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# Illegal Drug Trade in Latin America

## The Impacts of Drug Trafficking in Latin America

When we think of drug trafficking, we often imagine the growing American war on drugs that aids other countries in prohibiting drug use and reduces the illegal drug trade to improve overall quality of life. Although the war on drugs continues to expand, there are disastrous outcomes that arise from the global drug trade in relation to many aspects of human life. In fact, the Global Commission on Drugs concluded that “the global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world” (GCDP). Therefore, in order to combat these effects, there must be a reduction of the negative impacts on the environment, social life, and economic development that stem from the drug trade.

Drug Trafficking in Latin America takes place mainly in the Andean countries (Columbia, Peru, Bolivia) where the drugs are produced and are then transported through Central America including Mexico and the Caribbean to the United States and Europe. The growing practices involved in the making of drugs, effects on human lives, and decrease in economic development are all negative results of drug trade. Admittedly, some may argue that there are effective drug laws in place to prevent illicit drug use and trade. Most would agree that the drug trade allows for the introduction of money into the economy that otherwise would not be available without the drug industry. One cannot argue with the control of drug cartels on an area such in the favelas of Brazil creating a sense of safety for residents.

Despite the effectiveness of drug laws, the Latin American environment is greatly affected in a negative way by increased pollution, deforestation, and decreased biodiversity due to the harmful growing practices of illicit drugs. Massive increases in pollution are a result of Monsanto's Roundup herbicide which can be used to kill plants in areas of coca cultivation. The attempts of eradication of these plants through aerial fumigation are dangerous methods that cause major damage due to human error and other conditions leading to soil erosion and the elimination of other plant life (“Count the Costs”). In order to create areas for the cultivation of illegal drugs, tropical forests are cut down in the Andean regions reducing the number of biomes available in Andean countries. In fact, the Andean rainforests have lost 76% of their original forest cover due to the production of cocaine and opium that takes place in these tropical wet forests (“Andean Report”). Not only does deforestation take place for the cultivation of illegal crops, the construction of land strips and roads in order to transport the product to consumers greatly diminish the amount of forest coverage. Experts such as Brian Howard, an environmental journalist, state “drug trafficking [is] accelerating forest-clearing,” and it is an issue that should not be ignored (“National Geographic”). The loss of arable land threatens biodiversity from the deforestation of areas causing destruction of habitats and ecological changes within forests. The tropical Andes have a history of immense biological diversity as it is home to 10% of distinct species in the world (“Count the Costs”). With lack of sustainable agriculture and the loss of habitats, these species are on the brink of extinction creating a need for environmental issues to be addressed to preserve the beautiful tropics of Latin America.

In addition to negative environmental effects, the illegal drug trade plays a large role in the development of organized crime and increased health issues. The illegal drug trade is fueled by

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the increasing amount of gangs created to promote illegal activity which constitute more crime and violence in an area. Thousands of lives are lost due to organized crime and a history of illegality and violence such as in Latin American countries (“Organized Crime in Latin America”). Although exact numbers are unknown, growing gangs in Mexico commit crime, create violence, and distribute drugs; they have killed about 48,000 people in Mexico alone having a reputation for “sickening brutality” (“Bodies for Billions”). A multitude of health issues arise from both the consumption of drugs and the violent nature of cartels. Cocaine related emergency visits in the United States, a large consumer of cocaine, have increased since 2010 due to the dangerous nature of the drug that can cause seizures and possible overdose (World Drug Report 2014”). Consumption of high risk stimulants, such as opiates and cocaine, are associated with high addiction rates further harming users’ health. The mass amounts of people dying due to drug abuse and drug related violence must be addressed to preserve lives and increase the general sense of safety in Central America.

Despite common belief that illegal drug trafficking has economic benefits, it leads to increased spending, loss of productivity, and the corruption of governmental officials. Since substantial amounts of money is spent towards the prohibition of trafficking to shut down major drug operations, less capital is used to create infrastructure and boost the economy. Grand economic costs create an environment in which companies aren’t interested in investing because of the loss of human capital and medical care costs in the area. The economic hardships in states blighted with violence like Mexico also have induced high migration rates in the major centers of drug trafficking experiencing a 12.3% loss of GDP in relation to violence (“Mexican Drug Market”). Trafficking also causes a loss of productivity in areas of drug use which greatly hinders productivity of the available workforce. In the United States alone, \$100 billion dollars are lost annually because of drug use in the workplace as a result of drugs being exported to more developed countries (“Consequences of Drug Abuse”). Enormous amounts of profit within the drug market breeds corruption between federal police and officials that work together with gangs to smuggle and traffic drugs. Javier Sicilia, a social activist and victim of the war on drugs, states “I don’t know where the state ends and organized crime beings” (“Corruption in Mexico”). Potential earnings sway state officials from upholding their duties and, instead, bargain with drug traffickers to become a part of organized crime. The drug industry slows the economic development of Latin American countries that are on the path to development into core countries in the near future.

Illegal drug trade in Latin America is a primary cause for the massive threat to the beautiful environment of the region, loss of thousands of lives, and economic squandering. A small amount of people benefitting from the illegal trafficking at the cost of thousands of others is in no way justified and must be put to rest. Although there may be short term benefits in the drug trade, ultimately it will result in long term obstructions in the way of the development on Latin America. If such a calamity continues, the drug industry will continue to grow, increasing its unfavorable effects and ruining many lives of innocent people.