



Interview with EcoLeaks | The Fight against Fracking, Exploitation & Colonialism

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INTRODUCTION:

Esteban Servat is the founder of EcoLeaks. He is an Argentine-American biologist living in Berlin. He spent nearly a decade working in the Silicon Valley, where he also got his master's of Biotechnology. He moved back to Argentina to start a project to create a self-sustainable, multicultural community in Mendoza province. Once the government brought fracking to the province, he turned into an activist and created EcoLeaks.

actVism Munich (acTV): Thank you so much for joining us today. Can you start by telling us about your background and what motivated you to become active in the environmental movement?

Esteban Servat (ES): Yes, thank you. It is very nice to talk to you. I am a scientist from Argentina. I spent ten years of my life working in the Silicon Valley, in California, in the biotech world. I found this corporate life to be so dehumanising and going against everything I stood for. The soon as I could I wanted to move back to my country, move to the farmland and build an eco-village. I chose the province of Mendoza, where they have done a huge environmental struggle in the past by mobilising massive numbers to the roads to stop illegal mining activities that were coming to the province in 2007. A few years later I arrived and I chose to buy a farm on this land because of their environmental awareness. Mendoza is a desert, it is a famous wine region of Argentina, it is very beautiful, but really deserted. So defending the little water they have is in the DNA of people. And so this awareness drove me to Mendoza, knowing that in the future, if the environment was at risk, people would defend the environment and the water. I bought a piece of land and I started building an eco-village. Everything was going well. We had the full support of the government. We were reactivating and repopulating a region that has been quite depopulated due to economic crises and political crises in Argentina. But the land is perfect, it is fertile, native and intact. So we were doing very well until the government brought fracking. And sadly this was the same people that ten years earlier had led the protest against mining and had used the popularity they got as defending water in the desert, actually then translated to elections. They won the elections and then as soon as they were in government, they betrayed everything they stood for. So in 2017, at the end of the year, they started bringing fracking. Mendoza is unfortunately sitting

on top of the world's second largest shale gas basin and the fourth largest shale oil base in the world, which is called Vaca Muerta. It is about the size of Denmark and the United Nations has warned that exploiting it fully will consume 15 percent of the global carbon budget that humanity has left not to exceed the Paris Agreement 1,5 degrees. That is how big and how bad it is. I found out that the government was withholding a secret study, an environmental impact study, that they were keeping secret because the results were very bad on the first pilot of fracking as they were revealing contamination of the water tables. A whistleblower led me know that they were very concerned. Not everyone was in bed with the government, with the history of Mendoza a lot of people were very worried. They were hiding the report and they were planning to replace the results by fake ones that they were going to fabricate in the lab. Inspired by Julian Assange and WikiLeaks' work, and in a very South American fashion with very low tech, we were able to obtain a copy of this report and decided to leak it and create EcoLeaks with a very basic website and a Facebook page, but with the urgency of knowing that this needed to be leaked to the public. This led to really a revolution. People were outraged and they mobilised by tens of thousands. The biggest ever anti-fracking movement in Argentina's history and likely in world's history. Some demonstrations had 15,000 people in towns that have only 30,000 inhabitants. So really massive involvement and engagement of the population. In turn that turned me into the biggest target of political persecution, criminal cases, and that is what started in 2003, when we published the report.

acTV: You founded EcoLeaks in 2018. What is the organisation's purpose and your role today?

ES: Soon after we published the report and the war broke out with the government, we continued to get reports and information on conflicts of interest and corruption and continued to leak that in Mendoza in Argentina. But the prosecution became so intense that I, and I am not the only case, had to leave my country because of this. I became the person in Argentina with the highest number of criminal cases against me for fighting fracking. I have criminal cases brought against me, even by the mayor of my city personally. They did operations against us like planting drugs in our farm, followed by a media operation saying we were drug dealers and should be persecuted. They also tried to invade the farm with forged documents made by the local government and using the bulldozer from the government to break into the farm to try to steal a piece and force us out. They failed, but the accumulation was driven to wear us down and to intimidate us. Eventually they succeeded in terms of the increase of death threats against me and my family. And in 2019, we decided to go to Germany because of this. And so I've been living in Berlin. So the story of EcoLeaks has been mostly in 2018 in Argentina. Then as we continue to get some information, we publish it, but so far it's kind of stagnated and on pause as here in Germany I've been focussing more on trying to defeat the fracking industry that is destroying my homeland, and where Europe has a lot to do because a lot of the companies are from Europe and a lot of the products are coming to Europe. We are mostly focussing on the environmental side of things than on the publishing side for now, but I have plans to hopefully try to build EcoLeaks properly with the proper technology, so that we can actually be a global platform.

acTV: You mentioned that European companies are operating in Argentina. Can you talk about the responsibility and the role of the Global north when it comes to fracking?

ES: The Global North is playing a major role, not only in fracking, but in every aspect of global warming, while European governments are committing to the Paris Agreement on reducing emissions and signing different declarations of commitments to the climate. Unfortunately there is a double standard. While they do all of this, they are not only allowing their companies, but even promoting and often subsidising them. Some of the world's biggest oil multinational companies such as BP, Shell, Repsol, Wintershall from Germany, Total from France, they are the world's biggest players in fracking, for example, and they are the biggest holders of land in Argentina, where they actually hold thousands and thousands of hectares of land that they are actually fracking. Doing in Argentina and in the Global South what they cannot even do at home. And oftentimes they promote their subsidises to do so and then in turn, the products of these, in this case shale gas that is extracted and then exported back into Europe, where the governments are using billions of euros to subsidise their construction and the expansion of a lot of LNG terminals. LNG stands for liquefied natural gas, which is the form in which the gas is transported over the ocean. They liquefy it, compress it 600 times, freeze it to minus 160 Celsius degrees, and then it can be transported and then it is imported into Europe through these terminals that are being built with public funds. Germany, for example, has committed to build three LNG terminals in Brunsbüttel, Wilhelmshaven and Stade with millions of euros of public funds to import this gas, and in fact, the minister of finance recently even pledged an additional billion euros of public funds to import more American fracked gas. So this is really serious, especially when science has shown that shale gas or fracked gas has the biggest carbon footprint of any fossil fuel. Actually 40 to 60 percent higher than even coal. So how is it possible that Germany and Europe is pledging to move away from coal, and they are proposing to replace it as a transition fuel with something that is actually much worse and that also involves a form of colonialism that involves the destruction of the Global South with techniques such as fracking, that are banned in Europe. This cannot go on, not only because it is injustice, but also because Europe will also pay the consequences of global warming. So we cannot afford this hypocrisy anymore.

acTV: Can you mention the major breakthroughs, you've made through EcoLeaks and also talk about how the government and public reacted to them?

ES: When we published the first report, the secret report, on March 16th, 2018, the initial response was surprising. The next day was a Saturday. All the government agencies and official websites from the government and different media went out to say the opposite to deny our report. They said that fracking had not contaminated anything. They used all the infrastructure they had and all the power and the established media, which, by the way, the biggest media conglomerate in Mendoza. The problem is that the owners of the company ... the fracking company. It gives you an idea what we were up against; the media, the government, the multinational companies and the weaponised justice system. It took a while until we could break through the fractures in the system as they were contradicting one

another over the report. First they said it was fake, then they said it was partially true, but it was mistaken and it was being misinterpreted. Eventually they were contradicting one another between the different government officials and we managed to get some interviews in small local media that went viral through social media. When they heard our story and I being a scientist, people believe a scientist than they believe a politician. Luckily. So even with no money, no power, no media, just a couple of local radios from tiny, tiny towns, the interviews went viral and they managed to alert the people of what was going on. A month or so later we ended up having thousands of people on the streets. In the town, where I was living, we mobilised 15,000 out of the population of 30,000, of course it did not make it to the media. There was almost no reporting of what was the biggest march against fracking in Argentina and maybe in world history. The mobilisation continued and we continued to leak information on conflict of interest, such as for example, the vice dean of the university, who was the representative of the fracking company and many other info on corruption and conflicts of interest and hiding information. I mostly focussed on the action of trying to mobilise and keep the pressure so that we could get the law against fracking approved in the local parliament of the province, which took a lot of fighting and a lot of persecution, which became more and more intense. The government was really ... people that were joining the demos. Some people had to leave the province, not just me. They were threatened or they were persecuted. Some people were jailed. It was a very tense year and at the end of the year, the government managed to approve a code of conduct that was resembling something that Argentina had during the dictatorship in the 70s that makes it illegal to demonstrate, makes it illegal to criticise government officials and if they like, they can put you in jail or they can give you big fines even for saying things on social media about the governor. That was like the final nail on the coffin that really brought down people from mobilising as they became more and more scared. In that context, it intensified, and me and my family had to leave at the beginning of 2019.

acTV: Did you ever have to fear for your life?

ES: I knew that the moment I started this that it was almost like committing suicide. I knew that the forces we were about to find were so big and so dark and so corrupt that they could put us out any moment that we could be, I could be, assassinated at any time. But also I felt that if I did not get involve, the same would happen in the long term, because anything that we were doing, trying to build an eco-village, having a healthy life, was doomed if fracking was to continue as everything would get contaminated. The little water there was, would be gone, the trees that we were planting by the hundreds would be drying up and the houses we were building could be collapsing due to earthquakes. Mendoza is already highly seismic and to bring fracking to a seismic region, as fracking causes earthquakes, and that is the reason it has been banned in much of Europe, like in the UK with a moratorium last year. It was a recipe for disaster. So for me, there was no option but to get involved and fight. And then yes, I got also explicitly death threats, but I think I am lucky to be able to tell the story. Latin America in general has the highest number of assassinations of environmental defenders. Over the last 15 years out of about 1,500 murders in the world, 75 percent of those happened in Latin America, mostly to indigenous land defenders. The situation is really dangerous

there and that is why also we have so much power and responsibility here in the Global North and we have been organising actions of international solidarity to amplify and give more power to the actions in the front lines in Argentina, in the Global South, in Latin America, by mobilising together with them and putting pressure on the European governments and companies that have played a major role in this ecocide.

acTV: What are the problems facing maybe not only Latin America, but the Global South in general today? And what can citizens as well as governments do to effectively address them?

ES: I think that we are going into an era, where after the pandemic, the thirst for resources, the hunger for resources, is only going to expand. And the economic crisis that we are already beginning to face, which I believe is only going to get worse, is going to be used to justify expanding extractivism in the Global South, always at the hand of companies and governments from the Global North that are requiring such resources like minerals and gold and oil and gas. I think there is an ever growing responsibility and power for people here in the Global North to stop that and to change that. As usually, governments in the Global South are merely secretaries to the company. They are so corrupt, and even if they wanted to change anything, they have no power. The companies usually have a bigger GDP than the country they are in, where they're operating, so the power dynamics are very disproportionate. But here, if we would influence public opinion in Europe, where the environmental movement is strong, and we could realise that the climate movement, the climate fight, is not a fight of statistics, it is not a fight of abstract declarations, but it is actually a human issue, where the Global South is being sacrificed so that the Global North can continue its consumption and its industry and so on. Also, there is no planet, there is no winning the climate fight, unless we can stop this colonialism, because much of the global warming of the world, the top 100 polluters of the world are Global North companies mostly, and their operations are mostly taking place at the front lines in the Global South. So there is a lot that we can do if we can put pressure on such as Wintershall from Germany, it is the biggest independent oil and gas company of Europe, and nobody ever seems to have ever heard of them. They are headquartered in Kassel and yet nobody knows and it is the biggest oil company of Germany. So how is it possible? And they are fracking in Argentina and the rest of the world. Last December, on December 11th, we did an action of international solidarity, where we went to the headquarters, to the office of Wintershall in Berlin, and people in Argentina mobilised and also in many places over the world against other oil companies and beginning to connect, connect the dots of extraction and consumption and do actions on the same day together. In Berlin, there was a Mapuche group of activists. Mapuche is a native people that are living in Vaca Muerta. They are paying the highest price for fracking with their lives, with their communities being destroyed. We had a group of Mapuches that are in Berlin who came and joined the action. That was very powerful. So we can connect the people from the front lines and the movements of Europe that are usually blaming themselves for being too white. But we can actually mix it up and put Europe in the way at the service of the front lines, the people on the front lines that are fighting to survive.

acTV: How do you think we can create more awareness on this issue? And what do you

think should be the role of grassroots activists in all of this?

ES: I think that the way to create more awareness is to try to reach out to, to find people on the front lines, to get out of the bubbles that we are in in Europe and try to reach out. There is a very nice project called Environmental Justice Atlas online, where they have begun to map some conflicts in the world, environmental conflicts, it is not complete, but it is a great start. You can even search by company and search by industry, so you can find German companies or European companies that are involved in some destruction in Latin America or in Africa or beyond, and try to find a resistance movement and contact them and ask 'how can we help?' We know there is a German company that is destroying your land, maybe there is something we could do here in Germany. I think, if we turn the pressure on to the governments of Europe and the companies in Europe, for example, to prevent, to force governments in Europe to stop, to regulate companies, to stop them from doing abroad, what they cannot do at home, that would be a huge victory, because that would put an immediate end to the operation such as fracking, that are destroying the world and by the way, which has been shown by science. Fracking has been shown to be responsible for more than 50 percent of all of the world's increased methane emissions over the last decade. Methane is 87 times worse than CO2 for the atmosphere on a 20 year period. It is really a climate timebomb. So there is no way we can achieve the Paris Agreement or any other climate goals if fracking continues to go on. So the way I think, it is just to try the break out of the bubbles and reach out to the people on the front lines and begin to do international solidarity actions like we are trying to do.

actV: Are you optimistic about the future? Do you really think the Global North will act in solidarity with the Global South in the future?

ES: I am very optimistic, because I have been very surprised by the action we just did on the 11th of December. There has been a lot of countries mobilising. Most of Europe has mobilised tackling different companies and tentacles of the fracking industry and the people in the Global South, in South America, in Asia and in Africa, are coming together, despite being in the middle of a global pandemic that we were able to pull this action. Here in Europe, we had Ende Gelände, Extinction Rebellion, people from Fridays for Future in different places. Since my arrival almost two years ago now in Germany, I think getting involved in organising and helping organise these kinds of fights in different places of Europe, such as in Ireland and Spain, and I also joined actions in Sweden and other places. I am really surprised to see how much energy is beginning to gain momentum right now. I think as soon as this is embraced by Ende Gelände, Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, more and more, I think fracking has its days number. Europe is the world's biggest importer of gas, which means that if Europe is to close the gates to the import of this gas, which Trump was very desperate for Europe to import and was bullying his way to get these terminals built. If Europe closes ... it is the end of fracking all over the world because the industry is also struggling, it is a financial bubble, then it will save Argentina and beyond. So I am very hopeful and I think that hopefully within this year we can bring it down. And I am making the case that we must bring it down this year, if we are to have a chance at

succeeding in the climate fight.

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