A Note from the Cochabamba Peoples’ Summit

Last Thursday night the Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Writs of Mother Earth drew to a raucous conclusion in the Cochabamba football stadium as more than 35,000 people from 140+ countries cheered the adoption of their own strategic plan to address climate change around the world. Bolivia's Cochabamba gathering was neither a Social Forum nor an intergovernmental meeting but a marvelous mix of the two - bringing together official government delegations from 42 countries with social movements and civil society organizations. Almost 10,000 of the 35,000 participants made their way to Cochabamba from other countries -- despite the shutdown of most of the airline routes that would have connected European, African and Asian delegations to the Andean city in the heart of the Altiplana.

The final 10-page summary of negotiations read out in the stadium could hardly be described as great prose and will still need some final editing but there is no doubt that it was the consensus of three days of intense negotiations that brought together indigenous peoples, peasant organizations, trade unions, environmentalists and governments. Many UN agencies including a representative of the Secretary-General also attended. The summary and full final report will be delivered directly to the United Nations as well as to the UNFCCC conference scheduled for Cancun at the end of November. In a closing luncheon for government negotiators and civil society representatives, president Evo Morales and his Venezuelan counterpart, Hugo Chavez, were enthusiastically joined by Ecuador’s Foreign Minister and Cuba’s Vice-President in calling for the report to be taken directly into the climate change negotiations. Government delegates from the United States, Canada, Australia Mexico (and probably many others) looked on in dismay.

The Bolivian government announced its plan to hold the Peoples Summit in Cochabamba last December following the Copenhagen debacle and the failure of governments to achieve even the remotest consensus. Few took the proposal seriously at the time. The decision to hold the meeting in Cochabamba undoubtedly complicated Bolivia’s organizational problems -- but it was a politically strategic move. Not only is Cochabamba in the center of South America, it is also the seat of successful civil society protests 10 years ago, when citizens took to the streets and peasants blockaded roads to prevent the privatization of Cochabamba's water supply. The long battle and final victory brought international recognition to the global issue of water privatization and contributed to strengthening the social movements that, arguably, began with the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 and led to the creation of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001.

If the Cochabamba report lacks poetry, it doesn't lack for either rhetoric or substance. In comparison to the US-imposed "Copenhagen Accord" which was summarily rejected in Copenhagen, the Cochabamba document is elegant, erudite and explicit...

GHG emissions, for example, must be cut back to no more than 300 and the industrialized countries climate debt must be paid in full. Carbon trading was flatly
rejected and the delegates warned sternly that that the global South should not accept Trojan horse technologies that -- while pretending to address climate change -- do little more than outsource high-risk experiments that use climate change’s most vulnerable peoples as guinea pigs. The full text provides more details and examples of both what should not be done and what could be done. It is the product of 17 working groups that met intensively over the three-day summit.

The summary report explicitly rejects "false solutions" to climate change such as nuclear power, agrofuels, transgenic crops and GM tree plantations and geoengineering. Although most of the 35,000 delegates came to Cochabamba with little or no understanding of geoengineering, the launch of the "Hands off mother Earth" campaign in the midst of the conference attracted enormous attention and spontaneous opposition to geoengineering sprung up in several working groups. The campaign was considerably aided and abetted by the presence of a handful of scientists advocating geoengineering who traveled to Cochabamba from Europe to give two seminars advocating their position. Their presence and participation solidified opposition to the idea of any technofix that would massively modify planetary systems on land, on oceans, or in the stratosphere.

Although participation in the conference was impassioned and debates intense, the hurriedly-convened international meeting did have its problems. The government of Bolivia had only expected 10 to 13,000 delegates -- not 35,000. Cochabamba was bursting at the seams and there was considerable confusion around the time and place of side events and working groups. Some social movements had been concerned that government delegations -- including the Bolivian delegation -- would try to manipulate the outcomes. An alliance of national CSO's formed "working group 18" that met just outside the conference to discuss controversial government plans to encourage the mining of silver and lithium and to debate other industrial developments related to fossil fuels. While Bolivia's external image is pristine, it has many "friendly critics" among environmentalists and other progressive movements inside the country. Despite differences, working group 18 function without constraint and the fears of government interference in the other 17 working groups largely failed to materialize.

There were also mixed feelings about a government proposal to create a new "Global Alliance" of governments and civil society to work together on climate change. At a banquet Wednesday night, one Brazilian guest at the head table proposed that the Cochabamba Summit be reconvened every two years. Although there is genuine support for a global forum that can bring together government and civil society on an equal footing to discuss critical issues, social movements were firm that the nature and structure of such meetings will require careful consideration and can't be assumed automatically. Cochabamba was a remarkably successful first experience with a format that could have easily turned disastrous. Lessons need to be absorbed before further meetings are planned.

More than anything else, the Cochabamba Summit succeeded in bringing together progressive government negotiators and activist social movements who are now
committed to dialogue (and, maybe, some cooperation) during the long sequence of negotiating meetings that will wind their way to Cancun and the UNFCCC at the end of November. As a result of Cochabamba, civil society has become not only more militant but also more coherent. More governments have got the message that the Copenhagen debacle must not be repeated.