



Transnational Institute



Press Release



May 9, 2006

Coca yes, cocaine no? Legal options for the coca leaf

Drugs & Conflict Debate Paper 13 - May 2006

<http://www.tni.org/reports/drugs/debate13.pdf>

A simple leaf of an ancient plant will feature prominently on the international agenda this year. A decade-old demand to remove the coca leaf from strict international drugs controls has come to the fore again. Time has come to repair an historical error responsible for including the leaf amongst the most hazardous classified substances, having caused severe consequences for the Andean region. This issue of Drugs and Conflict explains the motives, context and range of this petition, as well as the procedures that need to be followed to reach this objective.

The coca leaf has come to symbolise hopes for a more equal and inclusive future, for a large, impoverished share of the Andean population, many of whom are indigenous peoples. This symbolism draws on a rich tradition of uses for the leaf, with archaeological evidence revealing its widespread and varied use in the pre-colonial period, as opposed to its modern fame, which associates it with the extraction of one of its alkaloids - cocaine.

Since the coca leaf is currently listed together with cocaine and heroin on Schedule I of the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, public awareness of the intrinsic difference between the leaves and their cocaine derivative has gradually vanished. At the recent 49th CND session, the Bolivian delegation announced that it would ask the international community to reconsider the inclusion of the coca leaf in these schedules.

There is enough scientific evidence to substantiate that the traditional use of coca has no negative health effects; that it serves positive therapeutic, sacred and social functions. Its classification as a narcotic drug was a mistake. However, whilst the slogan "coca is not cocaine" is a valid assertion, it cannot be denied that the leaf contains cocaine. Those seeking the revalorisation of the coca leaf need to face up to the complexity and integrity of the leaf, including cocaine.

The inclusion of coca in the 1961 Convention has caused much harm and a historical correction is long overdue. For the international community, this year will become a moment to decide: do we really stand by the cultural insensitivity and scientific nonsense that placed coca under the control of the UN Conventions, or do we have the courage to say 'we apologise for the pain our prejudices have caused these past decades, we stand corrected.'

The briefing will be **presented officially** in Vienna on 12 May at "Linking Alternatives 2", the meeting of social movements and civil society organisations parallel to the official fourth Summit between the Heads of State and Government of Latin America, the Caribbean (LAC) and the European Union (EU).

Venue and time: 16.00-18.00 - Room 1, Stadthalle, Vogelweideplatz 14, Vienna.

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