

## **In the construction of autonomy, education and peace**

### **Interview with Asdrúbal Plaza Calvo**

*Asdrúbal Plaza Calvo is a Yanacona teacher who has been involved with the Colombian Indigenous movement for 40 years. After being a teacher for several years, he went on to become a lawyer and later obtained a doctorate in political and social sciences. From the perspective of his long professional and activist career, he highlights the importance of supporting processes of recovery of ancestral knowledge in environmental matters with the Nasa Tewalas of Valle del Cauca.*

**By Diana Alexandra Mendoza - September 1<sup>st</sup> 2022**

**Debates Indígenas:** Asdrúbal, you have participated and contributed to the discussion and construction of proposals on various issues of interest to Indigenous Peoples, including their own education, autonomy and, more recently, the Ethnic Chapter of the Final Peace Agreement signed between the Colombian State and the FARC. Although all these issues have different developments, could you try to help us see them in the perspective of the new government that will be installed with the arrival of Petro and Francia?

**Asdrúbal Plaza Calvo:** I would start by considering the issue of autonomy and authority, and I would say that there have been some important discussions on this matter about which I have respectful objections. The overriding approach in the Permanent Roundtable for Consultation with Indigenous Peoples has been one of giving regulatory recognition to Indigenous Peoples as environmental authorities. I do not share this position because Article 246 of the National Constitution already establishes the Indigenous Peoples' right to administer and legislate within their own territories; it does not say "at least in" or "only in", in other words, it is a general rule. In 2003, the Constitutional Court confirmed that Indigenous Peoples have the right to act as authorities in all matters within their territory. Failing to understand the scope of this autonomy and self-government as handed down by the Constitutional Court has resulted in us getting bogged down on a path that says we have to create an environmental authority by decree. And yet, if we accept this decree, tomorrow

we will have to negotiate another decree for our education authority, then another for our health authority and so on. This is not how it should be. Indigenous authority cannot be compartmentalized because, like all Indigenous thought, it is formed of a single whole.

It is worth noting another element of constitutional case law which explains that, the more consolidated you are, the more autonomy you have. Since Indigenous Peoples are able to legislate, the rules governing their territories have priority over other rules, i.e., their own law takes priority. In short, if we do not want continual interventions in our territories with external regulations that run counter to our interests, we must make progress in our own legislation, from the territory, from within. This requires us to embark on a serious process of decolonizing our thought as a necessary step to effectively exercise autonomy in these new times.

**DI: Another field that you know in depth and that is directly connected to the theories of decolonization is that of self-education. How do you think it will be possible to make progress in this field with this new national government?**

**APC:** If approved, our proposal for our Own Indigenous Education System (SEIP) will have a major impact. It will be of great importance, not only for the Indigenous Peoples themselves but for the whole country. Once we have successfully implemented it, they will surely have to review the whole national education system because we will be breaking new and innovative ground. Our starting point in terms of coordinating strategy is not *interculturality* as such, but we instead talk of *own* education, turning on its head the different levels that are at stake in the educational process. For example, we do not talk of teachers but instead include key elements such as spirituality, educational spaces and actors, in line with each culture's natural way.

We wanted to project this same perspective to the SISPI [Intercultural Health System for Indigenous Peoples], that is, we questioned the idea of interculturality because we believe that, as in education, health should be our own, the Indigenous one. Interculturality is a valid crosscutting principle but we cannot lose sight of the fact that what we are interested in strengthening are our *own* ways. If not, what will happen to our ancestry or our worldviews? A Western focus has always predominated in previous health proposals, with

our *own* methods being ancillary. This now needs to change because we have greater clarity and our proposal for *own* Indigenous health is better structured.

In terms of *own* education, health and economies, we have already made a great deal of progress, and we have even managed to open a path for them despite the previous governments that were in power. The education proposal is ready. We have been able to agree on the normative aspects of the law, which will be implemented by means of regulatory decrees. We have already had an initial meeting with the Minister-designate, Alejandro Gaviria, and we have his commitment that he will take this regulatory proposal for Indigenous *own* education forward and address the educational emergency that has been declared since 2019.

Now you ask me, what can happen going forward? First, we need to be clear that we are not in government because, if we were, we would be able to set rules and make decisions directly. But we do now have a friendly government, a government that is hopefully in tune with our interests (as one of our authorities put it); this does not, however, mean that we can sacrifice our processes or renounce the mechanisms we use to exert pressure simply because a friendly government has taken office. We cannot stop our processes or fall into bureaucracy, far less mortgage our autonomy, self-government and community decisions.

**DI: Do you think there's a risk of further bureaucratization of leaders and organizations in this political moment?**

**APC:** It is undeniable that there are leaders across all nations who put their own personal interests and benefits first. How do we solve this? How do we put our own house in order before putting those of others straight? This is clearly a moment that we can take advantage of to grow in strength and demonstrate this internal harmony, but we cannot remain focused only on internal issues. Over the next four years, we have to meet with the government to discuss the future of Colombia. For this we will need to agree, as Indigenous Peoples, on our priorities, what we are going to focus on and how we are going to achieve it. We must also establish how we are going to ensure that a friendly government remains in place so that we can continue to make progress in these processes because, if not, we will be worse off in the future.

**DI:** Let's talk a little about the implementation of the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Agreement of which you were a part. After many efforts by the Indigenous, Afro and Raizal peoples to have a space as counterparts of the Agreement and being denied by both the Santos Government and several members of the FARC, you were able to assert your voice as a third counterpart of the Agreement through the Ethnic Commission for Peace and Defense of Territorial Rights and include the Ethnic Chapter. Do you consider that after four years of setbacks in its implementation, the time has come to put it into action?

**APC:** Let me tell you a story. A few days ago, after being appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Alvaro Leyva (whom I met in Havana during the Peace Process) contacted me. He wanted us to continue to be involved in strengthening the Agreement and we agreed to promote the National Political Pact set out in the Peace Agreement. This commitment and initiative has almost been forgotten but it is of enormous scope because it seeks to involve everyone in a great pact for peace: friends, adversaries, trade unionists, women, LGBTI+, ethnic peoples, peasants and businesspeople. We had prior contact with Dr. Leyva. During the dialogue process, we met him and invited him to present our proposal regarding the structural reforms we had identified. We knew that Iván Duque's government was not going to promote it and that the FARC did not have the capacity to do so. Now, we want to try again.

The ethnic peoples and communities can promote this National Political Pact because we are the third political actor in the Agreement. It is unprecedented in the history of global peace agreements that we have been able to open up this space. The introduction to the Ethnic Chapter in the Agreement is full of incredible situations that only took concrete shape at the last minute on the last day of the public announcement of the signing. But, as we all know, it has not been implemented.

The first issue that needs to be resolved is the functioning of the CSIVI [Comisión de Seguimiento, Impulso y Verificación a la Implementación del Acuerdo de Paz], which depends exclusively on the Government and the FARC. Without this body, the Special High-Level Body for Ethnic Peoples (IEANPE) cannot function, and this is a primary advisory and consultative body to the CSIVI in terms of fulfilling the 97 indicators of the Ethnic

Chapter. The situation is the same for the body created by women to follow up on gender issues. Since the outgoing government never accepted the Peace Agreement and did not want to meet with the FARC, the CSIVI never functioned. Instead of fulfilling the Peace Agreement, they wanted to supplant it with a programme called “Peace with Legality”. We’ve already seen the consequences of that.

Faced with this prospect, we made the decision to move forward as the IEANPE and we made this known to the Duque government and the FARC. Our mission is to verify implementation, but we are not able to mobilize throughout the whole country. We do not even have the logistical capacity to disseminate the Ethnic Chapter to the communities. When we began to raise this problem at the international level, the Presidential Adviser for Stabilization, Emilio Archila, contacted us to tell us that the Peace Fund had approved resources for IEANPE. Unfortunately, although we had set up a technical team, the pandemic subsequently forced us to work virtually. Even so, we demanded information on progress in the bodies responsible for implementing the Peace Agreement and, although they laughed at us to begin with, they were forced to take the Implementation Framework Plan and the development of ethnic indicators seriously. Despite many difficulties, we were able to prepare a first report and this was published in December 2021.

**DI: It is definitely a fact that the implementation of the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Agreement and its consultative and verification bodies have not started moving forward. However, after these four lost years, there must be some aspects that you now identify as more strategic for the future. Is that so?**

**APC:** Yes, it is important to highlight the Substantive Safeguards in the Ethnic Chapter: Cultural Objection; Prior, Free and Informed Consultation; the focus on women, family, gender and generation; and the progressive (and non-regressive) nature of rights. As these four safeguards are crosscutting and were not included as indicators for measuring compliance in the Agreement's Framework Implementation Plan, they have not been given the necessary importance. At the moment, we are seriously challenging the municipalities that have [Territorially-Focused Development Programmes \(PDET\)](#), where the Special Consultation Mechanisms are being applied. These mechanisms are a violation of Prior

Consultation because they do not meet the minimum international standards but are in total breach of them. We will need to review what has happened so far in detail in order to work on the necessary corrections.

These and other aspects about which we already have greater knowledge should be reviewed. We have already asked the incoming government to revive the Peace Process and they seem to be in agreement with this. It is also clear that the first IANPE report attracted a great deal of international attention and support for the implementation of the Ethnic Chapter. For the moment, we are looking at the possibility of promoting Cultural Objection and [Leonor Zalabata's support within the United Nations](#). The international stage is an important challenge for us as Indigenous Peoples because we need to occupy the empty spaces, both in terms of implementing the Ethnic Chapter as well as guaranteeing all the individual and collective rights that have been violated for centuries.

**(Unedited interview at request of the author)**

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