

up to the recommendations made by the Ombudsmen's offices in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, as well as contributing to the strengthening and supervision of their work.

Within this framework, it is especially important to follow up on the Preliminary Report, by the Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights in Honduras, on forced disappearances. That report, tabled on 29 December 1993, must be the first step towards justice and the prevention of such grave human rights abuses in Honduras.

Indigenous peoples' rights

We support the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination, to their lands and to their natural resources; full respect for, and constitutional recognition of, indigenous religions, as well as of the right of indigenous peoples to protect their sanctuaries.

With regards to Guatemala, we request the official recognition and implementation of bilingual education, as well as the use of indigenous languages by local and regional governments; we also urge full respect for Maya organisational structures and support full participation of indigenous representatives in the peace dialogue.

5. Consultative forum with civil society

Concertación, Asocode, and CIFCA maintain close coordination in order to follow through on the San José Process.

Based on our experience, we think that the San José Process would benefit from the establishment of a consultative mechanism with the participation of, among others, our networks. Such a representative mechanism would make it possible for:

- the EU and the Central American governments to have a mechanism for consulting civil society with the purpose of making their own actions more effective;
- there to be an organised channel for the exchange of information.

In concrete terms we propose that the EU initiate a consultation on the strategies of cooperation which are being elaborated for Central America. Such a consultation would be timely in view of the tendency for the EU to increasingly channel financing through the organisations of Central American civil society.

"WE DON'T NEED ALL THOSE NGOs"

Interview with Wilson Campos ()*

Wilson Campos represents a new generation of Central American peasant leaders; he is a pragmatic, undogmatic man, and averse to political paternalism. His organisation Asocode with its 1,5 million members is a factor not to be ignored in the current power relations in the region. Campos has little sympathy for organisations that claim to serve their interests. *"We farmers can speak up for ourselves. Already too many people have been taking advantage of us, without us getting any the wiser for it."*

A delegation of peasant leaders from Central America is visiting Wageningen and many other places in Western Europe. For the sake of international solidarity; in search for contacts with Dutch and other European farmers. *"To learn from each other, to find universal solutions for the worldwide exploitation of farmers."*

It sounds a bit obsolete. Solidarity with the popular movements of Latin America, isn't that a thing of the past? After all, once the revolutionary zeal of the Left in Europe began to fade, it soon also lost interest in that distant continent, and by now Europe's Left finds itself in an unprecedented crisis, at political party level as well as within the solidarity movement.

And what about mutual solidarity among farmers? Doesn't that conflict with the reality of today, with farmers becoming each others rivals throughout the world? European beef (supported by huge EC subsidies) offers cut-throat competition to Sahel cattle-farmers. Banana-growers in southern Europe strengthen their market position at the expense of farmers in Ecuador and Central America, due to protective measures.

So, what exactly are they looking for, this large delegation of Central American peasant leaders who have been touring the EC-countries for the past few weeks? And what made them join *The*

(*) *Interview by Hans van der Veen with Wilson Campos, General Coordinator of Asocode; Onze Wereld (Dutch magazine on development issues) June 1993.*

Peasant Road which offers a new worldwide dialogue between peasant organisations, when the next thing they do is march through the city of Arnhem armed with banners?

We present our doubts to Wilson Campos from Costa Rica, General Coordinator of Asocode, the *Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas Centroamericanas*, the first regional platform of peasant organisations in the history of Central America, to which all peasant leaders on this European tour and their organisations belong. Our scepticism does not surprise him. *"It is a fact that public opinion in Europe is no longer as interested in Central America as it used to be. The poor of the world make headlines only when there is a war on. We have to live with that."*

Campos is also familiar with the political developments in Europe. *"Don't think we are naive. We know what is going on in Italy, in France. The political Left is disintegrating. It is a worldwide phenomenon. Political parties are becoming less important. That is precisely why Asocode, being an autonomous, non-political peasant coordination, is of our times."*

Appearance of entrepreneur

The peasant movement of Central America, according to Campos, is freeing itself from the political chains of the seventies and eighties, which enables it to look ahead and face the new challenges of our era. *"The war is over and the time has come for the peasants of the region to go hand in hand. They are no longer divided by ideological differences."*

Campos himself serves as a model for these changes. His enthusiastic plea conveys little of the political rhetorics that were so characteristic of the leaders of the Latin American popular movement. His age, 34, and his appearance, remind one of a young successful entrepreneur rather than a traditional Latin American peasant leader. This actually made people at Hivos, one of the Dutch development agencies that support Asocode, wonder if this Campos was a real peasant.

"I certainly am," says Campos, adding that in two years time at the most he will resign and go straight back to his farm and family in northern Costa Rica. *"That has been my intention ever since I was elected. You must not do this sort of work for more than a couple of years. You must never lose touch with your land."*

Being the son of poor day labourers, Campos is still not quite used to the luxury of having land and a farm of his own, which he acquired when he took part in the illegal land occupations in north-

ern Costa Rica in the 1980s, at the time of the armed conflicts in Nicaragua. Much of the land on the Costa Rican side of the border was wasteland that belonged to large landowners who used it for extensive cattle-farming.

Or it belonged to farms from where the *contras* launched their attacks, from bases built by the CIA who supplied the weapons and ran military training camps there. When the *Sandinistas* lost the elections and most of the *contras* went back to Nicaragua, more and more farms became abandoned, attracting a steady flow of poor Costa Rican peasants hoping to get hold of a patch of land.

Campos became the leader of a new local union of peasants, the *Unión de Campesinos de Guatuso*. He wanted it to be a new kind of peasant organisation, without the traditional ties with a political party, the Church, or the State. A real peasant organisation, solely serving the interests of its members. *"Before I had my own land, I belonged to a more traditional, left-wing peasant group. But, like many other peasants, I was unhappy with it. The leaders were no real peasants, and we were mainly an instrument for that political party, mobilising people for it, winning votes for it."*

Scornful reactions

After his election as leader of the local union, Campos was given the opportunity to take some classes, to study. He became convinced that they needed a new kind of peasant organisation and a new ideology. New ideas about development had to be put into practice. This meant more training courses, more studying. It provoked scornful reactions from both the established Left and the authorities. Campos: *"They would say that all those farmers going to college were no longer farmers, but intellectuals. What they actually meant was, that farmers cannot have ideas, that they should not study."*

"The illiterate peasants used to be harassed with ideologies, by the Left, by the Church, or by the Government, instilling them with simplistic ideas about how the world should be made a better place. Experiencing the misery that resulted from the wars, there are few people left who still believe in simple, top-down solutions."

In the early nineties several meetings of peasant leaders from the whole Central American region took place, most of them in Nicaragua, where the Sandinista revolution had put new life into peasant unions. These meetings eventually led to the foundation of Asocode. Young Wilson Campos was elected its first General Coordinator. Now, after more than two years, Asocode has, through

the national organisations, a membership of about 150 local unions covering all seven Central American countries. Thus Asocode represents 80 per cent of the organised peasants of the region — some 1.5 million small and medium-sized agricultural producers.

This is quite an achievement, which has also made an impact outside the region. Asocode receives financial support from both national governments (among them the European Community) and non-governmental organisations such as Hivos and Novib in the Netherlands. The Transnational Institute supports Asocode by conducting a long-term research project. Asocode serves as a resource centre, a service point for its national members, and represents the peasants of Central America in international organisations and at summit meetings of the political leaders of the region.

Unique

"Asocode is quite unique," Campos proudly says. "We, the producers, have created our own movement. Based on the idea that we ourselves want to define the direction of our own development. The idea is not new, there are numerous groups in society that already do so. All, except the peasants. The reason is that there were always others who thought they should speak on our behalf. This has changed now. This is the beginning of a new social movement."

A social novelty, though not welcomed by everyone, because from the start Asocode - with Campos playing a leading role - has campaigned against the traditional peasant representatives, and especially against the NGOs, the intermediary organisations that are supposed to channel foreign development aid to the Central American peasants. Campos emphasises the words *are supposed to*, for in his speech at Asocode's First General Congress in Nicaragua in 1991, he criticised the inefficiency and rivalry, the bureaucracy, corruption and lack of democracy (paternalism) of many of these organisations. "The good ones excepted, of course," says Campos. "But there simply are too many NGOs in Central America acting on behalf of the peasants. The result is a great lack of cohesion: one NGO is running a small project here, another NGO a project there. They lack a common strategy. Besides, too much money is being wasted on setting all these organisations up and paying salaries."

Asocode's message was clear and hit home: Just give the money to us, we don't need those intermediaries. And since one of the aims of the European tour of Asocode's leaders is to establish direct relations with potential funders, it is clear why not everyone in

Central America has greeted Asocode with enthusiasm.

"We have been severely criticised by the sectors that traditionally represented us," Campos admits. "To them we are illiterate peasants who need to be guided. Their criticism is diminishing now, partly because the influence of the traditional workers' platforms like the labour unions is diminishing. You see company-oriented organisations emerging, rather than national ones. And we, as an association of local unions of small peasants, fit into this development."

Dangerous liaisons

The question remains, however, how Asocode manages to remain politically independent in the highly politicised region of Central America. Besides, where does Asocode itself stand politically? "Of course we have a political dimension," Campos states. "And that's what we want. But we also want — on principle — to offer diversity. We do not aim at ideological unity. There is a need for discussion, for many different solutions to be found for many different problems. It is by no means in our interest to commit ourselves. Such commitments have proved fatal in the past."

"More and more weight is being attached to peasant autonomy. You see it happen in the whole region, but most of all in Nicaragua and El Salvador. We, the associations affiliated with Asocode, want to focus solely on the interests of the peasants. That is our central issue." Campos readily admits that there are still many Asocode-members with political connections, but he adds: "We are working hard to loosen these ties."

According to Campos the current political climate is more favourable than it has been for a long time. "With the wars in the region largely over, there will be room for negotiations that will get us somewhere. But the peasant organisations must raise their voices now, for the old situation may be restored before you know it. The governments are giving us some elbow-room, but that is mainly tactics, a way to keep the social movements under control. Besides, other organisations are trying to regain their former power."

Asocode must squeeze into a place in between, according to Campos. A return to former relations is impossible. "Before the wars it was unthinkable for a peasant organisation to negotiate with a government. That's all changed now. We represent 60 per cent of the population. We have our own ideas about what Central America needs, about what course to embark on. First of all for agriculture, of course, but also in a wider sense, for the whole economy."

Voice in development

In short, the organised peasants of Central America want a voice in the development of their countries. In that respect Asocode is different from the traditional organised pressure groups. Campos: *"Before the wars, negotiations with governments were always about concrete issues, such as higher wages, higher prices, and they took place in the well-known atmosphere of social polarisation. Today we have a clearer perception of what development is, and of what role a social movement plays in it."*

The armed rebellions in the region, which were mostly intended to end discrimination and exploitation of poor peasants, were ineffective. Campos: *"There are now probably more landless peasants than before; an awful lot of peasants have been driven from their land as a result of the wars."* According to Campos, most peasants in the region are worse off than before, perhaps with the exception of Nicaragua, where some results have undeniably been achieved. But the land issue remains a bottleneck in every Central American country, together with the lack of state support. Cheap credit facilities, agricultural training, consultancy services for peasants are either non-existent or do not work properly. Economic adjustment programmes are making new cuts in deteriorating basic facilities and lead to even greater emphasis on export crops. *"We are forced to grow pineapples for other people, while there is less and less corn to feed our own populations. It is obvious that we are on the wrong track, that we are abusing our national resources."*

Peasants must be involved in other sectors of the economy too, Campos argues. They should not just produce cash crops but also take part in their processing and trading. This is part of the alternative strategy that Asocode has in mind. Campos believes in its feasibility: *"It is the farmers who must shape such a new development model. We have the experience and the potential."*

Daydreams or realism? Campos is convinced of the latter. He stresses once more that Asocode and its peasant leaders are not naive. *"We know very well that the present political opening is largely tactics on the part of the governments, but still, there is a political opening. So we take advantage of it. If we do it right, we can win. But we'll have to strengthen our own structures as much as possible. By cooperating, by creating networks in, as well as outside the region. In Western Europe, for instance. And that's why we are here."*

Networks — a typical concept of the 1990s. But more neutral than *international solidarity*; it leaves no room for paternalism.

Networks is about *strategic alliances*, they say at the Transnational Institute, organisers of the European tour of the Central Americans. In their opinion Asocode's development shows a powerful dynamic. It is an example of what can be achieved under tough political circumstances. And others, in the Third World as well as in Western Europe, can learn from it.