



Drug contamination in the movement of cargo units from Ecuadorian ports

La contaminación con droga en el movimiento de unidades de carga desde puertos ecuatorianos

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ABSTRACT

World trade has experienced exponential growth in recent decades, facilitating the exchange of goods and products around the world and promoting the development of consumer societies. In this article, we will explore in depth the problem in Ecuador of the use of containers for camouflage and drug trafficking worldwide (commonly called contamination) and we will analyze the negative effects on the actors involved (from individuals to institutions) with social consequences, legal, economic and security that this phenomenon entails for the affected countries and the international community as a whole. In this context, legal challenges persist, especially with regard to the identification and punishment of those responsible for introducing drugs into containers, as well as the prevention of corruption in ports. The ability of law enforcement agencies to detect and prevent drug trafficking in containers must continue to improve. The conclusion reveals that drug contamination in maritime containers leaving

Ecuadorian ports continues to have harmful effects on society, the economy, and the country's prestige.

RESUMEN

El comercio mundial ha experimentado un crecimiento exponencial en las últimas décadas, facilitando el intercambio de bienes y productos en todo el mundo y promoviendo el desarrollo de sociedades de consumo. En este artículo se explora en profundidad la problemática en Ecuador del uso de contenedores para el camuflaje y tráfico de drogas a nivel mundial (comúnmente llamado contaminación) y se analiza los efectos negativos en los actores involucrados (desde personas naturales hasta instituciones) con consecuencias sociales, legales, económicas y de seguridad que este fenómeno conlleva para los países afectados y la comunidad internacional en su conjunto. En este contexto, los desafíos legales persisten, especialmente en lo que respecta a la identificación y sanción de los responsables de la introducción de drogas en los contenedores, así como la prevención de la corrupción en los puertos. La capacidad de los organismos encargados de hacer cumplir la ley para detectar y evitar el tráfico de drogas en los contenedores debe seguir mejorando. La conclusión revela que la contaminación con drogas en los contenedores marítimos que salen de los puertos de Ecuador siguen generando efectos nefastos en la sociedad, la economía y el prestigio del país.

Keywords / Palabras clave

smuggling, drugs, trade, seaport, customs

contrabando, droga, comercio, puerto marítimo, aduana

Introduction

Global trade has experienced exponential growth in recent decades, facilitating the exchange of goods and products around the world and promoting the development of consumer societies ranging from food and medicines to machinery and beauty accessories. In this context, containers travelling on large vessels have become the backbone of international logistics, enabling the most efficient and secure maritime transport of all types of goods on a large scale. However, this growth in shipping has also been exploited by criminal organisations to conceal and transport illegal drugs globally.

The use of containers in the export and camouflage of drugs has posed an unprecedented challenge to counter-narcotics agencies around the world. Taking advantage of the sheer size of these containers, as well as the complexity and volume of international trade, drug traffickers have developed sophisticated concealment techniques to evade detection and customs control.

This article explores in depth the problem in Ecuador of the use of containers for camouflage and drug trafficking at a global level (commonly called contamination) and analyses the negative effects on the actors involved (from natural persons to institutions) with social, legal, economic and security consequences that this phenomenon entails for the affected countries and the international community as a whole.

Around 90% of all trade is conducted via sea containers, of which more than 500 million are shipped annually in the trade supply chain and, of this amount, less than 2% is inspected. The sheer volume of containers travelling across the seas from country to country and continent to continent makes them prime targets for illicit drug trafficking actors. The global dependence on maritime trade, combined not only with the sophisticated concealment methods employed by drug traffickers, but also with the diverse trafficking routes, makes successful interdiction and intervention difficult. The situation therefore poses a serious threat to the supply side of international trade, as well as to the sustainable development of countries (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).

The sheer volume of international maritime container traffic, with approximately 750 million containers shipped annually in the trade supply chain, coupled with the sophisticated and often ingenious concealment methods and complex routes adopted by illicit drug traffickers and other smugglers, invariably makes successful interdiction difficult. Seaports are notoriously challenging, and sometimes dangerous, places to work. Law enforcement structures are often hampered by lack of resources, inter-agency mistrust, complex port processes and systems, and other factors that criminal organisations deliberately exploit. This situation represents a very real and serious threat to the security of the international trade supply chain, which is so important for sustainable development (World Customs Organization WCO, 2023).

Materials and Methods

In addition, it addresses the efforts and measures implemented by the competent authorities to combat this problem, from port logistics methodologies with the limitations and virtues to prevent or detect at different points of risk of contamination. The intention to implement strategies related to advances in detection technology, inspection protocols and international cooperation agreements in the fight against drug trafficking in the context of export and container transport is highlighted. It also discusses remaining challenges and possible future strategies to enhance security and prevent the criminal use of containers.

For the drafting of this article, different sources of information were reviewed, such as news articles from the media, news in digital newspapers, recent articles related to the subject from indexed scientific journals, books by different authors and institutions and other documents that led to a conclusion on the current state and future prospects of drug contamination in containers transiting through Ecuadorian ports.

Results

Trafficking by sea, mainly in containers, is on the rise, as evidenced by the fact that almost 90 % of the cocaine seized worldwide in 2021 was transported by sea (UNODC, 2022).

In Ecuador, non-oil exports continue to grow, providing encouragement after the difficulties caused by the pandemic. According to the Ministry of Production, Foreign Trade, Investment and Fisheries, in 2021 exports reached 18.092 billion dollars between traditional and non-traditional products; in 2022 they grew to 21.071 billion and so far this year up to March they have generated 5.562 billion (Ministerio de Producción, Comercio Exterior, Inversiones y Pesca, 2023).

Despite this growth, many of the producers have decreased their sales due to the problems of the war in Ukraine, competition with trade agreements, falling demand, rising freight costs, among other causes, as well as complications in local logistics and the continuous risk of drug contamination in their containers.

The contamination of drugs in containers represents high costs in losses, because their formal and honest activities are clouded by the

web of corruption and interests woven by the mafias. One of the fastest growing drug markets is Europe. According to the results of Operation Sky ECC, which took two years, more and more cocaine and methamphetamines produced in Colombia and Peru are hidden in legitimate export containers and arrive in Europe following the route from the port of Guayaquil in Ecuador to the port of Antwerp in Belgium (Diario La Hora, 2023).

The business is very lucrative, as a cocaine producer's margin can be as much as 150% over cost and the margin on the sale to the consumer can be as much as 300%. However, transport from the origin to the final market generates a return of 1,500%, which is why they try to send as many drug-infiltrated containers as possible, despite the fact that between 10% and 20% of the cargo can be lost in customs controls (Diario La Hora, 2023).

The imagination of the members of drug trafficking organisations nowadays leaves more than one person surprised, due to the capacity of occurrence that they have, as they surpass all ideas at the moment of making a camouflage and of course they do not have any type of limitation with what they do, as long as they get or hide the drug in different ways to be exported to a third country, which can be a consumer or trading country and its objective will be to cross the borders (Palacios & Quimiz, 2018).

Drug contamination in maritime containers constitutes a multifaceted challenge that has generated serious social, economic and legal implications in the country. Ecuador, strategically located in the Andean region and with direct access to the Pacific Ocean, has become an important departure point for drug trafficking to international markets. The presence of narcotics hidden in exported containers has generated a series of negative consequences affecting various spheres of Ecuadorian society and economy.

The Ecuadorian police confirm that 60 per cent of the alkaloid leaving the country goes to Europe; the rest goes to North America, according to the traceability lines carried out by investigators. Ecuador ranks third in the world with the most cocaine seized, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The banana export sector is the hardest hit by drug contamination, as it is the product with the highest volume and frequency of shipments through the ports of Guayaquil (Diario Correo, 2022).

According to the Anti-Drug Investigation Directorate of the National Police of Ecuador, in 2021 Ecuador reached an all-time record in drug seizures with 210 tonnes seized, 60 per cent of the drugs seized were in the ports. "The state cannot give space to these criminal gangs and we have to fight because there are already countries that claim that many containers arrive with drugs at their destination and are beginning to look at Ecuador as a brand that we have to be careful and concerned about," Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso told the press on 16 February 2022 (Onofa, 2022).

But pressed cocaine does not only go into Ecuador's famed bananas, it goes into plastic replicas, pineapples, wood and other products. In 2022, the contamination of cocoa containers increased by 400 %. The exporter spends up to \$100,000 on lawyers to prove his innocence. "All this, plus the fight against common crime (an average of \$ 150 million a year in security), is robbing competitiveness to a sector like this that brings foreign exchange to the country," said Jose Antonio Camposano, president of the Corporation of Exporters Guilds of Ecuador (Zambrano , 2023).

Ecuadorian exporters expressed their concern because not only is the name of the country's export brand at stake, but clients who receive goods from Ecuador and are recipients of a contaminated container immediately enter an investigation process, exposing themselves to harassment and violence from criminal groups operating in those countries when their interests are affected (Onofa, 2022).

How contamination occurs

Drug traffickers take advantage of shipments of fresh fruit, because this is one of the main exports from South America, and a priori does not raise alerts when entering Europe. In addition, they are perishable products that need to be distributed quickly and are normally managed to pass through without much paperwork and inspection (Diario La Hora, 2023).

Villegas (2018) agrees with the opinion of Juan José Pons, general coordinator of the Ecuadorian Banana Cluster, who indicates that drugs can be introduced into shipments at the farm, during transport, in the container yard, at the port, at the shipping company or transit ports, reported the Spanish news agency EFE (Onofa, 2022).

A recent report claims that "drug traffickers pay for container data to contaminate containers". The key to camouflaging drugs is to know the

destination of the container to be exported. With that information, drivers are enticed along the way and others are part of the criminal structure. However, the network of corruption extends to other vulnerable bodies, such as the operational personnel of the ports, who run the risk of being recruited by criminal organisations, either willingly or through extortion mechanisms (Onofa, 2022).

Different people are continuously detained for investigations and links to these criminal networks are uncovered. In February 2022, the police arrested eight people involved, including truck drivers, technicians and crane operators at the port of Guayaquil, who tried to contaminate a container of bananas bound for Belgium with three tonnes of drugs. According to Karla Arteaga, Head of the Ports and Airports Investigation Unit (UIPA): "The criminal organisations seek to recruit people to work in the ports, because of the access they have to contaminate the containers with drugs. They do not belong to a fixed structure, they are hired by different gangs, the structures used to be pyramids, now they are organised into cells, whose members do not know to whom they are sending the drugs' (Primicias.ec, 2022).

Ecuador has eight main ports, the two largest of which operate in Guayaquil: Contecon and DP World Posorja. "The gangs choose Belgium because of the cost of marketing the drug. A kilo of cocaine costs USD 1,900 in Ecuador, around USD 5,000 in Central America, USD 20,000 in North America and up to USD 60,000 in European countries," said the head of the UIPA.

Effects of drug contamination in containers

Two ways of analysing the effects of drug contamination in containers are proposed, one from the dimensions of the export process and the other from those involved in the operation. For the review of the dimensions, we should point out that these are: social, economic, legal and security. On the other hand, if we refer to the vision of those affected, we will point to the product, the people, the companies and the country, which affect different levels of our society in a broad manner.

The export sector is not only affected by the costs of a possible seizure of the product or the goods being frozen. The loss of clients abroad must also be taken into account, as well as all the legal processes such as going to the Public Prosecutor's Office and hiring lawyers to face the process of determining how the contamination occurred and whether it is the company's responsibility. According to Rosero, all these

procedures multiply up to 10 times the \$200 already incurred for each container inspected. "It can exceed the cost of the cargo itself. We are talking about containers that can cost \$20,000 or \$100,000," said Ribadeneira, who added that this situation is discouraging many companies that want to export, but do not want to be involved in all these problems (Diario La Hora, 2023).

Dimensions

Let us begin to review the effects from the dimensions mentioned above.

Social Dimension: Drug contamination in maritime containers has had a profound impact on Ecuadorian society. Some of the most worrying effects are the increase in drug-related violence, the decomposition of the social fabric and the deterioration of security in the affected communities. The increase in crime, the creation of multiple gangs that confront each other and fight over smuggling routes or key contacts for their illegal business, and the loss of trust in public institutions have generated a feeling of hopelessness and distrust among the population. Furthermore, the availability of illegal drugs can contribute to increased substance use and abuse in affected communities, which can have serious consequences for people's physical and mental health, including addiction, health problems and deterioration of general well-being.

Economic Dimension: The economic dimension includes the supplier's and client's money, commercial investment, operating costs (insurance, transport, warehousing, operators, shipping procedures, sanitary permits, taxes, etc.), the negative impact of which leaves large losses in Ecuador's international trade. The detection of narcotics in exported containers has led to a decrease in the confidence of trading partners, as well as to the imposition of stricter restrictions and controls in Ecuadorian ports. These new stricter inspection protocols and additional requirements have generated delays in the loading and unloading of containers, resulting in higher costs and economic losses for producers and exporters, which in turn diminishes economic growth and affects the country's competitiveness in the international market, with restrictions on projected inter-country and inter-company agreements. **Legal dimension:** In terms of legal implications, Ecuador has taken significant steps to combat drug contamination in maritime containers, strengthening its legal framework and security measures to combat drug trafficking, implementing more rigorous

inspection protocols and making international cooperation agreements. However, legal challenges remain, especially with regard to identifying and sanctioning those responsible for smuggling drugs into containers, as well as preventing corruption in ports.

The capacity of law enforcement agencies to detect and prevent drug trafficking in containers needs to be further improved. Greater investment in detection technology and training of customs personnel to identify sophisticated concealment techniques is required. It is also essential to strengthen cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination of drugs in order to exchange information and coordinate efforts to dismantle criminal networks.

Vélez (2021) points out that there are difficulties in establishing coordinated public policies since the Maritime Authority of Ecuador, the entity in charge of controlling national and international traffic vessels, has divided competences between the Undersecretariat of Ports and Maritime and River Transport, and the National Directorate of Aquatic Spaces in the areas of maritime safety and security, This requires harmonisation of processes, including those related to security within national ports, and the incorporation of electronic means of control with a view to detecting controlled substances found as contraband.

Security Dimension: Checking some 2.4 million containers a year "is a Herculean task", admit Antinarcoitics. The violation of security protocols that allows the contamination of containers with drugs means that methodologies, personnel and systems are continually being revised, changed and updated, without this being a complete guarantee of immunity to this evil. According to Iván Ontaneda, president of ANECACAO, despite the investment they make in security, the contamination continues and is done inside the port despite certain scanners, so the problem is not solved with more scanners. "We have to sleep with one eye open and hold a candle to the saint so that they don't contaminate my container. This complicates the growth of this important export sector" (Zambrano, 2023).

Affected

Drug contamination in containers transiting Ecuador's ports has significant short- and long-term consequences for individuals, companies and the country in general. The following are some of the main effects:

The product: loss of external and internal physical characteristics, humidity, maturation, contamination with fungi, bacteria or viruses, as well as possible deterioration as a result of inadequate handling for separating the drug, are some of the consequences that can occur, especially when they are perishable organic foods whose conservation times, refrigeration temperature and storage follow international standards that must be met for entry into destination countries. We must understand that, when drugs are discovered, police agents concentrate on separating and guarding the illegal substance, and as it is part of an investigation, many operators and workers who are hired to handle it prefer to avoid doing so in order not to be part of this process and not to expose themselves to pressure from authorities or criminals who want to recover the merchandise or avoid being linked to it, so that the legal product that was being transported begins to deteriorate.

People: In the course of an investigation, many people are involved for investigation, among whom there may be innocent people, who are exposed to public scorn and labelled as criminals, which affects their personal and family life and the context to which they belong. If their innocence is discovered, doubt is left in their environment and their chances of reintegrating into the labour market are diminished, not to mention that the experience may motivate them to move away from the export processes and seek a new occupation or migrate to another city.

Companies: The detection of drugs in containers exported from Ecuador can lead to a decrease in confidence on the part of trading partners and importers. This can negatively affect the trust and reputation of Ecuadorian companies and make it difficult to establish solid, long-term business relationships. And it is these companies that assume legal, logistical, production, asset and personnel costs, in order to solve the case in which they are involved and resume their activities to recover what has been lost. However, in cases of drug trafficking, everything slows down and often, even with the acquittal of the company and its representatives, there are workers and professionals who prefer not to continue, losing many technical staff who know the operations of the company, machinery and colleagues, and even prefer to be fired but not get involved in the recovery of containers, products, trucks, or documentation that was part of the drug contamination, to avoid being approached by gangs or getting involved in additional investigations by the authorities.

El País: The presence of drug trafficking and drug contamination in Ecuador's ports can affect the country's international image. This can deter investors and affect tourism, as well as have implications for the global perception of the country's stability and security, which in turn has a direct impact on Ecuador's economy. The decrease in confidence of trading partners and the restrictions imposed may affect exports and harm the country's economic development, which would imply the need to improve controls, adjust laws, train personnel and purchase new security equipment, all of which are significant costs for the Ecuadorian state. It is important to note that these consequences can vary in magnitude and scope depending on factors such as the frequency and scale of drug contamination, as well as the responses and policies implemented by the government and relevant institutions.

Something to highlight is mentioned by Luna et al. (2021) who indicates that drug traffickers have the element of transnationality of their illicit operations, which limits the capacity to respond to organised crime within and between countries, given the institutional shortcomings and the difficulties of interaction (by their laws or authorities) to cooperate effectively internationally; therefore, the implementation of technological tools has a very important role in the identification of shipments of goods that may contain controlled substances.

Current strategies

In response to this threat, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Customs Organisation (WCO) launched the Container Control Programme (CCP) to assist governments in establishing effective container screening and controls to prevent drug trafficking and other illicit cross-border activities. At the heart of this innovative approach is the creation of inter-agency Port Control Units (PCUs), consisting of risk analysts and physical inspection teams from different law enforcement agencies (e.g. Customs, Police, maritime institutions, private sector and other law enforcement agencies), which are trained and equipped under the CCP to work together towards the systematic targeting of high-risk containers for professional law enforcement scrutiny, using risk analysis and other proactive techniques with minimal disruption to the free flow of legitimate trade (World Customs Organization WCO, 2023). In total there are twenty countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with operational Joint Port Control Units (JPCUs),

including Ecuador: 1 JPCU in Guayaquil covering: Port Contecom and TPG, and 1 JPCU in Machala covering: Puerto Bolivar (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023).

The former President of Ecuador, Guillermo Lasso, issued Executive Decree N° 227 dated 19 October 2021, which provides for the installation and operation of anti-narcotics security scanners in all ports, airports and border crossings in Ecuador, as a complementary measure to the National Security Plan. The implementation of X-ray scanners, particularly in the country's seaports, would allow the non-intrusive inspection of all incoming and outgoing cargo, with the aim of combating drug trafficking, smuggling of illicit goods and other crimes linked to organised crime.

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On the other hand, the port operator DP World points out that with the Ecuadorian Navy they signed a cooperation agreement for the construction of a maritime security and protection component in Posorja, they have three scanners since August 2019 and all their containers go through the X-Ray control. Contecon, for its part, highlights that it signed an agreement with the National Police that seeks to strengthen the institution's capacities and reinforce operations in the port, with an investment of USD 3.5 million in infrastructure and equipment (Zambrano, 2023).

Alternative solutions

We will also explore the initiatives and strategies adopted by companies, the Ecuadorian authorities and the international community to tackle this problem. We will highlight the importance of cooperation between countries, information exchange and capacity building in the fight against drug trafficking.

UNODC launches a call to action to contain criminal markets by:

- Intensifying cross-border law enforcement and criminal justice cooperation and intelligence sharing with a view to disrupting transnational trafficking enterprises.
- Stemming the increase in waterborne drug trafficking by strengthening container controls and interdiction capabilities in ports and by raising awareness among port authorities and commercial shipping companies of the related risks.

- Increase technical assistance to developing countries to facilitate their participation in international cooperation initiatives and joint operations, including those to address drug trafficking on the dark web (UNODC, 2022).

The Anti-Narcotics Directorate of the Police and the Financial and Economic Analysis Unit (UAFE) are promoting work on two fronts: training in prevention for all employees and exporters: manual of good practices, strategies and alerts; and the establishment of more efficient mechanisms, due to the fact that the police give two hours' notice of an inspection and exporting companies cannot send a delegate to the port in time. This leads to postponement of the inspection, loss of time and even space on the ship, with detrimental consequences for perishable exports (Diario La Hora, 2023).

The trade unions have also mobilised and put forward proposals such as

COOPERATION. The banana exporters' sector sent a letter to the Ministry of Interior and governors of different provinces to hold a meeting with the banana cluster, in order to join forces to fight against delinquency. There is still no date.

SCANNERS. CORDEX proposes that SENAE should have a timetable to determine how long the learning curve for the use of the scanners in the ports will take and from that point onwards the physical inspection of the container, which costs the exporter around 200 dollars, will be reduced.

PAYMENTS. Exporters stress that the responsibility for providing security lies with the government, therefore, the use of scanners should be free; in Colombia, the first pass through the scanner is free, but it costs if they have to pass the cargo through again because of a doubt (Zambrano, 2023).

Conclusions

Drug contamination in maritime containers leaving Ecuador's ports has had a negative impact on the country's society, economy and prestige. Only through a coordinated and multidimensional approach can we mitigate the negative impacts and build a safer and more prosperous future. To this end, it is essential to strengthen port security by promoting international cooperation and fostering the development of comprehensive strategies.

The solution is systemic, i.e. it will not be enough to buy new scanners if we do not work on state policies that protect operators from extortion and pressure, that implement methodologies to find the "hot spots" where contamination occurs, that allow the police and judges to bring justice as quickly as possible, that implement contingency spaces to protect legal cargo, that integrate institutions, processes and information from the entire national and international logistics chain, that integrate institutions, processes and information from the entire national and international logistics chain, and that provide a more efficient and effective security system.

Stricter security measures and more rigorous controls implemented in response to drug contamination should not generate additional costs for exporting companies, as well as avoid delays in the loading and unloading of containers by implementing detection technologies that increase efficiency and decrease operational costs.

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