

From Cochabamba to Cancún

the urgency of real solutions to the climate crisis

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After the debacle of the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen, the government of Bolivia took an unusual step: it launched a call to “the peoples of the world, social movements and Mother Earth’s defenders” to come together to analyse the causes behind the climate crisis and to articulate what should be done about it. The gathering happened in April 2010 in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and brought together more than 35,000 people from around the world. For once, “the people” – and not the governments – took centre-stage, and their deliberations and conclusions provide a solid basis on which to move forward. If only governments would listen! Here, we focus on the links they draw between climate, food, and agriculture.

There seems to be (almost) universal agreement that the 2009 Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen was a total failure. The governments of the countries most responsible for global warming refused to even discuss the main causes of climate change, let alone come with meaningful solutions. Outside

the Copenhagen Summit’s doors the protests of social movements were silenced with violent police repression and preemptive arrests. Inside the conference rooms, meanwhile, the talks were dominated by the most polluting countries leaving the poorest nations to rubber stamp a pre-fabricated text under the threat of losing desperately needed adaptation funds. It was a charade, a sell out, whose only redeeming quality was that it laid bare the complete lack of political will among governments and the degree of their complicity with business.

The next UN Summit on climate change will take place in Cancún, Mexico, and there is widespread scepticism about whether this conference will fare any better than the last. But something interesting took place in between.

Given the failure of Copenhagen, the Government of Bolivia decided to take an unusual step. It launched the “People’s World Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth’s Rights” to bring in the views and experiences of social movements on how to stop the climate crisis. The objectives of the conference (see Box) went far deeper than any other government-initiated process on climate change has gone. This was probably the only time in recent history that a government, faced with an urgent international crisis, has called on collectives, groups, movements and communities for a fundamental discussion about what can and must be done.

The number of participants to the Cochabamba Conference surpassed all expectations. Over 35,000 people came, with at least 10,000 coming from outside Bolivia. Discussions were divided between 17 working groups that were run collectively. The documents that came out of these working groups are extremely valuable in their own right, since they provide a basis for international positions that echo the views of social movements, civil society organisations and researchers. They provide a counterweight to the official texts produced behind closed doors by the powerful countries in Copenhagen.

The diversity of experiences, backgrounds and cultures did not get in the way of discussions or collective decisions, which made Cochabamba an example of how people can work together. It may be thought impossible to extract focused, coherent proposals from a group that consists of thousands of people with thousands of experiences, but that is precisely what Cochabamba managed to achieve.

Group 17 focuses on the food system

One of the best-attended and most important working groups in Cochabamba was “Group 17”, which the global small farmers’ movement La Via Campesina had expressly called for to focus on the relationship between food sovereignty, agriculture and the climate crisis. The group was coordinated by Via Campesina’s Latin American regional grouping, CLOC–Via Campesina. By anchoring the debate within the framework of food sovereignty, the group was not only able to analyse the main sources of greenhouse gases, but also to come to an understanding of the complexity of the forces generating the ecological crisis and the various other crises affecting the planet – finance, energy, food, migration and others. From there, they were able to identify strategies to reverse global warming. Food sovereignty was put squarely at the centre of such strategies, recognised as a concept central to the global movements of peasants and indigenous peoples and their ever-expanding alliances.

The group that focused on the food system came to several major conclusions. The first was that

“agribusiness, through its social, economic and cultural mode of development under globalized capitalist production (...), does not fulfil the right to adequate food and is a major cause of climate change. The change of land usage (deforestation

and expansion of the agricultural frontier), monocrops, production, marketing and use of agrochemical inputs, industrial food processing and the logistics to transport them thousands of kilometres to reach the consumer (...), are major causes of the climate crisis and the growing number of hungry and malnourished peoples in the world.”

With regard to water, a basic resource for food production and survival, the group noted that, while people are losing access to water for their own needs, corporations are grabbing it without restrictions for their large-scale operations. The group also decried the subsidies that are dished out to promote dangerous techno-fixes to cool the planet – such as biofuels, GMOs, nanotechnology, synthetic biology, biochar, artificial trees, and geo-engineering. In essence, these technocratic approaches just allow the world to continue on its suicidal path from which a few get rich.

The group also condemned “clean” mechanisms of trade and speculation for clearing forests and sowing plantations in the name of averting climate change. Such mechanisms create markets for rights to pollute while treating rural communities as servants and denying them access to their own territories. It was clear to the group that carbon credits are a scam, and the programmes that are advertised as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) are particularly bad, since they take land management out of the hands of forest peoples and give it to carbon traders.

Another key conclusion of the group was that

“the advance of free trade through economic partnership agreements, free trade treaties and investment protection, among other things, are a direct attack on the sovereignty of countries and peoples, autonomy of states and the capacity for multilateral action by international agencies.”

Seed laws were condemned for undermining the sovereignty of communities by robbing them of their foundations for building their future: seeds. Similarly, intellectual property rights were described as “instruments of privatisation that destroy local, traditional and scientific systems of knowledge”. According to the group, “the current concentration of landownership and ocean exploitation by economic groups, corporations and hedge funds both state and private are one of the most serious and imminent attacks faced by people and their food sovereignty.”

Of course, all of this has been said before in various ways. But what is new and powerful is that a diverse group working together has been able to systematise, recombine and reach a consensus on such a complex picture of devastation. Through



Photo: GRAIN

Via Campesina members at the opening of the People’s World Conference, Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 2010

wider dissemination these conclusions can become a guide and framework for future action.

The way forward

The outcome of Cochabamba provides clear guidance as to how to orient our struggles on climate change. Cooling the planet must start with the indigenous peoples and peasant communities who demand self-government, food sovereignty, and autonomy. As a way forward out of the climate crisis, they defend their forests, their water sources, their native crops, their agricultural, pastoral and fishing practices, their health systems and traditional medicine. They defend their territories and biodiversity against projects of environmental devastation that seek to extract resources from their lands and waters. They demand that their resistance is not criminalised.

Indigenous and peasant communities can cool the planet but to do so there must be, as Cochabamba points out,

“broad-based, deep, genuine agrarian reform and a reconstitution of indigenous and afro-descendent territories, as well as the building of participatory policies with a gender focus, so that farmers and indigenous peoples, their cultures and lifestyles regain a central and fundamental role, vital in world agriculture to achieve food sovereignty and restore harmony to achieve global climate balance.”

Real solutions require that we properly identify the causes of climate change, and that we challenge the industrial model, particularly agribusiness and the corporate food system, since they are responsible for half or more of global greenhouse gas emissions. Above all, real solutions require a defence of peasant agriculture, which produces food according to local

The Cochabamba objectives

1. To analyse the structural and systemic causes that drive climate change and to propose radical measures to ensure the well-being of all humanity in harmony with nature.
2. To discuss and agree on the project of a Universal Declaration of Mother Earth Rights.
3. To agree on proposals for new commitments to the Kyoto Protocol and projects for a COP Decision under the United Nations Framework for Climate Change that will guide future actions in those countries that are engaged with life during climate change negotiations and in all United Nations scenarios.
4. To work on the organisation of the Peoples' World Referendum on Climate Change
5. To analyse and develop an action plan to advance the establishment of a Climate Justice Tribunal
6. To define strategies for action and mobilisation to defend life from Climate Change and to defend Mother Earth's Rights.



Photo: GRAIN

Banner at Cochabamba: Bolivia, capital of dignity

need outside the global corporate food system. Cochabamba has made all of this much clearer than ever before, and has helped to open a horizon for long-term mobilisations and action.

On to Cancún

Whether and to what extent the Cochabamba proposals and mobilisation will influence the official governmental negotiations remains to be seen. It has managed to stimulate discussion, to say the least. Some of the conclusions of Cochabamba were incorporated into the official UN text for the approaching negotiations. But, perhaps more importantly, Cochabamba has made a major contribution in advancing two ideas: that the climate crisis is part of a much larger crisis of environmental devastation caused by incessantly expanding industrial and trade interests; and that there are feasible solutions at hand, if we focus on eliminating the causes of the problem.

The next UN climate summit will be in Cancún, at the end of November. Already a collective mobilisation of networks, groups, communities and environmental organisations from many parts of the world is under way, and the Cochabamba gathering has given impetus to this. Vía Campesina and Mexico's Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales (National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected) have built an alliance to promote a huge mobilisation around the Cancún negotiations in November. Indeed, the likelihood that governments will come to any meaningful agreement in Cancún might already be vanishingly small – as is convincingly argued by George Monbiot overleaf.¹ But social movements' mobilisation and common understanding of what is at stake and what needs to be done grows and becomes clearer by the day.

¹ George Monbiot's article (see page 16) was published in the *Guardian*, 21 September 2010. A fully referenced version can be accessed at: <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2010/09/20/the-process-is-dead/>

The process is dead

It's already clear that the climate talks in December will go nowhere – so what do we do?

The closer it comes, the worse it looks. The best outcome anyone now expects from December's climate summit in Mexico is that some delegates might stay awake during the meetings. When talks fail once, as they did in Copenhagen, governments lose interest. They don't want to be associated with failure, they don't want to pour time and energy into a broken process. Nine years after the world trade negotiations moved to Mexico after failing in Qatar, they remain in diplomatic limbo. Nothing in the preparations for the climate talks suggests any other outcome.

A meeting in China at the beginning of October is supposed to clear the way for Cancún. The hosts have already made it clear that it's going nowhere: there are, a top Chinese climate change official explains, still "huge differences between developed and developing countries". Everyone blames everyone else for the failure at Copenhagen. Everyone insists that everyone else should move.

But no one cares enough to make a fight of it. The disagreements are simultaneously entrenched and muted. The doctor's certificate has not been issued; perhaps, to save face, it never will be. But the harsh reality is that the process is dead.

In 2012 the only global deal for limiting greenhouse gas emissions – the Kyoto Protocol – expires. There is no realistic prospect that it will be replaced before it elapses: the existing treaty took five years to negotiate and a further eight years to come into force. In terms of real hopes for global action on climate change, we are now far behind where we were in 1997, or even 1992. It's not just that we have lost 18 precious years. Throughout the age of good intentions and grand announcements we spiralled backwards.

Nor do regional and national commitments offer more hope. An analysis published a few days ago by the campaigning group Sandbag estimates the amount of carbon that will have been saved by the end of the second phase of the EU's emissions trading system, in 2012. After the hopeless failure of the scheme's first phase we were promised that the real carbon cuts would start to bite between 2008 and 2012. So how much carbon will it save by then? Less than one third of one per cent.

Worse still, the reduction in industrial output caused by the recession has allowed big polluters to build up a bank of carbon permits which they can carry into the next phase of the trading scheme. If nothing is done to annul them or to crank down the proposed carbon cap (which, given the strength of industrial lobbies and the weakness of government resolve, is unlikely) these spare permits will vitiate phase three as well. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the EU's emissions trading system will remain alive. It will also remain completely useless.

Plenty of nations – such as the United Kingdom – have produced what appear to be robust national plans for cutting greenhouse gases. With one exception (the Maldives), their targets fall far short of the reductions needed to prevent more than two degrees of global warming.

Even so, none of them are real. Missing from the proposed cuts are the net greenhouse gas emissions we have outsourced to other countries and now import in the form of manufactured goods. Were these included in the UK's accounts, alongside the aviation, shipping and tourism gases excluded from official figures, the UK's emissions would rise by 48%. Rather than cutting our contribution

George Monbiot

to global warming by 19% since 1990, as the government boasts, we have increased it by around 29%. It's the same story in most developed nations. Our apparent success results entirely from failures elsewhere.

Hanging over everything is the growing recognition that the United States isn't going to play. Not this year, perhaps not in any year. If Congress couldn't pass a climate bill so feeble that it consisted of little but loopholes while Barack Obama was president and the Democrats had a majority in both houses, where does hope lie for action in other circumstances? Last Tuesday the Guardian reported that of 48 Republican contenders for the Senate elections in November only one accepted that manmade climate change is taking place. Who was he? Mike Castle of Delaware. The following day he was defeated by the Tea Party candidate Christine O'Donnell, producing a full house of science deniers. The Enlightenment? Fun while it lasted.

What all this means is that there is not a single effective instrument for containing manmade global warming anywhere on earth. The response to climate change, which was described by Lord Stern as "a result of the greatest market failure the world has seen", is the greatest political failure the world has ever seen.

Nature won't wait for us. The US government's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports that the first eight months of 2010 were as hot as the first 8 months of 1998 – the warmest ever recorded. But there's a crucial difference: 1998 had a record El Niño – the warm phase of the natural Pacific temperature oscillation. The 2010 El Niño was smaller (an anomaly peaking at roughly 1.8°C, rather than 2.5°C), and brief by comparison to those of recent years. Since May the oscillation has been in its cool phase (La Niña): even so, June, July and August this year were the second warmest on record. The stronger the warnings, the less capable of action we become.

Where does this leave us? How should we respond to the reality we have tried not see: that in 18 years of promise and bluster nothing has happened? Environmentalists tend to blame themselves for these failures. Perhaps we should have made people feel better about their lives. Or worse. Perhaps we should have done more to foster hope. Or despair. Perhaps we were too fixated on grand visions. Or techno-fixes. Perhaps we got too close to business. Or not close enough. The truth is that there is not and never was a strategy certain of success, as the powers ranged against us have always been stronger than we are.

Greens are a puny force, by comparison to industrial lobby groups, the cowardice of governments and the natural human tendency to deny what we don't want to see. To compensate for our weakness, we indulged a fantasy of benign paternalistic power, acting, though the political mechanisms were inscrutable, in the wider interests of humankind. We allowed ourselves to believe that, with a little prompting and protest, somewhere, in a distant institutional sphere, compromised but decent people would take care of us. They won't. They weren't ever going to do so. So what do we do now?

I don't know. These failures have exposed not only familiar political problems, but deep-rooted human weakness. All I know is that we must stop dreaming about an institutional response that will never materialise and start facing a political reality we've sought to avoid. The conversation starts here.