



The Right Livelihood Award

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

Juan Pablo Orrego / Grupo de Acción por el Biobío (Chile)

(1998)



...for his personal courage, self-sacrifice and perseverance in working for sustainable development in Chile.

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

Juan Pablo Orrego was born in 1949, and has a Master in Environmental Studies (1986). At a younger age he was a composer and singer in a popular urban folklore group. In 1991 he helped to establish and was elected to be general co-ordinator of the Grupo de Acción por el Biobío (GABB) to attempt to stop the construction of six dams in the Biobío River in southern Chile, one of South America's most spectacular rivers and of great ecological significance. Its watershed is also home to the Pehuenche indigenous people, numbering about 10,000.

Since the early 1960s there had been plans to build a linked series of six mega hydro dams on the Biobío, planned without any environmental consideration. Originally the scheme belonged to ENDESA-Chile, a state-owned energy utility, obscurely privatised in the last days of the Pinochet regime, with some officials of Pinochet's government becoming its major controllers and beneficiaries. The privatisation included 90% of Chile's water rights. As a near monopoly supplier of Chile's electricity, it wielded enormous economic, political and media power. In 1997 the Chilean company was sold to ENDESA-Spain with the water rights.

GABB had two main thrusts to its work: building an ample coalition for campaigning at a local, national and international level to stop the building of the dams, and working together with the Pehuenche for the defense of their right to remain in their ancestral territory. The campaign was remarkably successful in many ways, enabling GABB to make the previously secret plans for dam construction a hot issue of environment and human rights, and to denounce Chile's undemocratic and unsustainable development model, which was forcibly put in place during Pinochet's 17-year brutal dictatorship. Orrego criticises that the constitutional, legal and institutional system installed in Chile by Pinochet has been enthusiastically administered since then, without any changes, by the

three successive 'democratic', so-called socialist governments . He calls this system a check mate for democracy that empowers corporations and disempowers people .

Despite GABB's successful campaigning, the government allied with ENDESA proved to be an almost invincible adversary. The first dam, Pangué, was built and inaugurated in 1997 and a second, Ralco, was built and inaugurated in 2004, both behind schedule due to the campaign. However, only two of the six dams were built, saving a substantial portion of the watershed and river from its destruction, and the campaign put in the public agenda issues that no one had raised before: issues of energy policy, environment, indigenous people's rights, ENDESA's energy monopoly and the neo-liberal development goals of the establishment. The campaign also resulted in a much better deal for the relocated Pehuenche than they would otherwise have had. In addition, Orrego's campaign made a substantial difference to the International Finance Corporation's handling of such projects, following a complaint by GABB and some 400 Chilean citizens before the Inspection Panel of the World Bank, which resulted, according to the public declarations of officers of both financial institutions themselves, in a major revision of their operational directives and procedures.

In Chile the Biobío has become a symbol of the environmental and social struggle, which is still going on in the country. According to authorities and analysts the story of hydro development in Chile has a before and after the Biobío campaign... for the better.

Quotation

"The situation is extremely complex. Just the combination of the indigenous and environmental issues in one cause in Chile today is 'explosive'. If you add the issues of energy policy, ENDESA's monopoly, citizens' participation and the imperfection of Chile's democracy - issues which are all in question around the Biobío situation - then you will understand why the Biobío cause is so important as to be called emblematic by many."

Juan Pablo Orrego

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