

ON THE INDIGENOUS UNDERSTANDING OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN THE CENTRAL ANDES

Jorge Ishizawa
Proyecto Andino de Tecnologías Campesinas (PRATEC)
Lima, Peru
Nov 2011

It was in 2000 that PRATEC (Andean Project for Peasant Technologies) through the conversations that our colleagues from the Nuclei for Andean Cultural Affirmation (NACA) were holding with the traditional authorities of the communities they were accompanying first heard of the generalized loss of respect as the obstacle for living well in the central Andes. We were trying to gather the views of the “target population” to elaborate a joint project concerning rural education at the primary level, and the perception of the authorities in the community of Huarcaya, Ayacucho in the south central Andes of Peru, of the role of the school in the loss of respect to deities, nature, and among themselves, was thereafter found to be unanimously shared in the conversations with other communities including those in the Upper Amazon region.

The project's challenge was to help teachers to contribute with the recovery of respect starting with bridging the rift between school and community that had been produced by the modernizing zeal of the education they were imparting. Parents in the communities readily clarified the project components orienting the school activities to connect with their ancestral traditions of regenerating their modes of living based on their own knowledge and practices that were being devalued by promoters of economic development efforts.

A later exploration by the NACAs in the communities' understanding of their experience of the effects of climate change in 2008 led to the same diagnosis of loss of respect as the root cause of the disturbance it was effecting. Further conversation made clear that their diagnosis ensued in viable intervention for local adaptation to climate change. Later, we were able to interpret the holistic approach to adaptation to climate change that Andean Amazonian communities apply. It covers the various types of ecosystems involved and diverse aspects ranging from infrastructure to the recovery of their organicity through the promotion of mutual aid, the reinstatement of traditional authorities and rituals and feasts, though the priorities and importance of the interventions vary locally. Nonetheless, the provision of water seems to be the issue that is present in all interventions.

And yet, it was clear that the climate emergency involved all aspects of life in the communities and, in consequence, the approach had to be holistic. Our recent systematization of the experience of community initiatives for cultural affirmation in the southern central Andes of Peru, involving five NACAs, revealed that community groups welcomed initiatives for the recovery of their ancestral customs that were pertinent to their current understanding of community welfare. The community of Quispillaccta, Chuschi, Ayacucho, for instance, has been exemplary in its two-decade setting up of an on-site model of living well, accompanied by the Association Bartolomé Aripaylla (ABA), a community-based organization. Through a series of interventions acting on the different ecosystems that the community inhabits, selected on the basis of the diagnosis of the community authorities and elders as interpreted with ABA's attentive mediation, what one can see today is a vital landscape that is healthy and beautiful. ABA's accompaniment inspired the other

NACAs in the region in the implementation of a joint program for community initiatives for cultural affirmation in the period 2002-2009.

Three salient characteristics of that program, the Fund for Community Initiatives in Cultural Affirmation (FIAC) can be highlighted: 1) the initiatives were identified by the community groups themselves; 2) the resulting microprojects were oriented to recovering ancestral components of their traditional way of living that the communities considered pertinent to living well; and 3) the NACAs accompanied their implementation facilitating the documentation, self-evaluation and reflection, and the transparent management of funds.

The *ex post* examination of the total of 116 initiatives undertaken by communities in the region, found that 95 (82%) concerned some aspect of adaptation to climate change according to the communities' understanding. Progress in cultural affirmation was, in the expression of a community authority, "going back to respect" toward their deities, Mother Earth, and themselves. Some of the initiatives included were: (i) strengthening the protection of the landscape of the region with the nurturance of water with actions ranging from restoring infrastructure for irrigation, the protection of springs, lakes and wetlands, to reinstating children as communal authorities (ii) protecting woodlands and pasture lands, (iii) restoring the appearance of the sacred mountains; (iv) nurturing the diversity of native plants and animals with emphasis in diversity. It was not only the threat of water scarcity that constitutes the core of the technical diagnosis leading to measures like water harvesting. Recovering respect implied going beyond the obvious technical intervention towards a comprehensive, holistic approach, that eluded us at the time and probably even now.

There may be some lessons that can be learned from this experience: one, and perhaps the most important, is that indigenous peoples who have lived in close intimacy with the ecosystems they inhabit since times immemorial have the diagnostic capacity to identify the difficulties that their lands are experiencing and the ways and means to face them. They may lack the means now but not the acuity to identify what the difficulties are and what to do locally about them. The challenge now then is to ensure that top-down external approach by the state organizations appropriately complement and facilitate these bottom-up initiatives and their extension and interconnection.

The second lesson concerns the serenity with which the Andean peasant nurturers of biodiversity face these difficulties. Beyond the measures of adaptation to climate change that they have been carrying out without official support, there is no finger pointing or looking for the guilty party. Recognizing that the generalized loss of respect is a global phenomenon, they own their part of it; they feel part of the estrangement of the human species from the living Earth and the urgency of recovering the ability to "think like a mountain" and "feel like the Earth." Perhaps nothing less than learning from the indigenous peoples will do nowadays in the face of the climate emergency.