



**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**  
BRUSSELS OFFICE

**STOPPING THE MACHINES  
OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL  
DESTRUCTION AND BUILDING  
ALTERNATIVE WORLDS**

EN

GLOBAL WORKING GROUP BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

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OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION  
AND BUILDING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS**

**Global Working Group Beyond Development**

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# GLOBAL WORKING GROUP BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

The Global Working Group Beyond Development is hosted by the Brussels Office of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung since 2016. It includes around thirty engaged researchers, activists and popular educators from all five continents which bring together knowledge and experience around the different relations of domination which we confront in actual times – class, race, gender, caste, coloniality and depredatory relations with Nature – and also from processes of alternative transformations towards greater equity, sustainability and justice around the world.

This text has been written collectively on the basis of the discussions during a working group meeting in Quito, Ecuador in May 2017. The following persons collaborated in its creation:

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# INTRODUCTION

The present text is the result of a collective process of analysis, dialogue, and editing based on the second meeting of the *Global Working Group Beyond Development* in the Ecuadorian capital, Quito, and in Nabón County, in Azuay province, in May 2017. It represents an effort to understand the historical moment our world is living through, its patterns of domination and the tendencies, prospects, and challenges of a multi-dimensional transformation. Our discussions have been deeply rooted in our localized experiences of struggle and alternatives, with their particular histories, strategies, advances, and challenges, and in the search for global connections, translations, and lessons between our experiences.

The perspective of the *Global Working Group Beyond Development* is the idea of multi-dimensional social transformation. Its point of departure is that a multidimensional crisis calls for multidimensional responses. Social transformation today should address simultaneously the complex relations between class, race, coloniality, gender, and Nature, as it is precisely their historical entanglements and interdependencies that configure the civilizational bases of the system we face. Although the debates presented here have much in common with a socio-ecological perspective, we believe that it is necessary to highlight gender, race, and coloniality as necessary dimensions of social transformation that are no less significant than relations between classes or society and Nature. Although the term “socio-ecological” does not necessarily exclude these dimensions, it does not explicitly include them either.

So at the very least, the following five key processes of social change are required to strengthen justice, dignity, democracy, and the sustainability of life:

- 1) decolonization;
- 2) anti-capitalism;
- 3) anti-racism/anti-casteism;
- 4) the dismantling of patriarchy;
- 5) the transformation of predatory relations with Nature.

The group shares the conviction that radical change, understood as a transformation originating from the roots of our society, economy, and politics, is imperative if we wish to put a halt to the current socio-ecological destruction wreaked by our civilization in crisis. Several members of the group felt that spirituality and *cosmovision*<sup>1</sup> are another crucial dimension of this transformation.

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1 Cosmovision is our way of seeing and being in the world according to indigenous communities and movements. The word is used to distinguish the indigenous consciousness of the unity of all living things from the modern consciousness that separates Nature and humanity, the present from the past and future, and the individual from the community.

Our discussions were informed by five case studies on the construction of multidimensional alternatives in different regions of the world: the self-determination of the local people of the village of Mendha Lekha in Maharashtra, India; the community resistance against oil extractivism and the closely associated post-colonial State in the Niger Delta in Nigeria; the current building of an alternative municipalism in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain; the building of radical solidarity alternatives in the midst of the economic crisis in Greece; and the process of the Bolivarian revolution, later labeled as “21<sup>st</sup>-Century Socialism,” in Venezuela.

A crucial element that facilitated and enriched dialogue was the Global Group’s visit to the municipality of Nabón in Southern Ecuador, which was aimed at learning from the experience of building *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir*.<sup>2</sup> In Nabón, this indigenous vision has been translated into a mode of local governance practiced by communities and associations with the support of the local government, which was led over four successive terms of government by two female mayors from the indigenous and intercultural *Pachakutik* political movement (for more detail, see Lang and M’barek 2018).

Our discussions were also inspired by multiple global debates and emancipatory perspectives, such as those associated with eco-feminism, the commons, socio-ecological change, post-extractivism, the rights of Nature, degrowth, transition thinking, and others. Often these debates have been more effective in showing the directions in which social change needs to go than in providing the practical strategies of transformation. At the same time, our group integrates researchers, popular educators, and activists who are deeply engaged with processes related to social movements and the politics of transformation, and who deal with the very concrete and practical challenges of social change on a daily basis.

Our main objective for the Ecuador meeting was the analysis of practices of multidimensional social transformation. We engaged with questions such as: What strategies do we need? How can we do this in ways that do not remain marginal, but spread throughout our societies? How do we engage with the dilemma of the urgency of stopping accelerated socio-ecological destruction versus the usual slowness of deep cultural change? How can we ensure that transformation takes place in democratic, emancipatory ways? And what kind of institutions can sustain these processes of change?

Of course, these are big questions considering not only the complexity of contemporary societies, but also the particular character of our group, made up of people from so

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2 *Sumak Kawsay* (in Kichwa) and *Buen Vivir* (in Spanish) translate as “living well” in English. The concept refers to the possibility of living with dignity, prosperity, and in harmony with all living creatures, and is very much based on indigenous spirituality and communitarian practices.

many different realities with their own particularities. We focused on four central questions which will constitute the central parts of this article:

- > How to democratize democracy or deepen democracy in the context of the growing diversion of democratic tools for the benefit of political and economic elites, taking into account the authoritarian practices of previous emancipatory projects?
- > How does multidimensional transformation deal with the State? Or what is the role of the State in such a transformation?
- > How to make use of or handle the legacy of the left? What does the left need to rethink or transform in order to deepen its emancipatory potential?
- > What kind of internationalist relations and solidarities are necessary for multidimensional transformation?

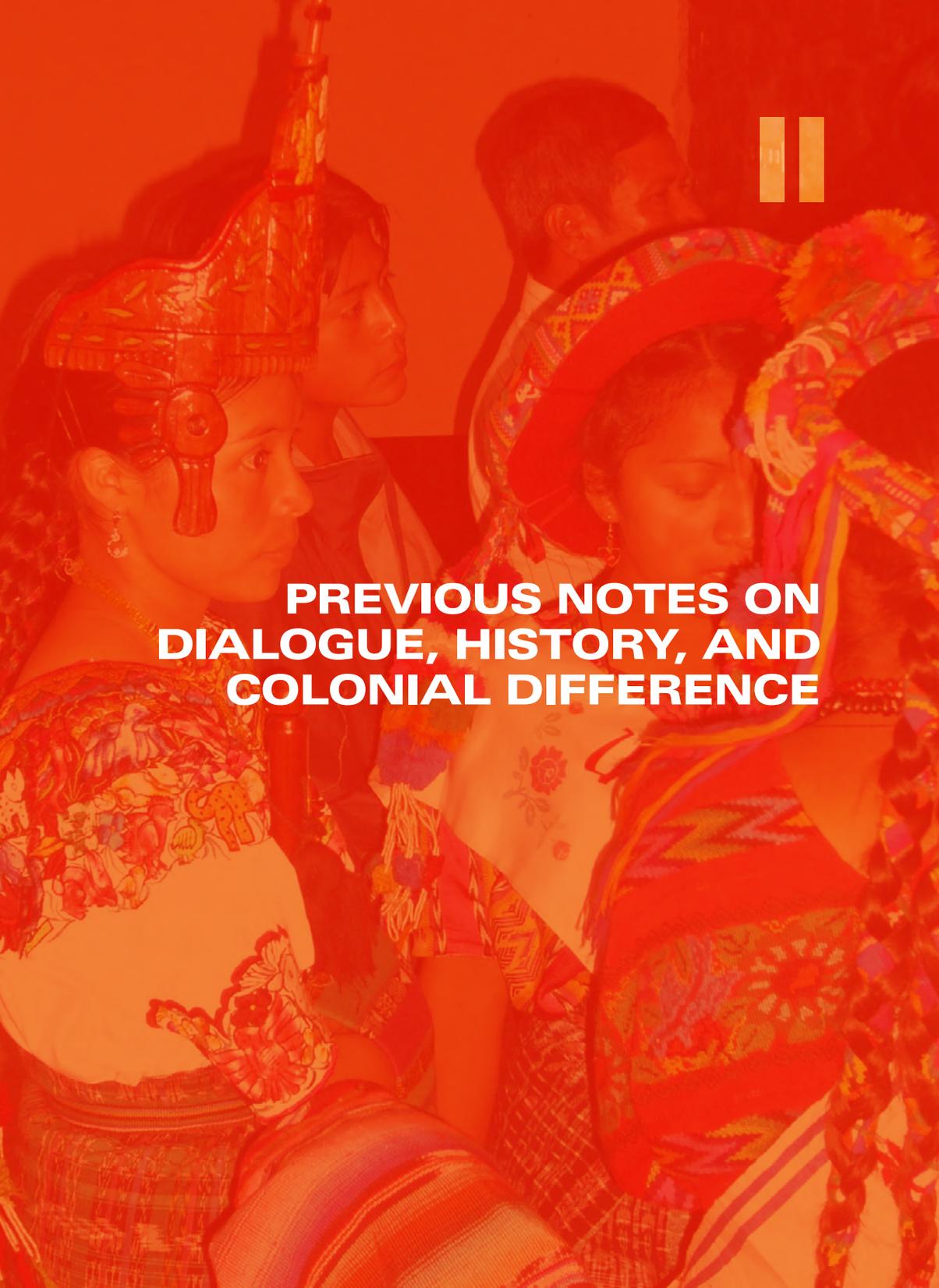
These questions relate to a particular historical moment of profound changes and new challenges. The paradox of our historical moment might be that radical transformation is imperative and urgent, but at the same time it seems further away than in recent decades. All of this means that we need to be mindful of two different temporalities: short-term actions and campaigns that can put an end to socio-ecological destruction now, and long-term strategies for building deep-rooted alternatives that secure our collective future. We could also state this in terms of the defensive struggles that protect rights, institutions, bodies, and territories from predatory capitalism, and the offensive struggles that create other worlds through new subjectivities, social relations, modes of production, and institutions.

One of the lessons of the past historical cycle might be that politics as we know it is not enough for the kind of transformation the world needs; neither has armed struggle proved to be a path in the right direction. At the same time, most of the political legacies, instruments, and analytical horizons of the global left also seem to be insufficient for meeting the contemporary challenges as they were developed to overcome a very different form of capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We have seen that the variety of organizational structures and practices that were used and developed in social movements throughout the long 20<sup>th</sup> century have reached their limits over the last two decades. New ways of doing politics are being invented in processes of mobilization around the world, but they lack a shared political horizon and instruments for structural articulation.

Prior to outlining the four sections on each of these issues we have dedicated a section to the particularities and embeddedness of our dialogues, and the ways in which we relate to colonial legacies and presents, as well as to patriarchy and gender. After the four thematic sections, we will try to wrap up our ideas on the implications of these debates for political strategy.

We decided to produce a collective text that reflects our conversation, and we have therefore not included references and citations for the concrete members of our group in the text, nor have we included extensive bibliographical references. We are very aware there are many differences between our perspectives and thoughts, based on theoretical or political differences, but also regarding the concrete necessities of the contexts in which we are living.

However, we feel the dialogue between our differences enriched all of us, and produced new knowledge and thinking that goes beyond our individual positions. In a sense, this final document is like a tapestry in which the words and feelings of all of us have been woven together. We have tried to represent our discrepancies faithfully and to open up debates and new questions because we feel that the right questions are as important as relative certainties.



**PREVIOUS NOTES ON  
DIALOGUE, HISTORY, AND  
COLONIAL DIFFERENCE**

In our meeting, we intended to develop a global discussion rooted in personal and collective localized histories and experiences. “The global” and “the local” are not separate spheres, but co-constitutive dimensions of realities around the world. Our world is shaped by place-based actors and actions in complex, interdependent, and continuous ways. For example, the resistance of farmer, *campesino*,<sup>3</sup> or indigenous communities to mega-mining operations can affect global stock markets and bilateral governmental negotiations. At the same time, the rise of global prices of minerals due to the boom in the Chinese construction sector can intensify the strategies of mining companies for advancing their projects even when they are resisted.

The global is present in the local, and vice-versa. Therefore, in our meeting we tried to understand ongoing global processes as they are constituted in concrete places around the world. We also tried to understand why similar political phenomena, like the emergence of new social movements highly critical of traditional politics and representative democracy, are taking place in very different societies at the same time.

Therefore the challenges of our discussions have been simultaneously methodological, political, and theoretical. Throughout this experiment we have agreed to think and learn together as a group through the exchange of our experiences, but also through the recognition of our differences, in order to:

- 1) deepen and clarify debates on and analysis of concepts, criteria, political contexts in relation to alternatives beyond the development imperative;
- 2) contribute to the strengthening of strategies of emancipatory resistance and the building of alternatives;
- 3) strengthen articulations, weave alliances, and build support networks for future actions;
- 4) and to create ways of communicating our ideas and debates within and beyond academia.

Our analyses are informed by our personal histories, locations, and trajectories of struggle, transformation, experiences of pain, joy, victories, and injustices. They are also embedded in very different historical experiences, societies, and movements, which produce diverse semantics and significations. Although we all share a commitment to similar political perspectives, and participate in the politics of social movements, we are not the same in terms of sociocultural background, education, political identities, spiritual beliefs, and geographical belongings. Therefore, in our discussions we often

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3 *Campesino* is the Spanish word for peasant but goes beyond this meaning as it includes a differentiated social and cultural identity within Latin American contexts.

included information on our class, territorial, and political belongings and becoming in order to make our situated knowledges explicit.

This rootedness allowed us to talk from positions of complexity and diversity while on the other hand it also implied challenges in terms of dialogue. We saw that words like crisis, identity, the State, the left, solidarity, Nature, alternatives and many others turned out to mean very different things in different contexts. Although, of course, we never intended to find universal or univocal meanings, we did strive towards the identification of connections and equivalences that allow shared political horizons and comprehension of how global patterns of domination are at the same time connected and specific in each geo-historical context. Our discussion therefore required us to both find translations between languages, as well as to recognize the differences between ourselves. Several of these will be analyzed further in the text, but at least three are so fundamental that they should be made explicit right from the start.

Firstly, our group could easily be seen as homogeneous in ideological or political terms, but this would be a false conclusion. Although leftist political identities and histories are present in many of us, we recognized that not all of us come from the left, nor do all of us see the left as our principal political identity. Some identify with Gandhian political thought or orientations, and others in our group would see themselves primarily in social movement terms, as part of indigenous, feminist, or environmentalist struggles. This diagnostic allowed us to understand that our group identity and debates go beyond the left, engaging with a far broader horizon of emancipatory traditions. Much more on this will be discussed in the section on the left.

Secondly, as we come from different parts of the world, we come from very different historical conversations and embeddedness. We need to take history into account, in a complex and differentiated way. In particular, our debates and situated knowledges are deeply influenced by colonial difference<sup>4</sup> that has deeply marked our bodies, territories, societies, States, and knowledges, affecting in very different ways colonized and colonizing peoples and societies.

Although this is still rarely acknowledged in the Global North, colonial difference has shaped power structures within and between our societies, as well as economic processes and networks, with deep implications that still exist today. Africa was distributed to the colonial powers in a way that guaranteed their access to lakes and rivers, determining reality until today. African, Asian, and South American cities and rural areas

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4 The notion of colonial difference states that the division between colonizers and colonized peoples, who were seen as inferior beings, has been institutionalized and naturalized as a fundamental divide that persists in our societies, distinguishing the people who are seen and treated as subjects with rights from the people who are treated as objects of domination and exploitation, and consequently do not enjoy real citizenship, until today. This notion has been worked on in Africa, Asia, and South America in discussions on Subaltern Studies, Post- and De-coloniality.

were connected to allow the exportation of agricultural products, minerals, and precious metals to Europe in specific ways still present today. And European societies integrated colonized peoples within their societies as second-class citizens for their own economic gain, naturalizing racist practices. The coloniality of knowledge privileged western, modern, and academic knowledge over other forms of knowledge rooted in indigenous, afro-descendant, peasant, female, and popular experiences.

As we sought the political and practical effectiveness of ideas and perspectives over academic sophistication, we had to avoid the academic shut-down of certain discussions, and ensure a connection with concrete experiences and movements. But it also required us to see what words would be relevant for what contexts, or what words could allow translation between these. For example, the word crisis has a very different conceptual meaning in different cultures; it is sometimes seen as a threat, sometimes as an opportunity for change. But it also refers to very different historical experiences. For indigenous Guatemalans and the black community in the United States, it is not so obvious that the current crisis significantly differs from their longer historical experiences. It was remarked that for them, life has always been a crisis, with the implication that the current crisis could be seen more as a crisis for the dominant groups in their societies.

In a similar way, the language of alternatives – understood as post-capitalist institutions and practices – might make invisible other practices that have always existed and still sustain the lives of millions of peoples around the globe today, such as, for example, the practices of indigenous peoples. Many contemporary alternative practices related to *the commons* reflect, reconstruct, or restore modes of living that existed before contemporary forms of domination. In other cases, alternatives are to be found in the contemporary practices of peoples in the Global South deeply rooted in their ancestral history and current livelihoods, but denigrated as primitive, backward, underdeveloped, or poor.

Finally, knowledge and dialogue are also gendered and embodied. All people regardless of their gender have participated in differentiated ways in knowledge production, and their ways of knowing and perspectives have received very unequal attention and value in our societies. Simultaneously, knowledge is always embodied: we know through our bodies and their ways of being part of society. So women will produce other perspectives and emancipatory knowledges than men, whilst among women themselves, the experiences of indigenous, dalith,<sup>5</sup> and black women will again produce other meanings. In our own group, we identified one silence that should be addressed in the future: the perspectives of LGBTQ people and struggles were not explicitly incorporated into the Group's discussion.

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5 Socially marginalized caste in India, literally meaning the oppressed.

All of this means that our dialogues and discussions did not take place in a homogeneous space and community, as is never the case. The choice of words or elaboration of lists and categories always reflects a certain geopolitics of knowledge that we need to take into account in our interactions. For example, western language, terminology, and theory remains hegemonic in many of the analyses of global processes, whilst at the same time Europe and Latin America may be predominant in the global debates on alternatives and social movements. Therefore we need to reach out and open up the debate to other geographies of emancipation in Africa, North America, and Asia – as the Global Group explicitly tries to do.

We also need a critical awareness of the implications of the choice of our words. For example, the modern, liberal, and western grammars of democracy and human rights can be seen as weak grammars for self-determination and dignity. They certainly are useful and even very necessary in some contexts, but limited in others. It is necessary to cross cultural boundaries and subvert or transform colonial difference, both in terms of language and political theory, and by not always taking modern and Western concepts and analytical tools as points of departure for our discussions. For example, we could easily start from the indigenous concept of reciprocity, instead of the modern concept of solidarity, to talk about walking together and alliances between struggles and peoples.

Thirdly, we need to see words through their historical embeddedness, reconstructing the long-term conversations of which they are part. For example, many of the issues that are on the table today were talked about a century ago by DuBois in the conference on pan-Africanism, or in historical debates within the pluralities of the left. Finally, a crucial methodological question is whether all of this complexity can be processed only through spoken language. Some of us stated that dialogues with other languages, through our bodies, emotions, artistic expressions, and spirituality, are crucial for our mutual understanding, for breaking through the limits of our rational analysis, and the strengthening of our relations. In a sense, this happened through the field visit and shared days in Quito and Nabón.

Most definitely, it is precisely all of this complexity that enriched our discussions, and allowed us to get a real grip on the processes evolving in our shared world.



# DEMOCRATIZING DEMOCRACY



The first central theme of our collective discussion was the notion of democracy. Contemporary liberal democracies have become distorted and weakened due to the extreme concentration of wealth and mediatic and political power in national and global elites, the emergence of right-wing populism, the corporate capture of the State and the intensification of the state-led criminalization of dissidence. This has produced societies that are merely democratic in form, but increasingly authoritarian and elitist in substance. As experiences of social change have, for the most part, also bred authoritarian regimes – in the Soviet Bloc or more recently with progressive governments in South America – the question of democracy becomes fundamental.

## LESSONS ON DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

We understand democracy in its original sense of self-governance, of people deciding their individual and collective futures. Consequently, democracy is not a state of government, but a continuous and multidimensional process that seeks to democratize unequal power relations through political action, enhancing liberties, justice, and the capacity for individual and collective self-determination. As such, the building of a just and democratic society depends on the transformation of all – mutually embedded – systems of domination through the interrelated processes of the dismantling of patriarchy, decolonization, anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and the transformation of predatory relations with Nature. Our case studies showed the diverse and complex faces of these democratizations, far beyond liberal conceptions of democracy.

A first logic of democratization is the transformation of existing institutions and their powerful tendencies towards bureaucratization and their reproduction of the inequalities present in society. In the Ecuadorian county of Nabón, the means of formal liberal local democracy have been stretched and reinterpreted in a participatory and communitarian way, through participatory budgeting and dialogues between the municipality and indigenous communities and productive cooperatives. The municipalism of *Barcelona en comú* seeks to open and strengthen spaces for self-determination beyond representative democracy and the division of *public* and *private spheres*, thereby enhancing the capacity of society to control the reproduction of life.

In both cases, local municipal politics are reclaiming power in relation to the central State through the intensification of popular participation, organization, and mobilization. Evidently, this has created tensions, for example in Nabón, regarding mining projects supported by the national government versus the protection of highland ecosystems and forests promoted by the municipality.

Other case studies also show that democratization can happen beyond the exclusive realm of the State, through the building of other collective proceedings or institutions

to resolve the problems communities and peoples face. In Greece, practices of collective control over the reproduction of life emerged precisely where the democratically chosen government failed to live up to its promises and people started to organize themselves around the needs of local communities in areas like health care and support for refugees. In Mendha-Lekha, drawing on the generation of independent and shared knowledge in numerous study groups on issues that affect the community, genuinely local decision-making processes were implemented in order to recapture power from the State. The village adapted the temporalities of change to the needs of the process, as the villagers believe that the quality and strength of decisions can only be guaranteed through consensus, based upon equal opportunities for participation and the collective generation of knowledge.

Thirdly, and importantly, democratization also requires profound changes in established political cultures around the world. These changes address patriarchal, colonial, clientelist, and verticalist biases which are deeply inscribed not only in existing institutions, but also in the ways many people currently understand and imagine politics. A good example is the notion of the feminization of politics in Barcelona, which goes far beyond just having a female mayor or the equal representation of women in all institutional bodies. Instead, it proposes the building of a new political ethics/practice/process which breaks with classic power patterns, promoting relations of care, diversity, and consensus-building over those patterns of confrontation, competition, and masculinist power.

Democratization is also about the (re)distribution of control over the means of (re) production – for example the redistribution of the access to land and seeds, in order to make food sovereignty possible on different scales. Here, the case studies show that there are very different ways to redistribute that have significant consequences for the democratizing or emancipatory effects they produce. While Venezuela's rentist and extractivist model has produced a form of redistribution, it is centered on the executive power of the central State, which has led to a strong concentration of power and manifold dependencies.

On the contrary, the experiences of Nabón or Mendha-Lekha show that, on a smaller scale, and if operated from below, redistribution can also happen in ways that, by contrast, disseminate power and contribute to individual and collective emancipation. The question of scale, and how different regulations shape the relations between local and higher scales, giving or taking away competences or budgets, is crucial and should be directly addressed by our struggles. For now, whilst there are positive examples of democracy on smaller scales, their translation into higher levels of coordination, like the national level, is unsatisfactory.

## CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

All of these paths of democratization depend on dynamic relations between political institutions and organized society. Democracy is always a net result of people appropriating decision-making from below in the context of social struggles, which creates new spaces and practices for deliberation and political renovation. New institutions arise, but soon become sclerotic and infected by power struggles and vested interests. Democracy thus requires a constant and conscious process of appropriation from below in order to remain dynamic and profound. Drafted institutions may look excellent on the sketch board, but will only remain democratic if they can be constantly re-invented.

In the case of the Spanish State, for instance, the last wave of democratization started with the occupation of the squares (the 15M movement) that questioned the “old regime” and practices of representative democracy. This was a constitutive moment, in which people in the streets and the squares started doing politics in a different way, creating horizontal places for decision-making around the country. *Barcelona en comú* is a movement which attempts to translate this grass roots democracy into the spaces of institutional politics by “seizing the institutions”. Now in power, the municipalist movement seeks to implement strategies to promote a new ecosystem of movements and institutional experiments – a new institutional structure – which at the same time would preserve the autonomous agenda of the movement (for more detail see Castro 2018).

In the Indian village of Mendha-Lekha, democratization started from people’s understanding that their weakness within the Indian State was the consequence of the delegation of their decision-making and power to higher levels and the more distant State through their representatives. So their first struggle was to re-appropriate direct decision-making and establish systems for the generation of knowledge. On the other hand, in Venezuela it was precisely the increasing control exercised by the governing party over communitarian and social movement practices that limited the emancipatory potential of the process.

Thus, democracy is not primarily a question of institutions, formalities, and elections, but a self-determined historical process of the construction and renovation of the best conditions for the people to decide over their own futures, based on dynamic relations between society and formal institutions. We therefore discussed the preconditions that would allow real democracy to emerge:

- > Democracy should be understood as an on-going process of democratization within our communities, movements, societies, and States, instead of as a series of technical instruments or mechanisms that can be implemented;
- > Democracy as self-governance has to encompass all aspects of life, including issues of gender, care, production, consumption, distribution, reproduction, and economic organization;
- > Democracy starts from the recognition of the fundamental right to participate in decision-making about the issues that affect and concern us, which implies the right to actively take part in informal or formal, institutional or legal spaces far beyond the very limited act of voting;
- > Democracy also requires the recognition and inclusion of different kinds of knowledge beyond the western/scientific canon, as well as access to sufficient knowledge, skills, and information in order to be able to make complex and informed decisions;
- > Democracy needs the creation of meaningful forums, mechanisms, and processes for deliberation and decision-making, including referendums, consultations, citizens assemblies, but also more creative forms like sortition<sup>6</sup> and the use of digital forums and media, where this is possible, in an inclusive way. The precise forms and practices of democracy will be embedded in local histories, cultures, and practices, and will therefore be profoundly plural and in many societies plurinational;
- > The recognition of political rights, the access to information and capacities, and the actual functioning of meaningful democratic forums and processes depend on people's individual and collective political self-awareness for these conditions actively realized by its subjects. Since in many societies the institutions that should contribute to the building of political awareness and democratic culture (the media, educational systems, and political parties) tend to promote depoliticization, popular education, alternative communication, and communitarian practices are crucial alternatives to formal political education;
- > It is imperative that the State does not have the power to institutionalize certain forms of "permissible" participation and delegitimize others, but that the realm of deliberation is a lively space which is constantly in motion, and determined by the people themselves and their organizations;
- > Another important condition is the maturity and wisdom of democratic processes, which implies that majorities do not simply impose their decisions on minorities, but understand that weaker positions are an important contribution and should have greater access to decision-making;
- > Finally, in the face of the ecological crisis, we want a democracy that embraces all forms of life, including the different beings and forms of existence commonly referred to as Nature. Some of us use the term earth democracy to describe the democracy we are looking for, in which the rights, voices, and roles of all beings must be considered in the decisions on our collective future.

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6 Sortition is an alternative to election, which consists in choosing public officials as a random sample from the population (by a sort of lottery), according to criteria of proportional representation.

Some of us think that bottom-up democracy, and the building of confederalist alliances between spaces of self-governance, might have the biggest democratic potential, constructing new spaces of decision-making which are not centered on the structure of the Nation-State. At the same time, others insist that the struggle for democracy must also be fought within existing national and global structures, as urgent issues like the ecological crisis need to be dealt with on these higher levels.

Diverse political communities are crucial for imagining alternative democracies. These not only include the evident indigenous and farmer communities, but also urban communities, productive associations, even communities in virtual/digital spaces. We are aware that communities should not be idealized, and are themselves spaces for political constructions of justice, dignity, and democracy. Consequently, overcoming oppressive practices and discourses (for example: in terms of patriarchy) implies the building of democratic culture within those communities, the self-determination and organization of minority subjects, and dialogues between different political communities about broader political processes. For example, when the people of Mendha assessed their weaknesses, they not only included their powerlessness before the Nation-State, but also weaknesses created by gender inequity within their village society, and the former could not be addressed successfully without addressing the latter.

It is clear that such a perspective on democracy goes beyond the liberal notions of democracy that have been hegemonic since World War II. In the short term, in the face of the current right-wing populist offensive it might be necessary to also use and defend the grammars and institutions of democracy and human rights in liberal terms, although in the long term, these will need to be expanded or radicalized by other perspectives on self-determination and dignity.

One of the remaining crucial challenges ahead has to do with the institutional forms of these radical democracies: How do they work beyond local communitarian spaces? How can the consistent weakening of transformative local spaces through actions taken at higher levels be avoided? Is it even necessary to go beyond a certain level and how can this be thought about in ways that maybe transcend the local/national/global logic? How can these democracies be sustained? These questions lead us to reflect about the role of the State.

# IV

## REFOUNDING AND OVERCOMING THE STATE



The State has always been the main object of political theory, where it has been analyzed both as a problem and as a solution. The “conquest” of the State has been – and remains for many – the recurring slogan of leftist movements, which postulates that through the control of the State, dominant relations of power and (re)production can be transformed. In revolutionary times, rather than being abolished, the State has been reimagined, redesigned, and refocused – with rather contradictory results. What is the State today? To what extent can or should the State have a central role in processes of emancipation? In which way do we need to revolutionize institutions themselves? Can we imagine a State that guarantees the common good, or is the best State the one that illuminates its own dissolution?

The State was one of the most controversial subjects of our group discussion, with positions ranging from anti-statism (see below) to arguments in favor of rebuilding a functioning Welfare State. So, in this section we try to shed light on the shades between these two poles. We all would agree that all currently existing State configurations – be they more presidentialist, more parliamentary, post-colonial or not, post-socialist or not, etc. – are rather limited in their transformative potential, at least at the national level. At the same time, it is also true that emancipatory social movements have often found allies in state-run bodies and individuals within the State who have supported their struggles. We therefore need to be more precise in our assessment of its emancipatory or anti-emancipatory potential.

## **ASSESSING THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF THE STATE: SOME EXAMPLES**

A serious evaluation of the emancipatory potential of the State should start by recognizing that the State is a complex landscape of interrelated institutions (local, provincial, or departmental and national-level, executive, legislative and judicial, authorities, public health and education systems, state-owned companies, and other state-bodies). It interacts with society in many ways: the State as provider, as regulator, as mediator, as expression of certain interests and power relations, as repressor, etc. The State should therefore be understood as an articulation of different bodies, methods, discourses, roles, and persons, on different geographical scales. However, one of the main objectives and functions of the State is ensuring stable conditions for capital accumulation, building new equilibria in the face of new situations and new challenges to corporate power and interests.

Although the State currently tends to be more a part of the problem than of the solution, certain specific historical constellations show its potential for contributing to positive change as well, particularly when it comes to defensive struggles that aim to stop

ecological or social destruction. In Peru, Colombia, and Argentina, local governments participated in the organization of referenda on mining that made the popular rejection of mining projects in their territories evident, and strengthened grassroots struggles. The experiences of Nabón and Barcelona show the possibility of social transformation through, in, and of the State itself, through participatory politics and commoning experiences on a local level. More than 200 cities around the world have taken back municipal control over public services, as a result of concrete struggles and campaigns against privatization by social movements.

On a national level, feminist and LGTBQ movements have advanced the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights, particularly in Europe and Latin America, by combining popular mobilization, legal strategies, and political participation. And affirmative action policies have opened up education and government services to those otherwise excluded on the basis of class, race/ethnicity, or gender.

In Germany, a strong movement against nuclear power catalyzed the creation of the Green Party, which went on to participate in coalition governments. New alliances between parliamentarians, the ongoing social protest movement, and alternative-energy start-ups, which combined resistance, legislation on renewable energies, and experimentation at the practical, technological, and local levels, converged into a majoritarian cultural awareness of the need for a different energy paradigm. In the end, this cultural shift generated new effects on public policies and the economic model, which led to 30 percent of the energy produced in Germany today being renewable.

We also have seen how constitutional processes, for example in Ecuador and Bolivia, but also in South Africa and Tunisia, allowed the incorporation of new rights, like the rights of Nature, into national legal and political spheres. In Colombia, the Constitutional Court has been extremely important in defending human rights and democracy in a country torn apart by civil war and subject to increased political control by paramilitaries. Among its important decisions was the annulment of the so-called Strategic Mining Areas in twenty departments in the country, and the recognition of the right of local governments to reject mining projects by means of referenda, even if these are supported by the national government. Finally, the recent recognition of the rights of rivers in India, New Zealand, and Colombia seems to open new possibilities for their protection.

On the international level, the ILO Convention 169<sup>7</sup> and the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights provided indigenous peoples with new arguments for the defense of their territories and cultures. New juridical figures can offer interesting opportunities for emancipatory politics, although their concrete implementation can be difficult and problematic, and advances in the law are often undone by the initiatives of political adversaries afterwards.

These examples show that state-owned entities and local governments *can* support grassroots innovation and significant efforts aimed at sustainability, the deepening of democracy, and the realization of human rights. However, these examples tend to reflect isolated advances in terms of specific rights or policies for determined groups, and not integral processes of the social transformation of all of society. Therefore, the evaluation of the cycle of progressive governments in Latin America allows a deeper understanding of the potentials and limitations of the State as an agent of social change.

After approximately two decades of intense social movement mobilizations in a series of Latin American countries, first against dictatorships and later against neoliberal policies, political forces of the left finally acceded to government at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A unique opportunity had emerged in which a whole world region could choose an alternative path for regional integration and a relative decoupling from neoliberal globalization, led by progressive governments and backed by strong social movements.

These governments have been quite effective in marking their distance from neoliberal macroeconomics, re-instituting the State's regulatory power, and building a new regional discourse centered on sovereignty against US influence, while at the same time deepening economic relations and dependencies with China. They have implemented a certain redistribution of the extractivist rent through a series of social programs that have diminished statistical poverty significantly. In some cases, they have improved health and education policies by extending the outreach of those public services and giving them better infrastructure.

On the other hand, economic, productive, and wealth structures have remained largely untouched, with the richest getting richer while the poorest became a little less poor. At the same time, consumer culture and modernization have expanded and left their imprints on subjectivities that until that moment had not been completely shaped by capitalist imaginaries. This peculiar model of transformation seems to have relied on a cycle of high commodity prices, and is currently being reversed in many dimensions.

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7 The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989 is an International Labour Organization Convention, also known as ILO Convention 169, or C169. It is the major binding international convention concerning indigenous peoples, and a forerunner of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

At the same time, Nation-State structures and logics have proven largely resilient to transformation, as the most emancipatory goals of introducing plurinationality and dismantling patriarchy in the State have not gone beyond rhetoric. Instead of deepening democracy, most countries experienced a concentration of power in the executive and a backlash regarding autonomous social organization.

*Buen vivir*, as a new guiding principle which seeks to re-integrate production with reproduction and human society with Nature, has been re-signified by State institutions, transforming their development plans and indicators into a term synonymous with “development.” But most importantly for the debate to which we seek to contribute in this section, the new governments understood the State as having a central role to play in transformative processes. Instead of opening up the existing institutions to plurinationality and wide participation, they increasingly fell into authoritarianism and criminalization, seeing a threat in social movements, NGOs, and organized society as autonomous forces, and creating their own parallel loyal organizations in order to undermine their representativity.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE POLITICS IN THE SHORT TERM**

The examples we discussed in our meeting suggest that the State can play an important role in affirmative political action and in limiting socio-ecological destruction in the short term. In general, this can only happen if active and strong grassroots actors push State agencies or even individual representatives to bear their responsibility for enforcing human rights in practice – as changes within the State always reflect changes in power relations within society. It is only after popular mobilization, the development of proposals for change, and strategic litigation that different parts of the State begin to act, often in contradiction with other State actors.

Particularly at the local level, as the Nabón and Barcelona experiences show, wider margins for emancipatory politics seem to exist, due to the direct relations of grassroots organizations with local governments, and the possibilities for them to exert pressure on and participate in local politics. However, this emancipatory potential requires the transformation of the institutions themselves, with their inherent logics and procedures, to be a consistent part of the strategy of change. But again, the limits of transformation at the local level are also shaped by national and transnational dynamics.

The transformation reached by state-led progressisms in Latin America remained way below the expectations of the protagonists of the previous cycle of social struggles, and it is even often described as a mere modernization and re-legitimization of capitalism, which, during the neoliberal cycle, had reached an impasse in the region. Many of us agree that this reflects the structural limits and problems of the neokeynesian left, but

also of the populist right, both of which gained terrain with an aggressive discourse against the consequences of neoliberal globalization, but ended up implementing insufficient policy responses that seek to empower traditional State structures without fundamentally changing its relation with capitalist markets.

The modern State has been a principal agent of “development,” creating megaprojects within infrastructure, industries, and resource extraction, and in recent years this has happened all the same under socialist, progressive as well as under neoliberal regimes worldwide. The intensification of the grip of extractivism on many countries especially in the Global South, but in recent times also in the semi-peripheries of the Global North, leads to a particular kind of low-intensity democracy. The control and distribution of the share of the rent that governments can retain leads to strongly centralized State configurations prone to corruption. At the same time extractivism promotes mass consumption as compensation for other kinds of needs.

National governments around the world are under elite control, which enables corporate power and increasingly creates configurations where the State shares or concedes sovereignty to private companies, like special economic zones and economic corridors. In the contemporary global economy, States are competing for investment sites in global economic value chains, and more and more decisions regarding our societies are made by extra-territorial actors, including other States, corporations, or multilateral bodies. The German or US governments might have more influence on other countries than the people of these countries have themselves, as could be clearly seen in Greece in 2015.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, in particular the post-colonial States in the Global South – as well as some in the North – remain strong in terms of supporting repression and backing the economic interests of national elites, but weak in terms of channeling the interests, demands, and agendas of the people, or of opening spaces for self-determination.

So, we should see the modern liberal Nation-State as a particular historical construct, configured by capitalism and colonialism, as well as by social struggles. Many of its flaws are a consequence of the fact that the State was built upon (or within) the capitalist system, and is founded upon this mode of production. At the same time, contemporary

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8 After the government debt crisis (also known as the Greek Depression) faced by Greece in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-08, the country required bailout loans in 2010, 2012, and 2015 from the International Monetary Fund, the Eurogroup, and the European Central Bank. The Eurogroup, led by Germany, demanded extreme austerity measures that prioritized meeting loan payments over effective measures to dynamize the economy, with grave consequences for social security in Greek society. This austerity program was firstly imposed by the government of the social democratic party PASOK in 2010 and continued by a coalition government between PASOK, a right-wing party (ND), and center-left party (DIMAR) in 2012-2015. In January 2015, five years after the first bailout program, SYRIZA, a coalition of the radical left in Greece, took power and formed a coalition government with ANEL (a center-right party) by promising a sustainable plan for managing the debt crisis and overcoming austerity. However, in the end, and despite mass opposition expressed by the people in the referendum of July 2015, the government struck a new loan agreement in July/August 2015 that perpetuated previous austerity packages, promoting privatization schemes for public land and infrastructure; wage cuts; divestment of the pension system; and a deepening of external, EU supervision of all State policies.

social rights were institutionalized on the basis of social conquests, and participatory and affirmative politics were the result of social struggles.

For the last few decades the State has been going through a process of transformation as a result of a neoliberal restructuring which seeks to undo the gains of social struggles that have been institutionalized in previous decades, as well as its growing internationalization in the face of global challenges. One of our short-term goals in dealing with the State is to deprivatize power and decommodify the State, promote transparency, fight corruption, and strengthen citizen surveillance of the State and corporate actions.

Another central problem with the State is its use of force and violence. Increasingly, State and parastatal actors are involved in the imposition of extractive projects on indigenous and peasant territories. In countries like Peru, the police can be contracted by mining companies to organize their security, whilst in India the military is increasingly involved in enforcing extractivism. Around the world, the police also reinforces existing practices of discrimination and exclusion, as we can see in the ethnic profiling and police violence in the United States particularly against people of African descent, or in the extremely violent wars on drugs in the Philippines, Mexico, and Colombia that particularly affect poor people and populations of color, and especially women and children. So, another crucial issue in the short term has to do with the demilitarization of our States, and with the deprivatization of their security apparatus.

Finally, there is an urgent need for reflection about what we mean by “social inclusion,” as most state-led social programs of monetary assistance create dependency and paternalism, and encourage participation in capitalist markets and consumption instead of strengthening autonomy and alternatives modes of living. Due to their abandonment and discrimination by the State, in the past many indigenous peoples, tribal and dalith communities, people of African origins, and other marginalized groups have maintained their solidarity and autonomous capacity for organizing daily life in the face of many threats.

This capacity of the excluded to resist adverse conditions should be recognized as a great strength that also contains many seeds for transformation, as their very exclusion from dominant logics has opened up spaces for different logics of (re)production at the margins. Therefore, we should not frame them as needy, poor, and without skills, but find ways to strengthen those groups at the margins within their own sociocultural and spiritual logics, without exposing them to market forces or making them dependent on paternalistic State subsidies.

## THE WELFARE STATE

One of the most intense debates of our meeting concerned the relevance of the Welfare State as a horizon of transformation and the possibilities for radically democratic policies in the context of the crisis of the Welfare State.

In this regard the Greek experience shows an important dilemma. Many of the promoters of autonomous spaces in Greece insist that they do not intend to replace the State. Whilst they want to assure social rights through their autonomous initiatives on health care, housing, and other services, in response to the State's neoliberal withdrawal, at the same time, these efforts demand that the Greek State assume its responsibilities for ensuring social inclusion and as a guarantor of rights.

Of course, other autonomous and anarchist perspectives are also present within the Greek experience, but the crucial question posed here also found echoes in other realities like the United States or France. To what extent can our movements and struggles resolve the concrete daily problems of people who cannot do this themselves in a sustainable way? Is it realistic to think of a communitarian prefigurative politics of care that would sustain society as a whole? It was noted that we cannot expect people to engage in endless struggle and conflict, as we also want to defend their right to leisure and enjoyment of life. While mainly people from countries of the North expressed their doubts about whether such a strategy really could involve popular sectors, or would end up instead as initiatives that mainly benefit the middle class, in southern countries which have never experienced an integral Welfare State, the commoning of certain aspects of care was often driven by the popular sectors themselves, simply out of need.

We found it necessary to historicize the current reality of Welfare States in Europe. Across most of the continent, these were not simply initiated by the State, but built up from below through welfare initiatives, social struggle, and collective negotiations by trade unions and the civil society. It was, again, these prefigurative policies that were later institutionalized by the State. Some members of our group, mostly from countries where Welfare States have existed, argue that as the Welfare State is the result of a people's conquest of their rights, it should be defended.

The opposite perspective present in the meeting was one critical of the Welfare State as a relevant political project for several reasons. According to this view, one problem is that transformative actors often limit their own autonomous politics to small experiments because they are waiting for the State to take over, in the context of the "illusion of the Welfare State." The imaginary of the Welfare State locates the responsibility for solving citizens' problems within the State. But welfare programs orchestrated by the State usually implement national modern standards which homogenize all cultural differences and define needs from above, mostly prioritizing access to money,

goods, and services. This not only makes invisible other relational or cultural needs, which communitarian welfare could easily address. It also turns State welfare into a way of dispossessing people of their diverse and contextualized abilities, capacities, knowledges, and practices of self-determination. State welfare often weakens local resistances and movements as it creates dependencies and deepens clientelism. From this perspective, the Welfare State can be seen more as an instrument for the salvation of capitalism in crisis than as a horizon of transformation.

Also, the idea of the Welfare State as a political ideal reinforces the idealization of Europe as the result of the path towards “development” and progress, which all peoples and societies should follow. A more precise historical analysis shows that the Welfare State has been a historical exception in geographical and chronological terms, which applied only for a few decades to a very small part of the world. Its possibility depended on the historical international division of labor and Nature, through which the necessary resources were transferred to the North. It is this historical exception that spread across the whole world (post-colonial societies) through the promise of “development.”

Finally, the viability of the Welfare State was called into question in our debates. The geopolitical conditions that allowed its creation have changed dramatically over the last decades. The Welfare State was possible due to

- 1) the massive transfer of wealth from the South to populations in the North;
- 2) the abundance of very cheap energy;
- 3) a predatory relationship with Nature focused on continuous growth, in an era in which there seemed to be no limits to its exploitation;
- 4) the fact that, as long as “the others” were elsewhere (the colonized people stayed in their own countries), the claim of universalized rights was possible, as it concerned only a few privileged people. Both globalization and massive migration have changed this situation, as many “others” are now demanding to be included as well; and finally;
- 5) the challenge of Soviet-bloc socialism and the experience of war made social reform necessary in capitalist countries, in order to undercut the fierce social struggles for radical change in their own countries.

According to this reasoning, the Welfare State is no longer even possible in Europe, so we should seek out other paths for securing social rights in both the Global South and North that lead in the direction of commoning them, while asking of the State only to ensure favorable conditions for this.

The dialogue between these two positions on the Welfare State allowed the emergence of other perspectives. In general, it was agreed that in the short term, local contexts will vary, and will require diverse State operations and attitudes that might resemble social welfare policies against poverty and inequality. However, radical reformist State politics implies both the enforcement of social rights for its citizens, and the promotion of autonomy and participation. New ways of organizing are necessary, and the perspective of the commons opens up a window in this direction.

In the short term, of course, the State will be the main institutionalizing mechanism, but in the long term we do need other, more flexible and diverse ways to institutionalize the commons which guarantee elements of welfare as an alternative to the centralizing, rigid, bureaucratic, homogenizing, and paternalistic State. So the question we need to answer is: what would our institutionalized commons look like? And how could the localized commons that are emerging throughout the world coordinate and connect to address complex issues like energy sovereignty on inter-local or other levels?

Also, in the context of financialization and automatization, new debates beyond the Welfare State emerge. Crucial questions are: how do we share available employment opportunities since there will be less formal paid work available? How do we value – both in terms of financial retribution, as well as recognition of its crucial importance – necessary work in all its forms, including care work, subsistence work, and community work? And how do we distribute wealth in all its dimensions? How do we even understand wealth beyond its material dimensions? It is necessary to go beyond the historical relationship between wages, rights, and participation. Some of us regard the idea of a basic income as an alternative worth discussing, as it recognizes autonomously productive and caring subjects who are not linked to wages. This, however, is an open debate for the future as it could also be coopted for capitalist interests. And it has to be assessed from a critical North/South perspective, as most experiments in this respect have taken place in the North.

## IMAGINING OTHER INSTITUTIONS, ARTICULATIONS, AND AUTHORITIES: PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS, POLYCENTRICITY, AND PLURINATIONALITY

There are fundamental ambivalences in how processes of multidimensional transformation relate to the State. The subjects of social change experience State power as expropriating, repressive, promoting new enclosures and processes of privatization, but at the same time, they are less vulnerable to corporate power if the State regulates and intervenes in their favour. We have seen how in the short term the State can be helpful in defending rights and limiting socio-ecological destruction, and how the necessity and urgency of globally coordinated answers to the ecological crisis cannot wait for new political institutions to emerge. However, as a group we would agree that in the long term a deep transformation of State institutions will be necessary to address the challenges the world is facing. We therefore discussed how political action against socio-ecological destruction in the short term can be combined with strategies aimed at transforming State institutions along the way.

Considering the potentials and differentiated realities of the State for social transformation, but also the difficulties and failures of state-led transformation in the past, we propose to demystify the centrality of the State for multidimensional transformation, a basic attitude that some of us call *anti-Statism*. This does not mean that we reject the incorporation of the State into transformatory strategies, but we do reject the idea that it would be the most important actor of change. We also reject the centralizing, homogenizing, and bureaucratizing tendencies present in state-centred politics and the concentration of power in all its forms (men over women, human beings over Nature, but also State over society). A critical attitude towards State mystification also rejects the securitization, militarization, and criminalization of dissidence, and should open horizons of political imagination beyond existing forms of governance and authority that have been severely infringed in contemporary political history and in certain strands of left-wing ideology.

Moving beyond state-centred politics creates visibility and support for thousands of alternatives around the world, relating to issues such as health, education, food production, and consumption. The term “institution” should therefore not be understood only in terms of State politics. Throughout history, institutions have also been created from below, by the people, to resolve problems with and challenges to their existence. Popular kitchens were founded to fight hunger throughout Latin America and Europe; women’s organizations have created numerous modes of mutual care, support, and protection around the globe; indigenous communities around the world now manage common goods like forests or water through ancestral rules and procedures; and auton-

omous councils have been established to organize popular neighbourhoods in order to guarantee access to water in urban contexts or to bring security and social protection in many global metropolises.

So our discussion also considers the rules and procedures people and social movements create themselves, for example, when governing a commons. This form of institutionality, in opposition to the one which is part of the State, is often much more fluid and can adapt to local circumstances, cultural practices, and problems on the basis of collective agreements. The process of Mendha Lekha village, for example, shows such oral-based, non-rigid institutionality. At the same time, it is also necessary to see that State institutions themselves are not given and permanent, but in a constant process of readjustment which precisely reflects social struggles and the influence of autonomous institutions from below. The case of Nabón shows that the transition between both can be continuous.

These prefigurative practices open a window towards a society that does not depend on the modern Nation-State to resolve its problems and issues, and allows us to imagine a bottom-up strategy for social change. Still, we face the huge challenge of imagining a kind of institutionality that is able to provide the necessary social coordination and is not as useful to existing power relations and capital accumulation as the modern liberal Nation-State. One important perspective for the transformation of the existing Nation-State remains plurinationality. We saw that in spite of the difficulties and structural contradictions it encountered in Latin America, plurinationality evokes a prospect of change which is relevant to the whole post-colonial world.

The struggles of the Ogoni and Ijaw communities against corporate power and corruption demonstrated that social transformation would only be possible through a constituent process which rewrites the rules of engagement between the different peoples of Nigeria and the State, on the basis of the self-determination of the people. In spite of the pluriculturality of most of our societies, in most cases the State is organized as a monocultural Nation-State based on the institutions and political practices of one dominant culture, producing colonial subjects and destroying autonomous cultural practices. Plurinationality is an idea that allows us to challenge and subvert the colonial matrix of power.

Two countries have confronted the issue of the Nation-State in Latin America (Bolivia and Ecuador). In both cases, monocultural States had been imposed on pluricultural societies through a particular political system that colonized society. The rules, mechanisms, and subjects of participation were defined in colonial terms. After two decades of intense indigenous mobilization, the constitutional processes in Bolivia and Ecuador decreed the subversion of this colonial monocultural State through moves toward the construction of a plurinational State where pre-existing communitarian and participatory

democracy, but also plural justice, education, and health systems, would be recognized and coexist with representative democracy and its institutions. This was a big challenge, because the limits of the State itself were not questioned. Geopolitics did not allow the experiment to go any further than this.

The practical efforts of transformation have not been successful – in Ecuador the modernization project of the Citizen Revolution led to the strengthening of the western-shaped Nation-State, whilst in Bolivia, a huge network of clientelism absorbed much of the existing social tissue and bound it to the central government and ruling party. However, it is also true that the recognition of plurinationality opened up local spaces for politics in another way, as we saw in Nabón, and similar processes exist in other places like Cotacachi in Ecuador or Charagua Iyambae in Bolivia. These processes consist of continuous experimentation and creativity, and face fundamental tensions with the national economy and government, but they maintain an aspiration towards the realization of plurinationality.

Another crucial question has to do with scales and the articulation of local alternatives: how can we make local experiences of alternatives more influential in broader society? Can they end up replacing hegemonic economic and political practices by linking up with each other? In India, within social movements the phrase “scaling out” is used as an alternative to the western and corporate “scaling up,” evoking the Gandhian idea of oceanic circles.<sup>9</sup> This implies that similar and simultaneous processes seek to spread horizontally and create links, which in turn creates better opportunities for effecting change on higher and more structural levels. The same idea resonates in Kurdish democratic confederalism, and in the political perspectives of the Zapatistas.

Such a perspective could redraw State organization in the long term, opposing notions of polycentricity to both centralized Nation-States and the more (post-)modern tendencies towards the decentralization of the State. Even the decentralized State is pyramidal and has a top that coordinates and concentrates power, and regional and local instances which respond to the national government. Polycentricity works from a local level, clustering different local experiences of alternatives, involving horizontal dissemination and weaving.

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9 The oceanic circle describes Gandhi’s vision of social organization. Gandhi believed that for a non-violent society to achieve lasting peace, it must be organized in a decentralized way. In Gandhi’s words: “Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. [...] In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.” Metta Center for Nonviolence, Oceanic Circle: <http://mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/oceanic-circle> (15.11.2018).

In contemporary urbanized, technicized, and globalized societies, local alternatives require capital to strengthen their economies and inclusiveness; information and technology for sustainability and communication; exchange and alternative markets for their products and for responding to their needs. But why should this be done by the State? Through polycentricity, this could be done in a more horizontal, communal way that reinforces resilience and relative self-sufficiency, but also creates relations of solidarity, mutual exchange, and markets in a more just and localized way. But how can this be powerful enough to bring about at least a partial decoupling from broader economic processes? How can the appetites of transnational corporations, which increasingly rely on private security or paramilitary forces to secure their grip on territories, whilst at the same time implementing sophisticated strategies for the co-optation of communities, be resisted?

These bottom-up processes of restructuring society and weaving new relations will inevitably question existing boundaries imposed by the state-building process. In India, there is an example of the retaking of power over a river basin<sup>10</sup>; in other societies, eco-regions based on shared eco-systems, histories, and cultures have also been the basis of political organization, subverting artificial political borders within and between countries. This prompts us to look more closely at biocultural governance systems and practices. It might not be about “taking” the Nation-State as currently formulated, but about giving it less importance in our processes as a first step, widening spaces of autonomy and self-determination, and in a second step transforming it *de facto* from below, once the balance of power has shifted on the ground.

Within our group, diverse positions co-existed on how to combine these short- and long-term strategies aimed at the State, as well as on the probability and difficulties relating to the construction of a truly alternative way of organizing society. However, we did agree that this should be one of the central debates for the reinvention of left-wing politics, as we will see in the next section.

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10 See Syed Miftahul Hasnat, Arvari Sansad: the farmers' parliament: <http://edepot.wur.nl/95014> (30.11.2018).



V

# REINVENTING THE LEFT BEYOND THE LEFT

All previous discussions present questions on political subjects and actors. What kind of agency can be at the basis of multidimensional transformation? What political actors can reconfigure the liberal modern State? And what political subjects can articulate the commons?

Historically, left-wing political organizing played a central role in connecting struggles and providing them with shared utopian horizons. However, its role in emancipatory politics has grown increasingly ambivalent, due to its difficulties in overcoming state- and class-centered, productivist, and “economicist” politics and vanguardist practices. At the same time, the global left remains the principal reference point for the organization and action against capitalism in the world, so that its refoundation on new grounds seems necessary for multidimensional transformation. We therefore wanted to assess and discuss the role of the left(s) in global emancipatory politics.

## WHAT'S LEFT?

We had started our meeting by acknowledging that any discussion on emancipatory politics should go beyond the left, as emancipations and revolutions have been realized by a plurality of actors, of which many are not necessarily part of the organized left. At the same time, our discussions revealed that in the social processes in which we have participated, in general there has been some kind of presence of left-wing organizing and discourse, and all of us have maintained relationships with left-wing politics throughout our lives and engagements, so that the “othering” of the left(s) would be problematic as well.

Secondly, we saw that there are many different contexts in which the left emerged in many parts of the globe. In Greece, the whole spectrum of emancipatory politics – including social movements – is related in one way or another (theoretical, by tradition/heritage, or for practical reasons) to left-wing political organizations. In India, a deep divide exists between social movements which tend to have Gandhian orientations, the “political left” that mostly acts through party and institutionalized politics, and the Maoists who still engage in armed struggle. In Spain, the left has become outflanked by the waves of the “indignados” who have raised the question of whether left-wing discourses, organizational practices, and political instruments are still able to represent what was called the struggle against the “political caste.”

The analysis of multiple local processes allows us to understand how the left is being reinvented in concrete places and histories throughout the world. Roughly, a divide can be identified between those parts of the left still very much rooted in classical Marxist thinking, with its focus on class analysis, anti-imperialism, and the male wage labor subject at its center, and those more deeply influenced by critiques of capitalism’s race, gender, and Nature relations, and are consequently supportive of indigenous, black, environmentalist, and feminist struggles. This division between a traditional and new (post-1968) left has been analyzed extensively in academia, and should not be regarded as absolute. New

left formations, of course, tend to take into account class analysis and imperialism, whilst the traditional left has also been influenced by feminism and indigenous struggles. On the other hand, the debate on the situation in Venezuela in 2017 – particularly within the Latin American left – shows how real and deeply polarizing this divisive line can become.<sup>11</sup>

A plural understanding of “the left” is also necessary for overcoming historical reductionism, which understands the left only through its contemporary hegemonic currents. Leninist and Maoist lefts are dominant in many societies, particularly in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. However, both political history and theory of the left are far more heterogeneous than these currents. For example, the anarchist left was very influential in the decades before and after 1900, but was finally defeated in its efforts to build alternative societies. The left all over the world was inspired by the perspectives of Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg, who were in many senses critical of hegemonic Leninist thought, and many parts of the non-Western left were inspired by interpretations of Marxist thought according to local realities (like Mariategui and the dependence theorists in Latin America or Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral in Africa).

These subalternized traditions have been far more aware of the challenges posed by contemporary social movements to the institutionalized left around gender, culture and ethnicity, power and development. And they were far closer to the political perspectives of autonomy, self-determination, and the commons that have gained terrain in emancipatory politics in recent decades. Therefore it is imperative to recuperate the plural history of the left, and to recognize that there is such a thing as a broad “left culture” that inspires critical grassroots political action and discourse around the globe, beyond left-wing political parties. This left culture can be far more appealing than the politics based on narrow and rigid left-wing identities and political parties and other organizations.

Taking these refinements into account, the first crucial question would be whether the left/right divide is still relevant in the contemporary world. We would say that this divide remains useful in different contexts and issues, particularly in relation to inequality, social rights, imperial geopolitics, and the assessment of the impact of capitalism. However, many of us would state that on other issues, left versus right is not the fundamental dividing category, and can even create divisions and difficulties for concrete struggles. Although this might vary according to different realities, on environmental issues, indigenous rights, gender justice, and engagement with democracy, leftist currents can adopt very conservative positions.

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11 This dossier composed by TNI and CLACSO gives a clear insight into the different leftist perspectives on the crisis in Venezuela: Daniel Chavez; Hernán Ouviaña; Mabel Thwaites Rey, Venezuela: Pressing Perspectives from the South: <https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/venezuela-en1.pdf> (30.11.2018).

## AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LEFT

Throughout its history, the left has created different ways of doing politics, both within institutions and through its huge influence on social movements, struggles for independence, and local processes of self-determination, with both positive and negative results.

Without left-wing discourses and organizations pushing for democracy and social justice, the world would be far worse off, as numerous examples of left-wing contributions to emancipation show. Cooperativism, participatory budgeting, and worker-ownership were created from below as alternative modes of production or decision-making. Popular education and communication provided peoples around the world with instruments and information that allowed them to shape or influence their futures. The conquest of social rights by people in Europe and North America allowed the construction of the Welfare State; the support of the emancipation of indigenous peoples in Latin America contributed to victories in the form of land reforms and new constitutions; and the participation in liberation movements in Africa and Asia contributed to former colonial States' independence from the imperial powers.

Nowadays, we can identify multiple crises of the left. Left-wing parties have moderated their discourses and programs significantly, whilst their militancy and even electoral support have decreased over the last decades (although of course in specific electoral conjunctures, the opposite of this general tendency can occur). Some of us argued that most currents of the left are fighting capitalism on its own battlefield, for example when social change is narrowly framed around money and the redistribution of material wealth – making other values and dimensions of the symbolic and material reproduction of life invisible. Or when the lefts emulate capitalist tactics and strategies, like charismatic unipersonal leadership, or media and electoral politics, and in doing so prioritize recognition by the political establishment over radical politics from below.

The different elements of the organized left have had difficulties connecting with emerging political cultures and processes related to autonomy, horizontalism, and self-organization, a struggle which led directly to the massive protests at specific historical moments around the globe in recent years. And finally, as seen before, other political groups, including right-wing conservatives, have co-opted parts of the “natural” left-wing agenda, electorate, and, in some cases, even parts of its utopian outlook or language of change. Of course, it is true that left-wing organizations and emancipatory processes have been undermined, repressed, criminalized, and attacked by national elites and international agendas, and that active campaigns to discredit left-wing culture, language, and organizations have taken place – often effectively – around the world. However, this historical crisis of the lefts is also very much the result of their own historical and contemporary limitations and contradictions, present of course in different intensities and variations within the plurality of processes. For the sake of the argument, we have formulated the difficulties and challenges in a somewhat generalizing but provocative way:

## POLITICAL THEORY AND UTOPIAN OUTLOOK

The left has often failed to truly incorporate all dimensions of domination in their critique of society and political strategies, maintaining their original agenda based on class and anti-imperialist struggle. As such, it has failed to challenge the deeper patterns of western capitalist civilization, which is founded on patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and predatory relations with Nature. Simultaneously, a state-centric and developmentalist utopian horizon has maintained hegemony in a large part of leftist discourse, creating a preference for electoral politics and a positive attitude towards economic growth and the over-exploitation of Nature for the sake of economic redistribution. This failure to challenge the epistemological framework established by capitalist modernity, for example the binary division between Nature and culture, or the reliance on modern science and technology, has limited the scope of the left's utopia severely.

## OTHER DIMENSIONS OF POLITICS

Consequently, the left has had difficulties in understanding and incorporating other dimensions of knowledge, struggle, and politics, like religion and spirituality, culture and identity, emotions, the dimension of subjective or personal change, as well as joy and celebration. It is precisely these elements that have been crucial to many of the youth, indigenous, women, LGBTQ, and other struggles around the world.

## ALLIANCES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The left has often maintained instrumental relations with social movements. Instead of supporting grassroots struggles and incorporating their demands and proposals into a left-wing agenda, they have tried to direct these struggles towards the "real" political agenda for change. Such vanguardist practices have slowed down the incorporation of environmentalist, indigenous, and feminist struggles in the left's agendas, and these issues usually still remain secondary to issues of economic justice.

## **POLITICAL CULTURE**

Within the left, ideology and “ideological identity politics” centered on having the “right political conscience” (e.g. Trotskyist, Maoist, etc.) remain an overwhelming and divisive reality which often absorbs existing social energies for the effective transformation of sociocultural reality. There is a tradition in the left in which differences are inflated on the inside, whilst from the outside the lefts are seen as a homogeneous but conflictive bloc. Ideological conflicts are mixed with a culture of power disputes, which both favor fragmentation and division, as well as an intolerance towards plurality, dissidence, or genuinely open debate.

## **LEARNING**

Particularly over recent decades the left has had great difficulty in learning from its own practices, as well as from other struggles. Their focus on the capture of the State, either through military organizations or through elections, has inspired a vanguardist, vertical political culture which tends to give pre-fabricated answers instead of asking new questions. This has resulted in huge problems in terms of learning and innovation.

## **GOVERNING FOR RADICAL REFORM**

The left has often succeeded in bringing about social transformation and radical reform more effectively while in opposition than in government. A series of historical experiences in different parts of the world has shown that once the left acceded to government, the desire to be accepted politically as a serious option, as well as the underestimation of the intrinsic logics and dynamics of State institutions, led to the postponement of more radical change. In other cases, the left was prepared to win elections, but not to govern. The most successful experiences of left-wing governments usually took place at a local level.

## REFOUNDATIONS IN PRACTICE

The crisis of the lefts has led to different processes relating to the reinvention of emancipatory politics, within and beyond the left. The Spanish case allows an interesting illustration of this point.

The mobilizations of 15M didn't only reject the government and its neoliberal policies, but also questioned the traditional left and its collaboration with neoliberal reform. To many people on the street, leftist culture seemed alienating, and new movements were seen as more attractive because of their horizontalism, their practices of direct democracy, and their dynamism. The municipalism of *Barcelona en Comú* and other projects emerged as an attempt to take this energy to the arena of institutionalized and electoral politics (which has proved difficult). At the same time, left-wing experiences, organizations, and cadres have played crucial roles in these new processes of mobilization, and in the (re-)invention of the strategy to "seize the institutions" in cities like Barcelona, since many people originated from different left-wing processes. On a national level, *Podemos* also sought to talk to the people beyond the languages and spaces of the left, in a different vocabulary, following the example of the Latin American populist movements in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Argentina.

We discussed the advantages and threats of this "post-ideology frame" as a basis for the refoundation of emancipatory politics. On the one hand, both grassroots movements (like the *Indignados* or *Occupy*) and new institutional politics (*Barcelona en Comú* or *Podemos*) were capable of creating new languages, identities, and political movements that appealed to bigger proportions of the population than the historical base of the left. They questioned both the concentration of wealth and power in the 1 percent, but also reject traditional left-wing politics and representative democracy, engaging new people who were skeptical of the role of left-wing parties in emancipatory politics.

At the same time, these "leftist" or progressive populisms, like *Podemos* in Spain, *Kirchnerismo* in Argentina, or the "citizen's revolution" led by Correa in Ecuador, resonate with right-wing populisms, such as that of Trump in the US, Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, or Wilders in the Netherlands. Both kinds of populist discourses share certain anti-emancipatory characteristics, in terms of the issues and feelings of discontent they mobilize, the personalism present in their political strategy, and in the lack of answers to the underlying structural processes that made them emerge: communities being torn down by capitalist restructuring, rising individualism and consumerism as dominant cultural practices, as well as the deep transformations in democratic deliberation which are caused by the massive use of social media.

Both types of populist formations are successful in mobilizing crowds, but this is insufficient for effecting the changes the world needs. Significant multidimensional transformation requires the construction of counterpower capable of implementing change, as is more proper to the left-wing strategy of the building of cadres, organizations, and movements with a shared utopian vision. In many parts around the world, the left remains the only force that really seeks to confront capitalism and its disastrous effects in a continuous and strategic way, but to be really effective it has to do so differently, and open up to the multiplicity of struggles taking place.

## IS THERE A FUTURE LEFT?

Our discussion on the left is part of the bigger discussion on what political subjects correspond to the theories of change we have been presenting. What kind of political actors or relations can implement differentiated strategies for the short and long term, work in and outside of institutions, connect alternatives with resistances, and act on local, national, and global levels? Evidently, our discussion does not lead us to one new privileged, homogeneous, and unique political subject as its representation or vanguard, in the way that the working class male was for the left.

Instead, we see multiple and heterogeneous political subjects, capable of connecting different struggles with each other and acting in different scenarios at the same time. We frame these subjects as eco-systems of different types of actors who share emancipatory horizons. Within such eco-systems of change, the presence of a powerful organized and renovated left is important, as it acts as a bulwark against right-wing economics and policies, and against the “machines of social and ecological destruction” in the short term, and might contribute to deeper transformations in the long term. This is especially true if we go beyond the discredited left-wing political parties, giving credit to the presence of a plural and broad leftist culture and values that inspire grassroots organizations and struggles in the contemporary world.

We have also seen that the left is being reinvented in many places simultaneously, based on local histories and situated conditions. Broadly, these refoundations require the recuperation of the left’s own plural histories, and also its engagement in critical dialogue, learning processes, and constructive alliances with indigenous, feminist, Gandhian, and other emancipatory movements that have often maintained differences with the left. Some elements for the reinvention of the lefts include:

## **POLITICAL CULTURE**

A rupture inside the left is necessary in terms of political culture, as emergent movements merge with other political practices. Authoritarianism, vertical political practices, and masculinist (and sometimes even militarist) political culture should be transformed and overcome. Diversity, decentralization (or polycentricity), rotation, horizontalism, and the feminization of politics should be part of the renovation of political culture. Indigenous political practices based on assembly-logics, complementarity, reciprocity, relationality, and correspondence can be a good inspiration.

## **ALLIANCES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

The left-wing principles and central ideas of profound social change itself, solidarity, equality, and others, remain crucial in the current context, and are an adequate base for participating in and relating with emergent emancipatory struggles and movements. The support for concrete local or thematic struggles, beyond the left / right divide, can allow a reconnection with new movements and agendas. Yet the participation in these movements should not be motivated by a conviction that we already know all the answers based on some narrow ideologically determined toolkit, as often has been the case, but by the will to learn and discover new paths together.

## **POLITICAL THEORY AND UTOPIANISM**

Marx's theories are still very relevant as a tool for the analysis of some dimensions of contemporary capitalism. They have been – and continue to be – updated and complemented by other kinds of cultural analysis, political ecology, feminist critical theory, anti-racism, and decoloniality. Non-Marxist progressive theories are relevant as well and have positively influenced struggles. We need to overcome Eurocentric thinking and polarizing theories and practices that reinforce a Cartesian and binary world view (humanity vs. Nature, man vs. woman, friend vs. enemy, self vs. other). A multidimensional perspective on transformation requires a far more complex theory of change than the state-centered strategic perspective that remains hegemonic in a large part of the left. Cultural change, the building of self-determination, and knowledge about processes for extending the commons should be crucial elements of a refounded left-wing political theory.

## **LEARNING**

The left needs to reengage with its own histories to learn from them, and recuperate the diverse lefts among different cultures through the building of historical balances within different countries or regions. For those of us who identify as left, we need to learn from both our own experience and from other struggles. This requires learning from complexity and from the contradictions in our struggles (instead of seeking to eliminate or do away with those contradictions). It also means patience and the commitment to long-term struggles, as the changes we seek are complex and need time.

These processes that are part of the refoundation of the left also present dilemmas. Although we see the necessity of intercultural dialogue regarding the grammars of social transformation, we discussed to what extent concepts and discourses from outside of a certain cultural space can be useful for emancipatory politics within this space. Can the idea of *Buen Vivir* – which is actively promoted as a South American source of inspiration for European movements nowadays – be relevant for the refoundation of the European left? But also: to what extent can European concepts serve as the foundation of a new left in the Global South, or become the basis for a global dialogue on emancipatory politics?

In a general sense, we would say that the recuperation of the plural and local histories of the left, but also the recognition of social struggles beyond the left, are crucial elements for the strengthening of a plural emancipatory politics. Secondly, we would say that intercultural dialogue can enrich our political grammars and strategies. For example, a dialogue between theories, notions, and practices of the commons in different places of the world and indigenous community thinking seems relevant. Of course, we should not seek to blindly apply any external recipe, but we do need to learn from the advancements of other cultures and movements, through the creative appropriation and translation of external concepts into our own contexts. Finally, it is also imperative to decolonize the global debate on emancipation and social transformation, as it still is principally held in European and modern languages and through European conceptual frameworks. It is worthwhile analyzing the world, and developing agendas and utopian perspectives, through the lenses and grammars offered by non-western struggles.

**VI**

**GLOBAL SOLIDARITY  
AND RECIPROCITY**



Finally, responding to the purpose of a global working group, our debates addressed the need for a rethinking of the concepts and traditions of solidarity and internationalism. Solidarity and internationalist relations have been central to leftist thinking and action throughout history, as class struggle was an internationalist endeavor. Solidarity between workers' and independence movements have been fundamental for emancipatory politics, while at the same time solidarity was conditioned during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the complex geopolitical alignment logic of the Cold War. The historiography of solidarity – at least what is understood under this term – is as Eurocentric as the dominant history of the left itself, and the geopolitics of solidaritarian relationships have drawn a map in which Europe and Latin America are overrepresented, with few exceptions, such as the Middle East, Southern Africa or Vietnam in the late 1960s/1970s.

In the age of globalization, political and economic processes are becoming more interdependent and global than ever before, whilst the ecological crisis implies a global threat to humankind as a whole. Thus, multidimensional transformation and strategies for social change also need to be more global than ever before. While the colonial international division of labor and Nature is still at work, the terms Global North and Global South are obviously a simplification. The imperial mode of living has already spread from the classic capitalist centers to the elites and middle classes of the so-called emerging economies and many so-called developing countries as well. On the other hand, social exclusion, poverty, and even the effects of extractivism are also present in countries of the Global North. Examples of this include fracking, or mountain-top removal in the United States. We basically use these terms (Global North and Global South) to describe the gap opened up by colonial difference.

Within this context, at the beginning of the new millennium, the *World Social Forum* (WSF) and its slogan "Another world is possible" emerged as a unique space for solidarity and networking between different struggles and geographies, contributing enormously to the building of shared perspectives on change for at least one generation of activists and social movements. By becoming an open space for self-organization and the convergence of all struggles, the WSF also questioned traditional internationalist practices, which were often shaped by hierarchical organizations and class-centered politics. Over the last few years, however, the WSF has lost its dynamism and centrality in international social movements. Reasons for this include the problem that it did not produce sufficient action or agreements, that it did not manage to remain independent from its functionalization by left-wing governments in Latin America, and that it became more of a space for a transnational activist elite with little grassroots participation. However, in our meeting, several participants stated that their local processes, for example, in Venezuela and Tunisia, benefited enormously from the WSF, as the versions

of the Forum in their countries allowed new alliances, introduced new political perspectives, and inspired local struggles. Within this context, we wanted to revise the current realities of solidarity and internationalism.

## AID AND COOPERATION

Since World War Two, the reorganization of international relations along the dividing line between development and underdevelopment that replaced the former colonial worldview of civilized vs. uncivilized worlds has shaped a hegemonic sense of solidarity around cooperation and aid, basically organized through thousands of projects that have mobilized millions of dollars. Generally, these were supposed to meet certain “development” goals formulated by western experts, who also “scientifically” define the “needs” of receptor populations. Other projects were also aimed at humanitarian relief in contexts of hunger or natural disaster.

Without a doubt, there is a broad range of practices and political perspectives within the sector of development cooperation. These include technocratic cooperation through State agencies and international institutions, as well as a certain technical civil society cooperation which has concentrated on the modernization of agriculture and the introduction of capitalist modes of production in the postcolonial world, as in the context of the so-called “Green Revolution.” Other strands of the sector, which emanated for example from trade-union movements in the North, have gone much further in building real political solidarity with revolutionary processes in the Global South (like with Nicaragua), supporting the indigenous and women’s movements, the struggle against apartheid, or local processes of resistance against extractivism. Although these processes were supported through State funding, as well as by direct donations from their social constituencies in the Global North, these organizations sought to extend the boundaries of what “development cooperation” allowed them to do. And finally, there has been a direct solidarity cooperation which understood itself more in political terms than in terms of development cooperation, driven as it was by all sorts of collectives, and political and social organizations.

In the context of economic financialization and of the foreign debt crisis of many southern countries in the 1980s, a structural shift took place. Many processes, even those relating to social movements and resistance, began to revolve around donor money, its timely “delivery” in projects, its transparent management, etc. This led to the transformation of many social movements into clusters of thematic NGOs, which then competed with one another for funds instead of being allies. Those NGOs provided formal employment for activists, but also grew increasingly donor dependent, vertically structured, and bureaucratized by “project logics” – a process of alienation that has had a huge impact on the emancipatory potential of those actors and on the strategies of solidarity and internationalism.

In the last few decades, we have seen new tendencies towards the homogenization of the diverse world of international NGOs and development cooperation schemes within a neoliberal and technocratic framework. This has meant a shift away from support for grassroots processes of social organization and transformation to support for projects that seek technical solutions to problems like climate change and food insecurity. By applying pre-determined recipes and strategies, often driven by international trends instead of the contextualized agendas and perspectives of grassroots movements, the view of “development” as the dominant political perspective for Global South societies was reinforced. As such, donor agencies with their own agendas reproduced the asymmetrical relations between Global North and Global South civil societies, following the patterns of colonial geopolitics. Such patterns can also be found within the Global South, as the example of the Brazilian state-owned firm PetroBras financing indigenous organizations or the World Social Forum shows. In the aid sector this was even more problematic as enormous cash flows moved through the agendas and institutions of the Global North, with little vision of structural change that would enable transformative grassroots social movements and foster their autonomous capacities for the reproduction of life after disaster.

We therefore propose a very critical angle that questions international cooperation from a perspective of emancipatory solidarity or even reciprocity, and distinguishes between development cooperation and political solidarity. Relations framed through development cooperation have to be transformed, overcoming paternalistic relations and perspectives that insist on the necessity of the Global North “helping” the Global South by transferring certain skills, knowledges, and resources. Instead, horizontal and reciprocal alliances between actors and agendas for social change in the North and South should be constructed to promote structural transformation around the world. Within these alliances, grassroots communities and organizations should be the central actors in strategy definition, incorporating where possible local government and universities, instead of international institutions which impose technocratic methods. We recognize that several solidarity organizations are going through such processes of transformation, but this still remains a minority within the sector.

## **CAMPAIGNS AND NETWORKS**

The many international campaigns and networks concerned with concrete cases or issues constitute a second group of solidarity and internationalist actors. Nigerian activists needed Dutch and English counterparts to implement legal strategies against the companies that affected their livelihoods in their home country. The struggles against apartheid or the World Trade Organization allowed the building of long-lasting collaborations, whilst alliances built around global value chains of production (e.g. the Clean Clothes Campaign) or the impact of mining companies (Networks on Vale and Glencore Xstrata) are examples of processes of action that have had positive outcomes.

Here, solidarities have been built between very different people and organizations around shared goals, or people from different parts of the world affected by similar phenomena have been brought together. However, within these processes and networks, the languages and strategic perspectives emanating from the Global North are often still dominant. Also, struggles can be appropriated by bigger, more visible global campaigns whose interests can conflict with the needs of grassroots processes. For example, when global campaigns need a face or story of one person in order to be able to campaign on complex issues and collective processes, this introduces a new logic of individualism, creating tensions and conflicts at the grassroots level.

Within environmentalist networks, struggles have taken place to include the languages and perspectives of the Global South, particularly in relation to indigenous movements on Nature, knowledges, and spiritualities. For example, the growing leadership of Global South actors, in particular of the group Acción Ecológica from Ecuador, introduced a change of perspective into Friends of the Earth International. Other networks based on South-South cooperation, like Oilwatch, emerged, with strong leadership from Ecuador and Nigeria, to overcome the limitations of Global North leadership. Therefore, the capacity to produce knowledge in an autonomous and independent way as a basis for political action, and to engage in a real dialogue between different kinds of knowledge, is crucial to real solidarity and internationalism.

## **CONNECTING OUR PRACTICES AND STRUGGLES**

Solidarity as part of emancipatory politics requires the revision of our everyday practices in the places where we live. It is obvious that in the face of the civilizational crisis and its ecological expressions, an important reduction in consumption, in the matter we transport across the planet, and in the energy we require, is mandatory. Nevertheless, the social and ecological costs that are inscribed in a certain product that has gone through a global production chain are invisible to the consumer. It is important to acknowledge that our everyday habits, routines, and decisions to a great extent have effects elsewhere in the world – for example the destruction of livelihoods through extractivism.

Consequently, the ethics of social change that obliges us to self-reflect on our practices and to find individual and collective ways to change our reproduction of patterns of domination is a crucial dimension of internationalism today. We need to ask ourselves necessary questions such as: how are we embedded in the imperial way of living? According to what axis of domination are we privileged and where not; what is our point of departure in the struggle? What power patterns do we reproduce in our own lives? What material structures sustain our struggles and forms of knowledge and what can

be done about this? Where do we contribute to sustaining global value chains, corporations, and finance? To what extent are we open to learning from other cultures and grammars of emancipation?

In the context of a globalized economy, our struggles are more interdependent than ever before. This means that transformation in the Global South often depends on effective social transformation in the North, and vice versa. To offer a simple example: If there was no demand for the newest generation of technological gadgets, mining in the South would be significantly less lucrative. But also if the expansion of extractivism was not so dramatic in the South, there would be much less migration towards the North, and maybe right-wing populism would have less grounds to expand.

Particularly in the Global North, it has often been easier or more satisfying to support the struggles of distant others in the Global South than to engage with or promote emancipatory struggles back home, partly because these might be full of contradictions and present difficult choices, whilst helping a distant struggle of the materially “poor” can easily be idealized. This idealization of struggles in the South may have enabled uncritical solidarities. The Venezuelan process could be the best example of this in recent times, as the degeneration of the process was justified and even reinforced by the unconditional support from outside of the country.

The main problems and challenges for contemporary human society might be embedded in geopolitical and colonial difference, but they are also very much rooted in global interdependency. The extreme concentration of power and wealth in the world, or the consequences of ecological destruction and climate change, are global phenomena rooted in global processes. Therefore, conceptual frameworks like the *imperial mode of living*, transition thinking, and the Degrowth movement might allow us to revise our own role, place, and responsibilities in global processes. In this sense, real solidarity requires an engagement with social transformation in our own societies first, not only to act on the structure of the current world system, but also as a basis to strengthen alliances and solidarity in a horizontal way between struggles around the globe.

## **SURPRISING SOLIDARITIES: SOUTH-SOUTH, SOUTH-NORTH, TRANSLOCAL AND TRANSLATION**

Beyond these more structured and visible forms of solidarity and internationalism, many other forms are taking place in invisible and even unexpected ways. The emergence of simultaneous political phenomena, languages, and cultures need to be explained through the travelling of ideas and strategies through the digital world, personal encounters, travelling, and reading. It was noted how, for example, the ideas of Gandhi still inspire strategies of civil disobedience in many places. In the last few years, the discourses and practices of horizontalism, the questioning of traditional representative democracy, as well as left-wing organizing, have emerged from Senegal to the United States, and from Peru to the Philippines, as our discussion showed. So inter-people learning, sharing, and building often occurs outside the formal frame of institutionalized cooperation or even movements.

Nowadays, solidarities between local processes, without interference from national movements, NGOs, or international institutions are taking place. They configure translocal solidarities between struggles that recognize themselves in each other. This happened between Cajamarca in Peru and Intag in Ecuador, for example. South-South internationalisms remain hard to sustain and are even logistically complicated by the scarcity of air routes connecting the distant parts of the South. South-North solidarity has also been taking place, such as when Latin American indigenous organizations expressed solidarity with the Standing Rock struggle in the United States, or through the support from the Venezuelan, Brazilian, and Chinese governments for the black movement in the US. Venezuela even opened a diplomatic mission in New Orleans to be in direct contact with the black social movements.

This diversification of solidarities brings us to issues of translation and learning. In Nabón we talked to the veteran indigenous leader Juana Morocho who plainly refused to talk about development. Possibly, she preferred her life not to be framed in those terms, because her territory and culture go beyond this word, whose very use she might well have considered a form of dispossession. In Ecuador, the construction of the idea of the rights of Nature was originally rejected by the indigenous movement which felt alien to the framework of ordinary justice, but after a process of dialogue and political construction, they decided to accept it as a strategic translation. Of course, there remains a tension between the non-western idea of Nature being endowed with agency and its enshrinement within the Western discourse of rights.

But this is not the same as saying that things get lost in translation. Nor is it the same as saying that translation inevitably implies that something gets lost, as we will never be able to translate our realities in ways that allow complete understanding. In reality, nothing is ever lost in translation, because there is nothing to lose. That is, there are no fixed meanings in separate societies waiting to be lost when they are transported across boundaries. Rather, meanings are created in translation itself. The question is what the politics of that translation process consist of. By the same token, the “complete understanding” of others is not an intelligible goal of dialogue. Understandings are continuously created in encounters, not transmitted from fixed “cultures” or “identities.” This underlines the emancipatory importance of paying more careful attention than social movements often do to the slow process through which concrete struggles learn about others and themselves through mutual encounters and mutual translation.

## REINVENTING INTERNATIONALISMS

Our revision of the idea of inter-people solidarities allowed for some evident but still necessary critiques. Emancipatory internationalism requires us to overcome the money-centered, donor-driven, technocratic, bureaucratic, and paternalistic logic of aid and cooperation. It also requires us to overcome the trends and formulas embraced by international institutions. Consequently, very relevant political perspectives like *Buen Vivir* or *Plurinational State* are not well known in Africa or Asia, and Latin Americans know little about struggles on those continents, and even less about the emancipatory theories that have emanated from those struggles.

Within processes of exchange and solidarity, inequality also exists. A kind of transnational elite has emerged that attends conferences and monopolizes international dialogue and representation, often without close connections to the struggles back home. This politics of representation reflects class or status differences within struggles that are not openly discussed. It is also favored by the big agencies of development cooperation promoting “their favorite” leaders, who end up losing a structural connection to the grassroots level.

Uncritical or unconditional solidarity is more harmful than useful, as it reinforces negative (e.g., authoritarian) evolutions within processes, as we have seen in Venezuela or Ecuador. A binary, black and white “cold war” approach (i.e., “the enemy of our enemy is our friend”) creates obstacles for transformative processes elsewhere as learning from errors becomes difficult. This confirms the image of the left as hypocritical and authoritarian, leading to a kind of immunity against socialism and any other kind of progressive politics in large parts of the population, as happened in many Eastern European countries.

The reinvention of internationalism and solidarity is taking place in practice, for example through translocal solidarities between territory-based struggles. This reinvention should be understood through notions of internationalism that go beyond simplistic binary understandings of the Global South and Global North as homogeneous and separate entities. The language of intercultural or inter-movement solidarities seems to suggest that these are interactions between two relatively fixed blocs or entities, whilst talking about the local and the global suggests the idea of separated scales. However, the real world is far more complex and interdependent.

Many, if not all, phenomena are local and global at the same time, dominations and social struggles are intersected, and the multidimensional social transformation we seek needs at the same time to be personal, collective, symbolic and structural, local and global to be effective.

So solidarity means building our struggles together, in reciprocity, as part of a common struggle. We see solidarity in terms of sharing, caring, and learning between our struggles, instead of giving and receiving. As all our struggles are incomplete, since they all confront some dimensions of the structures of power, all are in need of support wherever they take place; we need to connect them to build more articulated and integrated perspectives and strategies. This also implies that collaboration and cooperation should be built from below through long-term engagements; fighting together means leaving the people engaged in struggles with the power to define their struggle. Finally, we see big challenges for internationalism and solidarity as consequences of the expansive processes of surveillance, securitization, and criminalization that threaten activists in their own contexts and seek to delegitimize and attack solidarity itself.



VII

**FINAL THOUGHTS  
ON STRATEGY**

Our journey ends with a final reflection on strategies.

We have seen how radical multidimensional transformation is imperative to assure a just and democratic future for humankind. At the same time, the preconditions for such a change are very difficult. Power and resources are concentrated more than ever before in global elites and economic groups, and collective imaginaries of development, consumerism, and individualism are deeply rooted in the subjectivities of the majority of the world population. Militarism, the spread of corporate technology (and technological solutions), and the mass media are enabling factors for these negative conditionalities.

At the same time, we have seen how different logics of struggle and emancipatory politics are occurring throughout the world.

AT THE VERY LEAST,  
SIX DIFFERENT LOGICS OF STRUGGLE ARE PRESENT:

- 1) prefigurative politics at local levels, in which populations construct or defend self-determination autonomously, such as in Mendha-Lekha or in the process of the Zapatistas in Mexico, but also in many economic initiatives;
- 2) multiple social movements that seek cultural and political change through different strategies, including mobilization, as is the case in feminist, LGBTBI, environmentalist, anti-racist, and indigenous movements;
- 3) the appropriation and transformation of some parts of the State through processes of greater communal activity from below, as in the cases of Nabón and Barcelona, where local government enables society to direct itself into more democratic, equitable, and sustainable futures;
- 4) political parties, movements, and instruments that seek to change society through the capturing of the State or participation in the institutional political process, as was found in the cases of Venezuela and Ecuador, as well as in those of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. In contrast to radical municipalism, these processes tend to focus on the national level, and do not necessarily question the reality of the State. Nevertheless, they can help promote processes of transformative constitutionalism when existing social power relations allow them;
- 5) alter-globalization networks, campaigns, and movements that seek to influence and transform the politics of globalization. And lastly, but equally importantly, we have to remember that
- 6) the private is also political, and that our own personal practices of consumption, of building relationships, and raising children, of relating to each other and to Nature, all matter a great deal. Transformation has to target the cultural dimension of subjectivities shaped by modern capitalist civilization, including desires, habits, and routines. Of course, in practice, these different strategies can also overlap and connect with one another in many ways. However, they can also contradict one another and conflict with one another, as has been the case between progressive governments and indigenous and feminist movements in Latin America.

Our discussion showed that in spite of differences in our stances towards these different strategies, we agree that the current historical moment implies different temporalities of transformation which are best met by different, eventually complementary political strategies. In the short term, there is the need to stop the accelerated ecological, political, and social processes of destruction and dispossession, through defensive struggles which also protect the conquests of social movements in previous cycles of struggle. Spaces of autonomy, self-organization, and the extension of the commons need to be defended actively, as they are the building stones for deeper change.

Strong social movements of resistance at all levels, local, regional, national, continental, and global, are necessary and such struggles will require a multitude of strategies, including the politics of left-wing political movements or parties which dispute the legal and institutional conditions for transformation within the framework of the State. Different transition initiatives need to be promoted and supported from within and outside of State institutions, and bridges should be built between territorial and practical approaches which prefigure alternative modes of living and approaches that are aimed more at institutional politics. And, in the context of right-wing populism and a conservative offensive, we will also need to defend the liberal languages and institutions of representative democracy, environmentalism, and human rights, as well as the right to dissidence itself. In the face of extended surveillance, securitization, and militarism, solidarity is crucial for the protection of defenders of territories, the environment, and human rights.

This long-term multidimensional transformation will require other, offensive political struggles capable of creating new ways of being and consciousness, new institutions, new modes of production, practices of distribution, and consumption habits. The required political imaginary needs to go far beyond the realities of the Nation-State, the language of human rights, and the current processes and practices of production, consumption, and distribution, to be able to respond fully to the civilizational and ecological crisis we are facing. Such a radically different society is already being born and even practiced historically, in numerous local processes of prefigurative politics. It is bound to specific territories with significant ranges of autonomy from national State institutions, and in some cases, also with emancipatory local government, as in the cases of Nabón in Ecuador and Spanish municipalism.

One important task is to recognize these processes as valuable, to make them visible to each other and connect them. Building popular power through the preservation of the existing commons or by creating new ones, and thereby de-linking communities from the commodifying logic of the globalized capitalist world market, emerges as a path forward for the deepening of democracy and self-determination, as well as for the transformation of relations with Nature, and for the dismantling of patriarchy and decolonization. The political perspectives of plurinationality, polycentricity, *Buen Vivir*, or biodemocracy and their concrete practices allow for the possibility of overcoming the limitations of both modern liberal and Marxist Eurocentric political thought. Throughout our meeting, we saw that this requires deep and significant dialogues between cultures, political traditions, and social movements.

The last cycle of struggles shows that maintaining different logics, scales, and cultures of struggle simultaneously is both very difficult – some would say: impossible – and necessary for radical social change. Without social movements pushing for change in the streets, progressive governments will be coopted by institutional logic and possibly corruption. Radical protest movements that lack processes for building alternatives in terms of (re)production, (re)distribution, and consumption will become reactive or dogmatic. Local rural self-governance and alternative production will not be able to stop ecological destruction without a transformation towards sustainability in urban contexts and without enabling frameworks that have to be created on other scales. And transition initiatives and local alternatives that lack articulation and wider political horizons easily become self-centered, isolated, and marginal.

Several issues mentioned or touched on at our meeting require more discussion. We saw the importance of social control and ownership of technology, but what does good and just use of technology actually mean? Secondly, although we've stated that these contradictions require a politics of multiple temporalities, combining the urgency of radical resistance with the slow pace of deep cultural transformation, remains a big challenge. Finally, the transformation of our methods and networks of production, distribution, and exchange remains a central issue. Of course, several elements of economic transformation are clear; they include the strengthening of local networks of production and consumption, the promotion of circular economies (in which energy and materials are circulated continuously in different ways, to avoid waste), the promotion of sustainable products, and the definancialization of our economies. However, many open questions remain about its articulation on higher levels of our economies: how can this work? What kind of economic and productive models can sustain this?

There will not be one encompassing narrative of change, such as that provided by the narrative of socialism during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in many parts of the world. The necessary strategies will differ according to each local and historical context, but the challenge of nurturing relationships between them, of building ecosystems of change composed by different actors, strategies, and scales, is crucial. The kinds of alliances we need are those that connect resistances and alternative-building, on the basis of shared principles that inspire localized practices. For example in India, regarding agriculture, we can see grassroots initiatives working on agro-ecological alternatives while being connected to national movements fighting GMOs. We need horizontal alignments between local alternatives, and vertical alignments with the national and international level that can help make these struggles successful or sustainable. All of this requires the capacity to reinvent politics as we know it, and to find new ways of working together: between peoples, movements, struggles, and ways of doing politics.

## **ROSA-LUXEMBURG-STIFTUNG**

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left-wing non-profit organisation providing civic education. It is affiliated with Germany's 'Die Linke' (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide.

The Stiftung works in the context of the growing multiple crises facing our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organisations around the globe, the Stiftung focuses on democratic and social participation, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and alternative economic and social development. The Stiftung's international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions.

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung works towards a more just world and a system based on international solidarity.

