# COP 17 in Durban: From pessimism to optimistic signs

What can we expect from the 17th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Durban?

Could it be that at this meeting, the world's governments – and especially those of the countries that have historically created the most pollution – will finally be willing to reach a binding agreement, if only because the first period of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012? Could it be that this agreement will make the second decade of the 21st century a “turning point” in history, in the sense of ushering in the beginning of profound changes in the currently predominant industrial model of production and consumption? Could it be that significant cuts in emissions will be established for the countries most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, so that the global temperature will not rise above the levels that would signify drastic impacts for humanity? Could it be that the environmental debt owed by the countries of the North to the countries of the South will finally be recognized? And could it be that the world's remaining fossil fuel reserves will be left underground?

Or perhaps, instead, what will prevail this decade is an agreement with no binding commitments, leaving everything open to the transnational corporations and the carbon market, dominated by the strategy of viewing forests and monoculture tree plantations as carbon stocks though REDD+ projects? With “adaptation” funds administered by international financial institutions historically responsible for financing pollution and environmental destruction, like the World Bank? With the vision that the “green” economy or “green” capitalism, in addition to serving as an opportunity for a new cycle of accumulation of capital and profits, will be our “salvation”, “ratifying” the right of a small few to continue polluting more at the expense of the majority?

If we look at our governments and what they have done at international negotiations in recent years in Copenhagen and Cancún, where they address problems that affect us all, we cannot help but feel pessimistic.

At the same time, however, there are optimistic signs if we direct our attention to what has been done by the world's peoples, who are not only feeling the effects of the climate crisis, but also the effects of a much wider crisis. A crisis with economic, social, political, cultural and even ethical and moral dimensions. This notion has already inspired the climate justice movement to adopt the slogan, “Change the system, not the climate!”

If we look back over the last year on the side of the peoples, we see that many people, and especially young people, have taken to the streets. From the Arab world to Europe to the United States and many other countries in between, there have been mobilizations that have sometimes gathered over a million participants together. Take for instance the small South American country of Chile, held up as an example of the “success” of neoliberal policies, where the people are demanding free, quality public education. Also significant is the fact that thousands of people have taken to the streets to protest against the international financial system, even on Wall Street.

Judging by the stances they have adopted, and the repressive measures they have used, it would

appear that our governments are afraid of the people who elected them. A prime example is what happened recently when the Greek government suggested organizing a referendum to consult the population on whether or not it agreed with a new European Union “bailout” plan. Both the leaders of the European Union and the stock markets were gripped by panic at the mere thought of consulting the public and, even worse, the possibility of being forced to abide by the opinion of the majority of the population of a sovereign nation! They were frightened by the prospect of a government making use of a valid tool for participatory democracy.

Large-scale mobilizations and marches also took place in the struggle for climate justice in Copenhagen and Cancún, in addition to the major conference on climate change and the rights of Mother Earth held in Cochabamba in 2010, a participatory and dynamic meeting that gathered together more than 35,000 participants, who contributed to creating a profound final declaration symbolically entitled The People's Agreement. In Durban there will once again be thousands of people taking part in demonstrations.

Nevertheless, these massive popular mobilizations and the demands and positions they have put forward in clear opposition to what governments have done until now have not yet succeeded in “overthrowing” the “dictatorial regimes” of the transnational corporations from the oil industry and other sectors, the big conservationist NGOs that preach market-based environmentalism, and the other consultants, speculators and experts who are more interested in the profits to be gained from the carbon business than in the future of humanity.

But why have we gone from talking about Durban and the climate to discussing more wide-ranging struggles, like those waged by the people of the Arab world or Chile? What do these struggles have to do with demonstrations around climate conferences? They are all completely tied together. All of these people, and especially the young, have taken to the streets to demand better living conditions for all and social justice. They are protesting against the currently dominant system which, now more than ever, aggravates social and environmental inequalities, and deprives the majority of the world's young people of any prospects for the future.

The system against which all of them are directly or indirectly struggling has cleverly managed to fragment the different issues of social and environmental injustice, while turning a deaf ear to proposals of alternative paths that often involve very simple and easily feasible measures. And this has also served to divide and fragment protests and resistance struggles.

It is up to us to tackle the great challenge of overcoming this fragmentation, as we head towards Durban and, after that, the Rio+20 conference in 2012, in order to build a more unified and thus stronger movement to fight for social and environmental justice. This is fundamental, if we want our governments to start listening to us and taking action.