

## REPORT: AFTER RECOGNITION

# *El buen vivir*: Peruvian Indigenous Leader Mario Palacios



By Deborah Poole

In 1999, community leaders representing more than 1,200 communities in nine regions of Peru came together to form the National Confederation of Communities Affected by Mining (CONACAMI). Founded to counter the negative environmental and social impact of mining and the virtual absence of state regulation, CONACAMI initially sought direct, bilateral dialogue with the mining companies. But at its second national congress in 2003, delegates voted to reject dialogue and to embrace an anti-systemic politics that calls for the total rejection of mining and the neoliberal economy's exclusionary practices and principles. They also voted to reconstitute CONACAMI as an indigenous confederation that would center its demands on defending indigenous rights, promoting indigenous political participation, and refounding the nation-state. In subsequent years, CONACAMI has expanded its presence in the Andean region through the Andean Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations (CAOI), an umbrella organization that CONACAMI helped to found in 2006.

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The history of CONACAMI and its importance to popular struggles in the Andes points to the centrality of both community and Mother Earth to indigenous proposals for rethinking politics and the state. In this respect, it is also significant that CONACAMI, as an organization founded in opposition to the untrammled destruction of the environment and natural resources, has played such an important role in revitalizing indigenous political organizations in the Andean regions of Peru, where self-ascribed indigenous organizations have not historically played as visible a role as either peasant or labor movements in popular political resistance.

In May, Deborah Poole interviewed Mario Palacios, president of CONACAMI (2008–10), in New York. In the edited transcript that follows, Palacios expands on the political and cultural vision of CONACAMI and its relationships with other indigenous organizations, including AIDSESP, the Peruvian Amazonian confederation that led the indigenous uprisings of 2008 and 2009.

COURTESY OF CONACAMI

CONACAMI IS COMPOSED OF COMMUNITIES FROM THE Peruvian Andes that have suffered from the chaotic and disorderly expansion of mining in recent years. In Peru, mining is a crucial activity for the government in that it represents 64% of the country's exports. However, although the state celebrates mining as an activity that is crucial for maintaining exports, it never talks about the negative effects that mining has on our lives. Mining generates not only environmental contamination but also greater poverty; it affects social relations within communities; and it leads, in many cases, to the actual disintegration of communities. It also jeopardizes resources that are necessary for the development of communities, like water and land, by degrading or contaminating them. Faced with this, CONACAMI is responding as an organization to defend our territories and the natural resources of Peru.

CONACAMI is basically an organization of communities that works in 16 of the country's 24 departments. There are around 6,000 communities in Peru, of which 3,200 suffer the negative effects of mining. CONACAMI has almost 2,000 Andean community affiliates. Beyond that, however our work also draws on the diversity of Peru's social movement. For example, we are constructing a strong alliance, a process of unity with indigenous organizations from the Peruvian Amazon. In this sense, CONACAMI and the Inter-Ethnic Development Association of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSESEP) are organizations that have led the struggle in both the Andes and the Amazon. We greatly respect the work of AIDSESEP, an organization that has been carrying on very effective work in the Amazon since the early 1980s. In the Peruvian Andes, however, indigenous political organizing is more recent.

Peru's neoliberal political process bases its economy on extractive industries. This political process brings not only the "free market," but also free access to natural resources, free investment, and above all the looting of our resources. So our ancestral communities, many of which have territorial titles that date back 300 or 400 years to the colonial period, are today suffering from the expropriation, dispossession, and dissolution of their territories, not only because of the actions of the mining companies, but also because of the state itself and the governmental policies that are being applied in Peru. This is a politics of expropriation that dissolves or liquidates communities. And within this politics of extermination of communities, the rights of ancestral, originary, or indigenous peoples are not recognized.

In these last years, however, as a result of pressure, struggle, and resistance from both Andean and Amazonian communities, the Peruvian state has recognized the existence of the International Labor Organization Con-

vention 169 (ILO 169). Although Peru signed this international convention 15 years ago, the state has continued to deny us our rights, as indigenous peoples, in every conceivable way. But the indigenous struggle has finally forced the state to recognize that this convention does have normative value as a binding international convention. It was the indigenous uprisings of 2008 and 2009 that forced the state to recognize these rights.

Today in Peru we are debating a legislative proposal that would implement our right to prior consultation, as provided for in the text of ILO 169.<sup>1</sup> They are also debating a Law of Indigenous Peoples. I think these are important elements to achieve the recognition of indigenous rights in Peru, because these are rights that have been dismissed or denied ever since our lands were first invaded and colonized. But the proposal put forward by CONACAMI and the indigenous movements goes well beyond this question of rights and the defense of our own territories and natural resources. We are fighting because humanity itself is lost in a way of life that is marked by forms of accumulation and by the destruction and contamination of Mother Earth. These tendencies have increased in recent years because neoliberal capitalism is putting humanity's very survival at risk. In Peru, for example, we are experiencing in a particularly dramatic way the effects of global climate change.

For us, it is not just climate change, but rather a climatic crisis that manifests itself in the frosts, hailstorms, torrential rains, droughts, floods, and landslides that we are enduring in the Andean region. These climatic changes, which reduce agricultural production and introduce new diseases that we never before knew, are directly affecting our way of life. Humanity must think carefully if we are to avoid in the next decades a crisis that could lead to our own extinction. The indigenous movement has taken up this challenge to construct, during the past 20 years, a political proposal that is also a proposal for life, a project of life—*el buen vivir*. This project, which translates in Quechua as *allin kawsay* or in Aymara as *sumah qamana*, is composed of various parts: It encompasses a new vision, a new way of seeing, that is

1. On May 19, the Peruvian legislature passed the Law of Prior Consultation to implement rights guaranteed in ILO 169. President Garcia refused to sign the bill, arguing that indigenous communities are not juridically recognized subjects and that the law would give indigenous peoples "veto power" over the nation's development initiatives. The government's actions, which were supported by Peru's Constitutional Commission on July 15, have met with vigorous opposition from indigenous organizations, including CONACAMI, as well as from the Peruvian Ombudsmen (Defensoría del Pueblo).

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different from Western developmentalism in that we call for harmony with, and respect for, Mother Earth.<sup>2</sup>

Our project also calls for another way of conceiving the state. The republican states that were invented 200 years ago are effectively exhausted, since have not been able to resolve fundamental problems. These homogenizing, unicultural, monocultural, monolingual states, which took shape in the aftermath of the French Revolution, are today in crisis. In Peru, for example, we are effectively excluded from social, political, and economic participation because the state is dominated by *criollos* who are, in fact, a minority in the country. So the indigenous movement has put forward the need to reinvent another form of the state and a new model of democracy—a democracy that is no longer just representative. In the Peruvian case, representational democracy, through the Congress, has effectively collapsed. The Congress is highly corrupt, inefficient, and informal. The executive branch is also characterized by high levels of

corruption. So we need a different democracy, and the form of democracy that we propose from within the indigenous movements is communitarian; it is a participatory democracy of *mandar obedeciendo*.<sup>3</sup>

2. The literal translation of *allin kawsay* is “to live well.” However, the term is understood and used in a much broader sense by indigenous political organizations and activists, who use it to refer to the practices of living in harmony with nature, with other communities, and within families and communities. As such, it refers as much to the practice of equality and ethical responsibility as to the aspiration of achieving a more just world.
3. *Mandar obedeciendo* is a Zapatista phrase that has gained wide currency in indigenous movements in Latin America to refer to practices of democratic consultation in which authorities or elected representatives “lead by obeying.” In this view of political authority, leaders do not have the authority to make decisions without both consulting their bases and taking all opinions into account.

## Extractivism Spills Death and Injustice in Peru

On June 19, a barge belonging to the Argentine transnational Pluspetrol spilled 400 barrels of oil into the Marañón River in Peru’s northeastern Loreto department. The day after the spill, the Peruvian government’s Bioactive Substances Laboratory tested the river water—which the Cocama and Achuar peoples depend upon for both water and fish—and found very high levels of oil. “It was practically all petroleum,” said chemical engineer Víctor Sotero, of the government’s Peruvian Amazon Research Institute.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the extensive contamination had been reported to the central government, Minister of Energy and Mines Pedro Sánchez seemed to suggest that the many lives and the complex environmental systems it had destroyed were not important, when he declared on national television that the Marañón spill involved a “very small amount of oil.” When “compared with what has happened in the Gulf of Mexico,” he concluded, “it should not be a cause for alarm.”<sup>2</sup>

The Marañón spill was certainly much smaller in absolute terms than the estimated 35,000 to 60,000 barrels of crude oil that British Petroleum dumped each day into the Gulf of Mexico for almost three months.<sup>3</sup> But scale is not an issue in environmental disasters that destroy complex ecological and riverine systems, and deprive the humans who depend on those environments for food, water, and a future for their communities. Sánchez’s comparison does, however, speak clearly of the Peruvian government’s attitude that environmental disasters are acceptable collat-

eral damage for the millions of dollars that mining generates for Peru’s elite.

Indeed, the Marañón spill was just the latest example in a long series of environmental disasters that have accompanied Peru’s boom in mining, logging, and oil. Less than one week after the Marañón spill, the Caudalosa Chica company’s zinc and lead mine in the southern region of Huancavelica dumped more than 550 tons of tailings containing cyanide, arsenic, and lead into rivers that provide the sole source of drinking and irrigation water for more than 40,000 Peruvians.<sup>4</sup> Again, the government of President Alan García responded with a series of denials, dismissals, and disclaimers.

One of the biggest challenges facing indigenous peoples in Peru, and throughout the Americas, is the unregulated expansion of these industries and the resulting contamination of land and water. The García government has granted oil, lumber, and mining companies territorial concessions and leases to almost 75% of the Peruvian Amazon. Of these, the vast majority (58 out of 64 leases) are located in indigenous territories. García’s government has also refused to implement rights of prior consultation—or any of the many other rights accorded to indigenous peoples in International Labor Organization Convention 169, which Peru ratified in 1993 and signed into law in 1994.

Because natural-resource extraction directly affects both nature itself and those forms of community and social life that seek harmony with the earth, it has served as a catalyst for the

This proposal for life also envisions a deep discussion of the rights of Mother Earth. If in the last 200 years, political debate has revolved around the issue of human rights—and we have made enormous advances in this arena—we consider that the present century must necessarily incorporate within international and national debates the issue of the rights of Mother Earth, the rights of nature, as a new focus, a new understanding. It is not just the rights of man [that are important]. In the last instance, humans are just one of many threads in the great cosmic tapestry where all of us who make up this cosmos have rights. If man continues to destroy life, the life of other beings, the very life of humankind itself, we also put our own life at risk.

So *el buen vivir* is another form of life, an alternative response to Western civilization—a civilization that is, moreover, in a grave crisis. So we propose, for the whole of society, a project to build a different life, a life that has as its fundamental support the principle of *el buen vivir*.

*El buen vivir*, however, is not a theoretical concept. It is a daily practice in the communities. And it has to do with different things—with good agricultural practices, with the good use of resources, with honesty, with politics, and even with the economy. Unequal relationships among nations result in such things as free trade agreements, which are nothing more nor less than agreements for the looting and subjection of poor countries.

With *el buen vivir*, these would no longer exist because we are proposing a new form of relationship among nations, among people, and between humans and Mother Earth. We must take on and debate these concepts, and this debate is not one that involves only indigenous peoples, but also non-indigenous sectors of society, and the political classes who make decisions. In the end, the indigenous peoples are going to provide the foundations for a new way of thinking that emerges and is born from our own ways of life. □

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emergence of radical indigenous politics grounded in the defense of nature and life. Indigenous Peruvians have taken the lead in denouncing the mining, logging, and oil companies, as well as Peruvian government policies that promote extractive economies while trampling the rights of local communities and populations. In response, indigenous communities have mobilized to resist laws and policies that support the further incursion of mining companies. These include laws that grant the state ownership of subsoil resources in indigenous and peasant communities, laws that give the state the right to grant concessions without compensation, and policies that call for the titling and privatization (“regularization”) of collectively held lands in peasant and indigenous communities.

Indigenous organizations—including the Inter-Ethnic Development Association of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSESP), the Andean Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Organizations (CAOI), and the National Federation of Communities Affected by Mining (CONACAMI)—have called for criminal charges to be brought against companies like Caudalosa Chica and Pluspetrol. Faced with continuing protests from indigenous and regional leaders over the Caudalosa Chica disaster, the government finally imposed a symbolic fine on the mining company. The fine comes nowhere close to compensating for the extensive environmental and economic damages—and it will no doubt join the long list of environmental penalties that the García government has levied yet failed to collect. In the three years leading up to these two most recent environmental

disasters, Peru has managed to collect only \$4.4 million of the \$20 million in environmental fines it had imposed on the largest mining companies, which made more than \$20 billion in profits from Peruvian mines between 2005 and 2009.<sup>5</sup> As a result, mining and petroleum companies continue to operate in a de facto state of impunity in Peru.

This and other serious challenges remain for Peruvian indigenous movements, despite their significant advances over the years. The neoliberal agenda allows no room for negotiating territorial or political rights, and the entrenched racism of Latin America’s dominant *criollo* or *mestizo* societies makes it difficult for indigenous perspectives and voices to be heard. The García government has systematically criminalized indigenous organizations, and demonized indigenous peoples in speeches and TV spots that portray Indians who defend the environment and their territorial rights as “manger dogs,” “subversives,” and “savages.”

Indigenous organizations have made common cause with political actors who do not necessarily identify as indigenous but share their concerns. On July 7 and 8, for example, indigenous leaders joined opposition political representatives from Huancavelica to lead a regional strike and a “sacrifice march” to Lima to protest the García government’s refusal to act in the Caudalosa Chica case. Only after a general regional strike, marches, and protests of indigenous and popular organizations, and an increasing critical media, did the government reluctantly agree to temporarily close the mine.<sup>6</sup> □

NOTES

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