

THE WIND FLOWS FROM THE SOUTH:

*Intrinsic Values of Mexican
Indigenous communities:
A Bottom-up Solution for
Climate Change*

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“My experience has taught me that protesting has no sense without a credible alternative and tangible proposal. The future is not built by yelling at present day problems. This is why I developed the phrase: *We keep protesting, but at the same time we keep proposing*” Francisco Van der Hoff, (Dutch missionary, cofounder of Max Havelaar Labeling, first Fair Trade Initiative).

With the transitional economy to sustainable energy projects, comes the promise of a cleaner, just and prosperous future for the Mexican nation, one that will give people access to energy, education, and the ability to reach their full potential. “Energy is the golden thread that connects economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability,” said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

The Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the COP 21 Conference, was an epic moment for world unity and prosperity of the planet. One hundred and ninety six countries came together and committed to limit their carbon emissions while providing finance to poor nations to fight global warming. There is no question it was a great global achievement: the agreement called for zero net anthropogenic green gas emissions to be reached during the second half of the 21st century. But it seems the solution again is driven from the north to the south, imposed from rich countries to the poor, when the true solution will be raised from the bottom- up, from the voiceless.

Although many top leaders in sustainability identified by global experts are headquartered in the global north, strong leadership also comes from the south. “If being a leader in sustainability is partly about responding to the needs and expectations of one’s society, it is hard to make the case that the world in the global South is lagging behind. Maybe our expectations need to change.”¹

How are we going to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals is the main question that should be answered at COP 22. It is the direction of how we approach these solutions that will cause the true change needed today. Shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy, driven by economic forces, green technology and innovation, is challenging, yet is a partial

¹ *Global Scan* 2013, “When will emerging economies embrace sustainability?” Retrived from <http://www.globescan.com/news-and-analysis/press-releases/press-releases-2013/272-when-will-emerging-economies-embrace-sustainability.html> .

solution to reduce carbon emissions. *The complete solution, taking the world in the right direction, is the one that embraces bottom-up solutions. These solutions create public-private partnerships with social impact and an alternative model that challenges devotion to endless growth by recovering ancestral wealth values.*

Renewable energy industry leaders have largely failed to link sustainable energy to more robust benefits for local populations.

Today there are numerous corporations in southern Mexico striving to scale renewables, increase energy efficiency and secure energy access for the world's most vulnerable citizens. However, in the case of the wind corridor in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexican indigenous communities have been victims of unfair and biased contracts, in order to generate electrical energy with the wind on their land, for the benefit of private wind developers.² The Mexican government has produced an aggressive legislation to address climate change and support energy transition, yet these projects remain susceptible to internal and external forces beyond the government's control, that will deprive indigenous people and land and livelihood. Likewise renewable energy industry leaders have largely failed to link sustainable energy to more robust benefits for local populations.³ This is an example of how only innovation, technology and energy access are not enough: the world needs an energy transition that is clean, affordable and just to tackle climate change while lifting people out of misery.

Climate change and lack of energy access are affecting millions of the world's most vulnerable citizens. According to the UN, ensuring access to sustainable energy by 2030 will require collective leadership of all kinds, including communities, financial institutions, developers, governments,

2 "The dark side of wind power in Mexico," Renewable Energy Mexico (RNM), May 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.renewableenergymexico.com/the-dark-side-of-wind-power-in-mexico/>

3 Dominic Boyer, *Aeolian Extractivism and Community Wind in Southern Mexico*, 2012. Retrieved from: http://publicculture.dukejournals.org.ezpprod1.hul.harvard.edu/content/28/2_79/215.full.pdf+html

companies, entrepreneurs and organizations.⁴ Toward that end the world's leaders have called for "universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy". However a *fair energy transition is not only about reaching universal energy access, but also the democratization of its supply*. The effective regulatory framework, with new domestic conservation and sustainable legislation, must include incentives for energy developers to *include indigenous communities as co-investors*. These communities who own the land where the wind blows the fiercest, need to be provided with the tools and skills that will allow them to make decisions according to their community's needs and values. An effective framework must ensure that jobs and profit must be generated for host communities and ownership must be vested to the greatest degree possible. This energy transition should empower indigenous leaders and amplify women's voices, to broker partnerships and unlock finance to achieve universal access to sustainable energy, as a contribution to a prosperous and equitable world.

The challenge goes beyond access to funding and technology, but bringing together the correct players together to enable impactful partnerships to form. According to Rachel Kyte, from Sustainable Energy 4all, these coalitions must be funded with domestic revenue gained through different national strategies, such as reduced corruption. Bottom-up solutions foster transparency and best practices, which eventually will dissipate corruption. Traceability of the energy supply enables stakeholders to trace down energy production and distribution, from wind energy farms to the final consumer, to help ensure a positive environmental and social impact. Likewise the private sector also plays an important role in providing solutions and enhancing capacity through human, technological and financial resources. But the principal challenge lies in allowing engagement between indigenous people and the private sector and government.

For centuries indigenous communities have been victims of abuse, lies and exploitation from these parties.⁵ Today this relationship has to heal and trust needs to be re-built. New holistic partnerships between key stakeholders

4 Sustainable Energy For All, <http://www.se4all.org/>

5 "Mexico's Wind Farms Brought Prosperity, but Not for Everyone," *New York Times* July 7, 2016 Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/world/americas/mexicos-wind-farms-brought-prosperity-but-not-for-everyone.html?_r=1

at the international and national level are essential for implementation and action. Bottom-up solutions towards a decarbonized world foster the transition to renewable energy with positive financial and social impact for vulnerable communities around the world. The energy transition, through a bottom-up solution, should be used as a driver to fight extreme poverty, lack of education, inequality, and the young work force migration to urban cities and organized crime in Mexico.

The framework that embraces these goals is the Energy Cooperative Model comprised of rural and indigenous communities. This type of enterprise engages communities in the production of renewable energy for their mutual benefit. Energy Cooperatives are the ideal models to make energy supply accessible to everyone, as well as develop financial and social impact for local communities. Socially—conscious investments, aligned to interest of indigenous communities, creates opportunities in rural areas to unlock value through alliances and trust.⁶ Energy Cooperatives could become a bottom-up renewable energy model and act as an agent of change by empowering local communities within a win-win business model.

Bottom-up solutions towards a decarbonized world also proposes an alternative model that challenges devotion to endless growth, as well as recovering ancestral values. A decarbonized world also means zero carbon lifestyles. Bottom-up solutions enable mindset conversions reflected in people's day to day living, to what the economist Juliet Shor addresses as the "plenitude economy." How we spend our time is key to reducing our environmental impact, inequality and promoting social wellbeing.⁷ Research proves that inequality boosts carbon emissions. Fair income distribution is also fair distribution of work. Long work hours and higher income above a certain level boosts consumption and increase unpleasant emotions such as depression and anxiety. In addition, lower incomes will reduce consumption and unsustainable growth.

"At the same time we can note the rise of a false or superficial ecology which bolsters complacency and a cheerful recklessness" (Pope Francis,

6 Intrust Global 2016: Energy Cooperatives Retrieved from: <http://intrustglobal.com>.

7 Juliet Shor, 2016 "Plenitude Economy." Retrieved from: <https://www.newdream.org/programs/redefining-the-dream/plenitude>

Laudato Si', 59). The transition to renewable energy by itself is not an integral solution if we continue depleting natural resources to produce goods. Simply because a good was fabricated with "green energy" doesn't mean it does not have an impact on the earth. It makes no sense to think that we can use clean energy on the north while depleting the south. Instead, a new system is needed where the market is not dependent upon sales, which stimulates demand for more production, but by ecological wealth and true prosperity.

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But how does the bottom-up solution propose a mindset conversion? Today there are some people who believe nature is another commodity and an economic input into the production process, referring to nature as "IT": something that is ultimately for human benefit. This economic focus aims to conserve and enhance natural assets with four major sources of finance: compensation payments, pollution taxes, carbon taxes and contributions from the depletion of non-renewables.⁸ All these efforts are made to assure that natural assets do not deteriorate and to keep them functioning as environmental services.

Although this vision is well intended, and somewhat useful, it gives permission for continuous growth, and growth itself degrades natural resources. Bottom-up solutions, with intrinsic indigenous values, proposes mindsets opposite to materialism and consumption. It is important to highlight the fact that these are not new trends, these are ancestral lifestyles owned, enjoyed, suffered and embraced by indigenous people through many generations.

Indigenous cultures in the southern Mexico, from the Tehuantepec Isthmus region, such as "Zapotecos", "Mixes," "Mixtecos," and "Chontales",

8 Dieter Helm, *Natural Capital* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

view the intrinsic values of nature as priceless. In these cultures, nature has spiritual and aesthetic value above and beyond the instrumental economic yields. They believe in equal rights for nature and for humans. Both can live together and are an example of how humans can have a net positive impact on biodiversity, because they take care of their land. Nature was never seen as an individual property, instead it was a common good, that they could use, profit, possess along their lives, but always in community. Biodiversity is admired even in their food, having different crops variety is a blessing.

For Indigenous cultures poverty is not a curse but rather poverty, lived as a simple life, is their chosen lifestyle. Although the intrinsic economic system makes them struggle to earn fair payment for their work, they simply demand more equitable partnerships to ensure their basic needs. Poverty is not a paradigm of sacrifice, instead poverty is lived with dignity.⁹ In western societies poverty is viewed as a bad thing. For this reason phrases such as: “attack poverty” and “banish poverty” are commonly mentioned in the media and by politicians. Then society tries to overcome it with last remedy actions such as charity.

The energy transition, through a bottom up solution, should be used as a driver to fight extreme poverty, lack of education, inequality, and the young work force migration to cities and organized crime.

Indigenous communities resent and reject charity business; instead they propose fair trade. Charity treats individuals as objects, not as living beings. These communities feel humiliated every time corporations and organizations regret leaving poor people apart and try to compensate their actions through charitable causes. This is viewed as a new form of neocolonialism; a “green wash” action for sustainable development. Research found a real danger that “green capitalist” renewable energy initiatives will

9 Francisco Van der Hoff Boersma, *Manifiesto de los pobres* (Uciri 2011).

emerge as new modes of resource exploitation legitimized by the urgency of climate change mitigation.¹⁰

Indigenous communities, living in dignified poverty, have different sources of wealth lead by their values. Living with few conventional consumer goods promotes social and ecological well-being, putting sustainability at its core.¹¹ This phenomenon is already understood and is emerging in some western societies as an alternative solution to global warming. It’s an argument that through a major shift to new interpretations of ecological and social wealth, green technologies, and different ways of living, individuals and the planet as a whole can actually be better off and more economically secure.

“Authentic development includes efforts to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life, and this entails considering the setting in which people live their lives” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 147). People around the world are looking for ancient life styles that offer a way out of the work and spend cycle, and are rich in the newly abundant resources of time, information, creativity, and community. This alternative development had been lived by indigenous communities for centuries. Taken together, these intrinsic values represent a movement away from the conventional market and offer a way toward an efficient, rewarding life in an era of high prices and traditional resource scarcity.

It is unthinkable to believe that nations could build infinite solar panels or wind farms to satisfy endless energy demands. Renewable energy infrastructure has an impact too. Landscape justice should not be ignored. Natural resources, such as people and animals, should also have the right to be conserved in their original state to sustain marvelous forms of life and biodiversity. Indigenous people honor nature and understand landscape ecosystems role, because it is the land that has feed them and sustained their cultures for generations. For that end, they become conscious and fervent protectors of their land. Landscapes should not be also considered an endless space available for people’s convenience. They have more important purpose: to sustain life.

10 Dominic Boyer, op. cit.

11 Shor, op.cit.

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I envision a viable future scenario bringing together the renewable energy transition and finance to the southern countries, while incorporating intrinsic values from ancestral cultures to modern society. COP 22 should try to keep its positive energy and magnificent attitude toward global collaboration already reflected at COP 21. Looking for holistic directions and actions are key to reaching a viable solution to heal Earth systems and people's lives. "We, the people from the south, will be pleased to transfer our ancestral knowledge to help you reach and enjoy a meaningfully wealthy, truly prosperous and sustainable life, as we already do."



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