

LEGALISE COCA LEAVES – AND BREAK THE CONSENSUS

In April of this year, the International Narcotics Control Board was reported to have seriously discussed the possibility of sanctioning countries which fail to adhere to their obligations to the UN Conventions on drugs. One possible sanction could be the embargo on morphine supplies to such a country. So you can imagine: If a country like Jamaica would decide to allow the production and distribution of cannabis to its citizens Jamaican cancer patients would be deprived of morphine.

The INCB could just as well have praised the Thai police for executing hundreds of drug consumers this year, the US government for jailing 1 million non-violent drug offenders, or the Colombian government for fumigating 260.000 hectares of coca and opium in such a way that farmers will be unable to grow anything on these fields for the coming 15 to 20 years.

The Western world is confused. If we compare drug policy to a supertanker, the captains are drunk and have lost control. While most local governments in Europe are embracing the principle of harm reduction, some national governments like in Italy and France are starting to re-criminalise the consumption of drugs. But such a move is nothing but a final spasm of a dying body. As with other things, people's opinion and attitudes change with time. Thanks to the success of local experiences that create the evidence of what drug policy reformers are saying for decades, governments in several countries throughout the world have installed legal reforms that alleviate the worst and most visible consequences of the drug phenomenon. This is a process that will undoubtedly end with the establishment of a legal framework in which drugs will be distributed and consumed.

Meanwhile in other countries, especially in those where illicit drug production and transport takes place, governments follow a policy of "Zero Tolerance", imposed upon them by what is called 'the international community', most often represented by the UN drug control agency, the United States Ambassador and to a lesser degree, the European Union representatives.

In the Andean countries, those that mainly produce coca leaves and their derivatives, the harms caused by drug control policies are much more direct and visible than in Europe: violence, human rights violations and corruption. Western governments are not only aware of this – they endorse it financially and politically.

What to think of the case of Juana Quispe, a member of the city council of Chimoré, one of the villages of the Chapare, the main cocaproducing region in Bolivia. Quispe is chosen for the MAS party of coca growers leader Evo Morales, one of the main opposers to the former Bolivian president Sánchez de Lozada. On 14 September 2003, police forces raided her house, and flew her to La Paz, about 450 kilometres away, to put her in jail together with her 5 months old baby, accusing her of being a terrorist. The police reports to have found some dynamite sticks in Juana's house, which after some research by journalists turn out to be useless. Juana and her comrades say the police has planted the sticks in her house, but the judges have initiated the investigation against her. She is free now, but only because her baby is too young to live separated from his mother. When he is one year old, his mother could be detained again, and end up with a sentence of 20 years, after a legal trial that does not deserve that name. And she is a city councillor, you can imagine what happens with a simple farmer.

In the 1980s, the coca farmers in the Chapare have seen how US forces that were supposedly fighting coca cultivation organised cocaine transports which had to generate the money and weapons that other US forces delivered to the contras in Nicaragua. In the 1990s, when the Cold War had ended, they have heard the US commanders say that coca cultivation had become a giant threat to US national security. As militarisation of their region (one soldier for every 7 families) continues until today, when coca leaves grown in Bolivia are used mainly for domestic consumption, they start to understand that this war is not about coca. It is not even about drugs. The soldiers are there to ensure control over a region which has large reserves of natural resources like oil, gas, water and genetic material.

Meanwhile, European authorities play the role of the 'good policeman', not involved in eradication but in so-called 'alternative development', substitution programmes for coca which are considered by the majority of the farmers as a fraud, a terrible waste of time, as they have failed completely to alleviate poverty in the region, much less eliminate coca production.

As with prohibition as a whole, the key question is: How did we come into this mess? What was the ban on coca leaves about in the first place? The arguments that were used to put coca on the List of Controlled Substances that is annexed to the UN Single Convention originate from a time when the science of anthropology was poorly developed. Western authorities did not have any problem with considering indigenous people in the Andes as backward, lazy and useless. So when the United States proposed to wipe out coca consumption, a practice that had existed for at least seven thousand years in South and Central America without ever causing any adverse effect on anyone, nobody with any influence re-acted.

In Andean culture, coca leaves are a medicine, a gift of nature, a source of vitamins and energy for those who work the land in the mountains or the mines. Besides, it is a central element of social contacts, an instrument of communication, the fuel of a complex society based on reciprocity. Above all, it is sacred. Without coca, the Andean culture would not exist.

When it was still politically correct to investigate the issue in Western countries, scientists have proven that many of coca's medicinal applications are useful in a Western context too: they talk of potential uses as an antidepressive agent, a remedy against diabetes, obesity, sexual impotence, acute lack of energy, typically the diseases that have appeared in the West during the past decade. Of course we do not imagine Europeans go around with a ball of leaves in their mouth (although one should do it this way, it is actually very nice) but there are many different ways to avoid that esthetical problem.

There will be a market for coca products in the Western countries. We shall never forget that the only exception to the ban on coca in 1961 was given to the use of coca in a soft drink that today sells 1 billion liters every 24 hours: Coca Cola. When the company tried to put a new coca leaf free version of the drink on the market in 1986, public protests against this in the US increased so much, that the company had to go back to the classical version – with coca leaves inside – within months.

The international legalisation of coca leaves and its inoffensive derivatives is the first step to solve the current dilemma. With such a measure, US and other governments would have no justification left to force Andean countries to eradicate coca cultivation. The control over cultivation and elaboration of the leaves could be organised in close co-operation with existing organisations of coca producers. The producers themselves would counter the irrational extension of coca cultivation as this would damage economic and ecological sustainability of the sector.

The aim would not be to eliminate the black market, as this would be impossible to accomplish, but to reduce it to a minimum. Therefore strict agreements need to be made and respected concerning the extension of cultivation, production and trade. A truly independent international authority could be created that supervises the quality of the products and guarantees fair prices to both producer and consumer.

Proposing the legalisation of coca leaves and traditional products such as tea, chewing gum or toothpaste, may look like a futile request now. In fact it is an important step towards a more just and effective drug policy, which would be easier to take than for the case of any other product, because of the following arguments.

- Coca in its natural form has no known negative effects or effects that could be stigmatised as such. This proposal would count with the support from many citizens, also those who are not immediately in favour of legal heroin.
- The measure can be defended with the argument of offering realistic 'alternatives' to coca farmers who now grow for the cocaine industry.
- If Europe would decide to legalise the import of inoffensive coca tea, it could obtain the sympathy and political support of many developing countries, including those that do not favour 'harm reduction' right now. It would make its official attitude to favour humanitarian and rational instead of moral and repressive answers more credible.

- Finally, coca tea is quite a trendy artefact; it might well be a way to attract 'rebel youth' to coca in a way that's many times healthier!

One experience we had in 1995, during our first campaign to legalise coca, was in the Luxembourg parliament, the Chambre de Deputees. One member proposed a parliamentary resolution to ask the government to allow the import of coca leaves and inoffensive derivatives to the country. The resolution was approved unanimously in the session of 22 February 1995. The next morning the US Embassy called the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg to ask if the deputies had become crazy. Until now the government has chosen to ignore the resolution, but this could be taken up again. Or could anyone imagine the UN proposing to cut off all morphine supplies to hospitals in Luxembourg?

If one or more European countries would agree to legalise traditional coca products this will break the current consensus on maintaining the UN Conventions intact. The debate that would follow such a decision would be focussing on issues that countries need to agree upon before starting to design a new model for international drug policy: human rights, sustainability of drug trade, a rational approach to drug consumption etc.

Coca has a symbolic value: for the indigenous movement in the Andean Region, it is a symbol of the glorious past before the Spanish Conquistadores arrived. At the moment it has become the banner of a movement that is on the brink of obtaining the end of 500 years white domination. This is already happening in Bolivia, Peru is to follow.

It should also become one of the symbols of the future that is in front of us, if one day the world decides to replace drug prohibition with a rational, just, effective, sustainable and pragmatic alternative. In other words, a drug policy that respects the right of every human being to enjoy all conditions and opportunities offered by nature to live and develop in healthy and human conditions. That day may still look remote at the moment. But across the world several citizens groups have taken the most important step, that is the first one. Only if we manage to unite these efforts, we have a chance to convince politicians: finally it is their perception of what it is a great deal of the general public wants that decides their choice.

Joep Oomen – European NGO Council on Drug Policy
www.encod.org