



GDPO Working Paper Series

Working Paper No. 8 (November 2022)

Prime Criminal Real Estate:

Illicit Economies and State Power in Chocó, Colombia

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Key Points

- This paper explores the incongruous dynamics of the Colombian state in Chocó, and its intersections with the exploitation of illicit commodities.
- Chocó is the poorest department in Colombia. Its primarily Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities face structural inequalities and racism.
- Despite the Colombian peace agreement in 2016, conflict has escalated in Chocó as the remaining armed groups fight for control of various illicit economies in the department. Fighting intensified further during the pandemic, causing increases in violence, confinements and displacements of the local population.
- For people in Chocó, the state is both absent and present. The state's absence is evident in high-levels poverty, the socio-environmental catastrophe of illegal mechanised gold mining, and the violence of the conflict. Simultaneously, the state's presence is felt through the militarisation of public security and complicity in the networks that reach throughout the region and strip it of its wealth.
- The paper advances a contextually specific theorisation of state power that elucidates the state's encounters with the territorial counterclaims of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, and the pivotal role of illicit economies in these confrontations

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Introduction

The Colombian government's 2016 peace accord with the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) raised hopes that the country's long-running internal conflict was finally coming to an end. In the Chocó Department (see map), though, the FARC's demobilisation signalled the beginning of a new phase in the conflict. The remaining armed groups in the region – the paramilitary *Clan del Golfo* and the ELN guerrillas (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) – have fought for territory vacated by the FARC. This territory offers opportunities for enrichment from various illicit economies, including drug trafficking, gold mining and logging. Such wealth has been a driving factor in the emergence of Chocó as a key arena of the Colombian conflict, not only fuelling the armed campaigns of various protagonists, but an object of conflict in itself. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it another wave of intense fighting between the *Clan del Golfo* and the ELN, and affiliated urban gangs in Chocó's capital, Quibdó, as these group sought to exploit the crisis to consolidate territorial control. In the process, local communities have been confined and displaced, placed under curfews, and subjected to threats and violence.

For people in Chocó, the state is both absent and present in the ongoing conflict and the function of illicit economies in the region. The state's absence is evident in high-levels of poverty and lack of basic social and economic infrastructure, the environmental catastrophe of illegal mechanised gold mining, and the violence of armed groups who rule large areas of the region. State abandonment of Chocó may be traced back to Colombia's vast inequalities and the forces of structural racism that discriminate against the region's primarily Afro-Colombian and Indigenous population. Simultaneously, though, the state's presence is very much felt in Chocó through the militarisation of public security and complicity in the networks that reach throughout the region and strip it of its wealth. State-societal networks coalesce around various illicit economies to extend control over the legally-recognised ancestral, collective territories of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous groups.

In this working paper, we explore the incongruous dynamics of the Colombian state in Chocó, and its intersections with the exploitation of illicit commodities. We trace the development of illicit economies and the conflict in Chocó, outlining the evolving roster of actors involved in these trades. The paper draws on research conducted as part of the ESRC-Newton Caldas project, *Colombia River Stories* (grant number ES/S001883/1 – www.colombiariverstories.com), which included life histories and participatory workshops with local communities in Chocó, and ‘elite’ interviews with representatives of government and NGOs, as well as mapping of the environmental impacts of illegal gold mining using remote sensing, citizen science and analysis of geomorphological data. We argue that lived-experiences of state power in Chocó are rooted in violent modes of (illicit) capitalist extraction that aim to counteract local claims for territorial autonomy. We advance a contextually specific theorisation of state power in Chocó that elucidates the state’s encounters with the territorial counterclaims of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, and the pivotal role of illicit economies in these confrontations.

Illicit Economies and State Power

Within conventional analyses, the function of illicit economies is indicative of state deficiency. Illicit economies, such as the drug trade, are said to flourish in areas of low state capacity. Underpinning these assertions is a Weberian conception of the state, derived from Eurocentric assumptions around the nature of the state and its historic development. This conceptualisation conceives the state as the monopoliser of legitimate coercion within a given territory, a coherent and unitary actor, autonomous from society. As the state is synonymous with law and



order, illicit economic activity thus necessarily demonstrates ‘the frontier of state authority’ (Meehan, 2015: 259). Here, the state is viewed to lack the capacity to effectively impose its will on society and control illicit economies. Such claims have been evident in post-Cold War security narratives of ‘weak’, ‘fragile’ and ‘failed’ states in the Global South (Boege et al., 2009; Grimm et al., 2014). ‘Ungoverned spaces’ are viewed as security threats to the international order, producing illicit economies, transnational organised crime, terrorism, and armed conflict, for example (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2010). Liberal state-building measures are proposed as a solution to these problems, aiming to set such states on the path to Western statehood (Duffield, 2014). By bolstering the security forces, for example, the state may reclaim territorial control and reassert its Weberian functions.

These assumptions obscure our understanding of the state in places such as Chocó, and the role of illicit revenues in the reproduction of state power. The Weberian ideal-type has limited utility in explaining the dimensions of the state in post-colonial contexts. Distinct historical experiences in these contexts have entrenched diverse trajectories of state development. Throughout Latin America, for example, different phases of state development have been shaped by exploitation of the region’s natural wealth and different models of integration into global markets: from colonial domination and repression of native civilisations, and the elite-led states of the independence era to the twentieth century commodity boom, populism and modernisation of the state, and neoliberalism’s hyper-capitalist and exclusionary project. These different political economies – determined by Latin America’s place in the global economy and its relations with (neo)colonial and (neo)imperial centres – left their imprint on the development of the state, and tended to stymie unifying, inclusionary nation-building projects. Across these broad phases, the state’s ability to impose control over society has frequently been contested. Indeed, the state itself has been an object of contestation, as different state and societal actors (bolstered by international partners, in some cases) compete and form alliances to capture control of the state apparatus. These dynamics of negotiated and fragmented state authority should not be dismissed simply as deviance from the norms of Western statehood (Morton, 2012), but as enduring aspects of the state in Latin America that determine how state power is exercised and experienced.

Migdal’s (2001) conceptualisation of the state as a field of power opens-up a more empirically-grounded analysis of such states. Within this theorisation, the state is indeed

defined in one sense by its image as a unitary actor, with autonomy over society and control over a given territory. The dominance of this idea of the state reflects legacies of European-led colonialism, where the establishment of such state structures was necessary for extracting wealth from the periphery (Bhambra, 2021). The existence of this idea in the popular imagination of political communities throughout the world imbues state actors with authority to act and induces societal actors to follow the laws of the state (White, 2013). The state, though, is also defined by everyday practices. Modern states are sprawling organisations, made-up of multiple institutions and agencies, and (tens/hundreds of) thousands of officials. While the actions of state actors may at time reinforce the image of the unitary state, state practices are frequently directed towards particular interests: from low-level police officials extracting bribes to state agencies awarding government contracts to cronies, for example. Different state actors may pursue distinct agendas in collaboration with societal allies. The classic Latin American example of *coup d'état* plots hatched by military factions in collusion with allied political parties and societal groups is demonstrative of the continual generation and regeneration of the state, its meanings, and its relationship with society. Equally, distinct rule regimes in society may challenge the state's formal order: substate orders ruled by local *caudillo* rulers or tribute payments based in kinship ties for access to services, for example. Rather than seeking to dominate these systems, state actors – themselves drawn from the same societies – may instead negotiate with them. State power is extended through dynamic alliances with societal groups that make allowances for competing rules and systems, rather than through the monopolisation of coercion and absolute dominance. The reification of the state over society dissolves in the actual practices of state power.

This contrast – between ideas and practices – helps to explain how the state can be both absent and present in Chocó. The idea of the unitary state, extending its rule uniformly across the national territory is deficient in Chocó, where the state's reach and its extension of social, political, and economic rights to its citizens is so clearly lacking. In this sense, the state is absent in the imaginaries of people in Chocó. However, the state is also present through its practices and relations with various societal groups. Indeed, local Afro-Colombian and Indigenous groups have effectively collaborated with different arms of the state to claim rights. In 1993, for example, Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific region successfully claimed legal rights to their ancestral territories through the Constitutional Court. These

communities forge close links to the Procurator General and the Human Rights Ombudsman, as they seek to realise their full rights in the face of frequently indifferent national governments. Simultaneously, though, competing networks of state and societal actors collude to extract wealth from Chocó and challenge the autonomy of Afro and Indigenous communities. Shadow networks have historically included paramilitary groups, business interests and landowners, organised crime, elements of the police and military, and corrupt politicians. State neglect is a strategic decision which opens Chocó's resources to allied societal actors. State resources, such as military operations or intelligence, are deployed at other times to target opponents to this project, such as local social leaders and guerrilla groups.

Within these processes, therefore, illicit economies do not mark 'the frontier of state authority', but a site of state-making, where state power is asserted through collusion with various societal actors. Collusion in this sense can take on multiple forms that can include overt violence, corruption and turning a blind eye to illicit activities. The Colombian state's uneven reach into Chocó's geography has been mitigated through alliances with paramilitary groups, in-part funded by economic and political elites, closely enmeshed with government institutions. Reflecting the multifaceted nature of the Colombian state, the changing constellation of conflict actors within Chocó and the activism of local communities, these networks have not been stable. New waves of government policy, at times under pressure from international partners, has precipitated action against armed groups and illicit economies. However, the complicity of state actors in the modes of (illicit) capitalist extraction that erode the territorial claims of Afro and Indigenous communities has been a recurrent feature of the conflict in Chocó. Below, we broadly sketch out these dynamics.

Cocaine Transit Chains: The Conflict Takes Root in Chocó

Despite its vast natural wealth and biodiversity, Chocó is the most impoverished region of Colombia. It has also been a hotspot for the conflict since the 1980s. During this period, the exponential growth of the Andean drug trade gave Chocó increasing strategic importance to trafficking operations. The region has coastline with both the Pacific and the Caribbean, as well as a land border with Panama across the Darién Gap. The region is sparsely populated, with dense jungle, little infrastructure, and low state presence. Its extensive river network connects the territory and facilitates the movement of illicit commodities. These factors

make Chocó an important link in international cocaine transit chains and have drawn armed groups to the region.

Prior to the 1980s, Chocó had been left relatively untouched by the conflict. Guerrilla groups, such as the FARC used the region as a zone of respite from the 1970s (Agudelo, 2001: 19). Over the late-1980s, though, the FARC expanded its operations into Chocó, creating fronts in strategic territories as part of its newly-formed national plans to build an army capable of the military defeat of the Colombian state (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017b: 29). As part of the group's plans to strengthen militarily, the guerrillas sought to harness new revenue streams. This strategy included extortion of business and landowners in the Gulf of Urabá, and 'war taxes' on various levels of the drug trade. The guerrillas extracted rents from trafficking corridors from neighbouring Antioquia to routes north via the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Darién Gap, as well as clandestine cocaine processing labs built near departure points for shipments and emerging coca cultivation in the region (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2018). Control of trafficking corridors also enabled the guerrillas to move arms and provisions (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017: 75). In this sense, guerrilla groups, such as the FARC, looked to construct their own substate orders in Chocó as part of alternative state-making projects. These projects rest on relations with societal groups, such as organised crime, and the logic of wealth extraction that ultimately frustrate the territorial claims of local communities.

During the 1990s, the guerrilla presence in Chocó would be challenged by right-wing paramilitaries. The Élmér Cárdenas front of the paramilitary umbrella organisation, the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*), waged a major offensive in Chocó; funded by an alliance of traditional landowners in Urabá and a newly-emergent drug trafficking landowner class,¹ whose interests had been targeted by the FARC (Grajales, 2011). Indeed, the AUC's interests were protected by elements of Colombia's political class, who developed close relations with the paramilitaries (Escobar, 2013). The AUC unleashed a wave of violence in Chocó, aiming not only to take FARC-territory and seize control of illicit revenue streams, but to eradicate the guerrilla's supposed social base (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017b). For example, the AUC

¹ Drug traffickers bought up cheap land in areas that had been targeted by the FARC. Extorted landowners sought to cut their losses and sold-off their land to cash-rich drug traffickers, who were looking to launder their illicit wealth. This drug trafficking landowner class built alliances with paramilitary leaders and funded the expansion of these groups to protect their interests against the FARC (see Dudley, 2004).

colluded with the Colombian military during Operation Genesis in 1997 to terrorise the population of the lower Atrato. Thousands of people were displaced, with reports of horrific violence perpetrated against local communities (see Interamerican Human Rights Court, 2013). The FARC and the AUC – with their military backers – engaged in violent competition for control of Chocó. While the guerrillas held onto some enclaves, the AUC successfully took key strategic areas of the region (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017b: 31). The paramilitaries dominated lucrative trafficking routes, developing deep and symbiotic interests with the drug trade. The AUC's dominance in Chocó also facilitated their movement into other business ventures, as capital flowed back and forth between different illicit enterprises.²

This period coincided with the ratification of collective territories in Chocó, when Afro-Colombian communities had successfully used the rights offered by the 1991 Constitution to claim legal right to their ancestral lands. As communities in the lower-Atrato completed the legal processes of Law 70, the AUC offensive opened these territories to external economic interests. For example, the AUC's terror campaign in the lower Atrato cleared the area of local Afro and indigenous communities by causing mass displacement. With the local population displaced, lands were seized by the AUC. Palm oil plantations and cattle farms extended through the territory, set-up with AUC-drug money and capital from the financial backers of the paramilitaries (la Verdad Abierta, 2011). Furthermore, the AUC funded logging in Chocó's rainforest and set-up businesses to commercialise illegal timber (la Verdad Abierta, 2009). These businesses showed the fluidity of illicit economies in Chocó, as armed groups, economic elites, organised crime and elements of the state aligned to exploit the region's wealth.

Trafficking Corridors, Coca, and Gold

The AUC's eventual demobilisation in 2006 spawned a new generation of paramilitary groups. These groups were viewed as more blatantly driven by criminal interests than their predecessors and hence branded as 'criminal bands' (*bandas criminales* or BACRIM). The lines between drug trafficking organisations and these new groups were blurred. The BACRIM were involved in the coca paste market, cocaine production and 'enforcement' for organised crime, for example (McDermott, 2014). However, the same alliances with deeply entrenched

² Illicit gains also flowed into the bank accounts of political allies, as revealed during the 'para-política' scandal.

economic interests, political actors and elements of the military that define the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia, persisted.

Trafficking routes and other illicit revenue streams in Chocó were again the object of competition, although this time between the guerrillas and newly constituted paramilitary groups, such as the *Clan del Golfo* and the *Rastrojos*.³ Local communities suffered through violent clashes as the FARC and the ELN sought to retake strategic areas. Over this period, an equilibrium was slowly reached as armed groups carved-up territory. Pacts between groups delineating trafficking corridors were common.⁴ The *Clan del Golfo*, for example, largely dominated the Gulf of Urabá, a key point of departure to the Caribbean for semi-submersibles loaded with cocaine shipments; while the FARC and the ELN controlled refuelling points on the Pacific coast for go-fast boats on their way to trafficking networks in Central America and Mexico (Gagne, 2014). To facilitate such trafficking operations, armed groups imposed curfews and movement restrictions on communities (Oslender, 2008). These criminal governance pacts reinforced the strategic economic interests of external actors in the extraction of Chocó's wealth. Strategic state-neglect allowed these trades to thrive, with illicit goods entering global markets via routes carved through the territories of Afro and Indigenous communities.

Both guerrilla groups also tightened their control over coca cultivation in Chocó, encouraging communities under their rule to grow the illicit crop.⁵ Between 2006 and 2010, estimated total coca cultivation in Chocó increased from 816 to 3,158 hectares.⁶ Reports suggested that the paramilitaries were now content to give-up coca-growing areas and instead purchase coca paste from the guerrillas (McDermott, 2013). Under pressure from the US, the Colombian government responded to this spike in coca cultivation with an extensive programme of fumigation. In 2012 alone, for example, 13,258 hectares were sprayed with the carcinogenic defoliant, glyphosate.⁷ The state's absence was evident in these areas from the lack of basic infrastructure and economic opportunities for local people, and the

³ The *Clan del Golfo* have also been known as the *Urabeños* and the *Gaitanistas*.

⁴ UN official, interview with the authors, 2019.

⁵ Colombian military official, interview with the authors, 2019

⁶ Figures from Observatorio de Drogas, Colombian Ministry of Justice, quoted in Defensoría del Pueblo (2017b: 34).

⁷ Figures from Observatorio de Drogas, Colombian Ministry of Justice, quoted in Defensoría del Pueblo (2017b: 34).

governance imposed on them by armed groups. The state's presence was felt by the fumigation of coca crops that denied farmers a vital source of income and damaged other subsistence livelihoods. Rural communities claimed that fumigation had caused health problems for local people, as well as poisoning their farmland, drinking water and river.⁸

Subsistence livelihoods, the natural environment and the health of local communities were also threatened by the rapid expansion of informal, mechanised alluvial gold mining. Booming global gold prices caused by the 2008 banking crisis, attracted miners to Chocó. Miners from Brazil, for example, brought technology and methods developed in their home country. Dredgers – nicknamed 'dragons' locally – extracted Chocó's rich gold deposits and left a trail of environmental destruction.⁹ The use of mercury in the extraction process contaminated fish stocks; while deforestation brought severe flooding and biodiversity loss. Pervasive corruption has allowed this destruction to continue relatively unchallenged. For example, Chocó is heavily militarised, yet mining machinery regularly passes army and police checkpoints unfettered. The state's strategic presence in these chokepoints of Chocó's river-network and its limited road infrastructure, designed to limit the movements of armed groups, is shown as performance: the image of a unitary state, monopolising coercion, and imposing order on society. Instead, the interests of mining operations are protected, as state practices show collusion in the extraction of Chocó's resources. State performance is also witnessed by local communities in security operations against mining. Research participants state that miners are frequently tipped-off about operations against them, stripping expensive equipment before the security forces arrive. Mining machinery is blown-up in a token show of strength by the state, which has little impact on the advance of the dredgers. Communities complain that the state's response has not only been inadequate and ineffective, but that it adds to environmental contamination, as the burning wreckages of the dredgers release more pollution into the river.

The relationship between gold mining and drug trafficking in Chocó is close. Again, money from these different illicit economies has flowed back and forth, as criminal groups have diversified their business interests (Massé & McDermott, 2017: 18). For example, organised

⁸ Chocó community leader, interview with the authors, 2019.

⁹ Such operations are supported by national and international capital. In 2019, for example, two Iranians with US passports were arrested for their role in an illegal gold mining company in Chocó (Unidad Investigativa, 2019)

crime uses funds from drug trafficking to invest in mining operations and *vice versa*. These groups provide loans to miners for equipment and running costs; as well as various ‘criminal services’ required to ‘legalise’ gold, including corrupt links to state and business actors or smuggling operations to move gold out of the country. They also provide ‘services’ for cash-rich miners, such as brothels and drugs. Mexican organised crime is reported to be involved in the supply of mercury, which is outlawed in Colombia;¹⁰ and many gold traders in Chocó are suspected of being fronts for drug traffickers, as part of money laundering schemes (Ibid.: 12). Low-level actors in the drug trade have also capitalised on the gold rush. As coca fumigation intensified in the late-2000s, for example, some *cocaleros* migrated in search of work as labourers in gold mines (Rettberg & Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016: 90).

By 2016, it was estimated that the value of Colombia’s illegal gold sector had surpassed the drug trade (Wagner, 2016). Unsurprisingly, armed groups have sought their share of this boom by controlling gold mining areas in Chocó. These areas frequently overlap with drug trafficking routes and coca cultivation. Typically, armed groups have extorted miners, taking a royalty for operating in areas under their rule. In Medio Atrato, for example, the FARC sold ‘mining titles’ and charged miners monthly fees per dredger/backhoe (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017b). In Río Quito, the *Clan del Golfo* takes royalties per dredger. This group has worked closely with mining operations, threatening those in the community who speak out against the mining. Territorial control for these armed groups thus gives them access to multiple and interrelated illicit economies.

Ongoing Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis

While these illicit economies are not the primary cause of conflict in Colombia, they are interwoven with the struggle for sustainable peace in Chocó. In 2017, local civil society organisations declared a humanitarian crisis, highlighting the violence and environmental damage of illicit economies, the destruction of traditional livelihoods, the denial of basic rights and the fact of ongoing and escalating conflict in the region. Talk of transitioning to ‘post-conflict’ following the FARC’s demobilisation has been premature in Chocó. State security forces were slow to occupy former-FARC territories, opening the way for renewed competition between the ELN and the *Clan del Golfo* for control of these areas.¹¹ In this sense,

¹⁰ Colombian military official, interview with the authors, 2019.

¹¹ Defensoría del Pueblo official, interview with the authors, 2019.

the state's failure to secure the territories of Afro and Indigenous communities from external interests continued to frustrate local claims to autonomy.

Preliminary peace talks with the ELN were brought to halt following a car bomb attack by the guerrillas against a police academy in Bogotá in early-2019. The ELN's front in Chocó was opposed to the peace talks from the outset, with the suggestion that the guerrillas were reluctant to give-up control of their illicit business interests.¹² Indeed, the ELN attempted to extend their territory in northern Chocó around the Darién Gap and trafficking corridors to both the Pacific and the Caribbean. Here, they have been met by the expansionist ambitions of the *Clan del Golfo*. The paramilitary group has sought to cut-off the ELN by taking key points in the river network, reportedly colluding with local army units (Osorio Granados, 2019). These dynamics have been heightened during the pandemic, as both groups have sought to consolidate territorial control. State enforced lockdowns left communities isolated and vulnerable to incursions by armed groups. As a result, many communities have been confined to their villages, unable to fish, access their farms or travel to neighbouring areas. Communities have also been confined by landmines planted by the ELN. Some within the local population have been threatened and killed for speaking-out against the violence (for example, see Herrera Durán, 2019). Fighting has also spilled over into urban areas. There have been high levels of violence and curfews in Quibdó due to urban gangs affiliated to armed groups and organised crime fighting for territory and key transit points for moving illicit goods.

The prize for these groups is the same as before: illicit revenue streams. Coca cultivation skyrocketed across Colombia following the FARC's demobilisation, as the guerrilla group's controls (and limits) over the coca market were removed. In Chocó, coca cultivation also increased from 1,489 hectares in 2015 to 2,155 hectares in 2018 (UNODC, 2019: 32). However, gold mining and trafficking corridors remained the focus of competition. With total national coca cultivation increasing 96,084 hectares in 2015 to 169,019 hectares in 2018 (ibid.),¹³ these trafficking routes have been highly valuable. Reports suggest that both the ELN and the *Clan del Golfo* have deepened their role in the drug trade by moving their own shipments to trafficking networks in Central America and Mexico (International Crisis Group,

¹² UN official, interview with the authors, 2019.

¹³ This spike in coca cultivation has led for calls for the reintroduction of fumigation. Others argue that these figures are a consequence of broken promises from the peace accord on alternative development in former-FARC territories.

2019). In addition to drugs, Chocó's trafficking routes have been used to move migrants on their way to the US. For example, reports suggest that people smugglers use Chocó's river networks to move migrants from South America, Africa and Asia to Panama (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017b: 62-64). These people smugglers are often linked to organised crime groups. Extracting rents from these operations gives armed actors and their state-societal networks another source of revenue.

Conclusion

Fluid illicit economies thus continue to fuel conflict in Chocó. Drug trafficking has been a constant in the region since the 1980s, feeding the emergence of other illicit economies. This evolution has responded to global factors, from changing global prices for cocaine and gold to recent waves of migration to the US. Chocó's conflict ecosystem revolves around competition for these illicit revenue streams, bringing armed actors to the once peaceful region. The implications of this dynamic have been grave for local Afro and indigenous communities. As the region's wealth has been stripped, fear and violence has been a daily reality for communities.

The conflict has spread through the region and denied the full realisation of Afro and indigenous territorial and ontological claims. An evolving roster of guerrilla and paramilitary groups have competed for control of territory and access to revenue streams. As well as its strategic importance for the trafficking of illicit commodities, Chocó's natural resources have offered economic opportunities for armed groups.¹⁴ Seeking to control these resources, paramilitary groups have facilitated territorialisation processes of allied state actors and economic elites (Gutierrez-Sanin, 2018). Both the FARC and the ELN have created rival orders in Chocó, but have operated according to similar logics: controlling territory to extract rents from licit and illicit economies (Arjona, 2016). Despite distinct political and strategic goals, common logics of resource extraction underlie the coercive informal orders of these groups.

In this sense, the conflict in Chocó can be thought of as a reactionary response to Afro and indigenous claims of autonomy which implicitly contest capitalist modes of extraction.

¹⁴ The relative importance of these different economies to different armed groups has changed over time, forming dynamic 'resource portfolios' that respond to market pressures and the actions of other conflict actors. Political factors also shape these resource portfolios. For example, despite being a major source of income for the FARC, the group halted its kidnapping operation due to hardened public opposition to the guerrillas and damaged their political legitimacy (Rettberg & Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016).

Beyond Operation Genesis, further reactionary responses have occurred to community organisation and land claims. For example, the conflict in Chocó has intensified since the 2016 peace deal with the FARC, as the remaining armed groups fight for control of territory vacated by the guerrillas. The ethnic chapter of the peace accords contains provision for the restitution of lands to those displaced in the conflict. Paramilitary groups – descended from the AUC and with similar links to economic and political interests – have targeted social leaders and communities in northern Chocó in a bid to silence their legal claims to restitution of their stolen lands. Similarly, social leaders have been subject to death threats for their role in pushing for the implementation of the Colombian Constitutional Court’s landmark T-622 ruling, which recognised the rights of nature and demanded a halt to illegal mechanised gold mining. Community forms of resistance, aimed at asserting a specifically Afro-Colombian way of life in Chocó, have been met with recurring cycles of violence. In the case of illegal gold, the imposition of violent extractive regimes has not only supplanted community governance and caused displacement, it has remade socio-environmental relations in Afro territories.

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About the Global Drugs Observatory

The Global Drugs Policy Observatory aims to promote evidence and human rights-based drugs policy through the comprehensive and rigorous reporting, monitoring and analysis of policy developments at national and international levels. Acting as a platform from which to reach out to and engage with broad and diverse audiences, the initiative aims to help improve the sophistication and horizons of the current policy making communities. The Observatory engages in a range of research activities that explore not only the dynamics and implications of the existing and emerging policy issues, but also the processes behind policy shifts at various levels of governance.

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