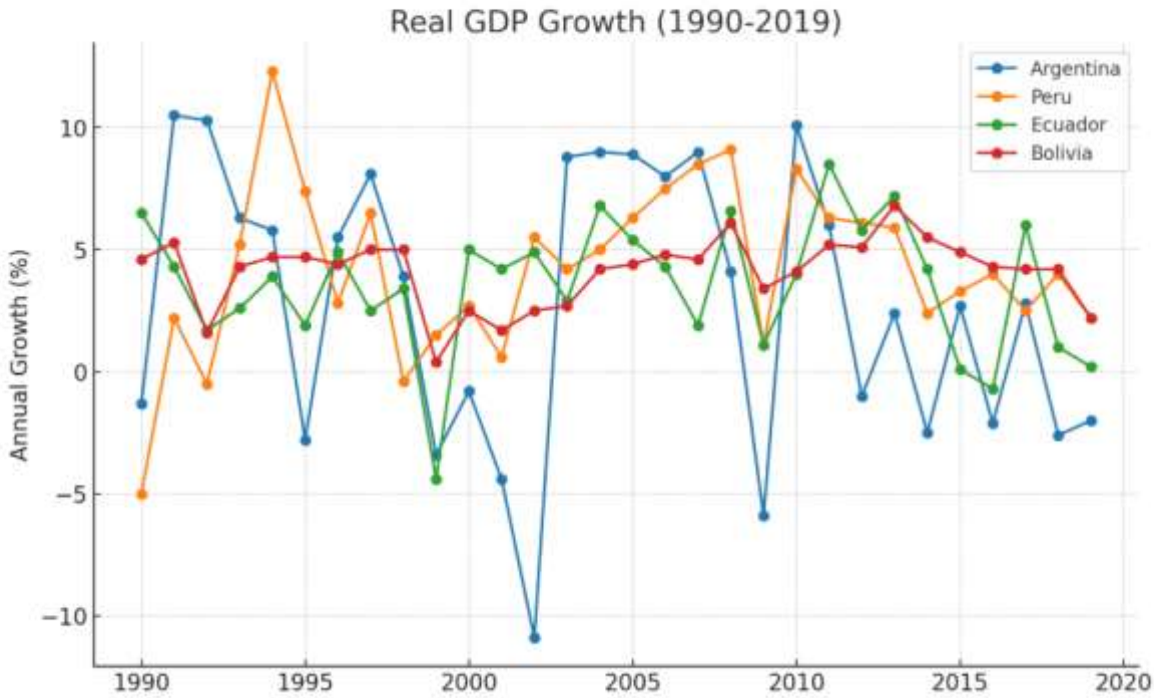
Note: own elaboration based on Population Living Below National Poverty Line: Euromonitor International from World Bank

Graphic 3: exports (FOB) by commodity



Note: own elaboration based on exports (fob) by Commodity: Euromonitor International from United Nations (UN), International Merchandise Trade Statistics

Graphic 4: Real GDP Growth



Note: own elaboration based on real GDP Growth: Euromonitor International from national statistics/Eurostat/OECD/UN/International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook (WEO)

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