



WECF | Women in Europe for a Common Future

“We need to explain people the effects of climate change if we want change”

Interview with Carmen Capriles of Reacción Climática

Carmen Capriles (34) is from La Paz, Bolivia and a volunteer at the organisation Reacción Climática, which she helped founding. She attended the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference Of the Parties (COP) 19 in Warsaw to participate with the WECF activities inside as well outside the UNFCCC meeting. Claire Greensfelder, senior Advisor on Climate and Energy for WECF, interviewed her on her work and climate change.

How did you become involved in environmental work?

“Since I was 14 I have been an environmental activist, always in La Paz, and when I was 23 I started to work as the executive director of an NGO working in the defence of the environment. I attended the university in La Paz and majored in engineering in agronomy with a specialty in sustainable development and agro-ecology. I also started a university campaign for sustainable development. In 2008 I decided I wanted to be an international consultant on climate change, so I left the NGO where I had been working on climate change since 2007.

I started at another NGO, named Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado, where I did research among indigenous peoples and campesinos in Bolivia on their perceptions of climate change. Those people told me stories about what had been changing all these years, like how their washed clothes now dry in half a day while it used to be two days. They also told me about the bio indicators they have. For example, there are birds that lay their eggs up higher if it is going to rain. And if it is not going to rain, the birds lay their eggs in a lower place. By watching the birds, the local people would know if it was going to be a rainy year or not. However, now they say that this system doesn't work anymore.

In 2009, Bill McKibben's (author and environmental activist –ed.) team of the NGO 350 started looking for leaders around the world. Kelly Lynn of 350 contacted me out of the

blue and I organised an action at a glacier for October 24th. And in 2010 I co-founded the NGO Reacción Climática, a climate volunteer organisation in Bolivia.”

Why did you found Reacción Climática?

“After reading the 4th Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report and the results of COP 14 in Bali, I started working with environmental issues especially around advocacy on climate change. I was convinced that something had to be done, especially to help people understand what was going on. In early 2010, after the disappointing results of COP 15 in 2009, we decided to start Reacción Climática with a group of very committed activists. Our goal was to inform people about the climate change definitions, impacts, possible solutions and at the same time encourage both mitigation as well as adaptation. Our methods include generating awareness, capacity building, research, support for the public debate and action. The organisation focuses particularly on youth, women and indigenous people, because those are the ones who will be most affected by the long-term impacts. Our mission is to provide solutions and alternatives to combat this problem.

The main focus of my work with Reacción Climática is raising awareness about climate change and its impact on Bolivia and on the planet. In order to achieve change, it is necessary to inform people about climate change and explain to them what it is. It is also important to inform them about the climate impacts, how this will affect them in the long term, and how they can be prepared in order to create more resilience.

One of the most important parts of my work is linking climate change with women and gender issues. I am also involved with following the UNFCCC negotiations, doing research and collaborating within the different organisations and networks where Reacción Climática has been able to engage. The most important network we work with is 350. Another essential part of the job we do with Reacción Climática is campaigning for local issues like glaciers and protected areas. We also train and educate new volunteers so they can understand the work that is being done on climate change. I encourage them to start their own projects and activities under the banner of Reacción Climática.”

Is it important for the organisation to have access to international processes like the UNFCCC and the Sustainable Development Goals?

“Yes, it is very important to be able to participate at international processes because Bolivia is very vulnerable to climate change, due to the socio-economic situation and because is a mega diverse country. We believe that climate change is a global problem and that it is necessary, not only to work on a grass-roots level, but also to ensure that the voices of the affected people are being heard in international forums.

Bolivia is a developing country. We are also a new country since we established a new constitution and a new name, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, in 2010. The issue of development is therefore very important for our future as a country. It is important to learn from the past and to be able to identify what we want. The Sustainable Development Goals and the Development Agenda Post-2015 will be defining the global

agenda. It is important to be aware of how this process will affect us and also how we can influence this process in a positive way in order to seek what is best for the country. Another reason for participating in these processes is that it helps volunteers to realize how difficult international processes are. At the COPs people don't always have power to achieve a real change. This encourages us more to work at the grassroots, but our commitment leads us to act in any arena where we are able to make our voices heard.

We have participated in the YOUNGO youth constituency with common proposals, campaigns and networking. COP19 was the first time we participated in the Gender and Women's Constituency. We focus mostly on young people with our work and we have done a good job in engaging new people. As a result we, as Reacción Climática, participated in COP 15, COP 16, COP 17 and COP 19.

It is important to say that most of our work is not focused on the COPs, but on on-the-ground actions and the raising of awareness about climate change. We try to come up with local solutions independent from the global agenda, so we look at the urgent needs of people. We also identify future problems, like the melting of glaciers that will affect our water supply.”

What is your experience in cooperating with WECF at various international meetings?

“The first time I was able to engage with WECF was during the 3rd intersessional meeting before RIO+20, as well as during RIO+20 as part of the Women’s Major Group. I was able to participate and see first-hand how the negotiations occurred and able to witness the process and not just read about the results. I also had the chance to see the great work women are doing around the world and to see the struggles that are still going on while trying to achieve basic rights.

I have been following the negotiations on climate change since Bali in 2007. I actually never thought I would get a chance to participate in a UNFCCC COP. So for me it has been an incredible experience to be able to participate in COP 19 in Warsaw, to be part of the process with all its ups and downs, and to be part of a great team. Even though it is not easy to fit in, as it is such a difficult place where so many things are going on at the same time. The COP has been a great source of information. And, although advocacy is not an easy task, being “inside” is a great place to meet people and network in order to find people that are doing the same work that I am doing in other parts of the world.

Thanks to WECF, I am now aware of the global women’s agenda and the great effort they put into leading us through these complex processes in order to build a more equitable and fair world that respects basic human rights including of course women’s rights. I am also more aware of the efforts being made to engage women from all over the world, so that voices from all the walks of life can be heard within an environment of respect and trust. This, I believe, is one of the most important characteristics of working with a great team of brilliant women.”