

# Valuation struggles in the Ecuadorian Amazon: Beyond indigenous people's responses to oil extraction

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## Abstract

Conflicts resulting from oil extractivism can be seen as ecological and cultural distribution conflicts, and have involved Latin American indigenous movements attached to their land and environments as providers of livelihood and cultural identity. In Ecuador, some have argued that this has become a 'standard narrative', essentializing the struggles of indigenous people. And the various agreements found historically between indigenous people and large companies operating in their territories seem to legitimize such criticism. But how to understand the choices of indigenous groups, with incommensurable needs, values, and claims, in the presence of extractive projects involving incommensurable local outcomes? Through an analysis of the different claims of indigenous people who voted in favor of oil extraction projects in their territories in the ITT fields of the Ecuadorian Amazon, I show how oil extraction coupled with 'social compensation' might create non-conflictive, but problematic situations, rather than conflicts. Indeed, the perception of an incommensurable loss, related to ecological and cultural difference, does not necessarily translate into opposition to mining or drilling. This is especially important in countries where the right to prior consultation could legitimize the expansion of oil activities in indigenous territories.

**Key words:** indigenous people, resource extraction in Latin America, prior consultation, oil conflicts, ecological and cultural difference, incommensurability of values

## Résumé

Les conflits résultant de l'extractivisme pétrolière peuvent être considérés comme des conflits de distribution écologique et culturelle, et ont impliqué des mouvements indigènes d'Amérique Latine attachés à leurs terres et à leur environnement comme fournisseurs de moyens de subsistance et d'identité culturelle. En Équateur, certains ont accusé cette vision d'être devenue un « récit standard », qui essentialise les luttes des peuples indigènes. Et les différents accords conclus historiquement entre peuples indigènes et grandes entreprises opérant sur leurs territoires semblent légitimer une telle critique. Mais comment comprendre les choix de peuples indigènes ayant des besoins, des valeurs et des revendications incommensurables, en présence de projets extractifs impliquant des résultats locaux eux-mêmes incommensurables? À travers une analyse des différentes revendications d'indigènes ayant voté 'en faveur' de projets d'extraction pétrolière sur leurs territoires dans le bloc ITT de l'Amazonie équatorienne, je montre comment l'extraction de pétrole couplée à une « compensation sociale » peut créer des situations non-conflictuelles mais problématiques, plutôt que des conflits. En effet la perception d'une perte incommensurable, liée à la différence écologique et culturelle, ne se traduit pas nécessairement par une opposition à l'exploitation minière ou au forage. Ceci est particulièrement important dans les pays où le droit à la consultation préalable pourrait légitimer l'expansion des activités pétrolières dans les territoires indigènes.

**Mots-clés:** peuples indigènes, extraction de ressources en Amérique Latine, consultation préalable, conflits pétroliers, différence écologique et culturelle, incommensurabilité des valeurs

## Resumen

Los conflictos resultantes del extractivismo petrolero pueden verse como conflictos de distribución ecológica y cultural, y han involucrado a movimientos indígenas en América Latina vinculados a sus tierras y medio

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ambiente como proveedores de sustento e identidad cultural. En Ecuador, algunos han acusado a esta visión de haberse convertido en una "narrativa estándar", que esencializa las luchas de los pueblos indígenas. Y los diversos acuerdos históricamente celebrados entre los pueblos indígenas y las grandes empresas que operan en sus territorios parecen legitimar tales críticas. En este contexto, ¿cómo entender las opciones de los pueblos indígenas con necesidades, valores y demandas inconmensurables, en presencia de proyectos extractivos que involucran resultados locales que son en sí mismos inconmensurables? A través de un análisis de las diferentes reivindicaciones de los pueblos indígenas que votaron "a favor" de los proyectos de extracción de petróleo en sus territorios en el bloque ITT de la Amazonía ecuatoriana, muestro cómo la extracción de petróleo junto con la "compensación social" puede crear situaciones no conflictivas pero problemáticas, en lugar de conflictos. De hecho, la percepción de una pérdida inconmensurable, vinculada a la diferencia ecológica y cultural, no se traduce necesariamente en oposición a la minería o la perforación. Esto es particularmente importante en países donde el derecho a la consulta previa podría legitimar la expansión de las actividades petroleras en territorios indígenas.

**Palabras clave:** pueblos indígenas, extracción de recursos en América Latina, consulta previa, conflictos petroleros, diferencia ecológica y cultural, inconmensurabilidad de valores

## 1. Introduction

"In the western Amazon alone, at least 50 indigenous groups, many of which are the world's last isolated indigenous peoples, live within oil and gas concessions that are under exploration or preproduction" (O'Rourke and Connolly 2003: 596). The interactions between indigenous people and resource extraction companies worldwide have historically been antagonistic (Bebbington 2011; Lertzman and Vredenburg 2005: 240; O'Rourke and Connolly 2003) but the western Amazon region, where oil extraction is the story of a "massive ecological and social disruption" (Finer *et al.* 2008: 178), has a concentration of literature on this topic.

Oil conflicts between indigenous people, states and oil companies have taken a particular shape in Latin America<sup>2</sup>. Two major frameworks have emerged to analyze them. For Martinez-Alier (2002) such conflicts are ecological, organized around resistance to pollution and toxics, for example, which threaten people's livelihoods. Escobar (2008) focuses on attacks on indigenous attachment to place, providing both livelihoods and cultural identity. Incommensurability of values is central to the two frameworks, known as ecological and cultural distribution conflicts; and both point to the failure of monetary compensation to solve such conflicts: it is impossible to put a price on "the ecological value of ecosystems, the respect for sacredness, the urgency of livelihood (...)" (Martinez-Alier 2002: 150). Both writers defend, instead, the need to re-embed economic decisions in ecological and cultural considerations (Escobar 2008), in order to find alternative, and more sustainable, development paths.

The two frameworks have been widely deployed in the analysis of Latin American social movements (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010). But they also raised significant criticism, outlined in Section 2. The 'counternarrative' highlights the importance of the economic, social, political and ethical dimensions of indigenous people's decisions over oil extraction, beyond their cultural and ecological ones (Fontaine 2004). More generally, the frameworks cannot fully make sense of the struggles of indigenous people, whose heterogeneous claims were sometimes accommodated through the material and social compensation brought by large oil companies to their territories. Indigenous people who do not hold a 'special relationship' with the environment, incommensurable with money, and who welcome oil extraction in their territories, are rarely part of the analysis. They rarely feature in political ecology studies.

In this article, I argue this absence (and the dichotomy it creates between different indigenous groups, depending on their responses to extractive activities in their territories) is counterproductive to their defense and the understanding of their claims and to the design of solutions. I analyze the different claims of indigenous people experiencing an oil extraction project in their territories, collected in the summer of 2014 in the ITT fields of the Ecuadorian Amazon. The case study highlights, on the one hand, that the acceptance of oil extraction can coexist with the perceptions of an incommensurable loss, related to what Escobar (2008) labels one's cultural 'difference' (thus, oil extraction coupled with 'social compensation' might not create conflicts but

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<sup>2</sup> While in other parts of the world they have often been analysed as "economic distribution conflicts" (a term I found in Escobar 2006: 122). What is at stake is the unequal distribution of material resources.

rather result in non-conflictive, yet problematic, situations). On the other hand, it shows that opposition to oil extraction can similarly hide other than ecological and cultural considerations (calling for policy responses which go beyond the "leaving oil underground" slogan).

All in all, I argue that the current focus of political ecology on the ecological and cultural claims of indigenous and poor people runs the double risk of 1) leaving aside situations of 'non-conflict' (to an analysis which does not take incommensurability into account), and 2) understating the economic and social claims of those who still oppose mega-projects such as oil extraction projects in their territories.

I call for a political ecology of mining conflicts which investigates, beyond the different responses of indigenous people to extractive projects in their territories, their common struggles for both 'equality' and 'difference' – or 'difference-in-equality' (Escobar, 2008) – in a modern world where extractivism, and development schemes more generally, often come with some form of 'equality' at the expenses of people's economic, ecological and cultural 'difference.' The main goal in this article is to challenge common understandings and descriptions of indigenous people's choices over oil extraction in their territories, highlighting the complexity of such choices, and delineating some important variables and considerations shaping them. By using an 'anti-essentialist approach' as defined by Engle (2010: 14), my hope is to invalidate an implicit assumption present in Hale's statement (2006): that indigenous people "should be empowered only to the extent that they are carriers of a culture worth preserving for the good of humankind" (Engle 2010: 14).

The article is structured as follows. In the second section, I present the two frameworks developed by Martinez-Alier and Escobar, and I discuss the underlying conception of indigenous people derived through these frameworks. In the third, I describe and analyze the perceptions, values and needs underlying the responses to the ITT project in the communities of Boca Tiputini and Llanachama, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Finally, I present the implications for the way we understand conflict and acceptance, and the role that a reconceptualized political ecology can play in such understanding, in Ecuador and beyond. The research raises more questions than it answers and more hypotheses than it validates.

## 2. Political ecology, its Ecuadorian applications and critiques

### *Ecological and cultural distribution conflicts*

Martinez-Alier defines ecological distribution conflicts as "conflicts on the social, spatial, temporal inequalities in the use of natural resources and services and in the burden of pollution" (Martinez-Alier 1995: 5). While the environment obviously provides the raw materials for consumption, in rich countries in particular – notably through the extraction of non-renewable resources – it provides essential services necessary to livelihoods of materially poor people (2002: 119). The destruction of the environment is therefore a direct threat for them (2002: 253). Oil extraction, as well as other extractive projects pollute air and water directly, disturbing subsistence, thus livelihoods, for livestock and people (Bebbington 2011). Health problems and even physical genocide are documented (Howitt 2001). Therefore, poor local people are often on the side of environmental conservation. Martinez-Alier labels these movements an 'environmentalism of the poor' (2002), which he defines as "the activism of poor women and men threatened by the loss of the environmental resources and services they need for livelihood" (2002: 119). Through these movements, they defend their livelihoods but more broadly their human rights, "...since it is impossible to separate Nature from human livelihood, and livelihood from human rights" (2002: 108).

Escobar, who sees "issues of access and control of natural resources" as central to many of today's conflicts, goes further in his conception of the relationship between indigenous people and the environment, by insisting on the cultural meaning associated with certain uses of the environment for livelihood (Descola & Pálsson 1996; Escobar 2006; Gudeman, Gutierrez & Rivera 1990). For him, the struggle of poor people witnessed by Martinez-Alier is also cultural. Through their movements, indigenous people defend an entire "life project" which embeds their cultural "difference" (Escobar 2008: 305), or in other words, their ecological, economic and cultural practices (Escobar 2006: 130). 'Life projects' are defined as being "about living a purposeful and meaningful life" (Blaser, Feit & McRae 2004: 30). They are embodied in territory (Escobar

2001); hence the cultural attachment of indigenous people to place (Escobar 1999; 2006; 2008).<sup>3</sup> Where Martinez-Alier sees an 'environmentalism of the poor', Escobar sees "place based struggles for economic, ecological and cultural difference" (Escobar 2008: 16).<sup>4</sup>

Both conceptions challenge and reconcile two widespread ideas: indigenous people as conservationists (Aagesen 1998), and the poor as 'too poor to be green' (Martinez-Alier 1995), encapsulated in Hobsbawm's statement that "the poor, multiplying and under-employed, wanted more development, not less" (1979). The people described by Martinez-Alier and Escobar are not conservationists by nature (Bernhardson 1986; Posey 1985; 2000), and they are not the "Noble Savage" denounced by Redford (Redford 1991; Redford & Stearman 1993). Instead, as Alcorn argues, the preservation of the environment is for them "just part of making a living" (1993: 425). They are 'environmentalists', and their environmentalism is not a post-materialist value (Inglehart 1971; 1991), but a material or cultural necessity.

Incommensurability and power are at the core of both analyses (Escobar 1998; Martinez-Alier 1995). For Martinez-Alier, these conflicts reflect "'value system contests', or in other words, clashes of incommensurable standards of value" (2002: 150), because such values cannot be compared on a unique scale of measurement: it is impossible to put a price on "the ecological value of ecosystems, the respect for sacredness, the urgency of livelihood (...)" (Martinez-Alier 2002: 150). The incommensurability between economy and ecology is widened in Escobar's view: he sees it "as arising from the contrasting cultural meanings assigned to nature by various human groups" (2006: 124). The environment as a source of cultural identity cannot easily be compensated by money; and efforts to find appropriate compensation "test the limits of current social science and institutional arrangements to identify and deliver an equitable solution to resource damages that result in culture loss" (Snyder, Williams & Peterson 2003: 108). An important implication is that monetary compensation cannot solve these types of conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

The two frameworks are part of the current of political ecology, which as readers will know is an interdisciplinary field with roots in the 1980s, when it challenged the failure of 'sustainable development' to address environmental problems (Bryant 1998). Political ecologists embody a critique of a 'weak'<sup>6</sup> interpretation of sustainability, which considers environmental problems as externalities which can be internalized through the creation of environmental markets and the assignation of property rights (Escobar 1995; 1998; 1999; Martinez-Alier 2002; 1995). This has been the preferred approach of the sustainable development consensus since the Brundtland Report of 1987 (Bernstein 2002). Such enterprises, in their view, favor one 'language of valuation' (Martinez-Alier 1995), often monetary, over many other possible languages, such as livelihood and cultural identity. They favor one 'norm', embedded in the assumption of strong comparability of values, over many other norms, such as incommensurability of values. As such, some groups in society benefit (Munda 2004), as they are given the power to define "the terms and values that regulate social life concerning economy, ecology, personhood, body, knowledge, property, and so forth" (Escobar 2006: 124). Indeed, languages of valuation and culture are associated with social power, in a given historical context (Escobar 1995). Where Martinez-Alier asks who "has the power to simplify complexity, ruling some languages of valuation out of

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<sup>3</sup> In that sense Escobar and to a certain extent Martinez-Alier fill a gap in the political ecology literature, which according to Middleton "has not usually delved deeply into how 'land' can be much more than simply a source of material livelihood, especially but not exclusively for indigenous peoples" (2015: 563).

<sup>4</sup> A recurrent example of an ecological distribution conflict in Martinez-Alier's writings is over shrimp farming, in many countries of Latin America (including Ecuador). The conflict is between poor people who harvest timber from mangroves to make a living, and industrial shrimp farming, which destroy them. Escobar's most frequent case study is Black and indigenous social movements in the Colombian Pacific, through which indigenous and Afro-Colombian people defend their "traditional production systems" (Escobar 2008: 8) against oil palm industries which threaten to displace them, thus denying their economic, ecological and cultural 'difference.'

<sup>5</sup> For Leff, "In the view of indigenous peoples, biodiversity represents their patrimony of natural and cultural resources, with which they have co-evolved throughout history, the habitat where their cultural practices are forged and embedded. Their ecological potentials and cultural meanings are incommensurable with economic values. These criteria differentiate what is negotiable and interchangeable in the debt for nature equation, and the ethical-political principle that questions settling the conflicts of ecological damage and distribution through economic compensations, establishing the threshold that separates ecological economics from political ecology" (2015: 38).

<sup>6</sup> "An economy is deemed to be sustainable (in the weak sense) if the ratio of savings to income (which allows investment) is larger than the sum of the ratios of depreciation of human-made capital and 'natural capital'" (Martinez-Alier 1995: 5).

order?" (2002: 271), Escobar asks: "Whose knowledge counts? And what does this have to do with place, culture and power?" (Escobar 2008: 4). For both authors, the answer is often capital and the state (Escobar 2008: 1; Martinez-Alier 1994: 326). Instead, ecological and cultural distribution conflicts point to the need to re-embed economic decisions in ecological and cultural considerations (Escobar 2008), in order to find alternative, more sustainable, paths of development.

Leff provides a broader perspective, as he defines political ecology as "the field of dispute of different visions and understandings of the environmental crises" (2015: 39). For him the environmental crisis is a crisis of knowledge<sup>7</sup>, and more particularly the result of the modern dualist thinking established from the North. An implicit assumption in both frameworks – which Leff thus makes more explicit – is that sustainability will result from the decolonization of knowledge, notably the "emancipation of subjugated knowledge embodied in cultural beings and embedded in their life territories" (2015: 37) and "an epistemological de-centering from modern rationality" (2015: 36). In that sense the two frameworks almost go in the direction of an 'indigenous political ecology', as defined by Middleton (2015); that is a political ecology which would give "credence to place-based indigenous perspectives" and "seriously engage with indigenous worldviews" (2015: 566), but also recognise that environmental destruction is the outcome of colonization (see also Whyte 2017 for this argument, with a focus on climate change).

#### *Empirical criticism: a very political kind of actor*

The frameworks, with their different emphases, have been deployed widely in the analysis of Latin American social movements (Schlosberg & Carruthers 2010). In Ecuador, in particular, they were used to describe the oil conflict arising in the 1990s, between a powerful indigenous movement (Jameson 2011) and multinational oil companies operating in the Amazon. The fight of Huaorani leaders against oil firm Conoco in block 16, for instance, would be described as an 'environmentalism of the poor' by Martinez-Alier (2002)<sup>8</sup>, and Escobar would describe the Ecuadorian indigenous movements as 'ontological struggles' (2011), referring to "a different way of imagining life" (2011: xvii).

However, a number of scholars denounced from the 1990s what they saw as an erroneous 'standard narrative'<sup>9</sup> (Reider & Wasserstrom 2013) which, while it accurately described the demands of indigenous organizations at the national level, failed to understand the "multiple and often coexisting motivations" (Bebbington 2011: 223) of indigenous people and notably the material preoccupations of local federations and local indigenous communities (Perreault 2001; 2003). This criticism arose in a context where oil companies increasingly offered social compensation to the people they were affecting. The claims of local indigenous communities were sometimes accommodated through such 'social corporate responsibility' (Guzman-Gallegos 2012; Orta-Martínez & Finer 2010; Rival 1998; Sabin 1998). These authors highlighted the economic, social, political and ethical dimensions of indigenous people's demands, beyond their ecological and cultural ones (Fontaine 2004). They follow a flourishing anthropological literature on indigenous people as increasingly integrated to the markets as a result of voluntary cultural assimilation (Alvard 1993; Kuper 2003; Lu 2007; Redford & Stearman 1993): in such accounts, integration often results in mixed worldviews and multiple values (Briggs & Sharp 2004; Gaonkar 1999; Van Cott 1994).

It is clear, and worth noting, that neither Martinez-Alier nor Escobar would deny that poor and indigenous people might value economic outcomes more than the protection of the environment, in some contexts. As Martinez-Alier puts it, it would be "blatant nonsense" (2014: 39) to argue that poor people always

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<sup>7</sup> More particularly, "Environmental degradation is the result of the forms of knowing the world that grew in the oblivion of being and nature, away from the conditions of life and of human existence" (2015: 38).

<sup>8</sup> Joan Martinez-Alier's influence in Ecuador cannot be overstated. I met him in Quito in 2017, where he had travelled to receive two *homenajes* [tributes] from the Universities Andina and FLACSO after he had received the 2017 Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought. He was welcomed for his particular contribution to Ecuadorian debates and issues, both as a researcher and an activist (notably due to his links with *Acción Ecológica*).

<sup>9</sup> They mainly refer to a local variant of political ecology, embedded in the discourse of NGOs and environmentalists in Ecuador, who from the 1990s denounced the environmental and human impacts of oil extraction through the languages of ecology, ethnicity and indigenous rights (Fontaine 2009), opposing international oil companies such as ARCO, Conoco, Maxus, and Texaco (Reider & Wasserstrom 2013). See Dayot (2023) for full details of this history and narrative.

think and behave as environmentalists.<sup>10</sup> Instead, both frameworks seek to describe the struggle of some individuals who rely on the environment as a source of either livelihood or cultural identity, a characteristic on which their attachment to the environment depends (Aagesen 1998; Alvard 1993; Coomes 1995; Gari 2001; Gray *et al.* 2008; Hames 2007; Lu *et al.* 2010; Orta-Martínez & Finer 2010; Peres 1994). But Martínez-Alier and Escobar go further in their assumptions about the people they describe. The poor people in Martínez-Alier's writings are not only dependent on the environment but also materially poor. However, when it comes to making decisions, he does not expect them to accept any kind of agreement: indigenous and poor local people do not ask for monetary compensation, but for their ecological and cultural 'difference' to be respected. Martínez-Alier argues that citizens refuse to put a monetary value on their health, their land, or their livelihood, because they "refuse to behave as fictitious consumers in contingent valuation surveys" (2002: 150).

In the same way, the subjects of Escobar's (1998) analysis are by no means against education, health, productivity and economic resources. In the 2011 preface to his 1995 book, where he replies to earlier critiques (notably De Vries 2007), he also recognizes that indigenous and Afro-Colombian people's 'life projects' can include schools and other services brought by modernity (Escobar 2011).<sup>11</sup> As a result, they incorporate aspects of modernization as well as "long-standing, place-based cultural logics" (Escobar 2011: xviii). However, through his conception, the monetary and development values and interests of indigenous people are subordinated to the struggle for 'difference', embedded in livelihood and pluriversal cultural identity: "...development must be guided by principles derived from the rights and aspirations of the local communities and must support the affirmation of cultures and the protection of natural environments" (1998: 72).

In the end, both frameworks deal with people who present a reversed 'hierarchy of needs' (Martínez-Alier 1995) (which is also a hierarchy of values, in both cases); that is, economic and social needs and aspirations are subordinated to the fight for cultural 'difference.' This is probably the reason why, for Fontaine (2007, 2009), political ecology tends to favor the analysis of, and solidarity with, radical actors fighting against the capitalist development model.

#### *Conceptual possibility (and the missing people of the frameworks)*

Obviously, the jump from incommensurability to opposition, and even to a reversed hierarchy of values, is not straightforward. That indigenous people do not privilege their 'difference' over many other values and needs they have does not necessarily entail that there is no incommensurability between them. Therefore, and finally, because indigenous and poor people do not oppose oil and other extraction projects in their territories, which are both environmentally damaging and providing socio-economic benefits, does not entail that environmental damage isn't a loss for them, threatening their livelihoods and cultural identity.

Political ecology, by limiting the scope of its analysis to conflict situations over access to resources, arguably creates a dichotomy between its subjects of study: indigenous people who oppose oil extraction in their territories because of a special attachment to the environment, and indigenous people who accept oil extraction in their territories. The latter are often left to analyses which do not take incommensurability of values into account. And they are implicitly assumed to lack such special attachment to the environment, incommensurable with other benefits. Typical of this trend, Sabin (1998) analyses the choice of oil extraction as a rational decision-making process which he frames as an economic and cultural cost-benefit analysis. For him the Siona-Secoya living in Cuyabeno National Park, and the Cofán of Siabalo, firmly opposed oil extraction because they had an alternative source of revenues through ecotourism. The Quichua people described by Whitten (1976) started working for the oil companies as soon as they arrived in the Puyo Runa because the opportunities provided by oil extraction were seen as better than the opportunities previously available – "slave-

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<sup>10</sup> In the recent *Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology* he reiterates "This does not mean that all poor peasants and indigenous people are environmentalists and behave like environmentalists. It means that in the conflicts over resource extraction and in the conflicts over waste disposal, poor people are often in favour of nature conservation because they live on nature's contributions very directly" (2023: 14).

<sup>11</sup> He maintains, however, that indigenous people's cosmovisions "do not entail a linear notion of development, nor a state of "underdevelopment" to be overcome, neither are they based on "scarcity" or the primacy of material goods" (Escobar 2011: xxvi).

like debt peonage on *haciendas* along the Napo River" (1998: 152). There is no digging further into the struggles people may experience as they make such 'analysis.' These are simply not being investigated.

The question remains: how to understand the choices of indigenous people who have 'mixed values' (various incommensurable claims) about oil extraction projects involving contradictory local outcomes (such as environmental damage with 'social compensation'), when there is no necessary hierarchy between their different needs and values? What are the valuation struggles entailed in such decisions? And what are their consequences on people, their values and their territories?

### 3. Case studies in two indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon

#### *Ecuador: Correa's compromise*

Ecuador under the Correa administration (2006-2017) proved to be a unique setting to look at these questions. Ecuador is the fifth-largest oil producer in South America, after Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, and Venezuela. In December 2019 the country had 1.338 million barrels of proved crude oil reserves and an estimated 2.257 million of total reserves, most of which are in the Amazon, according to Ecuador's Secretariat of Hydrocarbons (2020). At the same time, Ecuador is also one of the countries with the densest biodiversity in the world (Dangles, Nowicki & Valencia 2009) and counts fourteen indigenous nationalities (Fernandez-Martí 2012). In the Ecuadorian Amazon, oil extraction overlaps the territories of ten indigenous groups (Finer *et al.* 2008). After fifty years of unregulated oil development – which triggered the rise of "one of the strongest indigenous movements of the continent" organized politically against multinational oil companies operating in indigenous territories (Yashar 2006) – the election of Correa in 2006 brought unprecedented attention to the claims of the movement (Lalander & Peralta 2012: 22). His administration was at first particularly innovative in the recognition of the incommensurability between environmental protection, indigenous rights and economic resources.

The Constitution, built around the concept of '*sumak kawsay*', Quichua word for *buen vivir* (Lalander & Peralta 2012) ['good life' in English], recognizes the plurinationality of the Ecuadorian State and the rights of indigenous people. Most dramatically, it gives rights to Nature and states that "no amount of any other good or service can compensate for the loss of the Rights of Nature" (Rodríguez-Labajos & Martínez-Alier 2013: 339). For Escobar, rights to nature and the concept of *buen vivir* are based on ideas that do not fit the "environmental political correctness" and "the philosophical structure of modern constitution, within which nature is seen as an inert object for humans to appropriate" (2011: xxviii). Together with the Constitution of Bolivia, it was described as the most radical constitutional text in the world in relation to the provision of legal protection of nature (Lalander & Peralta 2012).

The recognition of the multiple values of nature was also embodied in the Yasuní-ITT initiative (see Falconí & Oleas 2023). Launched in 2007, it proposed to leave 20 per cent of the country's oil reserves permanently underground in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) fields of the Yasuní National Park (YNP), a declared UNESCO "Man and Biosphere Reserve", home to indigenous people including two groups living in voluntary isolation – the Tagaeri and Taromenane (Finer *et al.* 2008) (Figure 1). The initiative would have avoided the emission of 407 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> (Larrea 2014), protected the biodiversity of "one of the most biologically diverse areas on the planet" (Acosta *et al.* 2009: 4) and the rights of indigenous people living inside. By asking for monetary compensation from the international community to fund the avoided emissions, it brought "into focus a classic dilemma between extraction by a state that needs economic resources versus the conservation of global public goods and the rights of indigenous people" (Pellegrini *et al.*, 2014: 284).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Dayot (2023) for a fuller account of oil regulation under Correa's presidency.

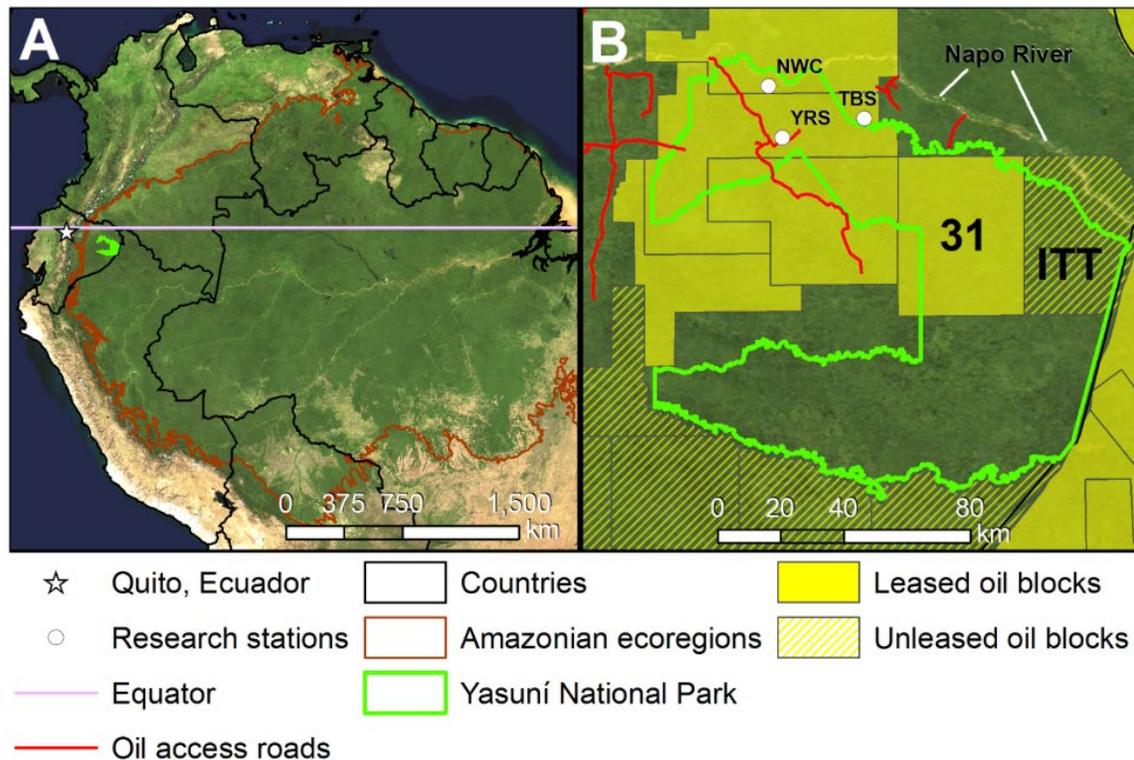


Figure 1: Oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park. Source: Bass, Finer *et al.* (2010)

But neither the acknowledgements of the contradictions between oil development and the protection of the environment, nor the recognition of incommensurability, solved the dilemmas of the Ecuadorian State. Because the compensation demanded from the international community was not secured, in 2013 oil extraction was finally allowed in the ITT fields of the YNP. The discourse of the Ecuadorian government shifted, to present oil extraction as the promise of decreasing poverty in the Amazon. State-owned company Petroamazonas<sup>13</sup> had already been created in 2007, and the implementation of a complex scheme of economic and social redistribution for local indigenous communities followed. Correa's administration was ultimately a typical example of the Latin American pink tide of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, marked by neoextractivism and an increased involvement of the state in the provision of basic services (Goodwin *et al.* 2022). The Law of Hydrocarbons, reformed in 2010, allocated 12% of the profits from strategic projects (principally oil and mining extraction) to the local zones of 'direct influence' (Cevallos 2014). Ecuador Estratégico (EE) managed these investments, in the sectors of education, health, water, electricity and infrastructure (Ecuador Estratégico 2015). By doing so, the state challenged the very idea of incommensurability, institutionalized through the Constitution.

For many commentators, this shift marked a rupture between Correa and the indigenous movement (Bebbington 2009: 18; Bebbington 2011; Jameson 2011; Lalander & Peralta 2012). A civil movement, *The Yasunidos*, emerged a few days after the failure of the initiative (Coryat 2015).<sup>14</sup> They were proposing a national

<sup>13</sup> Petroamazonas was merged with Petroecuador at the end of 2020.

<sup>14</sup> They defined themselves as anti-extractivist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist (collective interview, September 2014, Quito).

referendum on oil extraction in the ITT, which was rejected by the National Election Authority 'without adequate administrative justification' (Vela-Almeida & Torres 2021).<sup>15</sup>

However, at the local level, indigenous communities were reported to have responded favorably to one of the first processes of prior consultation ever led in the country (Vallejo 2014). In the ITT fields, this was officially carried out in 2013.<sup>16</sup> Thirty agreements of social investment were signed with community leaders and local governments in the context of the 11<sup>th</sup> round of oil extraction in the country (Vallejo 2014), of which the ITT oil project is part.

In 2014 Boca Tiputini and Llanchama were two Quichua communities in the 'zone of direct influence' of the ITT oil block (see Figure 2), which comprised sixteen communities. This meant that they would benefit from the social investments of the public company EE.<sup>17</sup> The block, situated in the Province of Orellana, Municipality of Aguarico, was divided into three parts: Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini. The license for the two latter had just been obtained (in May 2014) from state-owned oil company Petroamazonas (PAM), and the first barrels would be extracted in March 2016 in Tiputini.

The next section analyses the perceptions and responses of some inhabitants of these two communities to the ITT oil project. It is based on the analysis of eleven semi-structured interviews conducted in the community of Llanchama, against the ITT oil project, and thirteen semi-structured interviews (with sixteen indigenous people) conducted in the community of Boca Tiputini (BT), in favor of the ITT oil project, during the summer of 2014 (August and September).<sup>18</sup> They were completed by active observation of the daily activities of the communities while conducting my research, which Kusenbach (2003) defines as 'go alongs'<sup>19</sup>, and by interviews with state members, employers of public firms EE and PAM, environmental activists and heads of Indigenous organizations. I also analyzed various official documents. I have anonymized all the interviews with the Quichua inhabitants of the two communities; except for Andres and Holmer Machoa who wished their names to appear.

These two case studies should be read as a picture from two Quichua communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon, as an oil extraction project entered their territories. It does not seek to describe the situation of these two communities today – 10 years into the ITT oil project. However I provide updates from a second field trip to the communities (conducted between August 2016 and February 2017), where relevant. I provide more updates in the discussion, from recent social media and newspaper articles.

<sup>15</sup> The Ecuadorian Constitutional Court challenged this decision by approving a popular consultation over oil extraction in the YNP, on May 9, 2023. (Prensa Latina 2023). On August 20, 2023, 59 per cent of the Ecuadorian electorate voted in favor of ending all oil operations in the ITT fields of the YNP, ten years after the end of the initiative. The Ishpingo part of the project was the most debated one, because it reached close to the *zona intangible Tagaeri Taromenane* (ZITT – intangible zone Tagaeri Taromenane), which is the name of two indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation, and often also referred to as the 'uncontacted people', where extractive activities are forbidden by Art. 57 of the 2008 Constitution (see Narváez, Maldonado & Pichilingue 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Those results should be interpreted carefully: see Urteaga-Crovetto (2018) for the flaws of processes of prior consultation in Ecuador but also Peru, Bolivia and Colombia. Moreover it is worth noting that whether oil is extracted or not remains a decision of the Ecuadorian State (De la Cruz 2005; Finer *et al.* 2008; Simbaña 2012). I discuss below the situation of the ITT block regarding the prior consultation.

<sup>17</sup> It is hard to estimate how much the communities will receive, because the 12% is not necessarily reinvested in the zone of influence of the same project (Interviews with Haley Barrionuevo, then Director of EE in Orellana, August 2014; and Jorge Mendieta, then Planning Manager of EE in Quito, September 2014), but in strategic projects spread across the country.

<sup>18</sup> The interviews took place in the village of Tiputini and in the communities: in people's houses, fields, and during a meeting with PAM which gathered the whole community. The interviews in Boca Tiputini include a collective interview with four women.

<sup>19</sup> In Llanchama, I stayed with one member of the community and his family, with whom I spent most of my time at home and in their fields; while in BT I attended the monthly meeting (*asamblea*) which gathered the whole community. In addition, I studied letters sent to the state by the community of Llanchama and videos posted by activists from the same community on the Internet.

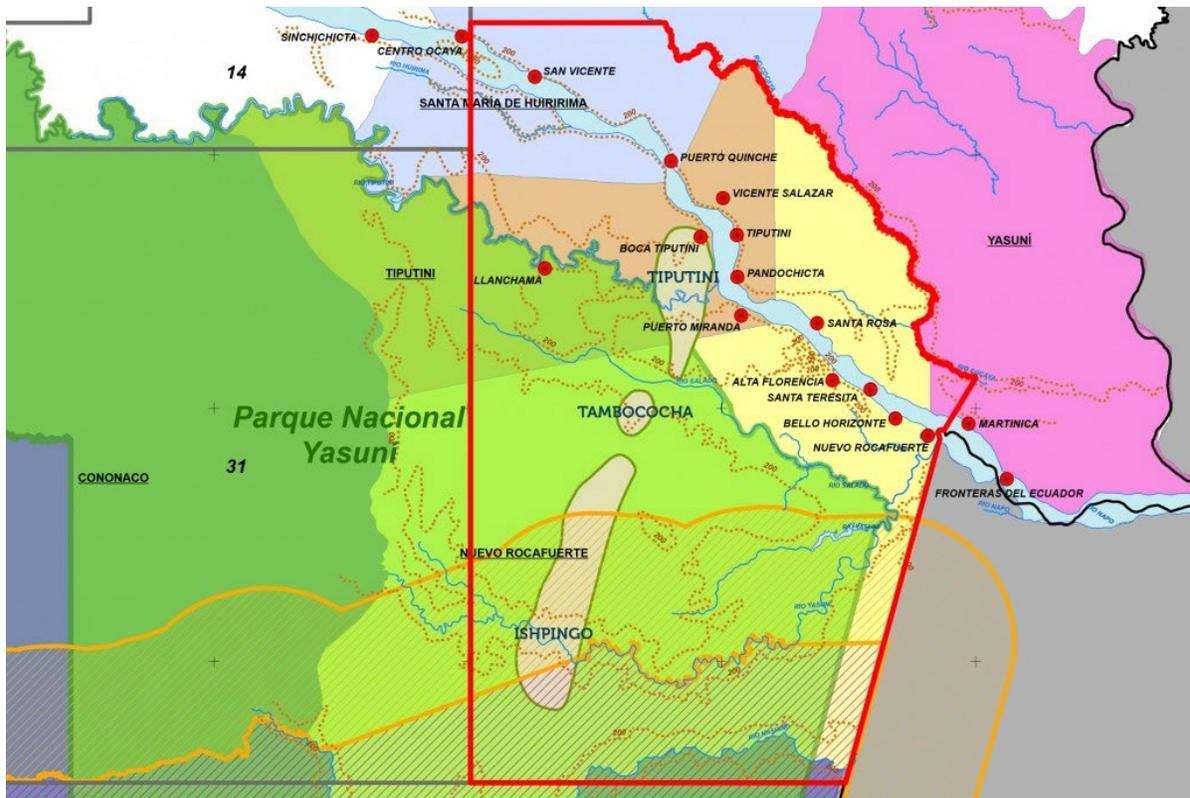


Figure 2: Zone of 'direct influence' of the ITT. The ITT block is presented in red. The map shows the three oil platforms and the sixteen local communities, among which are Llanchama and Boca Tiputini. Source: Secretariat of Hydrocarbons, Ecuador (2013)

*Boca Tiputini: 'too poor to be green?'*<sup>20</sup>

Like the Secoya people studied by Valdivia (2005: 295) in Ecuador, the Quichua people of BT depend on their environment as a source of livelihood, but recognize that it is not sufficient to meet their needs. As is often the case in Quichua communities (Holt, Bilsborrow & Oña 2004), the inhabitants rely on farming activities, such as coffee, cocoa, yucca, maize and rice, and on hunting and fishing: "If we cannot hunt, we cannot survive" (Interview BT8). But during the interviews, they often complained that their farms were not sufficient to support their livelihoods. They had to buy additional food, such as sugar, rice and salt (Interview BT7). The community mainly sells coffee, yucca, and cocoa (Interview BT6), to the weekly *feria* in the nearest village, Tiputini, where they considered they did not sell enough.<sup>21</sup> They often said that they were poor: "With the little we earn it is not sufficient. We need to share between families" (Interview BT6). Moreover, the inhabitants use the water of the Napo River for all their necessities, but it is contaminated.<sup>22</sup> They use money

<sup>20</sup> Martinez-Alier (1995).

<sup>21</sup> I realised during subsequent stays in the communities that the reason why people sell so little is that there are many sellers but very few buyers. Indeed the village counts with only 500 inhabitants, and the closest city, Francisco de Orellana (Coca), is located some 300 kilometres up the river and can only be accessed with the *turno*, a collective boat which runs daily between Coca and Nuevo Rocafuerte and cost the inhabitants US\$15 during my stay (which later increased to \$18). The trip was considered both too long and too expensive (7-10 hours).

<sup>22</sup> The Municipality provides them with a small amount of piped water which contains less bacteria than the water from the river, but it is not drinkable (Interview Francisco, a technician in the health centre in Tiputini).

not only to buy food but also to pay for clothes and domestic necessities (Interview BT6), petrol for their canoes (Interview BT13), and school essentials.

Experiencing oil extraction for the first time in their territory, the majority of the 165 *socios*<sup>23</sup> of Boca Tiputini had voted in favor of the project during the prior consultation in 2013.<sup>24</sup> Fourteen of my interviewees said they were in favor.<sup>25</sup>

What they often called their "urgent need" (Interview BT9) was the main consideration shaping their response to oil extraction. But the 'urgent need' was not a mere question of subsistence. As Valdivia & Perrault (2010) argued the acceptance of oil extraction also had to do with a certain meaning associated with development, of which health and education were important components, and it was these that were seen as lacking in the community.<sup>26</sup> Notably, many of them wanted their children to "develop knowledge and become good professionals" (Interview BT6), which they equated with going to school. With oil extraction, they expected socio-economic benefits such as schools and health centers, better houses, electricity, water, sewerage, productive projects and even material gifts such as boats, school material, and petrol. They also expected compensation and jobs from the oil company.<sup>27</sup>

Oil extraction was not only seen as a way to access these benefits, but as the only possible option, as in other cases in the literature.<sup>28</sup> The teacher of the community argued: "Those from outside say "no, no, no" but here there is much poverty. We are convinced that it is the only way out of poverty" (Interview BT13). The inhabitants had, in many ways, internalized the discourse of the government about the need for oil extraction to finance poverty alleviation (Acosta *et al.* 2009; Barrientos, Gideon & Molyneux 2008; Bebbington 2009). "And when there will be no more oil?", I asked one interviewee. "I don't know, when it is over we must look for more oil elsewhere (...) That's the only way. There is no other option" (Interview BT7).

While some people in BT clearly misperceived the environmental impacts of oil extraction, most of my interviewees expected huge impacts. One inhabitant told me: "They will damage the water, the plants, yucca, coffee, cocoa, the rice, the air, and the animals that we have, pigs, cows, and chicken. The air (...), they will take our lands and leave us without work" (Interview BT7). They also said that diseases would come, notably fever. Thus, oil extraction was framed as a necessary bad, entailing an incommensurable loss. This is illustrated by the following interview:

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<sup>23</sup> A *socio* is a member of the community who is over 18 years of age, and can vote in the *asamblea*.

<sup>24</sup> The process of *consulta previa* was officially carried out for the block between November 21st and December 27th 2013. As I dug deeper during a subsequent trip to the region, however, I was told by different people that the *consulta previa* had been conducted 'only in the village', 'only to the leaders', while people were only told about the benefits or 'consulted the other way round' – saying there would be no impact – or 'with words we cannot understand' (Interviews 2016-2017). No one could confirm that there had actually been a vote; and the processes I witnessed myself consisted in a rather technical presentation of the *Estudio de Impacto Ambiental* (EIA – Environmental Impact Assessment) and *Plan de Manejo Ambiental* (PMA – Plan of Environmental Management), without any clear mention to the environmental impact (instead the emphasis was put on what would be done to repair any potential impacts); where the inhabitants had the opportunity to ask questions and make observations, which were recorded by the Secretariat of Hydrocarbons in a document called 'summary of prior consultation.' However, each community seemed to have their own internal process to decide collectively whether or not they would let the company enter their territories – this explains why my interviewees in Boca Tiputini had a clear sense of the stance of the community. Often those discussions revolved around what the community would ask as part of the social compensation.

<sup>25</sup> One was against and one neither in favour nor against.

<sup>26</sup> The local school was considered inadequate (Interviews BT9, BT2) and there was no doctor or hospital in the community (Interview BT7).

<sup>27</sup> I never heard of EE or its compensation in the communities. However, public oil company PAM provides the six communities directly crossed by the oil facilities with indemnities and 'social compensation.' Boca Tiputini was one of them. When I went back in 2016, the community had received US\$512,443 from the company for the use of 110.83 hectares, and had agreed the construction of a computer centre, an electricity network for part of the community, the provision of a barge for community use, the construction of a community road, training in administration, and agricultural projects as part of the social compensation (a total amount of US\$1,019,200).

<sup>28</sup> Becerra *et al.* (2013), for instance, show that poverty and lack of economic alternatives for the Quichua inhabitants of Dayuma – due to their geographic isolation from any other activity – prevents them from claiming their environmental rights.

It will generate resources and here there are no jobs which generate resources. For that reason I am accepting that the oil firm enters (...). Well afterwards the environmental problems are the clearing of forests, pollution of rivers, the streams that exist within the block (...); the animals, the birds that live here can die. In any instance that will generate problems. There will be pollution.... (we would be) affected because later on, diseases will come.

*But you are still in favor?*

I am still in favor (Interview BT5).

Later, he told me: "Environmental problems cannot really be compensated for. That would be an irreparable debt." (Interview BT5)

The inhabitants did not believe that these gains could be compensation for the perceived environmental impacts. Incommensurability was particularly visible in the long run, when they mentioned their children who would be both the winners and the losers of oil extraction, on two different dimensions. One interviewee, after telling me that the children would be the ones affected by oil extraction, said that they would also benefit, notably through better education:

*But you told me before that the ones losing would be the children? I asked.*

Hum (...) they are the winners and also, well they are advantaged and disadvantaged (...). We will start working. [The affected ones] will be our children. But they will benefit too. There will be good and bad. (Interview BT9)

As one interviewee concluded: "We do not lose or win. We lose a little at the level of culture, dialects. We win standard of living" (Interview BT1). As a result, 'being affected' was seen as the promise of development. According to one interviewee, some people were against oil extraction "...because apparently where they live it is not affected. This is why they are against. In contrast we are affected within our community" (Interview BT14). However, oil extraction was generally not seen as the promise of a changing way of life, which would replace the dependence on farming, fishing and hunting activities by salaried jobs and monetary exchange. Many inhabitants in BT told me that if they worked for the company, they would still rely on agriculture, because "one needs to work in order to live" (Interview BT10).

#### *A story of resistance in Llanchama*

Llanchama is a smaller Quichua community of 65 *socios*, and its territory is situated in the zone of 'direct influence' of EE for both the ITT oil block (see Figure 2), and an older oil project called and numbered block 31<sup>29</sup>; and inside the YNP with which the two blocks overlap (Figure 3). The Environmental License for block 31 was obtained in 2007. The seismic study started in late 2013, and the first barrels were extracted in October 2013 (Araujo 2014).

I first met Andres Machoa, a Quichua man against oil extraction, in the village of Tiputini. He brought me to his house in Llanchama, along the Tiputini river (a 3-hour canoe journey from Tiputini) where I met his son, Holmer Machoa, who turned out to be a leader of the opposition to PAM.<sup>30</sup> In their house, I found a number of posters from the *Yasunidos*, stating: '*democracia en extinción*' [democracy in extinction]. In a public letter, the community of Llanchama states that:

On various occasions our community has manifested that we do not want any extractive industry to develop in our territory, because it represents our daily sustenance and our ancestral lands, that our grandfathers and our elders inhabited and their spirits still inhabit it and they are part of it, and because we want to preserve our territory for future generations. (Comuna Kichwa Llanchama 2014)

<sup>29</sup> Some 20 per cent of Llanchama's territory overlaps with block ITT while 80 per cent overlaps with block 31 Comuna Kichwa Llanchama 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Holmer Machoa was mentioned to me by the *Yasunidos* as the spokesman of the community against PAM.

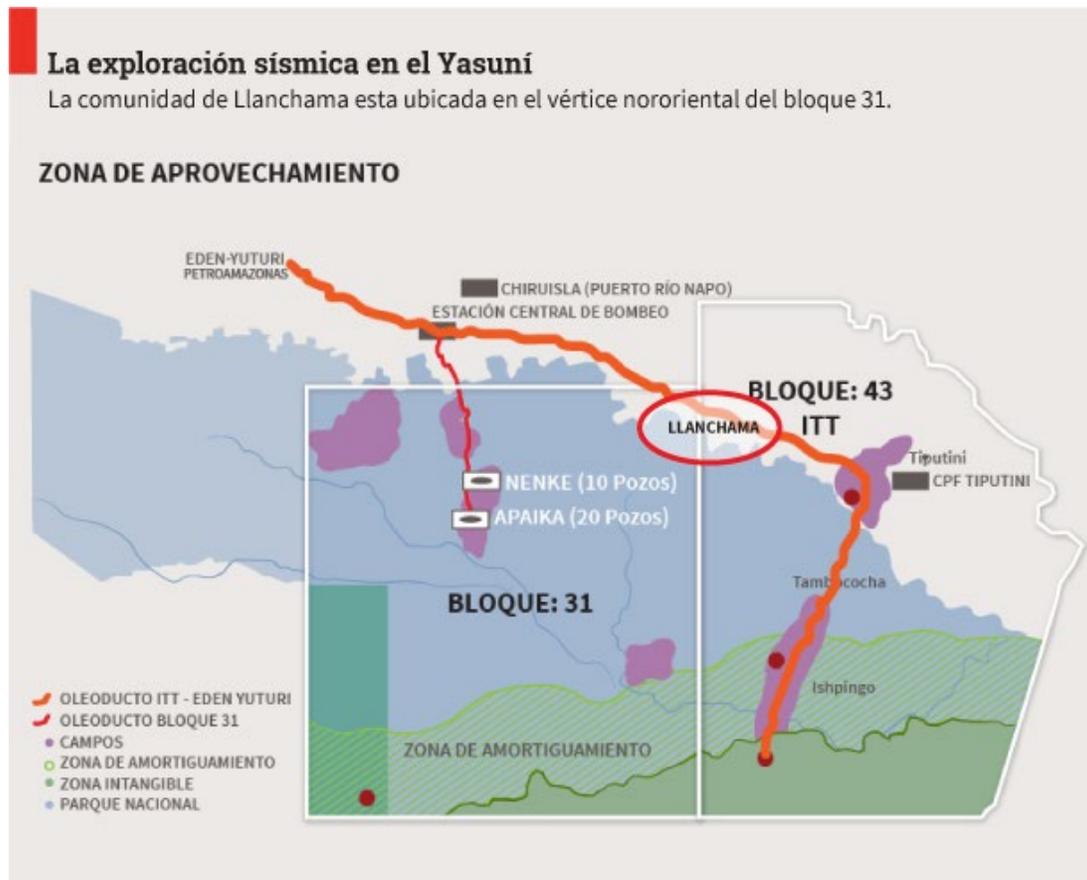


Figure 3: The overlap between Llanchama, block 31 and block 43 (ITT). Source: Calderón (2014)

Oil extraction in block 31 and the ITT was not the first encounter between Llanchama and oil activities. In 1997, a French firm, *Compañía General Geofísica*, had conducted a seismic study for an oil project overlapping with their territory<sup>31</sup>, and they had come back in 2002 to build an oil well. This had resulted in extensive contamination and the death of animals hunted for bush meat, according to the community (Calderón 2014; Comuna Kichwa Llanchama 2014). Moreover the project was carried out without prior consultation with the community. But while Llanchama had opposed oil extraction in its territory since that time, a majority of the inhabitants had voted in favor of the two projects in 2013. The twenty-two initial opponents, among them my main informant and his family, sent various letters to the government to complain about the way they had been consulted.<sup>32</sup> More and more people joined the resistance initiated by the initial opponents, during the year following the vote, and the community eventually became a 'bastion of resistance' in the ITT, despite the vote (Atakapi 2013). All my interviewees but one told me they were against oil extraction. Intra-community

<sup>31</sup> Interview Holmer Machoa, January 2017.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Comuna Kichwa Llanchama (2014) and Atakapi (2013). They complained that "The President signed a "pre-agreement" with PAM on behalf of the whole community without the CONSENT of the whole community, as it has been our traditional procedure" (Comuna Kichwa Llanchama 2014). They argue that majority votes do not mean anything for them: "in our community, the fifty per cent plus one does not exist" (Holmer Machoa, in Observatorio DDHHC 2014). Instead, they vote by consensus (*La Republica* EC 2014).

divisions, and the changing opinions of some of the inhabitants over time, made Llanchama a unique setting in which to analyze the complexity and contradictions of indigenous people's responses to oil extraction.

During a conversation with Andres Machoa, in the yucca plantations, he told me: "here people make a living with agriculture. Our fields are like banks, and that's sufficient. The one dying from hunger it's because he's not working" (Interview L2). The inhabitants of Llanchama perceive themselves as food self-sufficient<sup>33</sup>, although as in BT, they buy additional condiments (sugar, rice, salt), for their daily subsistence. The Tiputini River is a provider of water for all the necessities – treating aliments, drinking and washing. It is also contaminated, but less than the Napo River.<sup>34</sup> For Andres Machoa and his family, farming was associated with an entire way of life and identity. Every day, they went to their common fields to cultivate yucca and other staples, until the beginning of the afternoon when they would all go back to a family member's house to cook, have lunch and *chicha* [traditional beverage made of fermented yucca], and chat until the evening. Working with the family, in one's fields, was associated with freedom for him: "The others live from paid jobs like slaves. We are free: this is the *buen vivir*. The children now walk without shoes, and that's the *buen vivir* too" (Interview L2).

When I asked the people of Llanchama what was most important for them *para vivir bien*, most of my interviewees pointed to the unity of their community, the family and agricultural work, and the absence of pollution. For one inhabitant, "the important thing for me, to live well, is having what I already have: everyone with his land, living with my family" (Interview L11). The importance of agriculture and the absence of pollution were embedded in the notion of 'mother earth' which they did not want to see damaged: "hence our life could be permanently the same" (Interview L10).

Today we live well, quiet (...) The first necessity of the community is not to have pollution (...) The water is life for us. And then it's mother earth, that if they pollute there will be no animals. And then what will happen? There won't be anything remaining, what are we going to do? (Interview L4)

Oil extraction was seen as destructive for the environment. The inhabitants had already observed what had happened in block 31 and described environmental impacts such as river pollution (which was mentioned by seven of my interviewees and was described as "brown", "denser", "too high" and "so thick"), which according to them would bring diseases to the community (they evoked most often fever and skin cancers), the destruction of forests, oil spills and soil pollution leading to the disappearance of fauna and flora<sup>35</sup>, and noise which they told me they could already hear clearly with the seismic explosions from prospecting (Interview L6). These created air pollution and scared the bush meat. Four people told me there were fewer animals than before. And they were generally concerned about the availability of food in the future. One inhabitant thought that "maybe in some time we will not have subsistence for the family anymore (...) there are communities where you can't cultivate anything. All with petroleum." (Interview L10)

Someone else told me:

The community, with oil extraction, will lose what is his source of life, what is the *Pachamama*, the land. It will be polluted, we won't be able to cultivate. The cultures won't give any result. The air polluted, the animals. This is a lot. (Interview L11).

He did not think the damage could be compensated: "With US\$20<sup>36</sup> to remediate a hectare, that's very little." (Interview L11). I asked him what amount could compensate then, and he replied that even with a lot of

<sup>33</sup> In that respect, one interviewee told me: "we can live with maize and agriculture. And that's sufficient." (Interview L6)

<sup>34</sup> Interview Francisco, a technician in the health centre in Tiputini.

<sup>35</sup> "Possibly the plants will slowly die. It will be a desert. Because the pollution is huge." (Interview L10)

<sup>36</sup> In 2013, the community had received US\$20 per hectare as indemnity from PAM, for block 31.

money, the damage could never be healed: although money could buy food, it could not repair damaged fields. It was their culture that my interviewees often saw as threatened with oil extraction (Interviews L6, L9, L10). For Andres, the loss was embedded in the inability to walk without shoes: "In the places where they are extracting oil, we must use shoes. The government doesn't know what the *buen vivir* is" (Interview L2).

But while the view of the environment and the maintenance of their ways of life as 'the most important thing' could have closed the debate, the vote of 2013 seemed to contradict this apparent 'hierarchy of needs.' When I asked why people had voted in favor<sup>37</sup>, I was told they thought that money would change their lives (Interview L6) or they wanted better health and education facilities (Interview L2). Indeed, while the community was food self-sufficient and while some interviewees told me they did not need money<sup>38</sup>, most of them used it for transport and school materials. Like the inhabitants of Boca Tiputini, they obtained cash by selling food in the village of Tiputini, but very few gained from this. The perceived need for money was mostly related to the desire to be able to give education to their children.<sup>39</sup> While I could not properly address the following question given the time constraints in the field and the difficulty of understanding past perceptions, it seemed that residents had some understanding of the impact of hydrocarbon extraction, given their past experiences and the strong opposition of some people.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that as in BT, they had chosen to support it despite the perceived, incommensurable losses affecting the natural environment, farming, and their culture. The reason given for their new opposition was a certain disappointment with the benefits received.

Indeed, while the community was in the zone of influence of EE for the two blocks, most of my interviewees did not know what EE was, how it worked and what it could bring to the communities. At the time of the interviews in 2014, they had only negotiated with PAM directly and had received US\$230,000 in compensation, and US\$20 per hectare as indemnity, for block 31 (Calderón 2014). They were disappointed by the amount (Interviews L6, L2, L9) and by the fact the compensation had been given in cash rather than in works or projects, and the money had been spent – individually rather than for collective use (Interviews L10, L2). Others lamented that they had not received jobs. And while Llanachama was not directly crossed by the ITT oil pipelines, the inhabitants complained about the absence of any direct negotiation between the community and PAM. When I returned in 2016, EE had simply disappeared from the picture, and Llanachama still had received no benefits from the ITT oil project.

Interestingly, the lack of benefits cropped up in interviews with people who had opposed the project in 2013<sup>41</sup>, suggesting tension between the perception that they lived well and did not need anything from the company, and the fact that there was nothing in the community, and that the government should help them. During an interview, one inhabitant defended:

Here, we are living well. Pure and clean air. Without any noise. Now what does the government want with the *buen vivir*? They want to destroy the forest, but where will they give that resource? And here, in the Amazon, we will get diseases.

And in the same interview, he told me:

How do we live here? Without a communal house, without anything. The water isn't drinkable, we don't have health. The government says things, but it doesn't act. I see the news that they build [there], but here, nothing.

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<sup>37</sup> Some of my interviewees had been in favour in 2013, according to my main informant, even though they never told me so directly.

<sup>38</sup> One interviewee told me: "...in this life, for sure money is important but it is not indispensable" (Interview L11). Another said: "money is for a time. After, everything remains the same" (Interview L8).

<sup>39</sup> One interviewee, the mother of three children, explained: "It's for the school project. The children have to go far. They don't have lunch, they come back late. Sometimes they get sick because they don't eat" (Interview L3).

<sup>40</sup> This would be confirmed in neighbouring Quichua communities where I conducted subsequent, longer fieldwork.

<sup>41</sup> While no inhabitant told me directly that they had voted in favor in 2013, four of them told me they were already against at that time (Interviews L8, L2, L10 and L11).

He concluded:

There is nothing. 40 years extracting in the Amazon, (...) thousands of barrels, and that money, where is it? What have they done? To the communities nothing. That's why I do not want anything. (Interview L8)

It was not clear whether at the time of the 2013 vote, the twenty-two initial opponents were against the project because they already distrusted the government, or because of the environmental and cultural damage they could foresee, despite potential perceived benefits. Nor could I assess to what extent their environmental discourse was influenced by the perceived lack of economic and social benefits, and whether they would refuse oil extraction if it provided them with the benefits they expect from the state. What is interesting in their case, though, is that their 'response' to oil extraction, through opposition, also hid more nuanced claims, some of which the oil project could in theory fulfil, and a similar struggle for both environmental protection and socio-economic improvement. Opposition, just like compliance, was not straightforward. I went back to Llanachama in 2017, just as a new prior consultation was being conducted regarding a new seismic study in blocks 31 and 43 (ITT), overlapping with its territory. The community had turned, again, in favor of the project. The only exception seemed to be the Machoa family, who told me that out of 22 opponents, only 3 remained (Interview January 2017, Llanachama). Holmer, the young son, still against oil extraction, had himself been contracted as a boat driver by one of PAM's subcontractors.

#### **4. Oil 'non-conflicts': summary, reconceptualization and implications**

##### *Beyond the dichotomy: the 'missing people' in explanations*

The first conclusion is that support to extractive activities can coexist with what Martinez-Alier and Escobar label ecological and cultural 'difference.' These case studies, moreover, highlight some of the reasons why the special attachment to the environment as a source of livelihood or cultural identity might not translate into opposing extraction. First, a material dependence on the environment can be subordinated to the need for money, especially when the environment is not sufficient to provide people with all their necessities, and when its destruction is perceived as the only way to obtain needed resources, as was the case in BT. Although Martinez-Alier recognizes that the attachment to the environment by the 'poor' is material (2002), he does not offer the possibility that everyday incommensurability might mean this takes second place to the possibility of immediate financial rewards.

Second, indigenous people can have different values to those that Martinez-Alier and Escobar focus on, such as a desire for education and formal health, and which override their cultural attachment to the environment. This was the case in both communities. Lastly, oil extraction might, in some contexts, be seen as the only option for indigenous people to fulfil these goals. In the end, opposition to extraction was not the necessary result of 'cultural difference', but one possible outcome. As a corollary, accepting oil extraction in one's territory can hide an important struggle for the preservation of one's environment, and the cultural values attached to it: non-conflictive situations can still be problematic.

Another important conclusion of the case studies is that opposition to oil extraction, whether or not it is driven by ecological and cultural considerations, may hide a struggle for social and economic benefits. This was the case for the twenty-two opponents in Llanachama, who were trying to preserve a traditional way of life and their environment but would still like to benefit from social investments by the state.

These studies do not say anything about the reasons why some people voted in favor while others were against oil extraction in 2013; but this is not the most interesting part of the story. Instead, such divergences show that the line between acceptance and opposition was a fine one. In the two communities, oil extraction with compensation entailed a local dilemma between the different, incommensurable claims of the inhabitants, embedded in a certain conception of 'development' and the preservation of a traditional way of life. And it did not imply a straightforward answer. The fact that in some contexts, people ended up finding one or the other

option more urgent, more necessary or more desired is less important than the recognition of their shared needs and values – regardless of their responses.

### *Counter-productive effects*

Martinez-Alier and Escobar's works are deeply political, and oil extraction is for them very much part of what O'Connor called the "second contradiction of capitalism" (O'Connor 1994: 162) which, through its conditions of production, destroys its conditions of existence (Escobar 2011; Gudynas & Acosta 2010). Indigenous movements are, in their view, the carriers of alternative societies (a view which is shared more broadly in the field of political ecology). It is development and capitalism in general that Escobar's indigenous people and social movements fight against (Escobar 1998), and notably the 'cultural assimilation' that both imply; denying cultural, economic and ecological 'difference.' The message of these movements is as follows: "it is no longer the case that one can only contest dispossession and argue for equality from the perspective of inclusion into the dominant culture and economy" (Escobar 2006: 133).

The major frameworks from these thinkers are most useful for describing those people and 'movements' where there is a reversed 'hierarchy of needs', where the environment is particularly important (Martinez-Alier 2002). For these societies, 'difference' is a post-development struggle rather than the result of mixed worldviews; and economic and social needs and aspirations are subordinated to 'difference' in decisions made to accept or refuse oil extraction in territories (Escobar 2008). But the implicit dichotomy created by the limited scope of the frameworks might be counter-productive in the defense of poor and indigenous people. Indeed, they run the double risk of underestimating the economic and social claims of those who oppose oil extraction, and the ecological and cultural claims of those who accept it.

For Engle, an emphasis on cultural 'difference' "often displaces or defers the focus on the economic dependence and marginalization of most of the world's indigenous peoples" (2010: 13). In her critique, this is a default of International Law which focuses on cultural rights while leaving aside the question of economic and social equality. But this could well apply to the frameworks of ecological and cultural distribution conflicts which emphasize 'difference' but can overlook the importance of fulfilling the economic and social rights of those who oppose oil extraction in their territories. In Ecuador for instance, the social compensation brought by the state through PAM (now Petroecuador) has the potential to fulfil some of the claims of local communities, which go towards salaried jobs and money, but also education, doctors and hospitals, and basic services which access has historically been denied in the Amazon (Muratorio, 1991; Bustamante 2007; Juteau 2012). In such a context the redistribution of the state through the provision of social compensation may solve part of the problem – at least in theory. This may explain why the inhabitants of Boca Tiputini have campaigned against the recent popular consultation on the issue (Sandoval 2023).<sup>42</sup>

It follows that the responses to oil conflicts are not as simple as implied by Martinez-Alier or Escobar: while not extracting oil in indigenous territories when indigenous people want to maintain their 'difference' seems necessary, it will not be sufficient to provide them with their various claims, and notably equal access to education and health. This was even true in the case of the twenty-two opponents in Llanachama, who try to preserve a traditional way of life and their environment but would still like to benefit from social investments by the state. Moreover, Engle argues, "right to culture claims, when successful, threaten to limit the groups that might qualify for protection" (2010: 13). Again, the two frameworks, by describing opposition as directly arising from 'difference', could implicitly prevent indigenous people who do not oppose oil extraction from being considered as part of the ecologically and culturally 'different' group of people under study. The risk is that people who vote in favor of oil extraction in their territories or engage in market activities are seen as 'greedy opportunists' (Van Rooij *et al.* 2012) or "failed environmental stewards" (as described by Zanotti 2016: 5) having "given up on cultural difference" (Rival 1998: 3). As a result they may be denied the support they need from environmental and human rights organizations – as happened in Ecuador when communities signed agreements with oil companies.

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<sup>42</sup> In a recent YouTube video posted by EP Petroecuador (2023), the President of Boca Tiputini defends the ITT oil extraction project (and rejects the popular consultation), on the grounds that 'everything has improved' (he cites health, education and roads) since the project started.

Once we acknowledge the possibility that indigenous people might accept arrangements which they see as denying their 'difference' while they provide them with what Escobar calls 'equality' (2008), this view appears problematic. As Zanotti argues, the issue has to do with "the way in which indigenous peoples persist in (wrongly) being understood as antithetical to globalization, cosmopolitanism, and living a good life" (2016: 7). A further risk, in a country like Ecuador, is that the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for indigenous people may act as a legitimizing mechanism for extractivism in indigenous territories in cases of acceptance. A deeper and ongoing analysis of impacts is needed, even though oil extraction decisions ultimately fall to the Ecuadorian State (De la Cruz 2005; Finer *et al.* 2008; Simbaña 2012).

In fact, the number of non-conflictive, yet problematic, situations might increase as the result of two current tendencies. On the one hand, indigenous people are increasingly integrated into markets (Alvard 1993; Kuper 2003; Lu 2007; Redford & Stearman 1993), but often lack access to revenues and basic services which are becoming increasingly necessary as pollution levels increase everywhere and "the forest [and rivers] may no longer constitute the infrastructure people need" (Dayot 2022: 71). On the other hand, the multiplication of progressive governments in Latin America (which is arguably witnessing a second Pink Tide) coupled with the growing willingness of (or pressure on) extractive industries to comply with corporate social responsibility, makes the possibilities of attractive compromises between states and indigenous communities more likely. In this vein, Pellegrini & Arismendi show how the combination of redistribution (of the benefits from oil extraction) and consultation with the local populations has "debilitated opposition" (2012: 103) in the case of an extractive project in a non-traditional area in Bolivia under Morales. Similarly, I show in a recent article (Dayot 2023) how conflict may turn (and has turned, in the Ecuadorian case) into compromises and acceptance as large extractive companies start providing local indigenous people with basic services, money and other benefits they need (and are lacking), through social compensation schemes, in exchange for oil extraction in their territories.

#### *Direction for further research*

This article calls for a reconceptualized theory of distribution conflicts, which would take into account the mixed values of indigenous people without leaving aside the question of the incommensurability between these different values.

The problem is not limited to political ecology or extractivism. Indeed it relates to a broader critique of the ontological turn in anthropology, which tends to present a simplified and homogeneous picture of indigenous people and their worldviews. Cepek, in his critique, highlights the role of ethnography in revealing the complexity and uncertainty surrounding people's perceptions – which ontological approaches tend to hide instead – as he argues, "by ignoring or deforming much of the material available for ethnographic analysis" (2016: 625). Ethnography is indeed particularly well-suited for the enterprise; and some recent Amazonian ethnographic work goes in that direction (neither romanticizing nor condemning, as Erazo [2013] frames it). See for example Cepek (2012), Erazo (2013), and Zanotti (2016), to only cite a few.

By encompassing the study of non-conflictive, yet problematic, situations (which are currently understudied) political ecology could gain much explanatory power. Not only would it help to understand the needs, claims and struggles of indigenous people who have made compromises with an extractive industry; but it would also understand better the claims of those who oppose oil extraction and other projects in their territories. Allowing a better understanding of the perceptions, struggles and 'choices' of indigenous people with mixed worldviews is important when they are faced with both the destruction of their environment and the promise of the tokens of modernity. This has political implications, in terms of assessing extractive compromises, in Ecuador and other progressive states in Latin America. It also has practical implications, in terms of designing institutional mechanisms to better recognize the needs of indigenous people – designing alternative schemes for minority inclusion in public decision-making, and alternatives beyond the pervasive local dilemma between environmental destruction and socio-economic benefits (or, to go back to Escobar's words, between 'difference' and 'equality') which indigenous people are increasingly facing all around the world.

According to Laura Rival to create "opportunities so that people need not renounce their identities in order to have access to the full range of social and economic possibilities" is "one of the biggest policy making

challenges in the 21st century" (2017: 284). To provide people with such opportunities is not only a valuable goal in itself. It is arguably crucial for political ecology to fulfil its ultimate purpose – that is the decolonization of knowledge and the celebration of 'difference' which will allow the design of sustainable futures.

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