



**'Only a genuinely democratic government will be able to tackle the problem of climate change'**



*CIVICUS speaks to Enrique de León, leader of the National Committee to Combat Climate Change (CNLCC), a Dominican civil society organisation fighting for the slowdown of global warming. The organisation works to disseminate information and educate the public on climate change, monitors and puts pressure on the government to comply with its international climate commitments, and promotes renewable energy and the decarbonisation of the Dominican Republic's national economy.*

**1. Why did the recent hurricanes Irma and Maria make such a strong impact on the Caribbean? Were these just 'natural' disasters, or did they have human causes and could something have been done to mitigate their impact?**

We have always had hurricanes in the Caribbean; they have been with us even before records began to be kept. But they have changed in intensity, frequency and predictability. This year's hurricanes have been consecutive and aligned, which had not happened in a long time, not to say ever since they began to be recorded. And they have had a very unpredictable behaviour. This is due to climate change, and more precisely to the increase in temperature caused by the growing concentration of carbon dioxide particles. We know that the enormous volume of carbon dioxide emissions throughout the planet is creating the conditions for hurricanes in the Caribbean to become more frequent, intense and difficult to forecast.

What we can do to avoid this has been known for quite some time, although some still deny it: we need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. This is difficult, because our civilisation is based on the burning of fossil fuels – coal, natural gas and oil – which emit greenhouse gases, causing global warming. But the solution to the problem is indeed in the hands of humankind, and particularly in the hands of the portion of humankind that is responsible for most of the emission of gases, that is, those living in highly industrialised countries - although less industrialised countries also produce a relatively high level of emissions.

Carbon dioxide emissions and the resulting global warming constitute a particularly serious threat to island countries, which are vulnerable to sea level rise. Such is our case, in a country that also lives off its beaches. More than 80 per cent of our population lives in coastal areas, and we are losing territory. The temperature rise is also affecting biodiversity in our reefs, and as a result, it is also affecting the viability of fishing. This means that our food security is at stake as well.

Hurricanes are causing extreme weather phenomena: in 2014-2015 we had a great drought, while at the end of 2016 we had a flood at an unusual time of the year, which was a real disaster. In 2017 we had three hurricanes that came one after the other, and although the island of Santo Domingo – which the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti – narrowly escaped direct impact, Puerto Rico was crossed by Hurricane Maria through and through, and still has not even got electric power back.

In sum, there is something we can do to change the intensity and behaviour of hurricanes in the Caribbean: we can reduce carbon dioxide emissions as mandated by the November 2015 Paris Agreement. But this is a difficult task, because it depends on the introduction of profound changes in the global economic system.

## **2. Beyond changes at the global level, is there anything that the countries most affected by these phenomena can do to protect themselves?**

First of all, we can and must take political action, which would consist in appealing to the international community, and particularly to the countries that bear the greatest responsibility in the emission of carbon dioxide, so that they reduce their emissions. And we must also do the same, given that although the Dominican Republic's emissions are low in absolute terms, they are very high when calculated per capita (3.8 tons per year). So we bear co-responsibility and we are not in a position to demand that others reduce their emissions if we are not doing it ourselves.

It is at least necessary to comply with the goals set by the Paris Agreement, although more ambitious goals would be required as well, since it has been proven that those goals will not be enough to bring global warming down to acceptable levels. The National Committee to Combat Climate Change (CNLCC), along with the entire Latin American and global environmental movement, argues that the most vulnerable countries, that is the island states of the developing world, should demand those that are most responsible reduce their emissions and help mitigate the effects of climate change, and also establish a more sustainable economic system.

This has to be a political movement. We made a strong commitment at the United Nations (UN) Conference on Climate Change ([COP 23](#)), which took place in November 2017. With the leadership of our Peruvian colleagues, who have also been hit hard by climate change, we have formed a European-supported Latin American coalition pressing for specific agreements, such as the elimination of coal to generate electricity by 2020. Although the elimination of coal mining may take longer, at least no new coal-fired power plants should be built. We have also proposed, along with our Bolivian and Brazilian colleagues, that by 2030 at least 80 to 85 per cent of the world's hydrocarbon reserves be kept underground. In return, renewable energy must be used for both the generation of electricity and transportation and other needs.

Unfortunately, we depend on the will of governments and politicians, who in many parts of the world respond to very narrow economic interests. The best example of this is the President of the United States, who is really an extremist madman, but one who represents other extremist madmen whose interests and fortunes are linked to the reproduction of an economy that is based on the burning of fossil fuels. The fact that the United States has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement is a catastrophic setback, as well as the expression of the fact that the ruling leadership of that country is willing to risk a global holocaust in order to preserve their profit rates.

This is a political battle that cannot be fought by just a few people, and which, like all crucial struggles, must be fought in the streets. We have to take humankind out to the streets, as we did in 2015, to make it clear that we are not willing to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of a minority's profits, and to demand that hydrocarbon deposits remain underground and renewable energies be strongly encouraged in all their forms. In tropical islands, for instance, solar and wind energy must be strongly promoted.

### **3. Do you, civil society in the Dominican Republic, wage a similar battle against your own government, or is the Dominican government aligned with the policy positions you have just described?**

We are in fact fighting a similar fight. Ours is a rogue government, which, in a way that is [illegal and corrupt](#) to a degree never before seen in our history, has since 2013 been building two 770 megawatt coal plants in Punta Catalina, 50 kilometres away from the capital. At the same time, in November 2015 our president travelled to Paris in order to lead the most threatened island states in raising the demand for reducing the carbon footprint, and to promise a 25 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030. This will be impossible to accomplish with the new coal plants generating 6.34 million tons of carbon dioxide per year, which represents an increase of more than 20 per cent in the country's total emissions.

Thus, while building these coal plants that are going to increase our carbon emissions drastically, when they are already high in relative terms, the government is committing to the international community to reduce them substantially. In the face of this, since early 2016 the CNLCC, along with 20 other CSOs, most of them from the environmental movement, has rolled out an intense campaign for our country to ratify the Paris Agreement. Once that, thanks to this campaign, we got Congress to ratify the agreement, and to do so quickly, unanimously and after a single reading, we were forced to wait for three months until the office of the Foreign Minister deigned to inform the UN Convention on Climate Change Secretariat about it. For this to happen, we had to [mobilise](#): the government resisted ratification because they knew that the new coal plants would make it impossible for them to meet the goals, despite their plan to plant a million mahogany trees, which in 50 years would absorb at the most just a quarter of the carbon dioxide emitted by the power plants.

Our country has great need for electricity because, even under a model of great inequality and exclusion, our economy is growing. We currently have an energy deficit, with expensive and inefficient energy production, which is why we have major blackouts. So we do need to produce more and better energy, but what we do not need is for that energy to come out of coal, given that we are not even coal producers. Thanks to the struggle by Dominican civil society, in 2012 a Law on National Development Strategy was passed. Article 27 of this law set the goal of replacing imported fossil fuels with renewable energies before 2030, and therefore decarbonising the economy. But since it came to power in 2013, Danilo Medina's government has done just the opposite, by reaching very profitable agreements to establish new coal power plants.

### **4. Why did the Dominican government opt for coal instead of renewable energies? What interests does it represent?**

The option for coal, as well as the choice of the Odebrecht Corporation, which heads the consortium that is building Punta Catalina, was a political financing decision. President Medina wanted to be re-elected, and re-election was prohibited, so the government had to fund an

electoral reform to start with, followed by a re-election campaign. Funding was provided by the coal plant that was being built by Odebrecht. It is fully documented that the tender was rigged: Odebrecht bought the contract, as it confessed in New York in December 2016. As a form of corrupt political financing, the works included an overpriced amount of US\$1 billion from the very beginning. Out of the US\$2,945 million that the works were going to cost, US\$1 billion were overcharges. We denounced this, but there was no way a serious investigative process could be opened, because our judiciary is extremely dependent on the executive.

In fact, those coal plants will end up being way more expensive, because recently it was revealed that there is an additional US\$708 million cost, since the required studies were not done and to in order to conduct them they are passing the bill on to the government. In addition, one of Odebrecht's partners in the construction of the plant has made a claim for US\$720 million for amounts owed to suppliers and for replacing a generator that the state company damaged when trying to assemble the first unit at full speed to make a demonstration. We had denounced that the plant was not ready, and indeed it was and still is hugely delayed, and to show that we were wrong, the government hurried and damaged a generator. As for payments owed, delays are the result of a campaign we conducted with the support of our European allies so that the [European banks](#) that were financing the works stopped disbursing funds for reasons of corruption.

## **5. How did Dominican citizens react as these mega-corruption cases unfolded?**

Since 22 January 2017, massive demonstrations have taken place every month to demand an end to corruption and impunity. This is unprecedented in our history. At the core of the protests is Punta Catalina, which is by itself the proof of the crime. The demands expressed in the streets forced the government to mount a comic opera, in which eventually everyone except for the main culprits were brought to court. Odebrecht bought contracts between 2001 and 2015, and the government has prosecuted a large number of those allegedly involved until 2012, but none of those suspected of involvement after 2012. In other words, none of those involved in Punta Catalina, including the President of the Republic himself, were affected. In addition, not one of those being prosecuted is currently in prison.

People in this country are not just angry: they are frustrated and fed up, and feel their rights have been infringed. In order to contain possible citizen reactions, the Public Ministry appealed against the release of two of the accused: businessman Ángel Rondón, an intermediary in charge of distributing bribes and illicit proceeds, and Víctor Díaz Rúa, the previous government's Minister of Public Works. Nonetheless, the Supreme Court maintained their freedom. This really did not surprise anyone.

The Dominican people made use of the most democratic means at their disposal: street protest. The government remained indifferent and tried to wear the movement out: to let protesters scream and kick until tired. But there is already a big part of the population that thinks that the incumbent government is the main obstacle to delivering justice and ending impunity, and that it must be cut short. It was recently proven that in the 2016 elections, when President Danilo Medina was re-elected, the company that provided the scanners also programmed the vote count. The citizenry took the news calmly, because they already knew this after all, but have been looking for some way of shortening this president's term ever since.

On 16 July 2017 the anticorruption movement Marcha Verde (Green March) staged the largest demonstration in the country's history, and it was there and then that the idea of prosecuting the president was rolled out. The Dominican people have done everything in their power to

find a way out, and so far they have not found it because the executive has kidnapped all democratic institutions. Neither the legislature nor the judiciary are independent, so who is going to prosecute the president?

More recently, sectors of Marcha Verde and various political groups are proposing that next year a broad agreement of all sectors be sought in order to put an end to the presidential term and seek an institutional solution. The idea is for a Constituent Assembly to establish truly independent judicial and legislative branches and provide the guarantees required for clean electoral competition, so as to set the conditions for electing a new government in 2020.

## **6. Is there any chance that new elections will bring to power someone who represents broader interests, and who is in a position to seriously tackle the problem of climate change?**

We do not lose hope that this will be the case. The Dominican people never got tired of fighting for true democracy. On 22 January 2017, a people that many believed was defeated rose with force to reject corruption. It did not do so to demand wage increases or food price reductions, both legitimate causes, but simply out of outrage at the implications that the Odebrecht confessions had for our country.

The Dominican State is cut through and through by corruption and impunity, which strongly limits its ability to fight climate change. As of today, the authorities do not mind in the least lying to the international community, promising things that they know they will not fulfil.

We propose that a part of the Green Fund established by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change be used to mitigate the damage suffered by the Dominican Republic as a result of global warming. That is to say, we want a part of those US\$100 billion a year that developed countries, the largest emitters of gases causing climate change, will contribute to support mitigation and adaptation actions in developing nations, to fund the technological, cultural and productive adaptation of our country. Mitigating disasters and rebuilding afterwards requires a lot of money: for example, Hurricane Georges, which hit the Dominican Republic in 1998, caused losses amounting to 14 per cent of the country's 1997 GDP. Rains in late 2016 cost us US\$9,478 million. With Hurricane Maria we had another US\$9 to 10 billion in losses, although this storm did not hit us directly but only passed close by.

The problem, if money reaches us, is that it runs the risk of getting lost, since disasters and subsequent reconstruction are perfect occasions for corruption. For example, funds earmarked for the mitigation of the effects of the 2016 rains never reached the territories. People with Marcha Verde in the most affected regions insisted repeatedly that the money had not arrived. So we face a very tough dilemma: at the same time that we demand support from the international community to mitigate the consequences and fight the causes of climate change, we are subjected to the rapacity of our own governments. Preventing money from being lost and getting it to reach its destination is a problem we share with other countries in the region. Only a genuinely democratic government that represents the interests of the majority of citizens, instead of those of businessmen and politicians brought together by corruption, will be able to tackle the problem of climate change.

- **Civic space in the Dominican Republic is rated as 'obstructed' by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), indicating serious restrictions in civil society freedoms.**

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