

David against Goliath: Can Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean effectively fight drug trafficking, organised crime and terrorism?

Francis Maertens and Amado Philip de Andrés
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime¹

Why is Latin America vulnerable to crime in 2009?

In Latin America, the people identify economic issues and crime as their two greatest problems,² both of which are closely interrelated, as crime and corruption often derail economic development. Countries such as Venezuela, Guatemala and El Salvador seem to be the most concerned about rising crime problems,³ yet in Colombia crime is no longer considered the most pressing issue.

Many of the countries of the region are vulnerable to crime on account of socio-economic conditions. Income inequality is generally associated with violent crime, and the Americas contain some of the countries with the greatest disparities in wealth in the world. The recent past of conflict or authoritarian rule in many Latin American countries can also generate crime problems, as authoritarianism and civil war may have normalised violence as a means for solving disputes. Conflict introduces small arms into an area and teaches the practical and psychological skills required for their use, while authoritarian policing instils bad habits in the security services and stunts the development of the skills needed for community policing. Perceptions of growing crime can fuel popular demand for the military to be used in policing and for anti-crime legislation that reduces procedural protections to be introduced, thus eroding human rights gains.

These vulnerabilities are compounded by the drug trade, especially the production, trafficking and consumption of cocaine. In South America, the Andean region produces the world's cocaine, most of which comes from Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. An estimated 1000 tons of cocaine are produced annually, most of which are shipped to 10 million consumers in the United States and Europe. Neighbouring countries are prone to becoming transit countries, and other aspects of the trade also tend to spill over as enforcement pressures increase. This can be seen today in the cases of Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica. In 2007 and 2008, increases in cocaine seizures reported from Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay suggest that trafficking via the Southern Cone may have increased in the same period.

¹ Francis Maertens is Director, Division for Operations, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Formerly, Mr. Maertens was the Director of the Division for Public Affairs in UNODC. Amado Philip de Andrés is in charge of developing programmes for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean in the Integrated Programming Unit, Division for Operations, UNODC and formerly UNODC Deputy Representative for West and Central Africa. The views and opinions expressed in this commentary are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations.

² As shown in the *Informe Latinobarómetro 2008*.

³ See Tedesco, L., "Violencia urbana: Soluciones regionales y locales", FRIDE Policy Brief, January 2009.

Frequently quoted estimates among enforcement agencies in recent years have suggested that some 450 tons of cocaine (46% of production in 2006 and 44% in 2007) are shipped from South America to markets in North America, but that this amount is falling.⁴ Another 250 tons (25% of production) are trafficked to markets in Europe, and this amount is increasing.⁵ Most of the remainder, which is equivalent to about 170 tons in pure cocaine, is seized in the coca producing countries themselves. The balance is consumed in the region and in other parts of the world.

From at least 2006, traffickers increasingly began to use overland routes to transport cocaine from Colombia through Venezuela (and, to a lesser extent, Ecuador) to the United States of America and Europe.⁶ Of the seizures made in the region, 54% was seized on overland routes and 44% at sea. The Colombian authorities estimate that 78% may eventually be trafficked by sea, go-fast vessels (65%) or other sea craft. They also estimate that 55% of the cocaine produced in South America is transported along the Mexico-Central America corridor towards North America.

The Central American corridor

The US 'Interagency Assessment of Cocaine Movement' (IACM) estimates that between 530 and 710 tons of cocaine may have departed from South America heading towards the United States in 2006. Of this amount, some 90% is thought to have transited the Mexico-Central American Corridor in 2006. The IACM concludes that 66% of the cocaine departing from South America towards the USA in 2006 moved through the Eastern Pacific Vector, which represents an increase in comparison with the same figure for the previous year (50%).

The dominance of the Central American transit corridor is a recent occurrence. The Colombian Cali and Medellín "cartels" preferred the Caribbean corridor and used it from the late 1970s.⁷ In the 1980s, most of the cocaine entering the United States came through the Caribbean into South Florida.⁸ But interdiction successes caused the traffickers to reassess their routes. By 1998, about 58% of the cocaine went via Central America/Mexico, 30% via the Caribbean, and 11% via direct commercial sea freight or air flights.⁹ In 1999, the flows across the Mexican border dropped to about 54%, flows via the Caribbean increased to 43%, and only 3% arrived directly from South America.¹⁰ By 2000, the ratios shifted to 66% Central America/Mexico and 33% Caribbean, with a decrease in the use of Haiti and Puerto Rico and an increase in the use of Jamaica.¹¹ By 2003, the ratio was 77% through Central America/Mexico and 22% via the Caribbean.¹² In 2006, 90% was said to go via Central America, with two thirds along the Pacific Coast, and 8% via Hispaniola.¹³

⁴ UNODC, World Drug Reports 2007 and 2008, Vienna.

⁵ Direction Centrale de la Police Judiciaire / Police Nationale in France, 'The Traffic of Cocaine through the Maritime Channel in 2006', presentation given by the French delegation to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 12-16 March 2007. A 250 metric ton figure of cocaine destined to Europe has also been repeatedly quoted by Europol as an estimate for Europe.

⁶ 'Country report – Colombia', Meeting of Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, Latin America and the Caribbean (HONLAC), Quito, Ecuador, 15-19 October 2007.

⁷ US Department of Justice, National Intelligence Center, National Drug Threat Assessment 2008, October 2007.

⁸ Statement of Thomas A. Constantine, Head of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Crime, 3 April 1997.

⁹ National Drug Intelligence Center, National Drug Threat Assessment 2001. Washington D.D.: Department of Justice, 2001.

¹⁰ De-classified Joint Intelligence Report, 'Worldwide drug threat assessment'. Washington D.C., April 2000.

¹¹ National Drug Intelligence Centre, National Drug Threat Assessment 2002, Washington D.C.: Department of Justice, 2002.

¹² National Drug Intelligence Center, National Drug Threat Assessment 2005, Washington D.C.: Department of Justice 2005.

¹³ National Drug Intelligence Center, National Drug Threat Assessment 2008, Washington D.C.: Department of Justice 2008.

This shift in trafficking patterns has been attributed to law enforcement action. Another possible explanation is the long-term trend towards Mexican domination of the US cocaine markets. In the 1980s, Mexican cartels were used primarily to transport cocaine into the United States on behalf of Colombian groups. But since the traffickers were paid in cocaine, purportedly receiving half the shipment since the 1990s, it was only a matter of time before they began to dominate all aspects of the trade. Today, while Colombian groups and their Dominican associates still control the Northeast, Mexican groups are challenging other organisations throughout the country. Colombian/Dominican groups have traditionally preferred to use the Caribbean, while Mexican groups prefer to use the Central American corridor. While Colombians continue to control supply to the European market, Mexican traffickers also have a presence. In 2007, the Mexican authorities seized 48 tons of cocaine, more than double the amount seized in 2006.¹⁴

The Caribbean remains a competitive platform

However, the shift away from the Caribbean may be short-lived. The Caribbean has been a centre for smuggling contraband for centuries. In the past, the flow of cocaine oscillated between the two corridors, in response to enforcement action and other factors. The Caribbean is likely to maintain its attractiveness to traffickers for a variety of reasons. As long as Colombian trafficking groups remain a factor, they will likely continue to utilise both the Mexican organised crime groups and other trafficking networks to move their drugs. The continued importance of Caribbean expatriate groups in wholesaling and retailing cocaine in the United States, particularly in the Northeast, is also likely to promote Caribbean-controlled trafficking routes. The Caribbean has linguistic, historical, commercial, and legal ties to some of the major consumer countries, which include its massive tourism industry. These ties include daily direct air flights and container traffic. The torrent of remittances from expatriate populations, as well as a large financial services industry, provides cover for money laundering.

Therefore, despite recent shifts, large quantities of drugs continue to transit the Caribbean. In 2005, it was estimated that about 10 tons of cocaine transited through Jamaica, and 20 tons through Haiti and the Dominican Republic. More recently, it appears that Hispaniola has further increased its importance, and the number of Dominican traffickers arrested by Federal authorities in the US has grown. The Dominican authorities seized 3.8 tons of cocaine in 7,342 seizures in 2007, suggesting that much of the trafficking is small scale. Dominican traffickers have also established a presence in Europe, with Dominicans comprising 4% of the foreign drug traffickers arrested in Italy in 2006 and 17% of the foreign cocaine traffickers arrested in Spain in 2007 (over 500 individuals between the two countries).

The southern Caribbean has also come under increased pressure as transshipment through Venezuela grows and the European market gains in importance. Recently, the Netherlands Antilles led the world in per capita cocaine seizures, but this prominence seems to have diminished as enforcement efforts have sharply reduced airport couriership through the Dutch Caribbean to the Netherlands. These efforts may have pushed trafficking southward toward Trinidad and Tobago, where seizures and drug-related violence have increased in recent years. There is much commercial sea traffic between Venezuela and these islands which are just a few kilometres offshore.¹⁵ This traffic provides cover for drug shipments that can then be forwarded by sea or by air.

¹⁴ This increase was due to a series of remarkable large seizures, including a reported 23 tons seized in one haul in Manzanillo.

¹⁵ Curaçao is less than 65 km off the coast of Venezuela. Venezuela is the source of 52 percent of imports.

Trafficking remains dominated by Colombian and Mexican groups; the role that Central American gangs are playing in cocaine transshipment remains unclear and subject to change. It appears that much of the cocaine sent via the Pacific enters Mexico directly - in 2007, the Mexican authorities estimated that 57% of the cocaine entering their country comes by sea. But Central American countries, particularly Guatemala and Honduras,¹⁶ appear to be used as staging areas for road and air transport into Mexico, as well as for fast-boat traffic along the Caribbean coast. Here, Central Americans may be playing a logistical role.

Central American maras (street gangs) have often been associated with drug trafficking, particularly since the US Operation Community Shield began targeting gang members for deportation in 2005. These deportees have included more than 2000 members of Mara Salvatrucha, a gang founded by Salvadoran nationals which is active in both the US and Central America. But there remain reasons to be sceptical that mara members are key players in transnational drug trafficking.

Street gangs become more sophisticated and diversify their operations

Street gangs commonly control retail drug markets, but they have also been accused of involvement in transnational drug trafficking, and for using these funds to further foster local criminality. For example, in a number of Central American countries, including El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, gangs are seen to be at the core of the local crime problem, and the most prominent anti-crime strategies hinge on stamping them out.

According to information received by UNODC from law enforcement sources in Central America and Mexico, youth gangs active in Mexico and Central America may be classified into three categories:

- First, unemployed youths who join the "maras" and may be linked with some kind of criminal activity such as counterfeiting, smuggling of cigarettes, etc.
- Second, more organised youth gangs with operational ties to groups of enforcers of Mexican drug cartels, known as "sicarios". According to Mexican, United States and European intelligence sources, 5,000 "chiefs" and "animadores" of youth gangs from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are very active in 200 "cells" (operational units) in 23 of the 32 States of Mexico.
- Third, according to the Mexican federal police, certain Mexican drug cartels directly employ selected individuals from the maras to partner them on ad-hoc operations such as drug trafficking, prostitution, and the smuggling of arms and ammunition. According to Mexican and Central American intelligence sources, one of the deadliest Mexican drug networks, the Gulf cartel, has been recruiting MS-13 gang members from El Salvador and Guatemalan Kaibiles since mid-2007.¹⁷

¹⁶ 'Country Report – Mexico', Meeting of Heads of National Drug Law Enforcement Agencies, Latin America and the Caribbean (HONLAC), Quito, Ecuador, 15-19 October 2007. Information provided to UNODC by the Ministry of National Security of Honduras in October 2008.

¹⁷ INCB report 2008.

President Calderón's New Crusade against drug cartels

In recent years, Mexico's drug cartels have waged increasingly violent battles with one another as well as with the Mexican government. Upon taking office in December 2006, Mexican President Felipe Calderón deployed thousands of federal troops in a selective crackdown on drug-related violence. Yet death tolls continue to rise. There were more than 2,500 drug-related deaths in 2007, and the yearly toll rose to more than 4,000 by the end of 2008. Murders and street gun battles are only part of a more entrenched problem that includes corrupt police forces and a judiciary adapting to the newly sophisticated modus operandi of drug trafficking. Recent police and judicial reforms are a step in the right direction, but such reforms will take time to implement. Meanwhile, increased and sustained cooperation from the United States is seen as necessary to stem drug-related violence.

About 90 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States is trafficked through Mexico, according to the State Department's 2008 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. Mexico's extensive cocaine trade is controlled by cartels based in border areas and along the southeast coast. Three groups - the Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel and the Tijuana Cartel - have waged an increasingly violent turf war over key trafficking routes and "plazas", or border crossing areas. According to Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, Patricia Espinosa,¹⁸ and other Government officials, such a threat is further exacerbated by firearms being smuggled from the United States to Mexico through the 3000 kilometres of common borders.

Violence reached acute levels in 2006 and has only worsened since then: decapitations became common and cartels began disseminating videos documenting gruesome deaths - "narco messages" - to threaten rival cartels and government officials. While initially the majority of violence was between cartel members, in the past two years, police officers, journalists and politicians have become frequent targets of drug killings. In May 2008, for instance, Mexico's acting federal police chief was killed in a drug hit.

In December 2006, President Calderón deployed roughly thirty-six thousand troops to work with the federal police in nine states, including Michoacán, Guerrero and the so-called Golden Triangle of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua. These troops eradicate crops, gather intelligence, conduct raids, interrogate suspects and seize contraband.

Some experts say the Calderón Administration did not have any other good options for tackling the drug cartels. Police corruption appears to be pervasive at the federal, state and local levels, but the army is regarded as well-trained and disciplined. Furthermore, the Mexican public respects the military. "The military and the church are the two most respected institutions in Mexico", mentions David A. Shirk, director of the University of San Diego's Trans-Border Institute and editor of a recent book on judicial reform in Mexico. Since the public outcry over a 1968 student protest that the army was sent in to suppress, the military has shored up its reputation by maintaining distance from the public. As a result, unlike in many Latin American countries, the military abstained from political involvement in the 1970s and 1980s.

Some analysts say that deploying the army to tackle drug violence has made it vulnerable to the same corruption infecting the police. Moreover, Mexico and Central America would need better trained and well equipped counter-narcotics specialised units to effectively fight organised crime at the federal, state and regional levels. This solution would decrease the risk of continuous recourse to military action to the detriment of effective community policing, inter-agency cooperation and efficient inter-state judicial and law enforcement cooperation.

¹⁸ Interview with Patricia Espinosa, El País, 17 January 2009.

Other analysts state that the effect of counter-narcotic policy in Colombia and Mexico may have had a negative domino effect on the increase of violence and drug activity in Central America.¹⁹ According to this assumption, the increase of drug trafficking and violence is caused by a triple effect: firstly, inter-group rivalry in rival criminal organisations to expand the geographical reach of their operations and market share. Secondly, as in the case of Guatemala and Belize, the permeability of their borders, lack of inter-agency coordination to generate intelligence and effective threat assessments have further increased their vulnerability to organised criminal groups operating in their territories. Thirdly, the urgent need to strengthen the rule of law with well-trained judges and prosecutors and a national police with viable means to fight drug trafficking and contain violence.

In 2007, President Calderón and President George W. Bush agreed to cooperate on counter-narcotics efforts. Their meeting resulted in the Mérida Initiative, a three-year \$1.5 billion plan to combat drug trafficking in Mexico and Central America. The initiative, which passed the U.S. Congress in June 2008, allocated \$400 million in 2008 to purchase equipment such as helicopters; expand Mexico's telecommunications infrastructure and its ability to monitor airspace; strengthen existing programs to professionalise Mexico's police; and provide advanced technologies to Mexican law enforcement agencies.

On 12 January 2009, President-elect Obama met with President Felipe Calderón to discuss the mounting narco-violence (as well as issues of trade, security and immigration).²⁰ President Obama has announced his support for President Bush's Mérida Initiative and also vowed to support President Calderón's initiative to curb gun smuggling from the U.S. into Mexico.²¹ National security concerns stemming from the flow of illegal guns from the United States to Mexico²² have contributed to the sense of urgency in both nations. Shortly after the meeting between President Obama and President Calderón, a bill to target gun smuggling into Mexico was introduced by U.S. Senators Kay Bailey Hutchison and Jeff Bingaman, providing US\$30 million in funding to develop the Justice Department's Project Gunrunner Initiative.²³ Furthermore, President Obama has already met with his newly appointed Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, to discuss measures to improve information-sharing with law enforcement across the border.²⁴

In a similar context, President Martín Torrijos of Panama invited Presidents Felipe Calderón, Álvaro Uribe (Colombia) and Álvaro Colom (Guatemala) on 15 January 2009 to Panama to finalise and endorse a Declaration which launches a proposal to prepare an instrument open to all Member States in the region to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation to effectively fight organised crime, especially drug and weapons smuggling, trafficking in persons, money laundering and other criminal activities.

¹⁹ *The Latin American dilemma: drug trafficking and organized crime*. IRIUM Working Paper 5789, October 2008.

²⁰ http://www.elpasotimes.com/news/ci_11411514?source=rss.

²¹ <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5j7PCEJIKFtNw5Mi3KAmjAzoVhsdQD95LG6180>.

²² Mexican data suggest that 90 percent of the guns being smuggled into their country come from the United States and amount to a business of more than US\$22 million dollars per year. <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/37481914.html>.

²³ <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/37481914.html>.

²⁴ Id.

Money laundering, organised crime and terrorism in the region

Linked to drug trafficking and related organised crime operations is the ability to launder money by criminal groups. Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean receive massive remittances, and US currency is often smuggled in bulk through Mexico and Central America. Both Panama and El Salvador have dollarised their economies, and the use of the dollar in Panama is one key reason the country is so attractive for money laundering. Historically, the Caribbean has been susceptible to money laundering for a number of reasons. It has long focused on providing offshore financial services to the United States and European markets, but owing to its small state capacity, it has not had sufficient oversight resources. It is physically located along one of the world's premiere drug and cash thoroughfares. The tourism sector generates numerous cash-based businesses through which dirty money can flow undetected.

With regard to terrorism in the region, as in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the differences on the ground between the Shia Muslim sects and the Sunni *wahhabi/salafist* sects appear to be overcome by tactical alliances, particularly in relation to the movement of money and the procurement of services such as false identity papers. According to Douglas Farah, author of *The Growing Terrorism Challenges from Latin America*, in Latin America, Hezbollah (Shia) and Hamas (Sunni)²⁵ have developed sophisticated - but little studied - financial structures, largely through the unregulated exchange houses and free trade zones in specific parts of the region, including Panama's Colon Free Trade Zone, Isla Margarita in Venezuela, Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, the Aruba Free Trade Zone and others. According to the same author, the overarching structure that enables these groups to work alongside each other is the international Muslim Brotherhood, the one pan-Islamist group that has for several decades served as a bridge between the two factions. This is but a mere working example of the entire spectrum of the terrorist threat in the region.

There is also evidence, in the form of corporate registrations, that these criminal groups have established dozens of offshore companies in Panama and the Caribbean. Additionally, such criminal ventures appear to have financial dealings with specific banks that are often also involved in money laundering activities for drug cartels and other illegal transactions.²⁶

In the Caribbean, such criminal groups have a long history of offshore banking, dating back to 1982, when criminal leaders opened a series of banks, insurance companies and offshore shell companies.²⁷ Globally, these banks handle billions of dollars of transactions and investments, according to senior U.S. counterterrorism officials.²⁸

Moreover, regional authorities worry about the "growing influence" of Islamic radical groups as a threat to the Caribbean's maritime security, in addition to more traditional concerns such as organised gangs, illegal migration and drug trafficking.²⁹

²⁵ According to Central American law enforcement, Hamas appears to be active in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

²⁶ Some preliminary work in this field has been done by the NEFA Foundation, including the retrieval of corporate records from Panama and the Bahamas on Islamic banking institutions and offshore companies of the leadership of the international Muslim Brotherhood. These documents are quoted by Douglas Farah, author of *The Growing Terrorism Challenges from Latin America*, International Assessment and Strategy Center, 18 February 2007.

²⁷ Research sponsored by the NEFA Foundation has documented numerous banks and companies registered in Nassau, Bahamas, Panama. These documents are quoted by Douglas Farah, author of *The Growing Terrorism Challenges from Latin America*, International Assessment and Strategy Center, 18 February 2007.

²⁸ Interview of Douglas Farah with two senior U.S. counter-terrorism officials, referred to in *The Growing Terrorism Challenges from Latin America*, 2007. The Muslim Brotherhood financial holdings are generally estimated to be about \$5 billion, according to officials.

²⁹ For example, four men from Guyana and Trinidad were arrested in June 2007 and accused of conspiring to ignite fuel lines feeding New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport. The suspected ringleader, a Guyanese-born U.S. citizen, was taken into custody in New York. The others were fighting extradition from Trinidad (International Herald Tribune, 5 July 2007).

Global solutions for a regional challenge: Is David ready to effectively combat Goliath?

The Americas have a drug and crime problem: South America produces almost all of the world's cocaine, and North America consumes half of it (while most of the rest goes to Europe). The American hemisphere produces more than half of the world's cannabis herb, and 10 percent of North Americans smoke it at least once a year. The illicit trade in heroin, synthetic drugs and chemical precursors is predominantly intra-regional. In short, drug demand in the Americas is largely satisfied by drug supply in the Americas and the problem should therefore be treated as a hemispheric security issue.

The victims are the countries and communities caught in the cross-fire. Drug-related crime and the violence that it fuels in Central America, parts of the Caribbean and Mexico are a threat to public security and an impediment to development - this is what the public and foreign investors fear the most.

Weak law enforcement enables drug trafficking, which, in turn, serves to further undermine the rule of law. It is no coincidence that the countries most affected by trafficking have some of the highest murder rates in the world. Narco-trafficking also poses a threat to urban security, from Toronto to Tierra del Fuego. Gang violence in Central America and the Caribbean and gun-related crime are on the rise, to the extent that some neighbourhoods have become combat zones.

The problem is spilling over across the Atlantic. West Africa is under attack from Latin American drug traffickers cashing in on a strong Euro and increasing demand for cocaine in Europe. In the past five years, the amount of cocaine transiting this vulnerable coastline has grown at an exponential rate.

Tackling the threat of narco-trafficking in the Americas is a shared responsibility. No country is immune from the problem: all participate, either as a source of drugs, a transit country for trafficking, or an importer. The transnational nature of the problem requires regional cooperation, for example through the United Nations, the Merida Initiative, CARICOM, the Organisation of American States, and regional development banks. It also requires increased inter-regional intelligence sharing, for example between West Africa and Latin America.

Bilateral and international assistance can reduce vulnerability to drugs and crime. This includes development assistance to promote education, employment, rural development and urban renewal. It also requires technical assistance to improve capacity and integrity in law enforcement and justice systems in order that they can better protect witnesses, counter trafficking, fight corruption and money laundering, protect human rights, combat gang violence and deal with serious organised crime.

From a regional perspective, Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean are currently facing the most acute and challenging menace in terms of drug trafficking and organised crime. Such a panorama needs an Action Plan tackling increased drug trafficking using a dual route (via the Caribbean and Central America) that reaches out to Europe via West Africa, while reducing street gang activities and effectively fighting organised crime on all its active fronts.

Strengthening the rule of law can unleash development, as less crime means more growth and stability. For example, Haiti and Jamaica could double their annual economic income if they could bring their crime rates down to Costa Rica's level. More effective law enforcement and

greater cooperation are necessary to tackle narco-trafficking in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. UNODC is working very closely with the governments of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Mexico to prepare a Plan of Action for the region based on the creation of centres of excellence specialising in sophisticated and state-of-the-art maritime security, anti-organised crime, anti-money laundering, counter-narcotics enforcement and judicial cooperation techniques. Key stakeholders in the region such as the United States, Canada and the European Union also share a responsibility to support this on-going process.

UNODC has also established a strategic partnership with CARICOM and the Central American Integration System (SICA) in the Caribbean and Central America, respectively, to strengthen security and the rule of law in these priority regions.

Policy Recommendations:

- Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean are currently facing a challenging menace in terms of drug trafficking and organised crime. Such a panorama urgently calls for an Action Plan tackling increased drug trafficking using a dual route (via the Caribbean and Central America) that reaches out to Europe via West Africa, while reducing street gang activities and effectively fighting organised crime on all its active fronts.
- By fighting this menace, Mexico and countries in Central America and the Caribbean will consolidate their *economic development* while securing their democracies and multiplying their service industries (especially tourism) with tremendous growth potential in Central America and the Caribbean. For example, Haiti and Jamaica could double their annual economic income if they could bring their crime rates down to Costa Rica's level. Mexico would finally become an engine of growth in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- In this context, a *holistic security strategy* is needed for the Caribbean, which should be prepared for the CARIFORUM countries (CARICOM plus Cuba and the Dominican Republic) with the technical assistance of UNODC and other key stakeholders.
- Central America also needs a tailor-made Action Plan to strengthen the rule of law and efficiently fight organised crime and drug trafficking based on the establishment of *centres of excellence* in the region, as well as close cooperation with the US and Europe.

FRIDE's Comments provide a brief and concise analysis of current topics in international affairs in the fields of peace and security, democratisation, human rights, and humanitarian action and development. Further information about FRIDE, as well as its publications can be found at www.fride.org

The views expressed by the authors of the documents published on this website do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE.
If you have any comments on the articles or any other suggestions, please email us at comments@fride.org

Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org