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# **Organised crime and international aid subversion: Evidence from Colombia and Afghanistan**

Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Denisa Kostovicova, Mariana Escobar, Jelena Bjelica

## **ABSTRACT**

Scholarly attempts to explain aid subversion in post-conflict contexts frame the challenge in terms of corrupt practices and transactions disconnected from local power struggles. Also, they assume a distinction between organised crime and the state. This comparative analysis of aid subversion in Colombia and Afghanistan reveals the limits of such an approach. Focusing on relations that anchor organised crime within local political, social and economic processes, we demonstrate that organised crime is dynamic, driven by multiple motives, and endogenous to local power politics. Better understanding of governance arrangements around the organised crime-conflict nexus which enable aid subversion is therefore required.

**KEY WORDS:** Aid subversion, organised crime, corruption, Colombia, Afghanistan

## **Introduction**

*'The elephant in the room: How can peace operations deal with organized crime?'*<sup>1</sup> is one of several high-profile reports that have recently called for the issue of organised crime to be brought 'from the margins to the mainstream'<sup>2</sup> of peace-building theory and practice. These calls reflect the growing awareness of the salience of organised crime in conflict and concerns that international aid might be contributing to their convergence.<sup>3</sup> We assess the ability of existing scholarship on international aid and peace-building to explain the risks of international aid being subverted by organised crime. In this article aid subversion is understood as the diversion of aid away from its intended purpose. We use examples of international assistance to peace-building in conflict-affected countries in which organised crime is a prominent conflict actor.<sup>4</sup> We find that explanations that approach organised crime in the context of corruption have three limitations: they are static, they are transaction-focused, and they treat organised crime as exogenous to the local politics of power. In order to understand international aid subversion by organised crime, it is necessary to study how the latter is linked to the local society, political process and economy. A particular historical trajectory of conflict and post-conflict accommodation needs to be traced, since organised crime actors in many contemporary conflicts strive for political representation.<sup>5</sup>

Our argument requires a methodological shift away from the analytical matrix that juxtaposes organised crime, non-state armed actors and state structures as distinct actors and analytical categories. Our analysis instead foregrounds the study of the political, social and economic relations that enable organised crime, embodied by transnational drug trafficking, to be anchored within local social, political and economic processes. We study how organised crime shapes and is shaped by local relations. By scrutinising those relations, we show that, in contrast to prevailing scholarly assumptions, organised crime is dynamic,

driven by multiple and not just rational motives, and endogenous to the local politics of power throughout the conflict to post-conflict continuum.

We demonstrate this argument in a study of international aid subversion in Colombia and Afghanistan. In both countries, organised crime in the form of a drug economy has established informal power systems, which have become institutionalised parallel to long lasting armed conflict. We apply a method of structured, focused comparison and, in line with our theoretical interest in explaining the same outcome in two cases, employ a 'most-different' case selection strategy.<sup>6</sup> This strategy eschews variation in the dependent variable.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we investigate mechanisms of aid subversion within the context of regressive sub-national governance developed around the organised crime-armed conflict nexus. These mechanisms identify 'the generative processes that, given certain initial conditions, produce' specific outcomes.<sup>8</sup> We investigate how aid is subverted; the impact of aid subversion on power relations and the state is beyond the purview of this article. Following McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, we identify three relational mechanisms that 'alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks.'<sup>9</sup> These are: institutional positioning, societal embeddedness and role mutation, and operate at a state, societal and individual level.

In addition, we employ an embedded, as opposed to a holistic, research design to vary the level of analysis, from the more abstract to a sub-unit level that 'can often add significant opportunities for extensive analysis.'<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the comparison focuses on the mechanisms of operation around the Colombian paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) and a group of warlords in Afghanistan's Southern provinces. 'Embedded' in these comparisons are fine-grained analyses of aid subversion in the case of the oil palm

initiative in Urabá in Colombia, and private security contracting along the Southern drug trafficking route (henceforth Southern route) in Afghanistan. We go beyond the 'sub-unit' analytical level and reflect on the broader theoretical implications that explain aid subversion.<sup>11</sup> Our empirical evidence is built on primary literature consisting of court transcripts, government reports, expert specialised reports and local media sources, combined with extensive fieldwork in Afghanistan and Colombia involving semi-structured interviews with a range of interviewees (including officials and civil society representatives) and ethnographic observation. Systematic triangulation of a variety of data sources enhances the validity of the empirical evidence.

The article first looks at how the issue of organised crime is addressed in the international aid and peace-building literature. We identify gaps in this literature, and tackle them in the empirical part of the article. Comparative analysis of Colombia and Afghanistan traces the evolution of the links between a drug economy and armed conflict, with a focus on political and social relations. Studies of aid subversion of the oil palm initiative in Urabá, Colombia, and private security contracting in the provinces of Southern Afghanistan provide evidence for an alternative explanation of international aid subversion.

### **International aid and organised crime in post-conflict countries**

Subversion of international aid in the form of corruption surfaced as an academic and policy issue in the late 1980s,<sup>12</sup> though it remains a rare object of scholarly inquiry.<sup>13</sup> The topic is addressed by two literatures: on international aid and peace-building<sup>14</sup> and on fragile states. The former mirrors the mainstream debates on aid, as evidenced by research themes such as effectiveness, ownership, conditionality, modes of implementation, impact on governance and development, and anti-corruption policies.<sup>15</sup> In this literature on

international aid and peace-building, there is a consensus that corruption facilitates criminality, and *vice versa*.<sup>16</sup> The research strives to disentangle various facets of this dynamic, in which international aid plays an integral part. In analytical terms, the interaction between organised crime and state actors is the central focus.<sup>17</sup>

A parallel preoccupation with aid subversion in the fragile state literature attributes the prevalence of corruption to conflict-affected countries' weak state capacity, which is often compounded by domestic elites' lack of political will.<sup>18</sup> A subset of this body of scholarship, with roots in the three inter-related academic fields of post-colonial studies, democratic transition and hybrid political orders, breaks through the limitation imposed by the normativity of the concept of corruption alongside its state-centred focus. In this work, state weakness is traced to informal (hidden) power structures that straddle political, economic and administrative spheres and public and private domains and their actors, and merge local and transnational dynamics.<sup>19</sup> Although this strand of literature lends itself to more astute analysis of subversion of international aid by organised crime in post-conflict contexts, it does not explicitly address organised crime *per se*.

In sum, the study of international aid and peace-building in the context of corruption has three weaknesses that limit its potential to explain the mechanics of international aid subversion by organised crime in post-conflict contexts. It is static, transaction-focused, and views organised crime as exogenous to local power struggles unleashed by armed violence. Even in recent attempts to construct an analytical framework fit for the post-conflict context,<sup>20</sup> the static, transactional nature of corruption as a 'practice' and an 'act' between/among a set of actors re-emerges. Hence, there is a widespread view in peace-building scholarship that corruption is a practice to secure impunity and protect organised

crime groups, while the actors at the other end, namely state officials, reap multiple benefits from this exchange.

This perspective is static because it captures a snapshot of practices and transactions in which monetisation and actors' rational calculation based on material incentives -- created by the availability of international aid-- provide *the* explanation of organised crime's involvement in aid subversion through corruption. It overlooks the tenacity and adaptability of conflict structures involving organised crime, and the changing identities and motivations of actors over the lifetime of an armed conflict. By understanding corruption as an act of bargaining - typically involving elites<sup>21</sup> - between organised crime and political, business, military and other actors, organised crime, in effect, is viewed as exogenous to local power struggles. Hence, maintaining a dichotomy between organised crime *vis-à-vis* the state forecloses the analytic possibility that organised crime operates as integral to the local politics of power. Despite outright acknowledgment of a different nature of corruption in peace-building,<sup>22</sup> a view prevails of organised crime as an actor 'infiltrating', 'coopting', 'penetrating', and/or 'capturing' the state (or other domains) by using corruption as its 'capital'.<sup>23</sup> These arguments underline an implicit distinction—even a competition—between organised crime, the state, and other social actors.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, this approach obscures the thick vein of social relations that anchor organised crime within the very processes that shape the emergence, exercise and experience of governance. If, as Cockayne argues, organised crime is best studied as a 'system/strategy of governance'<sup>25</sup> - a point we return to below - and if, as Brinkerhoff posits, '[g]overnance is about the relationships between state and society',<sup>26</sup> then societal

embeddedness is of paramount importance to understand how that system works and the risks therein to international aid subversion.

This argument draws on two key analytical developments in the literature related to organised crime and conflict. One maps the complex relations between non-state armed groups and organised crime.<sup>27</sup> The other development turns on structures, contending that organised crime in conflict-affected places is a 'system' and/or (governance) 'strategy' used by a myriad of violent actors.<sup>28</sup> Both approaches abandon the aforementioned theory rooted in the discourse of criminalisation, which understands organised crime as a standalone *non-state* actor that engages in armed conflict primarily in pursuit of commercial goals and with no *a priori* political ambitions.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, corruption as a framework for understanding the subversion of international aid in post-conflict contexts in which organised crime is prominent, however important, provides only a restricted view. This view fails to capture the complex patterns of organised crime-conflict alignment and the dynamic post-conflict adaptation of the structures thus created. We argue that an analytical shift from actors to relations is needed to unpack how the governance structures rooted in the organised crime-conflict nexus pose a risk to international aid. We study those relations in their own right, in order to shed light on the mechanisms of international aid subversion by organised crime in post-conflict contexts. Although a number of authors have begun to point in this direction,<sup>30</sup> very little progress has been made so far. In the 'causal reconstruction'<sup>31</sup> below, we show how three mechanisms -- institutional positioning, societal embeddedness and role mutation -- link regressive sub-national governance in Colombia and Afghanistan with aid subversion (See Graph 1).



INSERT GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT HERE

### **International aid subversion in Colombia and Afghanistan**

Colombia and Afghanistan represent two contrasting cases for the analysis of international aid subversion in terms of domestic political contexts, organised crime/conflict trajectories and types of drug economy. While Afghanistan is a failed state undergoing state building as part of post-conflict reconstruction, Colombia is a long-standing, functioning democracy grappling with a decades-old peace process, without intrusive international involvement of the kind experienced by Afghanistan. Colombia has a long history of an expansive drug economy run by drug cartels, whereas in Afghanistan the drug economy is more diffuse, and the foray into drug processing a more recent development. However, in both countries, criminal actors are integrated in the governing structures through complex webs of relations among incumbent political, economic and military actors.

#### ***Colombia***

Drug trafficking and its coevolution with the protracted internal conflict have undermined political, economic and social development in Colombia since the 1980s. Although overall security has improved, the state still lacks effective control in some peripheral areas,<sup>32</sup> where guerrillas, paramilitaries and other criminal actors are still active and highly dependent on criminal economies, such as cocaine production and illegal mining. Helped by the international community (principally, the United States and the European Union), the Colombian state is engaged in an internal conflict with guerrillas, re-emerging paramilitary

structures and drug traffickers. International aid has been skewed towards supporting a counter-narcotics agenda, set against broader goals to strengthen rule of law and promote sustainable development in critical regions.

### *Organised crime and conflict actors*

Colombia's increasing strength in the drugs production phase was an important factor in the transformation of drug-related organised crime structures. Peripheral areas were traditionally beyond the reach of the state and its anti-narcotics policies, the enforcement of which required huge investment in public security, protection and regulation. This motivated the left-wing Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and right-wing United Self-Defence of Colombia (AUC) and their massive armies to join the drug economy, managing massive requisite labour force, securing the expansion of plantations, and protecting crops from competitors and the government eradication efforts. By the 2000s, the paramilitaries and guerrillas fully controlled coca-leaf production and processing and were involved in trafficking. Specialisation in the production phase was an important source of war finance for both forces.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike FARC, the origins and evolution of the AUC were steeped in crime rather than war. At their inception in the early 1980s, the paramilitary groups operated as drug barons' private security guards. Their only organisational glue was an anti-guerrilla discourse, while they pursued private agendas related, among other things, to drugs trafficking,<sup>34</sup> control of other illegal and poorly regulated legal activities, and accumulation of rural land through violent expropriation. In many regions, these groups soon became an instrument of terror of

the rural rich, politicians, and, importantly, sections of government armed forces<sup>35</sup> against the guerrillas, left-wing parties and social organisations in the central and northern regions of Colombia, where drug barons were involved in money laundering through massive investments in rural property.

In 1994 small groups operating in Antioquia and Cordoba reorganised as the United Self-Defence of Cordoba and Urabá (ACCU) and engaged in a violent territorial struggle against FARC in Urabá. ACCU's successful counterinsurgency prompted other paramilitary structures to join forces. By 1997, ACCU evolved into AUC, a nation-wide counterinsurgent irregular army with several commanders. These commanders mostly emerged out of drug cartels and advanced in the criminal world. The AUC was demobilised in 2006, but new paramilitary structures emerged and focused mainly on organised crime.<sup>36</sup>

### *Paramilitaries' political and social relations*

Unlike guerrillas who aimed at overthrowing the state, the paramilitaries sought, as they spelled out during the first AUC national conference, to reclaim and not replace the state.<sup>37</sup> The AUC's links with state actors were ambivalent; while officially adversaries, they were tacit collaborators.<sup>38</sup> In many central and northern regions the paramilitaries operated through informal arrangements with rural rich, politicians, military leaders and drug traffickers, affected by the guerrilla violence and threatened by democratising reforms. The military and police 'subcontracted' informally counter-insurgent tasks to paramilitaries and charged them with eliminating demand from the peasantry for more democratic access to land, as well as with eliminating political opponents and alleged guerrilla members.

But the AUC did not exclusively expand and act 'on demand'. The AUC's territorial expansion and actions reflected its commanders' own political, military and economic agendas.<sup>39</sup> This intersection whereby the agendas of strategic territorial actors met those of paramilitaries is known in Colombia as 'parapolitics'.<sup>40</sup> In 1997-2007, these alliances between the AUC and elected and appointed politicians enabled the AUC to control local electoral processes, to divert hundreds of millions of dollars from public coffers (including international aid) and penetrate into the judiciary and security agencies.

Taking over territories also entailed a social integration strategy. An important share of the middle class in the AUC-controlled regions supported paramilitary action as a means to neutralise guerrillas. In contrast, the majority of people in the lower strata of society were forced either to integrate or be excluded.<sup>41</sup> The local economy and politics were violently reorganised to maximise the income of the communities they dominated, and, hence, secure clientele.<sup>42</sup> The AUC accumulated land by dispossessing and forcibly displacing peasants (alleged guerrilla supporters) and repopulating whole areas with 'loyal' social bases.

Newcomers were integrated into a new political project, as illustrated by an AUC commander's statement that 'we subsidise peasants and provide technical support through our people [...] and we distribute the land. They owe us this'.<sup>43</sup> Such relationships turned the rural and urban poor and the coca labour force into important clientele that benefited from the paramilitaries' ability to capitalise on their need for welfare provision. The social base was widened for the paramilitary governance project, in which criminal and legal actors and

resources comingled and blended, providing a context for aid subversion through official procedures.

### *Regional dynamics in Urabá*

The Urabá region, which occupies a large part of the Antioquia, Córdoba and Chocó Departments in northwestern Colombia, is considered the cradle of the AUC. Violence and crime in Urabá have been particularly prevalent from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and have intertwined with an internal colonization process. This territory's strategic location along the Caribbean coast and the frontier line with Panama, with natural seaports on the Pacific and Caribbean seas, mountainous systems, rain forest, and many other resources crystallised local elites' goals of consolidating agro-industrial expansion and securing a coastal exit for international trade.<sup>44</sup> The opening of the internal frontier in Urabá introduced the first wave of land structure modification *via* land plundering from its originate occupants (native, Afro-Colombian and *mestizo* peasants). Urabá constituted the ideal setting for an uncontrolled land accumulation process. The lack of state regulation over land property was addressed with policies that promoted the establishment of agro-industrial systems of banana and oil palm production and employment in the 1920s and mid-1930s.<sup>45</sup> Over time, the growing landless peasantry pushed for the internal frontier's further opening or became plantations workers. Working conditions were characterised by contentious labour relations. In this context, the internal conflict started in the mid-1960s, accompanied by the emergence of left wing guerrillas. Drug traffickers and paramilitaries joined the conflict in the 1980s.

As part of a massive counter-insurgent campaign against FARC, the paramilitaries pursued a strategy of assassinating farmers and/or violently expropriating their land. By 1997, paramilitaries had transformed the agrarian structure of the northern Urabá region from small and mid-sized rural properties to *latifundia*, all owned by paramilitaries through complex chains of front men.<sup>46</sup> They also protected many agro-industrial farms – including those of multinational firms in large plantation areas.<sup>47</sup> While they supported local politicians, the AUC's next step was to organise the rest of the community and the loyal people they brought from other places to re-populate the region.

#### *Oil palm: The new opportunity for criminal accumulation*

The oil palm sector has been promoted in Colombia as a means of agricultural modernisation in peripheral regions, such as Urabá, which have received substantial funding from international agencies. In Urabá in the late 1990s the AUC violently dispossessed Afro-Colombian communities of parts of their legally protected collective territories in the basins of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó rivers in order to expand oil palm plantations and secure drug traffic. Local public notaries and officials from the regional land authority facilitated this process.<sup>48</sup> The AUC then turned to a novel channel to divert international aid: civil society and grassroots organizations.

In the early 2000s, 'El Alemán' – the AUC's 'Elmer Cardenas Bloc' (ECB) --supported by key public and private actors in Urabá, created a social movement called 'Popular Peasant Power' (*Poder Popular Campesino*) and trained a group of wounded AUC privates to act as development promoters for community and co-operative work and citizen oversight

activities.<sup>49</sup> The Bloc controlled the election of thousands of communal action councils (*juntas de acción comunal*) in neighbourhood- and county-level associations that allowed citizens to participate in local development decision-making and public performance oversight. These councils became the incubators for paramilitary-controlled town councils. The Bloc designated candidates in each county and neighbourhood.<sup>50</sup> In the mayoral elections, each municipality in Urabá generally had two candidates (in order to avoid over-exposure through single candidacies) chosen by the Bloc. One stood for AUC ideals and the other carried very little political weight. The election of its favoured candidates as mayors and town councillors enabled the AUC to control local administration and access local public finances.<sup>51</sup>

Once the ECB had succeeded in controlling local communities, governments and budgets in Urabá, the Bloc, along with several mayoralties, promoted the establishment of a regional movement known as 'For a Great, United and Peaceful Urabá', financed 70 per cent by the Bloc and 30 per cent by other sources.<sup>52</sup> Through this movement, the AUC launched lists of congressional candidates and obtained two seats in congress. According to the Supreme Court, in 2002 the ECB created an NGO called the 'Community Association of Urabá and Córdoba' – *Asocomún* - to promote sustainable development for associated communities. It sought funding from the national and subnational governments and the international community. *Asocomún* emerged as an instrument to increase the paramilitary's contribution to and control over the regional economy and politics. It met all legal conditions for this type of association; it was a legitimate grassroots-level organisation committed mainly to eradicating coca crops in the region. *Asocomún's* oil palm, banana, and reforestation programmes attracted funding from the Antioquia Governor's Office, several

local governments in the region, the National Alternative Development Programme, USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the International Organization for Migration.<sup>53</sup> According to *Verdad Abierta*, the contracts that could be traced back were worth approximately US\$800,000.<sup>54</sup>

The final stage in the process was the creation in 2006 of the 'Social Alternative Project' (*Proyecto de Alternatividad Social – PASO*), which was the backbone of the ECB's demobilisation process. 'El Alemán' used PASO as a platform to develop productive community projects. The paramilitaries provided the land, and the displaced peasants returning to the region and demobilised privates became the labour force for oil palm, rubber, banana and reforestation projects.<sup>55</sup>

Oil palm is profitable only when produced on a large scale, or by linking small producers to larger ones. Hence, it is a business better suited to large investors and/or big landowners. The Colombian government and international agencies, such as USAID, have sought to support small palm growers in supply chains. The unintended effect of these efforts was a rapid expansion of oil palm as a source of extraordinary economic benefits, and consequently political influence, for criminal actors. Thanks to its elaborate system of relations with various actors around the Urabá oil palm industry and state actors across multiple layers of government, the AUC gained access to significant funding from the national government and the international community and became involved in highly profitable legal activities.

## ***Afghanistan***



International aid has a long history in Afghanistan and, since the fall of the Taliban, has played a major role in the stabilisation of the country.<sup>56</sup> Driven by security imperatives, aid has focused on counter-insurgency, which has overshadowed humanitarian and development assistance. The militarisation of aid entailed tolerance towards the involvement of the local allies -- their commanders and militiamen -- in the drug economy.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the decentralised aid management made aid funds vulnerable to misuse *via* loose structure of informal networks including actors in the drug economy.<sup>58</sup>

### *Organised crime and conflict actors*

Opium production in Afghanistan has expanded steadily during the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>59</sup> from relatively modest levels reaching unprecedented cultivation levels in 2014.<sup>60</sup> This expansion was driven first by a need to sustain the anti-Soviet struggle, and later by the civil war. Consequently, the evolution of the drug economy became intimately connected with conflict dynamics and the changing role of non-state armed groups.<sup>61</sup> However, the expansion of the drug economy ought to be understood beyond the motivation associated with violent entrepreneurship.

In Afghanistan's predominantly rural economy, decades of war decimated local agriculture. It shifted to labour-intensive poppy growing that, for many, was a 'low risk activity in high risk environment'.<sup>62</sup> The Taliban's support for poppy cultivation was a key source of its legitimacy in poppy-growing areas.<sup>63</sup> For those farmers, businessmen and political elites in possession of the appropriate assets and skills, it was an effective means to accumulate wealth and capital. The drug economy effected changes in the country's social

and economic structures, reshaping existing power relations. Singh wrote that '[yesterday's] Afghan nomads who had lost their traditional livelihoods due to economic devastation caused by the years of war, are today's traders and traffickers.'<sup>64</sup>

The post-Taliban era saw further expansion and commercialisation of the drug economy. This included in-country processing of opium into heroin, a high profit margin activity that began in the final years of Taliban rule. During this phase, a previously loosely organised and open drug economy began to concentrate within a progressively tighter circle of major players around a criminal/military/political nexus.<sup>65</sup> Since then, opium poppy cultivation, processing and trade have become a mainstay of the local economy.<sup>66</sup> This occurred despite the government's formal commitment to counter-narcotics policy, reflecting the central state's inability to assert its authority over regional power holders with an independent economic resource base in the drug economy.

#### *Warlords' political and social relations*

A spectrum of non-state armed groups called 'warlords'<sup>67</sup> proliferated during the anti-Soviet jihad. The identities and roles of these militias have changed over time. A sub-set of warlords, known as the mujahidin warlords,<sup>68</sup> challenged the Soviet-backed regime and its particular vision for the Afghan state. Lacking a common vision of a new state, they turned on each other in a civil war over control over the government in Kabul.<sup>69</sup> Fighting coincided with the warlords' increasing involvement in drug trafficking. This involvement not only helped the warlords' secure resources and recruitment, but also enabled various individuals and groups to pursue their particular commercial interests.<sup>70</sup>

During the counter-insurgency, many of the mujahidin warlords reappeared as the international troops' main allies, claiming legitimacy as anti-Taliban forces. For example, these warlords were behind the 2001 ouster of the Taliban in Kandahar the second largest province in terms of poppy production. This effort was spearheaded by the province's mujahidin-era governor and one of the country's three most powerful warlords.<sup>71</sup> Many mujahidin warlords who were involved in the drug economy<sup>72</sup> entered the political process. They filled ministries, district and provincial offices, the Afghan army and the police corps, while mobilising 'multiple relational bonds'<sup>73</sup> to family, ethnic kin, traditional authorities and local state institutions, as elaborated below.

#### *Regional Dynamics in the Southern Provinces*

The drug economy diversified most in the southern provinces of Afghanistan – Kandahar, Uruzgan<sup>74</sup> and Helmand – where poppy cultivation and trafficking in the border areas were most widespread and resilient, surviving into the internationally led post-war recovery phase. The transformation of the drug economy was linked to the emergence of a new generation of warlords who had kinship ties to the mujahidin warlords. Their rule was violent and coercive in most cases, with warlords often forcibly demanding that farmers grow poppy.<sup>75</sup> In Kandahar, large swaths of government land were seized and distributed to the warlords' loyal commanders.<sup>76</sup> They mostly dispensed their power partially favouring groups linked to them in the provision of protection and livelihoods. However, in some cases, warlord rule provided a degree of stability and order.<sup>77</sup> In the post-Taliban period, the militarisation of aid empowered the new generation of warlords, many of whom were key allies in counter-insurgency efforts. However, within Kandahar and Uruzgan, these warlords

were perceived as modern 'Robin Hoods of Afghanistan,'<sup>78</sup> who distributed the wealth to the poorer layers of society.

#### *Warlord rule in the Southern route*

The Southern route refers to the road running from the Spin Boldak border crossing with Pakistan, via the city of Kandahar, to the town of Tarin Kowt in Uruzgan Province. It was heavily used as a drug trafficking corridor, particularly after heroin plants emerged along the road to the Pakistani border. Opium from Helmand and Uruzgan, as well as from further afield, was transported along this road for processing. At one point during the civil war, some 20 armed groups were involved in this trafficking, imposing various taxes and controlling the drug trade.<sup>79</sup> According to one account, the three-and-a-half-hour drive from Spin Boldak to Kandahar involved crossing 24 checkpoints manned by those groups.<sup>80</sup> Post-Taliban, the Southern route along with Highway 1, which branches off north to connect Kandahar to Kabul and south to connect Kandahar to Hirat, was a vital path for supplies destined for international forces in Afghanistan. This road network passes through three provinces that were (at the start of the US invasion) and remain the biggest producers of opium poppy, including Kandahar, the Taliban's heartland. This status made these provinces the most insecure part of the country, requiring a massive operation to protect supply convoys destined for international troops.

Since 2001, a private security 'industry' including a variety of providers, legal and illegal, working alongside international military forces, has surged in Afghanistan. Until as recently as March 2015, the section of the Southern route running through Uruzgan was

controlled by a recently assassinated Matiullah Khan, a local warlord who rose to become the regional police chief of Uruzgan.<sup>81</sup> Some of Matiullah's militia contingent was integrated into the Afghan Local Police Force, but a much larger proportion operated apparently independently and illegally, benefiting from informal taxation on international aid.<sup>82</sup> Commenting on the loyalty of his troops, Matiullah noted: 'I have 647 men as part of the Ministry of Interior, but more than 3,000 men have picked up their weapons from their houses and are working with me. I get their salaries and other benefits from the foreigners' convoys and each of them is paid \$240 per month.'<sup>83</sup> The integration into the local police of some of the troops helped legitimise and strengthen the operations of this group. However, within the rest of this group some men were also secretly on the Afghan government's payroll. This group became the main security provider in Uruzgan as a result of its connections to local political elites such as the provincial governor (who was their war-time compatriot) and international backers, the ambiguous policy of the central state and successful rebuffs against potential competitors. Supported also by international forces dependent on its 'services', this group was able to operate with impunity. Commenting on the power of its commander as a *de facto* authority in the province, one of the Uruzgan's tribal leaders commented: 'He is not part of the government; he is stronger than the government and can do anything he wants.'<sup>84</sup> Private security companies provided a channel through which warlords and their militias operating as security providers were able to tap into lucrative contracts with international actors. Many of these companies were and are owned or controlled by prominent individuals linked to government officials, including former mujahidin warlords-turned-governors. In fact, these companies served as a conduit for the armed groups linked to the warlords both inside and outside the government to

continue with arms and drug trafficking<sup>85</sup> under the guise of security provision contracted by the international agencies.

With the arrival of US troops, a 'new warlord', Abdul Raziq, a close war-time ally of the former mujahidin warlord-turned-governor of Kandahar, and his militia took control of the Spin Boldak border crossing at the other end of the Southern route. Although Raziq became a regional police chief of Kandahar,<sup>86</sup> he continued to control the economy around the border crossing through his network,<sup>87</sup> while violently suppressing the rival Noorzai tribe smuggling clan. Around 700 trucks crossed the frontier linking Pakistan with southern Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia each day, according to Roteb Popal, whose company, Watan Risk Management, was providing security for 96,000 trucks a year and charging US\$1,500 per truck.<sup>88</sup> The head of Afghan customs, Bismullah Kammawie, claimed in conversation with American officers that corruption at the Spin Boldak border post was 'total.'<sup>89</sup> This comment indicates that an intricate endogenous network sustained its power by utilising international aid and combining it with drug trafficking activities.

## **Analysis**

We set out to study what kinds of mechanisms based on the mobilisation of institutional, social and individual relations account for subversion of international aid in conflict contexts where organised crime plays a prominent role. An inter-regional comparative analysis of Colombia and Afghanistan shows how regressive sub-national governance enables aid subversion through institutional processes. We point to a need to understand the integration of organised crime into the governing structures, a process that in both cases

was consequential despite the varying political contexts, conflict/crime trajectories, and drug economy types. While the AUC originated in organised crime activities around the drug economy, the southern warlords originated in armed conflict. Neither the paramilitaries nor the warlords, who nominally are non-state conflict actors, set out to challenge the state. In contrast, they performed important counter-insurgency functions for the state, suggesting a complex, mutual relationship.

In both cases, a convergence of organised crime and armed groups over the conflict cycle gave rise to a system of rule in which engagement in the drug economy served a variety of functions. These functions correspond to the changing objectives and motivations of multiple constituencies, including the state actors themselves, and sections of the respective populations. Through this process, both Colombia's paramilitaries and Afghanistan's southern warlords developed political, economic and social ties that gave them power and influence that they were disinclined to relinquish when faced with the prospect of conflict termination.

Transition from an open conflict produced two types of local governance arrangements: an arm's-length cohabitation with the state in the case of Colombia's paramilitaries, and incorporation into the state of Afghanistan's southern warlords. Both actors have been able to use the multiple links solidified through the engagement in the drug economy to secure access to public office. Such institutional positioning has allowed them to tap into international aid flows using official processes and institutional means, as demonstrated by the oil palm and private security contracting cases. The route to public office led through a parallel process of social embedding, as criminal-*cum*-conflict actors developed a relationship with a broader social base. Lastly, their role mutation from

criminals to officials was a formal exercise. In practice, they held on to old roles and links related to those roles.

The official political response, supported by international aid, was demobilisation of paramilitaries. In Colombia, the AUC was permitted to participate in the peace process; in Afghanistan, the warlords were co-opted into government structures. In both cases, armed actors' links to organised crime were treated as epi-phenomenal. Demobilisation and co-optation of these arms groups was not seen to be inconsistent with organised crime mitigation. Mitigating organised crime has remained part of the international counter-narcotics agenda, in line with the narrow view of the role of organised crime in contemporary conflicts that remains influential among the international donors.

## **Conclusion**

Our study of international aid subversion by organised crime in Colombia and Afghanistan has important theoretical, methodological and policy implications. Our key finding is that organised crime in conflict contexts is a dynamic phenomenon that lends itself to different configurations on different governmental, spatial and temporal scales. Hence, our analytical metrics needed to be adjusted accordingly. Prevailing scholarly discourses, which view organised crime and the state as static and separate, weaken our ability to fully grasp the trajectories of the organised crime/conflict/governance nexus and its implications for international aid. Foremost, political aspirations of organised crime actors in conflict, which are key to how they relate to the state and military power, ought to be fully integrated into conceptual frameworks for studying aid subversion.



Our evidence demonstrates that informal power systems established around the organised crime/conflict nexus are diverse, dynamic and resilient as well as path-dependent and context-specific. Therefore, their ability to interfere and subvert international aid using institutional means cannot be grasped appropriately within a corruption perspective, which treats the role of organised crime in the peace-building process as static, transaction-focused and exogenous to the local politics of power.

Instead, mechanisms of aid subversion can be gleaned from a systematic study of the ties among the multiple actors operating at the organised crime/conflict interface and the structures and interactions around them, and alongside their transformation over time. From the international aid perspective, rather than focusing on institutions *per se*, scholars must investigate how those structures and linkages are configured in relation to governance processes more broadly. There is currently a glaring gap in the empirical evidence in this respect.<sup>90</sup> More evidence is necessary to further develop a critique of the dominant framing of organised crime and international aid to post-conflict countries as a problem of corruption both in scholarly and policy approaches.

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Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Kemp, Shaw and Boutellis, *The Elephant in the Room*.

<sup>2</sup> Kemp and Shaw, *From the Margins to the Mainstream*.

<sup>3</sup> *World Development Report 2011*; Cockayne, "Chasing Shadows"; Briscoe and Dani, *Crime and Error*; and Kavanagh, *Getting Smart and Scaling up*.

<sup>4</sup> In those contexts international aid to peacebuilding is typically comingled with development aid.

<sup>5</sup> McMullin, "Organised Criminal Groups"; and Felbab Brown, *Shooting up*.

<sup>6</sup> George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*.

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<sup>7</sup> Gerring, "Case Selection", 19.

<sup>8</sup> Mayntz, "Mechanisms", 253.

<sup>9</sup> McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Yin, *Case Study Research*, 52. In this study we go from the national to the regional level of analysis.

<sup>11</sup> Yin, *Ibid.*, and Shively, "Case Selection", 347.

<sup>12</sup> Cremer, *Corruption and Development Aid*. There is a burgeoning literature on corruption whose review goes beyond the remit of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Zuercher, "Conflict, State Fragility".

<sup>14</sup> Lampe, "Transnational Organised Crime."

<sup>15</sup> Le Billion, "Buying Peace"; von Billerbeck, "Aiding the State"; and Marquette, "Donors, State building and Corruption."

<sup>16</sup> Goodhand, "Corrupting or Consolidating the Peace?."; Batmanglich and Hoyer, *The New Deal*; and Marat, "The State-Crime Nexus."

<sup>17</sup> Cheng and Zaum, *Corruption and Postconflict Peacebuilding*; and Batmanglich and Hoyer, *The New Deal*.

<sup>18</sup> Gastrow, *Termites at Work*.

<sup>19</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongmen Governors*; Suhrke and Berdal, *The Peace in Between*; Clunan and Trinkunas, *Ungoverned Spaces*; and Staniland, "States, Insurgents."

<sup>20</sup> Cheng and Zaum, *Corruption and Postconflict Peacebuilding*.

<sup>21</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace-Working Group on Corruption and Security, *Corruption*.

<sup>22</sup> Boucher et al., *Mapping and Fighting Corruption*.

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<sup>23</sup> Dobovsek, "Economic Organized Crime Networks."

<sup>24</sup> Briscoe and Dani, *Crime and Error*.

<sup>25</sup> Cockayne, *State Fragility*.

<sup>26</sup> Brinkerhoff, "Introduction," 18.

<sup>27</sup> Reno, "Transforming West African Militia Networks"; Cramer, Hammond and Pottier, *Researching Violence*; Berdal, *Building Peace*; Giustozzi, *The Missing Ingredient*; Cockayne and Lupel, *Peace Operations*; and Felbab Brown, *Aspirations and Ambivalence*.

<sup>28</sup> Mc Mullin, "Organised Criminal Groups"; Briscoe and Dani, *Crime and Error*; Cockayne, "Chasing Shadows" and Shetter, Glassner and Karakhail, "Beyond Warlordism."

<sup>29</sup> This scholarship uses the concept of conflict networks to question the analytical traction of the usual tropes of state, non-state and organised crime actors. See: Sharan "The Dynamics of Elite Networks", and Owen and Grisby, *In Transit*.

<sup>30</sup> Felbab Brown, *Aspirations and Ambivalence*; Zuercher, "Conflict, State Fragility"; Briscoe and Dani, *Crime and Error*; Chayes, *Thieves of States*; and Booth and Golooba Mutebi, "Development Patrimonialism."

<sup>31</sup> Mayntz, "Mechanisms." 238.

<sup>32</sup> Duncan, *Los señores de la Guerra*; and Cubides "De lo privado y de lo público en la violencia colombiana."

<sup>33</sup> Cubides, *Ibid.*; and Gutierrez, *Criminal Rebels?*.

<sup>34</sup> Thoumi, *Illegal Drugs*.

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch, *The Ties that Bind*; and Dube and Naidu, *Bases, Bullets*.

<sup>36</sup> Duncan, *Los señores de la Guerra*.

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<sup>37</sup> AUC, [Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia], Constitución de las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia.

<sup>38</sup> Felbab Brown, *Shooting up*; and Cornell, “Narcotics and Armed Conflict.”

<sup>39</sup> Aranguren, *Mi confesión*.

<sup>40</sup> Escobar, *Paramilitary Power*.

<sup>41</sup> González, Bolívar and Vázquez, *Violencia política*.

<sup>42</sup> Jaramillo and Duncan, *De la transacción*.

<sup>43</sup> Aranguren, *Mi confesión*.

<sup>44</sup> Roldán, *Blood and Fire*.

<sup>45</sup> Parsons, *Urabá, salida de Antioquia al mar*.

<sup>46</sup> “Los pecados terrenales de Sor Teresa Gómez Álvarez” (*Verdad Abierta*, January 11, 2011). [http://www.verdadabierta.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=2963](http://www.verdadabierta.com/index.php?option=com_content&id=2963).

<sup>47</sup> According to the Colombia General Attorney’s Office, between 1997 and 2004, Chiquita brands paid \$1.7 million to the AUC in the Urabá region. “Los ‘pecados’ de Chiquita Brands” (*El Espectador*, December 10, 2012). <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/los-pecados-de-chiquita-brands-articulo-391790>.

<sup>48</sup> “La palma y los paramilitares en el Chocó” (*Verdad Abierta*, September 7, 2011). <http://www.verdadabierta.com/despojo-de-tierras/3526-la-palma-y-los-paramilitares-en-choco>

<sup>49</sup> SCJ-30126, [Supreme Court of Justice], Sentence 30126 against Ramon Antonio Valencia Duque, 14 December 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with (\*) Rodrigo (reserved identity), official of USAID in Colombia, Bogotá, April 6, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> SCJ-30126.

<sup>53</sup> “La debacle del partido de Luis Alfredo Ramos” (*La Silla Vacía*, February 9, 2011).

<http://www.lasillavacia.com/historia/la-debacle-del-partido-de-luis-alfredo-ramos-21553>.

<sup>54</sup> The Supreme Court of Justice established that the politicians intensively lobbied governmental institutions and Plan Colombia instances (SCJ-30126, 2010) for the *Asocomún* projects.

<sup>55</sup> “Proyecto cauchero en tierras despojadas?” (*Verdad Abierta*, October 3, 2011).

<http://www.verdadabierta.com/component/content/article/158-captura-de-rentas-publicas/3583-iproyecto-cauchero-en-tierras-despojadas/>

<sup>56</sup> International Crisis Group, *Aid and Conflict in Afghanistan*.

<sup>57</sup> Goodhand, “Corrupting or Consolidating Peace”; and Singh, *Drug Production*.

<sup>58</sup> Poole, *Afghanistan Tracking Major Resources*.

<sup>59</sup> Goodhand, “Corrupting or Consolidating Peace”; Maass, *Afghanistan’s Drug Career*; Schetter, Glassner and Karokhail, “Beyond Warlordism”; Mansfield, *All Bets are off*; and Felbab Brown, *Aspirations and Ambivalence*.

<sup>60</sup> In 2014, opium cultivation reached 224,000 hectares, and the annual output of 6,400 tons, boosted by a sharp rise in the production in Southern regions where the yields increased by 27 per cent year on year. UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2014*.

<sup>61</sup> UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2014*; and Singh, *Drug Production*.

<sup>62</sup> Shaw, “Drug Trafficking,” 71.

<sup>63</sup> Felbab Brown, *Shooting up*, 136; and Singh, *Drug Production*, 133.

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<sup>64</sup> Singh, *Drug Production*, 135.

<sup>65</sup> Felbab Brown, *Shooting up*; and Maas, *Afghanistan's Drug Career*.

<sup>66</sup> Rosen and Katzman, *Afghanistan: Drug Trafficking*.

<sup>67</sup> On the notion of warlord see Giustozzi, *Respectable Warlords?*; Schetter, Glassner and Karohkail, "Beyond Warlordism"; and Mac Ginty, "Warlords."

<sup>68</sup> Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*, 106.

<sup>69</sup> Shaw, "Drug Trafficking"; and Giustozzi and Ullah, *Tribes*.

<sup>70</sup> Singh, *Drug Production*, 237; and Cordesman, *The Afghan War*, 137.

<sup>71</sup> Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*.

<sup>72</sup> Singh, *Drug Production*, 238.

<sup>73</sup> Mansfield, *All Bets are off*.

<sup>74</sup> Uruzgan is also spelled as Urōzīgān, Oruzgan, Orozgan, or Rozgan.

<sup>75</sup> Forsberg, *Politics and Power in Afghanistan*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> MacDonald, *Drugs in Afghanistan*.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Roteb Popal, Head of Watan Risk Management Company, Kabul, Aug. 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Singh, *Drug Production*, 105.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>81</sup> Ahmet, A. "Powerful Afghan Police Chief Killed in Kabul" (*New York Times*, March 19 2014).

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Matthieu Aikins, journalist, Kabul, October 2011; Filkins, D. "With US Aid Warlord builds Afghan Empire" (*New York Times*, June, 5 2010).



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<sup>83</sup> Who is Who in Afghanistan, [http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com\\_afghanbios&id=1489&task=view&total=2230&start=1657&Itemid=2](http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=1489&task=view&total=2230&start=1657&Itemid=2).

<sup>84</sup> Tierney, *Warlords, Inc.*

<sup>85</sup> Rubin, "The Political Economy of War and Peace in Afghanistan."

<sup>86</sup> Mashal, A. "Afghan Police Chief, Long a Taliban Target, Faces a New Emotion: Fear" (*New York Times*, May 30, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Aikins, M. "The Master of Spin Boldak: Undercover with Afghanistan's Drug Trafficking Border Police" (*The Harpers Magazine*, December 1, 2009).

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Roteb Popal, owner of Watan Risk Management security company, Kabul, August 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Who is Who in Afghanistan?.

<sup>90</sup> Cooper, "Picking out the Pieces."

## Graph 1: Organised Crime and International Aid Subversion

