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COLOMBIA

CARIBBEAN ROUTES REVIVE AS
COCAINE FLOWS SHIFT TOWARDS
EUROPEAN MARKETS

Lina María Asprilla | Andrés Aponte

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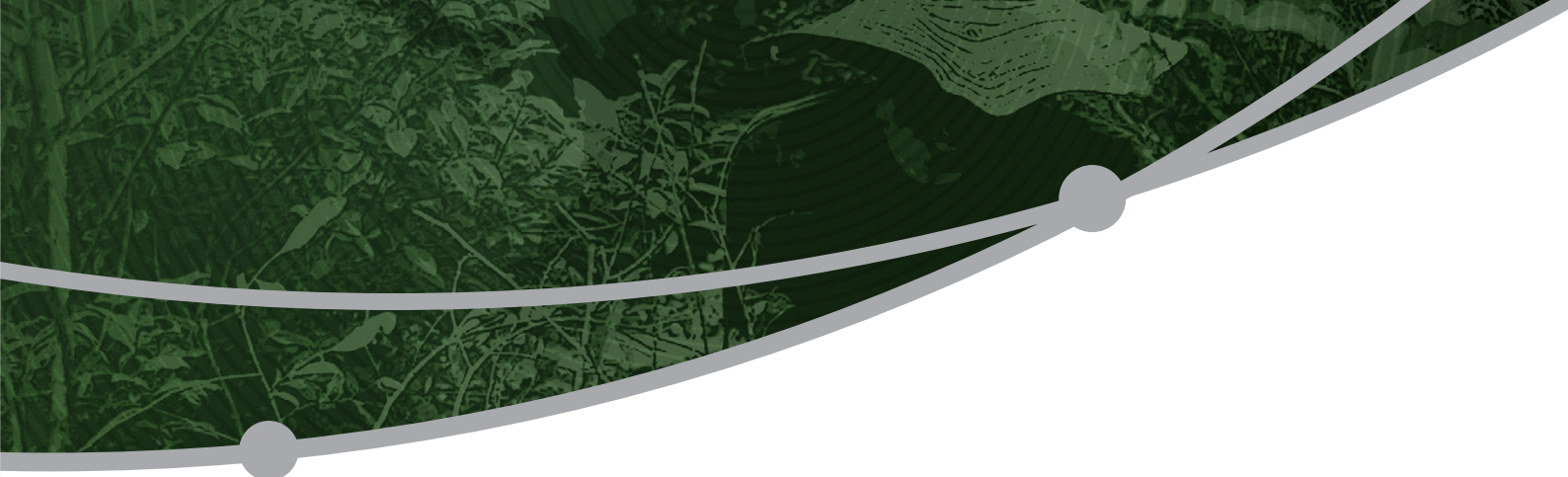
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Caribbean region has numerous operational and logistical advantages for cocaine trafficking, but its growing role in global supply chains remains under-investigated. Within this context, Colombia's role as the main producer of cocaine is undeniable and has been amply documented. This report analyzes cocaine-producing enclaves in Colombia, and how cocaine moves from production centres to the Caribbean region. It also explains some less-studied relationships with respect to ties with other areas in the Caribbean that are indispensable for the amount of cocaine reaching European markets indicated by recent statistics.

In addition to the long-standing traffic towards the United States (US), as well as the growing importance of transit countries such as Chile,¹ Paraguay² and Surinam,³ there are more recent focal points of concern. This report focuses on international connections from departure points in the Colombian Caribbean to transit areas including the Lesser Antilles, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. These countries in turn connect to the European market, and have shown renewed importance over the past decade.⁴

A report from the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), which analyzed drug seizures destined for the European Union (EU) between January 2019 and June 2024, found that, within Latin America, Colombia was the third most common country of origin for cocaine shipments seized en route to EU maritime ports: Ecuador heads the list with 306 423 kilograms of cocaine seized, followed by Brazil with 97 257 kilograms and Colombia with 77 696 kilograms.⁵

In the global architecture of cocaine trafficking, Colombia is the main cocaine-producing country, with continually increasing capacity. The recent trend can be partly explained by both the strategic focus of former President Gustavo Petro's government, which was more centred on the policies of interdiction by land and sea than on eradicating illegal crops, as well as by the sustained growth in global demand for cocaine, which continues to drive expanded production. In 2024, Colombia had a very high annual volume of seizures, and more than 550 tonnes of cocaine hydrochloride intercepted nationally between 2020 and 2024.⁶

The fight against drug trafficking in Colombia is now at a new inflection point, following Petro's administration faced regional tensions, particularly with Donald Trump's administration in the US. The US has reverted to a more repressive stance in the war against drugs, consequently 'decertifying' Colombia; that is, formally considering Colombia to have demonstrably failed in its efforts to reduce the production and trafficking of illegal drugs.

Mounting pressure during Petro's presidency gave rise to a political reversal in Colombia's 2026 elections. The new administration not only seeks to break with the earlier dynamic; it is also showing complete alignment with the focus and strategies of the fight against drugs from Washington.

President Abela's anti-drug programme is a radical break from Petro's policies. De la Espriella will focus on forced eradication, which could open the door to a heavier presence by US military forces, including direct action against vessels alleged to be transporting drugs to the Caribbean islands. An early sign of this possible alignment is that the Colombian government has been invited to be part of the Shield of the Americas, a cooperation initiative from which Colombia was excluded during Petro's government.

This scenario highlights the risks of a strategy that could end up not only reproducing traditional humanitarian impacts on producing farmers but extending them to the most vulnerable segment of intermediation: the transporters. Historically, they have absorbed the highest costs of repression without this resulting in a structural reduction in trafficking.

The Caribbean as a strategic node

Within this context, it is necessary to examine the dynamics of Colombia's Caribbean coast. This area, which has been marginalized in previous analyses, is now a key determining factor in the cocaine-trafficking economy. Over the past 10 years, the region has positioned itself as a strategic transit space for merchandise destined for the European market. It has become an essential logistical corridor due to its geographic location and the diversity of its maritime departure points, taking advantage of the infrastructure developed in the 1970s and 1980s, when cocaine was mainly smuggled to the US.

The reactivation of international routes for cocaine produced in Colombia through the Caribbean is related to at least three factors. First, the saturation of the cocaine market in the US and tightened controls have led criminal organizations to reactivate the smuggling and trafficking routes used by Colombian cartels in the 1980s, with the objective of expanding their market share in Europe.⁷

After the US, the European market is the most important worldwide:⁸ in 2025, 4.6 million people aged 15 to 64 stated they had consumed cocaine,⁹ while analysis of wastewater indicates even higher consumption over the past decade.¹⁰ In France and Germany, consumption has doubled and tripled with respect to previous years, according to the most recent data, rising, respectively, from 5.6% of the population (2017) to 9.4% (2023), and from 0.6% (2015) to 1.6% (2021).¹¹

Second, the geographic position of the Caribbean and the possibilities offered by access routes to the ocean, both from official and alternative ports, situate this region as a strategic node. The existence of a significant number of islands that can serve as points of transit, storage and/or hideouts to facilitate trafficking contributes to the supremacy of maritime routes over other possible corridors.¹² According to the EUDA, four of the 10 main countries from which the cocaine that reaches Europe originates are located in the Caribbean basin, or have access to it: Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic. Against the backdrop of a global trend, cooperation between local, national and transnational criminal groups has given rise to a network that guarantees the continued flow of cocaine and its arrival in European ports.

Finally, several recent geopolitical events – particularly interventions by the US in the Caribbean, along the Venezuelan coasts, the situation in Haiti and the lack of control over its coasts, as well as reinforced controls along the land borders of the US – have led to novel adaptations to cocaine

trafficking and routes. Criminal organizations operating in the region, such as the Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia (EGC) (also known as the Clan del Golfo),¹³ and transnational organizations, such as certain criminal groups in the Balkans or Italy's 'Ndrangheta, have diversified their routes in the Caribbean in response to stricter controls and the increased presence of various security forces. Other impacts of this new context are seen in recent detentions of intermediaries affiliated with criminal organizations in several Colombian port cities (Santa Marta, Cartagena and Barranquilla) since 2024,¹⁴ the growing role of Dominican networks, and the increased number of seizures in Panama and Costa Rica.¹⁵

The combination of these factors has enabled criminal groups to expand their operations, allowing them to extend their routes and project their activities towards new markets, particularly in Europe.¹⁶

The aim of this report is to analyze how the cocaine market in the Colombian Caribbean – with intended markets in Europe – functions, paying special attention to the interrelationships with the smallest countries and local communities that are directly involved in trafficking. To this end, this document is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes the functioning of the first two links in the cocaine-trafficking chain in the Colombian Caribbean, coca leaf production and internal transit routes to Caribbean ports. The second section studies the modalities of trafficking – maritime, land and air – used by criminal organizations. The third section identifies interconnections between the Colombian Caribbean and other parts of the region, specifically Venezuela, the Lesser Antilles and the Dominican Republic. Finally, this report draws a series of conclusions based on recent trends in the area, and makes recommendations in light of the indicated changes identified and the challenges created by these new dynamics in cocaine trafficking.

Methodology

This report employs a qualitative methodology. Research was conducted through semi-structured interviews and information compiled from secondary sources, such as reports, situational assessments and case studies on cocaine trafficking. A total of 30 interviews were conducted, of which eight were national. The remaining 22 interviews were carried out during fieldwork in the capital cities of the departments that make up the Colombian Caribbean: Montería (Córdoba), Cartagena (Bolívar), Barranquilla (Atlántico), Santa Marta (Magdalena) and Riohacha (La Guajira), during May and June 2025.

To understand this complex landscape, a wide range of people were interviewed, among them members of the Colombian police force, employees of local and national institutions, experts on domestic and international ports, representatives from the United Nations system, local academics, journalists and civil society leaders. The information compiled was organized into a matrix classifying and arranging findings by type of participant, trafficking dynamics, departure points and trafficking modalities, among other factors, to facilitate the triangulation of information and the establishment of comparisons.

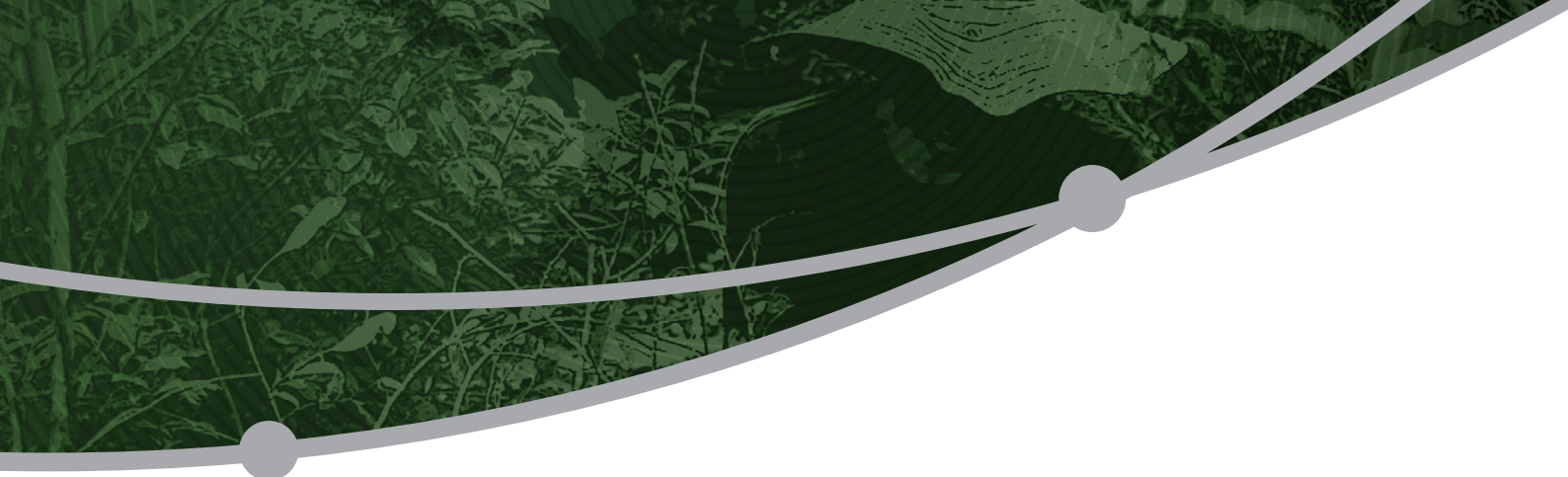
For safety reasons, and given the sensitivity of the issues discussed, the GI-TOC has taken the steps necessary to guarantee the confidentiality of the information collected and to protect the identities of participants. Consequently, none of the interviewees are identified by their real names.

Regarding secondary sources, specialized documents on drug trafficking in Colombia and the Caribbean were systematically reviewed, with a particular emphasis on cocaine trafficking. This review included academic literature, local and international reports, press articles and specialized publications.

Although the research was predominantly qualitative, quantitative data on cocaine trafficking was also collected and analyzed. This data was tabulated and mapped to show trends – both historical and recent – of cocaine flows and the direction of travel. The maps created show seizures of both base paste and cocaine hydrochloride. The information used is from the International Centre on Analysis of Maritime Drug Trafficking of the Colombian Armed Forces, the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Transportation.

Key findings and recommendations

- The Colombian Caribbean has been revived as a strategic route for cocaine trafficking. This region is a key geopolitical point for drug trafficking due to its prime location and the routes that can be traversed between Latin America and Europe.
- Internal cocaine flows show the connection between production zones and departure routes, which are determined by territorial control and influenced by the dynamics of armed conflict. These dynamics continuously reconfigure power among criminal actors.
- Maritime drug trafficking is the main way cocaine is transported in the Colombian Caribbean. This involves shipments to formal, natural and informal ports, which are exploited by armed criminal groups linked to transnational networks.
- Cocaine trafficking involves various actors: state employees and security forces, as well as individuals and groups from local communities, armed groups and criminal structures.
- The EGC has established itself as the dominant player in the western Caribbean cocaine trade, performing a material role in the three links of the illicit economy: production, processing and selling. Control of the eastern Caribbean is being fought over by the EGC, the Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada (ACSN) and local criminal groups.
- In the Greater Caribbean, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and the Lesser Antilles have taken on an increasingly important role in the dynamics of cocaine trafficking to Europe.
- Although Colombia has backed initiatives to improve port security against drug trafficking and contraband, the country still lacks a comprehensive and detailed national strategy that specifically approaches criminal risks at maritime ports.
- Strategies against cocaine trafficking in the Caribbean require a regional focus and cooperation that recognizes the structural role of Colombia and the criminal connections, logistics and governance that coordinate and facilitate illegal trade between the Caribbean and Europe.
- Coastal and inland communities participate in drug trafficking networks due to historical conditions of exclusion, smuggling-based economies and a weak state presence. Addressing this requires comprehensive responses that combine security with economic development and the strengthening of institutions.



THE COCA MARKET IN COLOMBIA

Colombia has been waging a so-called war on drugs for nearly five decades. This has been resource intensive and come at an enormous cost to society. Despite this, neither the production nor consumption of psychoactive substances has decreased. Although the figures show an ongoing war against cultivation and production, the number of hectares of coca crops has increased over the past 26 years from 160 120 to 261 000 hectares, and the potential production of cocaine has tripled in the past two decades.¹⁷

This trend has been particularly pronounced in recent years: since 2019, Colombia's planted areas of coca and its cocaine production have been increasing. The departments of Norte de Santander (Catatumbo), Nariño (Anden Pacífico), Cauca and Putumayo each have more than 30 000 hectares of cultivated coca. Antioquia (Bajo Cauca) and Sur de Bolívar together contain 15 enclaves of coca production, accounting for 44% (114 000 hectares) of the total area under cultivation in the country.¹⁸ This overview shows that despite the significant increase in crops, the geographic concentration has remained the same. This points to the ability of the criminal organizations that control the crops to adapt to state responses and highlights the limitations of the strategies implemented in the war on drugs.¹⁹

This persistence of coca cultivation in these regions can be explained by several factors. Many of these areas are marginalized both economically and politically, leaving households and local economies in a condition of precariousness. In the absence of viable alternatives, coca cultivation becomes the main, and often only, source of livelihood. The structural barriers to economic and social development in these regions reinforce this dependence, making coca the default alternative available. This continuity therefore points to the limited and ineffective results of state-backed programmes in changing these dynamics.

Although there are no large concentrations of crops in the Colombian Caribbean in comparison with other regions of the country, there are also no historical centres of cocaine production. In 2023, the southern regions of Córdoba and Sur de Bolívar reported 7 000 and 10 000 hectares under cultivation, respectively. The numbers were quite low in Magdalena, with fewer than 500 cultivated hectares, and no planted hectares were reported in Cesar, which contrasts with measurements taken in 2022.²⁰ The hectares registered in Magdalena are concentrated in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, an isolated mountain range in the north, supplying routes to secondary ports located in Parque Tayrona (Magdalena) and Dibulla (La Guajira), which are currently controlled by the ACSN.²¹

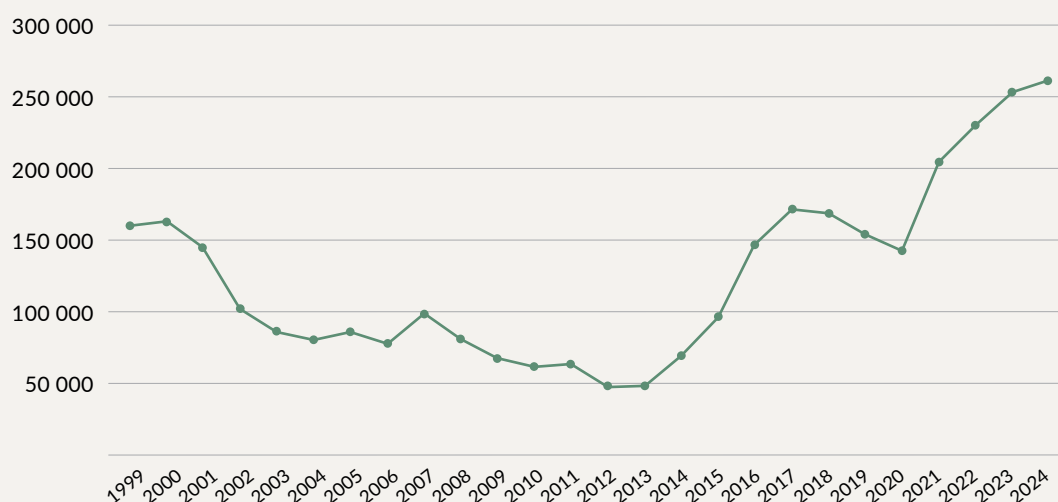


FIGURE 1 Coca crops in Colombia by number of hectares, 1999–2024.

SOURCE: UNODC, Monitoring of territories with the presence of coca crops 2024: Colombia, June 2026

Despite the relatively small amount of land used for coca cultivation, the Caribbean is a transit and collection area²² from which cocaine is moved onto international routes using the numerous commercial and alternative ports located along the coastline.²³ The cocaine that is trafficked through the Colombian Caribbean comes mainly – although not exclusively – from five production areas in the country: Catatumbo (Norte de Santander), Sur de Bolívar (Bolívar), Bajo Cauca (Antioquia), Putumayo and Sur de Córdoba (Córdoba).

Of these areas, Catatumbo and Putumayo²⁴ were two of the regions where the first illegal coca crops in Colombia were grown in the 1980s and before later expanding. Since 2017, they have both been among the areas with the largest numbers of planted hectares in the country (Figure 3). There are currently disputes in the two regions between armed groups fighting to control the entire drug trafficking chain. In Catatumbo, Frente 33 is fighting dissidents of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), while in Putumayo, the Comandos de Frontera and Frente Carolina Ramírez are embroiled in conflict. These areas are recovering following the 2022 coca crisis, which led to low business profitability, difficulty selling coca leaves, production slowdowns, a lack of resources to purchase chemical products, and serious impacts on families who depended exclusively on coca crops.²⁵

Sur de Córdoba and Sur de Bolívar, in turn, are production areas that are closer to the Caribbean coast, where coca crop growth has been gradual but sustained since 2017. In Córdoba, production and the rest of the drug trafficking chain have been dominated by the EGC. In Sur de Bolívar, there is an ongoing territorial dispute between the ELN, the EGC and FARC dissidents to control coca, illegal gold mining and the mobility corridors that connect the Caribbean to the eastern part of the country.²⁶

Bajo Cauca Antioquia is another strategic zone being disputed by the EGC, the ELN and FARC dissidents to control illegal coca-related economies, gold exploitation and the mobility corridors that connect to Nudo del Paramillo, a major mountain range in the north-west.²⁷ Coca crops in this region have been more volatile, decreasing significantly in 2019 and 2020, before growing consistently since 2021.

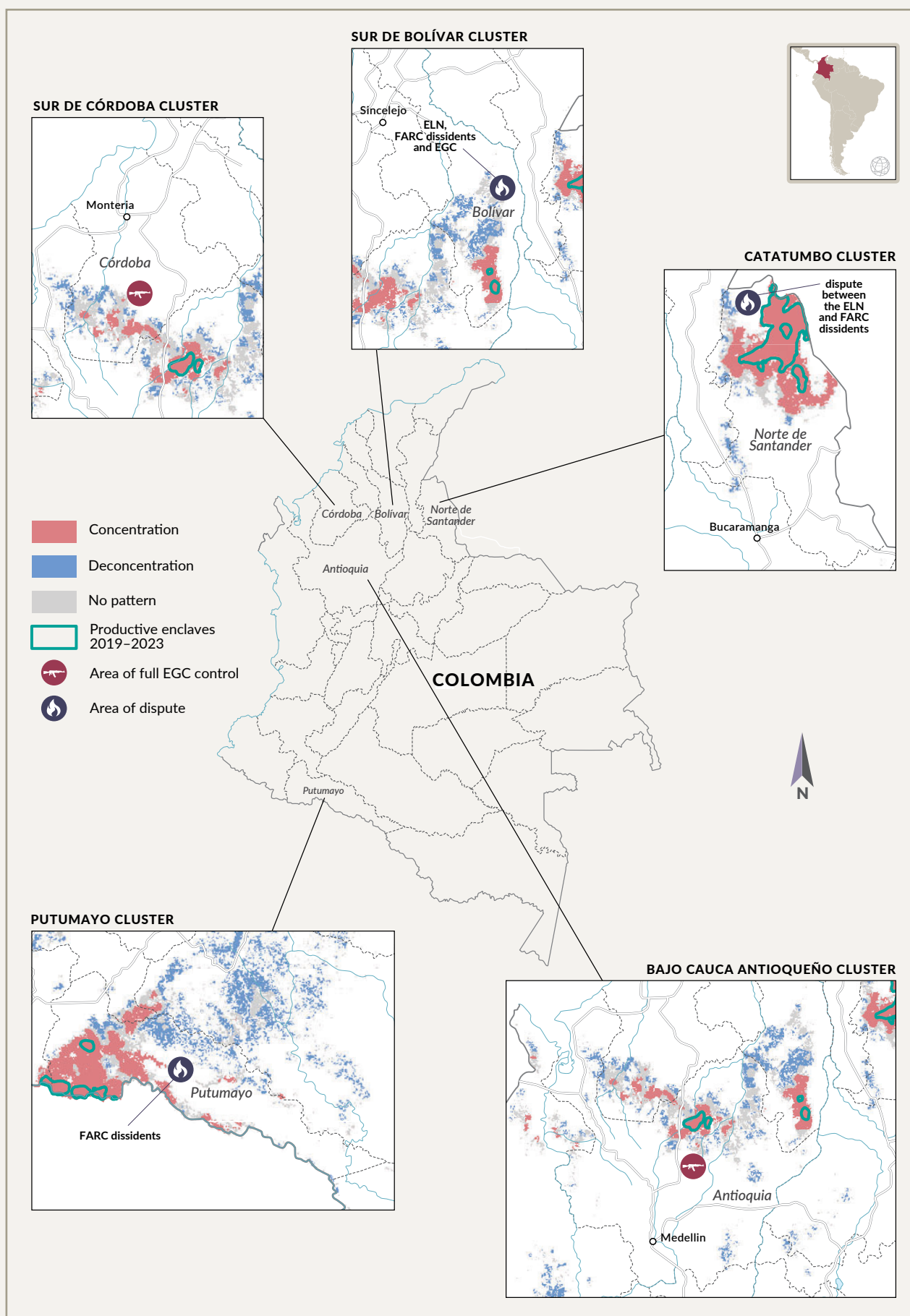


FIGURE 2 Main production centres supplying the Colombian Caribbean, showing controlled and disputed territory.



Former FARC combatants collect coca leaves in Catatumbo. The region houses one of the largest expanses of illegal coca crops, making it an important area of focus for organized crime © Raul Arboleda/AFP via Getty Images

Figure 3 shows crop development in these five zones, which have been supplying the Colombian Caribbean since 2017. A general characteristic is that they all have the stages of the production chain in place: cultivation, processing and routes to market. At the base of the pyramid are the farmers who make their living by selling the coca leaf, and who sometimes participate in processing the leaves into base and coca paste. Once the base is created, the purchasers pay for the product or for intermediation by the armed or criminal group that controls the particular area. These armed groups are responsible for transporting the product by land, river and air to storage and sales areas, from where it is then connected to international markets.²⁸

Production areas	Hectares of coca cultivated per year						
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Catatumbo	27 785	33 126	41 169	39 544	41 861	41 408	43 184
Sur de Bolívar	6 145	8 598	7 937	9 331	11 404	10 229	10 583
Bajo Cauca	10 771	10 811	7 376	9 403	12 554	12 189	13 680
Putumayo	29 588	26 407	24 972	19 986	28 205	48 034	50 342
Sur de Córdoba	4 780	4 636	2 881	3 748	5 480	6 363	7 426

FIGURE 3 Hectares of coca in the main production centres that supply the Colombian Caribbean, 2017–2023.

SOURCE: UNODC, Monitoring of territories with the presence of coca crops 2023: Colombia, February 2025

Three key issues should be highlighted in relation to the five production zones that supply the Colombian Caribbean. The first issue is identifying the cocaine that comes from these areas, as the merchandise has logos or seals marking it, which allows its origin and the group to which it belongs to be traced.²⁹ Information from the press indicates that the practice of marking the merchandise is a common practice in drug trafficking. Based on multiple seizures in the Pacific and the Caribbean, it has been possible to establish patterns by identifying the logos of high-end vehicle brands, clothing, watches, and figures from the worlds of music or football, which makes it possible to trace the origin of the cocaine, who it belongs to and its intended destination.³⁰

The second concerns the criminal complexity of these areas and the regulation of coca-producing clusters by armed groups. The ability to govern and impose order does not depend solely on the use of violence; it is enabled by the condition of these isolated and marginalized areas of the country, where state presence is limited, institutional legitimacy is low, and development and quality-of-life indices are below the national average. This combination of factors largely explains the persistence of illegal crops and the ability of armed groups and criminals to establish control over the inhabitants who depend on coca cultivation for their survival.³¹

Armed groups are present in all five areas. Only Córdoba is dominated by a single player, while in the other four areas there are ongoing conflicts between different groups fighting to control drug trafficking.³² The areas where armed groups participate in illegal economies and fight for territorial control tend to have the highest levels of violence in the country.³³

For transformation and intervention strategies to be effective, a way to replace armed groups must be found. Understanding the dynamics of the markets for coca paste and cocaine means adopting a perspective that considers the barriers to socioeconomic development faced by the communities and territories where the crops are planted, and understanding how to integrate the different segments of these economies. Armed regulation sits at the juncture of these two aspects: until the state and formal structures are part of this segment, any strategy is destined to fail.³⁴

In these areas, coca is a part of a complex criminal ecosystem in which other illicit economies flourish, such as deforestation, smuggling, oil theft, and illegal sales of crude in Putumayo;³⁵ illegal gold mining and money laundering in Bajo Cauca Antioquia;³⁶ illegal gold mining in Sur de Bolívar³⁷ and Sur de Córdoba;³⁸ and extortion, migrant trafficking and money laundering in Catatumbo.³⁹ As stated by the Ministry of Justice, the presence of local authorities and members of the security forces who facilitate these activities and the movement of illicit finance 'have contributed to certain areas being considered areas of criminal convergence, where drug trafficking, armed conflict and other illegal activities are mutually reinforced, aggravating precarious security and hampering social and economic development in these regions'.⁴⁰

Finally, the influence of and power relationships between armed and criminal groups vary according to the territory. In Sur de Córdoba and Bajo Cauca, the EGC is the controlling force; in the former, this organization replaced the armed order established by the now-defunct FARC, and currently exerts control along the entire chain that produces and transforms coca leaf into coca paste.⁴¹ There is a similar dynamic at play in Sur de Bolívar, where the EGC established control after defeating its former allies, the Caparrapos.⁴²

In Sur de Bolívar, there is an active dispute between the EGC, the ELN and FARC dissidents. The EGC is trying to expand its territorial and economic control, especially after the breakdown in its non-aggression agreements with the ELN. In Catatumbo, there is open competition between the ELN and FARC dissidents. Although in earlier periods both groups managed to agree on how to divide up control of the coca-producing areas, laboratories and commercialization circuits for coca paste, these agreements have fractured and led to a fight for control.⁴³

Routes to the Caribbean

Internal trafficking routes that originate in the coca-producing enclaves are the second link in cocaine trafficking, connecting production areas with commercial and alternative ports in the Colombian Caribbean.

The four transit routes that have been identified for this study are the Urabá–Morrosquillo–Cartagena connection, the Urabá–Morrosquillo–Cartagena–Atlántico route, the broad connection from Urabá to La Guajira, and the eastern and Venezuelan routes.

Sur de Córdoba: the Urabá–Morrosquillo–Cartagena connection

Four cocaine trafficking routes originate in Sur de Córdoba, due to the strategic location of the crops and laboratories in Nudo de Paramillo.⁴⁴ The first goes to the west of the country, towards the Gulf of Urabá. To reach the natural and commercial ports located in this area, coca paste and cocaine hydrochloride are transported along the Sinú river on speedboats or canoes. When the transfer is by land, pickup trucks, motorcycles and truck convoys are used.⁴⁵ Owing to its control over the area, the EGC often imposes night-time curfews to avoid being detected by the local community.⁴⁶

The routes start in the municipalities of Valencia and Tierralta in Córdoba, and move by land and water to the municipalities of Chigorodó, Apartadó and Carepa, in Urabá in Antioquia. Once the cocaine reaches this area, it is sent to the Gulf of Urabá (Turbo, Necoclí, Arboletes and San Pedro de Urabá), before being shipped to international markets using the commercial port and natural ports.⁴⁷

According to information collected in the field, this route has not been used in the past two years due to greater controls and operations by authorities in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Urabá. Increased vigilance by the police and the army along the Sinú river and tertiary waterways has also led to a higher number of seizures. This has meant that the EGC has had to open new transit routes, and to stop purchasing coca paste in the area.

The second route uses national roads that cross the wider region: National Route 21, National Route 23 and National Route 74. These roads connect production areas in Sur de Córdoba to the natural ports located in the coastal municipalities of Las Córdobas, Puerto Escondido, Moñitos, San Bernardo del Viento and San Antero, in Córdoba.⁴⁸ Land-based transport, the most common form on this route, uses privately owned cars, intermunicipal transport and freight trucks. Traffickers manage to evade highway police controls, thanks in part to the EGC's agreements with some members of the police force, the police force's lack of technical and technological tools (such as specialized scanners) to identify hiding places in articulated trucks,⁴⁹ and the many lookouts – people and networks that provide information to armed groups – that the EGC has along highways to inform them of any activity by the security forces.⁵⁰



FIGURE 4 Cocaine routes in Sur de Córdoba.

Montería, the capital of Córdoba, is a key node, with coca shipments from Bajo Cauca and Sur de Córdoba converging in the city, before being moved towards the department's coastline.

This route has shipping areas located at three points: the first is in the north-west of Córdoba, with Puerto Escondido, Las Córdoba and Moñitos;⁵¹ the second is towards the north and north-east in Moñitos, San Bernardo del Viento and San Antero.⁵² The department's entire coastline can be used as a collection point for coca paste; to preserve its quality, it is processed in EGC laboratories in mangrove areas and houses near the coast.⁵³

Finally, the third route goes east through the municipalities of Planeta Rica, Buenavista and Ayapel, with two variants to respond to state surveillance and control measures.⁵⁴ According to interviewees, this route – which is currently operating – is responsible for transporting the most cocaine to boats moored at natural ports, and it specifically supplies the commercial port of Cartagena.⁵⁵

Planeta Rica is crucial in the first variation of the route: using secondary and tertiary roads, it runs to the municipality of Ciénaga de Oro, passes through Tuchín, and reaches the coast through the municipalities of San Bernardo del Viento, San Antero and Coveñas, in Sucre.⁵⁶ The second variation crosses all of Mojana in the department of Sucre, heading directly to San Onofre, in the Gulf of Morrosquillo, via San Marcos, Caimito, San Benito, Galeras, Buenavista, Ovejas, and also to Cartagena by crossing Montes de María, a group of small mountains near Colombia's northern coast.⁵⁷ Cocaine is transported along this route through Sur de Córdoba using motorcycles and vehicles. It then crosses

La Mojana, a wetland region, by boat, before being moved by land to the collection points that supply natural ports (such as San Marcos) and commercial ports (Cartagena).⁵⁸

Both the cluster in Sur de Córdoba as well as the routes leaving the area are controlled by the EGC, which holds strategic zones in Urabá in Antioquia and Sur de Córdoba.⁵⁹ Control of these areas emerged from the paramilitary structures that dominated there in the 1990s.⁶⁰ Unlike other parts of the country, where several players share control of the cocaine-trafficking chain, the EGC maintains control right up to international trading points in the western part of the Colombian Caribbean, specifically from the Gulf of Morrosquillo to Panama. This is the most critical point in this area, as it is where security forces have made the greatest number of seizures.⁶¹

Bajo Cauca: the Urabá–Morrosquillo–Cartagena–Atlántico connection

The proximity of the coca-producing cluster in Bajo Cauca to Sur de Córdoba explains why many of the routes that begin in this area are connected to the others mentioned previously.⁶² The route that begins in the municipalities of Tarazá and Caucasia, in Antioquia, connects to those that start in Sur de Córdoba and go to Urabá in Antioquia and the Gulf of Urabá.⁶³ From Antioquia, the cocaine is transported in freight trucks, public transport vehicles, and privately owned cars.⁶⁴ There is also a route that uses National Route 21 to reach the municipality of Planeta Rica in Córdoba, connecting to the new route configured by the EGC.⁶⁵ In this variation, land transport and the network of lookouts are maintained to provide alerts on the activity of security forces.⁶⁶



FIGURE 5 Cocaine routes in Bajo Cauca.

Finally, there is the route that covers the subregion of La Mojana, in Sucre, which connects to the route from Sur de Córdoba. In La Mojana, there are currently three variants that end at the Caribbean Sea, moving variously via the Gulf of Morrosquillo (Sucre), Cartagena and Barranquilla.⁶⁷ The route that ends at the Gulf of Morrosquillo crosses all of Ciénaga Grande de Ayapel to reach Sucre; from there, it travels by land through San Marcos, Sincé and Sincelejo until it reaches San Onofre.⁶⁸ The cocaine is transported along this route first in boats that cross Ciénaga Grande de Ayapel, then it is moved to privately owned cars and trucks to supply the collection points located at the natural ports of the Gulf of Morrosquillo.

The Cartagena and Barranquilla variants use the connection between the Cauca river with the Magdalena river. The product is transported using speedboats, fishing boats and passenger boats, which take advantage of the numerous tributaries of the Cauca and its connection with marshes and other bodies of water to reach their destinations.⁶⁹ To get to Cartagena, traffickers use the bodies of water located along the left bank of the Magdalena river (Tacamocho and Ciénaga Grande), heading north from there along the entire Magdalena river, until reaching the municipalities of Calamar, Mahates, Arjona, Turbaná and Cartagena. From there, the drug leaves from commercial ports, or more recently on go-fast boats⁷⁰ from Tierra Bomba in the direction of the San Bernardo del Viento archipelago and the San Andrés islands and Providencia, which connect with transit routes in Panama.⁷¹ The route to Barranquilla follows the Magdalena river to the neighbourhoods located at the estuary: Flórez and Siape. These collection points supply the commercial maritime ports of Barranquilla, Santa Marta and Cartagena, and provide access to the go-fast boats that depart from informal ports located in Puerto Colombia, Puerto Mocho, Tubará and Juan de Acosta.⁷²

Most of these routes are now controlled by the EGC. After a serious conflict with the Caparrapos,⁷³ an armed group that arose after the paramilitary demobilization in 2006, from 2017 to 2019, the EGC took control of the territory and the cocaine-trafficking routes by coopting the structures and remaining logistical networks.⁷⁴ The only place where the EGC is encountering resistance is in Barranquilla, due to the presence of a local criminal organization called Los Costeños, which controls the local micro-trafficking network and provides security for the routes within the city, as well as the informal and natural ports located at the mouth of the Magdalena river.⁷⁵

Sur de Bolívar: the broad connection from Urabá to La Guajira

The cluster of coca plantations in Sur de Bolívar is located near the centre of the country. From there, at least five routes transport cocaine to the coast. From the municipalities of Santa Rosa, San Pablo, Simití, Cantagallo and Morales in Bolívar, coca paste and cocaine hydrochloride are transported by donkey, motorcycle and canoe to the Magdalena river.⁷⁶ The first route takes the Troncal del Caribbean and Ruta del Sol highways to reach Turbo and Necoclí, in the Urabá region of Antioquia, where the coca paste is transported in private cars and freight trucks.⁷⁷ The second route begins in these same municipalities, but heads north towards the La Mojana region, connecting with the route from Sur de Córdoba and Bajo Cauca and ending at the Gulf of Morrosquillo.⁷⁸

The third route runs along the Magdalena river towards the commercial ports of Cartagena, Barranquilla and Santa Marta using speedboats, fishing boats, and barges that transport wood and coal.⁷⁹ In Santa Marta, this route has one variant. In the Morales, San Pablo and Cantagallo municipalities in Bolívar, there are clandestine roads that connect to the banana-producing region of Magdalena (Pivijay), which has become a collection point for the coca arriving by water or land.⁸⁰ In Magdalena, shipments of coca paste and cocaine are dispatched from Pueblo Viejo and Sitio Nuevo in go-fast boats, or they are placed in the banana containers heading to Europe from the commercial port of Santa Marta.⁸¹

The last route, after the Magdalena river, crosses the swampy complex of Zapatos in the Magdalena district, where there is no protection or control by the security forces. Cocaine is transported by land in two directions. The first route uses the Ruta del Sol to reach Santa Marta, while the second route uses the main road in Carbón to cross the mining sector of Cesar and La Guajira. This route passes through San Roque, Chiriguaná, La Paz and Valledupar, in Cesar, and continues through San Juan del Cesar until reaching Riohacha and Maicao in La Guajira.⁸²

In contrast to the clusters in Sur de Córdoba and Bajo Cauca, the routes in Sur de Bolívar do not have a dominant player that controls the collection points and the coastal areas (commercial and alternative ports) of Barranquilla, Magdalena and La Guajira, and connects them to international markets. In Barranquilla, the EGC is in conflict with Los Costeños, while in the banana-producing zone of Magdalena, the eastern and western ends of the Sierra Nevada and some areas in La Guajira (Dibulla and Riohacha), the EGC is in open confrontation with the ACSN.⁸³ Several interviewees indicated that the EGC is trying to dominate both the cluster in Sur de Bolívar and monopolize the collection points, routes and ports along the entire edge of the eastern Caribbean.⁸⁴ In the highlands of La Guajira, the EGC holds sway with the support of the indigenous Wayuu community, with whom the group appears to have made agreements with some community members to enter their territory and use the natural ports located there.⁸⁵



FIGURE 6 Cocaine routes in Sur de Bolívar.

The absence of a group that clearly dominates and controls the territory explains why security agreements are unstable. Cocaine trafficking is subject to violent waves that redefine the roles and agreements regarding use of the routes by criminal groups,⁸⁶ as well as aerial routes to gain control of enemy territory (the ACSN, for example, avoids the EGC's areas of control). The importance of river routes compared to land routes must be considered because, due to armed conflicts, it is impossible to have a network of lookouts such as the ones that exist in Córdoba and Sucre.⁸⁷

Catatumbo, the eastern and Venezuelan connection: from Magdalena to Zulia

The final cluster is located in Catatumbo, which, due to its strategic location, connects easily to the Caribbean. Its border with Venezuelan territory has resulted in the creation of routes that connect to two fundamental corridors – one domestic and another international – that originate in the municipalities of Tibú, El Tarra, Sardinata and Teorama, in Norte Santander, where the coca crops and processing areas are located.

Two routes run towards the Caribbean from the domestic corridor. The first route runs from Ocaña – the entry and departure from Catatumbo – towards the centre of the country and the marshlands along the Magdalena river, through the municipality of Gamarra, in Cesar. The route then meets up with the shipments coming from Sur de Bolívar, using the Magdalena river to reach Barranquilla and Santa Marta. In this section the cocaine is transported in speedboats, public transport boats and fishing boats headed to Barranquilla.⁸⁸ In other cases, before reaching the mouth of the Magdalena river, the boats divert to the Ciénaga Grande del Magdalena complex, where the cocaine is collected.⁸⁹

The second route leaves Ocaña using the Ruta del Sol highway, passing through Aguachica, Pelaya, Pailitas and San Roque, in Cesar, heading towards Magdalena and ending in La Guajira. The first variant goes through Bosconia and El Copey to the banana-producing zone (Aracataca and Fundación), where it reaches the collection point that supplies the commercial port of Santa Marta or the natural ports located in Pueblo Viejo.⁹⁰ The second variant heads north to Valledupar, and either branches off towards Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta or goes through San Juan del Cesar y Fonseca, reaching Barrancas in Baja Guajira.⁹¹ Coca paste and cocaine hydrochloride are moved to the department of La Guajira – which functions as a collection and departure point for international markets – in trucks, vans and ambulances adapted with hiding spaces. They are able to evade police checkpoints thanks to established relationships with district authorities.⁹²

Barrancas is a notable location in the cocaine trade. The old Tigreras road is used there, which has good security due to the lookout system that the EGC manages. This road connects to the Troncal del Caribe, where cocaine flows in two directions: towards the municipalities of Dibulla and Riohacha, where the cocaine is dispatched in go-fast boats from beaches in rural areas, or from neighbourhoods surrounding the capital (Nuevo Faro, Villa Fátima, Las Delicias, Puerto Caracol); and towards Maicao and Manaure (which are also collection points), headed towards the natural ports located in Alta Guajira, such as Puerto Estrella, El Pájaro, Nazareth and Puerto López. There the drug is buried until conditions are ideal for dispatch by boat. These natural ports are not new: they are the same ones that have been used by smugglers and indigenous communities for centuries.⁹³



FIGURE 7 Cocaine routes in Catatumbo.

Of all the routes, the most complex in terms of dominion and control by armed groups are those that go to the eastern Caribbean – that is, Magdalena and La Guajira. Although most of the routes described are dominated by the EGC, the ACSN is disputing this control after breaking a series of agreements with the group. This explains the ACSN's attempts to establish a presence in Catatumbo. If it is successful, it will avoid paying for the security provided by the EGC along the routes and it will have direct access to the production areas,⁹⁴ while seeking to control the natural ports located in the neighbourhoods surrounding Riohacha.⁹⁵

Although the ACSN's incursion has nothing to do with the recent violent implosion in Catatumbo, its insertion into the area could be an additional factor in worsening the violence and current dispute between FARC dissidents and the ELN. Finally, due to the EGC's attempts to establish a monopoly over the regional cocaine trade, a similar situation is occurring in Magdalena, where the EGC controls the natural ports of Pueblo Viejo. There is rivalry there regarding control over the collection and transit areas in the banana-producing region and Ciénaga Grande.⁹⁶

These conflicts are in contrast with two areas where there is indeed control by a single armed player. The ACSN dominates all of the natural ports from Dibulla (Guajira) to Santa Marta, due to its historical presence there. The EGC does the same thing in Alta Guajira, in Uribe and Manaure, where it exerts significant control thanks to the agreements established with the Wayuu communities for the collection of coca paste on their lands and the departure of go-fast boats towards the Caribbean.⁹⁷

Finally, there is a route that leaves the coca-plantation cluster and connects directly to other international trade routes located in Venezuela. It is predominantly controlled by the ELN and begins in Alto Catatumbo, in Norte de Santander, where it takes the tertiary roads leading out of the municipality of El Carmen, which provide easy access to the municipalities of Pailitas, Chimichagua and Curumaní in Cesar. Unlike the AGC and ACSN, the ELN does not have the same connections with the police force; therefore, it uses the tertiary roads that cross the Serranía del Perijá mountain range to the municipality of Agustín Codazzi. There, transport is dependent on the physical condition of the roads. According to one state official:

Coca is transported out of Catatumbo using tertiary roads on the backs of mules and horses, and using motorbikes and 4x4s along the main road that connects Ocaña with southern Cesar. From there, it is taken through rural areas in the highlands of the Serranía del Perijá, which connects naturally with Venezuelan territory, where they have a safe haven on the other side of the border, and begin their journey northwards towards the Venezuelan Alta Guajir.⁹⁸

At this point transport is by land, and the coca enters Venezuelan territory taking advantage of the government's leniency towards the ELN. The route through Colombian territory is blocked due to the presence of a high mountain battalion, a special unit of the Colombian army. This obliges the ELN to move into Venezuelan territory, where it has consolidated its control over the Cojoro highway, allowing the coca to reach the Alta Guajira through an alliance with the Wayuu.⁹⁹

According to one interviewee, this permissiveness is due to the ELN controlling crime in some areas along the highway and in Wayuu communities:

The ELN managed to establish a connection with the Cojoro highway by cracking down on robberies and assaults on the road leading to the Venezuelan Alta Guajira. Through this effort, it gained the respect of the local communities and established contacts with family clans that allow them to transport the drug through their territory. There, in Alta Guajira, the modus operandi doesn't differ much from what happens in Colombia. The indigenous people allow the drug to transit through their territory in exchange for payment; they then store the coca in their settlements, and from there it is transported out by boat.¹⁰⁰

International alliances

With revitalization of the Caribbean as a transit area for the international cocaine trade and the position the EGC currently occupies, it is essential to understand the alliances with the Albanian mafia and the 'Ndrangheta, which, through their economic might, are financing local criminal groups.¹⁰¹ According to a report issued by the Italian Anti-Mafia Investigation Directorate, cited by the press, the EGC is the largest supplier of cocaine to Italian groups in Colombia, with numerous reported instances of maritime importation via the ports of Gioia Tauro, Antwerp and Rotterdam.¹⁰² However, the Italian groups have also

forged new ties with other groups, such as FARC dissident factions.¹⁰³

Over the past two years, the police have arrested at least five Italian citizens in Colombia for being high-profile members of the mafia and facilitating the trafficking of drugs from Colombia, Ecuador and Peru to Europe. Most of them are businessmen who launder money from the cocaine trade. In 2023, Luigi Belvedere, a leading drug trafficker in the Camorra mafia, was arrested in Cartagena, and Gigliotti Massimo, a member of the 'Ndrangheta, was arrested in

Barranquilla. The former was allegedly in charge of the logistics for sending cocaine to ports in Spain, Germany and Holland;¹⁰⁴ the latter was a fugitive from Italian justice and accused of having connections to the Albanian mafia to facilitate shipments of cocaine to Europe's main ports.¹⁰⁵

In 2024, authorities arrested a man in Medellín who was believed to be a key liaison between the Italian Rinaldi-Formicola, Amato-Pagano and De Micco clans and Colombian criminal groups such as EGC, which coordinates maritime shipments of cocaine to the Netherlands. Similarly, in 2025, alleged operatives linked to the 'Ndrangheta and the Lombardy mafia system were arrested in Bogotá and Cartagena. They are thought to have been responsible for overseeing the purchase of large cocaine shipments,

controlling maritime and land routes, and coordinating shipments from Colombia, Panama and Brazil to markets in Europe. This latter network includes at least three organizations from the Italian mafia: the Camorra, Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta.¹⁰⁶

In addition to the Italian mafia, the Balkan cartel's main liaison with drug trafficking organizations in Latin America (in Colombia, the EGC) was also arrested in Barranquilla.¹⁰⁷ Finally, in August 2025, a key intermediary wanted by INTERPOL on suspicion of international cocaine trafficking and for having alliances with organized crime in South America was apprehended in Cali. This alleged drug lord is accused of acting as an intermediary between the Calabrian mafia and drug traffickers in Colombia and Ecuador.¹⁰⁸ ■

COCAINE TRAFFICKING IN THE COLOMBIAN CARIBBEAN

The Colombian Caribbean coast stretches 1 642 kilometres, accounting for 46.5% of the total Colombian coastline.¹⁰⁹ Once cocaine has been transported to the Caribbean from the enclaves of coca cultivation in Sur de Córdoba, Catatumbo and Bajo Cauca Antioquia, it is moved onward in three ways: by sea, land and air.

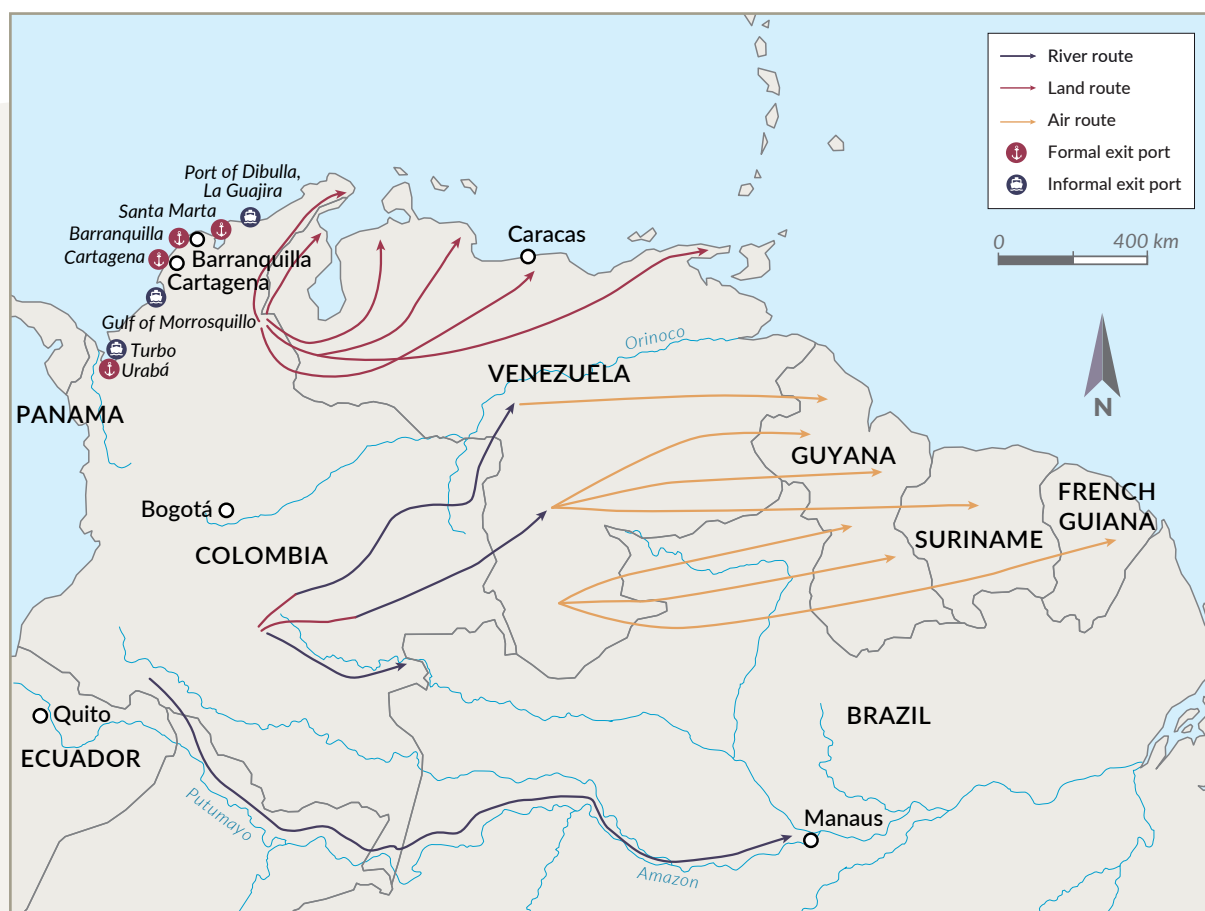


FIGURE 8 Cocaine trafficking routes from Colombia.

Maritime and port traffic

The long Caribbean coastline, the challenges of maritime border control, the wide range of transport options, and, above all, the low cost of maritime freight transport have all combined to make sea-borne methods the primary means of shipping cocaine in the Caribbean.¹¹⁰

Since 2022, the International Centre for Research and Analysis of Maritime Drug Trafficking (Centro Internacional de Investigación y Análisis Contra el Narcotráfico Marítimo, CIMCON) of the Colombian navy, has registered an increase in cases of maritime drug trafficking in the Caribbean compared with the Pacific, an area that had recorded the highest number of such cases between 2017 and 2021. Figure 9 shows the trend in incidents nationwide compared to those recorded in the Caribbean, which in 2023 reached an unprecedented high according to the CIMCON database. Figure 10 shows the trend of incidents registered in the Caribbean, the Pacific and the country's rivers, and supports the observation that the Caribbean has experienced sustained growth as a trafficking route in recent years, to the point where the number of incidents in 2023 almost equalled those in the Pacific Ocean.

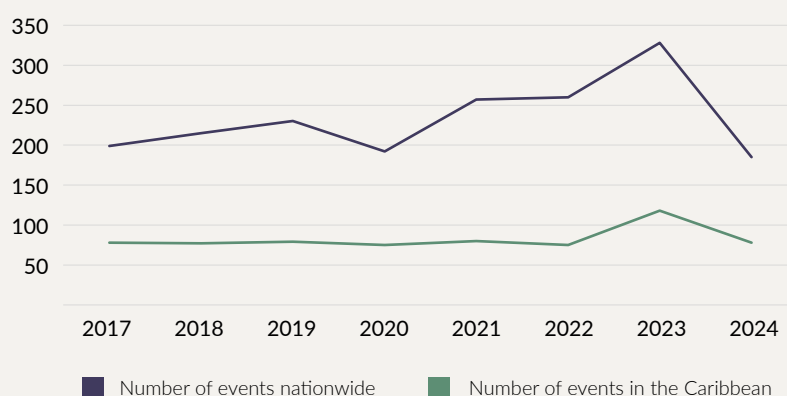


FIGURE 9 Successful cocaine seizures by sea in Colombia and in the Caribbean, 2017–2024.

SOURCE: CIMCON data

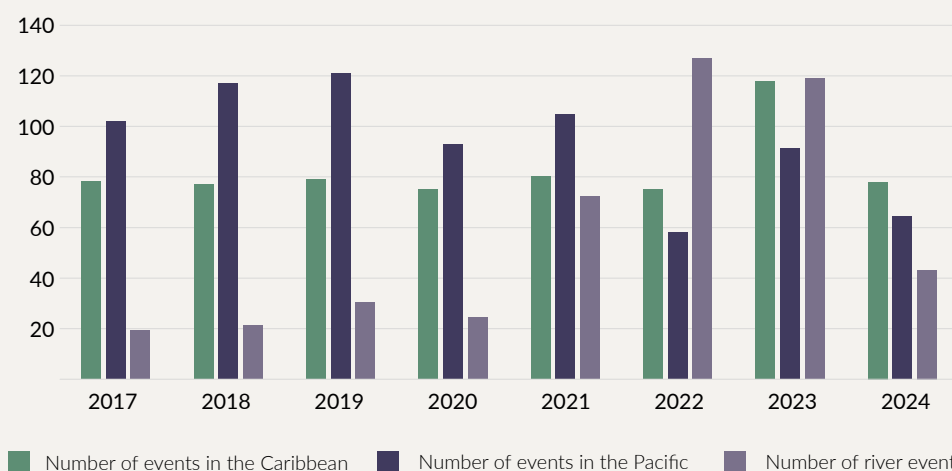


FIGURE 10 Successful maritime drug trafficking incidents in the Caribbean, the Pacific and riverways, 2017–2024.

SOURCE: CIMCON data

According to CIMCON, maritime drug trafficking in Colombia is carried out using various modes of transport, classified into two types: mobile and stationary. Among the most common mobile modalities are high-sea vessels, specialized vessels, and fishing or recreational boats. Drugs can be hidden within a boat's structure, in secret compartments or among commercial cargo, or attached externally using the so-called parasite technique, in which packages are affixed to the hull by divers. There are also more sophisticated forms of transport, such as semi-submersibles and artisanal submarines, which are used particularly to transport large shipments from South America to Central America or Mexico, because they can evade radar systems and maritime patrols.¹¹¹

The stationary method involves watertight packages being deposited in the sea and later recovered using GPS tracking or satellite buoys. In the Caribbean, go-fast boats often discard their cargo before reaching the coast to reduce the risk of seizure; someone then collects the packages several hours later. Drugs may also be hidden on beaches, in empty plots of land, in lakes or in vehicles, as intermediate storage points before distribution.¹¹²

These methods of maritime drug trafficking have changed since 2024 due to the increasing technological sophistication of organized crime and the development of new trafficking methods, including unmanned submarines and drones, and constant innovation in altering cocaine's chemical components to prevent detection.¹¹³

Maritime drug trafficking in the region takes place both through official and alternative ports, using departures and itineraries that have been utilized for decades by both legal and illegal actors. The extent of their use depends on the interests of armed and criminal groups.

Public and private commercial ports

Colombia has 12 maritime and river port areas, distributed across three regions:¹¹⁴ eight in the Caribbean region (Ciénaga, Cartagena, Gulf of Morrosquillo, Guajira, Santa Marta, Barranquilla, Turbo and San Andrés); two in the Pacific region (Buenaventura and Tumaco); and two river port areas (in Barrancabermeja and the Magdalena river).

Of these zones, the Caribbean region handles the highest volume of merchandise each year. Of the 174.2 million tonnes transported in 2025, 85.5% was transported in the Caribbean region.¹¹⁵ Within this region, Cartagena (27.78%), Ciénaga (18.09%) and the Gulf of Morrosquillo (14.31%) were the busiest areas that year, while Barranquilla and Santa Marta accounted for 7.4% and 6.7% of total cargo, respectively.¹¹⁶ Between 2022 and 2024, Cartagena, Ciénaga and Morrosquillo were the areas with the highest volume of freight transport.¹¹⁷ Since 1991, when the Law of Ports (Law 1 of 1991) was enacted, Cartagena¹¹⁸ has had the largest number of ports in the region.¹¹⁹

On 1 November 2025, the number of public ports under concession in the Caribbean stood at 63, with the concession already awarded to Sociedad Portuaria Puerto Bahía Colombia–Puerto Antioquia, a new multipurpose port terminal located in the Gulf of Urabá, which began operations on 5 February 2026. According to its official website, this terminal is 'capable of handling general merchandise, vehicles, refrigerated and dry containers, and solid and liquid bulk cargo, except for hydrocarbons',¹²⁰ and has the capacity to move around 7 million tonnes per year.

This new port on the Colombian coast offers some significant advantages.¹²¹ First, it reduces logistics lead times and import and export costs, as it is closer to the production centres (Bogotá, Medellín, Manizales and Cali) than the other ports on the Caribbean coast. Second, it has a more modern infrastructure for handling bulk cargo, which will reduce logistical losses and boost the competitiveness of Colombian agriculture. Finally, it is the only Colombian port to feature state-of-the-art technology, thanks to the use of scanners equipped with artificial intelligence. With its start-up, the strategic advantages offered by this port could also be exploited by criminal organizations for drug trafficking, as it is situated closer to the areas where coca is cultivated and processed,¹²² and the routes along which cocaine is sold. There is also a banana-growing industry nearby, which in the past was linked to the financing of armed groups and drug trafficking. Today, banana shipments remain at high risk of being used to conceal cocaine.

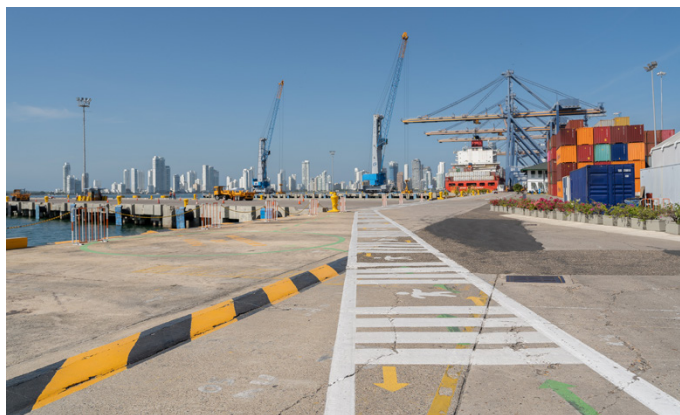
Public ports

Public commercial ports in the Caribbean continue to be used for trafficking cocaine, as they have the capacity to handle large-scale shipments of concealed cocaine.¹²³ They also receive significant amounts of merchandise by sea (ship) and land (vehicle), and carry out multiple processes – loading and unloading, inspection and control, and temporary storage – that prevent all entering and exiting merchandise from being verified, thereby enabling the smuggling of drugs on board vessels.¹²⁴ The final advantage relates to the variety of destinations and long-distance connections the ports offer to the US, Europe and Asia.¹²⁵

In the Caribbean, the regional port companies of Santa Marta, Cartagena and Barranquilla are the main strategic points from which cocaine is trafficked. These ports occupy strategic positions and have modernized their facilities as well as the logistics and cargo-handling systems, making them attractive to criminal organizations.¹²⁶

Gran Puerto de Cartagena is currently the most important port in Colombia,¹²⁷ and the country's main export port, owing to the volume of cargo it handles, its infrastructure and the use of technologies that streamline processes and boost productivity.¹²⁸ Over the course of its 30 years of operation, the port has undergone modernization and expansion, establishing itself as the best-connected port in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. It services more than 15 of the largest shipping companies in the world, with routes to and from 840 ports and commercial connections with approximately 150 countries.¹²⁹

Cartagena has a direct line to the ports of Dunkirk, Le Havre, Nantes, Bordeaux and Marseilles in France;¹³⁰ Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Riga in Latvia, Trieste and Monfalcone in Italy, and with the North Sea port in Belgium.¹³¹ According to data from the Ministry of Defence, Cartagena recorded the highest number of drug seizures (by the armed forces and the police) in Colombia between 2021 and 2025, followed by Santa Marta and Barranquilla.¹³²



Between 2021 and 2025, the port of Cartagena, Colombia's main export port, recorded the highest number of drug seizures of any port in the country. © David Lombeida/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Smuggling through commercial ports is facilitated and regulated by the corruption of a network of key players who make the process possible before arrival at the port and once there. Each city has its own dynamics that affect the cocaine's journey into port. In Barranquilla, for example, cocaine enters the port in powder form in vacuum-sealed packages hidden in vehicles.¹³³ This entry by land is possible because criminal organizations control the access route and charge for the service of bringing drugs in.¹³⁴

In Santa Marta, there is a place known as 'La Oficina', which is controlled by a criminal organization that wields both political and economic power and maintains ties with transnational organized crime networks, in particular with Italian mafia groups. It is there that drug shipments from all the armed groups are negotiated and coordinated. In this 'office', the logistical aspects of transport are organized and agreements are reached regarding the methods, timing and location of the trafficking.¹³⁵ In 2021, Albanian national Besnik Nikolli, alias 'Niko' or 'El Gordo', was arrested there; he had been seeking to consolidate ties for trafficking through this port, and France has requested his extradition.¹³⁶

According to those interviewed for this report, 'La Oficina' is a conglomerate of local political and economic groups, comprising traditional families from Santa Marta, with connections to drug trafficking dating back to the 1970s. Over time, these families have come to agreements with various armed and criminal groups to export drugs, using the commercial port or their private properties on the coast. Their control over local infrastructure, thanks to the positions of power they hold in Santa Marta's government and in the region, allows them to act as a key logistical player in the export of cocaine, whether through the stowing of drugs on ships or the use of their coastal properties to launch go-fast boats.¹³⁷ Although 'La Oficina' was mentioned by several interviewees, no public information on this group has been found.

Another significant factor identified is that some containers arriving in Santa Marta from municipalities in the banana-producing region of Magdalena have already had cocaine placed in them.¹³⁸ In this region, banana shipments of bananas are highly attractive for drug traffickers, as these perishable goods must be processed more quickly at the ports.¹³⁹

Criminal groups in these coastal cities are currently undergoing some reorganization, resulting in conflicts over control of the port areas.¹⁴⁰ In Barranquilla there have been assassinations and attempted murders reported in the areas surrounding the port and river, presumably linked to control of maritime and riverine drug trafficking.¹⁴¹ A similar dynamic is unfolding in Cartagena, with contract killings related to the port,¹⁴² and in Santa Marta, with murders occurring especially in rural areas and in the banana-producing region, as a result of the dispute between the EGC and the ACSN over control of the Sierra Nevada.¹⁴³

The main method of concealing cocaine prior to shipping is illegal storage, whereby the drugs are temporarily hidden in locations near port infrastructure or container-loading areas.¹⁴⁴ This temporary storage may occur in buildings such as warehouses and depots, or in residential properties where the drugs are packaged or prepared for mixing with legal goods. Other locations include in open spaces near the water, such as fallow land and beaches that can be accessed by small boats, as well as underwater locations and by burying the drugs underground. Finally, the drugs may be concealed in modified land vehicles with interior hiding places.¹⁴⁵

The main way in which cocaine is trafficked onward is by smuggling it into the ports. Cocaine is smuggled within the framework of the entry protocol for containers, which usually includes a room for analysis and monitoring to control the containers, as well as closed-circuit television and a schedule for control checks.¹⁴⁶

The high volume of cargo moving through the ports, the need to adhere to schedules, and limited human and technical resources, mean that it is not possible to inspect all the containers. Those selected at random for inspection require the presence of a customs officer and a police officer, who search the containers and specifically inspect the areas where they think they might find packages of cocaine.¹⁴⁷ In 2023, Colombia transported 4 453 000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units), representing 43.8% of the total number of containers transported by the Andean Community, followed by Peru (3 000 TEUs) and Ecuador (2 721 TEUs).¹⁴⁸ The ports with the highest number of transported containers were Cartagena (3 069 000 TEUs), Callao (2 650 000 TEUs) and Guayaquil (1 280 000 TEUs).¹⁴⁹

Shipments of tropical fruit play an essential role in trafficking cocaine in Colombia. In Cartagena, 1.6 tonnes of cocaine were recently seized in a shipment of fruit headed to the port of Seville in Spain.¹⁵⁰ This method has been replicated in Ecuador and other producing countries, owing to the perishable nature of the goods, which makes processing through ports faster. In Colombia, bananas are the most heavily exported agricultural product, and the EU is their main destination (69.5% of bananas produced in Colombia are exported to the EU).¹⁵¹ During the first half of 2025, exports of bananas increased by 22% compared with the same period the previous year,¹⁵² making them the shipments at most risk of being contaminated with cocaine, followed by coal shipments.

Coal shipments also have a history of being tainted with smuggled cocaine: in 2023, the Colombian authorities seized 2.45 tonnes of cocaine in Barranquilla, hidden in a shipment of coal headed to Belgium. The cocaine apparently belonged to the EGC.¹⁵³ Coal is a product in high demand in Europe, which imported 16.9 million tonnes of Colombian coal in 2022; between January and March 2024, that figure reached 15.4 million tonnes.

The high volume of cargo provides many opportunities to cocaine traffickers. According to the General Maritime Directorate, there have been a significant number of cases involving imitation cocaine and the use of new methods to mimic coal.¹⁵⁴ A key aspect of the coal trade is that coal is not shipped in container vessels, but in cargo ships smaller than bulk carriers.¹⁵⁵ Their size allows them to reach secondary ports in Europe that are less closely monitored, as they do not have a large draught or a deep keel.

Customs agents are key players, as they can facilitate the tampering of containers.¹⁵⁶ They may be members of criminal organizations that operate in the ports and have access to the monitoring and analysis room, and they might know the location of all the vessels, their routes and the number of containers they can carry. It is possible to access detailed information on the vessels and containers from the control rooms, thanks to the chips fitted to the containers. There are standard containers, specialized containers for transporting refrigerated goods, open-top containers due to the dimensions of the cargo, ventilated containers with openings (whether natural or mechanical) to allow for air circulation, among others. The details of each container are stored on the chips, which makes it possible to accurately identify the vessels and containers with smuggled product, and to determine whom the trafficked merchandise belongs to, as contamination almost always occurs before a container is sealed.¹⁵⁷

In addition to containers, ocean-going vessels are a principal method of smuggling cocaine. In recent years there has been an increase in cocaine affixed to the hulls of these vessels by divers as the ships leave commercial ports or while at sea. This so-called 'parasite' technique is becoming increasingly common on ships bound for major European ports (such as Rotterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg).¹⁵⁸ In 2021, a gang known as Troya was dismantled in Colombia. This gang sold metal pipes to ships in the ports of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta, so that they could attach their illegal merchandise to the vessels and transport it to the main global markets. It is estimated that, over a period of two years, more than 20 tonnes of cocaine were shipped using this method.¹⁵⁹ This trend has also been observed at the port of Vitória in Brazil, where vessels heading to Europe were loaded with cocaine using the same technique.¹⁶⁰

Private ports

Throughout the Caribbean, there are private ports that have signed concession agreements with companies for their exclusive use. The information available on the involvement of private ports in the trafficking network is scarce, as private ports are not subject to the same registration systems as public ports. Few of those interviewed had direct knowledge of how these ports operate, and no information was found in the press or in specialized reports regarding alleged links or ongoing investigations. To date, the only information that has been obtained is on possible ties between this type of port and the departure of small amounts of cocaine in La Guajira¹⁶¹ and Barranquilla.

The lack of information on private ports may be due, in part, to the private nature of the companies that operate them, which restrict access to their data and internal processes. In addition, institutional efforts in analysis, monitoring and investigation have focused mainly on public ports with the highest traffic capacity. Nevertheless, Colombia has a significant track record with respect to links between private companies and criminal activities. One high-profile involves the multinational company Chiquita Brands International, which was found guilty in 2024 by a US court of financing the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), an organization designated a terrorist group by the US in 2021.¹⁶² On 30 January 2026, Chiquita Brands filed an appeal against the 2024 verdict, and the case remains pending.¹⁶³

Alternative, informal and natural ports

Alternative, informal and natural ports are scattered along the entire Colombian Caribbean coast. These ports have historically been used by large drug cartels, and by armed groups and criminal organizations for illicit international trade.

In contrast to commercial ports, shipments at these types of ports tend to be smaller in volume, usually weighing less than 5 tonnes. Furthermore, since they are not subject to institutional control nor do they require complex infrastructure, they are particularly attractive for small vessels that can easily travel short distances, for example, to intermediate areas in the open sea.

Alternative ports function as links in a logistical chain that supplies new storage points on the Colombian Caribbean islands, such as the archipelagos of San Andrés and Providencia and San Bernardo, and in other locations on the high seas. These points serve as storage areas, facilitate the refuelling of go-fast boats, and act as nodes connecting with other parts of the mainland Caribbean. In locations such as Panama and Costa Rica, and parts of the Greater and Lesser Antilles, trafficking networks may

use commercial ports to load cocaine into containers on large-tonnage vessels, or they may continue their journey using speedboats, submersibles or semi-submersibles.

Natural and informal points are often the sites of key operations in the illegal international trade. Many of these coastlines and beaches are home to collection points and laboratories where the final stage of processing the coca base occurs, with the aim of improving the quality of the product before it is shipped to its final destination. These centres may be located on farms adjacent to the coastal areas, in hotel premises, mangroves, or even directly on the beaches, where the drugs are buried in sacks until enough has been gathered to be transported using the various maritime means available. It is estimated that shipping occurs once between 1 and 5 tonnes have been amassed at the collection points.¹⁶⁴

These ports use various different means of transport: self-propelled semi-submersible craft, drones, fishing boats, sailing boats, yachts, recreational craft and, above all, go-fast boats. The latter have been one of the most common modes of maritime transport since the 1980s. Go-fast boats are built from lightweight materials such as fibreglass, Kevlar and carbon fibre. They are notable for their deep V-shaped hulls, and for being fitted with at least two outboard motors. They are often painted blue, green, grey or black to blend in with the sea. In July 2025, the Colombian navy seized an unmanned semi-submersible vessel for the first time in the Caribbean Sea, near Santa Marta. According to authorities, it belonged to EGC and was in the testing phase, as it did not have any drugs on board.¹⁶⁵

Most shipments depart from natural ports – that is, water inlets such as bays or estuaries – which provide refuge for anchoring without the need for complex infrastructure. This is the case for the beaches located in the Gulf of Morrosquillo, the Gulf of Urabá or certain areas of Riohacha. In recent years, however, the use of beaches exposed to the open ocean – with strong tides, sparse populations and few tourists – has become a strategy for eluding the coastguard and navy.¹⁶⁶

Cocaine trafficking through these types of port and using these methods has a considerable impact on local communities. Many of these vessels are piloted by local fishermen or residents of neighbouring countries with access to the Caribbean Sea or the region's islands. These people have in-depth knowledge of the sea, the tides, the most efficient routes, the safest unloading zones and the strategies necessary to evade maritime patrols. Among the examples illustrating this dynamic is the increasingly important role played by Dominican nationals in transporting merchandise from Alta Guajira, as well as the involvement of residents settled in the Gulf of Morrosquillo, in Montes de María, and the indigenous communities.¹⁶⁷

The role of coastal communities in the Colombian Caribbean

The Wayuu community, located in the Colombian and Venezuelan parts of La Guajira, in the eastern Caribbean, have ties with cannabis buyers from the US,¹⁶⁸ and with transnational groups involved in cocaine trafficking.¹⁶⁹ Their involvement may also be the result of forced recruitment.¹⁷⁰

Riohacha, the capital of La Guajira, has a long history of contraband smuggling and cannabis and cocaine trafficking, with several sectors of the community participating. On one hand, there are players with significant financial resources – particularly young people from wealthy families – who fund the transport logistics in exchange for interest from the

purchasing of outboard motors, construction of ship hulls and remuneration of the sailors who make the crossing on the high seas. At the end of the process, they often receive double or even triple their initial investment.¹⁷¹

According to a civil society representative, the participation of vulnerable communities in drug trafficking has given rise to 'cultural models in which links to drug trafficking and illegal economies have become normalized, in addition to abandonment by the state'.¹⁷² In areas such as Villa Fátima, a large number of residents participate, or have participated, in the logistics of drug transport. Among the socially recognized roles are those of assemblers and 'fibros', who are in charge of locally manufacturing fibreglass and resin boats.¹⁷³

The involvement of the Villa Fátima community, in turn, gives rise to other social problems of great magnitude. When most young men of working age are involved in the transport of cargo, the community is deprived of their participation in other types of work. Furthermore, as the work is risky and illegal, there is always the possibility that they will not return. In a community of 400 families, at least 42 people

are currently detained in foreign prisons and at least 12 have gone missing.¹⁷⁴ The risk of death, incarceration or disappearance is offset by the financial gain that would otherwise be impossible to attain.

The situation is similar in Montes de María. Within a context of scarce material resources and limited opportunities for social advancement, armed and criminal groups offer access to consumer goods that would otherwise not reach these communities. According to one interviewee, when groups such as the EGC provide food and income to the community, 'they take advantage of poverty to use the communities' human capital and sustain illicit economies'.¹⁷⁵

Rincón del Mar, located in the municipality of San Onofre, Bolívar, enjoys a strategic advantage from the perspective of criminal organizations: there is only one way to access it. When law enforcement agencies plan an operation or judicial officials are deployed, the EGC is able to anticipate their arrival through a network of informants. This intelligence network is made up of people who depend on illicit income to survive in an unequal economy. According to one official interviewed for this report:



Riohacha, La Guajira. The coastal communities of the Colombian Caribbean occupy a strategic position in maritime drug trafficking.

© Fernanda Pineda/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Many of these fishermen live in villages or marginal areas of the capital cities. In some cases, they are rural inhabitants who have been displaced by violence; in others, they are indigenous people with few resources who have been neglected by the state. Their means of subsistence are limited, so stashing a consignment of drugs or helping to transport it to a collection point is a huge economic opportunity for their families. While they might typically earn between 1 and 2 million pesos a month, this type of work allows them to earn up to 15 times that amount.¹⁷⁶

Because of this advantage and its direct access to the sea, the municipality plays a key geographical role in the

launching of submarines and the use of mangroves as hiding places for stashing shipments.

Drug trafficking networks exploit the knowledge of local fishermen and sailors to navigate the waters and reach international shipping routes in the Caribbean Sea. This is the case, for example, in Santa Catalina (Bolívar), San Juan de Acosta, Tubará, Puerto Colombia and Pijó (Atlántico), Pueblo Viejo, Ciénaga and Parque Tayrona (Magdalena), as well as along the entire coast of La Guajira, from Dibulla to Punta Gallinas – areas where official patrols are limited due to challenging sea conditions. ■

Seizures and prohibition

The fight against drug trafficking in Colombia has gone through various phases, shaped by its expansion, the transformation of the cartels and armed groups, cycles of violence, and the national and international forces deployed to curb it. The focus has shifted from the repressive strategies, criminal procedures and extraditions of the 1970s and 1980s to more comprehensive approaches in the present day.¹⁷⁷ The fight against drug trafficking prioritizes reducing capabilities and revenues and targeting the most powerful networks.¹⁷⁸ In Colombia, the trend in seizures over the past eight years shows a steady increase in the number of incidents recorded related to maritime trafficking between 2019 (the year with the lowest number of incidents) and 2024 (the most recent record and the highest as of this time).

The government's efforts have focused on the oceans (the Caribbean and the Atlantic) and have emphasized a policy of prohibition and partial revitalization of Caribbean routes. A few days before the US withdrew its certification of Colombia's counternarcotics efforts in September 2025, the government of Gustavo Petro was able to report unprecedented figures in its fight against drug trafficking: 89 tonnes of cocaine seized in rivers, oceans and land areas in 2024, and 600 tonnes in the first half of 2025.¹⁷⁹

Despite record numbers of seizures, some experts point out that 'the amount of pure cocaine produced has increased at a much faster rate than the government's ability to intercept it'.¹⁸⁰ Following this line of reasoning, the quantities seized – despite the high number of seizures recorded in 2023 – was 'the lowest percentage of the total amount of cocaine produced in Colombia'.¹⁸¹ According to the last crop-monitoring report, the potential for cocaine production increased 53% in 2023.¹⁸² The actual impact of seizures on drug trafficking is unclear, and the record number of seizures is not as impressive when the acceleration in the total production volume is considered. The rise in the number of seizures, as shown in Figure 11, is in line with the Petro administration's policy direction, established in Colombia's National Drug Policy 2023–2033.¹⁸³

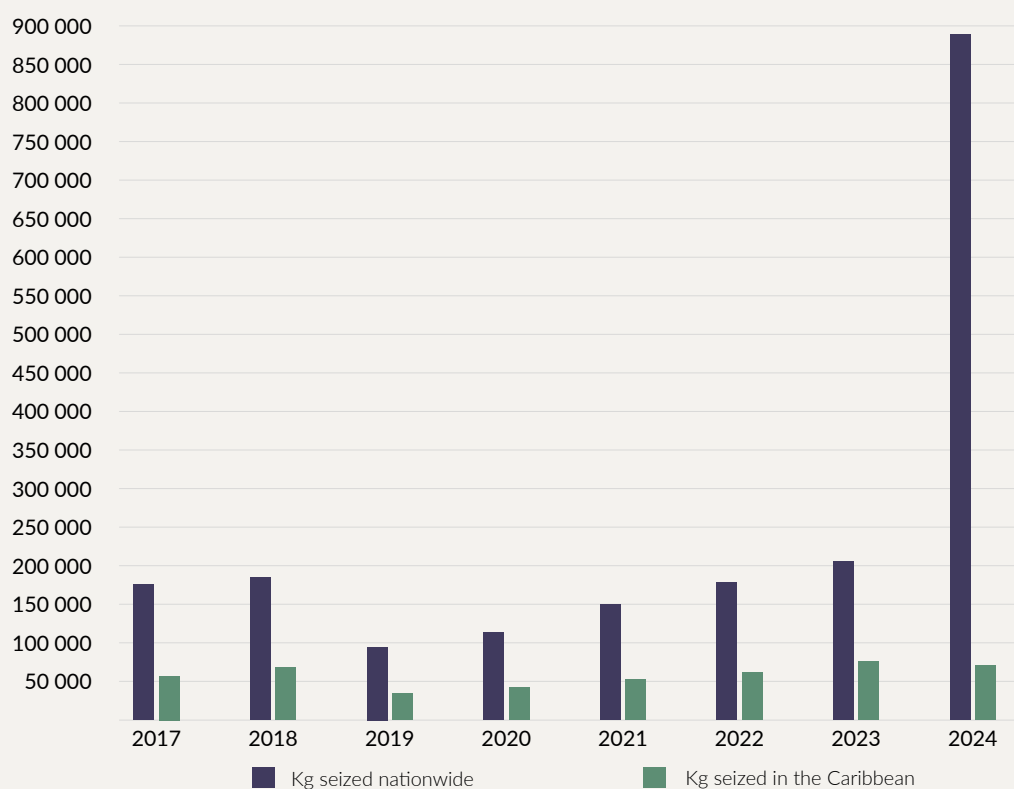


FIGURE 11 Cocaine seizures throughout Colombia and in the Colombian Caribbean, 2017–2024.

SOURCE: CIMCON data

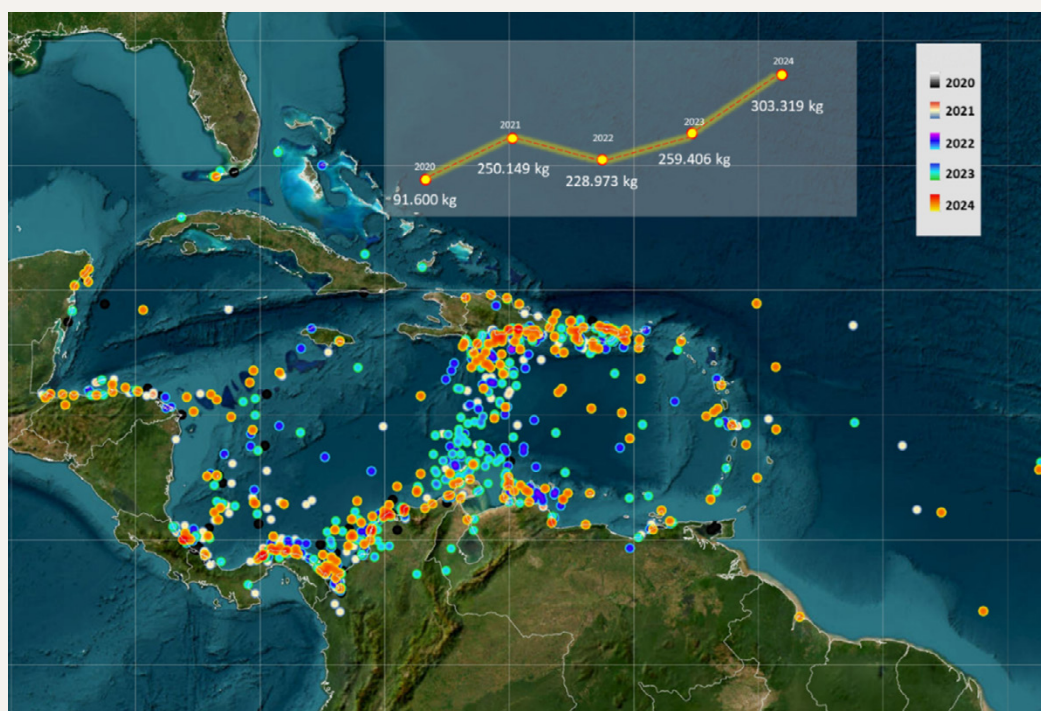


FIGURE 12 Critical points and amounts of cocaine seized in the Caribbean Sea, 2020–2024.

SOURCE: CIMCON data

However, despite the efforts of various state agencies and the international cooperation established to strengthen seizures in the Caribbean, the sources consulted for this report highlighted notable difficulties in the fight against maritime cocaine trafficking. Among other things, they pointed to the lack of technological capacity and the limited resources of law enforcement agencies to monitor the ocean and movements of small vessels. The constant adaptation and reinvention of the methods used by criminal groups to traffic drugs is another obstacle, alongside external factors such as meteorological conditions and navigability, which force official vessels to remain on the high seas, unable to manoeuvre easily. The absence of a naval base near the departure zones, and the general conditions of the interception policy, also hinder operations.

This assessment by local contacts, who may or may not be involved in trafficking, shows the extent to which players in key areas recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the security forces. For example, when seizures are made in the open ocean, those arrested must be transferred to land as quickly as possible to be handed over to the judicial authorities. This means that the boat must interrupt its patrol activities, which criminal organizations take advantage of to send new shipments aboard go-fast boats while the patrol is headed back to land. This also creates additional operating expenses and interrupts the operation that was originally planned.

Port policy during Gustavo Petro's administration

The government of former president Petro recognized that the ports 'have been coopted by drug traffickers and smugglers' and declared its commitment to backing reforms intended to 'change the method of port surveillance and administration'.¹⁸⁴ However, by the end of his term in office in August 2026, it is not known whether any progress had been made in this regard.

Petro's port strategy was officially put launched in July 2023, with the objective of updating the existing policy and 'promoting the efficacy of the Colombian port sector to adapt it to the global and domestic environment, in accordance with sustainability principles'.¹⁸⁵ This policy is structured around six positive actions. However, these administrative and regulatory reforms still gloss over the matter of effective security, which this report considers to be the most urgent issue. Although this policy does not include a pillar dedicated exclusively to security issues, it seeks to reinforce port control mechanisms, which would contribute to security. In addition, various strategies have been developed to take on the limitations of port control, among them two recent initiatives and a presidential proposal.

The first of these is the government's Colombia Portuaria 2023 strategy,¹⁸⁶ which was instituted in 2023 with the aim of 'combating illegality and contraband, and taking firm action against non-compliance with the regulations currently in force in the sector'.¹⁸⁷ According to the department of transportation, during its implementation 'five investigations were opened and three penalties imposed totalling 4 241 769 618 pesos [just under €1 million] against the ports for failing to comply with the obligation to guarantee continuous, permanent and efficient service, by not having non-intrusive cargo inspection equipment in permanent operation'.¹⁸⁸ One of these penalties was imposed on the Barranquilla port authority for failing to guarantee the minimum security conditions required for its operations.¹⁸⁹ Beyond the 2023 results, it is not clear whether this strategy is still being fully implemented.

Second, the Atlantic Ports Association (Asociación de Puertos del Atlántico) has developed an underwater inspection project to 'strengthen port security by identifying boats with drugs affixed to their submerged structures',¹⁹⁰ especially in relation to vessels bound for international

destinations. The project encourages inspection by diving teams while the vessels are being inspected in the ports. This project was previously the subject of a pilot exercise in January 2025 and is currently under review by the General Maritime Directorate.

Although there have been numerous institutional, cross-sectoral, private and international cooperation efforts to improve port security, Colombia still lacks a national strategy centred specifically on preventing and reducing smuggling and drug trafficking. ■

By air and land: Venezuela's grey zones

The interconnection of Colombian trafficking networks with those in Venezuela is now at the centre of regional debates. Cocaine trafficking through Venezuela is not a recent phenomenon, but over the past decade the country has become a key route for cocaine transiting to the Caribbean, Central America, Europe and Africa.

This dynamic can be better understood by looking at both historical and recent issues. On one hand, there is a degree of permissiveness or complicity between the Venezuelan authorities and networks with ties to the Cartel of the Suns (Cartel de los Soles)¹⁹¹ and certain Colombian armed groups, in particular the ELN and FARC dissidents.¹⁹²

Venezuela is increasingly establishing itself as a cocaine-producing area.¹⁹³ Over the past five years, the press has reported on the presence of areas with illegal crops in the states of Zulia and Apure, near laboratories for processing coca leaf and clandestine air strips.¹⁹⁴ According to InSight Crime, around 10-15% of global production in 2022 came from Venezuela.¹⁹⁵



A clandestine laboratory for cocaine production in Venezuela, located just a few kilometres from the border with Colombia, in Sierra de Periká, Zulia. © Federico Parra/AFP via Getty Images

The interviews conducted for this report, however, do not fully corroborate this information.¹⁹⁶ Caution must therefore be exercised with respect to cocaine production in Venezuela, in order to better understand the changes in cross-border trafficking routes and the relationships that unite the two countries.

According to information collected on the ground, the cocaine that transits to Venezuela comes from three regions in Colombia where coca crops are concentrated: Catatumbo, Caquetá-Guaviare and Putumayo. These regions are well connected to each one another by natural land and river corridors. Two main corridors have been identified that originate in Colombia and use Venezuelan territory as a transit route. The first corresponds to the south-east connection with the Orinoco and the Venezuelan Amazon (Apure, Amazonas and Bolívar), and the second to the connection between Catatumbo and the Venezuelan Caribbean (Zulia, Falcón, Carabobo and Sucre).¹⁹⁷

In the route between south-eastern Colombia (Caquetá, Guaviare and Putumayo) and the Orinoco and the Venezuelan Amazon, there is a transport corridor that has historically been used by insurgent groups known as ABC (Arauca-Boyacá-Casanare), as well as the trails that depart from Caquetá and Guaviare and connect with Guainía and Vichada, areas bordering the Venezuelan states of Apure, Bolívar and Amazonas.¹⁹⁸ These overland routes intertwine with numerous rivers in the Orinoco river basin (Guaviare, Meta, Vichada, Arauca, among others) and the Amazon river basin (Caquetá and Vaupés). In this diverse and complex landscape, the Colombian authorities encounter obstacles to effective surveillance due to their lack of familiarity with the river routes, the difficulty of navigating them and the lack of adequate equipment.¹⁹⁹ All of this facilitates drug trafficking along the rivers and lakes, a weakness that, according to one interviewee, the Colombian criminal groups take full advantage of:

Criminal actors in this area, particularly FARC dissidents, know the terrain very well, as they are originally from the region. They were born there or have lived there for more than a decade. This knowledge of the territory allows them to take routes unknown to security forces; the same applies to the river tributaries that connect one region to another. This gives them a considerable advantage over the security forces, which not only lack adequate boats suitable for navigating small rivers or their tributaries, but are also unfamiliar with the terrain.²⁰⁰

Once the drug shipments reach the Orinoco and the Venezuelan Amazon regions, there are many clandestine air strips from which small airplanes take off, headed for the Caribbean Sea. Many of these air strips operate without scrutiny from the Venezuelan regime or with the direct complicity of authorities. In the Orinoco region, coca paste produced in Colombia is mixed and stored alongside cocaine processed in Venezuela. When they have collected the amount necessary for a shipment, the planes take off towards Surinam and the Guianas, or towards the Lesser Antilles, where there is a direct connection with European and North American markets. This drug trafficking by air is possible because the air strips in the Orinoco region are close to the Caribbean islands, allowing for short journeys of up to 1 000 kilometres that a single-engine plane can cover.

In Guyana, the US has recently sanctioned a drug trafficking network that was shipping cocaine to the US, Europe and the Caribbean. This network comprised Guyanese and Colombian citizens, who coordinated smuggling by submarine, light aircraft and overland routes. The Colombian members were responsible for operational logistics, overseeing the clandestine air strips in Colombia used by the small planes transporting cocaine to Guyana, as part of a broader international distribution network.²⁰¹

Traffickers have also exploited the tensions surrounding the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo region.²⁰² which worsened in 2023 after Nicolás Maduro ordered that air strips be built to facilitate the arrival of light aircraft from Colombia and Venezuela. The situation was aggravated by the Guyanese government's limited ability to control the territory, and the high levels of corruption among the Venezuelan authorities. On several occasions, unregistered flights have been detected entering the Essequibo region from the west. While the origin of these flights cannot always be confirmed, Guyana's head of counternarcotics, James Singh, has indicated that, in some cases, the flight data and the pilots' own testimonies have made it possible to establish that the drugs originated in Venezuela.²⁰³

There are two pathways on the Venezuelan Catatumbo–Caribbean route. The first enters Venezuela from Catatumbo through the state of Zulia, using the Catatumbo river and cross-border paths. From there, the cocaine is transported by river or by land northwards to the coasts of the states of Zulia, Falcón, Carabobo and Sucre. The drugs are then transported from those points to the US, following routes that pass through Central America, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, or to Europe.²⁰⁴ In the second route, from places such as Puerto Cabello (Carabobo) and certain areas of Sucre, the shipments usually pass first through Surinam and Guyana, from where they cross the Atlantic to countries in West Africa such as Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Togo and Cape Verde.²⁰⁵ The aim is to reach storage locations close to commercial ports, where the cocaine is then placed in the containers.

There are also other transport routes along this circuit that do not use transit points but instead head directly to Europe. On 7 December 2024, Spanish authorities seized more than 3.3 tonnes of cocaine on board a Venezuelan-flagged fishing vessel west of the Canary Islands. During this operation 10 crew members were detained – nine Venezuelan citizens and one Colombian – and 110 bundles of cocaine were seized.²⁰⁶

Field interviews found that, over the past two years, connections between Colombian and Venezuelan traffickers have moved largely towards Zulia, through Alta Guajira. Along this route, the ELN's ties with the Wayuu communities are extremely important. The insurgent group's ability to regulate crime at the local level has been well received by the indigenous communities, a development also facilitated by the control exercised by the ELN over the Cojoro national highway, which leads to the most interior part of Venezuelan Alta Guajira. To reach Venezuelan territory, the ELN uses the paths that traverse the Serranía del Perijá. At Manaure, they cross into Venezuelan territory to evade Colombian government controls, in particular by the Special Energy and Road Battalions (Batallones Especiales Energéticos y Viales), which have closed the Maicao border crossing.²⁰⁷

FROM THE ISLANDS TO EUROPE

The final link in the cocaine trafficking chain in the Colombian Caribbean is related to the connection with markets outside the region. From commercial and alternative ports, go-fast boats and containerized transport are the main means used to move cocaine into the illegal markets of the Greater Caribbean.²⁰⁸

Cocaine from the Caribbean destined for the US comes mainly from north-eastern Colombia (Figure 13). Specifically, it is transported on board go-fast boats and fishing vessels that depart from the Gulf of Urabá, the Gulf of Morrosquillo, and from some natural ports in the Cartagena region (such as Tierra Bomba). These vessels use the islands in the San Bernardo del Viento archipelago as a transit point en route to Panama, in particular San Blas.

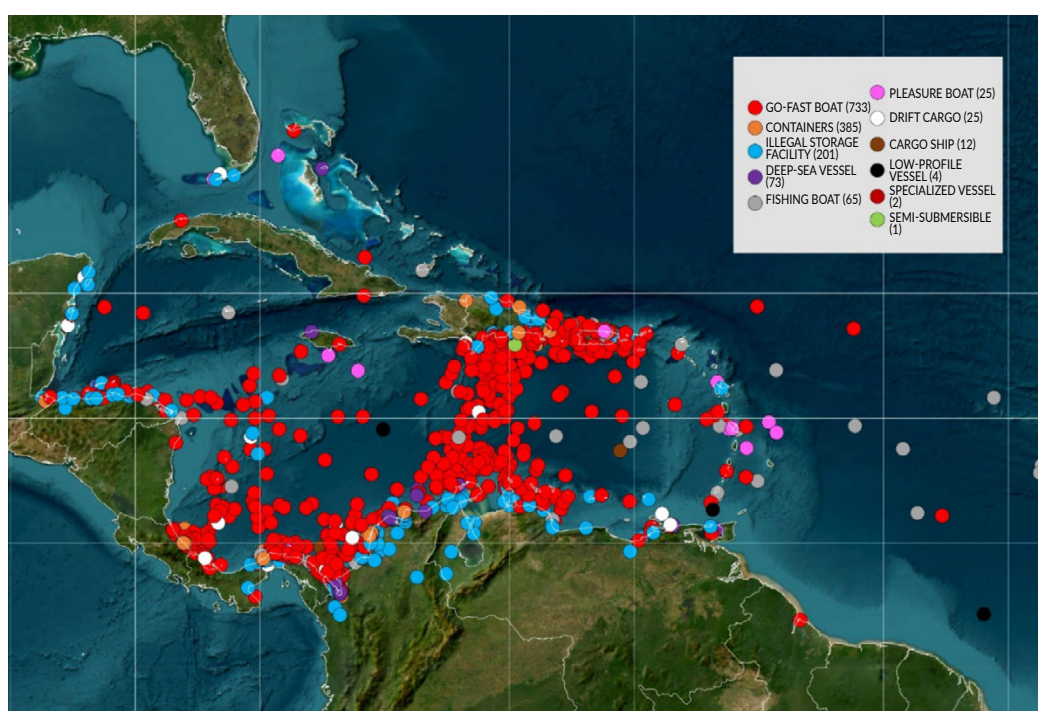


FIGURE 13 Maritime drug trafficking methods in the Greater Caribbean, 2021–2024.

SOURCE: CIMCON data



FIGURE 14 International connections from the Colombian Caribbean.

One less-travelled route uses the San Andrés Islands as a transit point to reach Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. The cocaine may continue on to the US, or it may be redirected to Europe (Figure 14). This route was used because the San Andrés islands and Providencia were historically considered to be less dangerous areas. Although there were well-established smuggling operations, this did not necessarily mean high levels of violence. However, this has changed over the past 15 years.²⁰⁹ Some Colombian criminal groups have sought to consolidate their control over the entire transport circuit, which has led to a significant increase in violence in the region. The EGC has clashed with smaller criminal groups over control of the territory, which triggered a wave of murders and resulted in a 71% increase in homicides in 2023 compared to 2022, according to the most recent data available.²¹⁰

For shipments bound for Europe, if large quantities of cocaine are not transported in containers leaving the commercial ports of Santa Marta, Cartagena, Barranquilla and the Gulf of Urabá, there are other transit points in the Caribbean that can be used. The flows of cocaine that supply the routes in the Dominican Republic and the Lesser Antilles come specifically from the eastern part of the Colombian Caribbean, in the Magdalena and La Guajira districts (Figure 14). The ports in the Dominican Republic and Panama are the logistical hubs from where the cargo is redistributed to European ports using scheduled shipping services.

As a result of tighter controls in European ports on shipments from countries such as Colombia, there has been a shift in cocaine trafficking through less obvious ports, such as those in Panama and Costa Rica.²¹¹ In 2021, countries in Central America reported a record number of seizures, accounting

for nearly 80% of operations in Panama and Costa Rica.²¹² Panama has become a more regular destination and a redistribution centre for trafficking cocaine to Europe, partly due to the increased infiltration of criminal groups into the ports.²¹³ Costa Rica, in turn, has positioned itself as a transit country and storage centre, with the creation of alliances between local criminal organizations and Colombian, Venezuelan and even Honduran organizations, with the aim of diversifying trafficking routes to Europe.²¹⁴

The new role of the Dominican Republic

In what is known as the western Colombian Caribbean, the most critical area and the source of the largest shipments of drugs is probably La Alta Guajira.²¹⁵ This is the northernmost region of Colombia and of the whole of South America. The distance between the La Guajira peninsula and the Dominican Republic is no more than 850 kilometres (less than 450 nautical miles). This short distance, together with the use of ports and highways built during the colonial period for trade and smuggling, has taken on a new role since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, due to its comparative advantages.

Limited state presence, regulation of transit through their territory by the indigenous Wayuu communities and the agreements they have signed with the EGC, as well as the arrival of Dominican emissaries and boatmen with ties to Caribbean gangs, have all facilitated this growing flow of drugs. During the field work carried out for this report, local sources underlined the increasingly important role of the Dominican groups in the transport sector. Their knowledge of the sea, coastal geography and unloading zones, as well as the relative safety with which they operate in their own country, mean that transport conducted by Dominicans is considered safer than that carried out by boatmen from Colombia or other countries. Some of the people interviewed indicated that, although fishermen from La Guajira are less expensive, they have been the victims of armed attacks upon arrival on the island, and some have even been murdered by members of the local mafias, which explains why the presence of Dominicans in La Guajira has increased considerably.

The connection with the Dominican Republic seems to have been consolidated during the pandemic, to the point where it has now reached an unprecedented level in La Guajira. It is reported that a Dominican can receive up to 300 million Colombian pesos (around €70 000) for just one trip. Due to the reliability of the transport, the EGC and ACSN are now vying for exclusive control of the route and of the Dominican contacts, which would explain the recent murders of several Dominican boatmen in Colombia.²¹⁶

In this area, cocaine is transported mainly using go-fast boats. These boats were initially imported from the Dominican Republic, but due to their 'poisoning' – a local term referring to the presence of tracking chips – they are now manufactured directly on the coasts of La Guajira, Colombia, where the fishermen have set up artisanal workshops to assemble and produce fibreglass boats.

In addition to skills brought by Dominican sailors, it appears that the ties between La Guajira and the Dominican Republic have been strengthened by the growing presence of Dominican networks in the European market, particularly in Spain.²¹⁷ An operation conducted in the Dominican Republic against the leaders of the Rostetan gang in September 2025, as part of Operation Búfalo NK, clearly shows the interest of Dominican authorities in the connection established with La Guajira,²¹⁸ but also in the additional connections with Venezuela and its islands. The scale of this logistical network is considerable. According to investigations by the Attorney General's Office of the Dominican Republic, this criminal network operated across Colombia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Europe.²¹⁹

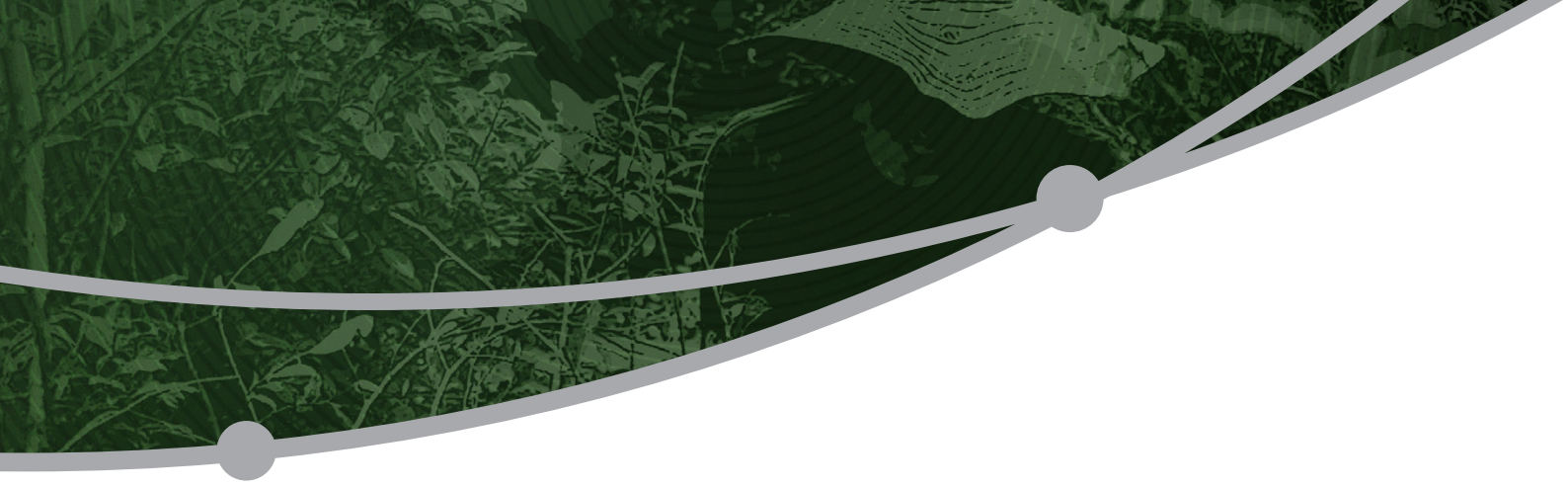


Alta Guajira. Local fishing communities' knowledge of the sea and coastal geography has been used by the drug trafficking networks operating between Colombia and the Caribbean.
© Lina Gasca M/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

The connection with Venezuela

The complexity of the situation in the Lesser Antilles is closely linked to that of Venezuela. The transit and flow of cocaine in the Venezuelan Caribbean has been facilitated over the last decade by the absence of patrols and of cooperation strategies with the international community and neighbouring countries. Flows of cocaine in the Venezuelan Caribbean (Zulia-Falcón) are facilitated by a corridor established several decades ago. The proximity of Zulia to Catatumbo has, in particular, facilitated the supply of the routes leading to the Lesser Antilles, thanks to the ELN's integrated trafficking network, FARC dissidents, and certain government members and officials with ties to transnational organized crime groups.²²⁰ The situation is even more complex in Falcón, as there are also local mafias involved, such as the Paraguaná criminal group headed by Emilio Enrique Martínez (alias Chiche Smith), and the Sabana Alta cartel, with which the government maintains a tense relationship; however, this does not prevent the supply of cocaine from continuing to reach the Lesser Antilles.

These developments could explain the increased flow towards the Lesser Antilles and the growing presence of transnational criminal groups that have established agreements with the inland local communities. These communities, marked by social exclusion, economic marginalization and, in some cases, a cultural mindset that normalizes these activities as a means of subsistence, have allowed their territories and economic spaces to serve as collection and storage points for large shipments destined for Europe. A similar situation occurs with the connection that has developed between Venezuela and Europe through Guyana. Colombian cocaine, which may come from the south of the country (Putumayo and Caquetá) or from the north-east, crosses Venezuelan territory to the Caribbean coast of Guyana, from where submarines set sail for Spain. One of these submarines was intercepted in March 2024, carrying 2.4 tonnes of cocaine.²²¹ Similarly, a fishing boat was detained near Cape Verde with 1 tonne of cocaine on board,²²² and another was intercepted by the French navy off the coast of West Africa, carrying 6 tonnes.²²³



CONCLUSION

This report brings to light the fact that cocaine trafficking routes from the Colombian Caribbean to Europe are currently a central hub of the international supply chain. The prominence of these routes stems from a structured process of reorganization and logistical innovation in drug trafficking, based on the combined exploitation of formal port infrastructure, legal transport routes, multiple points of alternative shipment – informal or natural – as well as the capabilities and networks inherited from previous illicit economies. This process is also supported by economic and political networks of corruption, as well as persistent socioeconomic vulnerabilities in coastal and inland communities.

An analysis of the actors involved reveals the existence of flexible and hybrid criminal networks, in which national and transnational organizations – particularly European ones – interact with segments of the government and local communities. The dynamics seen in official ports go beyond mere criminal infiltration and include ways of coopting key links in public and private logistical chains, involving customs agents, transporters and port operators integrated into illicit networks.

Trafficking routes are closely tied to armed groups' ability to exert influence and control over certain territories, and to the current dynamics of the violent conflict affecting Colombia. The coca-producing clusters in Catatumbo, Sur de Bolívar and Bajo Cauca have historically been main production areas, accounting for large proportion of the total hectares of illegal crops planted in the country. In many cases, they have developed every stage in the cocaine trafficking chain, from cultivation of the coca leaf to its processing. There is either one dominant presence or multiple armed actors that exercise control over and regulate the coca-producing economy, forming part of a wider criminal ecosystem linking other local, regional and transnational actors, as well as other illicit economies.

Internal transit, in turn, shows the relationship between production zones and exit corridors, conditioned by two structural factors: first, territorial control (who exercises dominion over a space and how they do so); and second, the subordination of that control to the dynamics of the armed conflict, which has repeatedly redefined the balance of power among criminal actors.

Comparable dynamics have been identified in certain sectors of the private economy, where local power networks bring together influential families, businesspeople, civil servants and political figures, who act as intermediaries between organized crime and legal export structures. In ports and at informal points of departure, the participation of more vulnerable coastal and inland populations is

particularly notable. In several coastal communities, the cocaine economy has profoundly reconfigured the social fabric, contributing to the normalization of involvement in illegal activities as a strategy for economic survival and social mobility.

Colombia's role in this chain cannot be underestimated. Once the go-fast boats or shipments containing cocaine have left their point of origin, the Greater Caribbean offers multiple options for transit, storage and redistribution, especially in interior areas and certain parts of Central America. This regional configuration compounds the complexity of logistics chains and obscures traditional points of vulnerability.

The adaptability of organized crime, in combination with constant innovation in methods and the growing sophistication of criminal networks, clearly shows that, despite historically high levels of seizures, trafficking networks are still far from being dismantled. Recent changes in the geopolitical context and regional security highlight the strategic repositioning of the Caribbean as a key international cocaine trafficking route and underscore the need for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the role each country in the region within this transnational criminal economy.

Recommendations

In order to address revitalization of the Colombian Caribbean as a strategic corridor for cocaine trafficking, and the central role played by territorial control dynamics in shaping trafficking routes, political adjustments are needed that prioritize intelligence gathering, regional and international cooperation, economic development and the strengthening of institutions.

Illegal crops

The sustained growth in areas planted with coca and in potential cocaine production in Colombia shows the limitations of the national strategies implemented in recent decades to sustainably reduce dependence on illegal economies. At the same time, recent experience shows that replacement programmes require more consistent implementation and greater state capacity to offer viable and sustainable economic alternatives to communities involved in the coca economy.

Within this context, it is essential to strengthen the implementation of the National Drug Policy through comprehensive interventions in the main production centres that supply the routes leading to the Colombian Caribbean. These interventions should combine rural development, access to markets, infrastructure, public services, economic formalization and institutional strengthening, with the goal of reducing communities' structural dependence on illicit crops.

It is also necessary to complement interdiction efforts with ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems that can measure the real impact on production, revenues from criminal organizations and levels of violence. The available evidence suggests that although seizures have reached historical levels, they are not sufficient on their own to alter the dynamics of the global cocaine market. Anti-drug policies should therefore prioritize reduced criminal governance capacity in these territories, as well as transforming the economic and social conditions that facilitate the persistence of the coca economy.

Furthermore, as mentioned, the growth of the European market has driven expansion of the coca economy in Colombia in recent years. The EU and its member states should redouble their efforts to promote targeted development interventions, in conjunction with the Colombian authorities, that address the underlying structural causes of the current boom in coca cultivation in the country.

Security in strategic corridors and internal routes

Cocaine trafficking along Colombia's internal land routes is closely tied to the territorial control exercised by criminal group. The anti-drug policy should prioritize improving the operating and technological capacity of the state along strategic road corridors. This policy should be accompanied by a security strategy and measures to strengthen state presence. The capacity of the police, in particular the force responsible for highways, must also be strengthened through the installation of cargo scanners, non-intrusive inspection arches, and smart weighbridges at toll booths and checkpoints on key trunk roads. These improvements should be accompanied by data analysis systems that can profile high-risk vehicles and cargos, such as shipments of tropical fruit.

These efforts must be supported by intelligence to identify the spheres of influence and monitor the criminal logistics networks that alert criminals about police operations and checkpoints. Furthermore, the Colombian state should identify corrupt links to organized crime inside the security forces through counterintelligence units, and it should implement measures offering incentives and protection for whistle blowers who help uncover the incidents and information-sharing between the security forces and criminal organizations.

Port security

In general, although there are numerous institutional, cross-sectoral, private and international cooperation efforts to improve security in maritime ports, Colombia lacks a coordinated national strategy specifically aimed at preventing and reducing smuggling and drug trafficking. This strategy should be based on a rigorous assessment, identify the actors – both state and non-state – who facilitate or benefit from these illegal economies, and promote effective mechanisms for inter-agency coordination, international cooperation and technological enhancement.

In addition, the EU and its member states should strengthen the outreach activities of the European Ports Alliance to South America, in order to facilitate the exchange of best practices and the sharing of intelligence to combat maritime drug trafficking between the two regions.

Members of the European Ports Alliance should promote bilateral exchange mechanisms with the main ports of origin of cocaine in Colombia and neighbouring countries, following the example of the alliance between the ports of Antwerp, Rotterdam and Hamburg, and their cooperation activities with South America.

Furthermore, the EU and its member states should maintain a political dialogue with Colombia and other South American partners regarding the growing threats associated with drug trafficking, for example, through periodic high-level meetings of the Mechanism for Coordination and Cooperation between the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), through the EU-CLASI mechanism, and continuing the work of the EU-CELAC Foundation on ports and drug trafficking.

Finally, the EU and its member states should invest in and strengthen the existing targeted assistance programmes for ports in Colombia and the rest of the region, with the goal of preventing and combating criminal infiltration and corruption at the ports, for example through bi-regional programmes such as El PacCTO and COPOLAD.

Technical and operational monitoring capabilities

It is necessary to improve technical and operational monitoring, surveillance and interdiction capabilities in the strategic corridors of the Greater Caribbean, such as the routes between Colombia and the Dominican Republic, and between Venezuela and the Lesser Antilles, which currently have limitations or low levels of state oversight. This includes not only maritime spaces, but also land, river and air routes used to move cocaine shipments.

In particular, it is crucial to prioritize isolated coastal zones, interior areas, river mouths, informal border passes and clandestine air strips, which facilitate the adaptability and fragmentation of criminal networks. To this end, progress must be made in integrated intelligence systems, satellite and maritime monitoring capabilities, international cooperation and information exchange between national authorities and Caribbean countries, for a more coordinated response to transnational criminal dynamics.

At the international level, the EU and its member states should strengthen cooperation with their Colombian and South American counterparts within the framework of the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (Narcotics), with the goal of bolstering monitoring and interception capabilities in the Caribbean, in close coordination with the current operations of states with territories in the region.

In order to address the current effects of shifting drug trafficking routes within Colombia and across the region as a whole, the EU and its member states should reinforce their network of officials who facilitate early warning efforts and information exchange at the regional level.

Strategies and responses with a regional focus

It is important to develop transnational security and control strategies that recognize Colombia's structural influence on criminal dynamics and illicit economies in the Caribbean. There are spaces to develop such strategies, such as the EU's COPOLAD project and the European Commission's El PAcCTO project, which may serve as a framework for moving away from approaches focused exclusively on national borders or on local interdiction, and towards regional cooperation mechanisms that understand how cocaine trafficking networks connect actors, markets and territories between Colombia and various Caribbean countries.

In this regard, public policies and security strategies should consider not only the role of the Colombian Caribbean as a corridor for shipping drugs, but also its role as a space where criminal networks converge, based on logistical arrangements and on forms of criminal governance that facilitate the trafficking of cocaine to Europe.

The EU and its member states should reinforce the cooperation and coordination under way among specialized agencies, such as EUROPOL and EUDA, and their counterpart institutions in Colombia and other South American countries, in order to facilitate more agile responses to the changing dynamics of drug trafficking and organized crime in the region.

Local communities

Field work revealed the role played by local, coastal, and island communities in cocaine trafficking, acting as intermediaries in the drug's transit and storage prior to its arrival at destination ports in Europe.

Many of these local, coastal and island communities are characterized by low levels of development, limited state presence, economies historically linked to smuggling, and weak institutional legitimacy. Beyond a restrictive approach, it is necessary to understand that in many of these territories, participation in trafficking networks stems from economic need, social ties and cultural ways of relating to illegality that have become historically entrenched.

Therefore, public policies should prioritize sustainable alternatives for employment and income, improving local legal economies, infrastructure and basic services, as well as mechanisms for building trust between communities and the state. Similarly, any security strategy should incorporate differentiated focus points for coastal and inland contexts, considering the social, cultural and economic particularities that favour tolerance or normalization of activities associated with drug trafficking.

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