

**Ecuadorian anti-extractivism: limits and possibilities of a convergence between
the ecologists and the indigenous movements**
-Working paper-

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Abstract

Two strands have been identified inside the Ecuadorian indigenous movement agglutinated under CONAIE, the National Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities, and its affiliates. The first strand organizes the struggles around land as a mean of production, assumes the form of class struggle with the historical subject being the peasant (the rural proletarian). The second strand emerged with a re-born indigenous identity as the historical subject, thus demanding cultural, political and economic autonomy. The classist and culturalist strands respond to the historical particularities of the Amazon and the Sierra indigenous organizations, the strongest of the country and coexist in time and space.

Each tendency influences the ways in which the indigenous movement approaches the ecologist movement in Ecuador today. It appears that the ethnic strand articulates with the ecologist movement against oil and mining developments that threatens territories mostly in the southern Amazon and the southern Sierra. Meanwhile, the classist strand prevails in the Central and Northern Sierra and appears to have a milder anti-extractivism character, thus the convergence with ecologists is virtually non-existent.

Introduction

The interaction between indigenous and struggle of environmental character has been studied extensively from anthropological and cultural studies: affectations of neoliberal development in indigenous cultures, indigenous knowledge as inspiration for environmental crisis resolution, indigenous empowerment in environmental issues, and so on (Igoe, 2005; Jones, 2008; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Theriault, 2011; Barton and Roman, 2012; Thomson, 2011). Political ecology has, too, contributed to this sphere of enquiry, focusing in the political structures affecting resource access, the different scales and discourse laden of indigenous politics and the forms of interaction between indigenous and ecologists as political actors (Bedoya and Klein, 1996; Peet and Watts, 2004; Bebbington and Humpreys-Bebbington, 2009; Bryan, 2009). Analysing indigenous participation in conflicts for natural resources Coombes and colleagues identified two trends in scholarly work; the first one that sees the convergence of the indigenous peoples to environmentalism is a 'natural'

consequence of the global crises, and a second trend of scholars whom see in this rapprochement an opportunistically political strategy from indigenous peoples and their mestizo or western supporters (Coombes, Johnson and Howitt, 2012).

In turn, Tania Li (2004) takes distance of both approaches and describes a more complex movement of articulation and conjuncture to explain how local indigenous struggles connect to global environmental activism (Li, 2004). So, following Li (2004), in this paper I aim to analyse the forms of and articulation and conjuncture of Ecuadorian indigenous and ecologist movements, analysing the discourses deployed in a moment of [apparent] convergence and intense activism: the Plurinational March for Water, Life and Dignity of the Peoples in 2011 (March for Water from now on). Then I will contrast those views with the period of collection of signatures to ask for a referendum to stop the oil drilling in Yasuni National Park, which started in 2013 and will end next 12th of April 2014.

Getting together

Ecuadorian indigenous and ecologist movements¹ have converged many times in the past in actions related to extractive industry: the trial against Chevron-Texaco, the affectations of oil drilling in the Waorani people, the resistance of Sarayaku and Shuar people to oil exploration in their territories. However, it was not until the current government of Movimiento Pais (president Rafael Correa's political party) that it appeared that a more permanent alliance between both could be attained. The indigenous movement adopted a strong anti-extractivist character, which crashed with the intentions of capitalist modernization of the State under Rafael Correa's regime (Lalander and Ospina, 2012; Marañón-Pimentel, 2012). The perspective of the affectations on water and on indigenous territories of the new oil and mining concessions made possible the convergence of the indigenous people with ecologists demands due to the discussion around the Laws of Water and Mining in 2009 (Machado, 2012). Later, in 2013, both groups re-grouped to criticize the new oil concessions in the Southern Amazon and the end of Yasuni-ITT Initiative in the Northern Amazon.

The character of the current government and the virulence of the confrontations resulted in the public prosecution of indigenous, *campesinos* and popular leaders. According to the indigenous and human rights organizations by 2011 between 189 and 194 social leaders supported trials for opposing to oil extraction, mining and dams construction. The Public Defender of the People of Ecuador stated that "a systematic criminalization policy" to the defenders of Human and Nature Rights is being applied (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2011; Hidalgo, 2011; CONAIE, 2012). The prosecuted included the current president of ECUARUNARI, Carlos Pérez Guartambel for his

¹ For this paper, I assume the indigenous movement as that conformed by the National Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities, CONAIE, and the regional affiliates ECUARUNARI (Sierra), GONOAIE (former CONFENIAE, Amazon) and CONAICE (Coast). The ecologist movement will be that grouped under two national networks: ANA (National Environmental Assembly) that groups grassroots

participation during the March in Defence of water (one of my case studies). He was condemned to 8 days in jail. Another case is Pepe Acacho, current vice-president of CONAIE, being held accountable for calling to rebellion during the protests against mining in the Southern Amazon that ended with the death of a Shuar teacher in 2009. Recently, Humberto Cholango, current president of CONAIE, and other 9 leaders are being investigated for incidents occurred in November 2013 during a business meeting between the Ministry of non-renewable resources and oil companies that intend to explore for oil in the Southern Amazon. That same incident derived in the closing of an environmental NGO, Pachamama Foundation, which actively called against oil exploitation (Diario HOY, 2014).

The Plurinational March for Water, Life and Dignity of the Peoples

In 2009 the Law of water and the Law of mining entered in period of discussion in the National Assembly. This inaugurated a period of protest that made explicit the ideological differences between the national government and CONAIE, by then headed by Marlon Santi, Amazonian leader (Hurtado, 2011). Several marches and blockades were conducted until March 2012, when the Plurinational March in defence of Water, Life and the Dignity of the Peoples was called. The national uprising started in an Amazon town that will be affected by the first mining project of the government. For 15 days indigenous, peasants, ecologists, Leftist, workers, students and feminists and women organizations walked to reach the capital city, Quito. The symbolism of the action was strong: the March started on March the 8th, Women's Day and arrived to Quito on March the 22th, the World Water Day to "flood" the capital city (Machado, 2012). The March challenged the development model based on the extraction of primary commodities, mainly oil and minerals, and posed as main demands the protection of *Pachamama*, the defence of water and life from oil and mining activities and the re-distribution of water² (INREDH, 2012a; Lalander and Ospina, 2012).

In the middle of the action, Humberto Cholango, new president of CONAIE and leader of the Sierra, emphasized the aims of the mobilization: re-distribution of water and lands through a real agrarian revolution, the change from the current extractive model towards the *sumak kawsay* (good living in English), and the nullification of the trials against indigenous and communitarian leaders (CONAIE, 2012). In words of Segundo Churuchumbi member of the Governing Council of ECUARUNARI, the March was in rejection of the new oil and mining concessions, and of the Law of Water that violate the rights of the indigenous peoples and nationalities (ECUARUNARI, 2012a). Other indigenous leaders sympathetic with green ideas like Carlos Pérez, who in 2013 will become president of ECUARUNARI, expressed: "The march is to support the defence of nature and to reject the large-scale mining in indigenous and peasants territories, reserves and natural water sources" (El Tiempo, 2012). Here, it can be seen already two strands in the indigenous movement that can

² The complete list of demands can be accessed in: <http://www.codpi.org/propuestas/112-marcha-plurinacional-por-el-agua-la-vida-y-la-dignidad-de-los-pueblos>. Last access: 24th March.

be approached to explain the different forms of articulation with ecologists (see below).

However the uneven ‘greenness’ of indigenous leaders, ecologists along the country supported promptly the March in defence of water and territory, but also for the conservation of nature:

“They prepare a brutal aggression against the *Pachamama* in Ecuador. Powerful transnational prepare to open vast mining pits and oil drilling in the water sources and areas of high biodiversity [...] At the same time, hundreds of people are being accused of terrorists for reclaiming respect for the rights of nature and fundamental human rights like the right to water, to land, to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and of their children.” (Comunidad Huella Verde, 2012).

Indeed, few days before the March departed from the Southern Amazon, a group of urban ecologists tried to enter the Chinese Embassy in Quito to deliver a letter against the involvement of Chinese companies in large-scale mining in Ecuador (Machado, 2012). The protestors said that the mining project “is located in one of the richest areas of biodiversity and cultures, and will affect in perpetuity the territory of indigenous peoples and nature” (ECUARUNARI, 2012b).

The Ancestral Peoples of Mangrove Ecosystem organized in C-CONDEM, which can be seen as a clear case of popular ecologists (Guha and Martínez-Alier, 1997), stated:

“[we are fighting] for our mangrove forests, sandy beaches, rivers, seas, oceans [which] are being privatized and contaminated by criminal and irresponsible industries such as mining, shrimp, timber, hotel industry among others. The struggle for the dignity of the people is also the struggle of women for their rights, against patriarchy and violence with nature that threatens life.” (C-CONDEM, 2012).

Other ecologists elaborated the support in political terms. Alberto Acosta, founder and ideologist of Movimiento Pais, known for his environmental ideas which cost him the removal from the political movement amidst bad relations with president Correa, said:

“[The march] announces the overcoming of the prehistoric era of post-neoliberal capitalist development, as well as the increasingly presence of a new alternative modernity: conscious, post-capitalist and post-authoritarian.” (INREDH, 2012b).

Although uneven, the newly move of the indigenous movement towards claims for water and safe environments, along with the autonomous use of territory made possible the convergence with ecologists that are still trying to corporate in a solely movement. Since, while important steps have been taken further with ANA and CEDENMA, the ecologists do not conform organic structures. Hence it prevails a necessity of the struggles of environmental character to hold on the indigenous movement to have an impact in national politics (Machado, 2012). However, these observations will be challenged by the social mobilization around the defence of Yasuni in which the indigenous organizations participated rarely, if participated at all.

Yasuni-ITT Initiative

The Yasuni-ITT Initiative proposed to keep 920 million of oil barrels in the underground of Yasuni National Park in exchange of an international compensation for half the amount that Ecuador would have earned (USD\$3.600 million in 12 years). The Initiative has its origins in an old ecologists' claim for a moratorium of oil exploitation in the pristine areas of Ecuadorian Amazon, at least until it has been assessed and repaired all the impacts of the industry in peoples and natures, due to the evidence raised by the trial against Chevron-Texaco (Acosta *et al.*, 2009). Being Alberto Acosta Minister of Energy in 2007, before his outbreak with Movimiento Pais' political project, the Ecuadorian government constructed and launched the Initiative as a national proposal. For 6 years it was promoted as a novel plan to protect biodiversity and to respect the life of two groups of indigenous in situation of isolation (Larrea and Warnars, 2009). Hence the indigenous movement supported it from the beginning. In June, the Congress of CONAIE committed to

“promote the fight in defence of Yasuni against the threat of the possible oil exploitation, because it threatens the un-contacted peoples” (CONAIE, 2013)

In August 2013 Correa announced the end of the Initiative alleging a lack of interest from the international community, while it only contributed with \$13.3 million of the proposed USD\$3.600 million (analysis of the failure of the Initiative can be found in Nysingh, 2012; Martínez-Alier *et al.*, 2013). The ending of the Initiative encompassed the imminent drilling of oil in the national park, which provoked indignation of many groups who began a series of public demonstrations. The social mobilization, eventually, led to the formation of a rather spontaneous movement, Yasunidos (*unidos* meaning “united” in English). Yasunidos define themselves as a “collective of collectives”, a multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2004) without visible leader or organic structure, citizens grouped under the effect of the rupture of the social pact: they feel that the government deceived them. The character of the group is of strong ecologist values and an open animosity towards political adscription (no Left, no Right), though many collectives inside Yasunidos are of Leftist background (PlanV, 2014). With that spirit, in October 2013 they decided to gather around 500.000 signatures to ask the National Assembly to call a national referendum to consult the Ecuadorian people if they agree or not to drill oil in Yasuni-ITT. At that point, the indigenous movement was participating actively in the mobilizations and gave declarations of support to the referendum:

“[The government and the National Assembly] cannot make a decision that will affect the life of un-contacted peoples and living beings [...]. The mother land is not for sale, Yasuni will be defended” (Humberto Cholango, August 19th 2013).

“The announcement by president Correa to end the Initiative to preserve Yasuni [...] ratifies which we anticipated in repeated occasions: never a government was really committed with nature preservation [...] Given these facts, CONFENIAE declares to be in alert and constant vigil for the defence of our territorial rights”. (Franco Viteri, president of CONFENIAE, 20th August 2013).

In October 2013, a hundred Amazonian women marched to Quito in rejection of the plans to exploit oil in their territories and in Yasuni. In November 2013, CONAIE,

CONFENIAE and ECUARUNARI participated in the action against the negotiations between the government and oil companies that derived in the trial against Cholango and the shut down of Pachamama Foundation (see above). Despite the social mobilization, the collection of signatures seemed hopeless from the beginning, given the massive popular support to president Correa (80% of the population approved him at that time). However, its enactor argued for using the process of signatures gathering to position the debate regarding the post-extractivism and to re-build the bases of the movements, eroded in the last years (Martínez, 2013).

Getting apart?

As time passed and despite the initial support, the indigenous organizations apparently withdrew from the collection of signatures for the national referendum. As Salvador Quishpe, anti-big mining indigenous activist:

“Right now I see that the collection of signatures for Yasuni is progressing well, but CONAIE at least, keeps quiet. I do not know if they are collecting signatures, but if they do, it is being done in a very quiet form.” (PlanV, 2014).

Actually, since his arriving to office, it seems that Cholango planned to resume the dialogue interrupted in 2009 with president Correa while “continue to reclaim firmly the rights of the indigenous peoples” (Ecuadorinmediato, 2014). In fact, on August 2013, he was called to respond to the bases for his evident intentions to get close to the government, whom resolved to trust him (Diario La Hora, 2013). Some of the detractors were Carlos Pérez and Salvador Quishpe, leaders of the Southern Sierra and Southern Amazon, areas with intense mining conflicts.

Cholango has been emphatic in the priorities of the indigenous movement under his leadership: water and land. In relation to Yasuni, he has stated:

“One thing is to not support the [oil] exploitation in Yasuni, but that doesn’t mean that the doors are closed to the dialogue [with Correa’s government]. [There are] other topics that must be resolved, like mining, new oil rounds of negotiations, and the Laws of Water and Land” (Diario La Hora, 2014).

Alongside with CONFENIAE, CONAIE insisted that their main preoccupation is the life of the indigenous peoples in situation of isolation, threatened by “the extractive development model and the accelerated colonization of indigenous territories” (MapuExpress, 2013).

So, although in declarations the indigenous organizations support the national referendum for Yasuni-ITT, apparently only ECUARUNARI is actively collecting signatures to support it and only in the Southern Sierra, home of the former president and fighter against mining in the paramos. Yasunidos has taken the lead in the process and has assumed the collection of signatures as “citizens with no flag” (PlanV, 2014). True, the signature collection overlapped with the local elections of last February 2014, and CONAIE declared to be committed to campaign in support of Pachakutik candidates, the political party of the indigenous movement (El Comercio, 2013). But

the lost of interest in the Yasuni-ITT campaign by the indigenous organizations is an example of a complex form of articulation with environmental claims, something that may be better analysed in light of the historical conditions of the emergence of the indigenous organizations.

Strands and history

The coalition of the Sierra and Amazon organizations gave rise to CONAIE and reveals two moments in indigenous movement history, which may well explain the *forms* by which the movement embrace environmental claims. The first moment was anchored to the emergence of ECUARUNARI, thus to the revolts performed by peasants' organizations in the Sierra against the conditions of exploitation inside the prevalent hacienda system. In this period, there was no emphasis on indigenous identities since claims were all about access to land and other means of production (Guerrero and Ospina, 2003). The second moment transformed this claim for land into the reclamation of *territory* as a space to exercise cultural, social and economic autonomy, highlighting thereby the question of indigenous identities and their right for self-determination. This fed through to the recognition of Ecuador as a pluri-National State and underscores the influence of Amazonian politics on national trends (Dávalos, 2002; 2005). Put differently, the first moment, strongly influenced by socialist and communist parties³, assumed the form of class struggle with the historical subject being the peasant –the rural proletarian-, while the second one assumed the cultural/social struggle with re-born indigenous identities as the historical subject (Moreano, 1993; Simbaña, 2009).

The shift to ethnic vindications appears to have influenced the adoption of environmental topics by the indigenous movement. In turn, this was influenced by amazon organizations and the depiction of the spiritual relation that indigenous people maintain with nature. Therefore the claims for territorial autonomy and self-determination strongly implied the possibility to realize this particular relation with nature (Varea and Barrera, 1997, Dávalos, 2002). Meanwhile, the Sierra organizations, forged in the class struggles against the hacienda system, also embraced the ethnic turn in a process aptly described by Guerrero and Ospina (2003). For these authors, the collapse of the hacienda system in the Sierra entailed the end of the indigenous people as the exploited subjects of the hacienda, which precipitated the move towards the ethnic vindication of the indigenous as a “positive and socially valued identity”, coupled with an internal political process of self-identification (Guerrero and Ospina, 2003: 13; see also Simbaña, 2009). Indeed, the class origin and peasantry character of ECUARUNARI is expressed in the form the organization speaks of itself:

³ ECUARUNARI results of the confluence of three political currents: Leftist parties, the progressive Catholic Church (affiliated to the precepts of the Liberation Theology), and autonomous processes inside the indigenous organizations, with the emergence of leaders with accumulated political experience and intellectuals (Simbaña, 2009).

“[Ecuadorunari] constitutes as an expression of unity and fraternity on the indigenous and *campesinos* of Ecuador. Born as a projection of a National Movement. This process agglutinated in an organized manner the indigenous and peasants of the country, overcoming the differences and isolation imposed since the colony and the individual struggles, for together defend the permanent abuse, mistreatment and exclusion of the landowners and of the State itself.” Delfin Tenesaca, former president of the ECUARUNARI (ECUARUNARI, 2013).

In contrast, the spiritual relation with nature and the importance of territory are depicted constantly by Amazonian leaders:

“[...] our struggle has been always, is, and will be for the defence of our territories from the extractivism, spearhead for the accumulation of big capital and, therefore, of the deepening of the capitalist system that oppresses not only the human but also the nature and all its creatures” Franco Viteri, President of CONFENIAE (CONFENIAE, 2013).

It appears that the ethnic strand articulates better with the ecologist movement against oil and mining developments that threatens territories mostly in the southern Amazon and the southern Sierra. Meanwhile, the classist strand prevails in the Central and Northern Sierra and appears to have a milder anti-extractivism character, thus the convergence with ecologists is virtually non-existent or circumstantial. Indeed, although the Sierra organizations have recently incorporated environmental aspects into their demands, the environmental topic remains a matter of tension inside these organizations, as the erratic support to the Yasuni-ITT campaign showed.

There is, too, a geographically distinctive form of articulation that might respond to the value that the local struggle attributes to the ecologists’ support, both at symbolic and material levels (access to resources, visibility, legitimacy, legal advice, etc.). The territorial articulation with the ecologists may, in turn, demand a strong convergence with the indigenous organizations in a bottom-up fashion. That is the case of the Southern Sierra, where the local anti-mining struggles forced ECUARUNARI to acquire a strong anti-extractivist character and ultimately allowed Carlos Pérez to win the presidency of the organization in April 2013 in detriment of the more ‘classist’ oriented leaders from the Northern Sierra. This happened despite of the concerns about the ‘non-indigeneity’ of Pérez. The territorial articulation serves to explain, also, the lack of support of the indigenous organizations (beyond ECUARUNARI) to the Yasuni-ITT campaign and the success of the March for Water. In Yasuni-ITT there are no local struggles, being a fight carried out by urban activists. Meanwhile, in the March for Water, thousands of local struggles converged in one big action.

So, as Li reported, a movement of articulation and conjuncture occurs in which territories under pressure find helpful the anti-extractivist discourse and material support of the ecologist movement: when “an ideology finds its subject” (Li, 2004: 347). But, at the same time, there is a movement of confluence between discourses and political agendas of social movements that might be useful to explore to escalate political influence.

Indeed, the dynamics of looking for common interests in different scenarios to increase the political impact of their actions is a widespread feature of the new social movements (Melucci, 1994; Machado, 2012). The cases analysed provided some insights about how such convergence occurred in Ecuador between the ecologist and indigenous movement. Apparently, the current leadership of CONAIE perceives that the anti-extractivist claim that led the organization to a permanent conflict with president Correa, has affected the support of the movement's bases, which perceive material benefits from the government. That could explain the disengagement of some sectors of the indigenous organizations from the Yasuni-ITT campaign. In contrast, the Plurinational Mandate for Life, issued after the March of 2012, incorporated demands that ranged from the opposition to large-scale mining to the defence of Yasuni and of sexual and reproductive rights. The Mandate was used as model for the government plan of the Plurinational Unity of the Left that ran for the presidency in early 2013 with Alberto Acosta as presidential candidate. In sum, a Leftist program with notions of environmental limits.

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