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Fourth International

Climate refugees: new social movements, new responsibilities of solidarity

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Some elements of reflection based on the Asian experience and presented to the International Committee of the Fourth International on February 23, 2014.

As with many other movements involved in solidarity with victims of humanitarian disasters, we had to take more centrally into account the breadth of natural disasters (whether or not of human origin) after the tsunami which struck in the Indian Ocean in 2004. The following year, New Orleans in the USA was devastated by hurricane Katrina; then northern Pakistan and Kashmir by an earthquake.

It is in this context that I presented in 2006 an initial report seeking to begin a reflection on these disasters, treating them already at the time as an element of the world situation, analysing in their social bases the “aid policies” implemented by the powers that be, opening the discussion on our own responsibilities and tasks in this area.

This report showed in particular that the solidarity provided by progressive organizations “on the ground” was effective both in the emergency period and in the long term. For the emergency period, I notably took the example of Pakistan where the first “hard” houses rebuilt in Kashmir in the areas devastated by the earthquake were thanks to the campaign launched by the Labour Education Foundation and the Labour Party Pakistan. For duration, I notably referred to the action led by Areds in Tamil Nadu (India), where Dalits (“untouchables”) and fishers were mobilized together, beyond caste barriers, and where the boats rebuilt in the coastal villages became the collective property of women: reconstruction should be not be “identical” – reproducing past inequalities – but “better”, strengthening popular solidarities and combating dependency.

Reconstructing “better” is a struggle. Far from reducing social inequality and oppression, humanitarian disasters sharpen them, the elite seeking to benefit from the state of dependency and shock of the affected populations. The development of tourist complexes instead of the villages wiped off the map by a tsunami provides a classic example of this. An international “people to people” and “movements to movements” effort however helps the popular layers to better defend their rights in all stages from emergency aid to reconstruction (habitats, consciousness, economy and so on).

Eight years have passed since this initial report, with a new accumulation of experiences. The political conclusions drawn at the time seem confirmed to me. It is nonetheless important to now review recent developments and questions which were not approached or neglected in the 2006 report, notably concerning the rules of humanitarian action.

I. Some recent developments

We note among recent developments:

The extension and aggravation of extreme climatic phenomena

Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda, which hit the Philippines in 2013 is the most violent cyclone ever recorded to reach land. It should be class 6 (international classification) or class 5 (Philippine classification) – however these levels do not exist, the highest class being 5 (or 4 in the Philippines), which indicates the novelty of the phenomenon.

Global warming leads to an increase in the average temperature of water, thus its level rises – and thus the average gravity of inundations of marine origin, along the coasts. Thus, the elevation of the water level is conjugated with the power of the winds (with speeds exceeding 300 km per hour) leading to destruction of a rare breadth in the central Philippines.

Extreme climatic phenomena are not confined to the South. This winter, France and Britain have suffered a very unusual succession of violent storms (with speeds exceeding 150 km per hour), leading to destruction on the coasts and repeated flooding. The USA has experienced according to the region drought or exceptional cold (the winter being on the contrary especially mild in Western Europe).

The interaction of “natural” disasters with other socio-humanitarian disasters

For a long time climate chaos has deepened conflicts, in particular for the control of water. We will look at three recent examples which illustrate to what point natural disasters can provoke (or combine with) other social and humanitarian disasters.

The most dramatic example is obviously north east Japan where, in 2011, on the basis of irresponsibility and the lack of preparation of the industrial lobbies and the government, an earthquake followed by a devastating tsunami led to the nuclear disaster of Fukushima, the most serious since Chernobyl. Remember that many nuclear power stations have been built along coasts, indeed in earthquake zones.

A significant part of Bangladesh is threatened by floods linked notably to tropical storms. Climate refugees, forced to leave their villages, are already numerous. Migratory flows, including across borders, are increasing in a context of social crisis which, in India as in Bangladesh, sharpens inter-communal tensions.

In the Philippines, typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda affected millions of families. The affected zones already included the most deprived peoples of the archipelago and the people risk plunging into a still greater durable, structural poverty. Numerous climate refugees went to the capital, in Cebu or Mindanao, erecting shanty towns. A supplementary effort was demanded of Philippine migrants working – with or without papers – in numerous countries, who sent a lot of money to their families. The social shock wave of an extreme climatic phenomenon of great scope risks then extending well beyond the areas directly affected.

The countries of the North are generally better equipped to face climatic disasters and limit the propagation of their social effects. But with the rise of precarity in these societies and the increasingly drastic reduction of the resources devoted to public solidarity policies, it can be feared that in this area there could be a “third worldisation” of a part of Europe or the USA.

Capital, from inaction to negative action

Faced with the global ecological crisis, continue as if nothing happened – such has been the philosophy of the capitalist lobbies and the governments who follow their order. Such action as there is concerns only the margins, or is often reduced to operations of communication.

The climatic crisis is an opportunity for immense capitalist profits. The mechanism is tested, on a small scale. One can ensure profits by producing in a polluting way – and new profits by selling systems of de-pollution. Geo-engineering seeks to elevate this logic to the planetary scale: dump iron filings in the oceans to capture CO₂ or disperse sulphur in the atmosphere to reduce the temperature, or put giant spatial mirrors into orbit to reflect the

sun's rays.

Research and experimentation in climate and geo-engineering are already underway – with support from public finance. Their implementation will lead to chain imbalances in the atmosphere or oceans (from increased acid rain to the modification of marine ecosystems) whose consequences cannot be entirely foreseen. It will also involve a new leap forward in production, and its impact on climate chaos and more generally the global ecological crisis: an infernal spiral.

However, ecological rationality counts for little faced with the attraction of geo-engineering for capitalists: beyond immense profits, it promises the creation of new oligopolies benefiting from a profitable position through their control of planetary systems – with as counterpoint the strengthening of their dictatorial political power over society.

Haiti and the crisis of the institutional aid system

I will not expand on this question here, but the incredible morass into which institutional aid has fallen in Haiti, after the earthquake of January 2010, has had very profound consequences, revealing to what point the governmental policies and the intervention of certain NGOs could feed perverse logics, disqualifying durably calls to solidarity among many people of good will: murderous failure of the UN and governments, creation of a “market in aid” with competition among humanitarian associations, abandonment of the affected populations to their fate.

I didn't say in 2006 and don't say today that no international humanitarian association does good work! But it is necessary to contribute to creating conditions which allow those who do so – through good solidarity work – to cooperate more effectively with progressive social movements.

Conclusions

From all this, I draw three conclusions:

– The effects of the climate crisis are increasingly felt. The source of the problem must be attacked by opposing to the capitalist logic a public logic based on social and ecological needs, so as to limit then stop global warming, necessarily involving radical anti-capitalist measures. But we must also take fully into account the fact that the crisis is a present fact, that it already has consequences that we must integrate into the analysis of the world situation and the definition of our tasks.

– The first of these tasks remains the deployment of a solidarity independent of the established powers. That was the main conclusion of the 2006 report. We cannot rely on the institutions or “aid professionals”. Some progress has been made in this area, but it has been limited. Also, we cannot respond alone to the problem posed. It is very important to associate (or associate with) progressive organizations involved in this area of action, trade unions, peasant movements and so on.

– We must continue to learn from a still very recent experience and fill the gaps in the 2006 report. We need a genuine collective work of reflection on a field of intervention whose importance grows, but which remains largely new to us.

II. Recent lessons

Here again, we have not to reflect in a vacuum: we have to learn from the movements involved in humanitarian aid for a long time. But in some countries, as in the Philippines, our own experience is sufficiently rich to inform our thinking. I want in particular to approach three questions not addressed or insufficiently addressed in my report of 2006: the principles of humanitarian aid, the question of climate refugees as a new social sector, prevention policy – and stress the importance of the choices made in the area of reconstruction.

The rules of humanitarian aid

In 2006 I stressed the undeniable fact that humanitarian action was not above politics. The elites seek to profit from the crisis to strengthen their grip on society and favour their own interests. We seek to help the most deprived so that they are not forgotten from aid and can defend their own interests up to and including during socio-economic reconstruction. There, however, one could conclude that “everything is political” ignoring the rules of humanitarian action in times of disaster.

Let’s draw a parallel with medical action. A group of progressive doctors choose to practice in a poor neighbourhood rather than a rich one; but where they practice, they treat everyone, rich or poor. We choose to prioritize aid to deprived communities, often where institutional aid is non-existent, insufficient or late; but the aid will be distributed according to need (breadth of destruction to which each family has been victim and their state of deprivation, and so on) without making their respective political positions a priority.

This question is especially sensitive after a large scale climatic disaster: devastation is such that the social tissue is torn up and the survivors remain profoundly traumatized, losing their sense of being free actors. Beyond their relatives, the survivors have often lost everything: housing, property, but also means of existence (fishing boats, farming or de transport equipment, harvest or plantations, sources of employment and so on) – the economy itself is devastated. They must literally start from zero. The bigger the area affected, the deeper the feeling of abandonment – the feeling of having no future.

The social movements do not generally stand up to a major cataclysm and in the best of cases need some time to recover a capacity of action. For example, in Tacloban (the main port town of the island of Leyte), after the passage of typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda, the militant tricycle drivers union was atomized. It had to rebuild contacts and take care of the families of members plunged into distress, helping them to drink, eat and house themselves, well before the union could again play any role as social actor.

Emergency aid is aimed at those most in need, but also aims to recreate the conditions indispensable to the resumption of a collective activity. It is a very delicate moment where the established powers (big wealthy families, clientelist parties, identity-based churches and so on) will benefit by demanding a debt of recognition) for the (more or less real) aid contributed.

What could for us be the link between humanitarian action with its “apolitical” principles (offering unconditional aid to the affected populations) and political engagement among the popular layers struggling for their rights in a time of crisis? Our own principles of self-organisation, conceived as the condition of self-emancipation. The established powers seek to perpetuate the state of dependency of the affected population; we seek to favour its capacity for self-affirmation and independence; that is the difference.

Climate refugees: social sector, social movement

One of the main lessons of our recent experience is that in the countries struck by recurrent climatic disasters, a new social milieu, a new social sector, appears: the “surviving” populations, the climate refugees. If the rich have the

necessary resources to rapidly regain their footing in society the same is not true of the poor (or families brutally pauperized by the disaster). In the absence of a massive and effective public intervention in their favour, they are condemned to suffer the consequences of such disasters for a long time; while other cataclysms create new surviving populations - or strike anew the victims of the previous one!

We can trace a parallel with the unemployed and marginalized in post war Europe. Yesterday, an unemployed person was generally an employee between two jobs; today, it is a social milieu which has permanence and is constantly renewed. Yesterday the status of precarity was marginal (even immigrants often enjoyed stable employment); today it is a norm. New social milieus appear (reappear), which requires (re)thinking, grasping their possible forms of organization, their dynamics.

Situations of humanitarian disaster are not new today in Mindanao, notably because of recurrent military conflict; and our comrades have a long experience in this area. However, it is only recently that high intensity cyclones have become more frequent in the Philippine south (previously they were more common in the centre or north of the archipelago). In December 2011, typhoon Washi/Sendong and floods devastated the coastal regions where they are active, notably in Iligan, in the popular neighbourhoods where they are based. For the first time, our comrades were directly confronted with the devastating psychological and social effects of such climatic disasters – and the appearance of this social milieu we call climate refuges. They mobilized their activist networks in this province and those around: this was a “founding experience” which allowed them to be better prepared to act when a still more violent typhoon, Haiyan/Yolanda, hit the centre of the archipelago two years later.

Movements of “survivors” were created, self-organized and led by victims of climate disaster. Two years later, while the fight for their rights continues in Iligan (Mindanao), cadres emerging from this experience went to Leyte (Visayas) to bring aid to the victims of the super typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda: these movements are of a long term nature, and thus recognize each other, help each other, make links, and affirm themselves at the national – and why not international - level.

The affected populations have a right to hope for aid and solidarity – which is what concerns us primarily when we are in a position to offer them. But beyond this “elementary” level, we must respond to the emergence of a new social sector (climate refugees) demanding specific forms of organization – this could involve millions of people! From the very fact of the depth of the disaster, the classic questions we face in mobilizations is posed with a particular sharpness: inequalities of class and status, gender oppression, communal tensions, racism and religious intolerance, casteism (when there are castes), violence towards women, the situation and specific needs of children, and so on.

The point which I would stress is this: intervening in the direction of this new (for us) social sector is complex – it is necessary to learn from experience – and it is a major issue which concerns the whole organization. It is not a fleeting, marginal responsibility, the affair of an ad hoc commission and some “specialists” in humanitarian aid, full of good will. The whole organization must understand what is new in this area, be capable of mobilizing activist resources, supporting a long term action; it must know how to react without delay when a new area is struck and take a number of measures: redeployment of cadres, collectivization of experience, training in basic principles of emergency action and so on.

Also, this area should be integrated into the general programme of the organization. We have already evoked in the past many facets of this question and I would just wish to return today on two of them: risk prevention and reconstruction in the interests of the popular layers.

The policy of risk prevention

The 2006 report did not give the policy of risk prevention the importance it deserves. For countries affected by extreme and recurrent climate phenomena (and they are increasingly numerous), this is not a vague “principle of precaution”: the said risks are known and often administrative departments are supposed to deal with them. If governments nonetheless prove impotent in the face of disaster, it is in full knowledge of the situation.

The reasons why a government fails in its responsibilities are multiple: indifference of the élites to the fate of the poor, corruption and so on. These reasons can be very profound. For example, in the Philippines, the distribution of funds and the implementation of national aid takes place via local authorities not to strengthen direct democracy, but because, in a clientelist regime, this strengthens at all levels the relationships of patronage or negotiation of alliances between “big families”. Problems: a major climate disaster renders the local authorities impotent and the system seizes up.

More generally, prevention is not limited to a set of “technical” measures (availability of means of aid and so on). One cannot, for example, anticipate the risks of flooding linked to torrential floods or the elevation of the level of the oceans without taking on powerful economic lobbies: mines, agro-industry, real estate, tourism, financial speculation and so on. This demands that the state prioritize the common interest rather than private capitalist interests.

There is then in this area an especially close link between an emergency programme seeking to protect the population and a set of “transitional demands” whose legitimacy is evident (it is about avoiding humanitarian disasters!) and which for their implementation involve taking on the omnipotence of Capital.

Reconstruction policy

We find this link concerning the policy of reconstruction which we defend after a climatic disaster. The 2006 report stressed it already. We say, very summarily, that reconstruction poses us very directly with the question of agrarian reform in the rural world and urban reform in the towns. It amounts on the one hand to demands made on the authorities, but also things the survivors’ movements can initiate themselves.

In the devastated villages, rebuilding habitations is not enough; the general conditions of existence need to be reconstituted. The authorities should thus endow the families affected with plots of land which will allow them to produce without for example waiting for new coconut palms to arrive at maturity. Also, the movements can on their own initiative reanimate a peasant agriculture which helps to stabilize the social tissue, to no longer depend solely on monocultures or landowners, ensure a healthier environment to children – and which participates in a programme of struggle against global warming. The exchange of experience is crucial here: peasants engaged for years in organic farming in Mindanao contribute their know how to disaster-struck rural communities in Leyte.

In the towns the reconstruction piloted in the popular neighbourhoods by the authorities can lead to disastrous situations when a great part of the funds allocated are diverted, when minimum architectural standards are not respected, when conditions of existence are not taken into account: expulsion of those affected by the disaster far from areas of work, public transport or health services; lack of intimacy inside buildings and children left without protection, when their parents are absent; creation of ghettoized, crime ridden areas and so on. The fight for the right to housing and urban planning conceived in the interests of the poor thus take on an especially vital character against big real estate interests and land speculation.

The struggle of the climate refugees thus is linked to that of the peasant and urban poor movements, favouring convergences and the formation of territorial or sectoral coalitions from the local to the national level.

III. International solidarity

The coalition Mi-HANDs (Mindanao) was set up in response to the devastation produced by the super typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda. It has made a considerable effort to bring aid to the affected communities in the north of the island of Leyte. The campaign it launched rests firstly on its capacity to mobilize activist resources, but also the financial support that it has received on the international plane.

Not counting loans, Mi-HANDs has up until now received 32,000 euros – around 1,000 euros collected locally, 10,000 received from Belgium and 21,000 sent via the campaign initiated by Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF). I give these figures to show that even at our scale, what can be done counts effectively. And this support continues, while Mi-HANDs is involved in a new stage: rehabilitation and reconstruction of the devastated villages.

ESSF has received the support of number of persons and organizations, some of whom are in this room. However its resources remain far too limited. It can only initiate one or two financial campaigns per year, exclusively aimed at Asia. The amounts collected are greatly insufficient in relation to what is needed. ESSF cannot work with its local partners as long as is necessary (big solidarity associations undertake reconstruction programmes over a 10 year period). So the basis of solidarity must be widened.

We face a difficulty: the loss of traditions of “popular solidarity”, of “movements to movements”. Mostly, progressive organizations have not been involved for very long in this area, leaving it to specialized NGOs and associations (indeed para-governmental bodies). At best, a union, for example, will send aid to its sister organization in a country affected by a humanitarian disaster. Some progress has been made in recent years; ESSF for example has worked with the Union syndicale solidaires in France. Also, other movements defend conceptions quite close to ours in this area, like Secours populaire français.

We have ourselves much to learn – and that includes associations involved in solidarity actions for many years. We can also encourage other progressive parties and movements to participate on this terrain and encourage the taking into account of this question in activist networks like the Forum populaire Asie-Europe (AEPF). We have our role to play, modest though it is, in the development of this internationalist commitment or in the political reflection it involves. While continuing campaigns of financial solidarity – for now with the Philippines.

A campaign underway: financial support for the activity of Mi-HANDs (Philippines)

To send donations

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