
Speaking to the Continental Soul: Indigenous Peoples in Danger

By: Vladia Rubio / CubaSi
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The piece of news from just a few days ago spread through Internet without much resonance, perhaps to be consistent with the headline: Silent wave of suicides hits indigenous communities in Colombia.

It dealt with the indigenous people of the Colombian Emberá Dobida community, where in the last three months had had 22 suicides, 20 of them were children.

The article explained that they suffered from 'wawaima', what in their cosmogony is a spiritual illness that could resemble depression in the Western world.

But that report is only the tip of the iceberg, a glimpse to what the indigenous communities of our America have suffered during these years of pandemic.

Not for the sake of it the XV General Assembly of the Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC), held in Bolivia in October 28-29, alerted the world that indigenous peoples were in the brink of extinction due to the Covid.

The FILAC Assembly is integrated by government delegates and representatives of the indigenous peoples of the Member States of the United Nations. The meeting began with an ancestral ritual of gratitude to the "Pachamama" or Mother Earth, the same earth that's watching them suffer and die.

At the same time, COVID-19 revealed and deepened the inequalities suffered by these peoples in terms of health and education. In the latter, the technological gap caused significant damage, considering in particular the alternative of distance education in times of confinement.

The other impact they suffered as a result of COVID-19 was in economy: "the indigenous people who are at the urban level lost their jobs and those who live in the countryside lost their crops because they could not sell them due to the confinement," summarized Myrna Cunningham, chairman of FILAC.

On top of that goes the occupation, invasion, of indigenous territories by companies, other private parties, and even drug traffickers.

The latter is the case of the indigenous people of the Central Amazon of Peru, for example, where hundreds of native settlements living there have denounced the expansion of coca growers in their territory.

The growing number of illegal coca fields, clandestine laboratories and other aspects of this illegal activity have occupied more than 24 thousand hectares of only three communities of the Kakataibo people.

And with that growing comes deforestation, which in this case does not imply a greater impact on climate change but rather means a shot to the chest of indigenous survival because the forests are their food, their medicine and also the core of their beliefs and spirituality.

To make matters worse, along with deforestation, drug traffickers have also unleashed a wave of assassinations of native leaders.

Nearly 40% of the indigenous people of Latin America are currently outside their native territory, and not because they have chosen to emigrate but because of pressures such as those mentioned earlier, which if they remain in time, in a five-year period the number of inhabitants forced to move away from their land would reach 70%.

This forced migration, as well as the death of older indigenous people, have put the survival of several cultures in South America and also in the Caribbean at risk.

"I'd say that what has affected the indigenous people the most is the death of the elderly, the sages, those who know the culture, the languages. There are some peoples who have very few speakers of their native tongue and by losing elders these cultures run a huge risk of getting totally extinct. There's a real threat of extinction for these peoples, especially in South America and Mexico," said Cunningham.

Solutions at Hand?

The obstacles to overcome in order to guarantee a fully and dignified life for these original communities are great and complex.

But FILAC's technical secretary, Gabriel Muyuy, believes that the capacity of these peoples can contribute to an understanding with the different governments in order to integrate all of them to post-Covid solutions.

Two main paths can be differentiated in this strategy for the post-pandemic time: health and the socioeconomic sectors.

For the first one, programs and projects for intercultural health would have to be established, which, in addition to healing diseases, deploys a comprehensive approach that ranges from environmental to cultural health.

Those who in this time of Sars-Cov-2 have undertaken the task of vaccinating these communities, know how many differences there are between that world and the so-called Western culture. Even rituals and dances sometimes precede the moment of the vaccination, on top of the language barriers that make explanations difficult.

Regarding the socioeconomic reality to be transformed, FILAC has defined the Indigenous Cooperation Initiative for Good Living program, which includes the contribution of tools and other implements that allow these peoples and their leaders to achieve autonomous development.

At the same time, it includes providing them with spaces for a better commercialization of their products and, acquiring those that they don't produce and need to survive.

The Brazilian Ro'otsitsina Juruna, from the Xavante people, in the Namunkurá community, Mato Grosso state, when interviewed for a journalistic series on human rights and pandemic, wisely summarized how these peoples could get ahead:

"I think that only through knowledge, talking about what human rights are, can we achieve some progress. But it's

not enough to educate indigenous communities, talk about human rights, if these rights are later violated by the State.

"We need to know what we can do to defend our rights and make them effective in fact", she concluded.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSí Translation Staff
