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Cochabamba Climate Change Conference of Peoples

Events in Copenhagen

A fundamental divide emerged at the last Conference of the Parties (CoP15) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Copenhagen in December 2009. Indeed, the road to Copenhagen had been paved with growing distrust between industrialised and developing nations due to an apparent lack of interest on the part of those countries expected to take specific actions to address climate change. In Copenhagen, a group of 26 selected countries, including Denmark, Brazil, South Africa, India and China among others, and led by US President Obama, presented a document to the plenary session on the last day of the event. They hoped that it would be endorsed by all, providing the event with an ostensibly successful outcome.

Known as the Copenhagen Accord, the document was developed outside the discussions that had led up to Copenhagen and during the event. Its introduction at the end of the conference sparked strong protests from developing countries, including Tuvalu, Venezuela and Bolivia. Copenhagen will therefore be remembered not only for this disregard for multilateralism but also the stance of some developing countries that showed themselves determined to stand firm for their ideals. Evo Morales took the floor twice in Copenhagen to express his concerns about this lack of transparency and to denounce the way the document had been drawn up by a select few.

Morales made the radical proposal of reducing emissions to a level commensurate with a rise in temperature of 1°C. The Copenhagen Accord was deliberately vague on this issue, allowing developed countries to decide on their own levels of commitment to emissions reduction. Morales sought to reach out to parts of Africa and to low-lying islands in particular that would be most affected by the consequences of an increase in more than 2°C over the coming years. The term

'selective democracy' came to be used to describe this process whereby the voices of the poorest were effectively ignored.

No sooner than Copenhagen had ended, people (including Britain's Ed Miliband) started publicly blaming countries like China, Bolivia and other ALBA nations for its failure. Less publicised was the US's cutting of climate change funds to countries, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, that did not sign up to the Accord. Meanwhile, large amounts of money were being offered to those developing countries that did associate with it.

The Copenhagen Accord is thus basically a statement of intent, not binding on those signing, who would carry out reduction of emissions on a voluntary basis. No limit was set to the increase in world temperatures. It could replace the Kyoto Protocol (not signed by the US), which is a binding agreement.

After Copenhagen

Dissatisfied with these results, Evo Morales in January called for a conference of peoples from around the world to discuss climate change. The place selected was Cochabamba and the date was set to coincide with Mother Earth Day on April 22. Bolivia argued that it was not prepared to accept an agreement whereby the world's biggest polluters took the decisions with little reference to those most likely to suffer from climate change. It was time, Morales argued, for the people to decide.

The Cochabamba meeting would therefore be a chance for governments, scientists, academics and lawyers to come together with the peoples and social movements of the world. It would analyse not only the effects, but also the structural causes of climate change, and come up with proposals for future action. Preparatory work carried out over the internet dealt with 17 main subject areas. These included issues such as

harmony with nature and the rights of Mother Earth; climate debt, the Kyoto Protocol and the need for a shared vision on permissible temperature increases; food security and agriculture; the protection of forests and the dangers of market arrangements for carbon offsetting; climate migration; adaptation to the impacts of climate change, funding requirements and transfer of technology; and possible ways forward, including the suggestion of a worldwide referendum and an international climate justice tribunal.

The Conference

In the end, more than double the expected number of participants converged on Tiquipaya, a small village on the outskirts of Cochabamba. Some 35,000 people registered, of whom over 9,000 came from outside Bolivia, with another 1,000 unable to arrive from Europe because of the grounding of planes due to ash-laden skies. They came from 142 countries, 47 of which sent official delegations. President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela was present on the last day, as were the vice-presidents of Cuba and Burundi and the foreign minister of Ecuador. The whole Bolivian cabinet was present, as were several parliamentarians.

The 17 working groups came together for three days at the UNIVALLE campus, with round table presentations from key Bolivian government members and invited personalities. There were some 200 fringe meetings on a wide range of topics. Some Bolivian NGOs and indigenous social organisations held an 18th working group to look at the question of the impact of big infrastructural and extractive projects. Morales opened the conference at a ceremony in the local football stadium, stressing the need for a return to living in harmony with nature, whilst also ensuring greater equality for all. Recognising the rights of Mother Earth was therefore essential.

In a presentation later the same day, the Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca brought out some of the indigenous thinking that underpins the concept of 'living well' (rather than better than others, at the expense of the environment). He talked of the need to apply this concept internationally in order to promote solidarity between peoples and to harmonise mankind's needs and those of nature. The solution – and possibility of change – he said, is in our hands.

The results of the 17 working groups were presented at a formal meeting on the last day, involving in addition social movement leaders and international government representatives. The final declaration, the Peoples' Agreement, was read out to large numbers in the football stadium

in Cochabamba.

The meeting brought together people from all corners of Bolivia, with large numbers of young people, women of all ages, indigenous people, and participants from most Latin American nations. Ideas bounced off each other, multiple accents competed, and curiosity and respect was shown for visitors from other continents with evident enthusiasm in meeting eminent thinkers and leaders. Members of the Bolivian armed forces and police also participated in working groups and meetings. Contradictions were permanently being ironed out, such as whether to use the term 'peoples of the world' or only 'indigenous peoples', whether capitalism should be questioned as such, or whether 'overproduction and mass consumerism' expressed the same idea. Morales referred to the sense of a common cause that permeated the event.

The agreement

"Today Mother Earth is wounded and the future of humanity is in peril". So begins the declaration, the Peoples' Agreement.

The conference considered the structural causes of climate change, blaming them on the capitalist model and its logic of competition and unlimited growth. It claims that the world has reached a crossroads, where either this situation continues unabated, or where we seek to re-establish harmony with nature, ensuring too greater equality amongst the peoples of the earth. Whereas the needs of development were acknowledged, these cannot be unbridled, as today, when the existing ecological footprint way surpasses the world's capacity to cope with it. Drawing up rights to protect nature was thus seen as a logical step to complement human and indigenous rights, and correct the lack of balance that exists.

The document argues that whilst countries share responsibility for current levels of greenhouse gases, developed countries have contributed more to this 'climate debt'. They should therefore recognise their responsibility for their part in climate change. The central proposal is that emissions should be reduced to ensure that the global increase in temperature does not reach 1°C, with developed countries reducing their emissions by at least 50% in relation to 1990 levels. It rejects the Copenhagen Accord as insufficient and non-binding, leading to a scenario of a 4°C increase with devastating effects for the poorest and most vulnerable. It suggests that the United States should sign up to the (binding) Kyoto Protocol. Whereas under Copenhagen, the funds committed for adaptation purposes are

insufficient and tied to certain conditions, the document suggests that funding should be equivalent to 6% of developed countries' GDP, equivalent to what they spend on defence and five times less than what has recently been spent on shoring up banks. The fund would be managed by the governments affected by climate change (and the respective UN climate change body).

Specific proposals include the following:

- Agriculture needs to be sustainable, respecting indigenous and ecological practice, ensure that all people have sufficient food, and that countries give priority to becoming self-sufficient in food production. Agri-business, technological packages and 'false solutions' such as agrofuels, genetically modified crops and geo-engineering, are seen as contributing to the deepening of the climate crisis.
- Mega infrastructural and extractive projects should be avoided, where these invade (indigenous) territories. Privatisation and commercialising the use of water was criticised, as was the militarising of lands belonging to indigenous peoples, leading to their displacement. Access to water should be recognised as a universal human right.
- Forests need to be protected. Market mechanisms that seek to offset carbon emissions are rejected, and other forms of direct payments should be explored to ensure the preservation of forests. Where oil is found in jungle areas, it should not be exploited.
- Transfer of technology and knowledge should be in the public domain, with a body that funds and provides information on available innovations. Indigenous knowledge and principles are important in stopping destruction of the planet and contributing to all people being able to live well together.
- Migrants, forced to move due to the effects of climate change, should be received in developed countries and their rights fully recognised.
- There should be an International Climate and Environmental Justice Tribunal to deal with non-compliance with the UN Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. This would act to penalise states that fail to reduce their emissions sufficiently and to act against states, companies and persons guilty of committing environmental damage. Support would be afforded to states that petition the International Court of Justice to bring charges against developed countries that do not meet binding commitments.
- Indigenous peoples should have the right to be consulted and express their consent in all negotiations that relate to the design and

implementation of measures relating to climate change.

Where next?

There are three key proposals for future action:

- The calling of a peoples' referendum on climate change to consult people around the world on the level by which developed countries and transnational companies should reduce their emissions, the financing that developed countries should provide, the establishment of the International Climate Justice Tribunal, the need for a Universal Declaration of Mother Earth's Rights and the need to change the capitalist system.
- The creation of a World Peoples' Movement for Mother Earth, responsible for taking the proposals of the Peoples' Agreement forward. National level committees would be set up to coordinate actions such as the referendum in each country.
- The calling of the next Peoples' Conference, on 22 April 2011, possibly in Europe.

The final document will be presented to the Secretary General of the UN and to governments of those participating, so that it can be taken into account at the next round of negotiations in Cancún, Mexico.

Conclusions:

- The Conference provided an important space for people to come together and develop ideas. There was a strong Bolivian presence, particularly from social movements, as well as from the ALBA and other Latin American nations. More countries, particularly beyond the ALBA, need to be involved if the process is to gain political weight. Civil society organisations and social movements were the protagonists of the meeting, and grass-roots participation was much in evidence. Some made clear their desire to push the Bolivian government further than it has gone so far. As host, Bolivia has become a protagonist in the international arena.
- The conference showed how climate change has become an important issue for mobilisation worldwide.
- Climate change is bringing a change in paradigms about how people view the world and their part within it. Indigenous thinking – specially the restoring of the balance between humanity and nature – is a key contribution in this respect. It also raises the need for an egalitarian and fair approach to the distribution of resources, both amongst countries and peoples.