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Live reporting from the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs

Side event: Turning over a new leaf: Regional applicability of innovative crop control policy during and in the aftermath of COVID19

APRIL 16, 2021

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Kathryn Ledebur, Andean Information Network

Innovative crop control strategies are a model that is all the more important in the context of COVID 19. We see contexts where this is very important, for example the coup in Bolivia or the US-supported renewal of aerial fumigation in Colombia. This is an egregious offence of human rights.

I want to introduce Nelson Delgadillo, he is a coca grower and former head of the programme for social coca control and an organiser. He will focus on the challenges he has faced with government repression and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nelson Delgadillo:

Thank you all for participating. We have grown coca and its been controversial. There was no evidence base. There was a first legislation on coca control which has created consensus. Drug trafficking increased and was promoted by the government. We have been promoting a proposal in the framework of our dignity and sovereignty and democracy within the framework of complementarity. We have proposed that the fight against drug trafficking shouldn't focus on arms. Evo Morales proposed a model to fight drug trafficking and nationalisation without militarisation. We have

been keeping social peace and dialogue and concertation, and have reduced and achieved growth stabilisation of coca crops. This is based on prevention, interdiction (mainly), and fundamentally the management of integral development through community coca control. We achieved a consensus and developed mechanisms as coca growers, which have become the norm and proceedings of communities themselves. As coca growers, contributing towards our programme, we have always protected our sovereignty and our own controls. The EU has funded community social control. We have been able to generate information and share between the coca growing communities and institutions in charge of coca management. It is dangerous to remember the 1980s when drug trafficking increased, during a time of de facto governments, when there was no respect for human rights, where peace movements were exploited and coca was grown in zone that were not authorised. In 2019, the government did the same. We are trying to do research on this. When we were quarantined under the first lockdown, crops were produced illegally. We were not able to market our coca. We, coca growers, are concerned. The war on drugs has failed, it doesn't see the social dimension, it focuses on stigmatisation and military repression. It will always be a failure and have a high social cost on communities that produce coca. We will always propose and recommend that the government takes a community control model, from region to region, in the frame of responsibility and with the commitment that in Bolivia there cannot be free and unlimited coca production. This is our commitment. Thank you.

Kathryn Ledebur:

Thank you so much for the summary of what has worked in the past, and highlight the EU funded coca model that has worked so well. It is a crucial, sustainable livelihood approach that can guarantee peace and well being for families.

I now introduce Estefania Ciro who will present her view on how the Bolivian model could be implemented in Colombia.

Estefania Ciro, Colombia:

Thank you, it is a pleasure to be here. I want to use this space to talk about the need for the Commission on Narcotic Drugs to recognise the attacks on growers over the past years. The use of aerial spraying has been considered illegal. Thanks to the advocacy efforts of many lawyers, we have brought cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, on the systemic failure of the system. A woman is facing 4 aerial fumigation planes and military intervention against her crops. She has kids. She has called on environmental agencies to intervene. In June, spraying will likely start again. Colombia is the only country in the world where glyphosate is being sprayed. There is no reason why this is being sustained, it is political. There is a lot of scientific evidence that this affects health. I want to remind the CND that under the Peace Agreement there was a commitment on drugs: one was about rural development and the need to provide conditions for farmers to address poverty and inequality. The second point was the need for the participation of communities in their own development, including farmers, community leaders, people of colour. This is not alternative development being imposed as a Latin America agenda. The third point was a change in the law. But none of the governments made this happen. This was all reduced to coca substitution as was the case 40 years ago, focusing on eradication with no solutions focusing on rural development. We are facing a crisis. 100,000 people registered in the programme, it was very ambitious, focusing on voluntary substitution. But there was sabotaging of the Peace Agreement. Farmers were protected, but now, the policy is destroying their livelihoods. The government is trying to bring the country to where it was in the past. The pandemic has also led to difficult situations. Prices have increased for coca, but none of it is going to the farmers. Those registered in the programme are concerned with the government's commitment to pay them. There is anger in the context of the pandemic. They are facing military interventions, and farmers just want to move forward if they can. Yesterday, the Senate discussed the regulation of coca. They were discussing how to rethink this topic because they want to crush us with the same formula from 30 years ago which killed so many people. Our awareness now is high on this, and we know it is not the way. We know a regulated market would reduce violence and the involvement of armed actors. The Canadian legalisation of cannabis is a lesson on how big industries are coming in. We need to consider this if a regulated market for coca and cocaine is

established. It's important to control coca prices, governed by communities. We need to think carefully how to control these substances, we cannot replicate exploitation and with rules and prices not fair to the local populations. Farmers should not be exploited. We need to think of the heterogeneity of our coca farmers. We are talking about men, women, the elderly. We need to focus on sovereignty, the defence of farmers, decentralisation and regional dynamics of each region.

Kathryn Ledebur:

Thank you for highlighting how damaging the Colombian policies have been, and highlighting the community control implemented in Colombia too, to protect their rights and generate an approach that originates from the farmers themselves in the Peace Agreement. It's crucial to take farmers into account, understand their demands and fully integrate them.

I now introduce our colleague from Peru, a coca leader and Justice of the Peace, Marianne Zavala, who can share the reality there and difficulties they face in their country.

Marianne Zavala, coca cultivator, Peru:

I want to explain the situation we are facing, especially as women. Many times, the state is not open to our needs. I want to highlight that we are currently in a pandemic wave (2nd one). As farmers, especially in my region, we grow coca, but also coffee, cacao and many other products. We have a lot of coca leaf consumers, we have a tradition for consumption in the valley. Coffee is produced once a year, so coca is our safety net. In 2020, when the quarantine started, borders were closed because of the virus. That month, this is where coffee crops had to be taken care of, so we lost our crops and other products, we couldn't get them out of the country. We were alone and the economy suffered. The government did nothing. We tried to face the situation on our own in the community. Mothers have to do what they can to get a cell phone, pay for the line, this was not foreseen in our budgets. But in many cases there is no wifi access. For health, this was even worse. Pills prices increased ten-fold. In Peru, there is a high mortality rate from COVID-19. We have to resort to natural medicine. We have no other choice. This statistic is not taken into account. I got sick, I had to cure myself at home. Previously in our communities, we could manage. But with lockdown, other types of acts in our communities that hadn't taken place before, happened. The police came into our communities with the quarantine. The state does not give attention to our needs. We, as growers, want to show how many we are and how we solve our problems. But the government never provided any help, they only talk about eradication. We have stopped this in our area, but the government has closed off from us. I hope we don't lose the progress we have made, we do contribute to crop plans, we have our traditions with coca. We also have our coffee based products, yuca, cacao. We don't want to be conditioned by alternative development programmes that force us to eradicate our coca. This is usually the case with AD programmes, promoting the idea that coca cultivation is related to drug trafficking. The government wants to continue with accusations of drug trafficking and the money that comes with it. Coca is nutrition, medicine. We recognise this. All we want to do is keep our traditions alive, but also be part of the solution. The government should conduct outreach to the community of coca growers. It must be sustainable. I see a lot of programmes that promote other crops but these are stalling. That's why coca growers don't believe in AD. It has to be improved, and we should reduce their negative aspects. We now are wary and want to regulate ourselves. We discuss this in our assembly. As leaders, we went to Chapare in Bolivia and have seen how coca and other products are ensured by the government as sustainable. The solution lies there. We debate this in our meetings. We are going ahead in any way we can, because we need to feed ourselves. This is what I wanted to share with you this morning, and show my position on the topic of what Estefania has said on aerial spraying: this is a crime against humanity. You are not only killing coca, you are killing everything. Based on this experience, I reject this spraying effort completely, which is being implemented in Colombia. We are also against drug trafficking and are willing to contribute to end this too. Thank you very much.

Kathryn Ledebur:

Thank you so much, for highlighting the needs of coca producing families. Coca producing families are not the problem, they are the solution with their vision, experience and faced with the decades of drug policy failure. They must be provided support, they are key to the success of coca control. We need to understand that visions imposed from above have done more harm than good, and we continue to have expanding crops. Please see regional and international events as an opportunity to share the vision of coca producers. They are the key to responses that are humane and effective. There is a willingness from coca producers to engage and to reduce illegal cultivation, but there is a lack of engagement from the government with them to seek humane solutions. I am really thankful to our three panellists, and their concrete proposals from Bolivia, Peru and Colombia.

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