

77. Indigenous groups and climate change in Colombia

by
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Indigenous groups in Colombia contribute to solving the problems of climate change and create new perspectives for social sciences. If their knowledge, practices and experience were fully considered at the national governance level, real change in terms of ecological practices would be possible.

Introduction

Latin America's social science contributions to climate change research are often neglected, even though they frequently include indigenous knowledge, traditional practices and ways of managing natural resources. New approaches to social science, however, recognise the value of these sources for devising solutions to environmental challenges.

Indigenous knowledge is key to orienting the social sciences towards addressing climate change challenges. This article discusses indigenous peoples' proposals for restoring their territories and traditions, as well as their leadership in conservation practice. Indigenous communities are involved in government activities, climate change adaptation programmes, and in developing a new social science based on the participatory research action methodology.

Indigenous proposals and action

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are 87 indigenous communities in Colombia, distributed mainly in Amazonas, the Eastern Plains, Guajira, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and the Pacific Coast (ACNUR, 2013). Their main aim is to restore their ancestral territories, so that they can preserve their traditional habitat practices, including respect for the environment and the sustainable use of natural resources. They are seeking the right to govern their own territories and create a platform for the preservation of the ecosystem and biodiversity of their land, and to protect it from being plundered by settlers and agricultural entrepreneurs.

They also propose returning to sustainable economies, for example as practised in the past by the inhabitants of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Today, local people are working to rehabilitate this territory and preserve the soil fertility using crop rotation,

forest preservation techniques and organic fertilisers (Herrera, 1985). Some communities also propose returning to their indigenous roots and practising swidden agriculture (slash and burn), fishing, hunting and gathering wild fruits and other materials (Echeverry, 2009: 15). They believe they can mitigate climate change using their own models of production, distribution, exchange and consumption, as determined by the cycles of nature.

Further suggestions include legal measures to prevent the exploitation of natural resources from affecting their culture, economy and livelihoods. Examples of such action include the long struggle the Uwa¹ waged against Shell and Oxy to prevent energy projects in their territories; the opposition of the indigenous inhabitants of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to building hotels and docks in their area; the Embera Katío in northern Colombia who opposed the construction of hydropower plants; and finally, indigenous communities in the Amazon who have succeeded temporarily in stopping mining projects.

Indigenous peoples, society and government

Over the past 25 years, indigenous peoples have become active and visible, political actors in Colombia. Their presence and voice are recognised in governance and Colombian public administration (Laurent, 2001). They have made valuable contributions to the discussion and implementation of public policies in the search for new styles of economic development and better government at the national level. Their contributions range from the guidance they have provided to environmental institutions to their role in safeguarding nature reserve areas.

Indigenous people played a leading role in developing the 1991 Colombian Constitution and in drafting the Indian Law. Their ability to participate in these activities has been promoted by a new and welcoming attitude from other sectors of society, by new policies, and by indigenous people's own struggles to become accepted in national politics. Indigenous groups and communities, such as the Colombian Indigenous National Organisation, the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca, and the Indigenous Authorities of Colombia, are now considered an integral part of society and the state. Their role as leaders and rulers of the ecosystems and biodiversity in their areas is legally recognised (Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2012).

Indigenous perspectives

For indigenous communities, fighting climate change is about achieving sustainable economies and opposing unsustainable ones (especially mining, hydro-electric power and drilling for oil). Their main objectives are to recover their land and culture, and protect their ecosystems and biodiversity through political action and community practices that follow sustainable development practices.

The location of indigenous groups in the mountains, deserts, forests, jungles and plains, and their knowledge of the natural environment, means that they are crucial participants in action-led research to mitigate against climate change. An example is the Amazon Consolidation Programme, which supports indigenous peoples to take the lead in preserving the Amazon.² Similarly, the UN programme on the Integration of Ecosystems and Adaptation to Climate Change in the Colombian Massif is an indigenous initiative (Monje, 2011). The importance of indigenous communities is recognised in other projects

undertaken by the United Nations and others, which seek to consolidate indigenous environmental practices in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and help reduce the impacts of climate change (Pabón, 2008: 10).

These activities between indigenous communities, scholars and policymakers have brought together different types of knowledge and resources, and have created political relations to manage the environmental resources of the country.

Conclusions

Social scientists and policymakers worldwide find that indigenous communities produce creative proposals to solve the problems associated with climate change, including changed weather cycles, flooding, the drying-up of rivers and increased temperatures (Echeverry, 2009: 15). These proposals will result in lifestyles that are in harmony with the environment and which mean effective action to mitigate global warming.

Indigenous peoples' efforts to preserve their ecosystems and biodiversity include important strategies for dealing with environmental challenges. Recovering degraded areas, protecting water sources and forests, and generating only low levels of waste will go a long way towards solving the environmental challenges for Colombia.

Notes

1. Inhabitants of Serranía del Cocuy, north-eastern Colombia.
2. www.gaiaamazonas.org (accessed 13 September 2013).

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