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**From coca to cocoa: land, labor and rural livelihoods
in Vista Hermosa, Colombia**

A Research Paper

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Capitalism is one of the main drivers of the expansion of illicit crops as global commodities in the 20th century. The commodification of land, the forceful expulsion of small producers, and the expansion of private property created the conditions for the engagement of peasants in illicit crops (Harvey, 2005, p.19). From the 1990s onwards, alternative development emerged as a critique of securitization approaches by proposing voluntary substitution and rural development. High-profitable cash crops such as coffee, bananas, or cocoa have become the alternatives. Yet, by attempting to integrate small producers into a system that once expelled them, substitution programs often risk reproducing new forms of exclusion rather than addressing structural inequalities behind coca cultivation.

In this context, the purpose of this research is to contribute to understanding the impact of substitution programs in the agrarian political economy. I will argue that the transition from illicit crops to legal cash crops has an impact in the land, labor, and livelihoods of the places where substitution has taken place. I will also argue that not everyone can access substitution, as land is in most cases a pre-requisite in such programs. This critique is linked to the literature about substitution programs in other countries, where scholars say that although alternative development tried to be more heuristic by including human rights perspective, at the end, it consisted of promoting local economic development by finding another cash crop.

My research paper aims to combine ethnographic fieldwork and agrarian political economy to fill the gap in critical perspectives of substitution programs. While there is a rich literature about agrarian political economy of illicit crops, this perspective has barely been used to study what happens after substitution takes place. Most research about substitution programs focuses on impact evaluations that measure the failure or success with few qualitative case studies. This will allow me to contribute to policy discussions about substitution processes by offering a critical perspective based on the social dynamics I will analyse.

To accomplish this, I will use the key theoretical questions proposed by Henry Bernstein regarding the social relations of production and reproduction. In the first chapter, I will introduce the problem statement, the research question, the objectives, the theoretical framework, and the methodology. In the second chapter, I will present other substitution programs in other countries to set a comparison point with my case study. In the third chapter, I will present the results of my case study based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Vista Hermosa, including how land, labor, income, and social relations have changed in the transition from coca to cocoa. Finally, I will present my conclusions.

1.1 Problem statement

Illicit crops have been a development problem since the 20th century, as the process of development boosted their growth (Rojas Herrera and Dessein, 2023, p. 2). They arise not only from capitalist expansion, but also from the asymmetrical

income distribution that it fosters. The cause, as Thomson clearly pointed out (2024, p. 4, 774), relies on extreme price volatility and increasing inequality of income due to heavy financialized and concentrated markets that have forced small farmers to seek alternatives to survive.

During the last decade of the past century, in Colombia the expansion of coca crops to new areas was closely linked to coffee crises, extractivist mining, and agribusiness. These factors led many small farmers to shift into coca harvesting as an alternative livelihood to secure a living (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand, 2024, p. 774). This phenomenon was evident in the Ariari region¹, where the proliferation of coca production responded to some extent to demand, but also to other factors that came along. For instance, agricultural modernization within the rice sector, that caused land concentration and subsequent smallholders' displacement (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 775).

Ballvé and Britto have argued that in other regions such as the Urabá, coca cultivation arose tied to the United Fruit Company's arrival in 1964. Specifically, in the city of Santa Marta, coffee and bananas smallholders shifted to marijuana cultivation and then later to coca crops (cited in Goodhand et al., 2024, p.9). Following the same pattern in other developing countries such as Bolivia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Laos, illicit crops have offered smallholders a way to mitigate the uncertainties derived from commercialization of agriculture, and to escape from the capitalist squeeze (Meehan, 2020, p.1).

Indeed, the increase of illicit crops has been associated to the deepening of capitalism, but one should not lose sight of the inherent value that arises because of banning measures. The prohibition perspective has its origin in the mid-twentieth century. Until today, it has remained valid, as international organizations and governments keep conceiving illicit crops as a direct threat to security. Eradication and substitution policies have been the answer to such concerns. However, from a political economy perspective based on the social dynamics of production, scholars argue that successful substitution programs involve a massive and rapid change in land use, which typically impacts on the distribution of wealth and power (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 769). Still, this has not occurred in most cases.

In the illicit crop-producing countries, counternarcotic policies and programs that seek to eradicate or promote alternative development, have often followed an apolitical logic by designing technical solutions to complex social dynamics (Lu, 2007, p.727). In Colombia, alternative development began in 1995 with the program "Plante", which means "grow". Its goal was to offer substitution assistance for small producers of coca, poppy, and marihuana. However, parallel to

¹ The Ariari region is in the Meta department, in the east Andean Mountain ranges. The name comes from the Ariari river that delimits the municipalities of Granada, Lejanías, El Dorado, among others.

its implementation, aerial fumigation was still being used, generating violence and fear among illicit crop producers (Comisión de la verdad, 2024).

In the mid-term, the program's effect was that coca crops moved to other parts of the country. After the failure of aerial fumigation and the first attempt to introduce alternative development, the National Illicit Crop Substitution Program (PNIS) emerged as a voluntary substitution program based on the idea of safe development (Rojas Herrera y Dessein, 2023, p. 2). It was the first time that substitution efforts were aligned with an integral rural reform.

In 2016, the government signed the final peace agreement with the guerrilla group named FARC-EP, to mark the end of the armed conflict and the construction of what was intended as a lasting peace. It consisted of six points to achieve that purpose: 1) an integral rural agrarian reform, 2) political participation and democratic openness, 3) end of the conflict, 4) solution to the problem of illicit drugs, 5) agreement regarding the victims of the armed conflict, and 6) mechanisms to implementing and verifying the compliance of the peace agreement (Portal para la paz, 2025).

Within the fourth component of the agreement, the National Illicit Crop Substitution Program (PNIS) was created with multiple objectives that aimed to target coca cultivation based on the idea of alternative development. The program consisted of the enactment of voluntary substitution by providing food immediate assistance, integral technical assistance, food security and self-sustaining assistance, short-term productive projects, and long-term productive projects (Portal para la paz, 2025). The program started in 2017 and is intended to end in 2027, having already been subject to several evaluations and critiques.

Within this program, cocoa has been especially designated as one of the alternatives for crop substitution, as it is easy to store, transport, sell, and grows in agroecological conditions like those of coca cultivation (Cascañt- Sempere, Dávila and Vesga, 2023, p. 396). In Vista Hermosa, a historical region of coca production in the Meta department², although current high prices have incentivized people to grow cocoa, the transition has created social differentiation dynamics that end up reproducing inequalities, which were the initial problem that led small producers to grow coca.

1.2 Research objectives and question

Research question:

How has cocoa production as a substitute for coca reshaped the agrarian dynamics in Vista Hermosa, Colombia?

² Colombia is a central state administratively divided in 32 departments and a capital district, Bogotá DC. Meta is in the centre of the country, and its capital is Villavicencio.

Sub questions

- How has land tenure changed since cocoa production began?
- How has the shift from coca to cocoa transformed labor relations in the community?
- Who has received the fruits of cocoa production?
- How have power relations changed in the transition to cocoa?

Objectives

- To analyse the evolution of land tenure following the adoption of cocoa as a substitute for coca.
- To examine how labour relations have been reshaped by the transition from coca to cocoa.
- To assess the transformations in smallholders' livelihoods under cocoa production.
- To analyse how power relations have changed in the transition from coca to cocoa.

1.3 Justification and relevance of this research

Gutierrez says that “the logic of illicit crops has been thoroughly misunderstood, as they are often associated with fragility, rather than resilience, disorder and violence, rather than order, and illegality, rather than legitimacy. They are often regarded as a matter of law preservation rather than a development problem. Eradication, Incarceration, and wars on drugs will be preferred over – and often at the expense of – land reform, credit expansion, agricultural diversification, or market inclusion” (2023, p. 93).

This assumption has been valid not only for illicit crops themselves, but for the substitution processes that have followed them. In this context, this research is crucial to offer a critical perspective on substitution programs and alternative development, by considering their agrarian political dynamics. As Rojas Herrera and Dessein sustain (2023, p.8), more than the obsession with increasing the number of hectares of coca eradicated, it is important to contemplate the conditions that will enable a fair socioeconomic transition towards licit economies. In this regard, my research aims to contribute to understanding the impact of substitution programs to achieve a fairer transition for marginalized rural populations.

Existing publications have focused mainly on monitoring and evaluation studies that point out the weaknesses of the program in terms of institutional articulation, delivery of the program components, unconsidered gender dynamics, and the contradictory historical role of the state (CESED, 2024; Velez-Torres and

Chiavaroli, 2025; Restrepo Parra and Valencia Agudelo, 2021; Acero and Thomson, 2022). Meanwhile, few papers have used agrarian political economy to analyse labor, land, and credit dynamics within illicit crops. However, few scholars have used that perspective to understand the impact of substitution programs on the existing agrarian dynamics.

In Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Bolivia, there are some papers that have criticized substitution programs (Lone and Cachia, 2021; Lu, 2017; Mansfield; Meehan). For the case of cocoa as a substitution crop, some scholars in Perú and Colombia (Sierra, 2016; Peñalosa Pinto, 2022; Wildey, 2016; Coq Huelva et al., 2023) have studied the impacts of the transition. Still, they have focused on the economic viability of cocoa, and just Coq Huelva addresses critically cocoa substitution programs from its institutional and agrarian dynamics. Thus, there is a gap in research that accounts for the changes in terms of the political economy of substitution programs. Lastly, in policy terms, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for policymakers who want to tackle illegal crops and substitution policies from qualitative data grounded in ethnography.

1.4 Theoretical background

“Political economy is not technology” said Marx in 1857, claiming that production involves not only the technical conditions, but also social conditions inherent to production. Later, the sociologist Henry Bernstein used Marx’s approach to the agrarian dynamics, to say that political economy deals with the following questions: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it. For this research, these questions shall guide the analysis in the shift from coca to cocoa to identify social differentiation processes. First, I will address some theoretical approaches regarding the nexus between prohibition and development, to examine why illicit crops are seen as a problem, and how coca and cocoa relate to each other by prohibition discourses.

1.4.1. Prohibition and development: why illicit crops are regarded as a problem

Illicit economies have been broadly studied by scholars in the fields of agrarian political economy, peace and conflict studies, drug and security studies. Characterizing such crops involves thinking about how prohibition shapes the agrarian political economy, and how this feature distinguishes them from other licit crops (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 765). It requires a middle point where the emphasis on the impacts of prohibition, which makes illicit economies distinctive, must be taken careful, as the danger of “fetishizing” drugs can obscure the continuities and connections between licit and illicit economies (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 765).

By “fetishizing”, I mean that the illegal status of coca and cannabis is perceived as something intrinsic and not politically and socially constructed. So, although prohibition has deeply shaped the production of such crops, the relations between them and the licit crops cannot be ignored. For example, Thomson et al. Say, licit crop crisis and illicit crop production are often linked. Illicit crop production subsidizes licit crops (2024, p.765). Also, for the transition of coca to cocoa, prohibition has linked illegal and legal crops, as the endeavour to end coca and poppy has led policymakers to find solutions in high valued cash crops.

Ultimately, prohibition ties cannabis, coca and opium-poppy together, as most similarities between these crops derive from their illegal status, not from intrinsic characteristics (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 764). Thus, before going into the agrarian political economy of illicit crops, it is necessary to think about where prohibition comes from, and which notions of development propel eradication and substitution policies. Such crops have been extraordinarily resilient not by their intrinsic characteristics, but by prohibition itself (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 93).

A growing number of scholars, Goodhand *et al.* (2021, p. 2) affirms, that policy makers prescribe what is considered as “good” or “bad”, whereas policymaking and ‘evidence making’ are political processes deeply entangled in and generative of the phenomenon they purportedly seek to address. In the case of illicit crops, a notion of law enforcement has guided the reading of drugs as a problem to be solved. As Gutierrez says (2023, p.4), “the question lies on why illicit crops remain as a development and governance challenge and have been kept as a sole preserve of law enforcement”. Illicit crops are critically misunderstood, and despite evidence that they have provided survival strategies to marginalized populations, there are some depictions of illicit crops that remain present in the UNODC and the World Bank reports.

The first assumption is that illicit crops are a problem related to fragile states, as a cause and an essential attribute of violent conflict (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 98). This assumption has been particularly used in the cases of Afghanistan and Colombia, where illicit crops have been linked to armed conflict. Despite the ongoing conflict and the increase in opium production in Afghanistan, which coincides with such assumption, scholars have challenged the depictions of fragility and crisis. Particularly in the rural population, rather than being helpless and dependent, Afghans have been resilient, innovative, and have adopted unorthodox strategies to secure a living (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 98).

Such depictions of fragility have been functioned as a convenient device for a story that supports state-centred, aid-dependent, and elite focused development agenda. Is an incomplete assessment that ignores the resilience, the interdependencies between licit and illicit actors in insecure environments (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 98). This leads to the second assumption behind drug development policies,

as illicit crop cultivation has been often associated with the existence of dangerous locations being represented as ungoverned zones that need to be civilised.

The notion of state fragility comes with a depiction of areas dominated by illicit crops and conflict, such as lawless and lacking local order. The result is that policies and programs obscure the fundamental problems of marginalisation and exclusion that generate illegal crops (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 110). Furthermore, despite the violence, rather than a void place without norms, conflict areas have different power dynamics where armed actors or local communities create rules despite the lack of state intervention. Although illegality is often associated with violence, in the case of Myanmar, for example, illicit crops can also be sources of order (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 124).

Therefore, policy orthodoxy has obscured and misunderstood the complex dynamics in illicit crops producing contexts, where the suppositions of state fragility, violence, and disorder, ignore the local dynamics and people's agency. They are incomplete assessments that obscure the ways in which illicit crops have been adaptations to long processes of marginalization and dispossession, linked to the parallel expansion of semi-legal or grey areas of economic activity (Gutierrez, 2023, p. 95).

As a result, anti-drug policies and substitution programs have constructed a narrative of violence and lack of state around illicit crops, naming it as a problem to be solved. In this process, legal cash crops have been seen as the ideal solution to end them. However, the dynamics of illicit crops are more complex than the dual relation between legality and illegality.

1.4.2 Agrarian political economy of illicit crops

In the following section, I will look at how illicit crops have been studied in agrarian political economy, to understand how the production relations were before substitution crops. This will allow me to show some patterns based on literature, and from there on, to identify how agrarian dynamics have changed in the transition.

So, agrarian political economy involves thinking of illicit crops in terms of land, labor, credit, and exchange relations (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 763). Challenging the thesis of traditional development approaches, which follow the logic explained in the previous section, the main argument of this perspective is that illegal drug economies are an inherent feature of contemporary capitalism. Thus, development models are less of an antidote to illicit economies and rather a driver of the forms of marginalization and dispossession that push rural populations into illicit crops (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 791). Hence, drug crop producers may be excluded from, and become the orphans of development (Gootenberg 2018).

Therefore, agrarian political economy states that orthodox development doesn't consider the systemic factors under illicit economies, and alternative development and crop substitution programs are unable to provide a real alternative for producers (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 791). On the opposite, illicit crops have integrated smallholders into global markets in ways that have provided some protection from processes of dispossession and displacement. This has protected them from not being able to reproduce themselves from land and family-based labor, escaping from the capitalist dynamics of mainstream agriculture (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 777). Therefore, land, labor, and livelihood dynamics in illicit crops are some of the reasons why rural populations keep engaging in their production.

1.4.3 Drug crop frontiers

One of the focuses of agrarian political economy when it comes to illicit crop production is the emergence of narco-frontiers and illicit peasantries. As borderlands have comparative advantages for illegal crops, they are spaces where state authority and legitimacy are contested through drug production (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 772). Goodhand et al., (2024, p. 2) consider that such spaces are the result of the interaction between drug-fueled capitalism and the development industry, which turns land and labor into commodities.

For instance, counternarcotic policies have the effect of reinforcing spatial concentration by pushing cultivation into the most remote areas and marginal environments with high ecological value (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 772). This influences the relation between the state and illicit crop cultivators, who in such contexts are being treated as second-class citizens. Moreover, Goodhand *et al* (2024, p. 5) believes drug economy itself plays a catalytic role in the expansion of capitalism in these spaces through land-grabbing and illicit commodity production.

Narco-frontiers are conceived as places of turbo-charged agrarian transformations, because the ways the illicit economies penetrate rural areas intensify the production of legal commodities. However, not all narco-frontiers are the same, and according to the same authors, within frontier spaces drug economies have acted as pusher, follower, financier, or a sort of combination that drives processes of rural and urban transformations in the margins (Goodhand et al., 2024, p. 6).

First, the role of illicit crops as a pusher occurs when drug economies are done through the colonization of under-commodified frontier spaces, opening opportunities for revenue generation by attracting petty commodity producers into these areas to grow illicit crops (Goodhand et al., 2024, p. 7). "These new arrivals are often the orphans of war, or the collateral damage of failed development schemes elsewhere" (Gootenberg and Davalos 2018). These new spaces are not

completely empty, but what is new is the commodification and large-scale production of coca for an external market (Goodhand et al., 2024, p. 7).

The second type of frontier are the extractivist frontiers, or follower ones. In this case, the emergence of illicit crops is related to commodity frontiers, whose revenues are reinvested in drug economies. But also, the expansion and intensification of production of legal commodities such as cattle or oil, leads to the displacement of a surplus population whose labor can't be absorbed in the extractivist economies, and thus, rely on illicit crops as a way of living (Goodhand et al., 2024, p. 9).

The last type of frontier is the trafficker or financing one. This kind of frontier emerges not from the cultivation of illicit crops, but from the transit and processing of drugs. In these spaces, narco-bourgeoise accumulates vast amounts of land, and plantation agriculture and cattle ranching are used as money laundering (Goodhand et al., 2024, p. 10). In this way, the emergence of illicit crops and the spaces where they emerge are key to understanding them.

1.4.4 The 3 L's: land, labor, and livelihoods

Besides the relation between frontiers and illicit economies, the key lens of political economy to understand illicit crops is to consider land, labor, and livelihoods as key factors to explain their prevalence. By considering production and reproduction dynamics, scholars argue that “when compared to many licit crop economies, coca crops have enabled relatively peasant-friendly land-based social relations” (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 777).

One of the reasons why illicit crops are “peasant-friendly” is that from a plot of less than a hectare, most cultivators can generate sufficient revenue to reproduce their livelihoods, enabling smallholder agriculture to continue in contexts of extreme land poverty and inequality (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 778). Also, drug economies are less likely to fuel land accumulation due to prohibition. As large companies are not likely to invest in such crops, and monopolizing cultivation is less important for drug traffickers, land accumulation is not common in illegal crops.

Thus, in the Colombian case, Gini and other inequality indicators are lower in coca regions, and much, much lower if the analysis considers only coca cultivated areas (Gutiérrez, 2019). This is an important differentiating factor, as at least some coca cultivating regions are not characterized by monoculture, and legal staples tend to suffer more land concentration than coca (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2021, p. 3). However, land tenure in coca crops is complex and intrinsically unstable, making informality widespread among illicit crops (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2021, p. 4).

In terms of labor dynamics, drug crops have been an opportunity for impoverished populations to gain access to land (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand,

2024, p. 778). They are typically cultivated by family-farmers who engage their members to participate in the cultivation process, but also, there is wage employment done in temporary and informal jobs that are often better paid than similar manual works in legal sectors (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand, 2024, p. 779).

Thus, one key characteristic of coca production is that it is labor-intensive. It produces a harvest every two or three months (depending on the variety; apparently, the seeds have been gradually improved) and scraping of the coca leaf is done manually." (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2021, p. 5). This work is done by the raspachines, the most salient group within the coca economy other than the growers. They are the ones who pick up and scrape the coca leaves (Thomson, 2024, p. 834). In terms of labor and class dynamics, illicit economies have helped sustain populations during agrarian crises and/or protracted conflict and, in some places, enabled social mobility (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 779).

However, while illicit drug crop economies can provide a bulwark for smallholder agriculture, it doesn't mean that they're peasant idylls, a place where peasant relations of production allow them to escape from exploitation relations (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand, 2024, p. 783). The high exposure to violence, the marketisation of social relations, the dependence on exploitative social relations, and the related processes of social differentiation are some of the downsides highlighted by illicit crops smallholders (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand, 2024, p. 783).

The criminalization and stigmatization of illicit crop producers have made them subjects of state interventions, violence, and the vulnerability of armed groups who want to control them. "Illicit peasantries" are a relatively recent feature of the second half of the twentieth century, fuelled by the global war on drugs, along with a decades-long crisis in smallholder agriculture due to processes of accumulation and dispossession (Gootenberg and Davalos 2018; Thomson, Meehan, and Goodhand 2023; Torres 2018). "Illicit drug farmers hung onto their land in frontier spaces, constructing precarious livelihoods that interweave productive, distributive, and reproductive work. They are classic petty commodity producers, in which non-capitalist roles are combined in uneven but enduring ways with capitalist ones" (Bernstein 2010).

Finally, agrarian political economy and peace and conflict studies have provided critical tools to assess policy solutions that promise ameliorative measures to address the circle of violence and illegality of illicit crops (Goodhand 2021). In this context, the eradication of illicit crops has undermined smallholder livelihoods and social safety nets without offering any other alternative (Goodhand et al., 2021, p. 6) Peasant smallholders who are directly dispossessed, or who cannot compete with newly emerging or incoming agribusinesses, such as cocoa,

are expected to become wage workers or leave agriculture, enabling further concentration of land (Thomson, Meehan and Goodhand, 2024, p. 783). This is the problem I will study in the following sections. But first, I will define my methodology and methods to carry out my research.

1.5 Methodology and Methods

The methodology of this research emerged from my interest in ethnography as a tool for qualitative research, as well as the nature of my questions regarding the transition from coca to cocoa. I aimed not to measure variables or test theories, but to collect life stories of people who have transitioned to understand the agrarian dynamics in terms of class relations. However, there were some limitations like the possibilities of accessing a context marked by violence, prejudice, and the ongoing presence of armed groups in some regions where coca is still grown.

In this section, I will explore the epistemological and ontological considerations of selecting a qualitative methodology such as ethnography. As Aspers and Corte argue, qualitative research is qualitative because of the explicit ways it considers the positionality of both the researcher and the researched (Reich, 2021, p. 576). This implies that knowledge is embodied and situated, and that power relations within and surrounding the research process shape the process of gathering data, conducting analysis, and presenting findings (Reich, 2021, p. 576).

My research began by defining the feasibility of conducting fieldwork, as ethnography often involves the researcher participating in people's daily lives for an extended period, having informal conversations, and engaging in participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). I began by selecting the municipality I wanted to study, using the PNIS list and considering the possibility of analyzing the transition, as well as my safety in a context where the confrontation between former FARC dissidents had intensified.

Ethnography relies on improvisation, and it is a process rather than a methodological doctrine (Allaine Cerwonka, 2007, p. 20). Hence, a professor suggested the Meta department, as it was a place marked by coca crops, and currently, by the emergence of substitution productive activities such as milk cattle, avocado, and cocoa. There were also some practical concerns, as it was close to Bogotá, and a friend had contacts in Vista Hermosa, who could take me to the people who transitioned. Cocoa crops are widespread throughout the region, but due to the presence of a rebellious fraction (Ivan Mordisco, an ex-FARC leader), I couldn't move freely to interview the people without an intermediary.

In this process, Agrocavis, the most significant cocoa association in Vista Hermosa, emerged, thanks to the recommendation of a local person. I spent three weeks visiting the association, interviewing cocoa producers, attending meetings, supporting the classification of cocoa beans, and weighing the cocoa sacks that

the producers brought to sell. My goal was to investigate the aspects of people's daily lives, how they have understood the transition, and how they see themselves (Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

This had some consequences for my research. As Thapar- Björkert and Henry argue, the position of researchers and subjects influences the research process, and when it comes to power relations, power is not understood as only top-down, but dispersed throughout both research relationships (2004, p. 364). In my case, as I needed the association's intermediation through the company of the association president, I was limited by his schedule, as well as the relation between the persons I interviewed with the association. This included speaking not just about my topic of interest, but expecting complaints about the administration of the association, and not being able to interview some people, as they were angry because their cocoa beans were underpaid due to quality reasons.

The sensitivity of the topic also put some safety concerns at the heart of my research, as the people who have grown coca have experienced violence, having members of their family being killed by guerrilla, state, or paramilitary groups, or have experienced forced displacement. As Reich claims, an ethic of care arises from awareness that research can cause harm to individuals and communities, and at times, the researchers themselves (Reich, 2021, p. 578). Thus, having such conversations made me close to the people I interviewed, creating some friendships and bonds that allowed me to enter their lives.

Coca is still not grown in Vista Hermosa, and people openly discuss their experiences during the acute years of the conflict. However, it is not always easy for them to recall their traumas, so my role was to listen to them and acknowledge what they went through. I also agreed with the president of the association to support them in communication tasks and provide them with some Excel classes that they could use for their employees.

There are other limitations concerning reflexivity including the possibilities of knowledge, and the partiality of knowledge claims (Türkmen, 2023, p. 148). My data consists of 10 interviews and a field diary with annotations on the places, dynamics, and life in Vista Hermosa. I conducted a semi-structured interview to allow for flexibility in addressing unexpected topics and conversations. The president of the association itself reviewed the questions with me and suggested me to add one regarding people's experiences during armed conflict.

- Where were you born? How did you come to Vista Hermosa?
- How did you start to grow cocoa?
- How have you achieved growing cocoa? Through which financial means (loan, state support, other programs, own resources)?
- When and how did you get land (inheritance, buy, state program)?
- Do you own or rent your land?

- How many land extensions do you have? How many acres of cocoa?
- Which other income sources do you have besides cocoa?
- Who works on your cocoa plot?
- How have you reinvested your cocoa earnings?

After conducting my fieldwork, I translated all my notes into the computer and then analyzed them, creating categories to connect empirical data with theory. I have no aim to prove or show through facts and numbers how the transition of crops has worked, but to pinpoint some class dynamics and changes in this process through the stories of ex-coca growers in Vista Hermosa. The names of the people I interviewed have been anonymized for their own protection. Before getting to my case study, in the next section, I will present other substitution cases to set up a comparison point between countries that have tried to eradicate illicit crops and how they have done it.

Chapter 2: Case studies: other substitution programs

Besides the PNIS and its former versions, other countries with illicit crops have undertaken measures to eradicate or substitute them. As in Colombia, scholars have highlighted how illicit crops have been misunderstood, and how this also translates to eradication and substitution policies. In the following section, I will look at the cases of Bolivia, Myanmar, Laos, and Afghanistan to look at the similarities and differences in the counternarcotic policies in comparison to Vista Hermosa. This comparative perspective will enable me to place in dialogue these cases in dialogue with my study case, to identify the consequences of such programs in the agrarian dynamics across these contexts.

Bolivia

Bolivia has a unique relationship with coca that makes it different from other coca-producing countries like Perú or Colombia. For centuries, it has been consumed by indigenous Andeans like the Aymara as a stimulant, but it has also been used since the 20th century to produce cocaine (Brewer Osorio, 2021). It has a long history that ranges from the Inca Empire to the rise of President Evo Morales at the beginning of the 21st century, and the strong unionist tradition created around its production.

The beginnings of coca production in Bolivia as a drug, as in other countries, started with the involvement of the rural population in illicit economies due to the result of new forms of impoverishment and precarity created by development processes and the expansion of capitalism (Goodhand et al., 2021, p. 7). In the Bolivian case, coca production was accelerated by the closure of the mines in the 1980's and the neoliberal policies, which left 35,000 people unemployed.

Many migrated to the Chapare region to seek jobs in the illicit industry and escape from the hyperinflation and neoliberal policies of the government. Between 1979 and 1985, coca was in its boom, absorbing the surplus population in an industry that requires abundant work for planting, harvesting, drying coca leaves, and processing cocaine paste (Grisaffi, 2022, p. 1280). In this context, the coca economy became a source of stability through economic growth that inserted relegated territories into global markets, being to this day one of the cornerstones of the local economy (Grisaffi, 2022, p. 1280).

Parallel to the coca expansion, the pressure of the War on Drugs launched by the US pushed the Bolivian government towards militarisation interventions like the 'Operation Blast Furnace' to create chaos in the region and end coca, while doing little to cut the flow of drugs to the North (Grisaffi, 2022, p. 1281). The US pressure also translated in the creation of the anti-drug law 1008 in 1988, which outlawed all coca cultivation in the country. According to Gutierrez Aguilar, the Chapare region was declared a red zone, and coca farmers were the "enemies" (as cited in Grisaffi, 2022, p.1274).

Later in 1997, the government paid producers 2000 dollars per hectare to eradicate their crops, but for every plant destroyed, they put new seeds elsewhere (Grisaffi, 2022, p. 1281). People resisted, and the failure of the eradication programs was also a result of the organization and resistance of the unions and peasant movements, which put Evo Morales, an ex-coca producer.

Unlike Colombia, Bolivia does not have a substitution program but has dealt with the pressure of the war on drugs with legalization mechanisms due to the cultural importance of coca. Studies like Ramos et al. have compared the Bolivian case with the Colombian one, arguing that the regulatory system and the supervision of the coca economy have enabled the decriminalization of coca producers, the reduction of violence, and the legitimization of the cocaleros (Ramos et al., p. 68).

Unlike Colombia or Myanmar, Bolivia has stood out for its vindication of the traditional use of coca and the rights of its producers (Ramos et al., p. 5). With the rise of Evo Morales, Bolivia enacted in 2004 a program that challenged the prohibitionist approach by adopting a method of social control that put at the center coca producers. The Cato agreement consisted of registering farmers in specific zones to cultivate a small plot of coca up to 1600 square meters, known as "Cato".

The Cato agreement has reshaped power relations in Bolivia. The Coca Unions have achieved massive power, being one of the most powerful movements in the country, with a policy role to ensure individual growers' rights, respect the limits, establish sanctions, and control land concessions (Grisaffi, 2022, p. 1282). The land formalization of the Unions has been an effective process that allows affiliates to have between 5-10 acres, depending on the size of the Union (Ramos et al., p. 14).

In contrast with Vista Hermosa, the Cato agreement had the effect of increasing access to land and land formalization. However, according to Lerch, this achievement came with a rise in state control. Cocaleros became more “legible” by mapping their plots, registering them with a biometric identity card, and being more amenable to state control, which the Unions have resisted for decades (as cited in Grisaffi, 2022, p. 1287).

From the Unions side, some tensions have arisen among the growers and the distribution of the Catos. For example, some problems in the land distribution include insufficiency of parcels, problems in the transfer of the titles, and, in some cases, an unfair distribution for some cocaleros who, even after participating in the protests, didn’t receive land (Ramos et al., p. 67). Consequently, an informal distribution mechanism inside the Unions has emerged, or even the sanctions the cocaleros face with the restrictions, makes them relocate their activities deeper into the jungle, getting away from the union-controlled areas (Grisaffi 2021, 57).

Myanmar

The first reference to opium in what we know today as Myanmar dates to 1519, when the ruler of the actual Mon state made a trade agreement with the Portuguese to allow the Arabs to bring opium (Aung Moe 1985, 13). In the first half of the nineteenth century, when the British banned the opium trade in China, the demand increased not only in the adjacent provinces of China but also in the Shan state. Thus, opium has been present in the history of this region for centuries, being used as currency to pay the soldiers in the Kachin hills, as funding source for the Burmese Communist party and the emergent armies in the mid 20th century, and also as a traditional medicine (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 589).

However, levels of poppy cultivation and the importance of opium to the region's agrarian political economy increased significantly since the late 1990s (Meehan, 2022, p. 264). The collapse in the tea and cheroot crops in the 1990s and 2000s meant the income small producers generated barely covered the production costs, pushing people to start growing poppy (Meehan, 2022, p. 255). In that time, residents of small villages learnt to cultivate poppy, working as labourers for large poppy farms controlled by local militias of the Myanmar Army (Meehan, 2022, p. 255).

However, opium wasn’t lucrative for small producers. For example, Khun Aung Win, in the villages of Pinlaung says: “Yes. But not for us. There is now a saying in the villages of Pinlaung. The farmer must plough his land five times: once for the Myanmar Army, once for the armed groups, once for the militias, once for the wealthy in the village and once, finally, for his family” (Meehan, 2022, p. 256).

In this way, the sustained global demand and the so-called “risk premiums”, meant as the incentives to engage in illicit buying and distribution offered by the global prohibition towards poppy crops, resulted in high profit margins (Meehan, 2022, p. 260). Hand in hand with the increase production of opium, anti-drug policies emerged. During the 1960’s with the pressure of the UN and in the middle of unstable military governments, opium was banned (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 589). After the failure of such approaches, only in the 1990s did the “alternative development” approach become popular (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 593).

While drugs have typically been treated in policy narratives as exceptional commodities driven by armed conflict, state fragility, areas of state control, and economic marginality and underdevelopment (Meehan, 2022, p. 257), the alternative development approach put greater emphasis on food security and basic human needs. Unless viable and sustainable livelihoods were possible, strict eradication wasn’t possible (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 593). However, despite the efforts to change the strategy towards the humanitarian side of the situation, alternative development failed to recognise and act upon the structural factors that place farmers living in vulnerable situations (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 593).

At the end, the alternative development consisted of promoting local economic development by finding another licit cash crop, ignoring the fact that the expansion of capitalism itself was one of the main drivers of the vulnerable condition of the farmers (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 593). This is also a consequence of the cultivation of illicit opium being treated as a residual of development processes, which assumes that with the expansion of market economies and the consolidations of state control the drug producing regions will overcome illicit crops (Meehan, 2022, p. 258).

Thus, without substitution efforts connected to land, investment and rural development policies, alternative development proposes market-oriented agriculture based on cash crop, monocropping, and mechanisation of processes, often deepening existing realities (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 594). As Meehan says, “throughout upland areas of Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar, models of rural development, defined implicitly in capitalist terms, have focused on “opening up” “marginal” spaces to markets and capital, expanding private property rights, and commercializing agricultural modes of production” (Meehan, 2022, p. 257).

For example, in the alternative projects implemented in the Shan state with support of UNODC, a condition to access to the program was to have a sufficient plot of land, and access to financial capital to pay for hired labour, leaving the most vulnerable people excluded from receiving support (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 594). As a farmer argues:

"I don't want the police to destroy my opium field while I cannot get a proper income from my coffee plantation. I have to invest at least three to four years of work in my coffee plantations before I can have any harvest. Currently, I still need the money I earn from opium to survive and invest in my coffee plantation" (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 599)

Another consequence due to the pressure of China in the substitution programmes was that they end up benefiting not the producers, but Chinese companies who wanted to advance their economic interests. Participating Chinese companies received state-subsidised financial incentives, tax waivers, and the permission to import crops. In this way, most poppy substitution programmes took the form of large-scale monoculture plantations of usually rubber, while smallholder poppy-farmers didn't benefit from such initiatives (Lone y Cachia, 2021, p. 595).

Laos Popular Democratic Republic

In the mountainous borderland of Laos, opium has survived as a key livelihood for small farmers, being the Yunnan region of China, the primary destination of export (Lu, 2017, p. 726). The influence of China and its geopolitical interests with their neighbour countries have made it a key actor in the substitution efforts. Consequently by 2009, the number of Chinese companies participating in China's opium substitution program reached 198, almost all private corporations, and about 80% from Yunnan (Sarma et al., 2023, p. 851).

The Lao state's opium eradication efforts undertaken with UNODC funding started through the early 2000s, with the limitation of no viable alternative livelihoods. Despite the lack of substitutes, by 2005, these efforts had drastically reduced production (in fact, the Lao government declared the country opium free) but in the process the cultivating communities faced economic difficulties that led them to recidivism (Lu, 2017, p. 731).

In this context, in 2004, the Beijing administration issued the Opium Replacement Program (OPR), the result of a broader push by the Chinese and Lao states to increase economic cooperation by "turning land into capital", encouraging foreign direct investment in land (Lu, 2017, p. 732).

While other initiatives in the region like the UNODC programmes have emphasised bottom-up initiatives, the ORP is a top-down initiative that funds companies directly, being managed by the Ministry of Commerce, reflecting China's business-driven formula for development (Lu, 2017, p. 733). Therefore, at the foundation of the ORP lies large-scale commercial agriculture, where foreign agribusinesses are expected to provide the technical resources and capital to transform land and generate wage-labour opportunities to attract opium cultivators (Lu, 2017, p. 734).

Rubber has been the main crop established as substitution for opium, having a reputation in the region as a lucrative cash crop that has been extensively planted through ORP support (Lu, 2017, p. 727). There have been debates whether rubber is the best substitute for opium, as strictly in economic and ecological terms, both are grown on different types of land and by different types of producers (Lu, 2017, p. 730). However, rubber has been extensively planted in northern Laos, where people work under independent smallholder production, contract farming, and concessions on state land (Lu, 2017, p. 739).

From a critical perspective, Lu argues that the Chinese and Lao state views make sense as a replacement crop based on the idea of opium being a symptom of weak state, and rubber tied to modernity (Lu, 2017, p. 726). A global narrative that countries must abandon small-scale, traditional modes of agricultural production and commercialise their agricultural sectors to develop lies under the ORP (Lu, 2017, p. 728). In this way, an apolitical logic that ignores the sociopolitical roots of illicit crops results in market mechanisms to replace opium (Lu, 2017, p. 727).

In terms of the agrarian dynamics, Lu identifies a process of replacement by displacement (Lu, 2017), where the income from labour demand for rubber is supposed to displace opium plantations, drawing away land and labour from opium cultivation. This translates in the requalification of opium producers, and the worsening condition of their livelihoods by being forced to enter to the market as wage workers or small-scale producers that are vulnerable to global price fluctuations and can't wait for the price to downturn (Lu, 2017, p. 741).

In other terms, rubber is part of a broader process called the "plantationocene", characterized by the simplification of the landscapes, the alienation of land and labour, and the reduction in the biodiversity (Sarma et al., 2023, p. 846). Instead of creating stable jobs or income sources for petty commodity producers, studies in Southeast Asia have shown how plantations like rubber, are more likely to cause small-scale dispossession from local and indigenous people from their land. For example, in the case of Indonesia, Li says that "plantations have routinely bad news for the "locals": their land is needed but their labour is not" (Li, 2011, 286).

Afghanistan

Opium cultivation in what we know today as Afghanistan dates to the times of Alexander the Great, but the production on a greater scale in the context of a worldwide market for illicit drugs didn't take place until the 1980s (Mansfield, 2016, p.102). The political and economic conditions shifted by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, added to the ban on opium in Pakistan created the perfect moment for the opium economy in Afghanistan to flourish. Opium became an ideal agricultural commodity in a context marked by war, the absence of a functioning

state, and advantages such as its drought resistance, labour intensity, and easy skills to learn (Mansfield, 2016, p.105).

While the opium production increased, the growing concerns over illicit drug production encouraged governments and international actors to act upon the opium market in Afghanistan. The complex dynamics and the shifting centres with dispersed economic, political, and military power has created a history of multiple policies and programs aimed at eradicating opium production and, through it, consolidating a state in a fragmented region. As in the other opium and coca-producing countries, alternative development came during the 1990s.

In Afghanistan, alternative development came with the interventions of UNODC, the Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS), and the US embassy in Islamabad, among other international actors, which funded most rural development initiatives in the growing poppy regions scattered in Afghanistan (Mansfield, 2020, p. 5). The common goal of all the programs was the specific tie to achieving drug control targets within a given geographic boundary. However, one of the main weaknesses was the lack of consideration of the causes of opium production and how farmers responded to the activities proposed to end cultivation (Mansfield, 2020, p. 3).

Added to the lack of understanding of the structural causes of opium production, alternative development interventions didn't have a clear strategy to address the multifunctional role that opium played in livelihood strategies, but rather had a crude model where development assistance was traded for reductions in opium poppy cultivation (Mansfield, 2020, p. 6). The time frame within which communities were expected to abandon opium poppy was short, the development assistance was insufficient, geographically dispersed, and the causality between delivery of sub-projects and opium reduction was not clear beyond the requirement that communities sign an agreement to abandon the crop, a poppy clause (Mansfield, 2020, p. 6).

Therefore, alternative development initiatives were closely associated with the efforts of those who had military power, like the warlords or the Taliban before 2001, to coerce the rural population to abandon poppy cultivation. Also, the drug control agents favoured this persuade-to-coerce perspective, rather than focusing on improving the quality of the lives of the people cultivating opium (Mansfield, 2020, p. 7). In terms of the class differentiation processes within such programmes, in some cases, the development assistance tended to go to the wealthier members of the community who were less dependent on opium (Mansfield, 2020, p. 8).

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and based on the learning and failures of the projects of the 1990s, the approach changed significantly towards more small-scale, geographically focused interventions. Donors began to prioritise sector-

based interventions with Western nations and multilateral institutions supporting wide-scale reforms, including health, education, and rural development (Mansfield, 2020, p. 8). The policy of conditionality was rejected in the initial years, as major donors wanted to build a social contract with the rural population (Mansfield, 2020, p. 9).

The term “alternative livelihoods” was established to signify change, meaning that the causes of opium poppy cultivation were a complex problem, where international, national, and non-governmental organisations had to coordinate the assistance given to Afghanistan (Mansfield, 2020, p. 10). However, it didn’t happen, and USAID, one of the key organisations in the region, followed initiatives akin to the alternative development programmes of the 1990s. Other programmes like the HFZ and KFZ, believed that a growing legal rural economy would offer farmers an alternative to stop drug crop cultivation (Mansfield, 2020, p. 12).

Still, the main issue was that they didn’t look at how they might contribute to reducing farmers dependence on opium as a livelihood strategy. The results were that fertilizers and irrigation systems given under such initiatives were given to opium production, and development programmes focused on increasing wheat production displaced the poorest producers from their land. In programmes that encouraged the extension of high value horticulture, those who sharecropped their land found themselves without land, access to food, or uprooting their families somewhere else (Mansfield, 2020, p. 13).

In sum, in the case of Bolivia the engagement of rural populations with illicit crops started with neoliberal policies in the 1980s that expanded capitalism, added to the closure of mines, which left a surplus population without source of income. Instead of substitution, the traditional use of coca and the unionist tradition encouraged its legalization, which resulted in the decriminalization of coca producers and in increase in land access. In Myanmar, the spread of opium also was related to the collapse of tea and cheroot crops, which led rural population without alternatives. The government’s substitution program consisted in market-oriented solutions through cash crops and monocropping. A condition for accessing them was land and the capital to pay for hired labor, privileging wealthy rural inhabitants.

In Laos, the pressure of China gave private companies a privileged role by giving them state-subsidised financial incentives. Unlike previous countries, substitution was a top-down initiative where rubber plantations expanded, people were dispossessed from their lands and labor. Finally, in Afghanistan substitution assistance was controlled by local military powers, so assistance was likely to go to the wealthier members of the communities. In the following section, I will present my case study to see how land, labor, income and social relations have changed after substitution took place.

Chapter 3: The cocoa boom: agrarian dynamics of substitution in Vista Hermosa

—I arrived at Vista Hermosa on the 27th of May 1967, but the guerrilla wanted to recruit me, and I didn't want to. At that time, there was a commander named Aljure. I didn't want to come because I was afraid of him, but when he was killed, I came back.

—¿And how was Vista Hermosa at that time?

—It was plain, not so much here. You could see the landscapes, the mountains, everything. People came here because of an expedition called San Juan. At that time, this wasn't called Vista Hermosa. It was founded in 1969. It was named Vista Hermosa because the first people who came here looked at the landscape and thought it was beautiful, so it was Vista Hermosa.

Vista Hermosa is a small town located in the Meta department, one of the severely affected areas during armed conflict. The presence of paramilitary groups, guerrillas, and coca processing has left a history of violence for the inhabitants until today. The most intense period of the conflict was between 2000 and 2006, when 1300 people disappeared (Rutas del Conflicto, 2025). But before the conflict and the war on drugs were intense, Vista Hermosa was a frontier that attracted labor from other parts of the country, appealed by coca production.

Having lunch with Don José, a 70-year-old man who lives in Piñalito, one of the municipalities near Vista Hermosa, we discussed how he came to be Vista Hermosa. “I come from Boyacá, where I worked in the emerald mines of Muso for many years. That was much more dangerous than growing coca at that time, as the mines were controlled by the paramilitary group “Los pájaros”. For the Colombian popular culture, the emeralds of Boyacá represent jeopardy, illegality, and conflict, a business in which narco-traffickers and paramilitary groups were involved in the 1960s.

It took me a seven-hour trip to get there from Bogotá. I came at 5 am on Monday, and because it was early, just one bakery was open, so I had coffee until more businesses were open. It is a small town with just some blocks of small businesses like restaurants, hardware stores, bakeries, and agricultural supply stores, but it wasn't always like that. Today, the landscape is covered by cocoa, plantain, rice, and coffee plantations, among others.

For decades, coca crops were the main harvest in the region, attracting people from different parts of the country, like Don José, and most of the people I spoke to. This internal migration became notorious after I asked people where they came from. Most of the people said they came from other parts of the country, and only one or two people were born in Vista Hermosa. The oldest

inhabitants and first founders of Vista Hermosa told me how this region was colonized.

—In the mid-70s, the Inderena, a gubernatorial institute responsible for controlling the natural resources, promoted the colonization of the Sierra la Macarena to expand the agricultural frontier. Many families from different parts of the country came to grab their piece of land. However, with the environmental legislation and the declaration of the Sierra as a protected area, there were problems with the arrival of colonizers— told me Don José while having lunch.

The Incora established an imaginary line to limit where people could settle, but nobody cared, and everyone went into the Sierra to settle their homes and plots of crops. That happened until the penalizations and the threat of expropriation of all the homes inside the protected area forced people to stop colonizing the Sierra (Interview, 2025). Later, marijuana and then coca started being grown. Everyone has their own stories about the coca time. The comparative advantage of a territory dominated by the Sierra la Macarena, an isolated place from the urban places, was the perfect scenario for the emergence of a narco-frontier. Coca and marijuana crops in the beginning, acted as a pusher through the colonization of under-commodified places, attracting displaced labour from capitalist expansion in other parts of the country. In the 1980's coca crops became so steady, that population triplicated during the decade, giving birth to a period named by local people as the bonanza times, which means a period of abundance.

Don Carlos, the leader of a milk production association, and a local leader who was present in the peace negotiations in Cuba in 2016, recalls how he had a clothing shop at that time, and in December, his profits were considerable. Fabio, another inhabitant, recalls how at that time “it was different. You could see luxurious vans, the “Mono Jojoy”, the commander of the east group of the FARC, having coffee in the bakery at the corner”.

But then people left because of the conflict, and he had to close his business, but still decided to stay because he had his house and his family there. In Piñalito, a man also recalls how they came to be seven hundred families, but now there are just empty houses left. From the 1990's Vista Hermosa was severely affected because of the confrontations between the FARC, the paramilitary groups, and the state, added to the beginning of aerial fumigations to end coca crops (SINCHI, 2024).

There are many reasons why people kept growing coca, but one of the arguments of the ex-coca producer's highlight is the lack of roads. “You can get a pack of coca with a backpack on your shoulder. Instead, transporting a sack of cassava or plantain is much harder. That's why everyone, including the police, the guerillas, and the paramilitaries, benefited from illicit crops (Interview, 2025). Today, there are some crops located deep in the mountains, but in Vista Hermosa,

“No one grows coca anymore. The rural areas cannot be abandoned,” said a man I spoke to on a red jeep that takes rural inhabitants to the main urban areas from their homes deep in the mountains. However, according to official numbers, by 2022 coca crops increased by 69% in the municipalities of Vista Hermosa, and Puerto Rico, close to the first one.

Among the farms I visited, no one had coca, except for Don José, who had a plant of coca peruana in front of his house to remember the history of the region. Don Fabio has been involved in programs that encourage tourism in the locality as a means of living, and his dream is to have a greenhouse with all types of coca, so people can learn about the history of this area. He himself had worked on coca fields and recalled exactly how to produce cocaine, the chemicals involved, and the steps.

Don Fabio recalls also the first substitution efforts that came in the region. He told me that before the PNIS, the first program that tried to introduce alternative development was the PLANTE (Program of Alternative Development), which has introduced in 1995. However, it didn't work out, as people just moved their coca plots elsewhere, and the alternative projects weren't successful. Also, aerial fumigations continued parallel to the implementation of the project, so alternative development didn't end with the previous repressive and militarized versions of eradication policies.

In the history of Vista Hermosa, the peak of coca production was in 2005 with 4,441,000 crops, which, after the eradication policies, has been reduced to 513,000 in 2022 (Baquero, 2024). For most people, coca is part of their past. However, after substitution advances in the region, the agrarian dynamics started to change. According to Juan, “a floating population was left, even the cultivator. I used to rent my land for coca, and people from all parts of the country came. Later, the floating population fled, they went to other parts to look for coca crops, as coca is a nomadic crop (Interview, 2025).”

The president of the biggest cocoa association in Vista Hermosa said that he used to transport coca where he had earnings every forty days. Now Vista Hermosa has ten economic activities that include maracuja (passion fruit), cheese, milk, cattle, cocoa, chicken, and coffee. For the treasurer of the cocoa association, the transition from coca to cocoa is a matter of the transition between an illicit to a licit economy. However, in the following section, I will use the key questions of agrarian political economy to analyze how substitution in Vista Hermosa has changed land, labor, income, and social relations of ex-coca producers.

2.1 Land

The first question of political economy regards property regimes. It is concerned with how the means of production and reproduction are distributed, and in the agrarian sector, it deals fundamentally with land property (Bernstein, 2010, p.22).

As mentioned above, in the coca sector case studies have exposed that Gini indicators and other inequality indicators are lower compared to the legal economy. In the coca sector, the highest decile of the population owns 94% of the land, while in the coca sector 58% holds the land, including land not dedicated to coca (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2021, p. 3).

However, coca crops were not a peasant ideal where everyone had land. Informality was widespread due to the risk of eradication, and even today, most people don't have a formal land title. The *raspachines* for example, the weakest producers in the coca chain, didn't have the same possibilities as landowners. After the eradication and aerial fumigation, "many people left. The *raspachines* were nomads, so they went to Cauca and Nariño to look for coca crops to work on," said Don José.

—So, what happened after coca?— I asked Alfredo, the vice president of Agrocavis, and a landowner who used to rent his land for coca production.

—A floating population was left, even the grower. I used to rent my land for coca. People used to come from other parts of the country. Then, the floating population left. They returned to their places or looked for other crops, as coca crops are nomadic. Now many of them are in Catatumbo. Don Carlos also said that the floating population, the ones who didn't have land, relied heavily on coca.

Then, in 2017 the PNIS came, and they were also not considered in the same way as smallholders. While the smallholders got assistance with short- and long-term productive projects, the *raspachines* only got food assistance. Thus, "this component of the PNIS didn't propose a long-term solution for this population and left unattended structural socioeconomic inequalities" (CESED, 2024, p. 19). I spoke with one ex *raspachin*, and his possibility of transitioning to cocoa relied on his savings from other informal day jobs to buy a plot of land:

I met Pedro while I was in Vista Hermosa waiting for people to interview at the cocoa sales and buy point. He came to Agrocavis to sell some cocoa. We talked about the cocoa prices, and he could receive more for his cocoa if he brought it dry and in good condition.

I didn't know he had worked as *raspachin*, until he mentioned he was part of the PNIS.

—How long have you been growing cocoa? — I asked

— Not so long ago. My plants are new. I have some old and other new. I'm part of the PNIS—

— Oh, really?

—Yes, that’s for eradication. I was *raspachin*. They have given us 2,000,000 pesos monthly, but do you go shopping for groceries?

—Yes, I do

—Is just that sometimes people don’t know how much food costs, and that is barely for groceries. If they’d have given us one transfer of 10 or 20 million, one could have bought a cow, or a parcel.

—And how did you come to Vista Hermosa?

—I came in 2002 with 20,000 pesos in my pocket. I worked as *raspachin* for around five years.

—And then, did you buy a parcel and start growing cocoa?

—No, coca left me with nothing. I spent everything in alcohol and women. At that time, I was a different man. I wasn’t responsible.

—So how did you acquire your land for growing cocoa today?

—That was from day laborer jobs. I worked on many things, and then I bought 5 hectares and started to grow cocoa, cassava, maize, and plantain.

Besides Pedro, most of the cocoa producers had already land from inheritances, from the INCORA state project to colonize, or from capital accumulation from other sources. However, one thing in common with all cocoa growers is that they own land. Nobody rents land for growing cocoa. As Alfredo says:

“I wouldn’t grow cocoa in a land that is not mine. For an hectare of cocoa you need 9,000,000 pesos”. In the shift from coca to cocoa, people become more attached to their land. Alfredo says that in 2005 or 2008, land prices were around 250,000 and 500,000 pesos, while today it is worth 25,000,000 to 30,000,000 pesos. At that time, the land was worth it for the plan it had, coca, and not for its value itself. As people feared being forced to eradicate, and migration was common to escape from state intervention, land was worthless. As cocoa prices started to rise, people began to value their land more.

Most people have 1-3 hectares maximum to have a decent source of living. When I asked how they got their land, Luis, an ex-coca producer, and a founder of Vista Hermosa told me:

—I had, but through an association, Asoproguapaya, they gave me one hectare more. There was a lot of coca here. Cocoa has been one of the substitutes for coca, and from then on, we have dedicated ourselves to it —answered Pablo, one ex-cocalero.

At Piñalito, Gabriel, another ex-coca producer who has benefited from the PNIS, told me that he had inherited a lot of land because his father was a merchant. He had received state assistance to grow rubber, where they just had to put the land and the labor. These are assets that not everyone had while working in the coca economy. In conclusion, the PNIS reinforced previously existing inequalities regarding land tenure in a context where not everyone who took part in the coca economy had access to land.

2.2 Labor

The second question in political economy concerns the social division of labor. Who performs activities of social production and reproduction, and the different kinds of people who perform them based on their gender, or their class (Bernstein, 2010, p. 11). In the bonanza times, coca crops attracted labor from all parts of the country. Coca leaves needed to be picked up as soon as they were ready. People were required to process the leaves, add the chemicals, and then process them until they got the coca paste. Then, it required a person to transport it and sell it. In season time, coca needed 13-14 people, and then 4-5 people to prepare for the next crop. According to Juan, *raspachines* used to come from 5 to 10 am and got paid 200,000 pesos. Now, cocoa has changed labor relations in Vista Hermosa, as it can be grown by a household, or even by a single person.

In one hectare with 625 cocoa trees, one person is enough to cover even two hectares. If a fruit of cocoa falls on the floor, it can last for up to 15 days until it is picked up, and it doesn't rot. In seasonal times, once a year, households hire a maximum of 1 or 2 people to help them collect cocoa fruits. However, Solanyi, a woman who has dedicated herself to growing cocoa for many years, says that there is no manual labor for cocoa. There are no people who know how to cut a cocoa tree in the right way without damaging it.

Jairo, the owner of a hardware store, who also buys and sells cocoa, says that cocoa is a spoiled plant. "You need to cut it, give it enough air and light". It is different from coca, but one characteristic that remains from the coca times is the reluctance towards monocropping. Next to the cocoa trees, people grow maize, plantains, coffee, oranges, and other crops for selling, or for their own consumption. However, besides reducing the labor available for the people who relied on coca production and were not landowners, the transition to cocoa required other skills and knowledge different from coca.

—At the time of President Álvaro Uribe, when forced eradication came, people asked for the eradication to be voluntary. We fought with the people who came to cut the plants, because we hadn't planned a future without coca. The FARC said it wasn't going to happen. And so, they took away the coca, but also our food. We had a meeting in the Palestina municipality. Some wanted to grow sugar cane, other plantains, and there was a group of people from Santander

who made a cocoa association. They asked for support in Granada, and they brought some seeds from Santander. They brought 14,000 seeds and the first experiment to grow cocoa began—said Juan.

—And so, how did you learn? —I asked.

—The national cocoa federation (Fedecacao) gave us some workshops.

However, according to Juan, those first seeds died due to the lack of knowledge, technology, and the existence of clones that stopped the plants from getting sick. Later, between 2011 and 2014 to 2016, the productive projects started to consolidate more. Coca didn't get out of Vista Hermosa, but cocoa was starting to gain terrain.

According to Juan, Vista Hermosa is the municipality of the Meta department that has the largest planted area of cocoa. People who transitioned to cocoa learned to commercialize it, to buy cocoa directly from the producers, and through the creation of an association, they made an agreement with the national factory of chocolates to sell them monthly. Then, they sought other buyers who paid more for better quality, and now they're looking for markets to export to soon.

This process has changed the production chain and the technical skills of people who used to grow coca, or who are now growing cocoa, attracted by the high prices. Once a year, after putting the seed, cocoa gives beans every 15 days. Producers can collect them and dry them, or they can sell them to the cocoa organization directly with the cocoa pulp. Once the producer has collected the cocoa beans, they can sell them to the intermediaries. In Vista Hermosa, there are buying and selling points, where producers take their sacks of cocoa beans and sell them.

In the micro station of Agrocavis, they have different types of cocoa. If the producer sells it with the pulp, they put the beans in wooden drawers to ferment them. They check its temperature with a thermometer, since the maximum temperature is 50°, so it is moved every 48 hours to prevent it from burning. If they bring them dry, they put them on wooden tables with a plastic roof like a greenhouse to let them dry until they reach the desired level of humidity. This work is done by two wage workers, who are processing the beans.

Meanwhile, in the main selling point of the association in the center of Vista Hermosa, people take their drought beans and sell them. As they come to different levels of humidity, some of them need to be further dried with a machine and then classified by a person. In the selling point people work receiving the beans, drying them, and classifying them. This work is done by young people of around 20 years, with no required formal education.

Most of the time the association faces confrontations with the producers. Entering the cocoa market has pushed them to ask for better quality from the producers, but they lack the knowledge to have the desired standards. According to Juan, the importance of classifying the cocoa and having the right humidity lies in the bonifications they receive from the enterprises that buy them. Not everyone knows how to do it. The same landowner is responsible for multiple tasks, and people are still figuring out how to grow cocoa in the way that the market requires them.

In other substitution cases in Perú, this dynamic has produced a dominant logic that promotes an ideology where cocoa producers are conceived as entrepreneurs. As Coq Huelva et al., point out, behind the alternative development approach lies the dominant project of giving the skills and the knowledge to the producers, so they can become entrepreneurs. However, in Vista Hermosa, although landowners assume the labor of working on their land, they have organized associations, creating an environment where they can have support for growing cocoa.

In summary, substitution came. Cocoa projects started to flourish in Vista Hermosa, and labor relations, including who does what, how many people are needed for growing a crop, and which skills and knowledge are needed, changed with the arrival of cocoa. In other cases, the transition was different. According to Coq Huelva et al., in Tocache, Perú, most of the cocoa crops rely on wage labor. Still, both in Vista Hermosa and Perú, the family as the unit of production remains in the transition from coca to cocoa.

2.3 Income

The third question of political economy regards the “fruits of labor”, or the distribution of income. In the case of cocoa, producers own and work on their land, so they receive the profits from cocoa. They sell the beans to the intermediaries, whether an association, a private buyer, or an Italian enterprise that came to Vista Hermosa to invest in cocoa. The cocoa association sets the prices, and from that reference point, other buyers calculate how much they can pay for the cocoa sacks. In this sense, substitution changed the actors involved in the market, attracting intermediaries who see cocoa as an investment. In coca production, intermediaries were the guerrilla, narcotraffickers, and other legal and illegal actors, while in cocoa, associations and private buyers have become the intermediaries.

From the producer’s point of view, people have different reasons to decide to whom they’re going to sell their beans. Solanyi doesn’t sell to the Italians, as they get paid less by being charged for the 33% of their profits. “People don’t understand the discounts that the Italians make them. The ones like us, who kind of understand it, don’t sell them because they take more to the producer.” Then, she sells to the association, where she’s charged a fee of 3%. If they don’t have

money, which is very often, as they don't have the financial capital to buy all the cocoa produced in the region, producers must sell it to private intermediaries like a guy in a drugstore named Hector, or to Jairo, the hardware store owner.

Hector then sells the cocoa in the department of Santander, one of the biggest producers and traders of cocoa, where he receives 2,000 pesos more than if he had sold it in the Meta department. Jairo takes the cocoa he buys in his store and then transports it to Granada, a bigger city near Vista Hermosa, where he sells it at a higher price. Everyone knows each other in the cocoa market, and while having coffee with Don José at Piñalito, he told me something about Jairo.

—The other day I met Jairo. Do you know him?—I asked Don José

—Yes, he has gained so much from cocoa. He has even received benefits from the government, because he appears as the first biggest producer of cocoa in Vista Hermosa—answered don José

—Really?

—Yes, as he buys a lot of cocoa, it seems as if he were the biggest producer, but he just buys and sells. He is an intermediary.

In the production side, the landowner who also performs the work for growing cocoa, is the one who receives the earnings from cocoa. However, in the distribution chain, where independent producers enter capitalist market dynamics, intermediaries and private enterprises are the ones who benefit the most from cocoa production.

This is a way of appropriation of the labor done by cocoa producers, as intermediaries profit by being intermediaries, who often take the credit for cocoa producers. Meanwhile, landowners who once rented their plots for coca production receive the entire profits of their own work. However, they also assume the risks of producing cocoa. “There are old trees of 15 to 20 years, but to renew the plots, we need 1 year, so we have to control how to have income the whole year”. People also have access to bank credit to grow cocoa. Gabriel has asked the bank for a loan of 10,000,000, he paid it, and now he has asked for another one of 20,000,000 with an interest of 1% to grow cocoa again.

In brief, regarding who receives the fruits of the labor, the transition didn't change the distribution of income within the chain of production. What changed was that new intermediaries came to appropriate the surplus from cocoa production, while landowners got paid for their work and investment in the resources required to produce cocoa.

2.4 Social relations

The fourth question of political economy is about “how different social relations of production and reproduction determine the uses of the social product” (Bernstein, 2010). In a context like Vista Hermosa, with a history marked by coca and violence, people remember the Bonanza time as a bad experience. “From coca there is a bitter experience left. I was left with my land, and international aid

didn't come. It was just a way to legalize money. Nothing is left to the peasant", said Gabriel. Violence left a deep wound among Vista Hermosa inhabitants. The conflict between paramilitaries and the FARC created an environment where distrust and the fear of being executed prevailed. The criminalization due to the cultivation of coca made people want to leave coca and seek new sources of living.

However, besides land and labour transformations in the shift from coca to cocoa, social relations among producers changed. One of the striking phenomena in this process is the proliferation of associations of coffee, milk, and cocoa, the main substitution crops in Vista Hermosa. This had an impact on people, as Alfredo, the vice-president of the association says: "In the coca culture, we were very independent. We were the producers, transformers, and we found who bought us. That's in the culture, but cocoa required associativity for the projects to succeed, plus the knowledge and the technical assistance. And from all those attempts, some things remain. The prices encourage cocoa production, but also the work of the associations."

Asoprocavis, the antecedent association of Agrocavis, was the first cocoa association that emerged in 2004 in the highest point of coca production and violence. It started as a joint effort between 8 cocoa associations, of which 6 are left. It was founded with the support of the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ) and the Embassy of Canada. It has around 650 direct associates who sell them cocoa, who participate in the annual meetings, and get benefits for being part of the association.

Loyalty is at the heart of the association culture, so the decision of who gets support with resources to enhance their productive cocoa projects is determined by their sales to Agrocavis. If a person has sold them and not to the Italian or private buyers, the association tries to support them with projects and technical support. The president of the association says, "I'm trying to convince more people to participate in the association, as in the long term it's convenient for them. The price and the technical support reflect that".

In Piñalito, for example, Don José told me that "five years ago they tried to help grow cocoa. Big tractors filled with cocoa plants came, but they got damaged. The people who delivered them put them in a warehouse for days, and they died. The root was already too big, so it wouldn't work. We must start with a nursery, then transplant it in two months, and in 2-3 years they're going to give the first beans."

Successful cocoa transitions have been achieved for people who have land and the resources to invest, but also the associations to access technical and social support. The prices have also encouraged cocoa production. "It is easy to access bank credit thanks to the projection and the durability of cocoa. Cocoa also helps

to capture carbon dioxide and protect water. Vista Hermosa is blessed with water. Cocoa also encourages food sovereignty, as you also grow potatoes, cassava, corn, pineapple, and plantains”, says Juan.

Josué, another cocoa producer, made me realize how people rely on the association. He came with his motorcycle to the selling point and asked Laura, the person in charge of buying the cocoa, to help him with a recommendation letter to request a loan from the agrarian bank. The letter was a statement that he is a member of the association, and he has enough funds to pay the loan. Laura gave him the letter, and then he left. This associativity effort and the social capital built over the years are among the key factors that determine whether people have been able to transition to cocoa.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research is to offer a critical perspective on the substitution and alternative development approach, in a context where substitution programs like the PNIS, have failed to account for the agrarian political dynamics of substitution crops. My question was to understand how cocoa production as a substitute for coca reshaped agrarian dynamics in Vista Hermosa, Colombia. The objectives were to analyze the evolution of land tenure following the adoption of cocoa as a substitute, examine how labor relations have been reshaped by the transition, and assess the transformations in smallholders’ social relations under cocoa production.

I followed the guiding questions of agrarian political economy: who owns what, who does what, who gets what, and what they do with it, to analyze the social relations of property and production after coca was replaced with cocoa. My research was entirely qualitative, using ethnography and semi-structured interviews as methods.

After my research and the analysis of my fieldnotes, the first conclusion is that illicit crops have been misunderstood as a problem of law enforcement rather than a development and governance challenge, which has ignored the structural processes that lead to the emergence of illicit crops. Illegal drug economies are an inherent feature of contemporary capitalism, and thus, development models are less an antidote to illicit economies and rather enhance forms of marginalization and dispossession that push rural populations into illicit crops (Thomson et al., 2024, p. 791).

This perspective has also guided substitution programs. However, the consequences in terms of agrarian political economy have been ignored. In the case of Vista Hermosa, the first conclusion regarding the question around land is that not everyone owned land in coca production. Land is a prerequisite for growing

cocoa, and thus, only landowners were able to substitute with cocoa. The relation with land also changed, as in cases of coca crops, people didn't attach to land because of the fear of imminent eradication. However, the effect is the increase in land value, as well as the importance people give to their plots.

In terms of labor relations, the major shift is that cocoa didn't absorb the labor force of coca, especially from the *raspachines*. That's why many people left Vista Hermosa seeking coca crops as a source of labor, while landowners stayed and persisted on growing cocoa. While coca needed 12-14 people to collect the leaves, cocoa requires only 1-2 workers on the seasonal times, and the same landowner works on his land. Still, one characteristic that remains from coca production is the central role of the family as the production unit.

In terms of income, the transition from coca to cocoa changed the actors involved in the production chain. Intermediaries keep appropriating the labor of the producers, and they receive the pay for their work in a double role of landowners and workers. Regarding the changes in social relations, substitution encouraged the spread of associations, as ex-coca producers and landowners needed to help each other to support each other with the skills, knowledge, and resources to benefit from international aid.

Finally, within the literature of agrarian political economy, my contribution is to expose how substitution processes based on the logic of alternative development cause new social differentiation processes, where structural inequalities are reproduced. The case of Vista Hermosa and the literature about other substitution cases reveal that capitalist market logics are at the center of their efforts, and thus, without considering the agrarian dynamics, the "problem" created by the development agenda of the mid-twentieth century is not going to be solved.

Based on the findings of my research, it is possible to suggest that further efforts of monitoring the impact of substitution programs in other municipalities, commodities, and countries would improve our understanding of the changes in the agrarian dynamics in such contexts. Further fieldwork is needed to have a more in-depth analysis, even with other substitution commodities, such as milk, for example. In terms of policy recommendations, programs such as the PNIS have tried to tie substitution with land reform. However, the lack of institutional articulation between both components of the peace agreement hasn't been satisfactory in tackling land tenure inequalities. This effort should be further encouraged, and class lenses should be at the center of these policies.

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