

TOWARDS THE 2010 CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

The historical milestones of a journey

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Document published in the Citizens Assemblies website

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** Edited transcription of the video-interview to Gustavo Marín, from the Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation for Human Progress, carried out during the meeting of Antofagasta in April 2007.*

“We may be from Antofagasta, sure, we may be from Chile, yes, but we may also be from Peru and from Bolivia. I was born in Antofagasta when it was part of Bolivia, so what am I? Bolivian or Chilean? Am I Aymaran or Quechua? I used to look at the Aymara and I have an Aymara or a Quechua nose, a Diaguitas’ nose or someone’s nose. What are we? This Citizens’ Assembly idea is a notion of social grouping of people from different regions, overcoming borders, nationalism and those limits that constrain us... while looking for new horizons.”

“We started in 1995,” referring to the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen. At that time, the United Nations were organizing world conferences on big issues. On the one hand, the UN agencies were organizing an official event; on the other, the NGOs organized a parallel event. This was a UN attempt, after the Cold War, to generate a multilateralism and global governance regulation instance. Or rather, it was an inter-governmental regulation attempt with subordinate citizens’ participation. We had launched the 94’, the idea of an Alliance for a Responsible and Supportive World, which we later called Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and Supportive World. This alliance sprung up from a Platform elaborated in 1993: the Platform for a Responsible and Supportive World.

Then there was the Social Summit in 1995. We said, “Let’s organize several simultaneous meetings in various regions of the world with a view to this Social Summit.” So, between January and February 1995, we organized four continental meetings, in Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Paris and Beijing. In the meantime, we gathered unions, NGOs and social organizations ; we collected proposals for the Social Summit, while trying to answer questions as to what should be developed on a human scale, what should be the new human development. We launched the notion of Citizens’ Governance. Those were interesting ideas because people from different cultures and different regions were involved in a common topic. In China, the meeting was unprecedented. Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean and Indian people took part in it. Two years later, in December 1997, trying to follow this dynamic for

a responsible, plural and supportive world, we put together six continental meetings as well as, simultaneously, a world meeting: in Sao Paulo, Barcelona, Kigali, Alger, Bangalore and Roubaix, in the north of France. A dynamic of “globalization of social dynamics” was forming little by little.

In June 2000 there was a meeting in Geneva to celebrate the so-called “Copenhagen + 5” in order to analyze the outcome of Copenhagen 95, five years later. It was then that Brazilians came up with the idea to launch the World Social Forum. They claimed there was a need to open up an alternative to the World Economic Forum in Davos. The first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre was then announced for January 2001. The Brazilians quickly realized that the dynamic had to be globalized as well. We wanted the Forum to be worldwide from the start, and we tried in 2002 but failed. We tried again – unsuccessfully - in 2003. But in 2004 we went to Bombay, and in 2005 we went back to Porto Alegre. In 2006, since we could not have only one Forum in Morocco, we had one in Bamako, one in Caracas, and one in Karachi. The idea of the continentalization of social processes, of the simultaneity of social processes, was an idea, a force, a tendency present in these dynamics.

In June 2001, five months before the World Citizens’ Assembly in Lille, and following the experience acquired in 1995 and 1997 with the Platform for a Responsible and Supportive World, we held five prior continental meetings. They were organized in Quito, Barcelona, Bangalore, Tanzania and Lebanon. With all this experience, one of the key ideas extracted from the Citizens’ Assembly in Lille was the creation of continental or sub-continental Citizens’ Assemblies which would allow for the articulation of efforts from various sectors working on different topics and articulated globally, and always following the idea of building a social force, a social dynamic, on a global scale, during these globalization times.

Within this context, the idea of a World Parliament becomes interesting, because it puts forward the need for a Global Governance, which is truly indispensable, as the UN system has become obsolete if not almost dysfunctional. The Global Governance issue is real, not only because of the expansion of geopolitical poles and the new attempts to multilateralism, but mostly because of the new presence of China, India and great powers, other than the United States. Unilateralism, with the problems of the US government, is on a new facet of the crisis.

The notion of a World Parliament sounds good but is not a good idea in the end. First of all, because the notion of “parliament” for some people is completely foreign. Secondly, because it places too much emphasis on the role of the “representative” but not on the “responsible”, and follows the representation logic. And, finally, because it has real representation problems, problems with the voting system (who chooses whom, who represents whom). Questions like, “will there be world parties?”, “will there be regional representation?” or “what will be the proportion for representation?” arise.

We propose continental or regional groups meetings as a form of participation and regulation. We believe that the notion of a Citizens' Assembly is a productive idea and that citizens understand it: "this gives us room, it gives us a space, it goes beyond current organizations; it allows for the creation of new instances, it empowers us."

Society's attempts through demonstrations and protests are not enough. In my opinion, the clearest and most pathetic example of these inadequacies were the great demonstrations in February 2003, which may have been the largest demonstrations for peace in the history of humanity. That, however, did not stop the US from declaring war on Irak two months later. Demonstrations are positive. New sectors take part and there is a new awareness enhancement. However, everything fades afterwards. Social Forums still have good prospects, of course, but hard though it may be for us to accept, are they truly an alternative for a civil society in the face of neoliberalism? There is still a long way ahead. Social Forums are important, but they are not enough.

So we said, "let's go on with the proposal for Citizens' Assemblies" because Citizens' Assemblies strive to be social processes with a historical perspective, with a constituting character, where social organizations and different players, including young people, women, indigenous organizations, mayors, parliament representatives, the military, businessmen, religious groups and scientists, get together, draft their own Letters of Responsibility, their own Ethic Platforms for the future, make their proposals and confront them, put them under pressure, and they build more consistent social processes which allow them to have deep social transformation programs. Governments change, and political parties are fragmented in general and cannot get the necessary consensus either. When parties take their ideologies to the extreme, they fragment society. This does not mean that Citizens' Assemblies are a place for social harmony. This is not the policy of the Chinese government, which is looking for "social harmony" amidst the various contradictions. Citizens' Assemblies can and should be places where ideas and visions are confronted, places to isolate all those people with authoritarian, dictatorial, fascist and excluding ideas. But they also seek to include many sectors of society, not just NGOs, heads of political parties or motivated activists. We would like Citizens' Assemblies to be organized, mass, social movements of a new kind. At this globalized time, at this capitalist time that keeps expanding, that keeps causing wars and environmental damage, Citizens' Assemblies are a way for citizens to sensitize and organize.

How viable is this idea? Who can it be developed? We are propelling this idea into other regions. We are proposing it in the dialog between China and Europe. We are starting a dialog between the Chinese and the Indians, who have already taken in the idea of a Chinese-Indian Citizens' Assembly around 2010. We also want to do this in Magreb. We want a Citizens' Assembly in Magreb, with a Magreb Citizens' Letter, which is urgent in such a region where it is necessary to open new social spaces in the face of authoritarian regimes. People can see that something is going on with the political system because they cannot move out of the crisis.

Citizens' Assemblies aim at creating new, more social, more autonomous, more participative forms of regulations. Will they be enough to influence States, to transform the old Governance regulation schemes? We do not know yet, but we can and we should try.

Citizens' Assemblies intend to receive the new citizenships that are being created, which are multinational or, at least, bi-national ones. The overcoming of Nation-States, which are products of the old colonization processes, is a strong tendency that will continue to increase. These notions to overcome purely nationalistic or sectioning notions take time, but this is a fundamental change. It is more than a political. It is an ethical change. It is a deep human change.