

Reflections on a Movement:

CONAIE, Grassroots, and a Vision for the Future



Interview with **José María Cabascango**

José María Cabascango is a Quichua activist of the Pijal Community, González Suárez Parish, province of Imbabura. Pijal has some seven thousand inhabitants and only 600 hectares of land. With intimate knowledge of that community, José María Cabascango, an activist since the 70s, reached a position of prominence in CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador). As Secretary of International Relations, he has traveled extensively throughout Europe and the Americas. In this interview, he reflects upon the accomplishments and the future of the continental Indigenous movement from the perspective of Ecuador.

What are the principal accomplishments of CONAIE and other communal organizations that you have seen in your years of work?

Since the 1940s and 1950s, organizations were born all over Ecuador; peasant organizations, even Indigenous organizations such as the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios (Ecuadorian Federation of Indians), headed by Dolores Cacuango, a woman of struggle in those days. Unfortunately, those organizations were controlled by political parties (like the Communist and Socialist party), the Catholic and

Evangelical churches, and by the labor movement. Therefore, they definitely were not autonomous and independent organizations.

In the years of 1972, 1974, ECUARUNARI began organizing itself with force and with many problems and conflicts with the Church. Then it became independent, initiating the reconstruction of Indigenous peoples' collective identity. In those years there were three main points of focus: the struggle against racism, because racism was very strong; the struggle for the recuperation and legalization of the ter-

ritories, one of the most important points; and the struggle for an indigenous education. Here, two primary demands were articulated: on the one hand, that [indigenous] languages be recognized officially by the Ecuadorian state, and that education be administered in our own languages. These are very important experiences that were initiated in those times.

Today, racism has not ended. Racism appears in economic exploitation and the violation of human rights. Racism exists in the behavior of civil society. But it is not as visible as before.

Little by little we have managed to make the non-Indigenous society understand that it too has Indigenous blood and that we definitely are dynamic peoples, with a millennial history, and our own territories. I indeed would like to emphasize this aspect of the struggle against racism that is one of the principal accomplishments; the President of the Republic himself is speaking of a "multi-ethnic Ecuador."

With regard to the Indigenous territories, I believe there are advancements. We were able to recuperate some lands although often under a veritable state of siege. There are *compañeros* that were assassinated and persecuted. But we managed to consolidate, at least in part, our territorial space. In the same way, Indigenous peoples in the Amazon and Coast were able to legalize their own territories, which is an important aspect. Therefore, despite powerful interests such as those of the multinational, oil, mineral, and other industries, and those of the Ecuadorian state, we managed to legalize, at least in part, those territories.

In 1988 we managed to get bilingual inter-cultural education institutionalized. Yes, there are many problems, many administrative, technical, and pedagogical difficulties, but nevertheless it is a move forward. Today for example, there are plans to create, in higher education, an Indigenous university. I believe this is an advancement.

What has been the experience of the communities living in this time of change?

All of these accomplishments, evident in today's daily life, have repercussions and are felt in the communities. For example, in the case of my community, nascent conflicts are no longer referred to the authorities comprised of political entities, courts, judges, and county and provincial authorities. They are resolved within the same community. This is a real control wielded by our own authorities which have the capacity to create a "legislation" proper to the community.

CONAIE surprised the world with its project to form a multinational country and take up Indigenous "legal" traditions to create Indigenous legal structures in Ecuador. Do you see a contradiction between this ambitious project and wanting to return to working directly with the communities?

We have always said that it is important to work on all fronts. The political, juridical, economic, social, and cultural projects that we have initiated have to continue forward, because these have an effect at the community level. I believe that Indigenous peoples in Ecuador have been the originators of many initiatives, and there exists a popular backing across Ecuadorian society for our work; these are not propositions that are only in the interest of Indigenous peoples, but rather propositions to inaugurate a new society and attempt to resolve the huge problems of social crisis, hunger, and poverty.

From the moment we initiated the struggle until 1993, there was generalized state repression. Then, thanks to the struggle that rose in national and international solidarity, little by little the military presence in the communities diminished. I believe this is an extremely important achievement.

In the case of my community, all are working diligently to acquire new infrastructure, to develop water works, and the like. We, like CONAIE, are worried about how to provide training in administrative matters.

Two events in Ecuador where the Indigenous organizations and CONAIE have had an important role: the Indigenous mobilization against the Agrarian Reform Law (*Ley de Reforma Agraria*) in June of 1994, and the border war with Peru. Did the effectiveness of CONAIE contrast strongly in these two events?

To summarize, around 1993 the industrial sectors like the big agro-industrial companies worked out a project for an agrarian reform law (*Ley de Desarrollo Agrario*). We as Indigenous

peoples and peasant organizations of the country also worked out a proposal for agrarian reform. In June of '93, we all presented these before the Ecuadorian parliament. There were three proposals: one from the government, one from the landowner and agro-industrialist sector, and another from the Indigenous and peasant organizations united in the National Agrarian Coordination (*Coordinadora Agraria Nacional*). In the end CONAIE's proposal was stalled or even thrown out, I don't remember exactly what happened.

In 1994, the IDB (Inter-american Development Bank) demanded that \$80 million be transferred to the agrarian sector, which it saw as archaic. Then it demanded a change in the agrarian law. Worried, the government urgently sent a project to the National Congress so that in fifteen days they could approve that law. When we reviewed it, we saw that it was the shortened version of what the landowners had presented in 1993. Nevertheless, it was pushed forward and approved.

The Indigenous movement reacted very quickly. The entire country mobilized—organizations allied with CONAIE, popular organizations involved and not involved in the agrarian issue. Now, why? On the one hand, the law proposed the privatization of community lands and natural resources, especially of water. It threatened to do away with peasant organization. It was a retrograde law; what they wanted was to return to the *hacienda* system, gain ownership of all our resources, and definitely implant an ideology of individualism, of market competition.

Historically, it was a very important moment. For the first time, Indigenous organizations demanded from the government the revocation of a law that went against the majority of the Ecuadorian people—not just Indigenous people. Also, for the first time in Latin American history, a president sat at the negotiation table with an Indigenous

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José María Cabascango, a long-time activist, in a 1986 interview.

trying to negotiate with the oil companies. The national government would say, "Not one step backward! We're going to defend the territory, our sovereignty!" But at the same time they were handing over this "sovereignty" to the oil companies! What are we supposed to make of that? In the Ecuadorian parliament they were approving measures to privatize petroleum resources, electrical energy, telephone industries, and the social security system of the country, the Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security (IESS)! So, what "sovereignty" do they speak of?

The U.N. declared 1993 as the "Year of the Indigenous Peoples" and in 1994 they declared a Decade of Indigenous Peoples. Has this been beneficial for Indigenous peoples?

Well I believe that at the international level, we have progressed a bit with regard to our rights. In 1992, Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize. But, we have said that if we, as Indigenous peoples, don't truly take advantage of these conjunctures, nothing will happen during the ten years, or twenty years even. I believe that the idea is that, for example, in regard to the Decade, we as organizations appropriate and seek change through the resolutions drafted by the UN.

We should fight in the framework of the United Nations and participate in forums with clear proposals. Many Indigenous people have traveled and participated, but often to provide a folkloric or cultural presence and not a politically active one. In the Ecuadorian case, we have a process of unification between Indigenous, peasant, and Afro-Ecuadorian organizations. There exists a national committee for the Decade wherein we are working with many proposals—concrete plans of action. We need to act, because many NGOs, and the church, are quite prepared to receive all of the resources filtering in for the International Decade. ❖

organization for fifteen days of work, day and night. We managed to paralyze the entire country, block roads, and prevent the delivery of agricultural products to the city.

Now, in regards to the war, CONAIE held some reunions with the Shuar-Achuar Federation and the Achuar *compañeros*. But we have to consider that, on the one hand, there was a total support from the Ecuadorian people, including support from Indigenous peoples and *campesino* sector. For example, in my community there were 14 *compañeros* in the line of fire. So, the participation of almost all the people was a very important aspect.

But I reiterate that CONAIE, the Shuar-Achuar Federation, and other organizations met and came up with very important resolutions, demanding of the government retribution for all of the impacts, both environmental and cultural, resulting from the war. There were very large communities that were displaced. Nevertheless, as of yet there is no response from the government.

You said that the Shuar and Indigenous people in other regions supported the armed forces. That contradicts the statements of organi-

zations such as CONFENIAE and CONAIE, that said that the war wasn't of Indigenous people but of governments and that those border areas definitively belong to the Indigenous people living there. How would you clarify this?

It's that, yes, there was support from the people, but unfortunately societies in general are too impassioned by events like this, be it war, or soccer, to mention just a few. So the people rise and with their impassioned attitude begin to back a position imposed by the government, with nationalism and a false sense of partisanship.

We must take into consideration that CONAIE produced many press releases clarifying that, truly, it was not in our interest to support [the war], or even the government (and much less the armed forces), because in the end, the war was not one of Indigenous peoples. On top of this, in the borderlands there were closely related Indigenous groups that were clashing; people with the same historical roots, the same blood, and the same economic problems.

The important thing to remember is that in the development of the war, when the people were up in arms, supporting the government, it in turn was