

## **“Development must be based on local cultures!” The Struggle for Local Independence and Self-Determination: An Interview With Don Roman Loayza, the First Peasant Elected to the Bolivian Parliament**

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“Development must be based on local cultures!”

## The Struggle for Local Independence and Self-Determination: An Interview With Don Roman Loayza, the First Peasant Elected to the Bolivian Parliament



**FIGURE 1** Don Roman Loayza with his wife, Doña Inés, and his daughter Mayra. (Photo by AGRUCO)

*“I thought that grass-roots organizations should not be degraded to a point where they are the servants of politicians.”*

MRD: To begin with, it would be interesting if you could tell us something about the community where you spent your childhood.

**Roman Loayza:** I was born in a small village called *Independencia*. My father worked as a hat maker, and we lived from what my mother made bartering hats for food with the peasants. As a child I followed in my parents’ footsteps, but I began to realize that we lived in difficult circumstances because we did not even have our own plot of land. So when I was a bit older, my father and I started a business as cattle dealers.

When did you decide to become a peasant leader, or *dirigente*?

When I went into the communities, I saw that people lived in disgraceful conditions, owing to the incredible social, organizational, and economic hardships they had to endure. I was moved to the bottom of my heart, and said to myself, “How extraordinary! We have everything here in our country, so why are we living in such miserable conditions?” We have to organize! That was my plea. But the attitude of our *dirigentes* was condescending, imposing, and oppressive; moreover, they were at the whim of different governments. I disagreed with this. I thought that grass-roots organizations should not be degraded to a point where they are the servants of politicians.

So with these ideas in mind, you went into action?

Back in 1979, when the National Confederation of Peasant Syndicates (CSUTCB) was founded, despite the oppression we suffered during the military dictatorship of those days, I thought, “This is a good organization!” In 1983, the members of our organization named me as their

provincial representative, and I started to build up the independence of the syndicates at the grass-roots level. It was very difficult for me because the “official” government *dirigentes* attacked me. They beat me, threatened my family, and broke into our offices. In order to stop these abuses and to find a way out of this dilemma, I decided that work had to be done at the grass-roots level on a larger scale. We established an office in the center of the village, and we received cooperation and support from another institution to establish community stores and to improve our agriculture.

How did you become a member of the National Confederation of Peasant Syndicates?

Because of the concrete work we had done, the grass-roots organizations in my province were convinced of my responsible attitude and therefore suggested me as their representative for the board of the Peasant Federation at department level. At that time, we were also having a very hard time with the groups that were friendly to the government. However, we did not let this situation discourage us, and after two periods as executive secretary at departmental level, I was elected to the executive board of our National Confederation.

Assuming responsibility as an official of the Peasant Confederation at the national level constituted a form of extraparlimentary opposition with a high degree of independence from government. Why did you decide to enter the political arena within the parliamentary structure?

The Constitution of Bolivia was modified, introducing the concept of single representatives for every district, in order to bring more representatives from the regional level into the parliament. So I became a candidate, and I came in first, with 53% of the votes in the province. The traditional parties spent some US\$ 100,000 for propaganda, but I spent nothing. I

won because I was diligent in my work and because I fulfilled the expectations of the people. Now we are doing all right, although we do have some problems due to the goal of separation being pushed by some of our companions, who are trying to appropriate our political party, the Sovereign Assembly of Native People (ASP).

What are the main problems that Bolivian farmers are facing at the economic level and to what extent is external cooperation actually alleviating poverty?

At the economic level, communities are suffering from an increase in extreme poverty, which is becoming worse because of natural disasters such as the El Niño phenomenon. Last year, agricultural production was very meager because of a drought. This year, we had a lot of rain and plants grew well, but our maize, wheat, and potatoes rotted. So the situation is bad. What can we do? How can we solve the problem of poverty now when our individual landholdings are smaller and smaller?

Also, the funds we receive from abroad are not properly distributed. If they come from government to government, they first have to pass through the ministries and the vice-ministries before they come to the prefectures. At this point, 70% of the total has already been used up, and the remaining 30% that actually reaches our communities amounts to very little. For this reason, we are now aware that the World Bank, the IMF, and cooperating governments are mistaken in the way that they distribute funds. We think that, if they changed their attitude and helped us directly, by channeling their funds through our municipalities, their support could be much more effective. The staff of a municipality could do the studies and research work necessary to design the required development projects at a lower cost. So the planning wouldn't cost the millions that are presently spent by executive agencies and their staffs. For bigger projects, we are also thinking about joint ventures involv-

ing different interested communities in order to give more substantial guarantees to the larger funding institutions. This is also important because I believe that their current form of distributing funds tends to corrupt both the system of justice and the executive and legislative powers rather than helping to alleviate corruption.

Today everybody is talking about sustainable development. What do local communities think about it?

First of all, I would like to say that for us, the indigenous peasants of Bolivia, sustainable development, rather than being something new, is a continuation of the way of life we inherited from our ancestors. Despite 500 years of colonization, we have survived till now. However, due to the lack of public support, we are forced to meet our needs by using what we have at hand. Had the government been more capable and honest, our land would not be so degraded and empty, and we would not be "without skirt or hat" as we say. Rather than being contaminated, our land, our pastures, and our animals would have recuperated. We do not appreciate the fact that we are often the only ones accused of degrading the land, although we do not engage in industrial timber production and we do not cut trees indiscriminately, for example. In our forests, we use only certain plants that we need as firewood. So, who is industrializing timber production in the forests? The private timber corporations. Who is clearing the forests? The big landowners who occupied the land, not us.

What initiatives and efforts have you seen in the communities to answer the need for more sustainability?

Now, instead of taking important steps to support the recuperation of nature by sowing pastures and planting trees and other plants, the government continues to abandon us. So we have come to the conclusion

*"I would like to say that, for us, the indigenous peasants of Bolivia, sustainable development, rather than being something new, is a continuation of the way of life we inherited from our ancestors."*





**FIGURE 2** Traditional Andean agroforestry systems are highly effective forms of sustainable land management. In addition to their ecological and cultural functions, indigenous trees such as *Schinus molle* and natural hedgerows are a source of medicinal products, and they also serve practical functions. One example is the “open-air silo” for corn cobs pictured here. (Photo by AGRUCO)

that it is no use to wait for the government. Maybe through the municipalities we can obtain the support necessary to establish community nurseries. All these things are necessary. And we also need to recover a tradition that is ours: building terraces. Terraces do not necessarily always have to be made of stone; we can also build them by planting rows of grass. As they grow, their roots hold the soil together. And that's all there is to it! In this way, we can recover everything because we continue to have respect for nature and *Pachamama* (“Mother Earth”). But what can we do right now if we lack the money to buy gas, if we have no electricity, if we have nothing? Well, then we have to continue to live off the trees and also use them for firewood, although we do not want to depredate nature. That's how things are right now. Obviously, something must be done.

How do you think this strategy for revitalization of Andean agriculture can be linked to the well-known laws on popular participation and decentralization?

We think it will be important now to seize the opportunity offered by the laws on popular participation and administrative decentralization in order to have our own authorities elected in the municipalities, where there are big concentrations of members of our community. If we can elect our own people as authorities at all levels, they will act in accordance with our needs. Until now, we have always had the same problem: imposition from above! But despite all this, I think we will achieve our goal if we work at the grass-roots level.

What is the role of Andean culture in this strategy of revitalizing independent organizations as a means of enhancing social control over municipalities and establishment of technical services?

Well, long before the so-called celebration in 1992 of the arrival of the first Europeans on our continent 500 years ago, we asked ourselves why a foreign culture was being imposed here to the detriment of our own Andean culture. We, the Quechua, Aymara, and Tupi-Guaraní cultures, ask ourselves, “Why is it that, till this day, we are invaded, and our rights and our dignity are trampled on, first by European and now by *Yanqui* culture?” We have come to the conclusion that this cannot continue and that our cultures must be respected. Therefore, our own political program will not be a copy of programs based on occidental culture. It will be based on our own culture, which we must recover. When we say “recover” our culture, we mean that we have to start with our own religion, our love for *Pachamama*, for nature, and our affection for the celestial bodies, the God Sun, the Goddess Moon, and the stars. In the same way, we have to recover our music, our clothes, and our own forms of organization. Moreover, I believe that one day we will even have to forget about syndicalism because we have our own indigenous organizations. Recovering our cultural identity involves all of these things. We are absolutely convinced of the urgency of

this because the cultures imposed on us have so far brought us nothing but problems: first poverty, then division, and now individualism. But with our own culture, we will regain strength. Perhaps we will not succeed 100%. For example, we might not be able to change our clothing, but we can certainly change our way of life! It is our firm belief that we are not mistaken and that development must be based on local cultures!

Don Roman Loayza, thank you very much for this very stimulating conversation! Before we finish, let me ask you if there is anything important that you would like to add?

No, I think on the whole, the most important things have been mentioned. But since you ask, there is one thing we would very much like to know: What is the feeling in your countries now? How do you see Bolivia? We know that there are countries working on Bolivia’s behalf, collecting funds to help us, for instance. But whom do you want to help? We feel that we should also be taken into consideration when assistance is being offered. We, the beneficiaries, must be able to take part in the process—not to control and criticize it—but to understand it and be able to present our own suggestions. This would enable communication and mutual respect among both indigenous people and professionals. But what do you say to this? Why don’t you demand this?

MRD asked Stephan Rist, an agronomist specializing in rural sociology, who lived and worked in Bolivia for many years, to interview Roman Loayza. The interview was conducted in Spanish in Cochabamba, Bolivia, on 22 May 1999. *Ed.*