



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Evaristo Nugkuag Ikanan (Peru)

(1986)



...for organising to protect the rights of the Indians of the Amazon basin.

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

Since the European invasion of South America in the 16th century, the indigenous peoples, and especially those of the Amazon, were confronted with various 'civilising' forces, which brought the destruction of their lands, resources, cultures and rights, and even individual or mass killings. On the threshold of the 21st century, this reality still continues in different forms, using violent or subtle methods according to the country concerned.

In this context, Evaristo Nugkuag Ikanan became a leader of the Aguaruna people of Peru and has devoted himself to organising the indigenous people of the Amazon Basin in order to uphold their human, civil, economic and political rights. In 1977, he was one of the founders of the Aguaruna and Huambisa Council (CAH), which represented 45,000 inhabitants of 140 communities in the tropical forest region. Developing alternative methods of land protection, human development, health care and education, the Council became one of the most effective indigenous organisations in South America.

In 1981, Nugkuag moved from the regional to the national level and was instrumental in setting up the Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSESEP), of which he became president. AIDSESEP pursued similar aims to those of CAH but its national status enabled indigenous communities to insist on respect for their territorial rights when threatened by state colonisation and the increasing pressures of capitalist exploitation.

Indigenous leaders from Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador attended a regional meeting called by AIDSESEP in 1984, and this led to the establishment of the Coordination Group of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), with Nugkuag again the prime mover. Today, with

additional members in Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam and French Guiana, COICA represents most indigenous people in the nine Amazonian countries. It has demonstrated its ability to unite the strength of its members in the common objective of gaining respect for their rights and for alternative development strategies.

From 1977 to 1996, Nugkuag worked on bottom-up processes from community to international level. Having sought to maximise the voice of indigenous people in global fora, he then felt called to return to his roots at CAH in order to work on the impact of international forces at the local level. He has set himself the task of construction an alternative human development strategy for the Aguaruna and Huambisa people.

Among other initiatives is one of bioprospección indígena, which makes use of the Amazonian forest (without felling it) to improve the human quality of life through natural, organic and spiritual approaches to health, medicine, agriculture, nutrition and industrial uses. This would require changes of national policy in respect of education, the law and government structures. The initiative is one aspect of the struggle Nugkuag has undertaken to find concrete expression for indigenous ideas of self-determination and alternative development.

Quotation

"We are now facing a difficult situation in Peru, where there are attempts to cut back the territorial rights of the indigenous peoples, including moves to divide, fragment and privatise our communal organisations. Now more than ever, it is a matter of urgency for us to consolidate our own indigenous alternatives for development."

Evaristo Nugkuag Ikanan

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