

PRESENTATION ON THE OCCASION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1961 SINGLE CONVENTION ON NARCOTIC DRUGS

Decolonising drug policy: The War on Drugs and the denial of indigenous rights

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Jallalla Sisters and Brothers,

Although it has been 60 years since the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, we must continue to lament the persecution and criminalisation of our sacred coca leaf; the coca leaf that is persecuted and discriminated against, just as our Indigenous peoples are still persecuted and discriminated against to this day.

Our sacred leaf is an essential part of our ancestral cultures. For thousands of years, our grandfathers and grandmothers have understood the medicinal and nutritional properties of the coca leaf, which was used without restrictions or prohibitions by our Tiawanaka, Kallawayá and Inca cultures, as well as by the Amazonian and Guaraní cultures. The coca leaf is a master plant given to us by Mother Earth Pachamama, forming the basis of thousands of years of ancestral knowledge, traditions, uses and customs. For the original Indigenous peasant peoples and the Bolivian people, the coca leaf signifies life, culture, dignity and sovereignty.

As both a tonic plant and a source of food, coca provides protein, amino acids, important minerals, essential oils and antioxidants, and it contains sufficient vitamins to strengthen the immune system and boost both the physical and spiritual metabolism.

There is sufficient scientific and academic evidence to sustain that the coca leaf in its natural state is not a narcotic drug because it is not a substance that produces similar effects to the substances included in Schedules I and II of the Convention and, more importantly, it does not cause any harm to the human body. On the contrary, the coca leaf has significant analgesic, anti-inflammatory, digestive, energising and many other properties.

2021 marks six decades since the neo-colonial establishment of drug policies through the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the denial of the rights of Indigenous peoples. These six decades of Western imposition of a global drug control regime are no cause for celebration for Indigenous peoples, as this legal framework embodies the harshest of racism and discrimination that seek to suppress our legitimate rights and ancestral cultural uses of the coca leaf. Today, we must again take a critical look at the outrageous injustices of this Convention.

The purpose of the Convention was to curb the abuse of narcotic drugs, not to prohibit medicinal uses and socio-cultural practices that pose no harm to human health, as stated in the preamble and several articles of the Convention itself.

The fact that the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 sought to force Bolivia to abolish the cultural and medicinal uses of the coca leaf represents a major historical error rooted in discriminatory colonial attitudes and a blatant violation of cultural rights, and it is one of the most significant historical and scientific injustices ever committed against Indigenous nations.

We believe that a nation that does not defend its culture and cultural roots is destined to perish. A plant without roots will perish, and the coca leaf is an integral part of our cultural roots. The coca leaf has been and continues to be one of the most important plants used for ancestral medicine in Bolivia and other countries in the Andean and Amazonian region. The traditional use of the coca leaf is practised in several countries throughout our region and is not exclusive to the peoples and nations of the Plurinational State of Bolivia; other Indigenous peoples and nations also share these uses and customs.

Coca, in its natural state, supports health and well-being, but it became one of the main victims of the 1961 Single Convention, which stipulated that its traditional use be eliminated within 25 years of the Convention's entry into force and classified it as a Schedule 1 controlled substance with no scientific basis, in clear violation of Indigenous rights and scientific principles.

Sixty years after the Convention entered into force, we demand that these violations of the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples be rectified. In light of this, the Government of Bolivia requests the support of the international community to remedy the serious errors of the 1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs regarding the classification of the coca leaf as a Schedule I narcotic drug.

After 60 years, we have also come to the conclusion that the so-called war on drugs has become an instrument of geopolitical and economic domination, which enables state intervention, sanctions against governments, the subjugation of Indigenous cultures, and the nurturing of the arms industry, rather than truly combating the use of narcotics.

According to a UN report, illicit drugs are now the third most profitable industry in the world, after food and oil, with an estimated value of over \$450 billion per year, entirely under the control of criminals. In practice, the outcome achieved by the 1961 Single Convention has been the opposite of the intended result.

The International Narcotics Control Board's position on "akulliku" or "pijcheo", the legally accepted consumption of coca leaf in Bolivia, demonstrates the neo-colonial approach with which the entire edifice of the "Vienna Consensus" Conventions was conceived and which at this stage warrants a re-engineering, or the creation of a new one. In 1995, the World Health Organisation (WHO) completed a study that concluded that "the consumption of coca leaves does not appear to have negative health effects and has positive therapeutic, sacred and social functions among Andean Indigenous peoples". Due to these conclusions, the study was censored and was not published.

Indigenous Peoples did not participate in the negotiations for the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which included the coca leaf under Schedule I, as a consequence of the 1950 Report of the ECOSOC Commission of Enquiry on the Coca Leaf, which was the basis for the 1961 Convention. This study was discriminatory and was not academically rigorous, nor did it include the technical-scientific bases and the appropriate methodological criteria of qualified bodies to classify the coca leaf as a Schedule I controlled substance.

When our government of democratic and cultural revolution came to power, we began our struggle for the defence and vindication of the coca leaf. Thus, in March 2009, the Plurinational State of Bolivia proposed remedying this violation of our ancestral Indigenous rights through an amendment to the 1961 Single Convention, eliminating two sub-sections of Article 49 that prohibit the traditional chewing of the coca leaf. A group of countries led by the United States raised objections, and this legitimate amendment proposal was blocked.

In light of this refusal and in full respect of international law, we denounced the Convention and later requested our re-accession, this time with a reservation that protects the cultural and medicinal use of the coca leaf. The support of much more than two-thirds of the Parties to the Convention allowed us to re-accede to the treaty in 2013, partially righting this historical injustice.

We call upon and invite the few countries that have not withdrawn their objections against the proposal of the Plurinational State of Bolivia to accept its reservation to the 1961 Single Convention, following the lead of Mexico in 2019. In particular, this call is addressed to Canada, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and France.

It is time we decolonise the Conventions and thereby do justice to our culture and to such a sacred plant as the coca leaf, enabling its cultivation as food and medicine for the benefit of humanity and opening up international opportunities for the trade and industrialisation of the coca leaf. It is essential that the United Nations allow a critical review for the reclassification of the coca leaf, thus righting this historical wrong that violates the rights of Indigenous peoples. Likewise, sisters and brothers, we have the challenge of establishing agreements and alliances that can break down the barriers established in the Convention, as well as between different actors in the more regional context.

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