

Climate Justice and Grassroots Responses in Latin America and the Caribbean

by Isis Alvarez

It is now widely recognized that climate change is the greatest threat the world has faced¹. The international environmental governance architecture that has been put in place to tackle climate change that dates back to 1992, 30 years later still discusses the very same issues while global emissions reduction has been largely negligible. Furthermore, quite a few transnational corporations responsible for substantial harmful greenhouse gas (GhG) emissions, are now active actors at the climate negotiations, i.e. Shell, Unilever, Coca-Cola, to name a few, meaning further entrenchment of the current unsustainable system that puts profit over people, rights, and life on Earth.

Latin America & the Caribbean (LAC) hold key resource-rich biomes, such as the forests rich Amazon or the minerals rich Andes mountains, and since colonization, they have suffered continued extraction of raw materials to satisfy overconsumption in the Global North. The imposition of such a patriarchal capitalist development model has meant not just the demise of LAC's natural resources but also peoples' livelihoods and cultures. The region is not only one of the world's most unequal³ but also one of the world's most affected by climate change⁴, despite people in LAC having the least responsibility in creating the climate crisis. Nonetheless, a small victory after years of advocacy by civil society at the climate negotiations was reached last year with the establishment of a fund for loss and damage⁵, but for highly vulnerable areas such as the Caribbean islands, time is of the essence as taking urgent action constitutes a matter of survival. Not only mass coral mortality due to bleaching has meant a stark impact on fisherfolk communities, but also sea levels rising mean increased forced migrations.

Thus, people on the ground bear the brunt of a disproportionate model of consumption and production mainly from 'rich' countries, while corporations have ensured that their interests and global power remain intact, often with governments' support. Since climate change has gender, race, and class differentiated impacts, so-called 'climate solutions' actually represent "million-dollar business opportunities" that continue to add further burden to indigenous peoples and local communities, especially women. The truth is that false solutions continue to promote extractivism, including fossil fuel projects and agroindustrial agriculture expansion, two of the main culprits for increased global greenhouse gas (GhG) emissions and peoples' rights violations. For instance, carbon markets guarantee polluters to continue 'business-as-usual' failing to address the root causes of climate change, grabbing peoples' lands, displacing them, denying access to the resources they depend on for their livelihoods, and increasing gender-based violence.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/climate-change-greatest-threat-world-has-ever-faced-un-expert-warns>

² The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an intergovernmental treaty developed to address the problem of climate change

³ <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/publications/trapped-inequality-and-economic-growth-latin-america-and-caribbean>

⁴ <https://unfccc.int/news/new-report-details-dire-climate-impacts-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean>

⁵ Essentially, a demand for a legal mechanism for those countries with high emissions to pay for the damage and loss caused in low-emission vulnerable countries, see: https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/11/07/opinion/welcome-age-adaptation/?p1=BGSearch_Advanced_Results

But civil society and social movements are reclaiming their rights and building alternative solutions. Social and environmental defenders - many of whom are women - are on the frontlines defending their territories against extractive industries although it could mean persecution and criminalization or even cost them their lives⁶. Indigenous, rural, and afro-descendant communities are organizing themselves and articulating struggles to confront and resist the destructive development model by self-determination; collective efforts have helped Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) to understand the climate crisis and build resilience together.

In fact, peoples' climate just solutions exist and have existed for centuries contributing to communities' resilience in the face of climate change and other upheavals; indigenous and traditional knowledge hold the key to some of these challenges through, for example, agroecological practices that cool down the planet, and native seeds saving resistant to flood or drought, mostly done by women.

Already the Incas in Peru between 1200 D.C. and 1533 D.C, developed incredible engineering techniques for water management and agriculture, such as 'waru waru' production systems, 'amunas' for aquifer recharge, platform systems, irrigation systems (i.e. Cumbemayo channel⁷), or 'Cochas' systems as water reservoirs, which even today, have not been surpassed by any modern technology⁸.

In Mesoamerica, the Milpa system (still standing today) is a small plot of land, usually owned by rural families and managed predominantly by women, where they grow most of their food having corn or maize as the main component but associated with other key crops such as pumpkins, beans and/or chili peppers, among others. However, it is not only a production technique and social work but also a way of thinking and social organization based on the value of diversity and interdependence which builds a dense net of social relations, based on reciprocity and oriented towards autonomy and self-sufficiency⁹. Growing crops in the Milpa entails respect for natural and social diversity through multiple and appropriate methods, environmentally friendly and culturally respectful, away from an occidental logic based on individualism, competition, and capital reproduction.

⁶ A Global Witness report in 2022, estimated that the LAC region holds a proportion of 68% of the total killings of environmental defenders since 2012.

⁷ For further information on the Canal de Cumbemayo see: <https://hidraulicainca.com/cajamarca/canal-cumbemayo/>

⁸ For further information see: Ancestral Water Use in Peru <https://hidraulicainca.com/acerca-de-hidraulica-inca/uso-ancestral-del-agua-en-el-peru/>

⁹ L. Harguindeguy. Peasant Milpa Mesoamerican: More than a form of production, a way of living, thinking and feeling. Interpretive essay.



Inca's Waru Waru hydraulic system - Source: <https://hidraulicainca.com/puno/waru-waru-puno/>

Many Indigenous Peoples groups in the Amazon remain in their territories thanks to their strong bond with Mother Earth. For instance, the 'chagra' is an integral and interdependent food system bringing together ecosystem, social and spiritual aspects. Although there are several types of chagra, the model is replicated, with variations, in all indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon. The extensive traditional knowledge of the communities about crops, relationships between plants, relationships with the soil, production cycles, diseases and pests make the chagra a dynamic cycle from which all forest organisms and beings benefit¹⁰. Besides, knowledge of their cultural worldview has ensured a balanced relationship with the environment.

The ONIC affirms that Amazonian indigenous peoples productive activities have always sought to do less environmental harm by adopting ecological processes of agricultural production, such as polyculture planting, soil improvement through the use of organic fertilizers, use of biopreparations for pest and disease control, planting and preservation of traditional seeds to conserve biodiversity, feeding animals with plants and seeds from the farms¹¹. They also manage to harmonize these activities with spirituality: chants, prayers, and 'pagamentos' from community-wise men and women make to obtain better harvests and ensure that animals remain disease-free. In this regard, phases of the moon for different activities, such as sowing, pruning, producing organic fertilizers, and harvests, play a key role.

¹⁰ For further information see <https://www.gaiaamazonas.org/noticias/2019-01-14-la-chagra-fuente-de-alimento-sistema-integral-y-fundamento-de-vida/>

¹¹ For further information see: Agroecología y cultura propia de producción de los Pueblos Indígenas <https://www.onic.org.co/canastadesaberes/125-cds/publicaciones/practicas-productivas/2779-agroecologia-y-cultura-propia-de-produccion-de-los-pueblos-indigenas>

But perhaps the most emblematic grassroots community-led response from the Latin American region emerged in the island of Cuba at the beginning of the 90s when the ‘Periodo Especial’ (special period) hit right after the collapse of the socialist bloc in Europe and the near disappearance of Cuba's international trade relations. It became evident for both government and peasant families that the agricultural model needed a shift given its high dependence on foreign inputs¹². Rosset et al. continue to affirm that agroecology has been the most viable and, in fact, enduring option for Cuban peasant agriculture amid unfavorable economic and environmental conditions on the island, considering that there has been a US economic blockade in place for as much as 60 years now.

During the ‘Periodo Especial’, Cubans at all levels understood the importance of being self-sufficient and resorting to environmentally friendlier practices; the government took a series of measures such as enabling peasant farmers to work the land and produce diversified food crops; science and research institutions worked towards enhancing and improving knowledge and techniques around agroecological practices, and soon, not only people from urban areas started migrating to rural areas but also a national agroecological farmers movement started consolidating.

Today, most climate scientists predict more extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and drought, which Cuba is more prone to due to its geographic location¹³. Therefore, resilience to climate disruptions is of particular importance in the island. Studies by Eric Holt Giménez (2000 and 2008)¹⁴ showed that in 1998, after Hurricane Mitch, agroecological plots in Central America withstood the impact much better than conventional plots. Even though the damage was tremendous, agroecological plots retained more topsoil, moisture, and vegetation than conventional plots. They also suffered less erosion, landslides, and economic losses.

Thus, grassroots groups hold the knowledge and are demonstrating their potential contributions to address the root causes of the climate crisis; they are taking up political spaces, thus elevating their struggles and helping advance policy changes through coordinated advocacy, pressuring local, regional, and national governments. Articulating work has meant joint regional platforms and networks, such as the LAC Platform for Climate Justice¹⁵, where principles of ‘Buen Vivir’ respond to a regional approach to human rights and rights of Mother Earth recognizing and appropriately supporting indigenous peoples and local communities’ initiatives and practices and ensuring their rights to land and resources, paving the way towards real systemic change.

¹² Revolución Agroecológica: El Movimiento de Campesino a Campesino de la ANAC en Cuba
http://www.ecominga.uqam.ca/PDF/BIBLIOGRAPHIE/GUIDE_LECTURE_4/7/Revolucion_Agroecologica.pdf

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Holt Giménez, Eric. 2008. Campesino a Campesino. Voces de Latinoamérica: Movimiento Campesino para la Agricultura Sustentable. Managua: SIMAS.

¹⁵ The platform strives for the visibilization and articulation of resistance struggles in the face of climate change and false solutions to the climate crisis, as well as bolstering alternative solutions to confront the crisis, and coordinated advocacy at the policy level to hold governments accountable and to be included in decision-making of policies that affect them.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/17TYnZ3AQ_4gMf5Oil0q-d6gIv9l0EmFB5zkxzYy6t3w/edit