

The socio-ecological crisis and the climate victims: some lessons from Asia

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For my contribution to this panel, I would like to link the role of social movements to the search for alternatives in the context of the climate crisis. Thank you for this opportunity given to me to share our reflection and some ideas on what may appear to be a banal issue but which in fact is of great importance and merits more attention, particularly by us in the social movements. I wish to bring in the issues concerning the victims of natural catastrophes, (wherein the causes are not only nature-driven but are often man-made). I will particularly use the global term of climate victims – to include refugees, internally displaced persons, or even those who remain in their place of residence.

I know that this issue is generally tagged as a humanitarian one and militants of Left groups can sometimes say that this is not their area of concern, humanitarian issues being the affair of NGOs, not of political parties nor trade unions, which have other issues to work on. But why is this a wrong position if I may be direct? Climate victims should be integrated by the Left and social movements in their agendas and actions today and this is a big challenge. We should not be contented with formal statements and punctual responses, nor simply donate some money when a catastrophe strikes.

Let me illustrate this point by a few Asian experiences, taking into account the Philippine case in particular.

Climate catastrophes are becoming more frequent, disrupting the daily lives in the cities as well as in the rural areas. Mindanao, in southern Philippines, is the scene of on-going military conflicts between the government and Muslim rebel forces. Indigenous peoples struggle to preserve their ancestral lands against the ravenousness of multinationals and logging and mining companies. Peasants are victims of land-grabbing by the rich. And today, people's organizations as we call them locally in the Philippines, find themselves also victims of climate change – faced with the occurrence of more violent typhoons and floods, land erosions, drought. No one is spared, but the rich are able to find their solutions while the poor fall down further into more miserable situations and become even poorer, with the feeling of being more abandoned.

For people's organizations and militant groups, there is no other option but to confront the situation and rethink their struggles. “Old” campaigns are taking on a new dimension, like for food sovereignty. Education in small-scale peasant agriculture, which should assure this sovereignty against multinationals and agribusiness also serves today to help peasants resist better against the social consequences of climate catastrophes. How to assure food for our families is a basic

preoccupation and as measures facing climate change, diversified production and small-scale peasant farming are now being put to practice by organized communities in the rural areas over single-crop planting schemes. Peasant farmers now undergo seminars about keeping and using traditional healthy seedlings and developing non-chemical fertilizers. Doing so, they of course come up against agribusiness, which looks badly upon these developments, or against the tourism industry's projects.

Militants engaged on the ground are experiencing more difficult and tenuous conditions under these circumstances and our support and solidarity is all the more precious during these times. Let me mention here the case of Baba Jan, condemned to life imprisonment for having defended the community of flood victims in northern Pakistan.

One can see that these issues are very political and not only humanitarian. Why is it that despite the aid that has come in tremendously from different parts of the world, climate victims still remain in makeshift houses and tents two years after the typhoon Haiyan, the strongest rated typhoon ever, hit the islands? You will feel frustrated if you followed the daily bickering and incompetency of Philippine officials and politicians, the clan fights, the influence of lobbying corporations in decisions taken. There is also so much hypocrisy at this level. The French president Hollande chose the Philippines as one of the countries to visit in preparation for COP21 and a common statement was signed by both governments formally. Yet, we later find out through militant networks that some 20 new coal-mining projects are being planned in the Philippines for the coming years!

Social movements and networks that have taken up the challenge have been more effective than states in responding urgently to needs and in the long-term phase of reconstruction. This was the case in Pakistan, for example, after the earthquake in 2006. We are not denying here that states can and should play a role. They have the duty to protect the people and they have the means to do so —helicopters, ships, building infrastructures, funds... which social movements do not have. But we have seen how states have always been caught up in power games and national and local politics, corruption. Their responses have been far from victims' priorities, where the participation of the communities involved and long-term reconstruction take minimal importance if any at all.

Social movements can find in these situations a positive force in changing the current system. A new sector of the population is being created today. Communities of climate victims do not live in the same way as communities living under normal circumstances. As catastrophes recur and their effects remain for a long time, this sector which has gone through a particularly traumatic experience, is growing. It needs its own forms of self-organization and self-expression. The feeling of dependence that is created should be surmounted. And victims remain citizens with rights. They have the right to aid and should not think that they are indebted towards the Administration nor to the officials who provide assistance.

Once the emergency phase has been executed, the issue of reconstruction is posed. This becomes the occasion where social changes can be initiated. After the tsunami of 2004, AREDS, an organization in Tamil Nadu in India working with Dalit communities used the solidarity aid from European civil society organizations to instill changes in the society together with the Dalit communities. The victims built their own houses and new fishing boats were bought. But this time, it was the Dalit women who managed the use of the boats, and in a more effective way (this was the men's responsibility before), giving women a more equal role within their families and communities.

Likewise, our friends from Mindanao formed a broad coalition of organizations called MiHands to help the victims of typhoon Haiyan in one of the neighbouring islands in the Visayas. They believe that the reconstruction phase does not only have to do with putting up houses and going back to the previous system of things. We can reconstruct differently, with an agricultural system that is more respectful of the environment, more rights for the people, more democratic processes of collective

decision-making, more egalitarian conditions for women, with particular attention to children.

Trans-border solidarities can also be strengthened. This is what is being done for example by the organizations of the Via Campesina in Bangladesh, the BKF-BKS, as they organize caravans for peasant rights, climate justice and gender equality, which travel through a big part of the country to meet up with communities, going all the way to India and to Nepal.

I would like to conclude by saying that we have here an opportunity to mobilise movements in ways we have neglected to do in the past. I am thinking of migrant associations for instance, as the climate issue is so relevant to them because of the links they maintain with their communities at home. Local projects financed with the help of migrants have often been affected by climate disasters.

I will stop here for now. I hope we can come back on certain points during the workshops, as we think of the passion and commitment of our comrades in Asia and more generally in the South, in developing alternatives for survival in a world in crisis.

Thank you.

Sally Rousset
