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## The Cato Accord: Bolivia's Humane and Effective Approach to Controlling Coca Cultivation

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**Abstract:** In 2006 President Morales made a radical break with the US-backed antidrug strategy, which focused on the forced eradication of coca leaf and the criminalization of coca growers. The new policy, often referred to as 'coca yes cocaine no,' draws on the coca growers' own distinction between coca leaf (which has been consumed by Indigenous Andeans for millennia) and cocaine, the illicit drug. The strategy legalized the cultivation of a small amount of coca leaf in specific zones, encouraged the coca unions to self-police to ensure growers do not exceed this limit, and envisions the industrialization and export of coca based products. The overriding aim of the policy is to reduce harms to coca grower communities. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Chapare, one of Bolivia's two main coca growing regions, this chapter explains how this new policy has been operationalized and demonstrates how coca farmers have made significant sacrifices to implement the new viable, less damaging alternative to the forced eradication of coca crops.

**Keywords:** coca, cocaine paste, union, sindicato, Evo Morales, Chapare, forced eradication, development, cato, social control.

Evo Morales and the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) party secured overwhelming victories in the 2005, 2009 and 2014 presidential and legislative elections. On coming to power President Morales (the leader of the Chapare coca growers' unions) made a radical break with the US-backed anti-drugs strategy, which focused on the forced eradication of coca leaf and the criminalisation of coca growers. The new policy, often referred to as 'coca yes cocaine no', draws on the coca growers' own distinction between coca leaf (which has been consumed by indigenous Andeans for millennia) and cocaine, the illicit drug. The strategy legalised the cultivation of a small amount of coca leaf in specific zones, encourages the

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coca unions to self-police to ensure growers do not exceed this limit, and envisions the industrialisation and export of coca-based products. The overriding aim of the policy is to reduce harms to coca grower communities.

The new approach has shrunk coca cultivation and has concrete positive impact, including dramatically cutting human rights violations and allowing coca growers to diversify their sources of income. Nevertheless, cooperative coca control remains controversial. The US has been particularly critical, citing evidence that the illegal cocaine trade has expanded in recent years. Since 2008 the White House put Bolivia on a blacklist of countries that do not cooperate in the fight against drug trafficking.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (thirty months spread over several visits between 2005 and 2014)<sup>1</sup> in the Chapare, one of Bolivia's two main coca growing regions, this chapter explains the lived reality of the coca farmers and their experiences a range of coca control policies. The chapter outlines coca cultivation in Bolivia and analyzes the harm generated by forced eradication and the failure of US-backed development projects to offer poor farmers realistic economic alternatives to coca. The second half of the chapter focuses on Morales's new coca policy and its implementation by the Chapare coca growers' unions. Farmers have made significant sacrifices to implement the new policy and that it represents a viable, less damaging alternative to the forced eradication of coca crops.

## **Coca in Bolivia**

Coca (*Erythroxylum coca*), a hardy bush, has been cultivated in Andean subtropical regions for at least 4,000 years. Around one in three Bolivians regularly consume coca or coca-based products (*La Razón* 2013a). Coca can be chewed or prepared as a tea and is used in order to suppress hunger, thirst and fatigue. Coca also serves important social, religious and cultural functions. For example, coca forms a vital component of rituals such as offerings to the *Pachamama* and *Supay* (Andean earth deities), and it is used to cure a broad range of ailments (Carter and Mamani 1986).

Since the arrival of the Spanish to the New World, debates have raged over the use, production and legality of coca and its derivatives. In 1961 International law classified the coca leaf as a dangerous drug, alongside cocaine and heroin, in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (the most important piece of international drug control legislation). The convention, which Bolivia signed in 1976, stipulates that governments must eliminate all

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<sup>1</sup> The Leverhulme Trust, the SSRC/Open Society Foundations' Drugs, Security, and Democracy Fellowship, and the Economic and Social Research Council supported this research.

coca bushes in their territory (even those that grow wild) and that the traditional practice of coca leaf chewing must be abolished within 25 years of ratification. The 1961 convention provided the justification and legal framework for subsequent US-backed coca eradication campaigns.

According to UN data, Bolivia is the third largest producer of coca leaf after Peru and Colombia, with some 20,400 hectares under cultivation. In 2013 Bolivia's dried coca leaf market was valued at US \$283 million, representing 9.4% of GDP in the agricultural sector (UNODC 2014). Bolivia has two principal coca-growing zones: the Yungas of La Paz, where two thirds of Bolivia's crop is produced, and the Chapare, which accounts for most of the rest. Given the cultural significance attached to coca in Bolivia, lawmakers were required to permit limited coca leaf production to supply the domestic traditional market. Thus, Bolivia's anti-drug Law 1008 (passed under intense pressure from the US in 1988) dictates that 12,000 hectares of coca can be legally cultivated in designated 'traditional growing zones', principally the Yungas of La Paz. Other coca, including that grown in the Chapare, was outlawed and slated for eradication. The Chapare coca growers have always viewed this distinction in Law 1008 to be arbitrary and deeply unfair. President Morales has committed to repeal Law 1008 and replace it with two different laws, one for coca and another for controlled substances. In July 2015 the new coca law was being developed in conjunction with the country's coca grower organizations

## **The Chapare**

The Cochabamba Tropics, known as the Chapare, is a tropical agricultural zone in the center of the country. The population comprises Quechua-speaking peasants, former miners and factory workers from the highlands, many of whom migrated to the region in the early 1980s in search of opportunities in the coca-cocaine economy. The settler families established small family-run farms and relied on manual labour to cultivate rice, bananas, citrus fruit and coca. Others found work labouring in rudimentary operations to soak shredded coca leaf in solvents to extract the cocaine alkaloid and produce cocaine paste (the first step to refining pure cocaine). In the mid-1980s the coca-cocaine industry provided jobs for up to 20% of the nation's workforce and generated around US\$600 million annually, equal to all other legal exports combined (Painter 1994: 49).

Influenced by the structure of the agrarian unions in the valleys of Cochabamba, the settlers organised themselves into self-governing units called *sindicatos* and set out into the jungle to claim land. The first thing they did was to clear an area for a football pitch and construct a barn for their monthly community meetings. Given the historic absence of the state, the

*sindicatos* assumed the role of local governance; to this day they are responsible for assigning land, administering justice, taxing the coca trade and undertaking community projects such as building schools or roads (Grisaffi 2013). There are in excess of 1,000 *sindicatos*, which in turn are grouped into six federations representing some 45,000 coca grower families in total. The women are also organised in a parallel federation.

The small-scale farmers grow coca because it has several comparative advantages as a cash crop. Coca grows like a weed in places where other crops do not (on steep slopes, in acidic soil and at altitude), it reaches maturity after only one year, and it can be harvested once every three to four months, providing the family with a regular source of income. The work of planting and maintaining coca involves both sexes of all ages, and the main tools (including a machete, digging stick, and a back-pack mounted crop sprayer) are cheap and widely available in rural areas. Coca has a high value to weight ratio; this is important because many farmers live far from the nearest road and may have to carry produce long distances on their back. Finally and most importantly, while the price varies considerably, there is always a guaranteed market for coca. Merchants often buy dried coca leaf directly from the farm gate (sometimes paying for half of it in advance), saving the farmer effort, time and money.

The farmers do not get rich from cultivating coca. Rather, it complements subsistence farming and, in the absence of other income generating activities, is one of the few pursuits that provide them with access to cash. As one female union leader explains, “Coca is our subsistence – it allows our children to study and pays for our clothes, visits to the doctor, and our food.” The majority of Chapare farmers live below the poverty line. Away from the main towns houses are built from rough-cut planks with beaten mud floors, and many do not have electricity, sanitation or running water.

### **Crop eradication and conditional development**

A cornerstone of US counter-drug strategy in the Andean region has been the eradication of coca crops. The justification for destroying crops is that it prevents them from being processed into drugs and subsequently traded on the international market. Eradication is often carried out manually: teams of eradicators (normally military conscripts) accompanied by heavily armed members of the police enter small farmsteads to uproot the crops.<sup>2</sup> While coca eradication enjoys strong support among US policymakers a growing body of research

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<sup>2</sup> Chemical eradication has also been used; typically herbicides are sprayed from small aircraft so that larger areas of coca can be destroyed. Colombia was the only Andean country to allow aerial fumigation - but ceased this practice on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2015.

indicates it fails meet its targets and generates wide-ranging harmful impacts (Dion and Russler 2008, Mejía 2010, Mansfield 2011).

The US launched a coca eradication campaign in the Chapare in the mid-1980s. Initially eradication was carried out in collaboration with coca grower communities and the state even paid farmers compensation (at a rate of around US\$2,000 per hectare eradicated). However, this all changed in 1997 when, in an attempt to curry favour with the US embassy, the Banzer administration (1997-2001) launched the Dignity Plan, a no-holds-barred accelerated coca eradication campaign with the aim to destroy the entire Chapare crop by 2002. The Dignity Plan dramatically reduced the amount of land under coca cultivation in the Chapare,<sup>3</sup> and was hailed by the US as a significant victory in the 'war on drugs'. However, this success came at a high social cost.

Eradication outpaced the provision of development assistance and plunged the coca grower families into severe economic crisis. Worse still, the decision to orientate the security forces towards 'internal enemies' provoked violent confrontations and opened the space for the violation of human rights. The US-trained and funded forces sent on eradication missions were denounced for a range of atrocities including murder, rape, theft, torching homesteads, beatings and torture.<sup>4</sup> Under the terms of the draconian anti-drug Law 1008, hundreds of farmers were arrested for drugs-related offences on little or no evidence, and held indefinitely without charge (Ledebur 2005). Unsurprisingly the government's policy of 'zero coca' in the Chapare came to be seen locally as 'zero *cocaleros*'.

While the bulk of US funding was dedicated to eradication and law enforcement, the US also provided coca farmers with assistance to encourage them to grow legal crops. However, with few exceptions, local people say that US Agency for International Development (USAID) backed projects did little to improve their lives. These projects were beset by problems in terms of the sequencing of aid (farmers had to uproot their coca before receiving assistance), the kind of assistance that was on offer, and the manner in which projects were executed. For example, farmers complained that given the lack of markets for the tropical products promoted by USAID (such as pineapples, palm heart and bananas), it often made more sense to let the crops rot in the fields than to go to the expense and effort of harvesting them. They also said that USAID agri-business projects did little to stimulate the local economy and only generated a handful of low-paid jobs. Finally, USAID's policy of non-

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<sup>3</sup> As a result of coca reduction efforts in the Chapare, coca was displaced to other parts of Bolivia (including the Yungas) but also to Colombia, an example of the so-called 'balloon effect'.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1997 and 2001 the security forces killed 33 coca growers and injured 570. This led to retaliatory attacks that left 27 military and police dead.

collaboration with the coca unions sowed mistrust and provoked division within coca grower communities. Local farmers came to the conclusion that USAID intended to break the union through a strategy of divide and rule. In June 2008 the unions announced that they would no longer sign new aid agreements with USAID.

### **The *cato* accord**

The state's repressive policies helped to strengthen the farmers' resolve to defend the right to grow coca, which they cast as an issue of national sovereignty (Grisaffi 2010). Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the coca unions led mass protests, marches and road blockades that made the country ungovernable. In 2004, President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005) conceded to the Chapare farmers' demands and permitted each union member to grow a limited amount of coca known as a *cato* (1,600 square meter plot) in established cultivation zones, to ensure some basic income. With the launch of the '*cato* accord', protests, violence and human rights violations decreased immediately. The '*cato*' was a measure to defuse the mounting social and political tensions. President Morales made it a central pillar of his coca policy. Morales permitted 7,000 hectares of coca to be grown in the Chapare and a further 1,000 hectares in other 'transitional' zones.<sup>5</sup> The MAS government, in collaboration with the coca unions and supported by the European Union, has since developed a sophisticated coca monitoring, control and reduction system.

To be eligible to maintain a *cato* of coca, growers have to obtain an official land title and have their *cato* measured and registered by the state coca monitoring institution, UDESTRO,<sup>6</sup> which carries re-measurement every two years. The European Union has funded a biometric registry of coca producers and distributed identity cards to enhance monitoring efforts. Building on this infrastructure, the local level *sindicatos* exercise internal controls (referred to as 'social control') to ensure that farmers respect the one *cato* limit.<sup>7</sup> The *sindicatos* are well placed to enact social control as they have a long history of self-governing (Grisaffi 2013).

Coca control is a shared responsibility, which involves the entire community. Each base level *sindicato* organizes regular inspections of coca plantations; commissions are formed of local

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<sup>5</sup> This includes areas surrounding the Yungas traditional zones in the department of La Paz and the Yungas de Vandiola in Cochabamba.

<sup>6</sup> Unidad de Desarrollo Económico y Social del Trópico (UDESTRO)

<sup>7</sup> The government is committed to the eradication of coca outside of the designated zones; over the past two years troops have eradicated over 11,000 hectares annually, far exceeding government targets.

members and often include people from neighbouring communities. If the commission finds coca above the one *cato* limit, then the community eradicates the entire crop and prohibits the farmer from replanting coca for one year. It takes for coca to mature, so this means two years without any coca income. If a farmer violates the rule more than once, then the *sindicato* imposes a permanent ban on growing coca. Farmers claim that the new system is more effective than the previous US-financed 'zero coca' policy. One man explained that under the old policy, when the military pulled up his coca he could replant without any immediate repercussion. "Before, when we planted the coca and they ripped it up, we would re-plant and they would rip it up again." However, he said that today it's "*jodido*" (really harsh): "... everyone knows how much coca you have and they will denounce anyone who plants more than a *cato*." The threats are real: to date more than 800 growers in the Chapare have lost their *cato* for breaking the agreement (*Opinión* 2014).

Farmers have good reasons to respect the agreement they understand that if coca cultivation is restricted, then prices will increase. As one farmer put it, "We work less, but make more money." A strong sense of community pride also motivates people. One farmer said: "If you do not respect the *cato* then you make the whole *sindicato* look bad." *Sindicatos* that fail to exercise adequate levels of control are singled out for criticism at union meetings and on the coca union radio station. This can have serious material implications: for example, union leaders and municipal councilmembers confirmed that they suspend public works for *sindicatos* that do not respect the *cato* – a significant consequence where many lack access to basic services. One union leader said: "If you go to the town hall and your *sindicato* has not respected the *cato*, it's like having a criminal record. No one will attend to you." Finally, the coca growers identify strongly with the goals of the MAS administration; growers consider that respecting the *cato* will support the government's attempts to lobby the UN to decriminalize coca. As one male union leader notes, "We respect the *cato* so the international community won't criticize us."

Along with these advances, implementation challenges persist for the new policy. For example, some farmers have managed to illegally acquire more than one *cato* by subdividing existing plots or buying up additional land and registering it under a false name. The coca unions are aware of these practices and over the past five years have made serious efforts to eliminate these 'ghost *catos*' (*catos fantasmas*). Land titling impact on the union organisation is of greater concern. Land titling (combined with restricted legal coca cultivation) has led to a steep increase in land prices in the region. In turn this has contributed to rising levels of inequality between coca grower households. Some farmers complain that their richer neighbours use cash to influence community decisions,

undermining the egalitarian ethos that characterises *sindicato* democracy (Grisaffi 2013). There is also an emerging generational divide between land owners and their children, many of whom have been priced out of the market and have no hope of acquiring their own land or a *cato* of coca. Finally, by taking control of land away from the community and handing it to the state, land titling has, in effect, undermined *sindicato* authority.<sup>8</sup> In the longer term these trends could have an impact on the community's ability to effectively self-police.

A minority of farmers quite simply refuse to comply with the regime. In these situations, workers from UDESTRO negotiate with community leaders, and, as a last resort government troops forcibly eradicate coca. However, violence no longer accompanies eradication. One middle-aged female grower said: "These days we don't rebel when the coca cutters enter our plots; we just show them where the coca is and let them get on with their work." Others pointed out that the security forces no longer see them as 'enemies' but as '*compañeros*' (comrades). UDESTRO is staffed by coca union representatives, which facilitates cooperation and enhances the legitimacy of the institution and the state itself. As one farmer said, "They understand that we depend on coca... We can talk to them, and if there is a problem then we can find a solution.", Most farmers agree that limiting coca cultivation is a small price to pay for peace and full citizenship.

### **A new development paradigm**

Since 2006 the MAS government has promoted economic development in coca growing regions. However, unlike the previous strategy, access to assistance is no longer conditional on the prior eradication of coca. This is important, because farmers affirm that the economic safety net provided by the *cato* (around US\$200 per month, less than the minimum wage of US\$240) means that they are now more willing to risk investing effort, time and capital in alternative livelihood strategies.

Farmers and government outreach workers say that government-backed fish farming and crop substitution programs are starting to yield positive results. Some farmers now describe the *cato* as a 'savings account' rather than their main source of income, reflecting reduced dependence on coca. As one farmer said, "You earn money to fill your stomach from something else, but coca is for savings." Indeed in November 2013 a leader at a coca union meeting remarked: "Today we are not only *cocaleros*, we are also *bananeros* (banana

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<sup>8</sup> Historically the power of the *sindicato* depended great to it control of land tenure . The *sindicato* had a strict code of conduct and if people did not obey then they would face sanctions, backed up by the threat of expulsion from the community. Today, however, union leaders are refrain from land confiscation from members for fear of legal action. This has contributed to a rise of demobilization and erosion of *sindicato* authority.

growers) and *palmiteros* (palm heart growers).” UN data corroborates these upbeat accounts: in 2011 bananas covered the largest cultivated area in the Chapare followed by citrus fruit and palm heart (Ledebur and Youngers 2013: 4).

Government investment in infrastructure, institutional strengthening and social development has brought the Chapare into the social and economic mainstream. Chapare residents claim that today there are more jobs in non-agricultural work; government scholarships allow their children to study at universities, and access to low interest government loans enable them to start up their own small businesses or buy taxis. The local economy has started to grow accordingly with the proliferation of second-hand motorbikes, home improvements, and a steep increase in land prices. To give an idea of the economic transformation that has taken place, one farmer said: “At the fiestas they don’t drink *chicha* (homebrewed corn ale) anymore, now they only drink (bottled) beer and rum.” Addressing the underlying causes of coca cultivation, including the lack of state presence, poverty, and social exclusion, coca crop reductions are proving more sustainable than those achieved under forced eradication.

However, the benefits of government development projects are uneven. Most of the government investment has focused on areas close to main roads. Meanwhile, residents of in isolated hilly regions still face many of the same challenges. In these areas crops do not grow well on the steep sandy, slopes, produce far lower coca yields than in flat areas. The lack of roads and bridges makes marketing produce all but impossible. Some farmers are therefore calling for greater government investment in infrastructure and support to aid the diversification of economic activities (including tourism and beekeeping), and there is a growing call for the right to plant two *catos* of coca so that they can meet their subsistence needs. The *cato* agreement is built on trust and requires farmers to make significant sacrifices so that all may benefit. If some farmers feel that they are paying a higher price than others, then it could undermine the long-term functioning of the entire system.

### **Coca legalization**

Morales, armed with a bag of coca leaves and backed by the United Nation’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, has gone before the UN on numerous occasions to urge the world’s leaders to remove coca leaf from the list of controlled substances. Morales argues that the coca ban is not only a historic mistake, but also discriminates against Andean peoples. These efforts have had some success. The G8 countries, led by the US, countered Bolivia’s demand, arguing that de-listing coca would threaten the integrity of the international drug control system. Morales scored a victory in 2013, when Bolivia won the right to allow traditional coca consumption within its territory, its international commitments with its 2009

Constitution, which declares that the state has a duty to preserve and protect coca chewing as an ancestral practice. However, while Morales venerates coca leaf, when it comes to cocaine production and trafficking, his government remains firmly committed to prohibitionist policies.

The government promotes the industrialization of coca-based products including manufactured teas, skin creams and diet pills. But the continued illegality of coca leaf at the international level still impedes the exportation of coca-based products and the domestic legal market still has not absorbed current production. A recent EU study found that Bolivia requires 14,700 hectares to satisfy domestic demand (*Página Siete* 2013), far short of Bolivia's actual production.. Thus the government-built coca processing plant in the Chapare, which was inaugurated over five years ago, runs below capacity, and the union's plans to cultivate organic coca for the legal market are in disarray. Part of the Chapare coca crop, like coca from other regions still ends up as cocaine paste.

### **Drug trafficking**

Bolivia's coca policy is not explicitly designed to limit drug trafficking; however, evidence suggests the *cato* accord has made paste production more difficult in the Chapare. Coca growers, with very low levels of drug use in their communities, are not opposed to cocaine production for personal reasons. As far as they are concerned drug use is very much a 'gringo' problem. Nevertheless, as a direct result of the *cato* accord they no longer tolerate drug production within their communities. As one drug worker commented, "Before, the *compas* (coca growers) would tell you when the UMOPAR (anti-drug police) were coming. Now they just turn you in."

The coca growers' hardened stance to drug production stems from their new stakeholder role-- with official land titles and a legal *cato* of coca; they now have something to lose. Union commissions imposed sanctions for functioning – or even abandoned – drug production sites on a union member's property, including indefinite suspension of the right to grow coca or, in extreme cases, expulsion from the community. Meanwhile, drug workers face considerable prison sentences if caught. Given the slim profits from drug production, most coca growers consider that it is simply not worth the risk.<sup>9</sup> Paste producers are feeling the pinch: as a result of pressure from the unions, they have been forced to set up production

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<sup>9</sup> Most drug workers are young men without land or much hope of decent jobs, and they earn pitiful wages for work that is tedious, intermittent and harmful to their health.

sites in ever more remote areas, and many have relocated their operations outside of the Chapare (Grisaffi 2014).

In spite of the coca growers' sincere efforts to limit coca cultivation and tackle drug production, Bolivia has an evolving drug trade, along with associated violence and corruption (Farthing and Kohl 2014: 139-142), although these levels remain significantly lower than other drug producing and transit countries. Bolivia has become a major transit route for much cheaper Peruvian cocaine paste, which is trafficked to Argentina and Brazil (now the world's second largest market for cocaine). The Bolivian government is keen to its committed to tackling the emerging drug problem to the international community, and has taken an uncompromising approach to enforcement. In spite of drastic cuts to US funding<sup>10</sup> (which went from US\$41 million in 2006 to zero by October 2013), the Bolivian security forces have nevertheless increased the seizures of illicit narcotics and the destruction of drug laboratories. For example, between 2006 and 2012 the police confiscated 187 tons of pure cocaine, a 234% increase compared to the 56 tons that were confiscated under the DEA's watch from 1999 to 2005 (*La Razón* 2013b). Since 2008 Bolivia has worked with its neighbors on counter-narcotics initiatives and has signed bilateral agreements with Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, and Colombia.

## **Conclusion**

Collaborative coca reduction seems to be paying off: the most recent UN coca survey reported that in 2014 coca cultivation in Bolivia stood at 20,400 hectares, the lowest level recorded since 2002, and a 34% drop compared to 2010 figures (UNODC 2015). Success can be measured in terms of hectares of coca crop reduced, but perhaps a more appropriate metric is to assess coca grower welfare, and on this score Bolivia is excelling. Since the inauguration of the *cato* accord, the Chapare's economy has picked up, human rights violations have decreased, and living standards have improved. While the US has remained highly critical of cooperative coca control, multilateral organizations have been more positive. In a recent report the Organization of American States (2013) classified the Bolivian experiment as "best practice" that is worthy of replication, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has commended Bolivia's innovative policy, saying "the progress in Bolivia is undeniable" (Ledebur and Youngers 2013).

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<sup>10</sup> US cuts came about in response to Bolivia's decision to expel the US ambassador and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2008, on the grounds of sedition.

The idea that coca can be eradicated entirely and significantly restrict the drug trade is pernicious, dangerous myth. Continued demand for cocaine will stimulate people will continue to cultivate coca leaf beyond traditional uses as a solution to their subsistence needs. If Washington-based policy makers remain firmly committed to supply-side enforcement then, at the very least, they should take note of the lessons learned in Bolivia. Engaged, healthy farmers cultivating less coca is preferable to the cycle of violence, instability and economic insecurity provoked by forced eradication. A still better solution would be for the US and other G8 countries to back Bolivia's call to legalise coca, which would open out new markets for coca-based products and generate economic opportunities for the Chapare farmers.

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