

Towards a Strategy for the Indigenous Peoples' Movement

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Madame chair:

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to present my views on what I think are crucial strategic questions for the indigenous peoples movement.

I presume it is time now to reflect on strategic questions as regards the indigenous peoples' movement. Any strategy of struggle or development must start from the global reality prevailing today; the main global political, economic and cultural trends that affect and control our lives and the global responses to this control and hegemony. The globalization of the market which is spreading like a prairie fire constitutes the globalization process from above, while the global response by civil societies the world over constitute the globalization process from below. Market globalization is out to spread the modernization project, a paradigm that has already failed from the point of view of human development.

Modernization that passes as development has brought human civilization to a brink of collapse; environmental destruction and ecological changes have given warning signals that the continued emission of green house gasses means that the global doomsday is approaching and that the longer Mr. Bush and his likes procrastinate to sign the Kyoto Protocol the earlier this doomsday becomes. The balance sheet of the modernization project should be examined from this global reality. The proponents of modernization have proved that they are incapable of coexisting in mutual harmony with the biosphere and nature in general. Modernization a la the market exists and expands at the expense of the destruction of nature; market and modernization are incompatible with nature. The destruction of nature and the biosphere is at the root of the marginalization and misery of indigenous peoples.

This state of affair is not being watched in silence. There is a global response to this alarming situation by civil societies the world over. The rationale and theoretical basis of modernization is being thoroughly deconstructed. It is in this prism that the concept of development is being redefined with a strong emphasis on preservation of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional natural resource management mainly of indigenous peoples. If market modernization in the name of development has at the end of the day brought human civilization to a brink of collapse, not to speak of the misery caused on indigenous peoples, then it is high time to question the very rationales of this paradigm: what is development after all? What has this science according to the dominant discourse brought to humans? No matter what this science tries to inform us, we pastoralists in Africa, however, are sure of one thing: we have a rich knowledge system to protect the environment and which enables us to live with nature in a complete harmony a situation that market modernization is destroying. It is this danger that hovers over this globe and that compels civil societies round the world to join hands in a global struggle against it.

Therefore, it is absolutely essential that the indigenous movement becomes an active component part of the global civil society movement against the globalization of the market. A global problem generated from above needs to be tackled by a global action from below. It is high time that the NGO communities slogan of the eighties "think globally, act locally" needs to be replaced by a new slogan "think globally and act globally too". Pastoral communities in Africa for instance, cannot attain salvation by acting alone without entering strategic alliance with civil society forces. Indigenous peoples' organizations must work very closely with civil society organizations in their own countries, regions and globally. The salvation of indigenous peoples lies in this global movement for global salvation.

The indigenous movement has attained the international status it deserves from the UN in particular. But, it has to go beyond a working group and be able to establish an active international network with regional and sub-regional branches. A global advocacy must be complimented by active advocacy at regional and sub-regional levels. There is also an additional factor for this regional necessity. Indigenous peoples are often divided by artificial state boundaries constructed by colonization, this is very common among pastoral communities in Africa. The Afar for instance are found in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea and Somalis are found in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. This state of affairs by itself calls for a regional and sub-regional advocacy networks to be the order of the day. Networks at all levels are critical for our movement; we in Africa should make noise when the Chiapas in Mexico, the Karen in Asia and Palestinians are in trouble. Our indigenous friends in North America and in the North as a whole should make noise when pastoralists in Africa are in trouble and vice versa.

The hegemonic forces that dominate this world are very strong and are presiding over an established system that was consolidating through the centuries. There can be no easy way to change it. The indigenous peoples' movement should be strong enough to match up its mighty adversary. An important area where the movement can draw its strength is adopting a self critical approach. True, the problems of indigenous peoples are indeed generated by external forces, but not all the problems. There are also problems generated by internal dynamics caused by traditional practices that are categorized as harmful. Those who receive the brunt of this violence in tradition are women. It is this violence that should make us think twice before we say "I am holier than thou." There can be no salvation so long as violence against women continues and gender inequality reigns. This self-critical attitude is a key that opens many more doors at the level of perception. Let's not forget that, after all, negative perceptions are among the factors that perpetrate our own oppression.