SUMMARY
The Dutch Cocaine Trade: Impressions of Participants in Drug Distribution Chains

This research project aims to draw a picture of cocaine distribution chains in the Netherlands as seen through the eyes of the participants. The research questions for the whole project are: Which structures and methods of working characterize the distribution chains of the cocaine trade in the Netherlands, as seen from the perspective of actors on different levels of the trade? And, which background factors explain the participation of these persons in the cocaine trade?

In this context, 37 Rotterdam cocaine retail dealers and 24 detained participants on the level of the cocaine middle market and import trade were interviewed between spring 2002 and fall 2004. In total 75 in-depth interviews have been conducted with them. The interviews concern the nature of the cocaine trade between, roughly, the mid-1990s and 2004. The recruitment method of the Rotterdam retail cocaine dealers – via two base cocaine dealers functioning as intermediaries – has led to the fact that three-quarters of the retail cocaine dealers in our sample are labelled as participants in the base cocaine circuit. The remainder can be described as retail dealers of powder cocaine mainly supplying recreational cocaine users. The 24 detained participants from the cocaine middle market and import level were selected on the basis of the administration of the 19 Dutch district courts. Selection criteria were the following: a nonsuspended prison sentence of four years or more for violations of the Opium Act (article 2 and/or 10).

More than half of this group of 24 respondents has a Dutch ethnic background and appears to have been involved in dealing XTC in addition to dealing in cocaine.

The interviews demonstrate that the structure and methods of working within the cocaine distribution chain in the Netherlands are heavily connected to the way cocaine is imported into the Netherlands. Therefore, a distinction has been made between large-scale cocaine import (mainly via the sea harbour and in some cases via road transport) and small-scale import mainly via Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport. Large-scale cocaine import and the middle market that evolves from this import appear to be the domain of people who are active on several other terrains of illegal trade and criminal acts. Involvement in the cocaine trade appears to be a profitable activity for each of the respondents regardless of the specific task they perform. Amongst the respondents we find, for example, suppliers for domestic (as well as foreign) cocaine middle market traders; drug relation brokers; co-financiers of transports; transporters; import agents; and persons who lend a helping hand in favour of export activities (inventing smuggle methods, offering stashes or collecting money, etc.).

Success in large-scale cocaine sea transports requires a good knowledge of the expedition sector. This knowledge appears more than sufficiently present among some of the interviewed. Large-scale cocaine transports (also coming to the Netherlands by road) appear to be seldom destined for the Dutch local market. The interviews revealed many examples of cases where the
cocaine was meant to be transported further to other countries in Europe. Remarkably, when cocaine is transported to other European countries these transports often do not only consist of cocaine. In many cases these deliveries are combined with other hard drugs (especially amphetamine and XTC) and sometimes also with soft drugs (hash). Establishing the contacts necessary for getting different drugs does not seem difficult for participants on this level of the cocaine trade. The trade in heroin seems to be a different circuit on this level. This drug is seldom offered in combination with cocaine. A common role at the level of middle market and import (export) is the drug broker. Many respondents indicated that they made good money in drug trade without ever being in possession of the drugs themselves simply because they had contacts that enabled them to connect drug users with drug suppliers.

In contrast with the large-scale import of cocaine - where the final destination is almost always some other European country, the Dutch local market for cocaine is almost completely supplied by small-scale imports into Schiphol Airport. However, the combination of airport seizure and cocaine consumption figures in the Netherlands indicates that part of these small-scale cocaine imports are also destined for transit trade. None of the 37 respondents active on the local Rotterdam market as cocaine retail dealers report that they are supplied by large-scale cocaine imports. More than half of these respondents have themselves engaged in the small-scale smuggling of cocaine. In all these cases they made one or more trips as a cocaine swallow, body packer, or luggage carrier, almost always acting under the orders of others. The supply line along which the cocaine reaches the local retail dealers appears to be very short. It is rare to observe more than one middleman between importation and the retail level.

On the cocaine retail level participants are often dealing in both cocaine and heroin. This is, however, especially characteristic of respondents involved in the retailing of base cocaine. Powder cocaine retailers say they seldom sell heroin because of the poor demand among their group of customers. For this same reason, drugs other than cocaine and heroin are rarely sold by these respondents.

In regard to factors that explain these respondents involvement in the cocaine business at specific points in their lives, there appear to be two basic categorizations. The primary feature distinguishing these two is whether the respondent is addicted to hard drugs or not. About threequarters of the cocaine retail dealers are addicts themselves, and onequarter was addicted not so long ago. Respondents’ own addictions seem to play an important role in determining their positions in the cocaine distribution chain. In nearly all cases, their own hard drug use was the primary motive for their initial decision to start dealing drugs themselves. However, because of their own drug use the financial circumstances in which these retail dealers live are often very poor. On the other hand, participants on the middle and import level of the cocaine trade seem seldom to be motivated by their own addictions. Although this group hardly consists of total abstainers (although some respondents are), most are relatively controlled, recreational users of soft and sometimes hard drugs. On the basis of their life histories we can distinguish three main roads leading towards their involvement in cocaine trade, namely: via family members (more or
less being ‘brought up in the scene’), via strong own initiatives (becoming aware of the possibilities that illegal drug trade can offer at a fairly young age), or via pursuance of one’s profession (especially the expedition sector, taxi and catering industries). In some life histories these factors are combined. Potential financial rewards are a universal motive for involvement in the cocaine trade. Yet for those acting on the higher levels of the cocaine distribution chain it seems that trading in itself is more important than the goods they trade in. This probably explains why many cocaine dealers have been involved in a whole range of other illegal trade practices during the course of their lifetimes. The trade that offers the most favourable financial perspectives and the nicest personal contacts at any given moment is the one chosen to be taken up.