Photo by Sarah Krupp.

A worker tends cacao seedlings.

STUDENT RESEARCH

Cultivating a Coca-Free Future

by Sarah Krupp

Now that residents of Rescate Las Varas have uprooted nearly all their illegal coca crops, the fear is gone. But so is the money.

In this village in Pacific Colombia, there are soccer matches again; children are learning traditional dances; and residents can now leave their homes at night without fear. There is hope that, in time, the newly planted cacao crops will replace some of the lost income that coca had reaped. And, Kella Calleno, 19, says she is no longer afraid that paramilitaries will hurt her family.

Las Varas is the only village of the 14 rural black communities, called *consejos comunitarios*, in the municipality of Tumaco that is free of illicit crops, and it is among the few not threatened by armed groups. Tumaco has the most coca cultivation, and one of the highest homicide rates, in Colombia.

Calleno wants to be a police officer, a measure of just how transformative the process of rebuilding the community, creating legal opportunities and eradicating coca has been — and the vital role that security forces have played. Perversely, the economic consequences of eradicating coca mean that Calleno's family has barely enough money to live on and certainly not enough to pay for her to attend the police academy. So, she works in a makeshift restaurant that her mother opened in Las Varas, serving lunch to a handful of school teachers several times a week. She plans to eventually move to a city, Bogotá or Cali.

"I don't want to stay here," she said. "What can I do? What job can I have?"

Her predicament represents the hope and the frailty of Las Varas' success. The community of nearly 7,000 is

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at once a beacon of change in the region — and perhaps even in the floundering drug war — and a testament to the challenges of creating sustainable development in areas long marginalized by the state.

The residents of Las Varas decided to stop growing coca after paramilitaries shot three people dead on September 7, 2008. At that time, the killings were not unusual in the region. By the mid-2000s, violence had engulfed the once-peaceful, rural Afro-Colombian villages. Coca growers, driven from other parts of the country by Plan Colombia's offensive tactics — aerial spraying of herbicides and military force — moved to ever-more isolated regions. Enter Tumaco: a sweaty, ramshackle port city surrounded by lush countryside in a region so remote that the city center didn't have running water until the 1980s, and the rural areas still don't.

The black communities have lived for centuries among the mangrove-enshrouded rivers that stem from the Pacific Ocean. Beginning in the 1990s, they were granted semi-autonomous rights as consejos comunitarios under an elected council, or *junta*, and collective title. However, unlike a city, they do not receive state transfers or have the ability to generate revenue. Besides clean water, they lack basic services, such as garbage disposal and sewage systems. Of the 14 consejos comunitarios, only two (including Las Varas) are connected by road. The others can only be reached by boat. Until the introduction of coca, residents had few options besides subsistence agriculture and fishing. Some found seasonal agricultural work on plantations. Those who wanted more moved away. When coca growers migrated to Tumaco, they seemed to offer a solution.

Within a few years, the paramilitaries and guerrillas had followed the coca, terrorizing villagers whenever it seemed necessary to maximize their drug trafficking profits. All too often, corpses were found in the rivers. But in Las Varas, which had come later to coca and had remained relatively untouched by violence, the 2008 murders jolted the community. The next morning, hundreds gathered in the central plaza and decided to eradicate coca throughout the territory.

It has been — and still is — a long and difficult slog as the community has sought to uproot coca from the soil and from its culture while generating other means of income in a destitute region.

When I arrived in Tumaco to research the efficacy of joint U.S.–Colombian strategies for eradicating coca — alternative development projects designed to coax farmers to give up coca for legal crops combined with aerial spraying of herbicides to kill the coca — I wanted to understand why Las Varas was unique.

Nearly all the consejos comunitarios had at some point been part of an alternative development project, most of them sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime. The U.S. funding for these projects is funneled through Plan Colombia, the security and counter-narcotics policy that has cost the U.S. more than $7 billion since 2000. Although primarily a military policy, a small percentage of Plan Colombia funds go to USAID for rural development.

Las Varas has become the poster child for USAID projects. But in the other communities, similar projects have done little to diminish coca, while leaving many community members embittered.

The original intent of my research was to compare USAID projects, and this myopic focus prevented me from understanding why Las Varas had such different results until months after I left Tumaco. The reality is that USAID had very little to do with it. A combination of community will, a partnership with a government entity and road access explain Las Varas' comparative success. USAID was an actor but not the protagonist.

"We made the decision," said Fanny Rodriguez. "We said as a consejo comunitario, no more!"

Profits and Social Costs

Long before the shootings, a growing number of Las Varas residents had decided that the social costs of coca were too high to justify the material gain, especially given that the profits were dwindling. Marco Antonio Quintero was one of them. He grew up in Las Varas, but like many, he left to find work. Quintero returned to Las Varas in 2000, when he heard that farmers were prospering with coca. Some coca growers earned as much as $2,000 to $3,000 a month, a fortune considering that the monthly minimum wage is about $320, and few villagers earn that much from legal work.

Quintero had just 40 coca plants and was making about $600 a month. Instead of cultivating more, within a few years, he stopped growing coca completely. He said he "saw the fear that it was creating in the community" and how it affected the young people, especially men, who began to "drink too much" and "develop bad vices."

The young men who were involved in coca production readily admit that they spent much of their earnings on booze, sometimes pointing to the poor condition of their home or vehicle — if they were lucky enough to have one — as proof. Infidelity also became a source of conflict, as men used their coca profits to woo other women.

Photo by Sarah Krupp.

A woman removes impurities from cacao beans.

Although the tension over coca within the community had been mounting, it was not until after the 2008 shootings that residents united in opposition to the illicit crop and the groups that traffic it. Amid the outcry, the 15-member junta insisted that addressing the situation would have to be a communitywide struggle: each of the *veredas* (hamlets or neighborhoods) would have to commit.

"It is easy for an armed group to disappear us (the junta) one by one and for things to continue to be the same," Las Varas President José Felix recalled telling the roughly 300 residents at the meeting.

Partnership and Community Building

The junta's initial tasks were twofold: expand community leadership beyond themselves and partner with an institution that could help them with the resources and capacity-building they lacked. Recognizing that the community could not end coca cultivation, resist the armed groups and rebuild its social structure alone, they requested assistance. The department of Nariño (departments are similiar to states in the U.S.), which had already been working with an indigenous community in a similar capacity, agreed to help.

The department's regional office has assisted the process at every step and secured a patchwork of funding — nearly $3 million — for Las Varas. Under then-governor Antonio Navarro Wolfe, himself a guerilla in the 1980s, the government wrested two important concessions from the state: the constant presence of state security to quell the violence and discourage illegal activity and a temporary ban on aerial spraying of herbicides, permitting the villagers to uproot the plants with their own hands. The community, with coaching from the department staff, strengthened the elected committees in each of the veredas. They also created youth and women's committees as well as task forces charged with coordinating the cultivation and commercialization of cacao.

In 2010, two years after Las Varas residents began to remake their community — and when most of the coca was already gone — USAID spearheaded an alternative development project through a contractor. It began with food security, financing small vegetable gardens for each family, a plan that flopped. More importantly, it launched a cacao cultivation project designed to increase production and improve quality. Hundreds of families participated.

The agency and various government and international entities also invested in adult education and badly needed

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Photo by Sarah Krupp

Las Varas, Colombia.

infrastructure projects: foot bridges that allow children to get to school and farmers to transport their crops when high tide swells the rivers; improvements to the dirt road that connects Las Varas to the municipal highway; a combination basketball-soccer court; and a project to build a water system. The department staff helped the leaders negotiate and administer the projects and funding, filling a crucial void. Since consejos comunitarios do not have a sustained source of revenue, they also have no staff, leaving junta leaders — some of whom do not have a high-school education — to assume roles for which they may be ill-equipped, such as managing finances and overseeing engineering projects.

The Other Communities

In contrast with Las Varas, development assistance in the other consejos comunitarios was limited primarily to agricultural projects. They received less funding per capita and little in the way of leadership training and community building. Leaders of many of the communities said that the projects did not reflect their desires.

"The projects were not created by the community. They were created by people in Bogotá who didn't know what we needed," said Ari Ledesma, a junta member of the Consejo Comunitario Gualajo, where several leaders said the USAID project did more harm than good.

Unlike Las Varas, the other communities did not choose to eliminate coca and ask for assistance. They were selected by the Colombian government. The exchange was simple: coca eradication for aid. If authorities found coca still growing, the project was suspended until the plants were removed. The result was often stalled projects that impacted just a small portion of the community.

In spite of these setbacks, there is still a growing desire among Tumaco residents to get out of the coca trade. They are tired of the aerial spraying that kills food crops along with coca. They are tired of the violence and fear inflicted by armed narcotraffickers. Many also said that coca is no longer as profitable. Armed groups have claimed certain territories and formed drug trafficking alliances — the Rastrojos, a paramilitary gang, have allied with the guerillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) — which has reduced violence in the rural areas but has also eliminated price competition.

In the years following the USAID project in Gualajo, leaders were able to eradicate much of the community's coca, although they insist that they did this despite

— not because of — USAID. They convinced many residents to stop growing coca partly in the hope that the Nariño government would also partner with them, but the cash-poor department was unable to take on another community.

Now Gualajo — and the other consejos comunitarios — are awaiting a second round of projects that USAID has proposed for the entire region. Securing the communities will be a crucial first step, and the state has indicated that it will deploy public forces in the zones where armed groups have the most significant presence.

USAID has signaled that the new projects will be more holistic, addressing community building and infrastructure deficits. But resources are limited and not likely to allow these communities to mimic Las Varas' development without the department of Nariño's assistance or the extensive patchwork of funding that it helped leverage. Additionally, transportation is arduous, costly and only possible during high tide. According to Tumaqueños, traveling by boat is about four times more expensive than by land, making it harder to sell their products in town at competitive prices. The more difficult-to-reach communities are harder to secure and, precisely for that reason, are where armed groups find refuge.

Nor has there been a firm commitment to stop spraying, a fact that many community leaders have cited as a major obstacle. In the consejo comunitario Alto Mira, farmers returning home from a USAID-sponsored workshop several years ago learned that U.S. pilots paid with U.S. funds had sprayed their farms while they were away. The fumigation, which targeted coca, also killed the cacao crops planted partly with U.S. dollars.

"The project was allowing us to every day substitute coca. We were removing it little by little," said community president Gilmer Ganaro García.

Ganaro said the spraying seeded distrust among the community, effectively ending the project.

Yet, the Alto Mira president believes that the new development projects, if done correctly, could begin to create decent livelihoods and restore peace to his community. For Ganaro, who fled to the city after receiving death threats, it would also mean that he could come home.

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A young girl stands among the cacao pods.

Photo by Sarah Krupp.