

ASOCODE: OUR VIEW ON DEVELOPMENT

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1. The context and Asocode's overall approach

The 1980s was not a totally lost decade for the people of Central America. On the other hand, we can certainly claim that from the colonial period until the 1980s fifty lost decades passed our peoples by. This is not to say that in the 1980s the secular exclusion of the majority of the population from participation in society changed, or that a genuine process of democratisation became established in our societies. What did happen was that during the unfolding of the far-reaching social conflict that marked this period, new forms of social participation and leadership emerged, and new visions and proposals for the ways in which our peoples could develop. The main features of the international context for this process were the collapse of the socialist system, economic globalisation and the rise of a group of issues centred on environment and development. In Central America this process affected the rural and indigenous movement and the women's movement, trade unions, urban communities, production and service cooperatives, small and medium-size businesses and development NGOs.

It is a new path, which we are just beginning to trace, and its main feature is a radical questioning of the established system of domination, in all its aspects. At the same time, however, we are setting out on it with a very practical attitude, recognising the impossibility of establishing ideological hegemony in any area and insisting on the urgent need to put together with the widest possible participation, a new ideological vision to define the sort of society we want to build and — at long last — tackle the unavoidable task of producing our own development strategy, one which recognises our basic structural problems, galvanises the productive capacities and resources that Central America possesses, and establishes an

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adequate basis for its relationship with the world economy.

As regards the rural and indigenous sector organised in Asocode, this context of action is part of a process of national and regional coordination in the sector that is still very recent. At the regional level it began formally three years ago, though nationally experiments had been under way since the early 1980s. This means that the ideas formulated in this context are the product of a long, continuing process of maturation, one that demonstrated its viability in its origins, attitudes and proposals, and proved that it had a social base that gave it full legitimacy and impetus.

2. Development and democratisation in Central America: Asocode's view

In Asocode we think that many obvious questions remain open about development, and how development should mean guarantees of a better standard of living and a more rational use of our remaining resources. For us this means that being very clear, very responsible and very honest in tackling these questions may be our greatest challenge at the moment. We are convinced that we have gone some way along this road but, in both North and South, we are still only beginning the common effort to make this search for solutions more rigorous, and only taking the first steps to generate a social mobilisation to carry these ideas forward.

We are producers from all the different geographical regions of Central America (including Panama and Belize) who have formed a movement in which we have tried to be both producers and managers. We have taken up the challenge of managing our organisational process and producing answers to these questions from our own cultural experience and our experience as producers, while at the same time seeing ourselves as part of a larger social complex. Our answers, inevitably, derive from a very critical attitude towards the development models imposed on us in the past, and also from a serious evaluation of our abilities and potential.

This attitude is enabling us to formulate these answers and use them to meet the historic challenge of creating a comprehensive theory and practice of development which takes human beings as its vital core and places the enrichment of our cultural roots — the sensibility which enables and at the same time monitors this development — social relations and the natural environment on the same level as material prosperity. This development cannot continue behind the single banner of neo-liberalism, but must be based on

respect for the obligations deriving from the rational use of natural resources, for the right of every human being to be able to meet his or her basic needs and, especially, the obligations of the present generations to those which will follow them.

Our logic can no longer be based on economic growth or average income. We cannot retain an economic model based on irrationality and irresponsibility. Outside interference — political, military and economic — can no longer be the decisive factor in the relations of Central America with the rest of the world. This means that the changes required are structural and point towards a new development model, a new economic order. From this point of view there is hope and our actions, organised as critical weapons, as social awareness and tools for construction, are fully able to achieve gains greater than mere financial gain and more sovereign than armed force.

We are not trying to disengage from the present process of the globalisation of the world economy, but we think that there are ways of structuring our peoples's development and the necessary involvement with the world economy that combine dignity with feasibility. In this respect, our vision includes the necessary structural transformations that point to the formulation of a practical view of development that is more rational, more egalitarian and more just and also creates the conditions for overcoming the many, increasing and complex difficulties of the present industrial system.

Political liberalisation and civil participation

The Antigua presidential summit of June 1990 took the political decision on the part of the governments to encourage "*broad processes of consultation and participation between governments and the different sectors of society to enable them to take a leading role in regional decision-making*". Nonetheless this decision comes up against the serious problem of an absence of political support for this position, starting at the presidential level and inevitably influencing the political leaders in the various sectors and the key support institutions. In addition, although we face the urgent task of creating frameworks for social agreement and collaboration if we wish to establish the peace we need to promote regional development, the extension of this process is threatened by the fragility of our institutions. Ultimately we see that the appeal for collaboration (*concertación*), the main expression of the democratic opening (*apertura democrática*) so much stressed by the governments of the region, is no more than a tactical concession to enable them to

continue with structural adjustment and trade liberalisation. Its political counterpart is the reinforcement of electoral structures to symbolise democracy. We think that the current economic changes, both national and regional, are being implemented without the real and effective process of *concertación* mentioned at the various presidential summits.

The abrupt closure of economic spaces that is a feature of the current situation, holds out no promise for the future as was heralded by the *Spirit of Esquipulas*, and is an attack on the current fragile areas of political space that ought to provide the basis for the processes of *concertación*. Whatever the situation, no clever refurbishing of concepts such as *concertación*, *democratic opening* or *sustainable development* will bring us any nearer to a solution; what we need is the real, clear and precise political will to make the negotiations between governments and the various sectors of society succeed, as happened at the previous stage, and to implement the agreements without delay. Political and economic liberalisation must be carried out at the most real and practical level if we are not to return to the tragic confrontations all too fresh in the history of Central America. As representatives of a rural sector, which contributed the majority of the thousands of victims of this process, we long for peace within a framework of full social justice, but we are not naive and hereby issue a warning about this ever latent threat which, if it becomes a reality, will be even more devastating and socially destructive.

In this connection, the joint process mentioned at the beginning of this article, embarked on by the regional civil organisations, offers one of the most responsible ways of conferring viability on the necessary process of broad social, political and economic collaboration that is so urgently needed in Central America. In Asocode we are convinced of the need to strengthen this initiative, and are directing the bulk of our efforts to this end. We are doing this because we realise that our sectoral process is a contribution to the construction of the greatest possible political and economic democracy, the supreme historical aspiration of our peoples.

3. The relationship between rural leaders and researchers in the process of social change

From this point of view an attempt at systematisation such as is presented in this book, is a most valuable contribution and guide to discussion and the formulation of policies and programmes on the

part of Central American rural leaders. Its value lies in the fact that it brings together the reflections and proposals of a large group of researchers, with long experience over the issue of agrarian development in Central America, who have also constantly followed the various stages of our organisational process. The methodological principle of this work was that it should be carried out in permanent contact with the rural leaders and with the processes of organisational and policy development they directed. As a result, the researchers were able to survey a range of experiments, views and concepts deriving from the leaders' knowledge which were also the product of the grassroots experiences that are the basis of the whole process embodied in Asocode.

In this sense this book is an attempt to express the understanding the researchers have reached — as a result of their formation and experiences — of our processes, as well as their reaction to the theoretical contributions generated by our organisational processes. These elements make this study a pioneering work that will enable to establish that the generation and systematisation of knowledge from a process such as that embodied in Asocode, is not the prerogative of professional researchers. There is a clear process — which begins in the organisations — of generating not only experiences, but also alternative ideas about social participation in the definition of the development possibilities open to our peoples and of the political administration of our societies. This view is clearly set out in the article written for this book (Chapter 6) by my colleague Jorge Hernández, a former member of Asocode's Regional Commission, which also traces the process followed by Asocode until now.

The combination of these two types of processes for generating knowledge that enables our movements to act, is one of the greatest assets we have to develop in order to improve and refine our struggles. In other words, this task is a challenge confronting us and we believe this was what TNI had in mind, when it proposed the aims of this book.