

Comparing Coca Strategies

Method	Short-Term Effectiveness at Reducing Coca	Long-Term Effectiveness at Reducing Coca	Cost	Risk of Health or Environmental Damage	Risk of Social Discord	Risk to Eradicators or Participants	Notes
Establish a functioning state presence with basic services, low impunity for abuse and corruption, enforcement of rules that a legal economy requires	Low	High	High	Low	Low	Moderate at first, then low	This is the ideal. Nobody plants coca in parts of Colombia that have a state presence (within a 100-mile radius of Bogotá, for instance). If fully implemented, Colombia's peace accord would come close to this. But it doesn't happen quickly, it's not cheap, and it confronts pressure, much of it from Washington, for short-term results.
Allow a modest amount of coca to be cultivated for licit uses under strict regulation, and eradicate the rest	Moderate to High	Moderate to High	Moderate to Low	Low	Low	Low	This is the model Bolivia has pursued under President Evo Morales. It has helped Bolivia keep coca cultivation to manageably low levels. The model probably can't be applied elsewhere, though. In Colombia, for instance, only a tiny percentage of the population has an ancestral tradition of coca leaf use.
Occupy territory with military and police forces, enabling eradication or crop substitution to take place, but omitting full state presence	High	Moderate to Low	Moderate to High	Low, depending on herbicide and method of applying it	Moderate to Low	Moderate	This is what happened with Colombia's U.S.-backed "Territorial Consolidation" effort a decade ago. Some early progress occurred, but the civilian part of the state mostly failed to show up. Coca-growing slowly but steadily recovered.
In absence of larger state presence, crop substitution in exchange for financial assistance and government services, with forced eradication of non-participants' crops	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low, depending on herbicide and method of applying it	Moderate to Low	Moderate for manual eradicators and substitution leaders	This is the current reality of Colombia's peace accord implementation. A crop substitution program is being rolled out at a modest pace, but the accord's "rural reform" chapter, which would establish a fuller state presence via Territorially Focused Development Plans (PDETs), is still getting started and has delivered little.
Government buys up all coca produced in the country and takes it off the market	Moderate to High	Low	Moderate to High	Low	Moderate to Low	Moderate to Low	Then-Colombian president Álvaro Uribe floated this proposal in 2005. It probably wouldn't cost much more than eradication, at least at first. But the law of supply and demand would kick in. If demand for cocaine remains the same, taking coca out of the illegal market would raise its price. This would entice more growers to plant illicit coca in still-ungoverned territories, and make the government's program more expensive.
Curtail coca eradication, and focus on interdiction of drugs and precursor chemicals, on arresting top traffickers, and on detecting illicit financial flows	Low	Moderate to High	Moderate to High	Low	Low	Moderate to High	Fully carrying this out—especially the "follow the money" part—would be effective, but would require levels of official corruption far lower than today's, so this would need to be coupled with the first option above. An offensive against <i>capos</i> would worsen violence, but otherwise have minimal effect: Colombia's already intense efforts have splintered drug trafficking organizations but haven't reduced supplies.
Manual eradication carried out by drones spraying herbicides from directly overhead, generally uncoordinated with economic assistance	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate to low	Moderate to High	Moderate to low	This is a proposal currently under consideration. It's safer for the eradicators, who wouldn't have to walk through fields and risk ambushes or landmines. Applying herbicides directly over the plants would make spray drift less of an issue. But what happens after the eradicators leave?
Manual eradication carried out by people pulling up plants or directly applying herbicides, generally uncoordinated with economic assistance	High	Low	Moderate	Low	High	High	This method at least involves government representatives (the eradicators) being physically on the ground, however briefly. It appeared to bring deeper reductions in coca-growing than aerial fumigation during the late 2000s and early 2010s. But hundreds of eradicators and police escorts were killed or injured. It is often met with organized protests.
Aerial eradication carried out by aircraft spraying herbicides from some distance overhead	High	Low	Moderate to Low	High	High	Moderate to low	The cornerstone of Plan Colombia's early years. It achieved quick reductions in coca in territories where it was applied heavily. But progress proved ephemeral as growers adapted. Some eradicators' planes were shot down. Due to public health concerns, Colombia suspended aerial spraying of glyphosate in 2015.