



The Ecopolitics Podcast – Episode 2.9: Indigenous Environmental Rights: The Maya of Belize (TRANSCRIPT)

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Guests: Filiberto Penados (Julian Cho Society) and Cristina Coc (Julian Cho Society/Toledo Alcaldes Association/Maya Leaders Alliance)

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INTRO: In this episode, we speak with Cristina Coc, Executive Director of the Julian Cho Society and Spokesperson for the Toledo Alcaldes Association/Maya Leaders Alliance, and Filiberto Penados, Chair, Julian Cho Society about the connections between Indigenous rights and biodiversity conservation. Together, we take a closer look at the fight for recognition of the Maya people's rights to land in Belize. Overall, we conclude that this struggle is a global struggle, not just for Indigenous rights to land, but for survival of all on a just and healthy planet.

[00:00:00] **Cristina Coc:** Before we went to court, we recognize that win or lose, we were going to continue to defend our rights to our lands and resources. And so, through our visioning of what we want to see and what we want to leave for our children through our continued practice and continued building of our relationship to each other and to our land, we continue to say, as a Maya people, that the land is important for us.

[00:00:27] And we hope that the government of Belize will do good to this judgment that has been very historic, not just for the Mayan people, but for indigenous people globally.

[00:00:43] **Peter Andrée:** Hello, welcome to the Ecopolitics Podcast, season two, Global Ecopolitics. This is a podcast for university students tackling some of the big questions in the field of global environmental politics. I'm Peter Andrée from Carleton university. My co-host for the show is Dr. Ryan Katz-Rosene from the University of Ottawa, though Ryan's not joining us for this episode.

[00:01:06] Today, we're traveling to the bio-diverse forests of Southern Belize in Central America to talk with two indigenous activists and educators about the relationship between indigenous rights and environmental conservation in their country, and how this links with global efforts to strengthen indigenous rights and build North-South relationships.

[00:01:26] The country we now know as Belize has a rich history, and it goes back thousands of years. Between about 1500 BCE and 1000 of the Common Era, there were a number of densely populated, and technologically advanced Mayan cities in the country now known as Belize. The first incursions by Europeans came with the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century.

[00:01:47] In the 19th century, the country was named a British colony, originally British Honduras. That country only gained formal independence from Britain in 1981. Over this long colonial period, from the 16th century to the present day, the indigenous Maya people of Belize, continue to live and move across their traditional lands in what are now Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize.

[00:02:09] But state recognition of Maya governance of the territories they lived on, at least in Belize, was never formalized. In recent decades, there've been many incidents that revealed a conflict between the traditional governance of these lands by community leaders, known as Alcaldes, in Mopan and Q'eqchi communities in the South of Belize and the nation-state of police.

[00:02:30] For example, the state would grant permits to explore for oil or to cut trees without the consent of the traditional leaders of the communities on whose territories these actions would take place. Starting in about 2005, these Maya communities in the part of Belize called the Toledo district, organized under the Toledo Alcaldes Association and the Maya Leaders Alliance, took the government to court in an effort to have their traditional governance structures recognized. There were multiple steps in the process, more than I can get into here, but eventually the case came to the highest court in the land, which is actually a multilateral institution called the Caribbean Court of Justice.

[00:03:08] In 2015, the Caribbean Court of Justice issued what they called a consent order on the Maya land rights case brought before it. This was an historic ruling for Belize and surrounding regions. It recognized the traditional land rights of the 39 Mopan and Q'eqchi communities of Southern Belize.

[00:03:25] These communities had been managing their territories for generations. The 2015 consent order reaffirms their collective legal rights over their lands. Our guests today know this struggle inside and out. We'll talk with them about how indigenous rights and biodiversity conservation relate to one another and where the struggle to protect both stands in Belize today.

[00:03:48] Cristina Coc is executive director for the Julian Cho Society and a spokesperson for the Toledo Alcaldes Association and the Maya Leaders Alliance. Cristina is herself a Q'eqchiu woman from Southern Belize. She helped lead the Maya land rights litigation since 2005 and was instrumental in achieving the legal victories I just spoke about. So welcome to the Ecopolitics Podcast, Cristina, and thank you for joining us today.

[00:04:13] **Cristina Coc:** Thank you, Peter. It is a pleasure to participate in and to be a part of this very important podcast.

[00:04:19] **Peter Andréé:** Dr. Filiberto Penados is chair of the Julian Cho Society and Maya activist-scholar from Succotz Village in the North of Belize.

[00:04:27] His work focuses on indigenous education development and future making. He's held faculty positions at universities in Belize, and has also been adjunct faculty at the University of Toronto and the University of Manitoba here in Canada. Filiberto is also founding advisor at the Center for Engaged Learning Abroad or CELA.

[00:04:46] And I first met Filiberto in this role with CELA when he set up a community service learning course for Carleton university undergraduate students to work with the Mopan and Q'eqchi communities in the South of Belize. I taught that course in the spring of 2019, which feels like a long time ago. And that's when I got to know Filiberto, Cristina and members of Laguna and Aguacate communities in Toledo district of Belize.

[00:05:10] In fact, they really taught the course and I went along for the ride and learned a lot from it. Filiberto and I also played a bit of music together when I was in Belize with the Carleton students and my family. And so I'm so pleased to also have Filiberto with us today. Welcome to the podcast, Filiberto.

[00:05:27] **Filiberto Penados:** Thank you, Peter. It's a pleasure to be here and to continue some of the conversations I think that we have had formally in other settings.

[00:05:35] **Peter André:** Super. I'm going to start with you Filiberto. I wonder if you can tell me a bit about this relationship between indigenous rights and environmental conservation in broad terms. What does this look like for indigenous people in Belize in general, which include the Garifuna and the Yucatec Maya that you're part of, and then maybe what does it look like in the case of the Mopan and Q'eqchi of Southern Belize in particular?

[00:05:58] **Filiberto Penados:** Let me start by saying that often indigenous struggles are casted in the language of rights, which certainly has to do with rights, but I think it's much broader than that. That ultimately indigenous struggles are struggles for indigenous ways of knowing, indigenous ways of being, indigenous ways of doing, is the struggle for the affirmation of life thought very broadly.

[00:06:28] In that sense, I think there's a lot in the question that you posed. In a sense, indigenous struggles are a struggle also not only for life, but against that which is not enough affirmation of life. In the words of indigenous peoples in South America, for example, what they argue is that we are in a crisis of civilization, that essentially that the system that we are living in is in crisis.

[00:06:59] In the sense that it is leading us to tremendous environmental destruction and we don't need to go into that, but we all are aware of the great challenges that we have, that life is under threat. And also in terms of the social realities, the level of exclusion that there is, and also the level of the self, in terms of wellbeing and health, both mentally, spiritually, and physically, I think are all under threat.

[00:07:30] So essentially it is a struggle against a system that tends to view nature as nothing but material to be exploited, to be controlled, rather than seeing nature as alive and seeing ourselves as part of that, a system that tends to see the individual being really selfish and seeking to maximize interests and as an individual that owes nothing to nobody contrasted with a sense of self in community, that indigenous kind of people talk about.

[00:08:02] And so in a sense, it is a struggle then for these indigenous ways of knowing, doing, being, which sees itself as in community, which sees the land as alive as us being part of that as being dependent on and caring for the land. So in that sense, I think indigenous rights, potentially has a lot to do with environmental or diversity conservation.

[00:08:25] And that the goal of biodiversity conservation can be defamation of life as well, that it is about conserving biodiversity. And I say 'can be' because I think that in some ways it is, but sometimes also conservation tends to be thought of within that old system, which is about the preserving of resources to be exploited for goods and services, that are going to be sold to the market. And in that sense, it's still operating from that old system and can come into conflict sometimes with indigenous peoples as well. When for example, products are set up without consulting indigenous people.

[00:09:00] So I guess in sum, there's a lot that can be connected and those connections certainly, I think are consistently and continuously being expanded and deepened. In terms of the Yucatec and Garifuna in Belize, the Yucatecan and Garifunan people have in some ways been perhaps disconnected in some ways from their own sense of self and being under land as a result of that colonial history and to some degree, that is.

[00:09:29] And so, there's a need to rebuild that connection. And I think sometimes better diversity conservation can facilitate that process as people connect to the land and we discover their own worldviews, their own ancestry of knowledge. I think in the case of the Q'eqchi and Mopan people in Southern Belize, they have maintained a very deep and close connection with the land and caring for the land.

[00:09:52] In fact, they talk about its status as being a valid judge, which means children of the soil. But it embodies that concept and bodies the notion that we are from the land that we belong to it, that we depend on it, and that we care for it. So ultimately their struggle is about how do we sustain or strengthen our relationship with the land and by virtue of that, our relationship with each other.

[00:10:18] So, I dunno, I think ultimately there's a lot that can come from this. There's a lot of overlap within this two struggles, two movements if you want, and I think it's something that needs to be continuously built.

[00:10:33] **Peter Andrée:** Thank you, Filiberto. Ryan has commented that we ask very big questions on this podcast and it's sometimes difficult to bring it all down into a few minutes of an answer, so I appreciate where you just took us.

[00:10:45] And I just want to ask one follow-up before I turn to Cristina and that's maybe just to give the listeners a sense of the day-to-day life of the Mopan and Q'eqchi communities in Southern Belize and how they interact with their environments. Just to give the listeners kind of a picture of what that looks like from day to day.

[00:11:02] **Filiberto Penados:** So I think in the case of Southern Belize, Mopan and Q'eqchi communities, and Christina can speak to this a lot more than I do. But as I mentioned, there's a deep in connection with the land. There's still a majority of people rely on subsistence farming which means working the land, and they do that in a collective sense, the planting of corn and beans every year that is done and people rely on that to feed themselves, and it's a collective process. There's also a lot of collection of material from the rainforest, which provides medicine, it provides material for building their houses, it provides a space for entertainment.

[00:11:46] So life is deeply connected with the land and in they connect in different kinds of ways. I'm reminded of two recent conversations with Mopan and Q'eqchi men and women, and the women were talking about going to wash in the river, and that it seems like a simple set of activity, but there's a lot that happens there.

[00:12:07] It's about caring for the river, it's about caring for the place where they go to wash, it's about creating a space for engaging in conversation and passing on knowledge. So land in a sense permits those kinds of social relations to be an individual, but to be an individual in community.

[00:12:24] **Peter Andrée:** One of the things that struck me - because you were talking about the way that the forests are a food source for communities, but you also talked about farming and subsistence farming - and one of the things that struck me is that the way agriculture is practiced in these communities is in, almost what we might call agroforestry, where the farms are these rich biodiverse environments and they're not what we think of here in Canada as: cut all the trees down and plant rows and rows of corn and nothing but. They tend to be these complex ecosystems that people find food resources, building resources. So, anyways, so I'm just trying to evoke in the mind of some of the listeners, this complex relation with the land that you're getting to Filiberto.

[00:13:09] And now I'm going to turn to you, Cristina. And given the context that Filiberto has just set up about the relationships between these 39 communities and their land and how they are really intertwined, I wonder if you can tell us a bit more about the importance of that 2015 Caribbean Court of Justice decision for these communities that you work with through the MLA and the Toledo Alcaldes Association?

[00:13:33] **Cristina Coc:** Absolutely. It's important to recognize that in the Mayan land rights struggles, what we were struggling and what were we continue to struggle for is: a place to be and a place to create the kind of wellbeing that we want for our communities. And so I might start by actually describing this three-decade long struggle of the Maya people.

[00:14:01] It involved a long process of direct negotiations. So I say that because the court was not the first place that we looked to. We attempted for a long time to try to engage the state of Belize to recognize and respect our rights, our lands and resources, through direct friendly negotiations. Failing that, however, and having tried and attempted many times to bring resolve and redress to some of these violations of our rights that were happening on our lands.

[00:14:35] We made a very difficult decision to begin to embark upon strategic litigation. And as we all know, lawsuits take a very long time and are quite expensive. And just understanding that the Maya communities themselves are engaging with a tool that is not a part of their own customary traditions or uses.

[00:14:58] This strategic litigation against the government of Belize by the Maya people culminated in what is now known as the 2015 Caribbean Court of Justice consent order and judgment. The highest domestic Court of Belize affirmed the rights of the Maya people to

our ancestral lands and obligated the government of Belize to protect our property rights, equal to the protection of property rights guaranteed under the Constitution of Belize.

[00:15:26] Now, what is important for us is that we didn't go to the court to prove to ourselves that these lands belong to us or that we've used and occupied these lands for continuous generations. We went to court really to prove to the rest of the world and to the states in particular that these lands are not empty, that these forests are not empty, that there are Q'eqchi and Mopan Mayan people living in these forests, and surviving and building a livelihood from these lands and forests.

[00:15:57] And so, this decision was really very important for the Maya people. It made it clear that we have had continuous use and occupation of these lands. We rely on these lands, as Filiberto has already described, in somewhat of what you might describe as an umbilical relationship to the land, our life source. The land is our life.

[00:16:22] And so the way that we value land, the way that we use the land, is very different from the majority of the outside understanding of land. Land is not a commodity for Maya of people, land is the source of our existence that includes our physical, spiritual and social existence.

[00:16:44] And so this decision was really very historic. It was very important and it certainly was a turning point for the state of Belize in the full and effective recognition of the rights of the Maya people.

[00:17:02] **Peter André:** One of the things that I found very interesting about the consent order is that the Caribbean Court of Justice said that they wanted to be kept in the loop as the state, together with the Maya people, implemented the consent order. And it looked like they just want it to be looking over the shoulder to make sure things are happening. And I found it fascinating in the last couple of weeks as I prepared for this interview, that I can go on YouTube and see videos of their meetings - in the context of COVID they're meeting through Zoom like we are today - and members of the court, hearing from lawyers, from the communities, from your organizations, as well as from the government, about the status of implementation.

[00:17:44] And I wonder if you can tell me, has the government been moving on the 2015 decision? What's the status of where that all sits today?

[00:17:53] **Cristina Coc:** I think that it's important to note that the implementation of the Caribbean Court of Justice's decision is perhaps only the beginning of the struggle. While the litigation was quite long and required a lot of continuous organizing and efforts on the part of the Maya people, the implementation is perhaps the most difficult.

[00:18:12] We are now six years post decision and the progress has been painstakingly slow. The government of Belize is the same government who for years and years have denied the Maya peoples' rights and have denied the recognition of the Maya peoples' rights to lands and resources.

[00:18:32] And so it's not surprising that they have made every attempt to delay the implementation. We have tried to come to some agreement on a roadmap for implementation and this has taken a long time. We have encouraged the government of Belize, again with the important supervision of the Caribbean Court of Justice, to employ experts to help them to really realize the implementation of the Caribbean Court of Justice's judgment.

[00:19:02] The judgment says three things. Simply put, it says that the government is obligated to clearly identify, delimit, and demarcate the territory of the Maya people. The question has always been, 'Okay, so we know that the Maya people have rights to these lands, but where are those lands? What is the extent of the use of those lands?'

[00:19:26] And so being able to identify by way of ultimately delimiting and ultimately demarcating and entitling is critical. That was the first obligation that the court give to the government of Belize. The second involved they need to develop some kind of legal mechanism to protect these rights that are found in this place that has been identified as the ancestral lands of the Maya people.

[00:19:50] And then the third was that the government has to cease and desist from granting any further development concessions, whether that be selling lands to private interests, whether that be permitting logging concessions, all development concessions, or any development concessions on Maya peoples' lands without their free prior informed consent, the government is obligated to cease and desist.

[00:20:15] The reality, however, is that the government continues to make excuses for not being able to clearly define the territories of the Maya people. The Maya people themselves are prepared to tell the government where they're use and occupation resides. At the same time, the government continues to grant permits to third-party interests and the incursions on Mayan continue to escalate.

[00:20:41] And so we are very happy that the Caribbean Court of Justice decided to maintain supervision of this very important decision. And it has been very helpful as we continue to report on noncompliance, or we continue to report on the delays that have really frustrated the Maya communities. And so we have seen where the court has really played a very important role in helping to bring the two parties together and also helping to ensure that the implementation is progressing.

[00:21:14] One way that they have done that for instance, is that the court, seeing the amount of incursions that we were reporting, despite their ruling, the court decided that they would assist the government of Belize and the Maya parties to develop a grievance redress framework, which is a way in which we could come and provide our complaints as to the incursions and allow for these incursions to be investigated. They instituted an authority, for instance, that would investigate these complaints, that would make firm recommendations as to how to resolve some of these violations. And so that has been very useful as we have progressed in the implementation.

[00:21:59] Six years later, we are now faced with a new government and new administration and they have asked for some time. They seem to take the position that they are, that they will prove that they have the political will to implement this decision and that they believe that the Maya people have waited far too long to see the effective implementation of the court's order.

[00:22:24] At the same time, we are cognizant of the fact that the Maya people have always recognized that the true defense of our rights to our lands and resources, the true realization of that will come from the Maya people themselves. We know that the implementation is going to take some time.

[00:22:42] We know that the Maya people will have to be very creative in creating laws that will protect our rights. But more than that, that will also give meaning and make right the wrongs that Maya people have suffered for countless generations now. And so we know that it's not going to be easy and we were already seeing how difficult it is, but at the same time, we know that it is a struggle for our lives. And we have struggled for the last three decades and we are prepared to continue to struggle to see good the protection of our lives, the protection of our ability to be Maya on the land that we were born and in the land that our ancestors have left for us.

[00:23:30] **Peter Andrée:** Cristina, what you've just described in terms of six years of waiting for movement and implementation from the state - I'm discouraged and I'm sure it is very discouraging for the communities that you work with. On the other hand, you also say that the new government just elected in late 2020 is making overtures to say that they are going to take this on and make this right and I do hope that is carried forward. What I also really hear in your voice though, is that this is a question of self-determination, not only a question of self-determination, it's the practice of self-determination for these communities and it really sounds like you are collectively approaching it from that perspective, saying, 'This is what we want. This is our lives and our livelihoods and we will move forward and we want to bring the states and with the support of the Caribbean Court of Justice to help us achieve our self-determination'. But it is ultimately about the self-determination of these communities.

[00:24:27] And I just wanted to ask you a quick question about that, because this isn't only about recognizing the limits of territories and the traditional uses of territories, but I think it's also about acknowledging the governance structures of these Maya communities. Can you just say a little bit more about that? How are the communities traditionally governed and how is that part of the collective rights that have been reaffirmed through this consent order?

[00:24:51] **Cristina Coc:** You are absolutely correct. The Maya people are often seen as people who are not a part of the mainstream. Don't have the necessary know-how to manage or govern their lands and are often painted in such a portrait. And it's important to recognize that our customary system of governance continues to be alive and continues to be practiced. In our communities, we have our traditional governance system is known as the alcalde system where every one of our communities elect to serve for two years the leadership of our community and Alcalde and a Deputy Alcalde. And while the word alcalde

is a borrowed word from the Spanish, it really in our language, it is the holome alibal or in Mopan Maya, it is the politica. And what it really means in our language is the person who opens the path, the person who leads on the path.

[00:25:50] And if you think about how we traverse in the rainforest, when we follow as someone opens and clears and makes a clearing in the forest, it's important to recognize that the leadership of the Maya people, the Alcaldes, they described themselves as the eyes, the ears, the mouth of the community. In other words, they are not the people making decisions for the community. They're not even considering their own individualism or self-interest in any of the leadership decisions that they make for the communities. Rather, it's important to recognize that the fundamental authority for decision-making rests with the community itself.

[00:26:33] And the process by which decisions are made in Maya communities is through the *yu'ubik* which is the community meeting. The *yu'ubik* itself, the word *yu'ubik* itself, describes the ability to listen to each other. And so it's not so much a space where you go to make necessarily recommendations, but to listen to each other, to consider the thoughts, the ideas, the things that are being put before you, and to be able to generate consensus.

[00:27:01] From the majority of the community, this system is still alive and well, the governance system of the Maya people also speaks very directly to how land is used. In many regards, the outside doesn't understand and failing to recognize that there are customary decisions that have been made. For instance, in the Maya communities, there are areas that are already designated in left for the harvesting of building materials for homes, and often you will see decisions taken by the communities to say we have elders and we want to make sure that there is an area that's close enough for them to access for their housing materials. The younger people will have to go farther to allow for this space to be available to the elders.

[00:27:48] And decisions like that, governance decisions, management decisions of lands, forests and resources, are very much a part of the Maya traditional government systems. That is very important to us. This is why we emphasize, at least in the cases that we have brought forward to the Caribbean Court of Justice and to the lower courts in Belize, we emphasize the importance of international law and in particular, the United Nations Declaration, for the very reason that we believe that the Maya people have to be the ones to make their own decisions, using their own ways.

[00:28:27] We must all understand fully what we are deciding on in our own languages, for instance. We must be responsible for our lands and resources, and we must be able to create the opportunities for our people based on our priorities and on our own time. It is the experience of the Maya people that the state continuously tries to weaken this ability.

[00:28:55] And so our self-determination really rests and resides within the collective existence of our people on the traditional territories that we are fighting for. This is very important for us to preserve. It is important for us to recognize. We have seen where the state has denied the recognition of the governance system of the Mayan people.

[00:29:16] In fact, the first time we went to court, the state position was that the Alcaldes Association, which is the association of all our traditional leaders, does not have standing to bring this case before the Caribbean Court of Justice. Today, the same can be said we have seen time and time again, where government representatives have questioned the legitimacy of our traditional governance system.

[00:29:43] In fact, even to the point of saying, we will go directly to the villages where we don't have to speak to your Alcaldes, and the communities have returned them to say, 'No, that is not our way. We have our system of governance. It must be recognized'. We have then rounded our struggle in the consistent application of international law, like the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous People, because it helps to create a space for the Maya people to really push for mutual respect and partnership, including the recognition of our traditional governance systems.

[00:30:19] **Peter Andrée:** Many of our listeners are political science students and I think what you've just been describing in terms of the traditional governance structure of the Alcaldes, as well as the collective rights that were sought to be protected under this case. I think political science students in the global North sometimes needed to be reminded I think that there are other ways of thinking about how to organize societies and govern resources and some that have stood the test of time. And that's certainly the case for what we've seen in the Maya communities of Belize.

[00:30:52] I'd like to turn to Filiberto now. Cristina, in a lot of what she talked about, it's clear that international links and international declarations, the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous People, for example, figure importantly in how the Maya of Belize are talking about their rights and their governance structures and what they want to protect today, vis-a-vis the state. The multilateral institution of the Caribbean Court of Justice has also played an instrumental role in moving these cases along and hopefully ultimately bringing about implementation.

[00:31:26] Filiberto, a lot of your work is also about international relationships with universities. I mentioned that you had our students from Carleton come down and work with two of these 39 communities in the South of Belize. I'm curious to hear why are those international links important for what we've been talking about today?

[00:31:46] **Filiberto Penados:** Sure. There's no doubt that the international relationships are important, extremely important, I would say. Of late, we have been talking about indigenous resurgence as something that is happening globally. And sometimes the expression might suggest that indigenous peoples are resurging from maybe some deep sleep or inaction, when that is not the case.

[00:32:15] Indigenous peoples draw out the world and certainly in the America South consistently struggled to protect their land, to protect their ways of life and to carve a space for their future, for their wellbeing. But I think what resurgence communicates or what is new is that what we have seen is that no longer indigenous people struggle in their own little spaces, where a community might be fighting a land owner or a particular state, or some actor in their own little space.

[00:32:47] What has happened is that we've seen the interconnection of this little struggles grow and that has come as a result of precisely what we're talking about, international relations. In fact, the indigenous resurgence movement that international has seen happened around the discussions of the ILO Convention 169, just prior to that when indigenous people being brought together.

[00:33:10] So in the first instance, they think, and it's important for indigenous rights activists in that they're able to learn from each other, they're able to build solidarity in networks, and they're able to also struggle with the bigger system because ultimately while the Maya people in Belize may be struggling with the state of Belize and incursions in their land, that is not an isolated situation.

[00:33:36] The companies that are trying to explain for oil and forest products in Toledo from other parts of the world, and sometimes these very companies are acting also in other spaces. The fact that the state allows for these things to happen is not different here than say in Brazil. So this there's a lot of commonalities.

[00:33:55] So on the one level, I think the international relations among indigenous rights activists is extremely important in that sense. And it has produced some very important results such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Dialogue Convention 169, the article 8J on the Biodiversity Conservation of Biodiversity, and many other international instruments that then have an application at the local level. So there's a constant interaction between the local and the international in that way.

[00:34:24] In terms of the civil societies again, I think I had started by saying that the struggle of indigenous peoples is for the formation of life and against the system. Trying to create a system that moves us away from one that's not from life.

[00:34:39] And I think civil societies across the world are doing the same thing. So being able to build a solidarity networks there are extremely important. The struggle of Maya people are connected to the struggles of people in Belize City. And even though that's within the nation, but also connected the struggles in the US and Canada and Brazil and Mexico and so on.

[00:34:58] So those networks are important. I think we saw in the case of the Zapatistas in Mexico, where civil society was important in terms of providing a level of protection of the Zapatista movement at the beginning. And so it also is true for activists in smaller countries like Belize, that people know that Cristina Coc and Pablo Miss are engaging in struggle - they're visible in international eyes. So it offers us a level of protection, because activists are often under threat, violent threat, that is.

[00:35:28] And then in terms of the universities, universities are about the production and the transmission of knowledge. And in a sense, they are training those people that eventually go and occupy positions of authority, either in knowledge production, or the states and organizations. And so, in a sense, it's important I think that the relationship exists with indigenous peoples and I think for indigenous people do have an interest in connecting with universities in helping to introduce and expose to young people as just as we explained

about the political science students that you are referring to, that it's important that they are able to see these other ways of knowing. Other forms of governance that are valid, but then in a sense, because of the dominant way of thinking and the dominance of Western science, the kinds of knowledge of Western society, it prevents it from seeing these other things that are so necessary to respond to the challenges of the present.

[00:36:32] It's also important, obviously, because universities do have a lot of intellectual and material resources and they can help to address the challenges that are being faced by indigenous peoples. There's a possibility of self learning together. And in fact, I would say that universities have a responsibility of contributing to solving the real problems.

[00:36:54] And so the importance of service learning, of engaged scholarship, is becoming much more common. So I think international relationships, in that sense, are extremely important because the struggle that Mayan people are engaged in Toledo is connected to everybody's struggling. The struggle is for a better world, for a different world, or as the Zapatistas put it, 'In a world where many worlds can fit'.

[00:37:20] It's connected to all of that. And I think we're all struggling for that in one way or another. So it allows us to build a solidarity and to learn from each other and to support each other.

[00:37:30] **Peter Andr e:** Cristina, when I was with a group of students in Toledo, I was struck by how generous the community was towards us. And I was amazed at the time you gave them and students will be listening to this who feel like these are struggles that we feel - this is a struggle for all of us - and they want to contribute. And I'm curious, over the three decades of struggle, you've engaged with a lot of students from around the world and professors and so on, in work alongside your campaign.

[00:38:04] And I just wonder if you can give some practical, tangible examples of how these relationships with students in universities in the North might lead to tangible benefits to the kind of work you've been doing?

[00:38:19] **Cristina Coc:** Friends of the Maya people have been very important to the struggle. One of the reasons that we have been able to maintain our communities' struggle is our reliance on many international partners that have given endless hours of their time, their energy and their important research efforts to support our efforts on the ground.

[00:38:41] Perhaps the only way that I can describe it is that the Maya people have always been a very community-oriented people. Community cohesion is very important to our existence as Maya people and perhaps that is evident in the way that we collectively use land, whether it be collective labor to build our homes, to plant our fields.

[00:39:03] And so it is not foreign for us to really continue to build community even outside of our direct village relationships. And so when visitors come, when students come, for us it is very important for them to learn and to have an understanding and appreciation of our struggle and of our ways of living in our communities.

[00:39:24] And so we're very, yes, generous in sharing that, but we also recognize, as Filiberto clearly put it, many of the students that have come to work with us, whether they have come as interns, whether they have come as volunteers, or as student researchers, these various students have gone back and have become professionals in their respective fields.

[00:39:47] We have students, for instance, that are now working at the United Nations, we have people that are working now at the World Bank, who have a deeper consciousness of indigenous realities and understand the complexities when you're working in indigenous communities. We have students that have returned to the Maya lands and have said, look, I want to continue to see how I can stay involved, how I can be more supportive.

[00:40:12] And we have scholars now that are sending us more students to help. I can tell you that, for instance, when we were building the lawsuit, we were very privileged to have law students come - and while it was a lot of work, they spent endless hours helping to put affidavits together, helping to organize our documents or files, and sometimes really helping to do even the logistics and the coordination of various efforts to mobilize our communities as we went to court - and I think these students took from that experience quite a lot. We've heard back from a lot of students say: 'It's a life-changing event. We've learned so much from the process.'

[00:40:57] It's mutual because we've also learned a lot from our students recognizing that some of the misunderstandings, some of the attitudes and perceptions towards indigenous peoples and their struggles for land and other rights comes because there has been a level of ignorance as to the reality as to how Maya people live or how indigenous people live on their lands. And I think that having these experiences helps to bring about a more broader global consciousness around indigenous peoples ways of being and around their own struggles.

[00:41:31] And so ultimately, I believe, and I continue to hold true to this belief, that what we are struggling for is for a more just world. And the more of us in this world that can understand and appreciate indigenous peoples' struggle, the closer we are to achieving this goal.

[00:41:49] **Peter Andrée:** Time goes so quickly when we do these podcasts. And I feel like you just brought us full circle, Cristina. When Filiberto started, I asked him about the relationship between indigenous rights and conservation, and very quickly he brought it to the point that this is a collective struggle for survival, for a just and a life-giving world.

[00:42:12] And then we really honed in on the case of the Maya of Toledo district in Southern Belize and how this is a microcosm of a global struggle of indigenous peoples to have their practices, their relationship with the land and with each other, and their governance structures recognized by their states and recognized internationally and valued, and so that they can continue with that.

[00:42:37] And despite many years of heel-dragging by the state in Belize, let's continue to hope and action into making these things a reality. But then you then brought it back,

Cristina, to the idea that this is a global struggle and both of you have talked about how important it is for people with social justice values who want to see the environment protected, who believe that indigenous rights and practices need to be recognized, can work with you and your people to further your struggle and through that to support the collective struggle for survival and a just and healthy planet. So thank you both for joining us today, Cristina Coc and Filiberto Penados.

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