

Commentary
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Bolivia's Historic Drop in Coca Cultivation Holds Steady

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For the fifth year in a row, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has reported a decline in the area under coca cultivation in the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Between 2010 and 2014, the country achieved a remarkable 34 percent net reduction in the area under coca cultivation. UNODC estimated 20,400 hectares of coca in Bolivia in 2014. In 2015, according to figures just released in [UNODC's 2015 coca monitoring survey](#), the area under cultivation decreased by one percent, leveling off at 20,200 hectares, the lowest amount registered in the history of UNODC monitoring efforts in the country. Coca reduction efforts continued over the course of the year, with an estimated 11,000 hectares eliminated. The Morales administration is now very close to meeting its goal of limiting coca cultivation for traditional and other legal uses to 20,000 hectares (about 77 square miles), [an amount](#) that would guarantee subsistence income for farmers and help to stem production for the illicit market.



Source: [UNODC Bolivia](#) Coca Monitoring, 2015

In 2006, President Evo Morales, himself a coca grower, extended a cooperative coca reduction policy put in place in October 2004 that allows registered coca growers to continue limited cultivation, providing some income security. At the same time, the government—with European Union support—has invested in infrastructure and economic development in coca growing regions. This approach has significantly improved the overall quality of life and income of a significant sector of coca growers, including a reduction of extreme poverty by 30 percent in some areas. While some coca eradication still takes place, particularly in national parks, the Morales government has been able to dramatically reduce the violence and confrontation that plagued past forced eradication efforts. At the same time, the most recent UNODC estimates offer evidence that this overall approach has successfully stabilized coca cultivation.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) features Bolivia's coca control approach in its April 2016 report, [Reflections on Drug Policy and its Impact on Human Development: Innovative Approaches](#). The report recognizes that existing mainstream drug policies have failed to reduce the supply and demand of illicit drugs and puts forward innovative policy alternatives. [UNDP highlights](#) that Bolivia's community coca control strategy has successfully reduced the amount of coca diverted to cocaine production, while reducing police and military violence. According to UNDP, Bolivia's approach "[D]emonstrates that respecting growers and local organizations and ensuring their meaningful participation in the design and implementation of coca control efforts can contribute to reduce poverty and hunger as well as sustain coca reduction."

In [Building on Progress: Bolivia Consolidates Achievements in Reducing Coca and Looks to Reform Decades Old Drug Law](#), WOLA and AIN reported that the government has also implemented a sophisticated coca monitoring system—also supported by the European Union—that includes land titling, a biometric registry of authorized growers, and periodic measurements of coca fields. The joint [GOB/UNODC methodology](#) involves "precise collaborative monitoring and ground verification provides reliable crop estimates to implement policy." (For more information, see the methodology section in [UNODC's report](#) on coca cultivation in Bolivia in 2015.)

The stabilization of coca cultivation in Bolivia stands in stark contrast to neighboring Peru and Colombia. Most notably, [UNODC cited](#) a 44 percent increase in coca cultivation in Colombia from 2013 to 2014 (UNODC's 2015 estimates for Colombia have not yet been released). Although Peru and Colombia lack the on-the-ground monitoring capability developed in Bolivia, UNODC clearly explains the methodology used to make crop estimates for those countries.

In contrast, U.S. coca cultivation estimates diverge dramatically from UN figures; for example, in 2014, the U.S. figure for Bolivia was 71 percent higher than UNODC's and the U.S. figure for Colombia was 62 percent higher than UNODC's. However, [U.S. officials](#) provide little insight into the methodology employed to derive them, beyond citing "a variety of methods including satellite imagery" and asserting that they "are confident in their methodology." Furthermore, [U.S. policymakers](#) frequently modify figures from previous years without clear explanations for the changes.

The stabilization of the Bolivian coca crop argues for continued international support for Bolivia's successful cooperative coca reduction strategy. The existing drug law (Law 1008) presently limits

the area of legal cultivation to 12,000 hectares. The Morales administration's compliance with its promise to replace the archaic law with progressive legislation on coca and on drug control is long overdue. These reforms are crucial to differentiate legal coca cultivation from the illicit drug trade, and to create a viable legal framework for the government's working ceiling of 20,000 hectares of legal coca.

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For additional information, see the WOLA-AIN report, [Building on Progress: Bolivia Consolidates Achievements in Reducing Coca and Looks to Reform Decades Old Drug Law](#).

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