

Mar 13 2011

Towards shared responsibility? The United States, Latin America and the Drug Trade

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In 1998, the member states of the United Nations committed to the objective of achieving by 2008 “significant and measurable results in the field of demand reduction” and to make “real progress in eliminating or reducing significantly crops of opium poppy, coca and cannabis”. One of the central principles underpinning those joint efforts and the commitment of the international community was shared responsibility, the moral obligation that countries with high levels of drug consumption (consumer countries) should assist countries with high levels of drug production (the traditional supplier or producer countries).

By 2008, however, the world was faced with [a stable supply and ample availability of illicit drugs, with corresponding stable or declining price levels, and increased consumption by ever-younger drug users for some illicit drugs](#). Faced with these disappointing results, the international community adopted a [new political declaration in 2009](#), in which the principle of shared responsibility remains at the core of the current ten-year strategy.

Of course the world is not neatly divided in producer and consumer countries, and today we even see new trends emerging such as in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, where most of the demand for cannabis is increasingly domestically produced. However, regardless of new trends, the general pattern of the illegal drug trade for substances such as cocaine has largely remained unchanged: producer countries such as Bolivia, Colombia and Peru cultivate the crops, and the processed drugs are transported through transit countries in Central America and Mexico towards the biggest consumer markets in North America and (via different trafficking routes to) Europe.

US commitment to Latin America

This unchanged pattern explains why the United States is still very committed to supporting Latin American countries in combatting the production and trafficking of illicit drugs. To a large extent, that support is based on national self-interest, either because of the US domestic public health challenge in the form of huge numbers of problematic drug users, or because of its (business or investment related) interests in stability in the Latin American region. Regardless of the underlying reasons, in recent years, it seems that the principle of shared responsibility has been reinforced. In a way, it may effectively have become the moral link between states’ realisation that the problem cannot be tackled without international cooperation, and the concrete support efforts in the form of programme funding, technical assistance and capacity building that flow into Latin America.

Mexico and shared responsibility

The problematic situation in Mexico is the clearest recent example of increased political will to adhere to the principle of shared responsibility when it comes to solving the problem of [illicit drug production and trafficking in the region](#). On her visit to Mexico, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed in March 2010 the [“shared responsibility to combat and defeat organized transnational crime”](#). She acknowledged that [“the demand for drugs drives much of this illicit trade, that guns purchased in the United States \[...\] are used to facilitate violence here in Mexico”](#). In her January 2011 visit, Clinton again reconfirmed strong support for President Felipe Calderón’s fight against drug trafficking and the drug-related violence that has killed more than 34,000 people since 2006.

In this case, the embodiment of the expressed principle of shared responsibility is the [2007 Mérida Initiative](#), similar to Plan Colombia, in which the US pledged to invest around £1 billion in Mexico and the Central American region to combat drug trafficking, transnational organised crime and money laundering. As with previous US support to Colombia, the assistance includes training, (military) equipment, logistical support and intelligence.

Not all the pledged funds have been allocated, and there are serious concerns about the predominantly military nature of the Mérida Initiative. Nonetheless the programme confirms that shared responsibility goes beyond mere political rhetoric. The question, however, is whether it will ultimately be effective in stemming the flow of cocaine towards US markets and whether it will be able to decrease the devastating impact the illicit drug trade has on the stability of Mexico and the Central American region.

A funding gap remains

In the case of Colombia, a multinational approach combined with strong support from the United States may have helped to dismantle the Cali and Medellín cartels, but it did not stop the flow of drugs to the US, nor did it solve Colombia's problem of illicit coca cultivation and cocaine production. Hopefully the current bilateral and multilateral efforts will fare better, but expectations and hopes should not be too high. The [latest report of the International Narcotics Control Board \(INCB\)](#) reveals that financial resources to combat drug-related problems continue to be insufficient in some South American countries. To solve this problem, the INCB calls on the international community to provide more technical assistance and funding – a gap that can be filled if the international community increasingly takes the principle of shared responsibility more seriously.

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