



COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY BASED ECONOMY MODELS

VIDEO-INTERVIEW WITH BLANCA CHANCOSO FORMER PRESIDENT ECUARUNARI, ACCIÓN ECOLÓGICA, ECUADOR

Video on YouTube: www.youtube.be/H8aNpJYij54

Transcript English

Interview and Translation: Birte Dohlen

I am Blanca Chancoso. I belong to the Otavalo people, from the province of Imbabura, and I am a member and co-founder of the Association of Indigenous Nations, CONAIE. Currently, I am accompanying Saramanta Warmikuna, the women of the corn, defenders of nature and territory.

At some point in your life, you decided to get involved with your communities and with indigenous peoples, and to engage in the struggles for the rights of nature and of buen vivir. How did you come to be involved in these struggles, and what path have you taken until today?

Well, first of all, there are two aspects that really set me on the path. One is my own life, where I've faced racism since I was a kid and all of that. And on the other side, it was my parents, my families, my grandparents, dependents, farm workers on the land. And *huasipungueros* in the countryside. They were illiterate, and in the face of racism, we indigenous people were considered the cause of the underdevelopment of the country and also people with low intellectual abilities. Yes, that's how they looked at us indigenous people. And then there is another issue that has led me to this day in all the struggles that we started: The reclamation of land and the struggle for education. Because the indigenous nationalities in the Amazon are surrounded by hydroelectric projects that take away their territory. In addition, roads are then built through which they are displaced. Another aspect that made me act is that there is obviously a confusion about what development is. If for so-called "development" we had to accept, for example, the opening of roads, it destroyed the process of organization of villages and entire families. And this is because the engineer or whoever who lays out the roads and builds them destroys the trees and the animals. And the people who were seen in the communities as the economically poor, as the dispossessed, had no progress to expect in their lives. Because there was no alternative proposal. The only thing we could observe was that the land, the territory, was getting smaller and smaller. And then we also notice that the whole country was getting poorer and poorer. And the people who have their food and their crops are impoverished because they can't get any more space. That's why there's a reaction. And they say, well, if this is development, it's going to lead to the death of people. And also, as I said, to the destruction of the trees, the mountains and the water sources. And we asked ourselves, how can we defend them now? If these sacred places, which are the sacred temples of our people, are already disappearing, then we must defend them. Also, I am aware that we are dependent on nature. We should not talk

about defending nature as a third person. Because we are part of nature. We humans are a part of it. The water we drink, the air we breathe, the mountain we are on, the tree that serves us. In the past, when there was no gas, we took a few leaves or wood for cooking. But only what was necessary. It was not like today that everything is taken away, that all the trees are cut down. It was not like that, but only what was needed was taken. In order not to cut down the tree, in order not to damage it, they even took only the fallen leaves to burn them. But now these things are happening, and these are the reactions that make me want to go deeper. And I come back to the idea that land and water go hand in hand. When I defend territory, the defense goes hand in hand with defending water, because water, of course, allows us to drink, bathe, feed ourselves, and grow plants. And land, without land we humans would be like fish out of water. And that leads us to death. Therefore, our profound struggle now is to defend the land, the territory, but also what is there, namely the water and the mountains.

We would like to talk to you about traditional and current forms of solidarity-based economy. How important do you think this topic is for a democratic and sustainable society?

Despite the discrimination and perhaps the marginalization that we have experienced as indigenous peoples, and despite the neglect of state policies, we have managed to survive until today. For more than 500, almost 600 years. And the thing is this: In the communities where we live, they talk about the community based economy. And what is that? It is what we call *randi randi, cara cha micuna*. The *randi randi* stands for sharing and the *cara cha micuna* stands for solidarity, to toast to the first harvests of the year, to what there is. Since the communal work is done by *minga*, almost without money. The premise is: you help me, and I help you to work on the land or the new house, or if you want to sow the *chakra*, right? So, the *chakra* is sown, and it's not that you come every day just to sow, you also get food, and at the same time what's left of the seeds is also given to you. You can take a little bit of it, either for seeds or for food. It will be shared. And just like the person who helped sow the seed, the family who received that support is also committed. When the grain is ripe, when it can be eaten, like corn and grain or beans and peas or potatoes, they give some of it to the person who helped them. Sowing, working. So, they also eat together, that's the *cara cha micuna*, the eating together. You don't eat alone, you don't lock yourself in, you share with each other. And that's what they used in order to maintain the exchange, isn't it? The other thing they call bartering is the exchange they did from family to family, isn't it? From neighbor to neighbor, they exchanged, exchanged, exchanged. That's the way they survived. There is also growth, progress and development in the economy of the community. There is also buying and selling. But always with, let's say, the principle of solidarity. Nowadays, we can see that the same conditions of today's reality exist here, although they were forced to follow the market economy. And the market economy is not well suited to, say, covering educational expenses, personal expenses, because of course you can't exchange your corn on the bus. You can't bring it to pay for your ticket, so they are also forced to deal with the market economy. So, to have some cash, right? What we have to realize now is that we are being watched and that we are being threatened. That is, poverty is becoming even greater. Because the community based economy is also lost in a way, because nowadays the *mingas* have already shrunk a little. This is because the neighbor or family member who organized them, has had to move away, looking for work, or has gone to another country to find work. Also, the need for money is growing, so now a person prefers that I pay him every day. So that's where the other thing is lost, because maybe they don't feel like they have a mutual

relationship that can reward that situation. I know that's a little bit of a change now, isn't it? But we believe that if there were a real democracy, where these situations were taken into account, that even in these famous free trade agreements it would be possible to promote this kind of solidarity economy, as we call it. The solidarity economy is reciprocal, that is, it is a two-way economy. It would allow countries that have the latest technology and are advanced, but don't have everything, to go into exchange with what we have. There could be an exchange that does not pursue the exploitation and impoverishment of the other. I think that they believe that the capitalist market economy, which only provides capital for profit and gain, is the only one that can prevail. However, we recognize that the countries that have entered this "great development" have only seen a development of impoverishment, death and increasing inequality among people. One does not see any development where the city, health and medical care are improving.

You are involved in the struggles of indigenous peoples and you support the Quichua communities in the Andes in claiming the rights of nature. To what extent is a collaborative and solidarity-based economy important in advancing the idea of the rights of nature?

I think that it is possible if this awareness is also created elsewhere. I think that it is even possible to have the country develop in the right direction if the technicians that the country has, and the educational programs were focused on the country. But even the educational programs only serve to maintain a workforce. Everyone studies only for a master's degree, for a PhD. Then they become consultants to an oil company or a mining company outside the country. However, it is not a program to restore, to liberate, to strengthen the economy in the country. It's not well thought out. But in the context of a community based economy, there is thinking about how to strengthen the economy in the community, to revive and strengthen the solidarity economy.

What are the main obstacles, difficulties and challenges in the realization and expansion of community and solidarity economies? Which actors and groups with their interests work against them?

The water becomes a resource, the tree becomes a resource, the land becomes a resource, the mountain becomes a resource, and then the businessmen show up to take it all. But they don't leave anything in return. They have no relationship with nature, they have no relationship with the environment. They just want to commercialize and cash in. And those are the obstacles that don't allow for a solidarity economy. And of course, in education, for example, there is no such opportunity for everyone. So, you force them to monitor themselves and people all over the world. And also, you don't allow the solidarity economy, the community based economy, to develop, to work, because you believe that it can only be useful for the neighborhood, but not for the progress of the country. So, there are different views. This is where we really need to flesh out the concept of development. Do they want development that leads to death, or do they want development that leads to life? We need to reorganize the understanding. And perhaps speak clearly, so that people also understand that if they want a development that leads to death, that I continue to work for others, not for my people, not for me, not even for my family. And then I can pay for a week with the profit from this work, but on the other side the land is destroyed, the mountain, and the air is no longer pure. The plants are no longer there. There is no more water to go to. So I think it's important to deal with these things, isn't it?

Can you give us some motivating examples from your own experience and involvement in issues of solidarity with indigenous communities?

Look, you've seen that now with the last pandemic, for example, when the government said, "Stay at home." But there were massive layoffs, layoffs of workers. So, people were left without jobs, schools were closed, and so they decided to offer virtual education. But the kids in the neighborhood don't all have cell phones, or if they do, it's one that doesn't have the virtual education software, for example. It's not made easy. The government didn't even provide us with the medicines to really overcome this pandemic. And I think there were hospitals and care for people first class and second class. The facilities, the private hospitals for first class people had all the equipment from the government. But the public health centers lacked medicines and had no permanent staff. The patients were not cared for, there was a lack of the necessary instruments for treatment and it was not safe. What did we do about it in the indigenous villages? With what we had, we shared. It was sharing, with the indigenous peoples. And we also started to review our knowledge, about the medicines. And that meant that it might not take the fever away completely, but at least it didn't hurt, and yet at least the fever could be brought down. You could share and give, and it didn't cost anything, compared to the hospitals. Those who went to the hospital had a hard time coming back because they didn't get care. Instead, communities began to recover their plants and their medicine. This also made me appreciate the role of nature. Because if it were completely degraded: the cement does not bring medicine.

What is your vision for the future?

My vision for the future? It makes me sad to see how, on the one hand, the population is increasing, and, on the other hand, more and more plundering is being done, more and more overexploitation of nature. And if it makes me sad, what is left for the children, for the grandchildren? I don't want nature to remain, as they say, only in cement or in a house made of matchboxes, but rather in a space where it can breathe. In any case, let's hope that the struggle for the future doesn't have an end date that says, "until this date," but that we fight for it to go up again, to go toward to the good life, right? For all of us. And of course, within the framework of the diversity of nationalities, of peoples who are different but have equal rights. And we also want true politics, plurinational politics, to take shape, but respecting this diversity and recognizing all rights. This is what we dream of, what we desire. As I said, this struggle that we have taken up has no end date. But we do not want it to last for centuries. However, we must try to take the appropriate steps.

What would you like to leave the listeners of this interview with?

We all started young, including me personally. And they say that young people dream. And it's true that even parents, if they try, never want their son or daughter to be affected, let's say, in the same way they are. They always want the best for their children. And what parents expect from their children is that we overcome the parents' lives. So, if the parents have taken the necessary steps to put us on the right path, then we also want the best, even for the young people, so they can have it better. That's why I think sometimes it seems like the dreams have been lost for today. And I would like to see those dreams revisited. Why am I saying this? Because it seems that we have allowed ourselves to be carried away by the new

technologies, and that is what prevents us from connecting, what prevents us from thinking about ourselves, indeed, about each other. I believe there are good technologies out there, but they are not having an impact. I call for thinking about others and revisiting our dreams so that things can be better, so that we can achieve the good life for all.

Can you please complete the following sentence?

My wish for a democratic and ecologically sustainable world is ...

It is for life. It is about creating a healthy space where you can be free from, let's say, all these sacrifices we have to make. That's what I want. To share this experience with others.

Can you please complete the following sentence?

We should all be active for democracy and sustainability, because...

Life is not static and confined to a single place. So, if we want to build a new world, a new country, we really have to change something, don't we? Also to achieve what we call *sumak Kawsay*, the good life for all.