Peace Leaders in Putumayo, Colombia Bet Their Lives on Coca Crop Substitution
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Community leaders in Colombia’s Putumayo department have historically supported coca substitution programs as part of peace processes aimed at resolving the country’s long-running civil conflict. But they put their lives at risk by betting on change and seeking new opportunities for the department, where ex-FARC mafia factions earn huge profits from drug trafficking. This story tells how these leaders in Putumayo face these challenges.

At 2:30 in the afternoon on March 19, 2020, three armed men in civilian clothes entered the community hall of the Nueva Granada village, asking for Marco Rivadeneira.

Earlier in the day, Rivadeneira had left his home to attend meetings between farmers and the national government regarding the substitution of illicit coca crops in the municipality of Puerto Asis, Putumayo, a department located in southern Colombia.

Rivadeneira and others participating in the process had traveled from the town of Puerto Asis to the village and settled in the community hall, where local residents were waiting for them.

The gathering was part of a series of meetings related to the diagnostic phase of crop substitution programs in the Puerto Vega-Teteyé corridor. The area, which has one of Colombia’s highest concentrations of illicit crops, holds strategic value for criminal groups because it is easy to traffic cocaine from there to neighboring Ecuador.

When the gunmen burst in, they did not identify themselves. But the authoritative tone they used to summon Rivadeneira alarmed everyone in the room.

The men pulled Rivadeneira out of the meeting, claiming he would be back soon.

But the minutes passed and the people who had arrived with Rivadeneira decided to leave and warn other delegates about what had happened. Officials from the Interior Ministry and other members of the farmers association had divided into groups to talk with more people simultaneously. For them, unaware of the arrival of the gunmen, everything was going normally.

That's when the chaos began. Community members hid other leaders and delegates, as word spread that the armed men were also seeking them out. Some farmers began to organize themselves to go out and look for Rivadeneira.

The clock was ticking.
About a half hour later, the armed men returned to the hall and told the group that Rivadeneira was waiting for them outside. Then, according to an account given to InSight Crime by a witness whose name is withheld for their security, the gunmen walked out, got on their motorcycles, and were never heard from again.

The community members left the hall, and 200 meters from the building, they found Rivadeneira’s body in a ditch. He was dead.
A New Beginning

The chain of events that ended Rivadeneira’s life began more than 500 miles to the north, in a theater designed by an Italian architect 135 years before the assassination in Putumayo. In Bogotá’s Colón Theater on November 24, 2016, a peace agreement aiming to end the oldest civil conflict on the continent was signed by Colombia’s then-President Juan Manuel Santos and the then-commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC), Rodrigo Londoño, alias “Timochenko.”

Amid applause and speeches that spoke of reconciliation, integration, and recognition of leaders and victims, Santos and Londoño sealed a pact that would change the course of the country. In the streets outside, thousands gathered with white shirts and Colombian flags to celebrate the historic event.

The agreement raised hopes worldwide about Colombia’s future. Santos won the Nobel Peace Prize for his negotiation efforts. More importantly, the guerrilla leaders began a process of reintegration into civilian life. Some even took seats in Congress, and members of the negotiating team were invited to prestigious universities around the world to give their perspectives on how the peace process had come about.

SEE ALSO: Colombia Sees Historic Levels of Coca Cultivation and Cocaine Production

Even so, the implementation of the agreement faced significant challenges. The Final Agreement between the government and the FARC guerrillas had six key points. It called for the end of the armed conflict and the surrender of weapons by the guerrillas; it provided for reparations and a Truth Commission for the victims; it gave new opportunities for the FARC to engage in politics; and it included a comprehensive agrarian development plan and a strategy for the sustainable substitution of illicit crops. While the world applauded Colombia, Putumayo’s community leaders sought to understand the agreement and their role in the momentous changes to come.

Joy was in the air. Farmers, citizens, and leaders believed that peace was going to change the situation in their communities, especially in Putumayo, a department hard hit by violence and long neglected by the Colombian state.
Hopes for a positive outcome were buoyed by the agreement’s assignment of an important role to community leaders. In order to implement the agreement’s provisions, the government and the guerrillas needed the support of the rural population, which had been the most affected sector of society during years of armed conflict.

For this reason, many territorial leaders helped to explain and administer the most important points of the agreement in the different municipalities of Colombia. Putumayo was no exception.

In many cases, these leaders became the liaison between the national government, the FARC guerrillas, and the civilian population.

José*, a social leader from Putumayo, was one such liaison. When he was young, he moved from central Colombia to Putumayo, looking for better living conditions. Since he settled in Puerto Asis, more than 30 years ago, he has been involved in social issues and has been gaining recognition in his community.

José is a charismatic man. He is talkative and passionate about his community. He says that in 2016, he and his companions believed that peace was going to come to Putumayo. For that reason, he decided to help explain and implement the agreement in the different municipalities of the department.

“Everyone was very happy, of course. Imagine how good it was. There was a time when we couldn’t go out much, to the river to fish, to the big mountains, to go hunting,” says José.

When the government announced plans to begin the implementation of different points of the agreement, José decided to participate. Along with other community leaders, he received training to help implement the National Comprehensive Illicit Crop Substitution Program (Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitucion de Cultivos Ilicitos - PNIS).
Peace Leaders in Putumayo, Colombia Bet Their Lives on Coca Crop Substitution

How Colombia’s Crop Substitution Program Works

WHAT IS THE SUBSTITUTION PROGRAM?
The Comprehensive National Illicit Crop Substitution Program emerged from the peace agreement signed in 2016 by the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas. Its main objective was to decrease the amount of coca grown in Colombia.

HOW DOES IT WORK?
1. The national government and families agree on voluntary crop eradication commitments.
2. In exchange, the government provides economic subsidies and technical advice to families.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS
- Immediate food assistance
- Self-sustainability and food security or home gardens
- Productive projects - short and long cycle
- Comprehensive technical assistance
- Monitoring and evaluation

36 million pesos ($12,000*) invested per family within two years

* Average currency value in 2017

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Illicit Crop Substitution Directorate

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The main objective of the substitution program was to reduce the amount of coca planted in Colombia. The country is the largest of the three main producers of the plant used to produce cocaine hydrochloride, one of the most consumed drugs in the world. Coca is also the lifeblood of Colombia’s armed groups, which fight for control of this economy and the profits derived from it.

The substitution program sought to convince coca cultivators to voluntarily eradicate their illicit crops. In exchange, the national government promised to provide them with economic subsidies and technical assistance to undertake new productive projects.

The program would be integrated with other points of the agreement and would adopt a regional approach, taking into account the differences between territories within Colombia when implementing productive projects.

For this reason, the program became the most ambitious crop substitution strategy employed in Colombia to date.
Bringing Coca Substitution to Putumayo

Farmers association representatives in Putumayo and community leaders like José committed themselves to the mission of getting buy-in for the peace process, and especially for the crop substitution programs, from cultivators and communities throughout the department.

Putumayo has long been a hotbed of coca cultivation. According to figures from the Colombian government’s official Drug Observatory (Observatorio de Drogas de Colombia), in 2000, the department had more than 66,000 hectares of coca. By 2004, aerial spraying with herbicides like glyphosate reduced the area under cultivation to about 4,300 hectares. But the decrease proved unsustainable and by the time the peace agreement took effect in 2017, around 30,000 hectares of coca were being grown in the department.

The figure has remained relatively stable in the years since. According to the latest report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Putumayo grew 28,205 hectares of coca in 2021 -- enough to produce approximately 196 metric tons of cocaine, nearly triple the production potential of the 2000s.

For the implementation of the substitution program in Putumayo, many leaders who were members of different associations came together and negotiated a regional agreement that took into account the characteristics and needs of the department. The coalition became known as the Roundtable of Social Organizations (Mesa de Organizaciones Sociales - Meros).

José joined Meros after being president of his village for many years and working hand in hand with his community on issues of coca cultivation. It seemed that he had been preparing for this moment all his life. His leadership had been recognized for years thanks to his participation in demonstrations in 1996 organized by farmers of the department to protest the national government’s coca eradication campaigns.
Other Meros members had similar backgrounds and many of them had become presidents of the community action organizations known as *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (JAC).

Together with substitution program officials and government delegates, José and the other leaders worked through Meros to spread word about the regional agreement to the public and conduct training on the substitution program in Puerto Asís and other municipalities in Putumayo.

For many of them it was a kind of deja vù. The 2016 peace deal incorporated many of the demands they had made during the coca growers’ protests two decades earlier.

José was struck, for example, by the fact that the substitution program offered technical assistance to care for the new crops and the land, which had long been sorely lacking in the region. Moreover, the program did not include...
plans for aerial spraying of herbicides like the eradication campaigns of the early 2000s. Finally, the program was voluntary and allowed for consultation with coca growers and their families.

The process of familiarizing the public with the crop substitution program and pre-enrolling cultivators lasted eight months. On paper, the substitution program agreements were to work as follows: Families would promise to eradicate and not replant their illicit crops during the first year of the commitment. In exchange, the government would deliver one million pesos (US$350, according to average exchange rates for 2017) per month to invest in new crops, plus one million 800 thousand pesos (US$600) for food security projects. Beginning in the second year, the government would commit to investments of up to 10 million pesos (US$3,400) to consolidate productive projects.

A few months after the signing of the peace accord, José signed up for the program and uprooted the coca plants he had on his land.

“I entered the program and you know it was hard work for us because, imagine, we had to set an example. So we were the first ones to start, we were the ones who were at the forefront,” he explained to InSight Crime.

It was a time of hope. José believed in the substitution program. And he and other Putumayo leaders were not going to waste the opportunity for peace.
A Fleeting Chance

The citizens of Putumayo had long lived under the yoke of criminal groups attracted to the region’s swaths of coca crops and trafficking routes into neighboring Ecuador.

But in the months leading up to the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, the security situation in Putumayo began to improve considerably. Confrontations between the guerrillas and the security forces decreased, as did attacks against the civilian population. The optimism was such that people displaced during the conflict began returning to their homes.

Then, under the terms of the peace agreement, the FARC began to demobilize. For years, Putumayo had been under the domination of the FARC’s 48th and 32nd fronts in addition to ultra-right-wing private armies known as paramilitaries that used the conflict as cover for drug trafficking and other illicit activities.

The demobilization saw more than 400 guerrillas put down their weapons and head for one of 24 special areas that were created to provide ex-combatants with rehabilitation and support for re-entry into civilian society.

Putumayo was breathing a sigh of relief.

José said during this time he was able to move freely through the villages of Puerto Asís and throughout the whole department -- something that was not possible before the signing of the peace agreement.

For José and the others in Meros, it was clear that the government and the FARC, at least in Putumayo, intended to comply with the agreement.

“People in Putumayo said that coca was going to end. That there was not going to be an armed actor left with the capacity to buy and regulate the market,” a social leader from Puerto Asís, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told InSight Crime.

In fact, Putumayo was one of the star departments in the first phase of the substitution program.

“Everyone was looking for new forms of income,” the same social leader said.

Indeed, many people connected to Putumayo’s coca industry signed up for the substitution initiative and the department accounted for a high proportion of total participants. According to the UNODC, a total of 99,097 families registered for the program nationwide. More than 20,000 of these were in Putumayo, including 11,888 families of coca growers, 4,014 non-coca growers involved in production, and 3,829 harvesters who worked on coca crops but did not own them.
Crop Substitution Figures in Putumayo, Colombia

Putumayo had high rates of participation in the substitution program. Around 20% of the families that enrolled in the program lived in the department.

PARTICIPATING MUNICIPALITIES

1. San Miguel  
2. Orito  
3. Puerto Caicedo  
4. Valle Del Guamuez  
5. Mocoa  
6. Villagarzón  
7. Puerto Asís  
8. Puerto Guzmán  
9. Puerto Leguízamo

TOTAL NUMBER OF FAMILIES ENROLLED

- Growers: 58.92%  
- Harvesters: 18.76%  
- Non-growers: 22.32%

- Total families enrolled: 20,316
- Growers: 11,971
- Harvesters: 3,811
- Non-growers: 4,534

HECTARES OF COCA SUBSTITUTED

- Total: 10,432

Sources: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), ART’s Directorate for the Substitution of Illicit Crops
José agrees that the initiative seemed to have promise. “In the municipality, we heard around 2016, 2017 that the FARC would hand in their weapons and that coca would decrease, so Putumayo was going to be a department without guerrillas and without coca. People got their hopes up.”

But, despite the optimism, seeds of doubt and dissatisfaction began to take root.
Doubts

Rivadeneira was more skeptical of the crop substitution program than many of his peers. He had been working for the inhabitants of the Puerto Vega-Teteyé corridor for more than a decade and had represented farmers in many situations.

Those who knew Rivadeneira before his assassination in March 2020 said he was committed to his principles and always supported dialogue and productive projects aimed at addressing the harmful aspects of drug trafficking and the armed conflict.

He was an established leader in the region. Even at a very young age, Rivadeneira had been very involved in coca issues and participated in protests in 2000 against forced eradication, which was concentrated in Putumayo and affected thousands of rural residents. It was at that time Rivadeneira became a spokesman for the growers, who saw coca as their most viable economic option due to the absence of infrastructure for other products.

Rivadeneira listened to the farmers and their ideas for improving conditions in Putumayo, traveling throughout the department despite difficult security conditions, according to sources who had worked with him.

Those experiences contributed to Rivadeneira’s reservations about the crop substitution program. He decided to distance himself from the process, believing it was overly ambitious and was wrongly paired with forced eradication initiatives carried out in parallel.

SEE ALSO: A Death Foretold: Colombia’s Crop Substitution Program

Rivadeneira’s skepticism was based in part on his assessment of the shortcomings of Plan Colombia, a US-funded program in the early 2000s aimed at crushing the cocaine trade. “Here there was a lot of money from Plan Colombia, but there was no concerted planning with the community and that was a failure,” Rivadeneira told the newspaper El Espectador ahead of the signing of the peace deal.

“No, supposedly the post-conflict is coming. They are making people think that a lot of money is going to arrive, but whatever it is, if it is not well planned and agreed with the people, it will also be a disappointment,” he added.
Rivadeneira disagreed with some of the ways the national government approached the implementation of the agreement. In particular, he opposed the government’s reliance on the army to carry out manual coca eradication campaigns.

The eradication episodes strongly affected Putumayo, which was prioritized due to the number of crops grown there. Many farmers protested these policies, leading to violent clashes between demonstrators and authorities.

In Putumayo, two processes began to occur simultaneously: while some growers enrolled in the substitution program were uprooting their crops and beginning to receive the first food assistance payments, other areas of the department saw an intensification of the eradication campaigns.

This fueled discontent among many farmers and also some leaders, including Rivadeneira, who began to eye the implementation of the peace agreement in Putumayo with growing concern.

Rivadeneira, along with members of his association, got together and created an alternative proposal to the national substitution initiative that sought a more gradual and cooperative approach to illicit crop substitution, Rivadeneira’s colleagues told InSight Crime in 2022.

They suggested surveying families and farmers throughout the department to discover who lived in the territory, what they knew how to plant, what the soils were like, and what level of technical training they had. The goal of the survey would be to match program participants with the most suitable coca substitution projects.

Another key point of their initiative was to phase in crop substitution gradually, rather than uprooting growers’ entire crop all at once. Only once the substitution projects had advanced and the farmer was no longer dependent on coca would the remaining crops be eradicated.

Furthermore, they proposed that each family should have a maximum hectarage, so as not to deforest more forest to plant bushes. This would protect the flora and fauna. Finally, they sought to create collection centers for harvests and processing chains so that agricultural products would have some added value.

But while Rivadeneira and other leaders were making initial approaches to the government to present their proposal, other cracks in the implementation were opening up.

In August 2018, Iván Duque took office as Colombia’s new president, bringing a different vision of what the peace agreement should look like and the path that implementation should take. The Duque administration’s about-face slowed down certain aspects of implementation, including the substitution plan. The outlook in Putumayo was darkening.
War Returns to Putumayo

By 2019, communities in Putumayo were witnessing a resurgence of violence and the government’s inability to establish a sufficient presence to implement the peace agreement.

A small group of armed men led by Pedro Oberman Goyes, alias “Sinaloa,” had not signed the agreement and began recruiting ex-combatants to swell their ranks. Reports also came in from another department, where a dissident group under the command of Edgar Mesías Salgado, alias “Rodrigo Cadete,” was recruiting ex-combatants, purportedly looking to make an incursion into Putumayo.

For the coca growers participating in the substitution program, it got even worse. By the end of 2019, the government ran out of money to make promised payments to participants. It was also falling behind on contracting and funding substitution projects.

A similar situation existed throughout the country.

Hernando Londoño, the national director of the substitution program during the Duque administration, told the Colombian media outlet Verdad Abierta that the program’s resources were stretched thin by higher-than-expected enrollment. “Obviously, the program was born without thinking that it was going to enroll almost 100,000 families,” Londoño said. “So, 100,000 families times 36 million pesos, is already 3.6 billion pesos and the state doesn’t have that money on hand. So we started with a debt of 3.6 billion pesos to execute it [the plan] in two years.”

The missteps of the crop substitution initiative also had consequences for the community leaders. José says he and other leaders who had promoted the substitution program felt they had let down families who had enrolled in the program because the non-compliance deepened a socioeconomic crisis among the farmers.

Others agreed that the bungled implementation left many embittered.

“We were left with frustration and a bad experience. That what we invested was already running out again. Things were deteriorating,” a leader in Puerto Asís, whose name has been withheld for security reasons, told InSight Crime.

Some families, desperate for an economic lifeline, began to plant coca again. For the armed groups, this crisis did not go unnoticed.
Two groups, both former FARC factions that dissented from the peace agreement, managed to settle in Putumayo and began buying coca paste and coca leaf from the families that resumed cultivation.

One group called itself the Border Command (Comandos de la Frontera). It was made up of ex-combatants of the FARC’s 48th Front that allied with La Constru, a paramilitary group that had been present in Putumayo for 15 years.

The other group was the Carolina Ramirez Front, a group affiliated with a branch of the FARC’s First Front dissidence. This group is led by Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias “Iván Mordisco,” and, before his death, Miguel Botache Santanilla, alias “Gentil Duarte,” two guerrillas with a long history within the former FARC.
According to sources on the ground, the clash between the armed actors and the leaders backing the peace accords was inevitable. Soon threats were made against social leaders like José and Rivadeneira. The substitution and implementation of the accord directly threatened the profits and activities of these groups.

That put Rivadeneira in the crosshairs.
An Inevitable Unraveling

After the farmers found Rivadeneira’s body, fear and anxiety took hold. Others present at the meeting thought they would be next to be targeted, even though the armed men had already left.

The security forces did not arrive, so it was the farmers themselves who transported Rivadeneira’s body to the town of Puerto Asis. Meanwhile, news of his death spread throughout Putumayo.

Rivadeneira’s wake was attended by few people, partly because of COVID-19 safety measures and partly because fear remained in the air.

The other leaders of Putumayo’s farmers’ associations had received a clear message: They had better keep quiet.

“It was a way to silence the people,” said Carlos Segura, the secretary of the government of the municipality.

Killings of Social Leaders in Putumayo, Colombia, 2016 - 2022

Since the signing of the peace agreement in 2016, social leaders who supported the peace process and coca substitution have continued to be killed.
The situation has not changed in the years since Rivadeneira’s murder. Other social leaders told InSight Crime during a visit to Puerto Asís in 2022 that those who support crop substitution programs, go against the economic interests of the armed groups, or question their behavior, sign their own death warrants.

“Sometimes I feel like it’s a miracle I’m alive,” José said, adding that today he feels much more pressure from the armed groups. He is always on alert, waiting to see if something will happen to him.

The past year was a brutal one for Putumayo. Both the Border Command and the Carolina Ramírez Front seized on the government’s unfulfilled promises to undermine local goodwill and commitment to the peace process.

The long-awaited peace fizzled out as its legitimacy faded.

Today, armed groups taunt families who want to enter the new substitution programs: “Go ahead, the government is going to default anyway,” they tell local people, an inhabitant of Puerto Asís explained to InSight Crime.

In addition, armed groups have seen that violence and intimidation can serve their ends. Today, they exercise unparalleled social control over the public by imposing curfews or demanding identification, and through physical punishment, disappearance, or even death.

Though the outlook for crop substitution programs has been darkening, Colombia’s recently inaugurated President Gustavo Petro has been a strong supporter of such initiatives, providing supporters with a glimmer of hope that the program could get back on track. However, Petro has sent mixed signals about the program. A new director for the program was appointed only in December, and to date, statements regarding the substitution program have hinted that the resources to implement the program are not available and that, on the contrary, the strategy must be redesigned to make crop substitution viable for farmers.

The leaders remain on the ground, expectant, while the conflict continues.

*The names of some subjects have been changed to protect their identity.*
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