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The Geopolitics of Illicit Crops South-South Cooperation for Sustainable Biocultural Development

The United States fosters today's International Drug Control Regime (IDCR) to impose a hegemonic hardline drug policy. It is intended as a tool for political and territorial control over the traditional producers of psychoactive plants such as peyote, cannabis, psilocybin mushrooms, and coca leaf in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This international legal framework typifies these plant species as dangerous narcotics whose traditional, religious, or recreational use outside the Western medical canon must be abolished. To do this, drastic measures must be taken, such as the massive destruction of crops, the criminalization of users, and the prosecution of its sale, all

with the supposed objective of reducing supply in the major consumer markets of the global North.

This article proposes we reconsider the psychoactive plants as extremely valuable genetic resources that indigenous peoples and local communities have traditional knowledge of. For that reason, they should be protected for sustainable use under the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity, also known as the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing (NPABS). Mechanisms of legal harmonization, interregional cooperation, and sustainable development should be created in the face of the growing international debate about the regulation of cannabis, the inclusion of psychedelic drugs in Western medicine, the multiplication of transnational interests associated with the agri-pharmaceutical industry, and

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the readjustment of geopolitical realities in the twenty-first century.

U.S. and British Narco-imperialism and the Geopolitics of Drugs

The international legislation that makes up the modern International Drug Control Regime includes three UN treaties: the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961; the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971; and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. Each of these was influenced by the rise and consolidation of the United States as the hegemonic political, economic, and military power after World War II.

As mentioned above, this regime classifies psychoactive plants considered sacred among first peoples as dangerous narcotics. In addition, the norms establish a detailed mechanism for supervising the development, provision, and commercialization of controlled psychotropic medications, emphasizing the difference between illicit drugs and psychotropic drugs in favor of protecting the interests of the Euro-U.S.-American pharmaceutical industry.

These treaties are exclusionary, as are, for example, the rules that smaller or weaker countries must follow in the concert of nations. That is, these legal instruments are not the product of conviction, but rather the imposition of the interests of the strongest nations in the international community. Neither do they show solidarity with the cultural reality or the interests of Latin American and Caribbean countries, the birthplace and historical providers of psychoactive plant genetic resources. This reflects the imperial criteria of their greatest promotor, ignoring and excluding the multicultural nature of indigenous peoples and rural communities' traditional wisdom, whether it be medicinal, spiritual, religious, or other.

The prohibitionist doctrine has been used as the justification for the United States to declare its war on drugs and promote its unilateral certification in this matter since the 1970s. The result has been a number of security cooperation policies implemented since then, such as Operation Condor, Plan Colombia, or the Mérida Initiative. The idea was to eliminate the drug supply, which is actually an insidious cover-up of the defense of their geopolitical interests, intervention in internal affairs, and the intrusion

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into the privacy of ordinary citizens. This has widespread secondary effects such as the strengthening of criminal organizations, human rights violations, and the diversification of the drug supply.

Similarly, despite the open declaration of war against the supply of Latin American narcotics and the adoption of international commitments to that end, figures from the Latin American elites (politicians, bankers, businesspersons, members of the military, and high-ranking police officers) have been suspected of offering protection and financial advisory services, and even being partners in trafficking. This is due to the extreme profitability of a seemingly unending business; this was the case of Mexico's former minister for public security, Genaro García Luna.¹ The emergence and strengthening of organized crime groups has guaranteed these actors great influence in Latin American economies, societies, and culture, with the result that they have consolidated themselves as companies with transnational stature in a context of asymmetrical interdependence between the global North and South.

Psychedelic Medicine and Sacred Plants

The tendency to abuse psychoactive plants and its effects have been the main reasons for banning and stigmatizing them. However, in recent years, they have sparked the interest of Western medicine. This has led to the authorization of hundreds of clinical trials in universities all over the world, and for some time now, a great deal of evidence has been produced about the therapeutic effects of the phytocomponents found in cannabis (cannabinoids, terpenes, flavonoids, etc.). In recent years, after deliberations by a group of experts convened by the World Health Organization, the UN issued a series of recommendations to its Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) member

states to recognize the medicinal usefulness of cannabis and withdraw it from the drug control lists that had catalogued it as dangerous.

After decades of demonization and criminalization, then, psychedelic drugs are about to take their place in traditional psychiatry. Many researchers suggest that these substances can help in treating diseases such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and addictions to other substances. For example, researchers at the Johns Hopkins, Yale, and California Universities, as well as the Mount Sinai Hospital have created research departments for psychedelics.

The Open Society Foundation, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), the RiverStyx Foundation, and the Aurora Foundation, among many other organizations, develop and finance multiple projects to change society's relationship to psychoactive plants and foster research into their potential medicinal and therapeutic potential. This augurs psychedelic medications entering into the pharmaceutical market. One relevant example is the medical care company Compass Pathways, which in recent years has earned US\$240 million, is listed on Nasdaq, and carries out clinical therapeutical studies in ten countries researching the use of psilocybin to treat depression.

Ironically, Latin America and the Caribbean have a bad reputation because of the stigma of being the main producers and suppliers of psychoactive plants. This distracts attention from the fact that our region is probably the world's richest in genetic biodiversity useful for the transnational pharmaceutical industry. This highly valuable genetic wealth, that the first peoples above all have been building and refining into centuries-old biocultural wisdom despite prohibitionism, deserves to be protected today, along with the species themselves. It is the responsibility of Latin American governments to do this using mandatory legal mechanisms that also guarantee sustainable, responsible access to the monetary and non-monetary benefits derived from their use.

What Is the Nagoya Protocol?

In the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing (NPABS) is a specialized international accord aimed at

regulating access to plant, animal, or fungal genetic resources associated with traditional knowledge, such as that which leads to the genetic improvement of species. Its provisions seek to combat bio-piracy² and the plunder of germplasm,³ promote sustainable use and the conservation of biodiversity,⁴ together with fostering the fair, equitable distribution of the benefits derived from enjoying those resources by indigenous peoples and rural communities.

By signing and ratifying this protocol, states commit to adopting legislative, administrative, and public policy measures to ensure conditions for the fair and equitable distribution of monetary and non-monetary benefits. To do so, they must base their action on the main pillars of the system of access set out in the protocol: well-founded, prior consent and mutually agreed-upon conditions.

These principles aim to empower indigenous peoples' decisions and participation in international markets through contracts based on revaluing their millennia-old knowledge, establishing a multilateral, worldwide mechanism for access and participation in the benefits, building transborder bridges of cooperation, establishing national focal points, designating competent national authorities for raising awareness in society, and supervising the compliance of the commitment to fair and equitable distribution.

Generally speaking, the Convention on Biological Diversity calls on states to legislate and build public policies based on their territorial, social, economic, and other specificities. This does not preclude the possibility of binational or multinational accords among the convention's signers. Transborder cooperation must be a priority for Latin America and the Caribbean. This region contains most of the so-called mega-diverse countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela), which concentrate the greatest diversity of flora and an enormous number of species and varieties of fungi, lichen, and micro-organisms that can be protected through joint legal stipulations for applying the protocol.

South-South Cooperation for Multipolar Development

The concept of multi-polarity in international relations refers to the concurrence of two or more dominant actors in international organization and management in which none becomes preponderant. For some years a debate

The absence of a harmonized regional criterion about the use of psychoactive plants produced in our lands has undoubtedly been something of geostrategic scope that favors the appetite of extraterritorial actors for raw materials.

has raged about the loss of U.S. world hegemony, China's emergence as a geo-economic power, Russia's military importance, and the general rearrangement of the world's geopolitical conditions and interests.

In this push and pull among global titans, a small window of opportunity has opened up for Latin America and the Caribbean to reconsider the geopolitical relevance of its immense genetic biodiversity, its importance for the transnational pharmaceutical and agricultural industries, and the need to establish a completely autonomous, sovereign drug policy.

As mentioned above, many of these sacred plants have been labeled diabolic, destructive to our "race," and lacking in benefits for humanity. This has been the case for a long time without appealing to a critical view that would analyze and consciously and sustainably take up the best of these plant resources for humanity.

Today, private entities all over the world seek to profit from the genetic diversity of first peoples' territories and millennia-old knowledge. Among them are many organizations dedicated to developing modified varieties and registering industrial patents. This can lead to mechanisms for appropriating varieties that should be in the public domain, favoring intellectual property and the economic profits remaining in few hands.

Given this scenario, Latin American and Caribbean governments, businesspersons, and civil society organizations must unify their efforts to redefine the Latin American paradigm around psychoactive plants with therapeutic potential. Multilateral coordination among countries of the global South must aim for the construction of a regional system of cooperation and defense of territorial biodiversity. This should be based on the inter-operationality and complementariness of capabilities and joint coordinated action for the technological development of reciprocal benefits, which would include funding programs

for biocultural conservation projects, and advocacy and research for fair, sustainable use in the framework of the Nagoya Protocol.

These types of programs will be important steps for the construction of sustainable routes toward inclusive development, the creation of new jobs, the stimulation of financial independence for vulnerable groups, and the promotion of better health systems and quality education based on the principle of restorative justice. They will also make for the proper use of young people's capabilities and the power of technological development in order to promote an environment of personal development and foster creativity, both of vital importance for the world of peace, prosperity, and inclusion we all hope for. ■■■

Further Reading

Amira Armenta, M. J., "Las convenciones de drogas de la ONU. Guía básica," October 2015, <https://www.tni.org/es/publicacion/las-convenciones-de-drogas-de-la-onu#5>.

Jacobs, A., "Una revolución psicodélica llega a la psiquiatría," July 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2021/05/15/espanol/psicodelicos-mdma-extasis-psilocibina-salud-mental.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>.

Secretaría del Convenio sobre la Diversidad Biológica, "Protocolo de Nagoya sobre el acceso a los recursos genéticos y participación justa y equitativa de los beneficios que se deriven de su utilización según el Convenio sobre la Diversidad Biológica" (Montreal: UN Environment Programme, 2011).

Notes

1 Member of the cabinet of former President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) of the right-wing National Action Party (PAN). [Editor's Note.]

2 Bio-piracy is the illegal use of biodiversity of developing countries to develop products and services that lead to the unauthorized commercial exploitation of genetic resources.

3 Germplasm consists of the genes that make it possible to perpetuate a species or a group of organisms.

4 I use the word "sustainable" in the sense of using biological diversity in a way that does not cause it to decrease in the long run, therefore maintaining the possibilities of satisfying the needs of current and future generations.