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

Drugs and Democracy Programme



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A simple leaf of an ancient plant will feature prominently on the international agenda this year, from the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in March, and the EU-LAC Summit and World Health Assembly in May, up to the UN General Assembly in September. As international relations and specialised mechanisms for managing the international drugs trade have evolved, a decade-old demand to remove the coca leaf from strict international drugs controls has come to the fore again in recent months.

For a large and impoverished share of the Andean population, many of whom are indigenous peoples, the coca leaf has come to symbolise hopes for a more equal and inclusive future. 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 mainly 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. The reasons for this, and the process by which it might be achieved, need urgent clarification if the motivation behind this demand and its context are to be fully understood by a broader audience.

There is enough scientific evidence to substantiate the claim that the traditional use of coca has no negative health effects; that it serves positive therapeutic, sacred and social functions; and therefore that its classification as a narcotic drug was a mistake. However, in order to withdraw the coca leaf from the UN drug control system, the argument concerning the “easy recoverability” of its cocaine content, the other justification for its inclusion

in Schedule I, needs to be tackled. Whilst the slogan “coca is not cocaine” is a valid assertion, it cannot be denied that the leaf contains cocaine. Moreover, this cocaine content is part of the reason that the coca leaf has attained importance in Andean culture. Those seeking the revalorisation of the coca leaf need to face up to the complexity and integrity of the leaf, including cocaine.

It also needs to be recognised that the mass protests against forced eradication in Bolivia, which contributed to the country’s political shift, involved a common effort between farmers producing coca for traditional uses and those that grow coca for the international cocaine market. Beyond revalorising the leaf’s traditional uses, there is a need to challenge the false premise that attacking poor farmers can resolve the world’s problem with cocaine consumption. Peoples’ rights to a sustainable livelihood rather than repression should be the starting point for policy-making.

This issue of *Drugs and Conflict* will consider past, present and future scenarios related to the coca leaf. The real options for a rescheduling will depend on a series of factors, not least the political will to face all dimensions involved in this complex issue from an objective, evidence-based perspective. The inclusion of coca in the 1961 Convention has caused much harm to the Andean region and a historical correction is long overdue, for the sake of further conflict prevention and out of respect for the Andean culture. For every member of the international community, this year will become a moment to decide: do we really stand by the cultural insensitivity and scientific nonsense that led to the decision to place 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.’



“From the standpoint of respect for ancestral cultures, both Andean and Amazonian, and the indigenous population’s identification with the coca leaf as a sacred cosmological element, there is a need to re-examine the value and importance of the coca leaf.”¹

Félix Barra, Vice Minister of Coca and Integral Development

Over the past few decades, the coca leaf has been systematically demonised on the basis of unfounded opinions that led to generalisations. Most of the information provided about the traditional use of the coca leaf and its modern adaptations is erroneous. This has made it impossible to shed light on the plant’s positive aspects and its potential benefits for the physical, mental and social health of the people who consume and cultivate it. Coca could become a factor in the economic development of impoverished sectors of society, as well as an element for the promotion of democracy.

The international community’s war on the coca leaf began when it was listed in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which established that *“The Parties shall so far as possible enforce the uprooting of all coca bushes which grow wild. They shall destroy the coca bushes if illegally cultivated”* (Article 26), and that, *“Coca leaf chewing must be abolished within twenty-five years from the coming into force of this Convention”* (Article 49, 2.e). The preamble of the Convention justifies this obligation and prohibition by stating: *“concerned with the health and welfare of mankind...² And it frames its arguments against the leaf in a rhetoric marked by exaggerations, such as: “Recognising that addiction to narcotic drugs constitutes a serious evil for the individual and is fraught with social and economic danger to mankind...”; “Conscious of their duty to prevent and combat this evil...”;*

¹ From one of the statements made by Félix Barra, Vice Minister of Coca and Integral Development, during the 49th period of sessions, Vienna, March 2006

² In the Spanish version of the Preamble, a different concept is used, replacing “health” with “moral”.

“Considering that effective measures against abuse of narcotic drugs require co-ordinated and universal action.”

The 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was meant to ensure two things: first, to guarantee that there was a supply of natural drugs for medical and scientific purposes, through a system in which countries would estimate their future need for certain substances; and second, to keep these substances out of the hands of drug traffickers. The Convention classifies substances in four lists, which are subject to different levels of control. Substances on List I are subject to all control measures; those on List II have fewer restrictions, especially regarding retail sale; the preparations on List III are subject to limits less restrictive than those for the narcotics they contain³; and those on List IV are subject to the same restrictions as List I, plus additional restrictions because of their hazardous qualities.

The Single Convention also raises the possibility — but does not require — that countries could specifically prohibit the cultivation (Article 22) of three plants with psychoactive properties: poppies (*Papaver somniferum*), from which the morphine alkaloid is extracted to produce heroin; the coca leaf, (*Erythroxylum coca*), from which the cocaine alkaloid is extracted for subsequent concentration as cocaine sulphate or hydrochloride; and marihuana (*Cannabis sativa*), which is generally consumed in its natural state. The treaty therefore set up administrative systems aimed at controlling and eradicating these crops and

³ In the case of preparation containing cocaine, a limit of 0.1 % was established, while maintaining the restriction to medical and scientific use, although less strict in its control measures.

Without any scientific definition, the Convention introduces an absurd distinction between legal and illegal psychoactive substances, sidetracking knowledge and public health efforts to reduce the harm done by psychoactive substances. In this context, the WHO does not distinguish between legal and illegal psychoactive substances.

establishing administrative and criminal prohibitions on these activities under a system governed by national bodies (Article 23 for opium and Article 26 for coca). In the case where countries want to cultivate opium for medical purposes, the Single Convention called for the creation of an agency that would be responsible for:

- Designating the areas where opium poppy cultivation would be permitted;
- Maintaining exclusive rights to cultivation, allowing only producers licensed by that agency to cultivate the crop within a designated area;
- Purchasing and taking possession of the harvest as quickly as possible — within a time frame of up to four months. Producers are required to sell it to the state agency.

In the case of coca, the 1961 Single Convention ordered the states to implement a mechanism similar to the one designed for poppies, but not as strict. This led to two exceptions beyond those allowed for medical and scientific purposes:

- The export of flavouring agents, which was meant for a specific case: to allow the continued manufacturing of Coca-Cola by providing decocainised coca leaves.
- In the case of the coca plant, the Single Convention only required the agency to take possession (see Article 23.2.d in concordance with Article 26.1 of the Convention); it did not indicate that farmers were obligated to sell their harvest to the agency, as in the case of opium. This is particularly important for the placement of traditional producers within the legal coca circuit.

According to Article 1f, 'coca leaf' is understood to mean the leaf of the coca bush, except for the leaves from which all ecgonine, cocaine or any other ecgonine alkaloid has been extracted. Coca leaves from which the alkaloid has been extracted are no longer considered coca leaves and are not covered by the Convention. The residue of the leaves can therefore be commercialised with no control, which particularly favors the Coca-Cola Company.

There was and is no obligation for the parties to the Convention to create a state monopoly on coca such as Peru's Empresa Nacional de la Coca (ENACO). The producer should be able to personally sell his or her harvest in the market even when the state agency has material possession of the leaves in a general warehouse. This difference between the mechanisms for opium and coca explains why Bolivia has never had a state monopoly, whereas there is a traditional market run by the producers themselves, known as ADEP-COCA.

The Commission of Enquiry on the Coca Leaf, 1950

The rationale for including the coca leaf in the 1961 Single Convention is mainly rooted in a report requested of the United Nations by the permanent representative of Peru — a report nowadays impossible to find ⁴ — that was prepared by a commission that visited Bolivia and Peru briefly in 1949 to “investigate the effects of chewing the coca leaf and the possibilities of limiting its production and controlling its distribution.”⁵

With this mandate, the mission implicitly had no choice but to conclude that the effects of chewing coca leaves were negative, even though chewing coca was defined as a habit, not an addiction,⁶ a position that would change in subsequent years. According to the report the harmful effects of chewing coca leaf, from the point of view of the individual and of the nation, are the following:

- *It inhibits the sensation of hunger and thus maintains, by a vicious circle, a constant state of malnutrition;*
- *It induces in the individual undesirable changes of an intellectual and moral character. This is especially clear in exceptional cases, and*

⁴ A search in the WHO's libraries was unsuccessful, although part of the report is accessible through the UNODC Web site: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/bulletin/bulletin_1950-01-01_4_page005.html

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “It does not at present appear that the chewing of the coca leaf can be regarded as a drug addiction in the medical sense”
Ibid.

it is much discussed how far this is general. It certainly hinders the chewer's chances of obtaining a higher social standard;

- *It reduces the economic yield of productive work, and therefore maintains a low economic standard of life.*⁷

The report was sharply criticised for its arbitrariness, lack of precision and racist connotations. The team members' professional qualifications and parallel interests were also criticised, as were the methodology used and the incomplete selection and use of existing scientific literature on the coca leaf.⁸ Each of the alleged harmful effects could be rebutted with a series of scientific arguments. Nowadays, a study like that would never pass the scrutiny and critical review to which scientific studies are routinely subjected. Nevertheless, it continues to serve as the only basis for the ruling against the coca leaf, and it has been sowing discord ever since.

The revision of the original ruling, which defined coca consumption as a habit, rather than an addiction, came in March 1952, when the WHO Committee of Experts on Drug Dependence⁹ concluded that *"coca chewing comes so closely to the characteristics of addiction ... that it must be defined and treated as an addiction."*¹⁰ Two years later, the issue came up for discussion again, and it was concluded that: *"coca chewing must be considered a form of cocaineism".*¹¹

Coca Diplomacy

There were various attempts in Bolivia and

⁷ Economic and Social Council, Official record, Fifth year: twelfth session, Special supplement No. 1, Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the Coca Leaf, May 1950, New York: United Nations, 1950 (E/1666-E/CN.7/AC.2/1)

⁸ See for example the article by Baldomero Cáceres: "Historia, prejuicio y versión siquiátrica del coqueo andino," in *Perú Indígena* 28, Instituto Indigenista Peruano, Lima, 1990. Also published in "Hablan Los Diablos", see relevant bibliography, p.19.

⁹ Then it was known as the Expert Committee on Drugs Liable to produce Addiction.

¹⁰ WHO, Technical Report Series 57, March 1952, Section 6.2, Page 10.

¹¹ WHO, Technical Report Series 76, March 1954, Section 6, Page 10.

Peru to change the status of the coca leaf on the lists in the 1961 Single Convention. The fundamental right of indigenous people to the traditional consumption of the coca leaf was included to a certain extent in Article 14 of the 1988 UN Convention, which states: *"The measures adopted shall respect fundamental human rights and shall take due account of traditional licit uses, where there is historic evidence of such use, as well as the protection of the environment."*¹²

This provision could be the exception to the rule, but not only is it ambiguous; it also does not function in practice. One contradiction that was recognised by the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) in the supplement to its 1994 report where it stated: *"Thus, mate de coca, which is considered harmless and legal in several countries in South America, is an illegal activity under the provisions of both the 1961 Convention and the 1988 Convention, though that was not the intention of the plenipotentiary conferences that adopted those conventions"*¹³

¹² United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, Article 14, clause 2.

¹³ E/INCB/1994/1/Supp. 1: 11 (Effectiveness of the international drug control treaties)

Coca leaf consumption is an integral part of Andean cultural tradition and world view. The principle uses are:

- **Energizer:** provides an energy boost for working or for combating fatigue and cold. Although it reduces feelings of hunger, the coca leaf is not considered a food.
- **Medicinal:** in teas, syrups and plasters for diagnosing and treating a series of illnesses. It is used as a local anesthetic.
- **Sacred:** to communicate with the supernatural world and obtain its protection, especially with offerings to the Pachamama, the personification and spiritual form of the earth.
- **Social:** to maintain social cohesion and cooperation among members of the community, it is used in community ceremonies, as a "payment" for labor exchange and a social relations instrument.

Article 14 was added to the 1988 Convention, modifying the original, thanks to the efforts of the Bolivian and Peruvian delegations, which opposed making the use, consumption, possession, acquisition and cultivation of coca leaf for personal consumption a crime. Only Bolivia lodged a formal reservation when ratifying the convention.¹⁴

In the early 1990s, governments¹⁵ and grassroots organizations attempted to get the issue onto the UN policy agenda, calling particular attention to the unfair nature of the coca leaf's status.

The WHO/UNICRI study

The innocuous nature of traditional use of coca leaves and the benefits for human health were proven with scientific rigor by the most extensive study of cocaine ever done. This research was carried out between 1991 and 1995 by the World Health Organisation (WHO), in collaboration with the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). The WHO/UNICRI Cocaine Initiative collected data from 22 cities in 19 developed and developing countries on five continents, examining the use of the coca leaf and its derivatives, effects on users and communities, and the response of governments to the cocaine problem. The 45

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¹⁴ The reservations noted by Bolivia upon the signing and ratification of the 1988 Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances explain its reasons in detail.

¹⁵ Like that of Bolivia in 1987-88, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promoted Article 14 of the Vienna Convention of 1988, and in 1989-92, when President Jaime Paz promoted "coca diplomacy." The Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also took steps between 1988 and 1992, when it designed and tried to promote the "Strategy for Re-examining the Importance of the Coca Leaf," and in 1994, when it signed the "Ilo Declaration" with the Bolivian government. These efforts, however, were abandoned in 1996.

international researchers (including professors from five US universities) who worked on the project produced profiles of cocaine use in 19 countries; studies of key informants ranging from users to people with extensive knowledge of the subject, and a natural history study in four areas of South America and Africa.

The WHO/UNICRI Cocaine Initiative underscored that the traditional use of coca appears to have no negative health effects and that it serves positive therapeutic, sacred and social functions among indigenous peoples in the Andean region, as well as among some groups in Brazil. Coca cultivation is also the mainstay of the subsistence economy of many farming communities in Bolivia and Peru.

Informants in Cochabamba noted that indigenous farmers have chewed coca for decades with no signs that continuous use has adverse effects. The report from Colombia stated

that there was no evidence that the coca-chewing habit had caused perceptible harm to physical or mental health. The same conclusion could probably be drawn about the use of other natural coca products, such as teabags or chewing gum.

Peasant farmers in Cochabamba indicated that coca chewing had economic benefits because it helped increase production in agriculture, fisheries and mining. Informants in Medellín noted that shamans used coca leaves in religious rituals to increase their power. Local reports show that long-haul truckers found coca-chewing vital when driving at night, and many university students and intellectuals said that chewing coca enabled them to concentrate better on their studies and increased comprehension.

The scientists who participated in the WHO/UNICRI study made the following recommendations:



- Although there is a possibility that use of the coca leaf may be linked to certain health problems that have not yet been detected, this is unlikely. It would be much more interesting to determine whether chewing coca could have positive health effects.
- The WHO should investigate the impact that drug control legislation and measures have on individuals and specific populations.
- The WHO should investigate the therapeutic benefits of the coca leaf and whether these effects could be transferred from traditional contexts to other countries and cultures.

On March 14, 1995, the WHO announced the publication of the WHO/UNICRI Cocaine Initiative to the international press.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, on May 9, 1995, in Commission B of the 48th World Health Assembly in Geneva, the US representative said he was “surprised to note that the package

seemed to make a case for the positive uses of cocaine, claiming that use of the coca leaf did not lead to noticeable damage to mental or physical health, that the positive health effects of coca leaf chewing might be transferable from traditional settings to other countries and cultures, and that coca production provided financial benefits to peasants.”¹⁷

He added that his government would suspend financial support if the WHO did not dissociate itself from the study’s conclusions and if it adopted a position justifying coca production. In response the WHO secretariat said that the study was an extensive, objective analysis of

data gathered from many countries, and that it had been carried out by international experts whose conclusions did not reflect the WHO’s position. The US representative replied that the study was not extensive or objective, and that it should be subjected to peer review in accordance with the WHO’s own strict guidelines. So far, however, the global cocaine study has not been reviewed or published.

Peer review is a basic step in all scientific studies, including those of the WHO. The announcement of the publication of the results of the “cocaine initiative” had been premature, because of its spectacular conclusions. The director of the WHO’s Programme on Sub-

stance Abuse (PSA), Hans Emblad, had sent a copy to the UN Drugs Office in Vienna, where it caused uproar. The peer review was scheduled to end on September 30, 1997. By May 1995, lists of researchers’ names were sent to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the US

agency responsible for selection. For nearly two years, faxes flew back and forth with lists of names of people proposed by the PSA and NIDA’s responses, rejecting them one by one. There was never a formal end to this ‘cocaine initiative.’ Most of the researchers who participated never knew what happened to their work. Some published their sections in their own countries.¹⁸

The fact that the WHO/UNICRI study was never published has had disastrous consequences for the Andean countries. In Bolivia, in the 10 years that followed the 48th World Health Assembly, the government implemented an eradication and “zero coca” policy under what was known as the Dignity Plan (*Plan Dignidad*). The implementation of this plan resulted in the killing of dozens of peasant

"Efforts to change international regulations on coca during the 1990s through scientific study or political diplomacy ended in failure. Nevertheless, their effects could be used to advantage by new protagonists in the 21st century"

¹⁶ See press release: <http://www.tni.org/drugscoca-docs/coca-press.htm>

¹⁷ WHA48/1995/REC/3, Forty-eighth World Health Assembly, Summary Records and Reports of Committees, Geneva, 1-12 May 1995, p. 229.

¹⁸ See: www.tni.org/drugs/reports/brief5s.htm

farmers and left countless farmers wounded. Many others are in prison, still awaiting trial and sentencing. These problems would have been avoided or alleviated if the WHO had published its report so that the international community and successive Bolivian governments had learned about the benefits of the coca leaf as consumed in its traditional form.

Efforts to change international regulations on coca during the 1990s through scientific study or political diplomacy ended in failure. Nevertheless, their effects could be used to advantage by new protagonists in the 21st

century. The intervention of the new Bolivian government at the CND in Vienna this year marked a first step towards this: “We believe the inclusion of the coca leaf in the 1961 Single Convention, List I, as a narcotic drug subject to control was an error that deserves particular consideration and analysis by the UN Narcotics Commission, so that in the future the groundwork can be laid for removing it from List I of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Félix Barra, Vice minister of Coca and Integral Development during the 49th period of sessions of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, Vienna, 15 March, 2006.

Chronology

- **4th of August 1947** - Petition from Peru to the UN Secretary General for the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to approve the appointment of a commission to “investigate the effects of chewing the coca leaf and the possibilities of limiting its production and controlling its distribution.”¹
- **10th of August 1948** - ECOSOC decides, in the second period of sessions, to form a UN Commission of Enquiry made up of Mr. Howard Fonda, Jean Philippe Razet, Professor Frederic Verzar and Dr. Marcel Granier Doyeaux.
- **September 1949** - Visit of the Commission to Bolivia and Peru
- **May 1950** - Writing of the report.
- **December 1950** - Commission on Narcotic Drugs chooses to postpone the decision.
- **March 1952** - the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence concludes that “coca chewing comes so closely to the characteristics of addiction ... that it must be defined and treated as an addiction.”² Two years later, the issue comes up for discussion again, and the conclusion is that “coca chewing must be considered a form of cocaineism”.³
- **1961** - Approval, ratification and implementation of the 1961 Convention. Inclusion of the coca leaf in the system of lists, in one of the strictest categories: List I.
- **1988** - Approval, ratification and implementation of the 1988 UN Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. Inclusion of Article 14. Reservations made by Bolivia.
- **1992** - Andean governments — Peru and Bolivia — request a reconsideration of the leaf’s value. Coca diplomacy and request at the 36th period of sessions of the Narcotics Commission. Campaigns by Foreign Ministries.
- **1992** - The WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence previews the coca leaf in order to define whether it should be critically reviewed and rules against this.
- **1991 - 1995** - WHO-UNICRI Cocaine Project study carried out. Publication not approved because of pressure from the United States.
- **1995** - INCB report mentions contradictions on coca leaf use and the 1961 & 1988 Conventions
- **March 2006** - Interventions of Bolivian Government at the 49th period of sessions of the CND in Vienna, reopening the debate.

¹ www.unodc.org/unodc/en/bulletin/bulletin_1950-01-01_4_page005.html

² WHO, Technical Report Series 57, March 1952, Section 6.2, Page 10

³ WHO, Technical Report Series 76, March 1954, Section 6, Page 10

Who better than an Andean government to take on the task of rectifying the historical error that defined the coca leaf as a dangerous substance? The political and social situation in Bolivia, where for the first time a candidate, Evo Morales, won the election with a social agenda that included the country's indigenous majority, has paved the way for this possibility. Bolivia now has the chance to review the consequences of the anti-drug policy that has been implemented and to open a series of channels that can contribute to new, clear initiatives regarding the cultivation and use of the coca leaf.

The *Cato*

Coca producers' demands were already beginning to bear fruit, even before one of their own representatives became president. Protests prompted agreements on the cultivation and commercialisation of the coca leaf. Perhaps the most important was the agreement signed between coca growers in the tropical region of Cochabamba (Chapare) and the government of President Carlos Mesa in 2004.

The agreement, which was conditioned on the results of a future study of demand for coca leaves for traditional consumption, allowed coca producers to cultivate an area of 0.16 hectares (known as a *cato*) until the amount needed to meet that demand was defined. In addition, 18 primary markets for warehousing and sale were allowed to operate, enabling farmers to sell their harvest in the national market. A one-year period was established for this.

This time frame was changed by political events in the country. In October 2003, Bolivia's elected president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, fled the country after a bloody crackdown on demonstrations by social movements protesting his policies. In June 2005, his successor, Carlos Mesa, resigned, leaving the presidency in the hands of the Supreme Court president, Eduardo Rodríguez, who called general elections for December of that year.

The break in forced eradication was a visible change in Bolivia's drug policy during a period of political turbulence. Between February and October 2004, the Mesa administration and leaders of the six federations in the Cochabamba tropics began a series of meetings to address the coca growers' demands, which included suspension of the eradication of excess coca, the demilitarisation of the coca-growing zones, and participation in alternative development programs through an association of local governments.

This 'pause' in eradication was sealed with an agreement on May 16, 2004, after eight weeks of intense negotiations. The Mesa Administration, however, did not begin to implement the agreement until October 3, when the government finally agreed to reduce the area of crops to be eradicated, respecting the *cato* for each producer affiliated with an organisation (the 23,000 members of the six federations), although the talk originally had been of "one *cato* per family."

The *cato* brought peace and stability to Chapare after years of confrontations and militarisation in the zone and a high toll of people killed and wounded. The 3,200 hectares of 'tolerated' crop area paved the way for the end of an era that had lasted more than 10 years.

The crop grown to meet demand for legal consumption in Bolivia is cultivated in the Los Yungas region of La Paz. Law 1008 defines 12,000 hectares for traditional crops, as well as transition zones and areas of illegal cultivation. The areas for traditional cultivation are exclusively located in Los Yungas. Coca growers in Chapare always considered this distinction arbitrary and unfair. For producers in Los Yungas, who have established a stable market and a sustainable economy, the current system has produced good results, although traditional, transition and illegal zones have also been defined within the region, reproducing the same divisions that are found at the national level.

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The agreement stated that “the process of reduction and registration will be peaceful, and will be carried out, controlled and supervised by the Coca Reconversion Office (Dirección de Reconversión de la Coca, Direco) and the Special Joint Task Force (Fuerza Especial de Tarea Conjunta, FETC) in coordination with the six federations of the tropics of Cochabamba.” In fact, as of that date eradication increased in Chapare, reaching the year’s eradication target of 8,000 hectares. Both the government and the coca growers in the Cochabamba tropics ratified the decision to respect and cooperate in actions related to interdiction and the fight against drug trafficking. This sowed the seeds of the Morales government’s drug policy.

Study of Demand for Legal Coca Leaf Consumption

Law 1008, the legal framework for regulations related to coca cultivation in the country, establishes in Article 29 that “the Executive Branch will periodically determine the amount of coca necessary to meet demand for traditional consumption and that established in Article 5, which cannot exceed production equivalent to an area of 12,000 of coca crops, taking into account the yield in the traditional zone.” Since the law took effect in 1987, no such determination has ever been made.

At the time, the possibility of carrying out a study of demand for coca leaf for legal consumption had strategic importance as a tool for the definition of a new coca policy in Bolivia. The study would be done with support from UNODC, which was asked to implement it, and the European Union, which was asked for funding. In July 2005, the government and the coca growers began negotiations to define the study, which had been in limbo for months. Preparations for the electoral campaign made

it difficult to develop the terms of reference for the study, which was also affected initially by issues on the broader political agenda.

The government team’s proposed methodology differed substantially from that of the coca growers’ representatives. The delegations suffered a series of ups and downs, including turnover of participants. One point of contention was the definition of who would carry out the study. The decision to put it in the hands of the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE) was not a consensus of all the interested parties, since it had been announced that the study would be put subjected to an international bidding process and would not be awarded to a single entity, but to an association of independent institutions. The other point of discussion, which some observers considered even more

serious, concerned the terms of reference for the study, which was reduced to a nationwide sample in which the questionnaire would be applied only to households of peasant farmers and workers, a survey that various observers considered incomplete and biased.

The cato brought peace and stability to Chapare after years of confrontations and militarisation in the zone and a high toll of people killed and wounded

While the pre-election climate was heating up and the parties involved in the negotiations were unable to agree on terms of reference for the study, it became clear that the study would be postponed until after the elections. All projections saw Evo Morales as the likely winner.

There were also other problems with the study and the importance being placed on it for defining the future of the country’s drug policy. One had to do with the perception of its impact on the definition of the number of hectares of legal coca crops. The terms of reference for the study were based on the implicit assumption that the result would



automatically dictate the number of hectares to be authorised as legal in the country. Calculations of coca crop yields, however, fluctuate between 2.7 and 0.9 metric tons per hectare (Operation Breakthrough¹). Demand is calculated in tons of leaves, but the number of hectares needed to produce a certain quantity of metric tons is still in question. Information that is currently available does not allow for precise measurements.²

After the elections, the parties involved finally hammered out the terms of reference for the study, and its implementation was agreed. The results — which will not define the issue of cultivation — are expected to be available in late 2006.

The study will be relevant to the extent that it meets its goals and provides details about the various uses of the coca crop nationwide. Conditions for this are not entirely favourable, however, because of Law 1008 and because of the policies for combating illegal drug trafficking plus the schemes of the conventions and international cooperation that are still in effect.

The Evo Morales government has further expanded the concept of 'rationalisation' of production, considering the possibility of a local or even an international (regional) market that could absorb much more legal coca than is currently absorbed.³ A possibility would be to make sure a follow-up for the

study is agreed, so as to take into account all the elements required for a serious, comprehensive analysis of demand, including a potential on an international market, negotiating these terms with cooperation agencies — or, if that were not possible, seeking alternative ways of carrying out a parallel, independent study with support from the international community.

The Bolivian government can take the stand that countries should be able to determine certain policies and conditions that respond to their internal situation and legal framework. In that sense, the Constitutional Assembly provides an opportunity to formally recognise the cul-

tivation and consumption of the coca leaf as an ancestral value or as part of the country's cultural heritage, consolidating and formalising the position of the current government and civil society regarding recognition of the leaf, and introducing recognition of alternative uses. Although the value of coca has been recognised since Law 1008 was passed in 1988, recognition by the Constitutional Assembly would be particularly valuable because it would constitute acknowledgement to establish the rules for a new state at the highest level — the Constitution. This implies that Bolivia would submit to restrictions imposed by international drug conventions only if these are in line with the country's Constitution.⁴ With a new, differentiated legal framework tied to this recognition, it would be possible to link the legal aspect to other areas, allowing the market study to be carried out within a more legitimate, honest assessment of the coca market, including its potential for expansion.

The distinction between coca and cocaine, and between coca cultivation and the cocaine business, is important, and for many years there has been a long and just struggle for acknowledgement of this difference

¹ DEA, Operation Breakthrough: coca plantations and cocaine base production, Drug Intelligence Report, Justice Department, United States. Every year the DEA writes confidential reports per country in the Andean region that cultivates coca and produces cocaine under this name.

² Figures from the report, "Bolivia Coca Cultivation Survey," June 2005 (UNODC/ Bolivian Government). New figures have not yet been published.

³ Because of control policies, the supply of coca leaves to several regions of the country and abroad has decreased or been considerably restricted, modifying demand in these areas.

⁴ See also: "Breaking the impasse: polarisation and paralysis in UN drug control," TNI, Drugs and Conflict Series No. 5, July 2002. (<http://www.tni.org/reports/drugs/debate5s.pdf>)

Cocalcocaine

The distinction between coca and cocaine, and between coca cultivation and the cocaine business, is important, and for many years there has been a long and just struggle for acknowledgement of this difference. Nevertheless, the problems caused and exacerbated by the implementation — in Bolivia, the Andean region and all of Latin America and the Caribbean — of poorly conceived drug policies are not limited to the criminalisation of the coca leaf or selective crackdowns on coca growers.

The new Bolivian government's idea of focusing the fight against drugs on cocaine, as separate from the coca leaf, responds to clear and logical reasoning. During his trip to Europe after winning the presidential election, Evo Morales met with warnings on this issue that left no doubt about the scrutiny to which the European countries were subjecting Bolivia as an ally in the international drug control efforts. Although the current anti-drug strategy has proven to be ineffective and to have perverse effects, so far the Morales government has not questioned it.

The distinction between the coca leaf and cocaine is both true and false. Without the coca leaf there would be no cocaine, and without one of its multiple ingredients the coca leaf would not be suitable for its traditional uses.⁵ The Bolivian government's use of the concept of "drug" does not differ from the rhetoric that is widespread throughout the world, which is based on zero tolerance for consumption of plants such as cannabis or poppy, which also have traditional uses.

The peasant farmers who cultivate the coca that is eventually processed into cocaine hydrochloride and those who grow the plant for other uses, defined as traditional (the ancient manner and its modern applications) and/or medicinal, sow and harvest the same plant and are part of the same impoverished rural peasant population that has been marginalised for decades. In countries where coca

Terminology for coca chewing

Acullicar/acullicu – from Quechua aculliku/akhulliku/akhullir
 Chacchar/cachado (Perú) – from Quechua chajchado/chajtar
 Coquear/coqueo (Argentina)
 Pijchear/pijcheo (Aymara language) - picchar/ pijchado
 Mambeo - mambear
 (mambeada) (Colombia- Brasil- Perú)

crops exist, but where traditional consumption is minimal, such as Colombia, would it be legitimate to propose the eradication of this mainstay of the peasant subsistence economy? The separation of the act of cultivation as a mere agricultural activity, without taking into account the final destination of the product, is a minimal requirement for bringing about changes that are needed in policies aimed at controlling supply.

In addition, Bolivia's prisons, like those of virtually the entire world, are filled with people who have been detained for activities related to drug trafficking, most of whom are from marginal social groups. Most of the people in Bolivia's prison have been detained under Law 1008, accused of participating in the production and/or sale of illicit drugs. Almost without exception, these are small-scale dealers; they are almost never the big fish. Would that change with a policy of "yes to coca, no to cocaine"?⁶

While it is true that cocaine cannot be produced without the coca leaf, and there is insufficient guarantee that cocaine would not be extracted from decriminalised and industrialized leaves, the debate cannot remain stuck on this point indefinitely. Ideally, there would be mechanisms and policies to allow the plant and its derivatives to co-exist without this necessarily signifying an increase in harmful consumption.

⁶ See also the article of Theo Roncken: "De la represión a...la represión, comentarios a la propuesta Cocaína Cero del gobierno boliviano", Marzo 2006, Cochabamba: http://www.cedib.org/accionandina/?module=displaystory&story_id=13040&format=html

⁵ This issue is addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The WHO's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence discussed this issue at its 1992 meeting, when the coca leaf was included in a list of 10 substances presented for pre-review by the WHO to the Committee to consider whether it would need a critical review. One of the significant conclusions was that "the coca leaf is appropriately scheduled under the

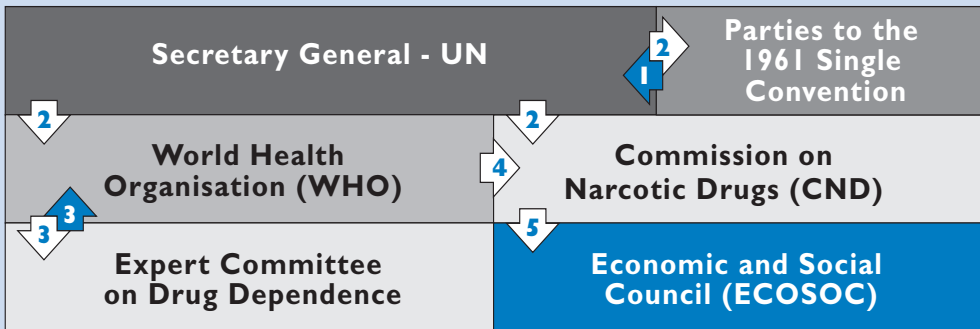
Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, since cocaine is readily extractable from the leaf."⁷ The committee did not find evidence to justify a new evaluation beyond what had already been considered in 1950.

⁷ WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence, Report 28, Technical Reports Series 836, p. 37.

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Critical review

Procedure for removal of the coca leaf from the 1961 Single Convention



1) Notification sent to the UN Secretary General

1961 Single Convention, Art. 3: "Where a Party or the World Health Organization has information which in its opinion may require an amendment to any of the Schedules, it shall notify the Secretary-General and furnish him with the information in support of the notification."¹ The convention explicitly mentions the possibility of removing a substance from the lists (Art. 3, § 6). The government requesting the removal of the coca leaf from List I must accompany its notification with scientific texts and data that can help the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in their consideration of the request.²

2) Distribution of the notification

The notification and supporting information will be circulated among the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the WHO and the signatories to the convention.

3) Critical review by the WHO

The WHO's Expert Committee on Drug Dependence is responsible for performing a critical review and issuing a recommendation based on its guidelines.³ The committee's

¹ United Nations, 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, Art. 3, § 1.

² United Nations, Commentary on the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, Art. 3, § 1, point 7, p.81, E.73.XI.1

³ WHO, Guidelines for the WHO review of dependence-producing psychoactive substances for international control, WHO/EDM/QSM/2000.5, 2000.

The issue of conversion, recovery or extraction is basic to the debate that seeks to separate the coca leaf from one of its derivatives. Once the case for the legitimacy of traditional use of the coca leaf has been won, the issue of how to handle cocaine in its isolated form can be addressed.

secretariat prepares the critical review document, including data regarding dependence potential, epidemiology of use and abuse, nature and magnitude of the public health problem, therapeutic and industrial uses, current international controls in place and their impact, etc.

The document will be circulated among governments, international institutions and NGOs with official ties to the WHO to obtain their comments and arrive at a balanced document. The interested NGOs can also request an information meeting before the session of the Expert Committee to present additional data and clarify their written comments. The fundamental criteria on which the committee must base its determination as to whether the coca leaf can be removed from List I are: (a) whether it produces dependence and harmful effects similar to those of other substances on the list, or (b) whether it can be easily converted into a substance on the list, in this case cocaine. Based on the committee's opinion, the WHO director-general will issue a recommendation to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

4) Decision by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Once the recommendation and the other parties' observations are received, the commission reviews them and issues a decision. The recommendation can be accepted or rejected by the commission. Nothing can be added to or changed in the recommendation. If the commission does not reach a consensus, a member state can request a simple-majority vote.⁴

5) Appeal and final decision by ECOSOC

The commission's decision is subject to review by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) at the request of any party to the convention that disagrees with the decision.⁵ Once the commission's decision is announced, the parties have 90 days to appeal it. ECOSOC's decision is final.

⁴ The Commission of Narcotic Drugs, a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is the main inter-governmental body responsible for policies and coordination in the area of international oversight of drugs. Fifty-three member states participate. Over time, the operating procedure has become a model based on consensus, and voting has fallen by the wayside. The procedure does not follow the guidelines officially established in the "Rules of Procedure of the Functional Commissions of the Economic and Social Council" (www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/rules.htm), which describes voting methods in detail and specifies that "A proposal or motion before the commission for decision shall be voted upon if any member so requests" and that "decisions of the commission shall be made by a majority of the members present and voting."

⁵ United Nations, Commentary on the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, Art. 3, § 8, pp. 99-107, E.73.XI.1.

The removal of the coca leaf from UN narcotics list I would imply a reconsideration of the value of coca domestically, giving impetus to its traditional use and the benefits of industrialisation, as well as internationally, for development of the external market. 'Industrialisation' does not just mean subjecting the leaf to a transformation process — by chemical or other means — to obtain industrial products; it also implies use of the leaf in its natural form. Beyond 'traditional use' — chewing of the leaves and coca tea — it is referring also to new applications in contemporary cultural contexts. For both purposes, it will be necessary to carry out new studies and dust off existing information about possible beneficial industrial uses. As the Cocaine Initiative mentioned in the preceding chapter indicates, 'The WHO should investigate the therapeutic benefits of the coca leaf'.¹

Traditional and modern uses

Policies aimed at gaining a renewed appreciation for ancestral uses of the coca leaf have a clear historical sense. The goal is to highlight the importance of knowledge that has been disdained by Western science for more than a century. Too often, concepts of a cultural nature, which are specific to certain peoples or social groups, are confused with pharmacological arguments. While it is true that coca and cocaine are not the same, without cocaine coca would never have occupied such an important place in Andean culture. The countless variants and specific contexts in which the coca leaf and its derivatives are consumed merit a more detailed and less Manichean understanding.

To begin with, the so-called traditional use of coca is not monolithic. Besides the Aymara and Quechua cultures that are most often mentioned in public arguments in favour of coca, other indigenous groups — in Colombia, Brazil and the lowlands of Peru and Bolivia — have their own traditions related to use of the leaf. Despite the stigma attached to it,

the spread of the coca leaf has created new "creole" consumption patterns, notably on the Peruvian coast and in northern Argentina and south-eastern Bolivia. Meanwhile, the use of illegal cocaine, which is unquestionably problematic in certain contexts, has also led to a cultural response and forms of social control that have been the subject of study by experts, but which are not recognised by the political powers and the mass media. The challenge is to find a way to create a bridge between the traditional uses of the coca leaf and the 'harm-reduction' movement, particularly with regard to cocaine users.

Industrialised and semi-industrialised products

One of the main properties of the coca leaf, which has been and continues to be used industrially, is its medical potential as an anaesthetic and analgesic. This characteristic of cocaine, which was part of ancestral practices and knowledge in the Andean-Amazon region, came to light in the 1880s and led to a revolution in medical science, particularly in surgery. As a local anaesthetic, it offered an alternative for operations that had previously been painful and hazardous. These properties were used to ease childbirth pains and dental treatments, among other things, taking the coca leaf and cocaine rapidly to the pinnacle of pharmacology and medicine.

In 1923, Richard Willstätter of the University of Munich synthesised the cocaine molecule for the first time, basing his work on the molecule found in the coca leaf and maintaining its anaesthetic and energizing effects, which later found a series of applications. Unlike natural cocaine isolated from the coca leaf, the synthetic version lacks vaso-constrictive properties. This was useful for some applications, but not for others. A long list of pharmaceuticals (benzocaine, novocaine/procaine, lidocaine, etc.) was soon included in the anaesthetist's *vade mecum*. Its energising characteristic also found a series of pharmaceutical uses in stimulant and geriatric medical products. These synthetic products replaced the coca leaf in a huge world market.

¹ The Cocaine Project¹, OMS/UNICRI, 1995, not published.

The most famous non-pharmaceutical industrial uses are in Vin Mariani and Coca-Cola. Both opened up large markets as natural stimulants used in different strata of society. Coca-Cola changed its formula in 1906, using the coca leaf as a flavouring agent without alkaloids; this was later made legitimate under Article 27 of the Single Convention of 1961. The separation of the cocaine alkaloid from the leaf, producing a substance that is used to flavour the drink without the alkaloid, is one of the best-kept industrial secrets in the history of the world.

There are many other products in both Bolivia and Peru that have a modest domestic market. The supply ranges from products that seek to take advantage of the leaf's nutritional value — although many of its valuable components, such as calcium and certain vitamins, can be obtained as well or better from other plants — and products that emphasise its energising value (syrups and teas) or anaesthetic properties (salves), etc. There are also cosmetic products (toothpaste and shampoo). There are various products whose scientific basis is not clearly proven, and there are no clear indications that coca is better than other ingredients for the preparation of the final product — although this could also be due to the stigma attached to coca, as well as the limited availability of technological means.

Other plants with psychoactive properties

“The use and consumption of the coca leaf do not cause psychological or physical changes greater than those resulting from the consumption of other plants and products which are in free and universal use.”²

Undoubtedly, the first thing that must be done is to make reparation for the unjust treatment that coca has received from the dominant culture. This injustice has been the fruit of two errors: having confused the effects of coca with those of cocaine, and having assimilated

both into the model of opiate-dependence. Because of its effects, coca would fit better into a category similar to that of caffeine-based plant stimulants — coffee, tea, guaraná and yerba mate. Because of the way it is assimilated, including the use of an alkaline reagent, its use would be more similar to the oriental custom of chewing the areca nut (*areca catechu*) wrapped in betel leaves (*piper betle*) and mixed with lime. Habits, it should be noted, that no one has ever considered including in the Single Convention.

In any event, regulations for controlling coca far exceed those applied to other psychoactive plants, many of which are more capable of altering consciousness, such as kava-kava (*Piper methysticum*), kratom (*Mitragyna speciosa*) and various hallucinogens (species of *psilocybe*, *lophophora*, *echinopsis*, *banisteriopsis*, *psychotria*, *anadenanthera*, *virola*, etc.).

It could be argued that coca is penalised because it is the source of cocaine. But then what can be said about the various species of *ephedra*, none of which is controlled under the conventions, although ephedrine is the raw material for an enormous amphetamine market, or of the sassafras tree, from whose bark safrole, the raw material in Ecstasy, is extracted? However one looks at it, the international prohibition on trade in the coca leaf seems to be the result of an unfair policy based on false scientific information, which only reflects cultural prejudice and academic dogmatism.

One of the great flaws in projects to promote the industrialisation of coca has been that of repeating the historical error of isolating cocaine, on the grounds that chemical solvents could be used to produce a coca extract that would contain all of the leaf's qualities. Coca must be consumed in its natural form, and that is the great virtue that differentiates it from the refined alkaloid. The 'industrialization' of coca does not mean its chemical transformation, but rather processing to make it shelf-stable and more acceptable to people who do not know how, or do not want, to chew it in the traditional way — and above all, to make absorption more effective, without losing sight of the



² Quoted from the formal reservations Bolivia has made upon signing and ratifying the 1988 Convention.

fact that one of the goals is to re-educate the market that currently demands cocaine.

How can this habit of disparaging coca, out of ignorance, be corrected? How can rediscovering the value of ancestral teachings about coca help us re-educate demand and replace some of the problematic uses of its derivatives? How could coca become a tool for harm reduction? This process would have at least three aspects:

1. a practical one, demonstrating that the pharmacology of oral absorption of coca, through the mucous membranes of the mouth, is the healthiest and especially the most efficient and precise way of assimilating the alkaloids and other properties of the plant.
2. a social one, highlighting that there are many different ways to use coca — from the classic Quechua and Aymara patterns to the many Colombian, Amazonian and Creole variations — but that all demonstrate that appropriate placement in a cultural context gives the use of any substance a positive value, both for the individual and for society.
3. and finally, an ethical aspect, based on the recognition that evil as such does not exist, but that it is the result of the creations and projections of individuals and societies. A rational attitude would restore to the coca leaf its status as a sacred element among certain human groups and would demand from everyone the respect that this merits.

Plea for mambe or *ypadú*³

Brazil could join the Andean countries in defending the traditional use of the coca leaf. Although such use is marginal for the country's predominant culture and is historically limited to the areas near the borders with Colombia and Peru, its persistence offers Brazilian authorities the chance to take advantage of the terms of Article 14 of the 1988 Convention, which recognizes the legitimacy of traditional uses of plant species that are condemned under international prohibitions.

³ Article by Henman AR, (2005), "La coca como planta maestra: reforma y nueva ética", artículo en Debate Agrario, N° 39, CEPES, December 2005, Lima, Perú

In contrast to the view of Brazil's Federal Police — which is widely disseminated in local media, and which holds that the country is being 'invaded' by coca plantations spilling over from neighbouring countries, which would justify repeated eradication campaigns in the area — so far no significant coca production has been detected in Brazil, for the same reason that coca is not grown in the low jungle areas of Peru, Colombia or Bolivia. Although the coca plant grows lushly in the jungle, its alkaloid yield is relatively low, limiting its usefulness for illicit cocaine production. Large areas of eastern Brazil would lend themselves to coca cultivation, but there is no precedent for it there, other than a few attempts in early 20th-century agriculture schools. For Brazilians, coca is *ypadú*, a plant cultivated by indigenous people of the Tukano family along the Vaupés River on the border with Colombia, and by a mestizo (*cabocla*) population in Tefé, midway between the Peruvian border and the city of Manaus.

Around 1800, *ypadú* was known in a much larger area, including the entire Río Negro river basin and along several tributaries of the Amazon River, known as the Solimões. When the native population and cultures disappeared from that area, *ypadú* also disappeared, kept only as a curiosity in the botanical gardens of Belém do Pará and Río de Janeiro. Ecologist Timothy Plowman identified this plant, also cultivated by the Bora and Witoto people along the Putumayo River and neighbouring areas on the Colombian-Peruvian border, as a specific variety of *Erythroxylum coca* adapted to lowland conditions. They were actually several clones that had been reproduced asexually — by cuttings, like cassava — since the plant did not produce seed in the jungle climate. Indigenous science recognizes each variety of *ypadú* by a different name (*danta-ypadú*, *venado-ypadú*, etc.), attributing to them characteristics that reflect detailed knowledge of their cultivation. The diversity of types or clones of *ypadú* may indicate that *Erythroxylum coca* was introduced to the lowlands at different times, probably from the Huallaga and other high-jungle areas.

Its life cycle in the lowlands is shorter than in the pre-Andean valleys. Plantations of closely

spaced rows, usually found in fields of cassava, begin to yield as of the sixth month and produce good harvests for two or three years. They are then used as sources of cuttings for new plantations, and the roots are left as stubble. In some cases, plants near areas of human habitation have survived for up to two decades, growing into small trees up to five meters tall, with trunks 20 centimetres in diameter and leaves as large as the palm of a hand.

Ypadú would not be more than an element in Amazonian botanical and ethnographic folklore were it not for its use, which enshrines it as a precursor in the current trend in favour of the 'industrialisation' of coca. Because the *ypadú* leaves are very fibrous and their alkaloid content is low, lowland cultures have developed a process for transformation of the leaf that produces a very fine powder, which is known as *mambe* on the Colombian-Peruvian border. The traditional technique consists of toasting the leaves in an earthenware pot, crushing them in a wooden mortar, mixing them with ash from the leaf of the yarumo plant (*cecropia* spp.), and passing them through a sieve to eliminate the fibrous part. The resulting powder is easily handled and rapidly absorbed. Experiments done by Anthony Henman in Lima and São Paulo have shown that a modern *ypadú*, made with any variety of coca leaf and with ash made from quinoa straw, is well accepted by people who find the laborious process of chewing whole leaves to be tedious.

If *ypadú* could move beyond its status as an Amazon curiosity, it could become the much-desired bridge between the traditional use of coca and new industrialised products demanded by the 21st-century world. Although it probably would not replace the traditional

chewing of coca leaves, or *chacchado*, in the Andean countries, it could become an alternative to refined cocaine, which — despite all efforts to repress it — has become a mass-consumption commodity in large areas of the world. As a result, it could become an effective tool for public policies that seek 'harm reduction' and a way to offer consumers a healthy, efficient way to absorb the properties of coca.

In short, *ypadú* would help achieve what no government has managed to do: re-educate the demand for cocaine and, along the way, return coca to its deserved pre-eminence as an ancestral plant of wisdom. If Brazil or any other country had an enlightened policy for addressing this delicate issue, it would do a great service to coca and to the region, as well as to all of humanity. For the moment, unfortunately, this depends on the willingness of the governments that are in office, which have never shown the least interest in the historical precedent offered by the autochthonous peoples of the Amazon. It would be worth noting the ideas offered by networks of consumers, who have taken *mambe* from Leticia to Bogotá, apparently with fair success. This represents a concrete historical change: with the dissemination of the use of *mambe* or *ypadú*, we would help break the sterile cycle of the cocaine war that has caused so much suffering among the peoples of the region.

Taking into account the international community's interest, we believe it would be worth reconsidering the assumptions that underlie the current classification of the coca leaf and following a different path that accepts and respects the teachings of the past in every sense.



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A simple leaf of an ancient plant will feature prominently on the international agenda this year. As international relations and specialised mechanisms for managing the international drugs trade have evolved, a decade-old demand to remove the coca leaf from strict international drugs controls has come to the fore again in recent months.

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.

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There is enough scientific evidence to substantiate the claim that the traditional use of coca has no negative health effects; that it serves positive therapeutic, sacred and social functions; and therefore that its classification as a narcotic drug was a mistake.

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 real options for a rescheduling will depend on a series of factors, not least the political will to face all dimensions involved in this complex issue from an objective, evidence-based perspective. For every member of the international community, this year will become a moment to decide whether to maintain coca under the control of the UN Conventions, or to dare recognize this mistake and show the will to correct it.

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activist-scholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.

Since 1996, the TNI Drugs & Democracy programme has been analysing trends in the illegal drugs economy and in drug policies globally, their causes and their effects on economy, peace and democracy.

The Drugs & Democracy programme conducts field investigations, engages policy debates, briefs journalists and officials, coordinates international campaigns and conferences, produces articles, publications and briefing documents, and maintains a daily electronic news service on drugs-related issues.

The aim of the project and of the *Drugs and Conflict* series is to stimulate a re-assessment of conventional prohibitive and repressive policy approaches and to argue for policies based on principles consistent with a commitment to harm reduction, fair trade, development, democracy, human rights, environmental and health protection, and conflict prevention.