



Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,
I have been given the honour of introducing you to Mrs. Natalia Sarapura, who will this evening receive the “Peace Award for the Unknown Peace Worker”. Unknown – that may be true for Germany. Mrs Sarapura is however a well-known and highly- regarded personality in many parts of northern Argentina.

Natalia Sarapura was born there in 1975, in the province of Jujuy and belongs to the Kolla people, one of the numerous ethnic groups in this region. She will be distinguished today for her admirable and persistent fight for the rights of the indigenous peoples of Argentina.

This commitment began when the 14 year old pupil Natalia was asked to give a school presentation on her people, the Kolla. It was a time when the majority of adults did not recognize their cultural identity. One wanted to be modern like the others and felt discriminated as an indigenous person, although 70 % of the population of the province of Jujuy in fact belonged to the indigenous people. And so the 14-year old went off in search of information about her people to the newly opened office of an organisation called the “Council of the Indigenous Organisations of Jujuy”, in Spanish “Consejo de Organizaciones Aborígenes de Jujuy”, COAJ. She saw how much work the few active members had to do and offered her help. She began by making tea for meetings, later she wrote letters as not all of the adults were able to read and write. She regularly accompanied the representatives of the council on their visits to the village communities, the *Comunidades*.

During this time, Natalia was often spoken to about her grandfather, with whom she shared a similarity, not only in looks but also in personality. She learned that her grandfather, whom she never got to know personally, had been an important leader for his people and had committed himself to the preservation and recognition of his culture. He was to become a role-model for her own action.

For this reason, after finishing school, the highly-intelligent young woman did not study at university as her family would have liked her to have done, but instead trained as an administration secretary because the COAJ desperately needed someone for administration purposes. Natalia Sarapura has been working there for the past 20 years, and has devoted her entire energy and work to the cause of the indigenous peoples. She has now been its president for 15 years.



Particularly important was the year 1994, as a reform of the Argentinean constitution stipulated the right to cultural identity of the indigenous peoples and promised them the land which they have been living on in village communities for hundreds of years, long before the Spanish conquerors had divided up the land between them as they deemed best, long before the foundation of state in the process of which large territories became state possession, this land in turn given by corrupt province governors to favourites, people of influence and foreign mining companies. It would be very naïve to think that these privileged people would now bow humbly before the constitution and readily give back this land to the indigenous village communities. The opposite was in fact the case. Whenever village communities asserted their rights, they were victimized and their leaders frequently received anonymous murder threats. And the provincial government did everything on their part to impede them from asserting their rights. Over 40 administrative requirements have to be fulfilled before a village community can become legal proprietors of their land.

This was one of the first great tasks facing Natalia Sarapura. The aim was to fight for the rights to collective land ownership for 230 village communities in the province of Jujuy. You can imagine what a Sisyphean task this was when you consider that by the end of 2012 only 50 communities had actually received their land titles. The remaining 180 communities have at least reached the point that they are registered as a juristic person, which is one of the most important prerequisites in the process of gaining land title. It would, however, have been impossible to overcome the mentioned 40 administrative obstacles without the help of lawyers and the commitment of further qualified individuals. She made use of her contact to the Weltfriedensdienst (WFD), a non-government organisation based in Berlin which, supported by the foundation "Solidarität und Menschenrechte" (solidarity and human rights) and by the BMZ, supports partner organisations in the south in their human rights work. This made it possible for the COAJ to finance the necessary qualified personnel. Next, it was a question of visiting the 230 village communities often found in remote mountain regions in order to inform the inhabitants of their land rights at village meetings. And every village community had to overcome the 40 obstacles. How many consultations, how many meetings and how many accompanied visits to public authorities did this entail over the course of the years?



Natalia Sarapura achieved this with unbelievable tenacity, perseverance and patience. We can thank her for the fact that, despite the victimization by owners of large estates and the administrative obstacles involved, the situation did not escalate into violence. She organized peaceful demonstrations, wrote petitions to the central government, took part in polite, but insistent discussions with politicians and mediated between conflicting parties.

However, Natalia Sarapura's work entails much more than enforcing land rights. Her concept for the support and development of indigenous peoples also includes:

- The development of their cultural identity
- School education for all, especially further training for the rural population

- Basic education for indigenous women (80% cannot read and write) and protection against violence and discrimination
- Protection of nature and the environment, especially the devastation caused by building companies

One essential step in achieving this aim was the development of a 3-year vocational training concept for indigenous community development for which she was primarily responsible. For this, she achieved state recognition and in December 2012, the first 200 men and women received a state diploma. These qualified workers have now returned to their village communities to develop projects with the population on nutrition security, improvement of the quality of life and environmental and nature protection. An application for project support has been approved this year by the BMZ.

I would not like to finish before mentioning one further aspect which, according to my impression, is at the very heart of Natalia Sarapura's commitment, and that is the development of cultural identity. I mentioned at the beginning that many people in the province of Jujuy were ashamed of being a member of an indigenous people as a result of the discrimination they experienced. Natalia's greatest aim is to make the indigenous people aware once again of the richness of their culture and spirituality, especially in the worship of the goddess Pachamama, mother earth.

Dear Natalia Sarapura, in my eyes this award is not simply a much deserved distinction for your remarkable commitment. It also serves to remind us living in Europe that we really must stop the brutal exploitation and destruction of our natural resources here at home and also in the southern countries. We should follow the example of how you live in the Andes and return to a life in harmony with creation.

Bernd Möllers