

Eradication of illicit crops as a federal police strategy to reduce the marijuana supply in Brazil

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Author's biography

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Drug abuse remains a cause of global concern, object of wide debates related to supply and demand, among other aspects related to the topic.

Combating drug trafficking, in this context, is a multidisciplinary challenge that still lacks definitive answers as to its effectiveness, being dealt with in heated discussions over the last decades.

Marijuana, extracted from *Cannabis*, is the most consumed illicit drug in Brazil, as well as in most of the world, attracting the attention of much of these debates.

Ineffective policies to reduce demand and a certain encouragement by some segments of society end up transforming the large marijuana consumer market into an attractive incentive for criminal organizations to explore the illicit production and trade of this substance, despite its lower added value when compared to other drugs, such as cocaine.

As it is the most widespread illicit drug, public policies focused only on mass incarceration of traffickers of this substance have the potential to collapse prison systems, and it should be remembered that the user is not subject to penalties of restriction of freedom.

Strategies to combat trafficking based on the mere drug seizure and the arrest of their transporters have proved to be insufficient to dismantle criminal organizations, having allowed them to strengthen over the past few years.

The seized drug shipments are, in fact, a mere business risk assumed by the traffickers, because, as a rule, for each seized shipment, others manage to reach their destination, enabling the sustainability of this business model that is exclusively aimed at profit.

Similarly, the arrest of transporters or members of lesser relevance in the criminal structure also does not dismantle the respective organizations, as such individuals are easily replaced and often do not even have knowledge of relevant information that could provide judicial evidence against the real articulators of criminal drug trafficking schemes and laundering of the respective profit.

Faced with the need to change paradigms and adopt a more effective model for combating the trafficking of drugs and weapons, crimes against property and criminal factions, the participation of the Federal Police in recent years has been based on three directives emanating from its central unit: decapitalization of criminal organizations through in-depth money laundering investigations; arrest of leaders and international cooperation.

With regard to reducing the marijuana supply, in addition to these guidelines, the body's national strategy also includes the systematic eradication of illicit *Cannabis* crops, divided into two main scenarios: the Paraguayan territory and the North and Northeast regions of Brazil.

The Brazilian demand is basically met by two large producing poles, one in the Northeast region of Brazil and the other in the east of Paraguay, near the border between both countries. Other production centers are known to the authorities and are the object of actions by the Federal Police, but correspond to a small share of the supply in the national territory.

The Federal Police's strategy to eradicate illicit crops as a basis for the repression of marijuana trafficking has shown significant results and presents itself as a more effective and efficient approach compared to the mere drug seizure in the later stages of the logistics chain of this illicit trade.

In this context, the analysis of the illicit crop eradication strategy can be divided into two scenarios, with their peculiarities, one in Brazil and the other in Paraguay.

Map 1 – Map with the main producing areas of the marijuana consumed in Brazil.



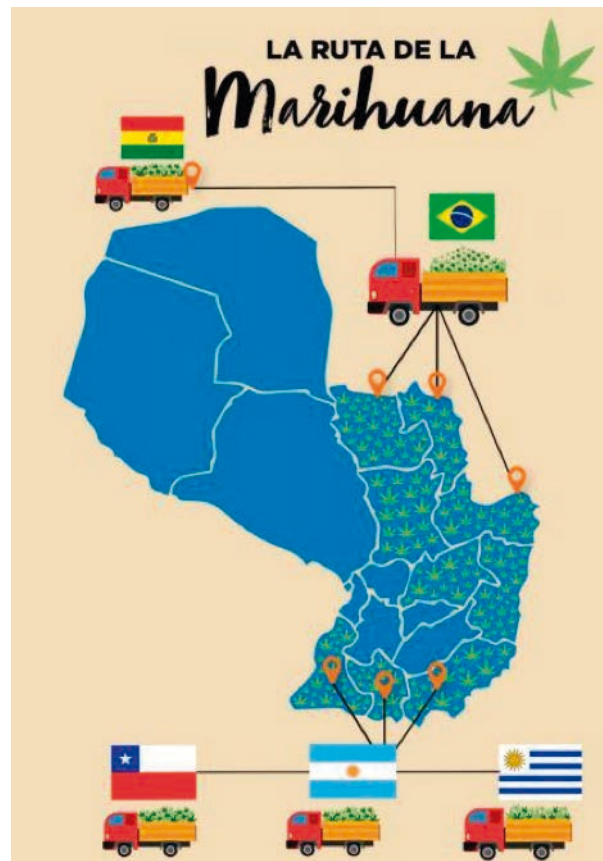
Source: Brasil, 2021.

In both scenarios, the eradication takes place through the extraction of the *Cannabis* plants identified and located through previous intelligence actions, with subsequent destruction by controlled burning in the cultivation area itself, considering the impossibility of removal. Each operation has an average duration between 8 and 20 days, a period in which the teams move between several cultivation areas previously identified in a given region.

Considering that most of the national marijuana supply comes from the cultivation areas in Paraguay, one of the largest producers of this drug in the world, this article is limited to addressing this specific area of interest in the neighboring country, in which joint actions of eradication of illicit crops were named Operation *Nova Aliança*.

Marijuana production in Paraguay comes from illicit crops concentrated in regions near the border with Brazil. Departments such as *Amambay*, *Canindeyú*, *Concepción* and *San Pedro*, are the main sources of the drug that supplies trafficking in Brazil.

Figure 1 – Map of marijuana producing zones in Paraguay.



Source: Paraguay, [2019?].

In this scenario, the Federal Police does not command the eradication actions, but carries out joint actions with the National Anti-Drug Secretariat (SENAD) of Paraguay to enable

the destruction of the drug before its harvest, thus preventing its entry into Brazilian territory, likely destination of about 80% of the marijuana produced in that country.

Conjointly, the initial planning of the number of annual phases of the operation and their durations is made. Subsequently, joint intelligence surveys are carried out to define the points at which illicit crops will be eradicated in each phase performed.

As for the operational execution itself, SENAD provides human resources, generally with the performance of other bodies, to ensure the safety and performance of the activities of harvesting and destroying the material, in addition to fuel for aircraft. On the other hand, the FP provides helicopters for the displacement of the teams, as well as financial resources to complement the necessary structure. Brazilian federal police officers travel to Paraguay to man the helicopters and to integrate teams with SENAD.

Therefore, true integration and international cooperation with a view to seeking more effective solutions to regional problems can be seen, which ends up strengthening even more the relations between both countries and the feasibility of expanding the modalities of joint action.

It is an exemplary application of the concepts of shared responsibilities between nations in the fight against transnational crime and drug trafficking.

Also in this context, Paraguayan agents are invited to participate in editions of the Illicit Crops Eradication Operations Course (COECI) held periodically by the Federal Police in Brazil.

The main benefit of the illicit crop eradication strategy prioritized by the Federal Police to reduce the supply of marijuana in Brazil is the possibility of destroying larger quantities of the drug with less investment and in less time. However, it is not the only one.

The concentration of efforts and results in eradication actions provides conditions for the body's other investigations to go beyond the mere seizure of marijuana in national territory.

As stated, the Federal Police's fight against drug trafficking is guided by three guidelines: decapitalization of criminal organizations through in-depth asset laundering investigations, arrest of leaders and international cooperation.

The adoption of the eradication strategy as a priority for reducing the marijuana supply allows the body to apply efforts to effectively dismantle the criminal organizations that mediate such trafficking and that concentrate the profit of the illicit activity.

Due to the very nature of the eradication actions, with large movement of people and aircraft in the region, there are few possibilities of obtaining the so-called "surprise element" and the arrest of those responsible for the crops, which is why arrests in these circumstances are rare.

It is worth mentioning that, usually, *Cannabis* producers are criminals who, despite the amount of drug produced, obtain reduced profits and end up having less importance within the illicit scheme, and can easily be replaced if arrested.

Thus, the strategy allows expressive results without the need for arrests of minor importance that end up burdening the already overloaded prison system, leaving for police investigations the function of identifying and arresting the true leaders, in addition to financially dismantling the structured criminal organizations that act in the distribution of the drug.

The operational risk, although present, is also smaller when compared to pulverized police actions aimed at seizing drugs at later stages of the logistical chain, when it is already in the hands of heavily armed criminal organizations, sometimes in conflicted areas.

The eradication strategy also allows the expansion of the front of action against environmental crimes, mainly the planting of *Cannabis* in conservation areas, as well as in attention to indigenous issues when criminal organizations seek to cultivate in these communities.

Faced with the ever multifaceted characteristic of combating drug trafficking, the joint eradication strategy leaves room for the performance of other government partners or the private sector in order to promote agricultural alternatives to the illicit planting of *Cannabis*, with dissemination of knowledge and agricultural techniques, reinforcement of producer cooperatives, provision of credit lines and encouragement of regional economic development with a view to discouraging illegal production.

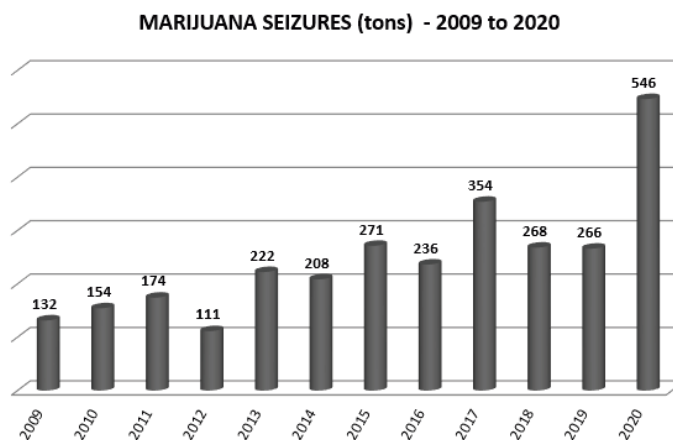
In addition to these benefits, the strategy of eradicating illicit crops to reduce the marijuana supply in Brazil has produced expressive statistical results, showing its success.

Given the vast planted areas, as well as the characteristics of the terrain and available logistical resources, eradication operations in Paraguay produce more significant results than those carried out in Brazil.

A measure of comparison that can be used is the amount of drugs seized by the Federal Police through ordinary local operations, ostensible action by the security forces or police investigations.

In 2020, approximately 546 tons of marijuana were seized by the Federal Police, a record in the historical data series, equivalent to more than double the total number of marijuana seizures in 2019. Such a mark is evaluated within the scope of the FP as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which would have increased the demand for the drug, in addition to hindering both the realization of eradication actions in Paraguay and the ordinary police action due to the respective sanitary restrictions.

Graph 1 – Chart of marijuana seizures by the FP in Brazil.

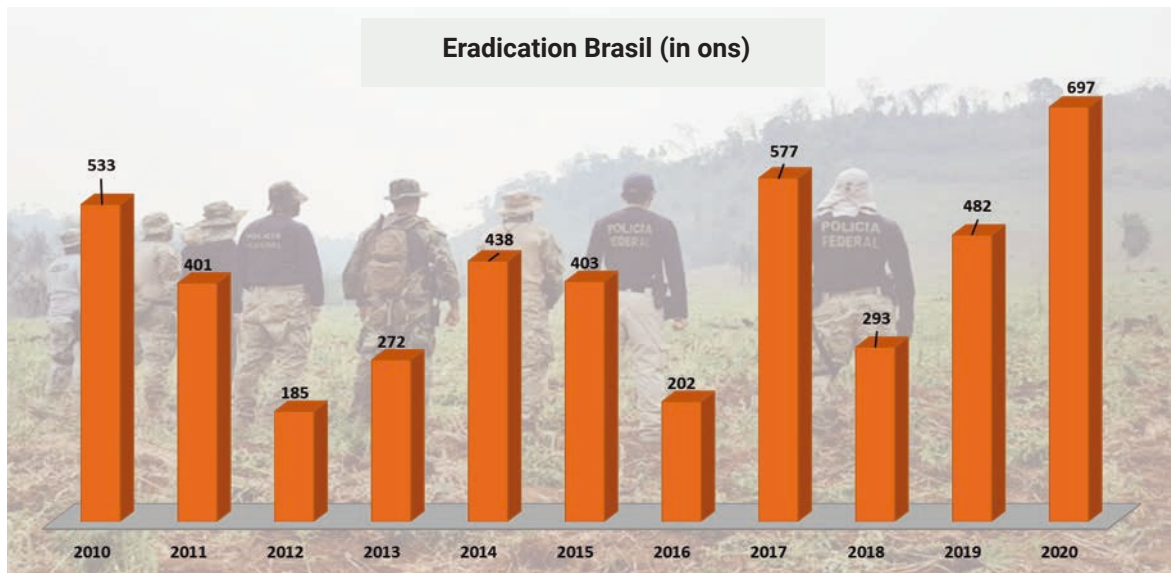


Source: Brasil, 2021.

The phases of Operation *Nova Aliança*, to eradicate illicit crops in Paraguay, were seriously impaired in 2020 due to the closing of borders and other restrictions also imposed by the neighboring country. Thus, the FP directed its actions towards eradication in the national territory, carrying out, in that period, nine operations in the States of Pernambuco, Bahia and Pará.

The result was the historical record also in the amount of marijuana destroyed in Brazil, reaching the mark of approximately 697 tons¹.

Graph 2 – Graph showing the results of *Cannabis* eradication operations in Brazil

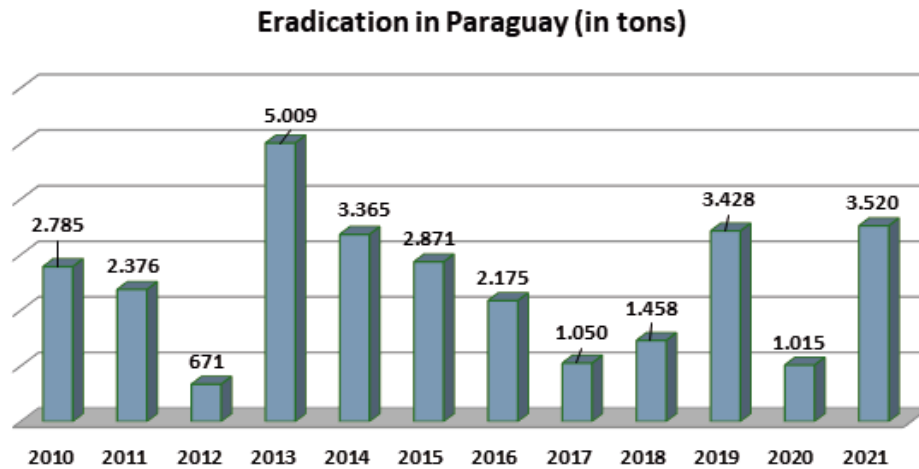


Source: Brasil, 2021.

It is observed that the result of eradication actions in Brazil in 2020 was higher than the historical record of seizures in the same period. In the previous year, eradications in Brazil were almost double the total number of seizures in 2019.

Nevertheless, in Paraguay, the series of results are even more expressive, as already pointed out.

¹ According to studies carried out by the FP's technical area, each *Cannabis sativa Linneu* plant in that region produces, on average, three hundred grams of marijuana (BRASIL, 2008).

Graph 3 – Graph of the results of *Cannabis* eradication operations in Paraguay.

Source: Brasil, 2021.

Even with all the difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, two eradication operations were carried out in Paraguay in 2020, lasting ten days each, reaching the apparently modest result of approximately 1,015 tons of destroyed marijuana.

Although this result does not stand out in the context of the respective historical series, this amount is equivalent to obtaining, in twenty days, almost double the entire marijuana seizure carried out by the FP in Brazilian territory throughout that year.

Table 1 – Individual results of *Cannabis* eradication operations in Paraguay by the Federal Police in 2020.

Operation	Date	Location	Hectares	Chopped marijuana (kg)	Seeds (kg)	Camps	Projected weight ² (t)	Total eradicated ³ (t)
XXII	15 to 24/08	Maria Auxiliadora e Alpasa	143	91.230	1.875	80	429	520,2
XXIII	03 to 12/11	Santa Ana Resort	137	83.718	1.337	116	411	494,7
TOTAL	2020	Paraguay	280	174.948	3.212	196	840	1.014,9

Source: Brasil, 2021.

2 According to the calculation methodology used by the National Anti-Drug Secretariat of Paraguay, each hectare of *Cannabis sativa* *Linneu* produces an average of three tons of marijuana.

3 Total eradicated is the sum of projected weight and chopped marijuana, both in tons.

In 2021, with the intensification of actions, the results were even more expressive.

Table 2 – Individual results of *Cannabis* eradication operations in Paraguay by the Federal Police in 2021 (updated until May 1, 2021).

Operação	Data	Hectares	Maconha prensada (kg)	Maconha picada (kg)	Sementes (kg)	Acampamentos	Peso projetado (t)	Total erradicado (t)
XXIV	06/03	525	570	17.770	580	97	1.575	1.592,8
XXV	14/03	635	880	22.610	520	104	1.905	1.927,6
TOTAL	2021	1.160	1.450	40.380	1.100	201	3.480	3.520,4

Source: Brasil, 2021.

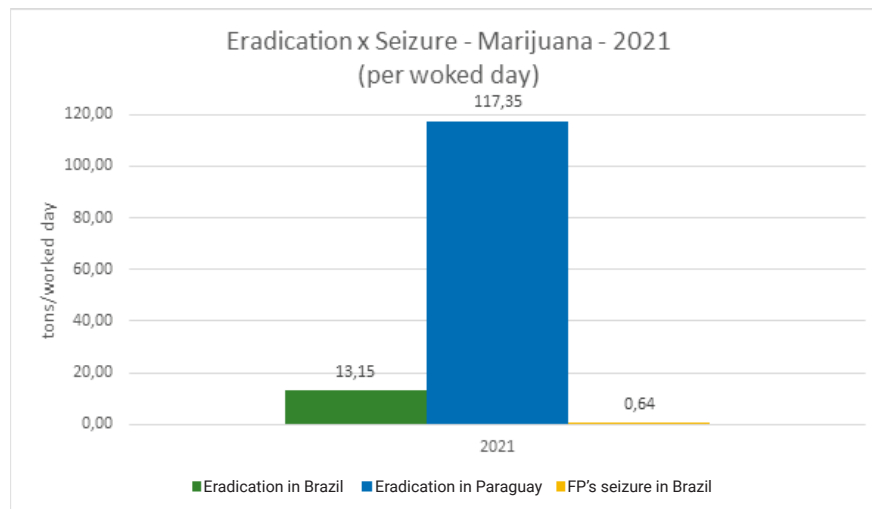
Comparing the results of the eradication strategy with those of other Federal Police actions to reduce the marijuana supply, a criterion for measuring effectiveness based on the amount of kilograms of marijuana seized or destroyed per day of the eradication operation in comparison with the results of all other FP units throughout the year can be established.

Thus, it can be seen that, over the years, the results of eradication actions in Paraguay have been unquestionably higher than those of seizures by the Federal Police. The eradications carried out in Brazil, under this criterion, were also more effective than the seizures from the other activities of the body.

It should be noted that, unlike the routine police action, which occurs daily throughout the year, eradication actions occur in reduced windows of time. This means that greater results are obtained with less operational effort.

The difference in effectiveness per day worked is even more discrepant, considering, in 2021, the average operating results per eradication operation day compared to the results of all other FP units throughout the year.

Graph 4 – Individual results of *Cannabis* eradication operations in Paraguay by the Federal Police in 2021 (updated until April 30, 2021)⁴.



Source: Brasil, 2021.

Under this prism, it is possible to see that, in 2021, eradication actions in Brazil were about 20 times more productive than the other actions that led to seizures since the beginning of the year.

Operation *Nova Aliança*, in Paraguay, produced a result approximately 183 times greater than the regular actions of the Federal Police and partner bodies, also surpassing by almost 9 times the amount of drugs destroyed in eradication actions in Brazilian territory.

The investment required to carry out such operations is still relatively low, considering the results obtained and the expenses inherent to the other activities of ostensive police and judicial police.

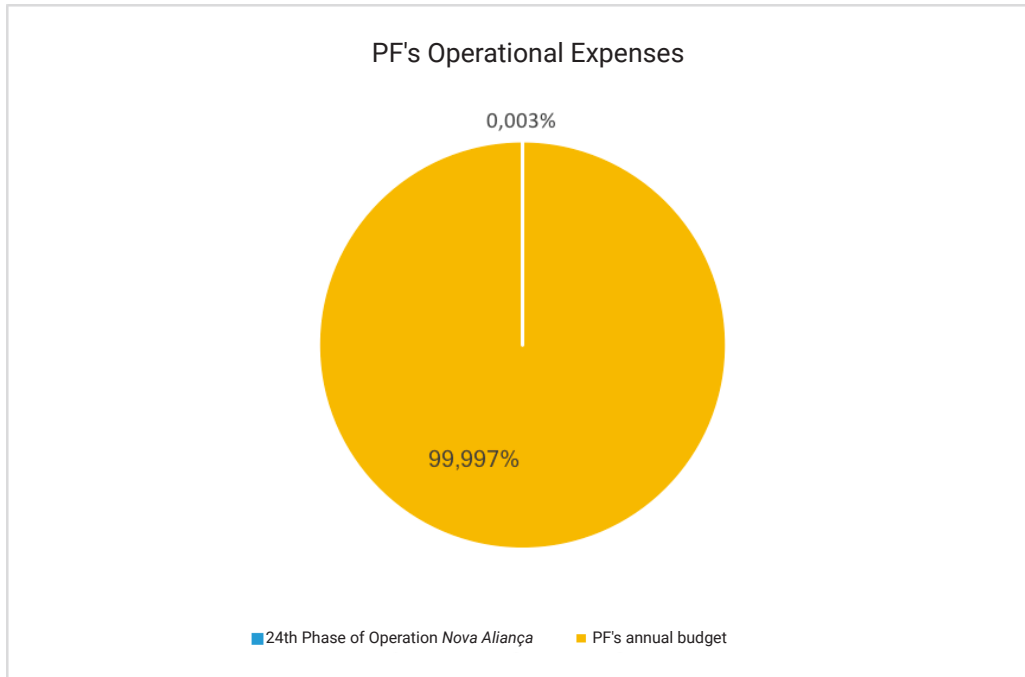
The 24th phase of Operation *Nova Aliança*, carried out between February 23 and March 8, 2021 in Paraguay, cost the Federal Police just over 50,000 US dollars, mostly related to the use of aircraft and daily expenses, resulting in the destruction of the equivalent to 1,593 tons of marijuana, that is, almost 114 tons of drug destroyed per day of operation.

Considering that the Federal Police's total annual budget in 2020 was equivalent to approximately US\$1,500,000,000⁵, the PF's investment in the 24th phase of eradication in Paraguay was equivalent to about 0.003% of the body's total budget, to achieve, in just two weeks, triple the total record of marijuana seizures by the Federal Police in the entire year of 2020.

⁴ The methodology developed by the author consists of establishing a direct relationship between the estimated amount of ready marijuana that fails to enter the illicit market as a result of eradication actions and the number of days of operation. Therefore, it is compared with the amount of marijuana seized by the actions of the Federal Police and partner bodies in relation to the days of the year, in this case limited to April 30, 2021.

⁵ 8 billion reais converted to the US dollar exchange rate on December 31, 2020..

Graph 5 – Graph of the percentage of the PF's budget used in the 24th phase of Operation *Nova Aliança* in Paraguay (in 2021) compared to the body's annual budget in 2020.

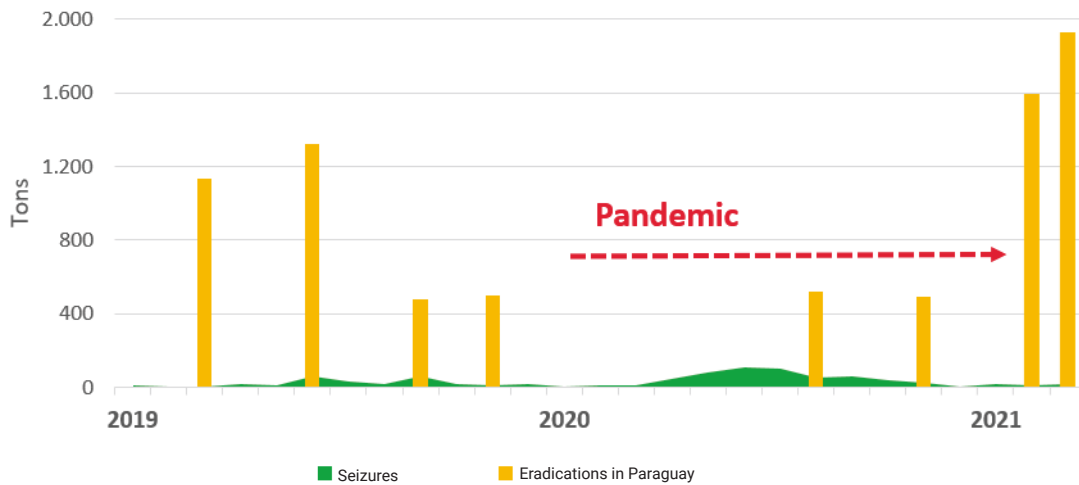


Source: Brasil, 2021.

Far from being metaphorically compared to “drying up ice”, as some preach, systematic eradication actions constitute the most effective strategy of the Federal Police in reducing the marijuana supply, with high productivity and relatively low cost.

The analysis of marijuana seizures, taken monthly, leads to three main conclusions: 1) the amount of drug destroyed during each eradication phase is much higher than the amount seized; 2) after the eradication actions in Paraguay, drug seizures in Brazil tend to decrease and 3) some time after the eradication action, the amount of seized marijuana increases again in Brazil.

Graph 6 – Monthly comparative graph of eradications in Paraguay and routine seizures.



Source: Brasil, 2021.

Such data demonstrate the positive impact of eradication actions in Paraguay to reduce the marijuana supply in Brazil.

In the medium term, these results tend to be even greater due to the development of methodologies involving geointelligence, with new techniques for analyzing satellite images through improved algorithms and artificial intelligence, to better target operational efforts.

The systematic eradication of such illicit crops brings significant benefits in the scenario of combating drug trafficking, allowing the application of more human and material efforts to effectively dismantle criminal organizations from the body's guidelines (decapitalization through asset laundering investigations, arrest of leaders and international cooperation).

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