

THE TRAGEDY OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION

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The National Planning Department recently carried out an analysis on royalty use in the Department of La Guajira. The results call into question the benefits of decentralizing spending and the automatic assignation of national resources to departments and municipalities. These doubts will persist as long as the political corruption that dominates most of these local governments endure and until effective, clear mechanisms are in place for central and citizen monitoring of the quality of spending.

The Department of La Guajira received nearly 2 billion pesos (two million million) in direct royalties from 2002 to 2008. These royalties were distributed to the department (53 percent), the five main municipalities (34 percent), and the other municipalities. It is the third-largest recipient of these resources after Casanare and Meta. With these resources, the DNP estimates that La Guajira and its municipalities would have been able to amply cover the goals for social well-being and coverage of basic services established by the Government. Coverage for basic education and health should be 100 percent. Coverage for drinking water should be 94 percent, and sewage should be 89 percent. Infant mortality in the department should be no more than 16 per thousand live births (1.6 percent).

Despite this, La Guajira continues to be amongst the three departments with the most basic needs unmet. Of the 16 recipient entities, none comply with all the coverage and ratings required. The municipalities that received the greatest amounts of royalties (Albania, Uribia, and Hatonuevo) do not meet a single one of them. None of the recipient entities meet the goals for infant mortality, basic sanitation, or drinking water. Coverage for basic education in La Guajira is barely 68 percent, and only two municipalities meet the required goal of 100 percent. The coverage for drinking water is 50 percent and for sewage it is 39 percent. The only area in which the department and municipalities (except for Uribia) are close to the goals is in the subsidized health regime, although perhaps for reasons other than the search for social welfare.

Infant mortality is at 40 infants per thousand, which is more than double the goal demanded by the DNP and well above the national average. La Guajira shows the second-worst performance in this regard, after Arauca. It must also be noted that none of the five departments receiving large royalty

benefits comply with the goal for infant mortality. All show mortality levels near or over 32, which is twice the goal.

Unfortunately, decentralization has accentuated political corruption, giving rise to a newly insatiable and savage appetite that knows no bounds. Corrupt politicians view the national and local budgets as an inexhaustible resource that exists for the politician to get his share, and he therefore tries to get as much as he can for his own financial needs and for those of his limited coterie. Under the pre-existing centralized system the appetites were the same, but the parties acted as moderators and regulators of the demand for resources since they were aware that the abuse and unrestrained looting of funds results in budgetary ruin and a deterioration of the State's ability to provide services. A similar effect was also caused by competition between parties or factions, which acted as a moderating agent on demand. Regionally, these checks are ineffective, which leads to the politicians carting everything off and the State losing effectiveness. This is the "tragedy of political corruption," which winds up bleeding the State dry and killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. We should take advantage of these elections to shed ourselves of many worthless things and recover the State.

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