Let me start by expressing my deep regret at not being able to be with you today. Things have changed since I last visited Colombia in March 2001. The Peace Process, in which the Colombian people and the international community had placed great hope, and in which we had built up as much belief as possible, is now over. But the engagement of the EU with Colombia, and with the wider Andean region, remains firm.

Our commitment to peace continues. Even if the Peace Process, with capital Ps, ended last year, throughout Colombia there are still many peace processes, many Colombian citizens who want to put an end to violence. The EU is working to support them, together with the Colombian government. Our flagship project, the ‘Peace Laboratory’, is well off the ground, and is starting to deliver concrete results in a troubled area. We are now studying with the Colombian government how and where else we could build on this positive first experience, to continue to work with those Colombians who want to work their way out of violence and towards peaceful and sustainable economic development.

To that end we are working not only with the government, but also directly with civil society and NGOs, whose role we recognise and support. Be it for the defence of human rights, humanitarian assistance, support to internally displaced people or the fight against poverty, we believe they are essential partners.

I won’t drown you in figures – it is not the sum of money but the value of results which matters but I know that these efforts are substantial. The EU as a whole – Commission and Member States together – is the single most important donor in Official Development Assistance. As far as the Commission is concerned, it delivers all its assistance through non-reimbursable grants rather than loans.

The EU institutions are not the only ones to believe in Colombia. European companies also do. The EU is the leading source of foreign investment in this country, which serves both to demonstrate and to magnify our stake in the search for a negotiated solution to the conflict. We want to do all we can to foster these economic ties. This is why we are maintaining our very favourable trade regime, thanks to which a majority of Colombian products can enter the EU market duty-free. We would like more Colombian exporters to take advantage of it. We will also try to boost these economic ties further by working for a successful outcome to the ongoing WTO trade round. For us, the Doha Round must not only liberalise market access, but also promote a wider development agenda, addressing key issues of legitimate public concern, and updating and improving the functioning of the WTO rules.

The EU knows, however, that the biggest contribution it could make to peace and sustainable economic growth in Colombia would be to curb drug demand, and stifle the numerous illegal activities related to
illicit drug trafficking that fuel the Colombian conflict. The EU’s acknowledgement of its shared responsibility in combating the drugs trade is not new, but let me reassure you that our determination and actions will gain, not lose, momentum in the years ahead. We know there is no quick fix to this issue.

In 1999 at the Helsinki European Council, the EU adopted its ‘Drugs Strategy 2000-2004’, which set out a global, integrated and balanced approach to dealing with drug production, trafficking and consumption. In the case of Colombia, voluntary manual eradication of illicit crops is part of our ‘Peace laboratory’ programmes. In addition to that, a new project is currently in its start-up phase. It foresees the provision of equipment, software and training of Colombian officials in order to build up a map of the country’s terrain, which can serve many purposes, including the control of illicit crops. The Commission is also working at the regional level to counter the trafficking of firearms, ammunition and explosives.