Following in the Footprints of Cochabamba

Several weeks have passed since the World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, convened by Bolivian President Evo Morales. But in these times of fast-moving and disposable news, we should make an effort to ensure that the crucial significance of this meeting is not simply tossed on the junk news heap.

While it was underway, the biggest media coverage given to the conference focused on the indigenous president's remarks about female hormones in chickens, comments which were misinterpreted or perhaps poorly expressed.

But beyond the brief coverage attracted by these controversial remarks, there was very little serious media analysis of what was in fact a major international event, attended by more than 30,000 participants. Representatives of campesino and indigenous communities, urban social organizations, environmentalists, government officials, intellectuals and activists gathered in Cochabamba – which gained renown ten years ago as the main battleground of the "water war" against privatisation of this essential natural resource – and collectively built a platform for analysis of climate change.

Climate change, the threat that looms over the entire planet while most of us are distracted by other things. Climate change, an issue that the world's governments have been talking about for almost 20 years – through the United Nations process of the Framework Convention on Climate Change – while moving ever further from finding real solutions to the problem, concentrating instead on the consequences of this global disaster and looking for ways to cope with and adapt to the effects. And making the problem worse.

In an era when corporations are spreading to every corner of the planet appropriating every possible resource in their search for profits (land, water, oil, minerals, plants, genes, etc.), even the climate has become a business. False solutions have been invented, "market-based" solutions like "compensation": those who emit huge amounts of greenhouse gases, which cause climate change, pay for others in the South to not produce emissions, and thus supposedly "compensate" for their own emissions, instead of reducing them.

A lot of money for a few companies. Even a financial carbon market! And this is how the process has continued, postponing responsibility for cutting emissions. And then came December -the deadline for the world's countries to establish their emission reduction commitments- when the process was exposed for what it is, and it was made abundantly clear that the powerful nations are not willing to do anything. A handful of countries, historically responsible for the crisis, tried to impose a parody of an agreement that they called the "Copenhagen Accord". No obligations, no responsibility for those who have created the emissions. No change. And the worst prospects ever: a rise in temperature of up to 4ºC which signifies disaster.

Cochabamba was the alternative. Bolivia, which was one of the few countries that said NO to this parody of an agreement, convened the World Conference of the Peoples. And the people came, to call things by their name, to give them other names than those used in official documents. And so

they talked about Mother Earth and her rights, about “Living Well”, about Food Sovereignty as the people’s right to control their own seeds, land, water and food production in harmony with Mother Earth in order to have access to sufficient, varied and nutritious foods. They talked about the climate debt accrued by the so-called developed countries, about restorative justice – in other words, not merely economic compensation but also “the restitution of integrity to our Mother Earth and all its beings” – and about creating an international tribunal for trying crimes against the climate.

And the people talked about the root of the problem: the CAUSES of climate change.

The Peoples’ Agreement (1), the result of an intensive, pluralistic and diverse participatory process encompassing 17 working groups, states that the cause of climate change is the crisis of the capitalist system: “We confront the terminal crisis of a civilizing model that is patriarchal and based on the submission and destruction of human beings and nature that accelerated since the industrial revolution. The capitalist system has imposed on us a logic of competition, progress and limitless growth. This regime of production and consumption seeks profit without limits, separating human beings from nature and imposing a logic of domination upon nature, transforming everything into commodities: water, earth, the human genome, ancestral cultures, biodiversity, justice, ethics, the rights of peoples, and life itself.”

To address the problem, it proposes “the recovery, revalorization, and strengthening of the knowledge, wisdom, and ancestral practices of Indigenous Peoples, which are affirmed in the thought and practices of ‘Living Well,’ recognizing Mother Earth as a living being with which we have an indivisible, interdependent, complementary and spiritual relationship."

“The model we support is not a model of limitless and destructive development. All countries need to produce the goods and services necessary to satisfy the fundamental needs of their populations, but by no means can they continue to follow the path of development that has led the richest countries to have an ecological footprint five times bigger than what the planet is able to support. Currently, the regenerative capacity of the planet has been already exceeded by more than 30 percent. If this pace of over-exploitation of our Mother Earth continues, we will need two planets by the year 2030.

“In an interdependent system in which human beings are only one component, it is not possible to recognize rights only to the human part without provoking an imbalance in the system as a whole. To guarantee human rights and to restore harmony with nature, it is necessary to effectively recognize and apply the rights of Mother Earth.”

Polluters must accept their responsibility. The Peoples’ Agreement calls on the developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50%, and to genuinely reduce emissions, rather than using deceptive strategies “that mask the failure of actual reductions in greenhouse gas emissions,” such as carbon markets and the new market mechanism known as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), aimed at incorporating forests into the carbon market.

With regard to forests, the Peoples’ Agreement categorically states: “The definition of forests used in the negotiations of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which includes plantations, is unacceptable. **Monoculture plantations are not forests.** Therefore, we require a definition for negotiation purposes that recognizes the native forests, jungles and the diverse ecosystems on Earth.”

Profit-driven industrial agriculture carried out by and for agribusiness has fatally wounded Mother

Earth and her children, because it does not respect the right to food and is one of the main causes of climate change. The Peoples' Agreement condemns agribusiness and its various technological, trade-related and policy tools: free trade agreements, intellectual property rights over life, dangerous technologies such as transgenic crops, agrofuels, geo-engineering, nanotechnology and others that serve as instruments of privatization and "only serve to deepen the climate change crisis and increase hunger in the world."

Also present in Cochabamba were the internal contradictions of a process of change that is difficult to carry out within the broader context of savage capitalism. Numerous organizations were convened by the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), an indigenous federation, to take part in an independent working group outside the official conference structure, known as Working Group No. 18. Their purpose was to denounce the serious environmental conflicts caused by extractive projects and infrastructure megaprojects undertaken in the framework of the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration (IIRSA) initiative which cross through indigenous territories and fragile protected areas. At the end of their discussions, the working group members called on the government of Evo Morales to suspend all extractive activities and projects that adversely affect the country's indigenous peoples.

Despite contradictions like these, Bolivia, with its indigenous pride restored, took the first major step towards an active leading role for the peoples in confronting the climate crisis. This step left a footprint. Now it is up to us to follow in the steps of Cochabamba, until our collective footprints become deep enough to forge a new path.

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(1) http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/24/peoples-agreement/#more-1584