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Implementation of the international drug control treaties: challenges and future work of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the World Health Organization in the review of substances for possible scheduling recommendations

Statement submitted by IDPC Consortium, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* [E/CN.7/2025/1](#).

** Issued without formal editing.



Righting a historical wrong: The UN review of the international status of the coca leaf

Introduction

Please note that this NGO paper is an abridged version of IDPC's advocacy note 'Righting a historical wrong: The UN review of the international status of the coca leaf', revised in February 2025 and available on the IDPC website.¹

In July 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) received a formal notification by the Plurinational State of Bolivia² requesting the Expert Committee on Drug Dependence (ECDD) to conduct a critical review of the coca leaf, and to provide recommendations on its status within Schedule I of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. This critical review comes nearly 75 years after the United Nations (UN) called for the abolition of traditional uses of the plant.

Coca has been used for millennia by Indigenous Peoples in the Andean-Amazonian region for traditional, religious, ancestral and medicinal purposes. And yet, the coca leaf is listed in Schedule I of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, alongside cocaine and subject to the same very strict international control measures. These controls require that the use of the coca leaf is strictly limited to medical and scientific purposes (article 4), with only a few exceptions included within articles 2.9 and 27 of the Convention. Article 49 of the Convention also requires States to abolish the traditional uses of the coca leaf 'within twenty-five years from the coming into force of this Convention',³ a deadline which expired at the end of 1989.⁴ Article 14.2 of the 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances allows States to 'take due account of traditional licit uses, where there is historic evidence of such use' – however, the Convention also makes it clear that these provisions cannot derogate from any previous treaty obligations, including those from the 1961 treaty.

Understanding the various uses of the coca leaf

The decision to place the plant under such strict international controls was mired in colonialist bias and racist 'findings', including by WHO officials, which also ignored the medicinal, nutritional, social, cultural and religious benefits of the coca leaf for Andean and Amazonian populations.⁵

In addition, while coca chewing constitutes an important element of Indigenous traditions, the culture of using coca has diversified over the centuries, spreading among the general population and geographically into the northern Andes, the western Amazon basin and southwards into Chile and Argentina. The plant is now used for a wide range of cultural and traditional purposes, including in religious ceremonies, for its medicinal properties, as a nutritional supplement, as an aid to collective exchange and discussions, and as a stimulant for work.⁶

Furthermore, thousands of families depend on the cultivation of the coca bush for survival in the Andean-Amazonian region. Forced eradication campaigns, in particular in fragile ecosystems and Indigenous lands, have caused devastating harms for affected communities' rights to safe water, to food security, to health, and to a healthy environment.⁷ Forced eradication, weak land tenure rights, and failed alternative development programmes have led to the displacement of coca growing communities to more remote areas, further exacerbating cycles of poverty and marginalisation. In addition, the actual intrusion of settlers and the illegal expansion of coca cultivation in Indigenous Peoples' territories often violate their sovereign right to their land. Enabling a legal regulated market for the coca leaf would facilitate the establishment of more protections for local communities' lands and rights, as well as ensure that the families that have traditionally engaged in coca cultivation can transition towards the legal market, breaking away from criminalisation, stigma, poverty and exclusion.

Addressing the contradictions between the classification of the coca leaf and international human rights law

The evidence is clear – the scheduling of the coca plant in the drug control treaties and the ban on coca leaf chewing are at odds with a number of international legal instruments that protect the use of the plant as an expression of cultural norms and as a fundamental part of the traditional medicinal practices of some Indigenous People.⁸ Various UN entities including the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,⁹ several High Commissioners for Human Rights,¹⁰ a range of UN human rights experts,¹¹ as well as a number of resolutions adopted at the CND,¹² UN General Assembly¹³ and Human Rights Council¹⁴ have all highlighted the need to protect Indigenous Peoples’ rights in the context of drug policy.

Revising the classification of the coca leaf in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs would resolve long-standing legal inconsistencies and contradictions, address the colonial legacy and biases permeating the international drug control system by ending the criminalisation of Indigenous, cultural and traditional practices associated with coca cultivation and use, and allow the international community to benefit from using the coca leaf in its natural form – while the provisions to control the illegal cultivation and use of coca for the production of cocaine would remain in place.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, IDPC proposes the following recommendations:

- **We call on the WHO to correct the historical error of listing the coca leaf in the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs.** This critical review should ensure that all scientific evidence is carefully assessed in relation to the properties of the coca leaf, an understanding of the traditional, religious, cultural and medicinal uses of the plant, its health effects (including its benefits), the low potential for dependence, and the fact that it does not meet the ‘ease of convertibility’ criterion. This review – and the elaboration of recommendations to the CND – should be conducted without undue political interference from Member States. Furthermore, as any other UN entity, the WHO is bound by the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, which is one of the overarching pillars of the UN. As such, the ECDD’s scheduling decision should take due account of human rights considerations, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Finally, the critical review should be an opportunity for the WHO to reflect on the problematic historical role they have themselves played in the scheduling of the coca leaf in the 1961 Convention, and explicitly distance themselves from past racist and colonial arguments made by WHO officials with regards to the plant.
- **The right of Indigenous Peoples to participate in decision-making** on matters that concern their cultural integrity is enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and is now recognised in drug-related resolutions adopted at the General Assembly, the CND and the Human Rights Council. We urge the ECDD to conduct its critical review of the coca leaf through a transparent and inclusive process, ensuring the meaningful involvement of Indigenous Peoples, and civil society more broadly, in its deliberations.
- **We urge the Member States that had objected to Bolivia’s reservation on the coca leaf, as it re-accessed the Single Convention in 2013, to withdraw such objections,**¹⁵ as has now been done by Mexico and the Netherlands.
- **We encourage Member States to initiate a much-needed discussion on the potential benefits of legal global market opportunities** for the coca leaf and its derived products, as well as on the possible mechanisms needed to avoid the risks of corporate capture and to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples of the Andean-Amazonian region – including the Nagoya Protocol of the Convention

on Biological Diversity,¹⁶ and the World Intellectual Property Organization's Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge.¹⁷ We urge those countries with large traditional coca growing and consuming populations to address this potential change, favouring the livelihoods of those currently depending on this market.

- **We urge Member States to decriminalise all drug use and related activities** to facilitate access to adequately funded harm reduction, drug dependence treatment and other health and social services for people who use drugs.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://idpc.net/publications/2024/09/righting-a-historical-wrong-the-un-review-of-the-international-status-of-the-coca-leaf>.
- ² <https://hojadecoca.cancilleria.gob.bo/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Coca-Review-Dossier-Annex-English-revised-VP-240523.pdf>.
- ³ Article 49.2(e) of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs.
- ⁴ The Single Convention came into force in 1964.
- ⁵ <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/40233>;
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/637047?ln=en&v=pdf>.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ <https://cndblog.org/2024/03/side-event-the-right-to-a-healthy-environment-and-drug-policy/>.
- ⁸ <https://hojadecoca.cancilleria.gob.bo/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Coca-Review-Dossier-Annex-English-revised-VP-240523.pdf>.
- ⁹ https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/E_C_19_2009_14_en.pdf.
- ¹⁰ <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F54%2F53&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkNdUvVxQ8I>.
- ¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/special-procedures/activities/2024-06-26-stm-World-Day-against-Drugs.pdf>.
- ¹² https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/Drug_Resolutions/2020-2029/2023/Res_66_4_2305857E.pdf.
- ¹³ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4000190?ln=en>.
- ¹⁴ <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2FRES%2F52%2F24&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>.
- ¹⁵ Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, the UK and the USA had objected to Bolivia's request.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.cbd.int/abs/>.
- ¹⁷ https://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/tk/en/gratk_dc/gratk_dc_7.pdf.