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Demonstrators protest demanding the resignation of the country's interim president Jeanine Añez in El Alto, Bolivia, August 14 2020. EPA-EFE/STR

Bolivia reverses years of progress with new draconian cocaine policy, supported by the EU

September 7, 2020 2.15pm BST

Bolivia has seen widespread public protests in recent months against the interim government, led by Jeanine Añez, which has twice postponed elections due to coronavirus. Her government has repeatedly violated its mandate by passing new laws and persecuting its political opponents, including coca growers in the Chapare region east of Cochabamba, who we collaborate with on research projects.

Bolivia is the world's third largest producer of cocaine, a drug manufactured from coca leaves, which is central to Andean culture. Under the previous government of Evo Morales, coca growers benefited from a programme that allowed them to cultivate a plot of coca up to 2,500 square metres, and actively engaged farmers to self-police to respect these limits.

This policy, which emphasised community participation and respect for human rights, was lauded and funded by the European Union. Internationally recognised in the mainstream press as best practice in this area, Bolivia's community coca control

Authors



Kathryn Ledebur

Visiting Fellow in Archaeology, Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading



Linda Farthing

Visiting Fellow in Archaeology, Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading

programme has long served as an example for cooperation in other parts of the world.

But this approach was recently reversed. One former EU official in the country confidentially told us that this represents a “significant setback”. Yet the EU has been helping to make this happen.



Thomas Grisaffi

Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Reading

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Family of Chapare coca growers learn about the EU-supported community coca control initiative in 2011. Proyecto de Apoyo de Control Social, Author provided

In February, the EU promised to provide €10 million (£9 million) in drug control funding for Bolivia’s interim government, and support its new “drug free” five-year strategy. On August 16, the Bolivian press reported that the EU representative to Bolivia, Joerg Schreiber, had affirmed this commitment.

This sparked criticism from former interim president and ex-head of the supreme court Eduardo Rodríguez and former president Evo Morales. Support of Bolivia’s new drug control strategy stands in stark contrast to the EU’s long-term focus in Bolivia and its internal policy guidelines.

An interim government

Jeanine Añez came to power without a constitutional mandate on November 12 2019, two days after Morales was forced to resign at the military's "request" after a police mutiny. The next day, the military unleashed lethal force against demonstrators protesting Morales' ousting.

Human rights violations, arbitrary detentions and threats against human rights defenders soon followed, as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has frequently noted. Añez's interim government has rejected Bachelet's statements as "subjective, erroneous assumptions" and an "attack against democracy expressed by the people".



Interim president of Bolivia Jeanine Anez. Javier Mamani/EPA-EFE

The post-election crisis last year resulted in at least 35 deaths and 800 injuries, most of them during army and police operations. Dozens of former government officials and people related to the former administration have been persecuted.

Bolivia's Interior Minister, Arturo Murillo, continuously makes troubling public statements. He has, for example, referred to people with drug dependency as "the worst scourge of humanity".

He joined the rest of Añez's cabinet in signing a law guaranteeing impunity for police and military actions that led to the death of ten coca growers and the wounding of over 100 others on November 15. A subsequent military and police attack on unarmed protesters left 11 dead and scores injured.

Collaboration or conflict

The "community coca control" programme adopted during the Morales years (2006-2019) focused on working with coca leaf growers to shrink crops destined for illegal markets, while increasing human rights, alternatives to coca and permitting traditional uses of the plant. This successfully reduced

illegal production, and was hailed by the UN Development Programme as an innovative approach superior to decades of forced eradication.



EU Official Nicolaus Hansmann inaugurates the Community Coca Control Office in June 2011. Programa de Apoyo de Control Social, Author provided

The Añez government quickly drafted its own drug strategy, “Together and Drug Free,” in coordination with the EU technical experts and DITISA, an EU-funded consulting firm. The strategy was later later rebranded as “Bolivia: Drug Free” after the original name provoked outcry that the EU was granting legitimacy to Añez’s government by incorporating her party’s name (Together) in the title.

It presents a hardline and often muddled stance on drug use, interdiction and supply control issues, demonstrating little knowledge of existing Bolivian policy or national dynamics. Its authors copied text from the US international narcotics control strategy report and press articles word for word and dismissed the previous strategy as “permissive and impractical” and “merely a political discourse”.

Aggressive statements from key high-ranking Añez officials characterise Chapare coca farmers as “narco-terrorists”. Ongoing threats of intervention against growers by Bolivia’s security forces fly in the face of longstanding EU policy in the country.



Coca leaves at Villa Fatima market, the main coca market, in La Paz, Bolivia. Rodrigo Sura/EPA-EFE

Añez announced the plan on state television only 11 days after the EU announced funding, but the full text wasn't made available to the public until three months later. "This lack of transparency is problematic," a Bolivian drug policy expert who asked to not be identified told us. "Neither government nor the EU has provided information about the action plan that has to accompany all EU-funded strategies".

The strategy also fails to comply with EU gender and generational funding requirements. Although the policy cites a focus on "vulnerable populations", it makes no reference to accompanying integrated development with direct involvement of the project beneficiaries, another EU requisite.

Loss of trust

The lack of consultation as well as the Añez government's suspension of existing development projects has eroded the high level of trust in government that previously existed in coca-growing regions.

"Before, we worked closely with the European Union to control coca so as to stay within the legal limits," a coca-grower leader who didn't want his name used because of fear of government retaliation told us. "We want to keep doing this, but everything has broken down with this de facto government. They don't communicate or coordinate with us at all."

The EU had actively explored adapting the previous policy to neighbouring countries. But now, the lessons from the community-based experience are quickly being lost. "It would be a disaster to lose all the progress Bolivia made on coca control," lamented one drug policy expert. "The technical focus has gone down the drain."

 **Drugs** **War on Drugs** **Cocaine** **Bolivia** **Interdisciplinarity** **Bolivia protests** **Jeanine Añez**