

Crime-Corruption Symbiosis: From Institutional Co-optation in Colombia to Societal Collapse in Venezuela



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Crime-Corruption Symbiosis: From Institutional Co-optation in Colombia to Societal Collapse in Venezuela

Luis Jorge Garay-Salamanca^{} & Eduardo Salcedo-Albarán^{**}*

Summary

This article argues, with a comparative approach, that corruption and crime are not isolated phenomena, but interconnected components of the same system of macro-criminality that co-opts institutions. Based on evidence from Colombia and Venezuela—with references to Mexico and Guatemala—the document develops the conceptualization of the "market of institutional functions": corruption provides institutional cover and access to public revenues, while crime provides coercive capacity, financing, and operational networks at the territorial level. It shows that, when responses focus only on attacking visible violence, without dismantling institutional co-optation, mass victimization persists due to lack of medical assistance, education, food, or forced displacement, among others, and long-term effects: deprivation of human rights of various kinds, erosion of public trust, and the weakening and delegitimization of liberal democracy. Comprehensive guidelines are proposed: institutional strengthening with cross-controls, establishment of an extensive system of restorative transitional justice, transnational cooperation against networks, adequate reparation, and a regulatory adjustment that recognizes corruption as an attack on life and human dignity.

Keywords: macro-criminality; corruption; institutional co-optation; Colombia; Venezuela; victimization; democracy.

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1. From Bribery to Reconfiguration: The Market for Institutional Functions

Why this matters: The relationship between crime and corruption is a necessary condition to explain why several Latin American countries continue to be trapped in cycles of impunity, violence, and democratic weakening, despite decades of anti-corruption efforts and the supposed strengthening of security forces.

The analysis of the causal relationship between corruption and crime in Latin America—where some of the world's most criminally and corruptly active states converge—demonstrates that these are not isolated phenomena. Instead, these are **symbiotic processes** that mutually reinforce each other, creating an interconnected system that goes beyond mere co-existence to actively shape state institutions. Over the past two decades, multiple cases in countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Venezuela have demonstrated that corruption does not merely facilitate the operation of criminal networks by providing institutional cover. It also plays a critical role in transforming state institutions, making them functional to illicit interests, and reinforcing the capture and reconfiguration of these institutions by criminal actors. Simultaneously, organized crime provides coercive power, logistical resources, financial backing, and territorial control, which, in turn, fuel the perpetuation and expansion of corruption. This mutual reinforcement creates a self-sustaining cycle, wherein each phenomenon feeds into and amplifies the other, co-opting state institutions, diverting public resources, and perpetuating mass victimization. This ongoing dynamic embeds institutional capture and state-enabled impunity. Its regional and transnational expansion, foreseen since the beginning of the century, reveals that institutional cooptation is not a localized phenomenon. Still, a far-reaching process that restricts rights, erodes

trust in institutions, and undermines the foundations of liberal democracy itself (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2016) (Garay-Salamanca, Salcedo-Albarán, & Beltrán, 2010).

Considering the above, this article examines, from a comparative perspective, how the causal relationship between crime and corruption functions, with special emphasis on Colombia and Venezuela. Based on these experiences, it aims to demonstrate how corruption and crime, far from being separate abnormal phenomena, form a system of macro-criminality that requires comprehensive solutions to break the cycle of impunity and structural victimization.

This article consists of eight sections. The first is this introduction; the second, a conceptual elaboration of the causal relationship between crime and corruption; the third, the analysis of the Colombian case as a historical laboratory of institutional co-optation; the fourth, a brief account of the Venezuelan case and its institutional collapse; the fifth, a discussion of the regional expansion and feedback of criminal and corruption networks; the sixth, an analysis of their effects in terms of human victimization; the seventh, a description of the long-term impacts in terms of institutional weakness and the delegitimization of liberal democracy; and the eighth, The conclusions and regulatory proposals derived from the analysis are presented.

2. The causal relationship between crime and corruption

Why This Matters: Corruption is not only an administrative issue, nor is crime a merely police phenomenon, but together they make up a system that transforms instances and institutions of the State.

Based on the analysis of empirical evidence about the dynamics of crime and corruption in Colombia, Mexico, and Guatemala, since the first decade of the century, it has been shown that illicit networks, in their varied expressions, do not simply seek to bribe officials but to move towards the reconfiguration of the rules of the game from within the state apparatus (Garay, Salcedo-Albaran, Beltran, & Guerrero, 2008b)(Garay, Salcedo-Albaran, & Beltran, 2009) (Garay-Salamanca & Salcedo-Albaran, 2015).

The confrontation between criminal networks and the state apparatus is only a basic and initial stage of their interaction, since with the systemic strengthening of criminality, this interaction evolves towards the coordination and complementarity of their respective capacities. Ultimately, social agents operating in the legal and illegal sectors seek to obtain their own and exclusive benefits and, for this purpose, coordination tends to be less costly and more strategic than confrontation. This evolution was observed in Colombia and Mexico, and it is possibly also the case in Ecuador.

This process generates a "market of institutional functions" in which legal, illegal, and gray social agents exchange political favors, regulatory privileges, and access to public revenues.

In this market, political financing (legal, illicit, or gray) and clientelist or patrimonial relations operate as privileged channels of exchange: corporate networks provide resources, logistics, and formal coverage to campaigns and parties; in exchange, they capture or co-opt – depending on the level of progress – regulatory decisions, budget quotas, public procurement, and tax benefits. The articulation of party/political movement–electoral campaign–contractor–supplier creates “rent-

extraction circuits” that facilitate moving from capture to co-optation and, finally, to the reconfiguration of key institutions.

These circuits, in turn, have been particularly serious when openly criminal agents with the capacity to exercise violence are involved, as observed with the alliances between local and regional political leaders and commanders of narco-paramilitary blocs. These alliances were not only established to coerce voters and thus ensure electoral victories, but also to advance institutional co-optation from the local level to the national level at the highest levels of the State, which led to mass victimization with the use of force and "social control" as in the case of forced displacement and misappropriation of land.

The so-called "criminal macro-networks" and "corruption macro-structures" do not operate as isolated and mutually decontextualized systems. Still, as complements of the same symbiotic dynamic, corruption allows criminal networks to access formal institutions with operational shielding. This shielding occurs in practice through non-criminal agents who operate within formal legal frameworks, with access to channels of decision-making power, to privileged information, and to the management of exclusive interests with the appearance of legality. At the same time, crime provides capacities for coercion, illicit financing, and territorial control, in addition to unjustified profits and privileges. In this way, the "market of institutional functions" sustains dynamics of capture to institutional and state co-optation to one described as **Co-opted State Reconfiguration** (Garay-Salamanca & Salcedo-Albarán, 2012) (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2016) in which resilient and antifragile (Taleb, 2014) networks are replicated on a

local, national, and even transnational scale (Garay-Salamanca, Salcedo-Albarán, & Macías, 2018d).

3. Colombia: From narco-parapolitics to health cartels and public procurement

Why This Matters: From narco-parapolitics to health cartels, alliances between criminal networks, public officials, and private agents who act between legality and illegality have not only generated violence but have institutionalized corruption as a mechanism of power.

Colombia serves as a historical “laboratory” for analyzing the Co-opted Reconfiguration of the State. Since the beginning of the 1990s, with the violence unleashed by the Medellín Cartel, and later with narco-parapolitics during the first decade of the century, it has been documented—in Supreme Court of Justice rulings and in specialized academic studies—that drug trafficking, guerrilla, and narco-paramilitary networks could not operate without systematic alliances with public officials, including congressmen, mayors, and public servants, not only at the national level, but also private agents of various kinds, such as lawyers, landowners, political leaders, money changers, and even “front” companies (Garay-Salamanca, Salcedo-Albarán, & Duarte, 2017) (Garay-Salamanca L. J., Salcedo-Albarán, Beltrán, & Guerrero, 2008).

Narco-parapolitics showed the evolution of criminal learning in Colombia. While the Medellín Cartel focused on bribes to local officials and open and violent confrontation against the state, the structures inherited from drug trafficking shifted toward institutional coordination and co-optation at progressively higher levels of the state apparatus (Garay-Salamanca L. J., Salcedo-Albarán, Beltrán, & Guerrero, 2008) (Garay, Salcedo-Albarán, & Beltrán, 2009).

As a result, narco-paramilitary networks consolidated territorial power over large areas and, from that base, extended their influence to (i) make formal commitments to mayors, governors, congressmen, and politicians, (ii) control the national intelligence agency (DAS), and (iii) co-opt key decision-making bodies in entities of the three branches of public administration (Lopez, 2010).

Narco-parapolitics would not have been viable without the convergence between electoral financing (formal and informal), corporate ties, and clientelist networks that operated as its political infrastructure. The flows of resources – in cash, in kind, and through contracts and subcontracts – established binding commitments between private sponsors (legal and illegal), political campaigns, and clientelist machinery. This network ensured votes, territorial control, and access to public revenues, while shielding the macro-network through appointments of public officials and progressive control of regulation and public management. The pattern was replicated, for example, in the public management of royalties, health and school feeding program (PAE, by its Spanish acronym): it began with political financing or undue support for political parties, movements and leaders, it continued with the capture of public policy decisions such as the routing of contracts, to consolidate the excessive extraction of public revenues in favor of

powerful exclusionary interests to, thus, feed back into the perverse cycle.

In Colombia, corruption—through contracts to capture royalties and agreements to co-opt control and decision-making bodies of the local, regional, and national state—contributed to paramilitary violence being transformed into institutionalized political power. With this political power, the agents involved committed massacres, forced disappearances, and displacements of peasant and indigenous communities, directly affecting millions of victims who were dispossessed of their territories, subjected to multiple forms of violence, and deprived of basic subsistence conditions. The resulting ruptures of the societal fabric are today characteristic features of exclusion and social fracture in Colombian society (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022)(Barandica Aparicio & Belalcazar, 2025).

Transitional jurisdictions, such as the Justice and Peace Law (“Justicia y Paz”) and the Special Justice for Peace (“Justicia Especial para la Paz”), have relatively effectively addressed the evident manifestations of criminal violence associated with the armed conflict and have made the victims visible. However, the root of the phenomenon – the reconfiguration of institutions because of systemic corruption and macro-criminality – remains practically intact, reproducing the symbiotic dynamic between crime and corruption.

In this context, the networks of systemic corruption that have been identified since the beginning of the century in the local management of royalties in departments such as Casanare, Meta and Arauca, in the administration of public health in the department of Córdoba, or in the execution of School Feeding Programs in Putumayo, among other cases, confirm this logic: public resources destined for vulnerable populations that are diverted through macro-corruption networks that involve officials, contractors – natural or

legal persons supposedly legal or openly “fronted” – local politicians and openly criminal agents such as members of subversive or narco-paramilitary groups. In all these cases, financial interactions emerge between campaign contributors and public decision-makers. The double accounting – the official campaign and the undeclared hidden – and the corporate opacity of front men and unidentified final beneficiaries facilitated the recycling of financial resources and the stabilization of clientelist pacts (Zuleta, Delgado, Guerrero, Salcedo-Albarán, & Almeciga, 2005) (Garay-Salamanca, Salcedo-Albarán, & Alvarez-Villa, 2020) (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2021b).

The Comptroller General of the Republic has estimated, for example, that a good part of the 48.1 billion pesos from oil royalties, destined to cover health and education in the regions, would have been lost due to corruption in which this symbiosis between political leaders, paramilitary structures, and private agents intervened (Contraloría General de la República, 2018).

In addition, journalistic and judicial investigations into the School Feeding Program in Colombia have documented thousands of children without adequate food. In these cases, criminality was not only expressed in homicides and extortion, but also in hunger, malnutrition, and denial of fundamental rights for large sectors of the population (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2021b).

This empirical evidence shows that when sectors of the State – such as control entities or public health institutions at the local, regional and national levels – are co-opted and put at the service of illicit interests, a replicable pattern is established that facilitates the expansion and feedback between crime and corruption, generating mass victimization, especially as more and more sectors give in to the dynamics of co-optation.

4. From Corruption and State Reconfiguration to Societal Collapse: The Venezuelan Kleptocratic State

Why This Matters: Venezuela is a radical example that the symbiosis between crime and corruption can reach: the consolidation of a kleptocratic state whose functioning reproduces a humanitarian tragedy.

In Venezuela, the lack of adequate controls has enabled the symbiosis between crime and corruption to escalate, resulting in a state characterized by the operation of a Super Corruption Network at local, regional, and national levels. Unlike Colombia, where even in the times of the Medellín Cartel and narco-parapolitics, foundational institutional counterweights persisted—for example, the high courts—in Venezuela, corruption and institutional co-optation are so widespread that they have produced institutional collapse: the state apparatus has been instrumentalized as a machinery of systematic corruption directed by civilian and military elites from the top of the government (Salcedo-Albaran & Garay-Salamanca, 2021).

Multiple investigations have revealed crime sub-networks articulated in key sectors such as oil, food, justice, and the armed forces, all intertwined with transnational criminal markets for gold, weapons, drugs, and contraband. In the oil sector, the network has massively co-opted the state-owned oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA), and a sprawling constellation of front companies used to siphon off billions of dollars through fictitious contracts, overpricing, and international financial triangulation (Salcedo-Albaran & Garay-Salamanca, 2021).

In the food sector, the CLAP programs were also co-opted to create a corruption scheme that combined diversion of public resources with selective distribution of food, used as a mechanism of social and political control. In terms of security, the armed forces and intelligence bodies have not only guaranteed impunity, but also actively participated in fuel smuggling, illegal

mining, and systematic repression operations against the opposition. The judiciary and control entities have been massively co-opted to legally shield these practices, thereby consolidating a regime of macro-corruption that is protected by “institutional legitimacy” (Salcedo-Albaran & Garay-Salamanca, 2022) (Transparencia Venezuela, 2022; Transparencia Venezuela en el Exilio, 2025b).

In fact, criminal and corruption structures in Venezuela have achieved levels of complexity and resilience even higher than those documented in the case of Lava Jato in Brazil, to the point of forming a kleptocratic state in which corruption and crime operate as a macro-system (Salcedo-Albaran & Garay-Salamanca, 2021).

The result of this feedback loop dynamic between corruption and crime has been a multidimensional crisis without precedent in Latin America: hyperinflation and impoverishment of large population groups, food crisis, collapse of basic services, forced migration of more than seven million people, and systematic violations of human rights. This is how structural corruption in the import of food and medicine deepened one of the worst food crises in the world, with a devastating impact on children and vulnerable populations, documented by international organizations and multiple academic investigations (Salcedo-Albaran & Garay-Salamanca, 2021)(Salcedo-Albaran & Garay-Salamanca, 2022).

In Venezuela, the symbiosis between crime and corruption does not simply produce “citizen insecurity” as a visible symptom, but rather a generalized societal collapse that destroys the institutional, economic, and

social fabric of the country (Transparencia Venezuela, 2022).

5. Expanding Super Networks: Regional and Transnational Macro-Criminality

Why This Matters: Such dynamics don't stop at national borders: they expand and strengthen on a regional and global scale, creating transnational resilient supernets that defy any isolated state response.

The higher the levels of corruption, the more likely it is that institutional functions and capacities at the national, regional, and local levels will be put at the service of interests to the point of generating a State that serves *de facto* as a cog in illicit networks. On the other hand, the higher the levels of criminality, the greater the incentives for different criminal expressions – from local illicit economies to transnational structures – to corrupt public officials, capture and co-opt state institutions and agencies, and even reconfigure states at various levels – local, regional, national. This is a perverse feedback dynamic that enhances the scope, effectiveness, and repercussions of both corruption and criminality.

In turn, the transnational dimension encompasses electoral and partisan financing via opaque channels, including "friendly" foundations, triangulated contracts, consultancies, and front companies that distribute contributions across various jurisdictions. The absence of common beneficial ownership standards, the weak traceability of in-kind donations, and the fragmentation between electoral, fiscal, and financial intelligence authorities in different countries allow macro-networks to provide and collect favors across borders, synchronizing regulatory changes, budget quotas, and tenders. The transnational network Lava Jato clearly evidenced this dynamic (Garay-Salamanca, Salcedo-Albarán, & Macías, 2018d).

Since the first decade of the century, this feedback in Latin America has been empirically documented in countries where high levels of corruption and criminal activity coincide, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, and, recently, Venezuela. In these countries, the ever-evolving networks of crime, corruption, capture, and co-optation do not remain confined to national borders. In fact, the resilience of macro-networks of crime and corruption is partly explained by their ability to expand regionally and transnationally:

- In Colombia, the collaboration between guerrilla groups, paramilitary forces, and drug trafficking organizations helped expand the illegal narcotics market to Mexico, Central America, and European countries, with stopovers in African nations. This included forming alliances with cartels and illicit financial networks that enabled large-scale money laundering.

The exploitation of multiple illicit markets has enhanced macro-criminal power, as has happened in Colombia with the illegal exploitation and export of gold by criminal drug trafficking networks, which is currently the most profitable illicit operation due to the boom in the price of gold in the face of the crisis of uncertainty in the world economy (Garay-Salamanca L. J., 2025).

However, the integration of marketing channels for drugs such as cocaine and synthetic drugs such as fentanyl has strengthened transnational macro-crime through multiple alliances and modalities of specialization between international networks throughout different countries.

- In Mexico, the network of connections nurtured the relationship of Colombian criminal networks with cartels such as Los Zetas, consolidating transnational drug trafficking corridors and institutional co-optation practices like those documented in Colombia. Indeed, as evidenced in empirical studies (Garay-Salamanca & Salcedo-Albarán, 2015), the processes of capture, co-optation, and institutional reconfiguration in Mexico followed the "bottom-up" pattern characteristic of narco-paramilitarism in Colombia: that is, from the local to the regional (departmental, state) to the national State levels (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2016).
- In Guatemala, the expansion was evidenced in the capture of judicial and security institutions, where hybrid criminal networks—known as Illegal Bodies and Clandestine Power Apparatuses, CIACS—

have replicated the model of symbiosis between corruption and organized crime (Gutiérrez, 2016).

- In Venezuela, illegal routes of drugs, gold, food, and fuel, as well as illicit financial flows, expanded to neighboring countries, generating sub-networks in the Dominican Republic, Panama, Spain, and other financial jurisdictions that served to triangulate resources and hide assets.

This dynamic has also included the expansion to financial jurisdictions on practically all continents to "layer" and "launder" the resources obtained illicitly (Corruptómetro Venezuela: <https://corruptometro.org>). Over the past decade, the interaction between the geographies of Colombia and Venezuela has strengthened a system of crime and corruption that has been in a state of permanent expansion and globalization. In this process, state agents, private companies, and transnational criminal networks have been articulated in a framework that goes beyond borders and consolidates a regional macro-crime regime with international projection (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2021).

6. The visible victims of macro-criminality

Why This Matters: Victims must be placed at the center of the analysis, showing that corruption, as well as crime, kills, not in an abstract way, but, among other cases, in hospitals without medicines, schools without food, and marginalized and impoverished communities.

The symbiosis between corruption and crime should not be analyzed only in economic or institutional terms, but also in terms of direct and indirect human damage. On the one hand, there are the direct victims of criminal markets sustained and strengthened by corruption and institutional co-optation:

- People displaced by the dispossession of land in contexts of illegal exploitation of natural resources, as has occurred and has been documented since 2015 in Bajo Cauca and Antioquia, where peasant families have been expelled to make way for illegal gold extraction operations (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2015; Comisión de la Verdad, 2022).

- Communities subjected to violence and extortion in areas of narcotics cultivation and trafficking, such as in Colombia's Catatumbo or in Guerrero, Mexico, where armed organizations control territories at the expense of the civilian population and impose "(dis-)order"(Hernández-Gutiérrez & López-Rodríguez, 2023).
- Women and migrants are exploited in human trafficking networks, documented in Central America, Mexico, and on migrant smuggling routes originating in Venezuela, which have led thousands of victims into conditions of modern slavery in sexual and labor markets (Márquez Olmos, 2022; Transparencia Venezuela en el Exilio, 2025c).
- Artisanal miners forced to work in bonded conditions in illegal gold activities controlled by armed groups, such as in the Orinoco Mining Arc in Venezuela, where killings and forced exploitation of indigenous communities have been recorded (Transparencia Venezuela, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2025; Transparencia Venezuela en el Exilio, 2025).

On the other hand, there are the victims of corruption, who, at first, seem to be indirect because they are spatially distant from the corrupt causal act or the systemic corrupting process, but who are equally direct (Salcedo-Albarán, Zuleta, Beltrán, & Rubio, 2007).

- Medical patients who die due to a lack of medicines in underfunded hospitals are victims of the usurpation or diversion of public resources intended for such purposes. This has been evidenced in Venezuela during the multiple hospital crises documented between 2017 and 2019, when more than 70% of hospitals reported critical shortages (Infobae, 2022; Transparencia Venezuela en el Exilio, 2022).
- Children who are denied adequate food and education due to the diversion of resources from

school programs, as seen in the corruption of the School Feeding Program (PAE) in Colombia, which has left thousands of students without basic rations (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2021b).

- Indigenous communities that are deprived of drinking water due to corruption in infrastructure projects, such as in La Guajira, Colombia, where multiple contracts for wells and aqueducts have remained unfinished. At the same time, unhealthiness, malnutrition, and infant mortality have increased, documented by the Constitutional Court (See: Sentence T-302 of 2017).
- Entire families faced hunger due to embezzlement in food programs, such as in the CLAPs in Venezuela, where the irregular and corrupt distribution of food boxes has become a mechanism of political control (Salcedo-Albarán & Garay-Salamanca, 2022).

The above, with the added factor that these chains of victimization grow over time and distance: damages to a patient who loses access to medicines not only lead to immediate health decline or even death. These damages also increase medical costs and household income loss, worsening long-term health conditions.

Likewise, a child who suffers from malnutrition or is deprived of proper education faces lasting effects on physical and cognitive development, which restrict their future and cause immediate harm and income loss for themselves, their family, and their community. These chains of damage are often overlooked in the few legal cases that deal with these issues.

Victimization, therefore, is not a side effect but a fundamental aspect of the symbiosis between crime and corruption: the survival of these large-scale and complex networks relies on the exploitation and suffering of the most vulnerable populations.

7. The institutional cost of corruption and crime

Why This Matters: The damage is not limited to the immediate social sphere, but erodes trust in institutions, empties democracy of content, and opens the path to authoritarian and kleptocratic regimes.

In addition to the human victims caused by crime and corruption networks, institutional weakness generates long-term indirect victimization. As public services become commodities subject to corruption networks, citizens' trust in institutions is progressively eroded (Salcedo-Albarán, Garay-Salamanca, Sánchez-Moreno, & de Freitas, 2020), fueling social skepticism, weakening the legitimacy of the State and, ultimately, of liberal democracy. This, with the aggravating factor that institutional capture opens the way to a gradual dismantling of liberal democracy: co-optation and corruption lead to the replacement of the principle of participation, representation, and accountability with clientelist and patrimonialism mechanisms, which

consolidate elites in power and further reduce the space for citizen participation and social control. (Garay-Salamanca & Salcedo-Albarán, 2024)

Progressively, the separation of powers is weakened, and the system of checks and balances is eroded. In practice, fertile ground is created for authoritarian and kleptocratic regimes that use the state apparatus to perpetuate themselves in power, manipulate electoral processes, and restrict civil liberties, consolidating a model of governance based on impunity and the use of public resources for selfish ends and excluding the elites in power.

8. Breaking the symbiosis: towards a comprehensive paradigm against crime and corruption

Why This Matters: Without a comprehensive approach to the crime-corruption system, societies will continue to be trapped in a perverse dynamic that condemns millions to victimization and weakens the very foundations of liberal democracy.

The comparative analysis of the dynamics of feedback between criminal and corrupt networks in countries such as Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, El Salvador, or Guatemala shows that crime and

corruption are not parallel phenomena, but complementary cogs in the same system of capture, co-optation, and institutional reconfiguration and mass victimization. Various investigations confirm

this: rulings by the Supreme Court of Justice in Colombia on parapolitics, reports by the Truth Commission and the Comptroller General's Office that document millions of dollars in diversion of public resources in royalties and social programs, as well as international reports that illustrate institutional capture in Mexico and Guatemala.

In Colombia, the experience of narco-parapolitics and systemic corruption in social sectors shows that the responses of the traditional justice system have been insufficient to ignore the structural roots of capture and co-optation.

It is therefore necessary that corrupt and criminal social agents not only answer to the justice systems for the public budget committed, but also for the damage caused to the life and integrity of specific people in their condition as victims. Examples such as corruption in the health sector in Córdoba (Colombia), where deaths were documented because of the diversion of resources, or the hospital and food crisis in Venezuela, in which corruption aggravated mortality due to lack of medicines and hunger, among many others, show that corruption has lethal consequences.

To cut the circuit of institutional financing-capture-cooptation, the following are required: (i) predominantly public financing with strict and restrictive ceilings on private contributions; (ii) online and real-time disclosure of all contributions (money and kind), with verification of beneficial ownership; (iii) prohibition of contributions from active contractors and State suppliers during a specific pre- and post-contract period; (iv) regulation and monitoring of incompatibilities and revolving doors with effective sanction; (v) algorithmic crossover between donations, corporate matrices, contracting, exemptions and regulatory agenda; and (vi) structural sanctions: loss of legal status, disqualification of leaders and return of rents.

To this extent, it is urgent to adopt a paradigm in which crimes of corruption are not defined only as offenses against an abstract social entity, such as the assets of the State, but also as offenses against life and fundamental rights in a liberal state of law.

In short, as long as organized crime and corruption continue to be treated as decontextualized spheres, it is to be expected that societies will remain trapped in a circle of impunity that condemns millions of people to suffer violence, hunger, and social exclusion. It is essential to recognize that corruption produces individual, collective, and social damage, material and immaterial, not metaphorical but real, as well as lasting ecological and environmental damage with the illegal exploitation of natural resources and with the loss of confidence in the institutions and legitimacy of liberal democracy. This implies reformulating the legal, social, and political treatment of this phenomenon.

Some unavoidable actions in this objective are: the establishment of a comprehensive approach to restorative transitional justice for the prosecution of those responsible for macro-criminality and macro-corruption, the reparation of their direct and indirect victims for material and immaterial damages, and the effective and timely confiscation of capital illicitly obtained for the financing of comprehensive reparation – with the operation of a fund for reparation of victims. Additionally, in countries such as Colombia, Mexico, and Guatemala, specialized prosecutors' offices and a chamber at the high court level are required to combat the most serious cases of macro-criminality and corruption. This, combined with the development of civic awareness about rejecting illicit actions, which often masquerade as legal, fosters a moral culture that values legality. These are some of the unavoidable actions to prevent and dismantle networks that capture, co-opt, and even reconfigure institutions, and to vindicate politics, build citizenship, and legitimize liberal democracy.

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