



## Organizing to Save the Amazon

An Interview with Valerio Grefa, new Coordinator of COICA

*Valerio Grefa was elected General Coordinator of the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Peoples' Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) in Manaus, Brazil, in November 1992. He is a member of the Quichua nation, from the community of San Pablo, Napo Province, Ecuador. The community is part of FECUNAE, the Federation of Native Communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon, which is part of CONFENIAE, the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon, which in turn is affiliated with COICA. In the Amazon basin there are more than one and a half million Indigenous inhabitants, from more than 400 nations.*

SAIIC: How long have you been active in the Indigenous movement?

VG: I have been active in the Indigenous movement since 1976. I am one of the first leaders that had the honor of establishing the Union of Natives of the Ecuadorian Amazon [UNAE].

SAIIC: What are the chief problems you had at that time in the Napo area?

VG: The first problems were to end the slavery that the *criollo* land owners maintained along the shore of the Napo River, especially between Coca and Nuevo Rocafuerte. They owned large haciendas, and made people work for meager wages. They used debts that were passed from generation to generation, which were unpayable debts, as an excuse to make the people work. The organization ended this abuse by the *criollo* land owners once and for all. The lands for the most part passed into the community's hands.

SAIIC: Your community, San Pedro, is part of FECUNAE. Who does FECUNAE represent?

VG: FECUNAE represents in particular the Quichua peoples of the lower Napo in Ecuador. There are 53 organizations now that make up FECUNAE.

SAIIC: You have represented both FECUNAE and CONFENIAE?

VG: Yes, twice I was president of FECUNAE, and then I was honored with representing CONFENIAE in 1989, 1990, and 1991. And now I am representing COICA as General Coordinator.

SAIIC: So you resigned from your position as president of CONFENIAE to assume the post in COICA.

VG: Yes, when I was elected Coordinator of COICA, I immediately called a meeting, — an amplified assembly, as we call it — of CONFENIAE to formally resign the presidency. On the 17th of December this ceremony took place, in which Angel Samarenda became the new president of CONFENIAE.

SAIIC: Who carried out the meeting in Brazil? Which local organization hosted it?

VG: The organizer was COICA. The host organization was the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB). COIAB is a new member of COICA.

SAIIC: And I understand that in this meeting of COICA there was increased participation. What other countries participated, and what other Indigenous organizations?

VG: In this case Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, and French Guyana became new members. So COICA now has nine members.

SAIIC: Can you tell us what the structure of COICA is like, the governing board, the coordinating board, or the coordinators?

VG: There have been two levels of organization in COICA since our last assembly. First there is the coordinating council, which is made up of all the presidents of the member organizations of COICA, that is, nine members now. Then on a more opera-

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Photo SAIIC

Valerio Grefa (2nd from left) on a recent visit to SAIIC

tive level we have established the governing coordinating board, as we call it, which is made up of five coordinators, including four area coordinators and the General Coordinator.

SAIIC: What contacts do you have on a regional and international level, like in Europe and the United States?

VG: Well, COICA has put a lot of effort into establishing international contacts. But it is our objective to respond in a coordinated way to the proposals of our base communities. That is how it was possible to sign an environmental agreement between the NGOs of the north and COICA. In the same way it was possible to sign the climate agreement, as it's called, between European cities and COICA. We began with seventeen cities, and now there are more than 200 cities.

In the same way, there are other proposals in the World Bank, proposals in the United Nations, in the Organization of American States (OAS), and to organizations that have to do with the rights of Indigenous peoples. We have as our work agenda the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Agreement 169, and we are in dialogue with governments to get them to pass this agreement. We support it because it is an international or legal tool that takes Indigenous demands into account in a more concrete way.

SAIIC: What is COICA's proposal to the environmental groups of Europe and the United States? Is it only economic support or is it something more profound?

VG: We have established as one of our basic objectives that the Amazon basin be considered a universal unit, a global unit, which calls on its protagonists — the Indigenous people — to raise our voice of attention, our voice of protest to the world, because the Amazon basin is the last frontier

of tropical forest and of biodiversity in which the basic rights of the first nations are involved.

That is the basic objective. The second objective is, proposing to international development organizations development alternatives proposed by the Indigenous peoples, what we call autonomous development, which permits the peoples' self-determination. Because we cannot isolate the development of the Indigenous peoples from the preservation of nature and the environment, we seek sustainable development, a harmonic development between man and nature.

SAIIC: When do you plan to begin COICA's actual work?

VG: Among the fundamental resolutions that were made in Brazil is the approval of the statute, and in its approval COICA's definitive seat was established in Quito, Ecuador. So our first activities correspond to that, to the transference of belongings that we have in Lima and to establish a permanent office in Quito. Our aspiration is to establish a basic infrastructure which will allow us to work with satisfaction and attend to the demands of our Indigenous organizations.

SAIIC: In addition to COICA's work in the Amazon, do you plan to make contact with other Indigenous peoples in the highlands, the plains, and throughout the continent?



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*Valerio Grefa continued*

VG: If we are protecting the Amazon basin, its floral life, it is obvious that we need to sign agreements with other forests that still exist on the planet. That is the reason that in 1992 in the month of February we held a world conference of the Indigenous and tribal peoples of tropical forests in Malaysia. The second meeting is expected to take place in May, possibly in Peru.

SAIC: We also understand that on a continental level there is coordination, a network among Indigenous peoples from all geographical areas, and there is an organization called CONIC. Do you have contact with these brothers and sisters?

VG: Our intention is to coordinate all the actions that other groups, other Indigenous organizations are taking on a continental or world level, to demand the rights that belong to us. So the doors are open, we are very willing to coordinate and have solidarity with all those organizations that are fighting in a sincere way for the rights of Indigenous peoples. We cannot remain isolated, we cannot keep our distance from the leaders of organizations that have similar goals.

SAIC: The U.N. declared 1993 the Year of Indigenous Peoples. What do you think about that?

VG: Actually, I have my doubts about this declaration. I think that maybe the United Nations wants to use 1993 to cover up the 500 Years of genocide, of barbarism, since the arrival of Columbus to America. Indigenous peoples have to unite to raise that voice of protest as soon as someone tries to make it a folkloric year.

I understand that if there are good intentions on the United Nations' part, it should be a year of reflection, a year of decision-making, a year of recognition of the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples, recognition of the organizations that are representative of the Indigenous peoples of America and the world. It should be a year of passing laws, international norms that benefit Indigenous peoples. Otherwise it will be a

world maneuver to control, to separate us. I'm not very optimistic, but rather hopeful.

SAIC: Is there a movement among the Indigenous peoples in Ecuador to reclaim Indigenous spirituality?

VG: I think that when we talk of spirituality, in an indirect way we are talking of the philosophy of the Indigenous peoples. I understand that we, the Indigenous peoples, must recover the spirit — the spirit that has led our peoples for millenniums, and which has been seized by the spirits brought by Columbus, so many saints, so many Virgins, that we are practically idolatrizing in churches, monuments, and that in this way we have abandoned our own spirits which have guided us — the spirit of the lakes, the spirit of the waterfalls, the spirit of the mountains, the spirit of the whole world vision of the peoples.

I believe that we have to reclaim the power of our Pacha Mama, the wisdom of our Pachacama, and all the spirituality of our earth, of our territory, of our power. Only when we respond to this material struggle spiritually will we have a complete struggle. I think that not only in Ecuador but also in Central America, in South America, in all of the places where Indigenous peoples are, we are reclaiming our true spirituality.

SAIC: Some last message for the peoples of North America?

VG: Truly, a call to solidarity, to the unity of Indigenous peoples within the diversity of cultures that we have, so that in the immediate future we have a unified voice, a monolithic voice, and that we can be heard by the governments in the international arena.

I understand that now we have to make an effort to find ourselves and that, setting aside any resentment, any individual interest, we search for a consensual interest, we seek a way sought by all the Indigenous initiatives. Only in that way will we be able to obtain in an organized manner the rights which we proclaim.

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