

The Good, the Bad and the Real Truth

*A research into the European press coverage
of the global drugs phenomenon*

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- ▶ This publication has been made possible with the financial support of the European Commission.
- ▶ The following people and organisations contributed to this publication: Angus Wilson and Janneke Vrijland, Council for Education in World Citizenship, United Kingdom, Stijn Delameilleure and Gerbrand Nootens, Boliviacentrum, Belgium, Tom Blickman and Amira Armenta, Transnational Institute, the Netherlands, Sandra Gil and Virginia Montañes, Conflictos y Acción Humanitaria, Spain, Joep Oomen, ENCOD, Belgium and Maurizio Veglio, Gruppo Abele, Italy.

Introduction

In 2001, it will be 40 years since the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was signed. This event marked the birth of an internationally-agreed policy aimed at countering the production, trade and consumption of illegal drugs world-wide. Today, few disagree with the observation that this policy has been unsuccessful. Since 1961, the global drugs phenomenon has multiplied several times, and is still on the rise. Meanwhile, the problems created by drugs control policies have often turned out to be larger than those they were intended to solve in the first place.

The debate on drugs and drugs policies continues to rage. In Europe, many countries have started to experiment with policies on drugs consumption which are in open contradiction with the spirit of the 1961 UN Convention and its even more restrictive successors of 1971 and 1988. The new approach is no longer directed at the elimination of drugs consumption, but rather of the harm related to the unsafe use of drugs. As a result, drugs seem to be slowly moving from being a legal issue to a matter of public health and security.

This change in policy has been accompanied by a similar change in the public perception of drugs, and above all, of one of the main target groups of those strategies, drugs consumers. Throughout the past 40 years, the public image of drugs users has slowly evolved from one of criminal elements breaking the law to ill people in need of health care. In recent years the principle has been introduced according to which drugs consumers should be perceived as ordinary citizens with the same rights and duties as everyone else.

A very different picture emerges when we consider the evolution of international drugs control policies, above all those aimed at developing countries. Here, in 40 years, nothing has changed. No authority seems publicly to question the impact of international drugs control policies. The underlying principle – the complete elimination of drugs production – remains untouchable in international meetings on the issue, as was the case during the recent UN General Assembly Special Session devoted to the drugs issue, held in New York in June 1998¹.

¹ The Member States of the United Nations affirm in a Political Declaration adopted at the end of this General Assembly: “(We) commit ourselves to working closely with the United Nations International Drug Control Programme to develop strategies with a view to eliminating or significantly reducing the illicit cultivation of the coca bush, the cannabis plant and the opium poppy by the year 2008”.

Nonetheless, developing countries are particularly disadvantaged in dealing with the effects of the drugs trade. Drugs have an enormous impact on the economic and political stability of an increasing number of these countries. This is not only due to their lack of resources, which means that their institutions are generally weaker than those of developed countries. It also arises from the fact that developing countries have a somewhat limited participation in international fora where decisions on global drugs control policies and other measures influencing drugs control are made. The reason for this is simple: at the end of the day, decisions are made by those who pay the price tag attached to them, and in global drugs control, they are basically the United States, Canada and the European Union.

International drugs policies are characterised by a tendency to “stop the drugs trade at source”, referring to police and military operations to reduce cultivation of drugs-related plants and the manufacturing of drugs in developing countries. This response does not resolve the often-complex causes of the drugs phenomenon in developing countries and the reasons for people's involvement in it. As a result, the problems related to these policies, in terms of economic, legal and human rights aspects, appear to be even larger than those experienced in developed countries. While billions of dollars are being spent in law enforcement operations against drugs in developing countries, there are many doubts as to whether these operations have had any impact on the size or even the patterns of drugs production.

So why does it happen that adjustments to drugs policies are limited to developed countries, when the need for them is even greater in the developing world?

One answer to this question could be found in this book. It summarises the results of an investigation into the coverage by European media of the international drugs problem, or phenomenon, as we prefer to call it. With this research, our aim has been to clarify the image that is created in the media and to analyse in particular how this image leads to the public perception of the global drugs issue, its underlying causes and, eventually, the policies that could contribute to improving the situation.

The research consisted of collecting, analysing and comparing newspaper articles on the global drugs phenomenon published in six European countries – Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.K. – during the year 1999. In order to achieve a complete image of the way in which the topic is presented in the newspapers concerned, we adopted two methods of compiling the inventory – a quantitative and a qualitative one. The quantitative method measures the importance that is given to this particular issue, using categories such as frequency, authorship, position and length of article. The second method inventories the qualitative features of the articles, referring to the use of keywords and sources, the description of actors and facts and the approach used by the journalists to comment on the events reported. The results of this research can be found in Chapters 1 and 2.

In order to make a comparison between European press coverage on the one hand and the coverage given by journalists in the developing countries concerned on the other, we carried out a similar analysis of press reports in three South American

countries – Bolivia, Colombia and Peru – in the same period. Chapter 3 summarises the results of that work.

Chapter 4 lists the main conclusions that may be drawn from this investigation. And finally, as one of the most important conclusions refers to the use of sources in the press, we have added a list of alternative sources on the issue of drugs and drugs control world-wide which could be used to supplement institutional sources. The majority of those can be found on the Internet.

The research has been carried out within the framework of a project called “Drugs and Development – from debate to dialogue”, elaborated by ENCOD (European NGO Council on Drugs and Development), a network of Non Governmental Organisations from several European countries². ENCOD’s activities are aimed at raising awareness within the European public about the implications of the phenomenon of illicit drugs trafficking and drugs control policies on the civil society of developing countries.

The driving principle behind ENCOD’s activities, which started in 1993, has always been the wish to contribute to more effective and just drugs policies based upon a constructive dialogue between peoples and nations world-wide. This dialogue should deal with the causes of the production, trade and consumption of illicit drugs, and with the ways that these phenomena should be countered in order to produce better results than the present policies have done. I.e., results that benefit the public health, security and well-being of people world-wide.

While aware that the publication of this book alone will never be able to accomplish this objective (as is the case with our other activities), we hope that it at least makes a modest contribution to the process that will eventually lead to that goal. We hope that you find it interesting to read.

On behalf of ENCOD,

JOEP OOMEN
Secretary

² Currently, the following organisations are member of ENCOD: Arbeitsgruppe Schweiz-Kolumbien – Switzerland, Asociación Ramón Santos de Estudios sobre el Cannabis – Spain, Boliviacentrum Antwerpen – Belgium, Conflictos y Acción Humanitaria – Spain, Concertación/s – Spain, Cooperazione Internazionale Sud Sud – Italy, Etudiants et Développement – France, Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker – Austria, Gruppo Abele – Italy, Gruppo Volontariato Civile – Italy, Informationsstelle Lateinamerika – Germany, Institute for African Alternatives – United Kingdom, Liasons Antiprohibitionnistes – Belgium, Movimento Laici per l’America Latina – Italy, Paolo Freire Gesellschaft – Germany, Transnational Institute – Netherlands.

► Choice of newspapers

For the research, the following newspapers were analysed:

- from **Belgium (Flanders)**: «De Morgen» and «De Standaard»;
- from **France**: «Le Monde» and «Liberation»;
- from **Italy**: «la Repubblica», «Corriere della Sera», «La Stampa», «l'Unità», «il manifesto» and «il Giornale»;
- from the **Netherlands**: «NRC Handelsblad»;
- from **Spain**: «El País» and «El Mundo»;
- from the **United Kingdom**: «The Guardian», «The Electronic Telegraph», «The Financial Times», «The Observer» and «The Daily Telegraph».

The newspapers were chosen on the grounds that they are considered to be quality papers and, at the same time, attract a relatively large readership. They are all leading newspapers with a good reputation, especially as regards their reports on international issues, and are papers for which objectiveness and impartiality seem to be more important than circulation figures. As a result, they are considered, both in their respective countries and abroad, as important points of reference for journalists of the written and the audio-visual press. These considerations also count with policy-makers such as parliamentarians and civil servants, who often base their idea of “public opinion” on the articles that appear in leading newspapers. We therefore assume that the role of these newspapers, both in creating public opinion and as a framework of reference for decision-makers in their constituencies, is particularly important.

► Frequency

Globally, 291 articles were collected (111 from Spain, 46 from Italy and Belgium, 34 from France, 33 from the U.K. and 21 from The Netherlands). The relatively high figure from Spain is due to the inclusion of articles on immigrants from developing countries involved with drug trafficking, an issue that received much less attention in press reports in the other countries. The articles appeared at an average of 24 per month,

with a notable increase during the second half of 1999 (see graph 1). July shows the highest number, with 37 articles.

The rise in the second half of the year can be ascribed to several factors. The lack of major news during the summer and Christmas periods could contribute to an increase in “drugs” articles in July, August and December.

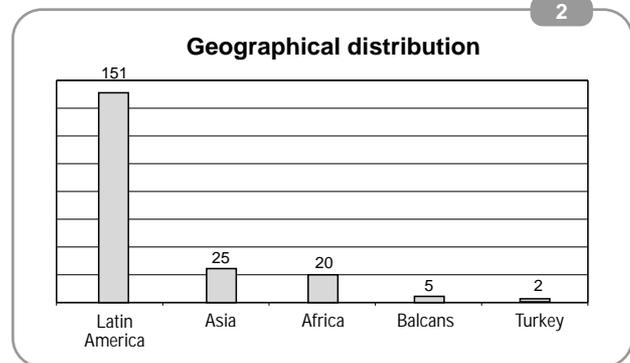
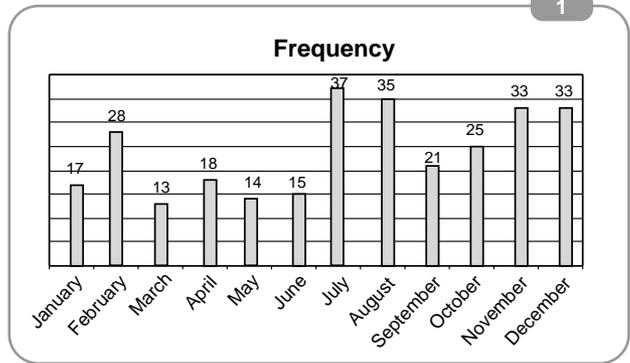
Another significant element is the worsening of the situation in Colombia, a country which featured in most of the articles during the second six months, plus the launch of “Operation Millennium”, an important police operation involving several countries, to break up a leading drugs-trafficking ring which operated between Colombia and the United States. Moreover the low figure for the first six months of 1999 can be partly explained by the war in Kosovo, which took up most of the attention that the press devoted to international news.

► Geographical spread

An analysis of the geographical distribution of the articles clearly shows that most press attention was focused on Latin America (graph 2). And that among the Latin American countries, developments in Colombia received by far the greatest attention. Colombia, caught between a worsening civil war and increasing interference by the US government, has continuously been a major object of press coverage.

The internal conflict between government troops, guerrilla and paramilitary forces, several seizures of cocaine, the role played by drugs in the peace process and police operations against traffickers resulted in 82 articles devoted to Colombia (nearly a third of all the articles analysed).

This figure is remarkable if one considers that the main drug produced and supplied from South America is cocaine, a substance whose impact on European society is far less than that of heroin. In spite of the damage related to heroin trafficking and consumption in European society, reports on the countries where opium is produced – such as Afghanistan and Burma – almost never appear in the



press. Nor were developments in heroin trafficking routes during and after the Kosovo war noticed by European newspapers.

We also found very little attention devoted to the cultivation of cannabis in Morocco, to its impact on EU–Moroccan relations, or to the increasing role of the drugs economy in sub-Saharan Africa. This is remarkable, as the latter events have a much more direct impact on the situation of the drugs industry inside Europe, and/or involve the European authorities more directly.

One explanation for this is that, apparently, the media prefer to report on violent conflicts in regions that are relatively accessible rather than on complicated processes and developments which take place far from the public gaze.

► **Authorship of the articles**

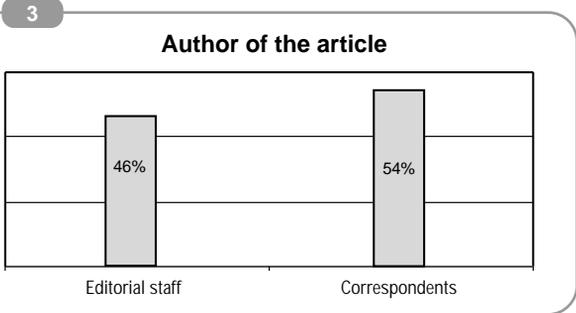
We used this category to inventory the authorship of the articles, dividing them between members of the editorial staff and correspondents. Whereas the former are mainly located in the newspaper's head office in Europe and base their articles on stories produced by others or on information obtained in Europe, the latter have been sent abroad to cover the news “on the spot” and are expected to have access to the areas from which they report. From graph 3, it appears that both groups

are more or less equally divided in authorship of articles on the global drugs phenomenon.

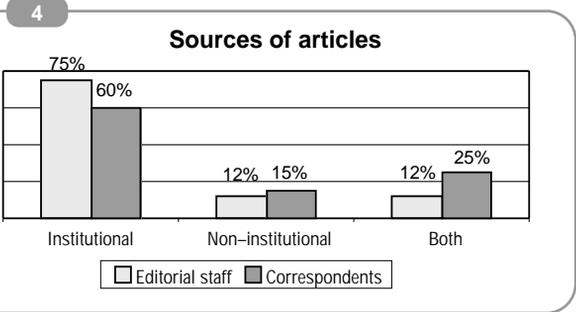
When we started the research, our assumption was that there might be a different approach to news coverage, in that correspondents would be more willing and able to include “non-institutional sources” than editorial staff members.

This assumption proved to be wrong: as the data show, both used primarily what we called “institutional sources” (graph 4) and we concluded that there was no significant difference between editorial staff and correspondents in this area. The same is true with regards to the approach used by staff

members and correspondents to comment on the issue (graph 5). The only difference is that the solidarity approach (see Chapter 2) seems to be more used by correspondents, suggesting that they are more inclined to highlight the difficult socio-economic situation of developing countries than

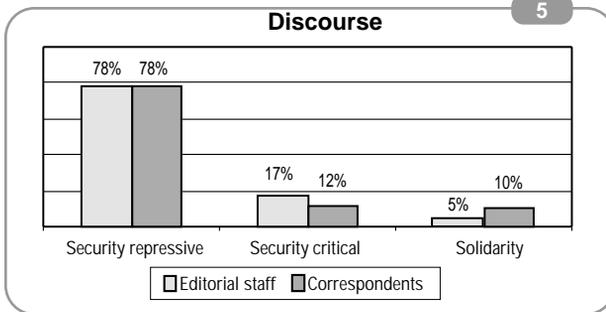


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journalists who observe the phenomenon from a certain – literal – distance.

Apparently, the opportunity for correspondents to obtain more and better information by adding local, non-institutional sources to the institutional ones is not much explored, either by correspondents themselves or by newspapers, which continue to rely largely on their own editorial staff to cover this issue.



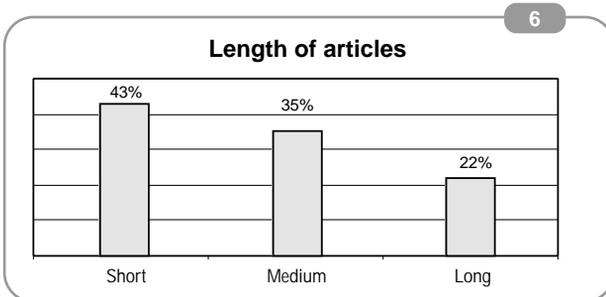
► **Section & position, length, further details**

Almost 80% of the articles collected were published in the “news” section, either national or international. The rest appeared in the sections “society” and “opinion”. Thus most press coverage on this issue consisted of plain news, reports on events or processes. Articles containing interviews or personal opinions are very much a minority.

In general, the use of the “news” section as the main vehicle of information shows the will to supply a descriptive and impartial kind of information. However this results in a scarcity of interpretation of facts and a lack of any attempt to find the roots and causes that underlie events. Therefore it is important to support news stories with background articles explaining the circumstances that gave rise to them.

The Spanish newspaper “El Mundo” is worth mentioning here. During 1999, this paper published most of its articles relating to the global drugs issue in the “society” section. International and national sections have a closer link to politics than the society pages, where issues are normally depoliticised. This unusual placing shows an attempt to separate the issue from politics and stresses its “general interest” value. It may also underline the role of the drugs phenomenon as a problem involving the whole of society, rather than as a mere political issue; however, it underestimates the relationship between the problems derived from the phenomenon of drugs and the effects of prohibitionist policies.

In order to evaluate the length of the articles, we considered them “short” if consisting of less than 500 words, “medium” between 500 and 800 words and “long” if more than 800 words. Most articles can be categorised as short and medium, while photos, graphs and maps are usually associated with long articles (graph 6).



► **Key words**

The first category used to classify the content of the articles collected consisted of the kind of issues or events described in them. Therefore, we established a list of keywords, each referring to a particular issue inside the range covered by the title of “global drugs phenomenon”. This range goes from issues related to drugs production, such as cultivation of illicit crops, eradication, substitution (also called “alternative development”) and armed conflicts between authorities and insurgent groups for the control of production areas, to issues relating to the drugs trade, such as large and small scale trafficking, seizures by authorities, corruption and money laundering, to a final range of issues relating to drugs consumption, within which we especially refer to domestic consumption in drugs-producing or exporting countries.

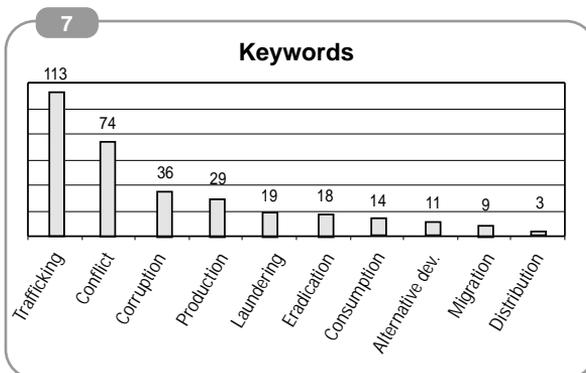
• *Trafficking is no. 1*

From the results shown in graph 7, it is immediately apparent that the topic of drugs trafficking is the one most dealt with. Not less than 42% of all articles include a reference to this topic. Most of them involve reports on police activities against drugs trafficking in or from developing countries.

It is worth mentioning that the articles on police operations especially tend to have

a single source, namely the representatives of the police force and judicial apparatus. Press representatives seem to accept that the update on the fight against drugs is supplied by the same forces who are responsible for implementing it, and whose status appears to be “unquestionable”. This suggests that the press are at risk of being used for the purpose of defending the current drugs control policy.

For instance, it is known that the



criteria by which law enforcement agencies evaluate the effectiveness of drugs control are limited to the number of arrests and the quantity of drugs confiscated. This may be the reason why regular press reports appear on highly spectacular and impressive operations against drugs-trafficking rings, whereas it is almost impossible to read anything about failures in this field.

However, the real figures suggest that the fight against drugs trafficking is failing: both in the United States and Europe – the two main markets for the drugs trade – levels of purity have been increasing while prices have been falling. This can only be a consequence of the fact that more drugs are entering the country. However, in the press reports on seizures or other police operations against drugs traffickers, the authorities are very rarely questioned on the impact of these operations on the global drugs trade.

• *Stereotypes, no background*

Other topics that have drawn the particular attention of the European press are those related to armed conflicts, corruption and the pressure on national governments – especially by the US administration – to increase the war on drugs. Together these themes are responsible for the creation of a somewhat stereotyped image of the global drugs issue: a world of crime, conflicts and corruption, where the US government, being the global policeman, urges the rest of the world to take a tough stance.

Compared to this image, very little attention is devoted to the background of the drugs phenomenon in developing countries. The situation of peasants growing illicit crops, the impact of rural poverty and of financial and trade policies promoted by developed countries, or the experiences of non-violent approaches such as alternative development, are hardly dealt with in the European press.

Finally, it is remarkable that little attention is paid to the issue of money laundering. Given the importance of this issue, the Achilles' heel of the entire drugs industry, one would expect that the press would be willing to play an active role in uncovering its structures and the reasons why it has been so difficult to fight against. However, money laundering activities have a stronger link with European countries, so it may be that reporting on them has a sort of “denunciation” aspect that articles on developing countries do not have.

To report on events that confirm the stereotypes instead of on background issues which could help to provide the total picture may be understandable from the point of view of a newspaper's commercial interest, taking into account that these are less “attractive” topics and need considerable analysis in order to understand their complexity.

However, the newspapers studied are considered “quality” papers and should not only have commercial interests. They should be well aware that the consequence of this emphasis in their reporting is that drugs appear to be essentially a law enforcement issue, with the people involved considered first and foremost as criminal elements.

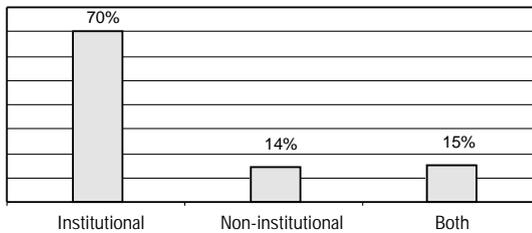
An objective analysis of the real situation in drugs-producing countries would show that cultivation of illicit crops has social, economic and cultural causes and that the first step to a solution of the problems related to this issue is by considering the participants as citizens with rights and duties, not as criminals.

► Sources

As regards the origin of the information published in the articles, we identified three categories: those solely based on institutional sources, those based on non-institutional sources and those relying on both of them. With the term institutional, we refer to institutions or their representatives who are responsible for the design and implementation of drugs control policies. They can be politicians, representatives of the police and the judicial apparatus, spokespersons of governments and international organisations. Among the non-institutional sources of information we identified independent experts, researchers, Non Governmental Organisations, individual citizens and citizens' associations, and the alternative press. There is a clear predominance of solely institutional sources

8

Sources



in the articles, as can be concluded from the analysis of data in graph 8. They appear in 7 out of 10 articles on this issue, whereas both types of sources are used in only 15%. This figure is particularly significant as an important principle of journalism seems to be violated here: the comparison between different types of source, which

may have contrasting points of views and versions of a situation. Without this comparison the reader may obtain a rather superficial impression of the facts and be unable to deepen his or her analysis of the causes and effects that lie behind them. By using primarily institutional sources, journalists run the risk of becoming mere “amplifiers” of opinions and points of view, thereby merely carrying out the wishes of politicians and officials. The lack of information on the points of view of non-institutional actors turns press reports into plain quotations from official sources, frequently promoters of the drugs war, whose initiatives apparently do not need any justification.

Among institutional sources, spokespersons of governments are the most prominent, followed by members of the police and judicial apparatus and international organisations. Citizens, experts/researchers and representatives of armed groups (guerrilla) are the most common informants among the non-institutional sources. In very few cases are representatives of peasant farmers or communities in the developing countries affected by the drugs issue quoted as a source.

► Actors

The term actor refers to the subjects (persons or institutions) mentioned in the articles. An actor can be “active”, if he/she bears a major responsibility for the situa-

tion described in the text, or “passive” if he/she is subjected to the consequences of that situation, whether they be beneficial or not. This differentiation is important when establishing which actors are the most important in the eyes of the press, and how they are related to specific actions. For instance, an article about a demonstration of peasant farmers protesting against the forced eradication of their crops may pay more attention to the number of people arrested than to the demands of the farmers, turning the active actors of the event, the farmers, into the passive ones (arrested demonstrators).

The appearance of a major actor in the international debate on drugs and drugs control was also recorded in the inventory, either as the national government of a concerned developing country, or one of the three international actors who play a major role in this regard: the United States government, the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) or the European Union.

- *Good guys against bad guys*

From graphs 9a and 9b on the principal active and passive actors in European press coverage, one may conclude, perhaps not surprisingly, that authorities make up the major part of the active actors referred to (approximately 70% of cases). This is due to the fact that in most articles on the drugs issue, the situation is described as a clash between parties, with the authorities – police, legal institutions and government – on the one side and drugs traffickers or insurgent groups involved in the drugs trade on the other. To a lesser extent, they can be different governments (typically that of the United States on one side, and those of developing countries, often accused of involvement in the drugs trade, on another).

Consequently, the image is projected of the authorities as the “good” guys fighting against the drugs menace. The main passive actors, i.e. the “bad” guys, are drugs traffickers, insurgency movements involved in the drugs trade or people accused or jailed for drugs-related offences.

When this situation refers to a police operation in Europe, the majority of the bad guys are immigrants from developing countries. In general, no attention is paid to their legal or social position, as the information focuses on their alleged crimes and nationality. When police operations lead to the arrest of people of different nationalities, great emphasis is devoted to the foreign citizens (rather than to those of European nationality). When an offence is ascribed to an immigrant, the chance of his being referred to in neutral terms decreases considerably. This clearly clashes with the image and the approach used by the press in describing the situation of European citizens convicted in developing countries. Terms like “victims” are common when talking about them, while immigrants imprisoned for drugs trafficking in Europe are referred to as “criminals”. This attitude can lead to the stereotype of the drug problem as an external phenomenon which threatens our society and victimizes the citizens of our community.

This interpretation of the facts may strengthen the underlying idea that drugs trafficking is basically an external, non European menace. Notwithstanding the involvement of European citizens in international criminal networks, these tend to be perceived and presented as coming from South America, Asia or Africa. Even when gangs are local or national, the connections with international networks, often

operating from developing countries – especially the Colombian cartels – are stressed. In this way, Colombian immigrants and illicit drugs are presented as constant themes. The final result is the identification of a whole category of people with a social stigma.

On the other hand, when the news event occurs in the developing countries, the role of the bad guys is mostly played by corrupt politicians or guerrilla movements which finance their insurgency with drugs money. Here too, the simplification of reality may lead to serious consequences: developing countries, considered to be the source of the global drugs trafficking, are seen as benefiting from this trade, while in reality the figures clearly indicate that the lion's share of the profits made in the drugs industry remains in the developed world³. However, maintaining this stereotype sustains the belief that international drugs control should be primarily based on law enforcement, and not on social or economic measures.

A clear example of what this can lead to are the United States, where, in June 2000, Congress voted in favour of a huge military aid package of 1.3 billion US dollars to the Colombian government. The main target of this military support is to enable local authorities to fight the FARC (Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia) guerrilla movement, which the European press describes as a “narco-guerrilla” because of the fact that it survives thanks to the taxes imposed on coca leaf production and on the cocaine trade. The official justification for US support is that it will enable Colombia to stop the flow of cocaine towards the United States. According to the declarations of US drugs control authorities, FARC receives around \$500 million per year from the cocaine trade, which represents only about 1% of the total value of Colombian cocaine sold abroad, even according to the most conservative estimates. Thus, even if FARC does make substantial profits from the cocaine trade, emphasising its role in the drugs industry could well serve the interests of the US government, whom many observers suspect to have created the “narco-guerrilla” story on purpose in order to justify military intervention in Colombia. If so, the media would be being used as an instrument in this strategy.

• *Europe is absent*

Graph 9a clearly shows that the United States are among the primary protagonists in European press coverage on this issue. Reports on European Union actions against drugs in developing countries count, surprisingly, for just 1% of all articles, notwithstanding the fact that European tax payers' money is involved in these programmes. This under representation of the European Union may be due to the relative lack of “media-attractiveness” in its approach, which, in theory at least, puts more emphasis on development and less on repressive measures. It may also be because the European authorities have difficulty in “selling” their policies to the press. Anyway, the principles of the EU approach seem to contrast with the general image evoked in the press, according to which the fight against drugs is a clash between good and evil forces. It may also be the case that the press tends to repeat the images it has

³ According to UN figures, less than 1% of the profits gained with the sale of illegal heroin and cocaine are obtained by peasants and owners of drugs laboratories in the developing countries. The remaining 99% is shared more or less equally by international traffickers and small-scale distributors.

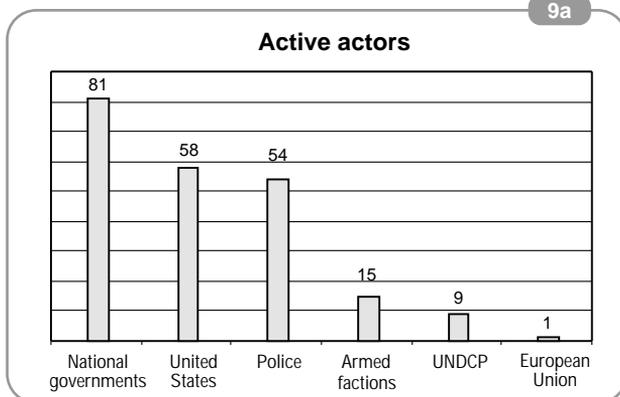
helped to create in the past, ignoring signals and evidences which point to a different situation.

Similarly, little attention is paid to the efforts of multilateral organisations such as the United Nations (and its specific agency, the United Nations Drug Control Programme) to counter the drugs phenomenon. It is very interesting to note that national governments of developing countries are mainly described as active actors when their actions are in line with the principles of international legislation and the instructions of the US government. The case of the Cuban government is exemplary. With two exceptions, all the articles involving Cuba considered the government to be a passive player (accused of corruption or violations of human rights). In the two articles, Fidel Castro takes on an active role by supporting the death penalty as a measure against drugs traffickers.

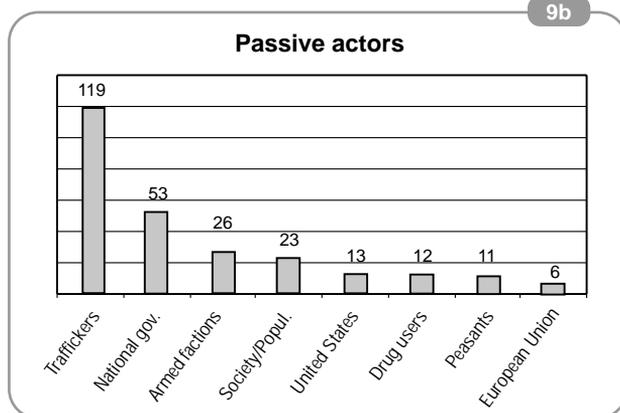
• *Peasant farmers as targets*

Finally, very little attention is paid to how civil society in developing countries is affected by drugs and drugs policies, such as communities of peasant farmers who grow illicit crops. They are usually not considered, but if they are, there is no evidence of them playing an active part in events at all. Apparently, they are seen as mere targets of actions – political, police or military – carried out by institutions. The obvious consequence is that, in the general picture, coca or opium poppy growers are considered as a mere extension of the criminal organisations involved in the drugs industry, not motivated by poverty but by the mere desire to enrich themselves; to be held responsible for the damage done to society in general and, therefore, not to be viewed as respectable citizens but deserving of punishment. Needless to say this representation does not correspond to the real picture. People living in these regions are forced to cultivate the raw materials for the drugs industry in order to survive. While the fight against drugs production evolves more and more into a war-like situation, no decent alternatives have been offered to them. Images such as the one described above undermine the possibility of creating global solidarity or even an open dialogue between populations of developed and developing countries. This was experienced by European NGOs some years ago,

9a



9b



when they invited several representatives of South American coca growers to Europe to present their suggestions for a lasting solution. Their proposal to legalise the cultivation of coca leaves, which are currently illicit but have a profound age-old cultural tradition in the countries concerned, went unnoticed by the European “quality” press, with few exceptions. Obviously, this proposal undermined the core principle of international legislation, according to which drugs are dangerous and should remain illicit. Moreover, a significant part of coca cultivation in Andean countries is currently legal: in this regard, it is interesting that in just one out of 291 articles published by Europe’s leading newspapers in 1999 are coca leaves described without negative connotations.

► Facts

Within this category, we tried to analyse the way in which facts are described. As mentioned earlier, most articles emphasise the magnitude of the drugs industry: the main topics are the amount of money generated by the drugs trade, the economic potency of the international networks, the size of seizures of substances and the increase in drugs production or consumption. Additional information often contains figures on drugs-related problems (abuse, corruption, criminality and political violence). Very few articles contain information on the social and economic circumstances of drugs production in developing countries, on positive peaceful measures or on developments towards the solution of these problems which could be supported by Europe.

Terms as “narcostate” and “narcoregime” are used to describe countries that are suspected of high level corruption (above all Burma), while the Colombian guerrilla movement FARC is described as “narco-guerrilla”. This serves to extend the stigma over entire countries and populations. At the same time, it is interesting to analyse the way in which some “facts” are produced: statements of legal authorities concerning the effectiveness of drugs control measures are published without any analysis, and sometimes this can have serious consequences.

Such is the case of the coverage of a major police operation, called “Millennium”, which took place in October 1999 against a drugs-trafficking ring working out of Colombia, the United States and several countries in and around the Caribbean. In the reports that some British newspapers released on this operation, the US Justice Minister was quoted as saying that the action had led to the «removal of important executives of the transnational drugs trafficking corporations» and that it would «cause a 15% increase in the price of cocaine on the market». Of course, this exaggerated interpretation and the unrealistic expectation of the impact of the operation should have been contradicted by the journalist writing the article. This did not occur.

As mentioned above, the media tend to focus on the spectacular sides of the international drugs issue, and not on the human interest that lies behind it. However the many stories describing the personal involvement of airline personnel, diplomats, (wives of) policemen and popular figures in drugs trafficking tend to suggest that a certain “human interest” plays a role in the decision to publish a story.

► Approach

This category refers to the tone or approach used by the journalists in their description of events or developments. By analysing the different kinds of approach used in the articles, we aimed to classify the coverage of the European press by various ideological concepts. These concepts are not just present in the press, but in any effort to interpret and construct a true image of the global drugs phenomenon. As in the case of other issues, ideological concepts on drugs seem always to be subordinated to certain tendencies that are present in society. The tendencies are oriented towards the production of certain effects: some are desired, others are rejected, some receive high priority, others low. At first sight, the concepts seem to react to these effects, while in fact, and especially if they are employed by the mass media which have a huge influence on public opinion, they may directly contribute to producing them.

The concepts of security and solidarity appear as key concepts in the drugs debate. Both are relative concepts, and imply the existence of alternatives. In principle, they appear to be in opposition to each other. The concept of security refers to exclusion, being connected to the need to control the people involved in the drugs phenomenon in a repressive way: peasants who grow illicit drugs-related plants, drugs traffickers, drugs consumers, illegal immigrants etc. Conversely, the concept of solidarity refers to inclusion, is tied to the goal of integrating vulnerable populations and, consequently, to the task of rehabilitation. The approach that derives from this concept would typically deal with the need to find alternatives to illicit cultivation, re-integrate drugs consumers, legalise immigrants etc.

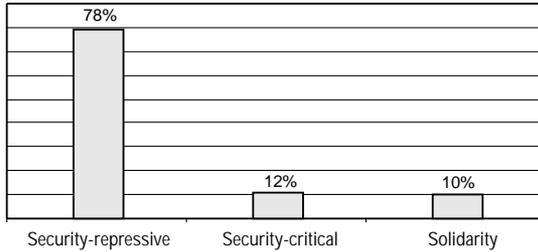
• *Security vs. solidarity*

Thus, the two concepts assume two modalities of intervention on the part of the authorities, whether they be national governments or the international community. Starting off from these assumptions, we have classified the articles by three types of approach:

1. Security – repressive: the approach follows the internal logic of international drugs control, supports the objective of eliminating drugs production, trade and consumption and the way this is currently carried out.
2. Security – critical: the approach also follows the logic of drugs control, but is critical either of the way it is implemented or of its objectives.
3. Solidarity: the approach does not start with the drugs issue as a matter for control, but rather as a social, economic or cultural phenomenon. It addresses the need to establish health and development policies rather than law enforcement.

As expected, the majority of articles have a security approach, as shown in graph 10. Combining the figures on all three approaches it transpires that 80% of articles are based on a security-repressive concept: this means that the methods, objectives and implications of drugs control are considered to be the starting point, a pre-

Approach



mise whose legitimacy cannot be criticised. Just one in five articles discusses international drugs control policies critically; if we look at the number of articles in which the international drugs issue is not primarily seen as a matter for control, the figure drops to one in ten.

Important conclusions can be drawn from these figures. Firstly, if the general ideology transmitted by the press is a repressive interpretation of drugs control, this contributes directly to “public consensus” about the need to fight drugs and to support for the way it has been done to date. In fact, it establishes the conditions in which the dominance of the repressive drugs control ideology is maintained, supposedly because current drugs control best serves the broad interests of society such as public health, development, security and the maintenance of law.

On the other hand, due to the under representation of different approaches to the international drugs issue, there is a serious lack of information about the situation of marginalized population groups who are involved in the drugs phenomenon in developing countries and who are often the target for repression by security forces. As a result of the ideological interpretation described above, general public opinion in Europe may continue to perceive these groups and communities as a factor of insecurity, belonging to or dependent on criminal organisations. In this situation, it is not very likely that these people are viewed as citizens with rights and duties who deserve to be respected and even to receive solidarity from developed countries.

In reality, many independent observers suggest that repressive drugs control has failed, and that the interests of reducing drugs-related harm, also at a global level, would be better served by a totally different policy. Support for current drugs control at international level seems more and more limited to authorities who claim success while reality shows an entirely different picture. By repeating these voices instead of challenging them, the press contributes to the creation of facts rather than analysing them.

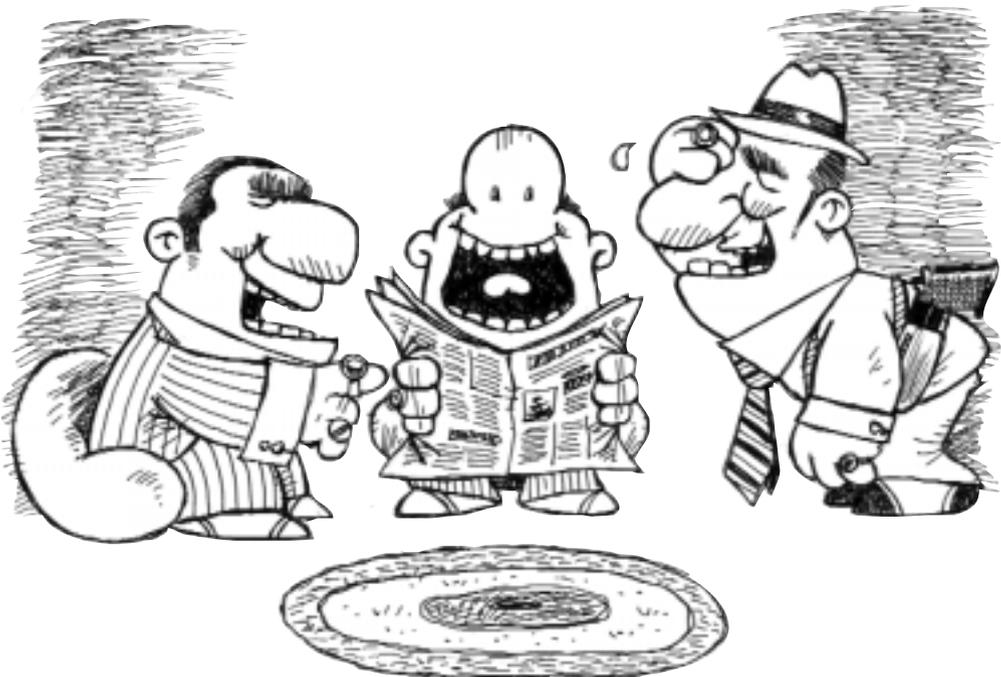
Likewise, any individuals who are mentioned in the press as calling for a revision of international drugs control policies and for more solidarity with marginalized groups in developing countries run the risk of being perceived as extremist, fighting upstream, perhaps even defending obscure interests. However, these same individuals often reflect the concerns of the majority of civil society in the developing countries affected, where current drugs control policies lead to the violation of human and citizens' rights, undermine development and directly contribute to the deterioration of living conditions for millions of people.

► Sources/Approach

One of the most important elements to emerge from the analysis of the data is the connection between the type of sources used by the journalists and the kind of approach. Looking at graph

Approach	Sources		
	<i>Institutional</i>	<i>Non-institutional</i>	<i>Both</i>
Security-repressive	162	15	20
Security-critical	20	18	13
Solidarity	7	17	5

11, it is evident that institutional sources are far more likely to stress the security-repressive approach than non-institutional. The fact that they are quoted with much more frequency in the press means that this approach receives much more attention than the solidarity one. The same is true, but in reverse, for the non-institutional sources: they are much more inclined to critical approaches, but far less present in the press.



Press coverage in the Andean countries

As in Europe, the Latin American press takes as a starting point for its coverage of the international drugs issue the dominant, control-oriented approach, essentially based upon institutional sources. Nevertheless, there are important differences between these two regions concerning the priority given to certain specific themes. While the European press concentrates most attention on the international drugs trade and the monies related to it, in Bolivia, for example, this same issue has had less relevance than concerns relating to the problem of illicit cultivation and development.

An analysis of press coverage between August and December of 1999 in three countries of the Andean region – Peru, Bolivia and Colombia – illustrates the similarities and differences between media coverage in the two regions⁴.

As regards the quantitative aspect, the first observation is that given the direct involvement of these Andean countries in the production, manufacturing and distribution of illicit drugs, the drugs issue occupies a dominant and almost daily place in the newspapers. In a country like Colombia, no day passes without at least one piece (generally many more) that deals with drugs-related matters. Thus the total amount and the diversity of information on this topic are considerably greater than in Europe.

According to the categories established elsewhere in this document, of the total number of articles published during the period, a high percentage (90%) fall inside the category “security” – 75% “security-repressive” and 15% “security-critical” – while only 10% of the articles correspond to the “solidarity” approach. These figures do not differ much from those in the European analysis. It is notable that most of the articles which raise questions about the efficacy of drugs control strategies, which use alternative sources of investigation and in which the issue is pre-

⁴ The present conclusions were extracted from the inventory of articles published in the following newspapers in the period August–December, 1999:
from Bolivia: «Los Tiempos», «La Razón»;
from Colombia: «El Tiempo», «El Espectador», «El Nacional», «Semana», «El Colombiano»;
from Perú: «Gestión», «La República», «Caretas», «El Comercio», «Cambio», «Expreso».

sented from the perspective of the victims of drugs control – in this case the peasant producers of illicit crops – occur in the Colombian and Peruvian press. An observation (which lies outside the reach of this document) on the attitude of press articles in these same countries in the year 2000 reveals an increasing share of articles of a critical nature, even among newspapers traditionally seen as pro-institutional.

As regards the qualitative aspect, the information provided by the Latin American press was concentrated in three major themes:

- 1) *Drugs and relations with the United States.*
- 2) *Big stories on drug traffickers (frequently expressed in a spectacular tone).*
- 3) *Illicit cultivation and development.*

Each one of these themes is made up of several categories. Let us look at them separately:

► **Drugs and relations with the United States**

Within this theme, the following categories can be identified:

a) How does bilateral co-operation against drugs work in practice? This means: is the country fulfilling the requirements imposed by the United States regarding drugs control strategies (programmes of manual or aerial eradication, other law enforcement programmes, signatures of agreements, etc.)?

b) Are the United States collaborating sufficiently with the country? This means, is there a balance between the support given by the USA and the achievements obtained by the country? This does not only refer to military collaboration (equipment, armaments, training) but also to funds dedicated to development programmes, both when these funds have been promised or it is expected that the United States will offer this support. This category includes the frequent references to trips made by politicians and military personnel on lobbying missions to the US Administration and Congress in Washington.

c) The relationship between the national army and the US. This includes collaboration between the military of both countries and the positive or negative reactions of the Defence Department. This issue took up much space in the Peruvian press due to the fact that, in the period concerned, relations between the Peruvian National Intelligence Service (SIN) and the United States deteriorated seriously. In the same period this also became an important issue in the Colombian press with the debate over a massive anti-drugs aid package that was also perceived as support for counter-insurgency. This initiated a debate that is still going on, and concerns the United States' military involvement in Colombia's internal conflict.

► **Big stories on drugs traffickers**

a) Cases of well-known drugs traffickers who are citizens of the country concerned, or else foreigners linked to the country. The articles of this category offer extensive descriptions of the way these people live, their possessions, etc. In this regard, the Bolivian press gave regular coverage of the case of Marco Marino Diodato, an Italian citizen resident in Bolivia who had links with president Banzer's family (thereby giving a more sensational tone to the story), and who may have been involved in drugs trafficking. In Peru, during the same period, much was written about "Los Camellos", a well-known group of drugs traffickers. The corruption cases involving government officials were also given a high profile.

b) How do drugs-trafficking rings and the Mafia operate? Details on massive drugs transports.

c) Actions of drugs control agencies. Large seizures. Cases of "narcoplanes". Discovery of laboratories.

d) Issues of money laundering. As in Europe, this category receives little attention, although the Peruvian press described several cases of money laundering in the period, including "low profile" ones.

► **Illicit cultivation and development**

Of all topics, this was given the most coverage in both Bolivia and Colombia. It is also the most complex issue, particularly in Colombia, where it appears to be closely related to domestic armed conflict. It is also the area in which most alternative and non-institutional sources of information were used, causing a larger presence of security-critical and solidarity approaches. It includes the following categories:

a) The current situation. Increases and decreases in drugs production and illicit cultivation; prices of coca leaves and cocaine paste; comparisons with earlier figures. In this category, critical analyses of the situation are frequently presented.

b) Alternative development projects. Eradication as a part of crop substitution programmes (a particularly common issue in Bolivia and Colombia).

c) Illicit cultivation and drugs control strategies. In this category (in the case of Colombia) several broadly documented critical analyses were published, representing the beginning of a more critical attitude – which continued to evolve in the following year – on the part of some of the media, with particular reference to the strategy of massive aerial fumigation. At this point one should mention the research into fumigation methods carried out by several Non Governmental Organisations, whose studies have begun to be seen as a serious source of information by the opinion pages in the press and by specialised journalists.

d) Movements of peasant farmers protesting against forced eradication; police and military repression of these protests.

e) Human rights and environment in the context of the drugs war (particularly in Colombia and Bolivia).

f) Displaced persons (Colombia). The relationship between this problem and the armed conflict, due to the presence of guerrilla and paramilitary troops in the coca growing areas.

While the same themes relating to international drugs issues are overwhelmingly present in the press of the Andean countries, despite a small but significant percentage of the published articles showing a more critical attitude towards the institutional message, most of the coverage is still limited to the reproduction of official information. There seems to be little interest in describing the origins of the problem or in analysing socio-economic conditions.

Another observation on these press articles is the relative lack of space devoted to drugs consumption in comparison to the developed countries. However, this seems to be changing and there is a tendency to publish more in this respect.

The reason we carried out this research was our conviction that the mass media play an extremely important role in transmitting ideologies, opinions and attitudes to the population as a whole. As most people acquire information from them, the media clearly have a crucial impact in the construction of collective images. This is even more the case when the media are the only possible source of information, as with the subject of this report.

We were particularly alarmed by the results of a poll of European public opinion published by the European Commission at the end of 1999. According to these results, 89% of people who live in EU Member States consider the fight against drug trafficking and organised crime to be a political priority. Apparently, nine out of ten Europeans believe that the fight against drugs is as important as the maintenance of peace in Europe and even more important than the protection of the environment. There is only one issue that concerns Europeans more, and that is the fight against unemployment.

It is very unlikely that, of the 89%, many have ever been in direct contact with "drugs traffickers". Probably most of them do not even know who or what hides behind the term. A minority may have been the victims of street crime, which is related to the practices of certain marginalized drugs consumers unable to finance their habit. Perhaps some of them know people who have run into drugs-related problems. However the majority will base their opinions of the international drugs phenomenon on the information they receive from the media or the cinema.

Given the relevance of this issue and the impact it has on public perceptions, it is important to ascertain whether the concepts used in the press are based on an objective and rational analysis rather than on an uncritical repetition of the positions expressed by the authorities and other powerful sectors. It is also important to identify the way in which these concepts are reached, and if important principles for good journalism have been respected, such as the use of different sources to provide contrasting versions of a story.

Undoubtedly, more analysis is needed to obtain a complete image of the way that the European press reports on the global drugs phenomenon. We do not pretend to offer a complete picture, quite simply because we did not have the means to identify and analyse in detail all the steps that precede the decision of an editorial staff

somewhere in Europe to publish an article on the drugs issue. This would require a scientific approach far beyond the capacity of an NGO platform. Therefore, we had to limit ourselves to the data collected on this occasion. The general picture that emerges leads us to the following conclusions:

– The European media interpret the international drugs issue as a clash between forces, the so-called War on drugs. On the one hand there are those representing the police, legal institutions and governments of developed countries and on the other there are drugs traffickers, insurgent groups involved in the drugs trade, corrupt governments in the developing countries, illegal immigrants smuggling drugs and, to a minor extent, peasant farmers involved in drugs production. To present the whole situation as a military conflict supports the call for a military response, even if the two factions are not comparable. A war is supposed to settle a clash between opponents of similar strengths. This is not the case in a confrontation between, on the one side, national governments, supported through financial, political and military means by the US, and on the other, peasants growing illicit crops to survive.

– The structural causes for drugs production and trade in developing countries, the social, economic and cultural context of this phenomenon and the possibility of non-repressive measures are hardly dealt with in the European press. Nor are the political and economic interests of developed countries in maintaining the drugs industry, as for instance the role of Western banks in money laundering operations. This generates an image of the drugs phenomenon as an external menace, coming from producing countries, for which the developed countries carry almost no responsibility. Instead, the responsibility is offloaded on to the developing countries.

– The European media tend to use institutional sources almost without questioning the veracity of official declarations or the effectiveness of the strategies they expound. Events and interpretations are reported without contrasting the official version with those of independent observers or representatives of civil society in the involved region.

These conclusions are significant when they concern the role, responsibility and professional reputation of the European press. Our impression is that the media blindly follow the mainstream approach to global drugs control, thereby strengthening a repressive policy on drugs which many European citizens and authorities began to question long ago (especially the demand-related aspects). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the Latin American press, for whom the global drugs phenomenon is an issue of daily concern, is also slowly starting to question the institutional approach to drugs control.

The presentation of a biased picture of reality, even if subsequently denied or rectified, reinforces superficial interpretations and strengthens prejudices. The broader public, whose awareness of the situation in developing countries is largely

dependent on newspapers, radio and television, is usually confronted with this issue when certain important events take place (such as international seizures, violent conflicts, arrests of important drugs traffickers, etc.). The reporting of these events solely from the institutional point of view, with an emphasis on the responsibility of non-European criminal groups allied with guerrilla movements and corrupt governments, easily leads to the stigmatisation of entire countries or communities. The next step is the perception of certain groups as the main source of insecurity, and their consequent criminalization.

In this circular, self-perpetuating process, the media play a strategic role. They have a responsibility to offer the public access to different information sources, emanating from both institutional and non-institutional actors. They are expected to provide a picture for the public that corresponds to reality as far as possible. It is significant that even newspapers considered to be the most authoritative within the media and the political community do not take this responsibility very seriously when it concerns their coverage of the international drugs issue.

We believe that in order to improve this situation, the media should simply remember the principles of good journalism. Currently, representatives of those forces which implement international drugs control predominate in media coverage. As these sources are far more likely to stress the security over the solidarity approach, it is no surprise that most of the articles take the war on or against drugs as a fixed point, something that cannot be questioned. Police and government representatives are always quoted, sometimes even with dubious statements that could easily be refuted. Non-institutional sources, especially those of the affected population sectors in the South, are virtually excluded from the debate. As these sources are far more likely to stress the solidarity approach, the information they supply to the debate may lead to a less biased perception of reality.

In this regard, it is significant to note that the research showed almost no difference between the reports issued by the editorial staff of a newspaper and those of correspondents who are supposed to be closer to the different actors involved. Firstly, this implies that the chance for correspondents to obtain more information than journalists from the editorial staff by using non-institutional sources is significantly unexplored.

Secondly, this unexpected similarity suggests that most journalists understand their role in the same way, with substantially no distinction between editorial work or correspondent activity. Both use basically the same methods, relying on a single source, with no effort made to deepen or criticise when information comes from the active players in the drugs war: readers are generally not presented with opinions or information that could raise doubts over these assumptions.

A plausible explanation for this phenomenon could be the style of journalism practised, in which the in-depth analysis of an event seems to be sacrificed for the desire to include details of a more spectacular character, such as the polarisation and often literal struggle between actors. Apparently, although modern technology pla-

ces the availability of different sources and versions of a story within the reach of a mobile phone or a computer mouse, journalists still prefer to stick to the official interpretation, according to which the drugs issue is the cause of a battle, a clash between forces.

The use of different sources and the comparison of different versions of a story is an important principle. If it is not respected, not only are the impartiality and objectiveness of the media jeopardised, but as a result, so is the freedom of information, a keystone of democracy. The press needs to take seriously its responsibility for defending society against the manipulation of information. It is essential that it pays due respect to its own principles and acts as an accurate observer of the impact that the policies adopted by authorities have on the living conditions of people, not only in their own society, but world-wide.

Today, the media have an enormous power to transform descriptions into explanations and subsequently common “definitions”, upon which policies are designed and implemented. To repeat the descriptions received from the authorities and other powerful sectors without questioning them raises serious doubts over the true interests that the media are defending.