

**COVERSHEET**



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Submission to the House of Commons Select Committee  
on the cocaine trade

# House of Commons Select Committee

## Cocaine trade

### MEMORANDUM

#### Main points

1. A review of developments and policies concerning the **cocaine market** will not be complete without taking into account proposals for dealing with its plant of origin, the **coca leaf**.
2. **Coca leaf** –the plant source for cocaine fabrication- in its natural form, is now in the UK unduly classified as a **Class A drug** under the Misuse of Drugs Act; the evidence base for this classification is untenable and needs to be reviewed.
3. **Coca leaf** in its natural form should be allowed on the UK market, as a mild stimulant and as an infusion, which could be helpful to support efforts aimed at **redirecting demand** away from cocaine consumption.
4. **Coca tea** and other natural coca products have a high potential on the world market and promoting industrialisation and marketing will **reduce diversion** of coca crops to illicit cocaine production and help develop rural communities now submerged in poverty.
5. The Andean migrant communities in the UK should be allowed the right to access and consume **coca leaf** as this is a fundamental part of their **indigenous culture** and tradition, in the case of Bolivia even enshrined in their new Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

#### About us

**The Transnational Institute (TNI)** was founded in 1974 as an independent, international research and policy institute. Since 1996, **TNI's Drugs and Democracy Programme** has been analysing trends in the illegal drug economy and global drug policies, underlying causes and effects on conflict situations and democracy, with a special concern for the production side of the drugs issue. The programme does field research, fosters policy debate and dialogue, provides information to officials and journalists, organises international conferences, produces analytical articles and documents, and maintains a website and an electronic information service on the topic. Over the past decade the programme has gained a reputation worldwide as one of the leading international drug policy research organizations and as a critical watchdog on the United Nations drug control agencies. The goal of the programme is working toward a reassessment of the conventional repressive drug policy approaches, and in favour of pragmatic policies based on harm reduction principles for consumers as well as small producers within the broader policy goals of poverty reduction, human security, public health promotion, human rights protection, peace building and good governance. TNI is actively promoting a change in the legal status of the coca leaf at the UN level, based on scientific evidence as well as respect for cultural and indigenous rights.

#### Factual information for the Committee

The attached summary report addresses the **myths that surround the coca leaf** and is presented to the Committee members in order to allow them to make an evidence-based judgement on its current legal status and on the potential usefulness of coca in its natural form, including in the UK context.

#### Recommendations

1. Request the ACMD to undertake a review of the coca leaf aimed at a possible reclassification or complete un-scheduling; the current status of the coca leaf under the Misuse of Drugs Act is not based on any scientific evidence.
2. Allow access of natural coca products to the UK market for its potential public health benefits.
3. Respect the cultural and indigenous rights of migrants from traditional coca consuming communities, by allowing them to import and consume coca in the UK, similar to those from other regions (e.g. the Somali community and qat consumption).
4. Support the petition from the Bolivian government to delete the provision from the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs that calls for an end to traditional coca chewing, and to remove the coca leaf from Schedule I of the 1961 Convention after the required WHO review.

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<sup>1</sup> There are 15-20,000 Bolivians living in London alone, according to a mapping exercise by the International Organization for Migration, see: <http://www.iomlondon.org/doc/mapping/Bolivia%20%20Mapping%20Report.pdf>

## **Coca Myths<sup>2</sup>**

1. The coca leaf has been used – since thousands of years - and misused – since decades - for many ends, each of them suiting different interests and agendas. Even its very name has been appropriated by a soft drinks producer, which has difficulties in admitting that the plant is still used to produce its “black gold”. Every day press accounts around the world use the word coca in their headlines, when they refer in fact to cocaine.

2. Although the claim that coca is part of the identity and history of the Andean/Amazon region is unlikely to be questioned by most countries, a possible removal of the coca leaf from the international control system is still met with considerable scepticism. Discussion has been stuck for too long at the point where it is now, and - sometime in the near future - political decisions will need to be made on coca's fate and legal status.

3. Many myths surround the coca leaf. Radically opposed views and opinions can be heard in the polemical debates surrounding this plant, and those not familiar with the subject are easily lost among all the apparent contradictions. The debate is politicised and has become subject to extreme ideological positioning. For some the coca leaf is as addictive as its best-known derivative cocaine, while others argue that it can cure half the diseases of modern times. For some, coca growing is the main cause of environmental degradation, while others claim that coca helps to protect the soil and prevents erosion.

4. By identifying the myths in pairs, each of these marking the extreme end of a given subject of debate, our aim is to pinpoint the middle ground where a new evidence-based consensus can emerge regarding coca's undoubted stimulant, nutritional and therapeutic properties. We consider five areas of current concerns related to: coca and nutrition; coca and alkaloids; coca and addiction; coca and the environment; and, coca and society.

### **Coca and nutrition**

5. While for some people, “the use of coca is symptomatic of hunger and malnutrition”, others state the opposite saying that “coca is a solution to the world's hunger problem”. It has long been common among superficial observers to confuse the use of coca with an inadequate diet, and thus to claim that coca is in some specific sense responsible for malnutrition among the Andean population. At the opposite extreme, there exists an increasingly vocal lobby, which defends the use of coca not so much as a mild stimulant, but as a food supplement, and sometimes engages in extravagant claims regarding coca's dietary benefits.

6. The use of coca leaves is neither a cause of malnutrition, nor a total panacea for the dietary deficiencies produced by imbalances in modern eating patterns. Coca has a significant role to play as a nutritional supplement, however the use of coca has been traditionally perceived less as a substitute for food among traditional users than something to be chewed or drunk after a meal, when the stomach is full, in a digestive role similar to that of tea or coffee. The major reason why coca is unlikely to become a major food source is its cost. Of course, this is not a significant issue to the relatively affluent urban consumers who are the most enthusiastic advocates of coca-as-food, but it certainly sets limits on the potential role of coca in ameliorating the nutritional status of poor and marginalized populations.

### **Coca and alkaloids**

7. Drug control bureaucracies constantly cite the “easy extraction” of cocaine as a reason to continue keeping coca leaves under the strict controls tied to Schedule I of the 1961 Single Convention, while defenders of coca instead use formulas such as “coca is not cocaine”, or “coca is to cocaine what the grape is to wine”. A degree of clarity is absent in both these extreme positions. The analogy with wine is particularly inappropriate, since the fermentation of alcohol from naturally occurring plant sugars provides no parallel whatsoever to the extraction of naturally occurring alkaloids from an organic plant source.

8. On the one hand there is the traditional Western view, enshrined in the UN Single Convention, which strictly equates coca with cocaine, and treats both in exactly the same way. In contrast, there is a school of thought, which has always stressed the differences between coca and cocaine, and has often

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<sup>2</sup> This text is a summary of the forthcoming report “*Coca Myths*”, by Anthony Henman and Pien Metaal, TNI Drugs & Conflict debate paper nr. 17, June 2009. The full report, to be released on June 26<sup>th</sup>, will be available at: [www.tni.org/drugs](http://www.tni.org/drugs)

– misguidedly, perhaps– sought to identify the crucial distinction in a contrast between an alkaloid and the more complex chemical composition of the leaf. This has led to the extreme position of denying that coca contains any cocaine at all, which undermined attempts to understand the real differences between these two substances: one a single alkaloid with a clear molecular structure, and the other a plant with a complex and still poorly-understood array of mineral nutrients, essential oils, and varied compounds with greater or lesser pharmacological effects, one of which happens to be the alkaloid cocaine. In public discussion of these different forms of the drug, it has not often been recognized that the clearly demonstrable, slow assimilation of cocaine through coca chewing actually provides a stronger argument in defence of traditional custom than the scientifically untenable idea that coca contains, or releases into the human organism, absolutely no cocaine at all.

### **Coca and addiction**

9. To some people, “the use of coca produces a form of drug dependence”, to others “the use of coca will cure dependence on cocaine and crack”. And, like a Peruvian expert added ironically in 1952, there is a third position, that of the members of the UN who maintain that it is not an addiction, but should be treated as such since it is a pernicious habit. The absence of scientific backing did not prevent the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence from ruling twice, in 1952 and 1953, that coca chewing should indeed be considered a form of “cocainism”.

10. Though used by millions without any obvious deleterious effect, coca was declared a powerfully addictive drug with no known therapeutic or industrial uses, and placed on Schedule I of the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. All without a single field study ever having been carried out among even the smallest population of coca “addicts”.

11. It is therefore understandable that the Andean and Amazonian peoples who use coca feel themselves to have been ignored and even insulted by the international scientific community, as well as humiliated by UN bureaucracies which call on them, in the inimitable language of the Single Convention, to ‘phase out’ what they consider a healthy and ancestral custom. It is also significant that there has been almost no attempt since 1953 to provide serious scientific corroboration for the thesis of coca addiction, for to do so would invite almost certainly a conclusion to the contrary, and thus undermine the entire basis of international coca prohibition.

12. An unpublished study on coca and cocaine of 1992-1994 by WHO/UNICRI<sup>3</sup> finally demolished what remained of the coca-addiction argument, and this may have been one of the reasons why its publication was blocked by the US ambassador at the annual World Health Assembly, threatening that “if WHO activities relating to drugs failed to reinforce proven drug control approaches, funds for the relevant programmes should be curtailed”.

13. Regarding the potential of coca in terms of a ‘substitution treatment’ to help cure the addiction to cocaine and crack, anecdotally, one hears of many ex-users of cocaine who have progressed to the use of various forms of coca leaf, often the easily consumed, powdered preparation known as *mambe* in Spanish and *ypadú* in Brazilian Portuguese. Experimentation by medical doctors has included projects by Theobaldo Llosa (2007) in Lima and by Jorge Hurtado (1997) at the psychiatric hospital in La Paz. Though lacking the panoply of data collection, which would allow a solid scientific case to be made for this form of intervention, preliminary results are encouraging and bode well for the future.

### **Coca and the Environment**

14. Since at least the 1980s, there has been a consistent effort to link the growing of coca with widespread environmental degradation, baptized recently by the Colombian government as “ecocide”. The slogan of a campaign currently doing the rounds in the European Union is emblematic: *“Awareness about cocaine’s ecocide in Colombia: Shared Responsibility.”*<sup>4</sup>

15. In terms of deforestation of actual primary rainforest, the impact of coca farming has been deliberately exaggerated, with the clear objective of gaining political support for eradication campaigns. Coca is rarely planted in areas of virgin woodland, since this demands a great deal of effort to clear, and leaves stumps and fallen tree-trunks which make harvesting of coca leaves impractical and highly labour intensive. Deforestation figures have never been analysed in terms of exactly what type of vegetation has been cleared to plant coca. Coca agriculture is also best organized in individual family

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<sup>3</sup> WHO/UNICRI Cocaine Project, available at: <http://www.tni.org/docs/200703081409275046.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.sharedresponsibility.gov.co/en/>

units, rather than in large plantations, and this has the effect of dispersing the plots in small fields, which rarely exceed one hectare.

16. The point needs to be made, and repeated, that coca eradication campaigns have greatly compounded what could have been a relatively containable phenomenon, forcing coca farmers to relocate, clear new areas, and engage in increasingly predatory agricultural practices.

17. Both manual eradication and aerial glyphosate spraying have the effect of further displacing coca producers and their crops, leading to the colonization and clearing of new areas. Forced eradication also has the consequence of making agricultural practices more predatory; since quicker yields must be ensured before the eradicators intervene. This leads to excessive stocking of the coca fields, soil depletion, and the need to employ ever-increasing quantities of industrial fertilizers and pesticides. And finally, glyphosate spraying - the backbone of Plan Colombia - has involved the added environmental cost of destroying the flora surrounding areas of coca production, as well as a series of knock-on effects on human health.

18. On the other hand, in order to counter the "ecocide", the Colombian government – funded by the US, UN and EU bureaucracies – has engaged in alternative development projects whose consequences, in both social and environmental terms, appear considerably more alarming than the problem they were supposedly designed to solve. In the Urubá region of northern Antioquia, for example, the expansion of mega plantations - like palm oil - has been achieved by means of the violent expulsion of coca farmers, a pattern repeated in many other areas of Colombia. Such policies have produced unimaginable levels of hardship and violence, as well as internal displacement, social "cleansing", political fragmentation, and land counter-reform.

### **Coca and society**

19. It is in the social realm that the attitudes surrounding coca sometimes find their most intransigent expressions, with extreme positions underpinned by deeply ingrained cultural prejudice. Many of the early condemnations of the coca habit had a clearly racist or ethnocentric bias. It is not surprising, therefore, that the recent revival in nationalist and indigenist sentiment in the Andes has led to a positive re-appraisal of the ancestral use of coca, and the slow diffusion of a better understanding of the plant into new social contexts. The objective of this re-evaluation of coca is clearly to distinguish the use of the leaf from that of its refined alkaloid, and thus to separate the stereotype of the "drug addict" from the image of the traditional coca chewer.

20. At the same time, it cannot be denied that farmers have often used the traditional status of the leaf to defend their coca crops against forced eradication, while being aware of the fact that most of their harvest probably ends up in the maceration pits for cocaine production. Both economical and cultural arguments are used to defend growing coca; the simple truth is that although producers would prefer their crop to have an international legal market, the current demand for coca is still predominantly for the elaboration of cocaine.

21. Today, coca is no longer an ethnic preserve, being consumed in different geographical areas and among social groups (students, urban workers, the "alternative" middle class) in Bolivia and Peru who, only a generation ago, would have found it unacceptable. But also in the north of Argentina, coca has become a mark of regional pride and its consumption – not its supply from Bolivia - has become fully legal. In Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil – even in Europe and North America - small markets for coca products are emerging. Rather than disappearing, the use of coca is currently undergoing a renaissance, much of it outside the bounds of what would be considered "traditional" in purist terms.

22. This fact demonstrates how ineffectual the UN conventions have been in eliminating the consumption of coca leaf in South America, and how unrealistic it is for the INCB to continue insisting that only "medical and scientific" uses for coca should be allowed by member states. It also underscores the need to define "traditional use" not in ethnic or even geographical terms, but rather as any use of the coca leaf in forms not subject to chemical manipulation.