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Blocking Oil Development in Yasuní National Park: Ecuador's Unprecedented Strides Towards Environmental Justice

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Abstract

This paper explores Ecuador's proposal to protect Block 43 of the Yasuní National Park from oil drilling through the Yasuní-ITT Initiative proposed in 2007. The paper will examine why the initiative failed and how community activists responded. Ultimately, it will argue that the Yasuní-ITT Initiative upheld environmental justice through its assertion of a moral economy and its potential to help Ecuador step away from oil dependency and protect the rights of Indigenous communities, particularly the two tribes living in voluntary isolation in the Yasuní region. When the initiative was terminated and Indigenous communities were not consulted in the decision to begin drilling for heavy crude oil, citizen activism and mobilization of democracy through a referendum reasserted environmental justice and Indigenous rights.

Author's note

Lillian Prime is a senior at Middlebury College majoring in environmental justice and minoring in Spanish. After being in Ecuador in August of 2023 during the referendum vote and celebrating with local community members, she was interested in learning more about how and why Ecuador voted to protect Yasuní and the people who live there.

Keywords: Environmental justice, Indigenous rights, Climate change, Yasuní, Oil

I. Introduction and Relevant Background on Ecuador's Relationship to Oil

With the impacts of climate change increasing and resource extraction continuing to rise, environmental leaders are seeking alternatives to meet economic needs while protecting the environment and those who live there. In Ecuador, Block 43 of Yasuní National Park, a space with significant heavy crude oil resources, offers a relevant case study on how natural resources and local communities may be protected. This paper seeks to address what allowed for the protection of Yasuní Block 43 and how this case of environmental justice supports climate change mitigation. By exhibiting the power of environmental justice, community rights, and local activism when international efforts fail, Yasuní offers hope for local individuals defending their rights against transnational corporate interests.

Yasuní marks a space of highly valued biodiversity. Yasuní National Park, created in 1979, hosts an incredible array of biodiversity including 1,300 species of trees and 610 species of birds (Barzallo, 2023). Yasuní is also home to the Waoraní, Kichwa, and the Shuar peoples as well as two tribes who live in voluntary isolation, the Tagaeri and Taromenane (Chivers, 2023). Nestled within the Ecuadorian Amazon, the park is renowned internationally for its biodiversity and ecosystem services. It is both the appeal of these resources as well as Ecuador's recognition of their intrinsic value that allowed it to become the first country to grant nature constitutional rights in 2008 ("Ecuador first," 2008). In a world leaning towards neoliberalism and growing corporations, "[t]he measure is a part of an effort to level the legal playing field against multinational corporations that, armed with enormous financial resources and the force of international law written in their favor, scour the earth looking for cheap resources" ("Ecuador first," 2008, p. 131). The "Rights for Nature" chapter of Ecuador's constitution reads, "Nature or Pachamama, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist...Every person, people, community or nationality, will be able to demand the recognition of the rights of nature before public bodies" ("Ecuador first," 2008, p. 131). By giving nature rights, Ecuador established a legal avenue for environmental advocacy.

Ecuador has long been exploited for natural resources by corporations seeking bananas, natural gas, and crude oil ("Ecuador first," 2008). Instead of wealth, this resource extraction has brought debt and poverty. The 1970s oil boom "enabled the Ecuadorian government to take advantage of low-interest loans to subsidize national infrastructure building programs; but by the 1980s oil prices fell at the same time as interest rates rose. Between 1974 and 1984, Ecuador's external debt had increased from \$324 million to \$8.4 billion" (Davidov, 2012, p. 13). Not only has resource extraction brought debt, but it has also left behind pollution that impacts both ecosystems and residents. In response, activists in 1991 began a campaign against Texaco (now Chevron) due to its pollution of the Amazon (Rivera, 2017). Their actions laid the groundwork for future activists to advocate for the cessation of oil drilling in Block 43 of the Yasuní National Park.

II. Relevant Literature

This paper will explore environmental justice and relevant terminology including recognition, capabilities theory, substantive and procedural rights, payment for ecosystem services, and cruel optimism. Pellow's (2009, p. 3) approach to environmental justice asserts that "[e]cological violence is first and foremost a form of social violence." Oil development in Block 43 of Yasuní National Park not only creates environmental pollution, but afflicts local communities with health issues, cultural erasure, and constructed economic dependency. Environmental justice requires an understanding of the different needs, knowledge, and cultures of different actors (Schlosberg, 2004).

Capabilities theory acknowledges the importance of recognizing cultural differences in order to ensure that actors can participate fully in decision-making processes (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010). Thus, recognizing the unique capabilities of Indigenous communities within Yasuní is necessary for them to fully exercise their procedural decision-making rights (as opposed to tangible substantive rights) (Fuentes-George, 2021). The combination of recognition, capabilities theory, substantive rights, and procedural rights creates the conditions necessary for environmental justice.

When Ecuador asked the international community for financial compensation for not drilling in Block 43, they enacted a payment for ecosystems services model. Kolinjivadi (2019, p. 6) critiques this model for its creation of a "neoliberal performance." Landowners are incentivized to depend on others to conserve ecosystem services rather than being inherently motivated to do so (Kolinjivadi, 2019). While this paper will critique the payment model's repetition of financial extraction for natural resources, it is also important to acknowledge Ecuador's lack of conservation resources compared to wealthier countries. Some local community members are likely to see oil development as a path out of poverty, but they are historically not likely to be the benefactors of this development. Cruel optimism is "when something [one desires] is actually an obstacle to [their] flourishing" (Berlant, 2011 p. 1), a sentiment that creates hope around the potential for oil development to create financial opportunities from Ecuador when, in reality, development is unlikely to directly support marginalized communities.

III. Imagining a New Possibility: The Yasuní-ITT Initiative

Ecuador garnered global attention and pioneered a new approach to climate change mitigation with its unprecedented Yasuní-ITT Initiative. In 2007, President Rafael Correa rolled out his proposal to protect Block 43 (also known as ITT or Ishpingo, Tambococha, Tiputini) of Yasuní National Park from oil drilling. For the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, Ecuador established a fund through the United Nations Program for Development to receive payments from other countries (Quang & Breña, 2016). Correa proposed that the global community provide Ecuador with \$3.6 billion USD, an estimation that accounts for half of the profits Ecuador could earn from exploiting Block 43, to support the choice not to drill for oil (Einhorn & Andreioni, 2023). The Yasuní-ITT Initiative puts the burden of responsibility for Ecuador's conservation and climate change mitigation efforts on wealthier countries that have more resources to devote to such projects. Thus, the initiative is not only a way to protect Block 43 but also "a way to mobilize a new moral economy as a critique of the established economies of debt and oil" (Davidov, 2012, p. 13). This initiative serves Ecuador's goal to "keep the oil in the ground" while still supporting its economy (Davidov, 2012, p. 12). Additionally, it acknowledges Ecuador's smaller contribution to greenhouse gas emissions as compared to larger, wealthier countries, disputing the assumption that Ecuador should have to suffer financial consequences by not exploiting its natural resources for profit the same way wealthier countries have. The initiative challenges the idea that economic growth and environmental conservation are mutually exclusive by promoting alternative payment avenues for the use (or lack of use) of oil.

Block 43 contains at least 850 million barrels of heavy crude oil (Finer et al., 2010). Thus, not drilling in Block 43 would prevent an estimated 410 million metric tons of carbon from entering the atmosphere (Fiske, 2017). As global temperature rises, the choice to not drill in Block 43 would mitigate these emissions. Funds produced by the initiative were to be invested in "renewable energy, protection of biodiversity, and conservation of 44 protected areas" (Quang & Breña, 2016). Thus, the fund created a long-term plan for Ecuador to maintain its sustainability efforts. This is

significant not only for environmental and climate reasons but also for the Indigenous communities residing in Block 43, which covers 200,000 hectares within the park's 982,000 hectares (Quang & Breña, 2016). For those tribes, legal protection, procedural rights, and consultation about decisions regarding the land is essential to their ability to maintain traditional cultural practices.

IV. The failure of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative

Despite its positive reception by Ecuador and the global community, the Yasuní-ITT Initiative failed to raise the economic funds Correa proposed. The initiative received support from a range of local and global actors (Rivera, 2017). However, the requested economic support did not materialize. Correa announced that the initiative would be terminated in August 2013 after only \$13.3 million USD of the proposed \$3.6 billion USD had been raised by donors including Spain, Germany, and Italy (Fiske, 2017). Terminating the initiative would allow for oil drilling to begin that same year. Part of this oil as well as revenue from the oil would be necessary to repay China for the loans Ecuador had taken out while waiting on the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, loans which totaled \$8 billion from the time Correa was in office (Einhorn & Andreoni, 2023). On August 15, 2013, Correa stated, "The world has failed us...It wasn't charity we asked for. It was co-responsibility against climate change" (Fiske, 2017, p. 127). Ecuador blamed the global community for its failure to support the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, directing responsibility for its choice to begin drilling to actors who chose not to contribute to the initiative.

As oil drilling began, Correa made empty promises to Ecuadorian citizens about the economic benefits they would receive from this endeavor. Shortly after the Yasuní-ITT Initiative was terminated, "[a] state owned company, now part of Petroecuador, started knocking on doors in Indigenous communities throughout Block 43, offering money, housing and sanitation projects" (Einhorn & Andreoni, 2023). Government and oil companies both pushed the idea of trickle-down economics, suggesting that drilling oil would have benefits for local communities in the area. Correa shared this narrative, stating, "You don't like oil. I don't like it either, but we should all dislike poverty even more" (Rivera, 2017, p. 232). Correa's words show his belief that oil drilling is necessary to support local Indigenous communities and avoid poverty. However, the decision to end the initiative and begin drilling was made without any consultation with the Indigenous communities who would be affected (Ceballos, 2019). The promise of trickle-down benefits from drilling also fell flat. "Economic gains have barely trickled down to communities that have lived close to oil development for decades. More than half the people who live in the Ecuadorian Amazon, where the vast majority of the country's oil comes from, are poor" (Einhorn & Andreoni, 2023). Correa promises that oil development will bring prosperity to the Amazon, but history shows otherwise. Oil development of Block 43 is much more likely to continue the pattern of exploitation, poverty, and wealth inequality.

V. Collective Power: The Yasunidos

In response to the government's failure to protect Block 43, citizen activists stepped up. In 2022, Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso stated, "Now that the global trend is to abandon fossil fuels, the time has come to extract every last drop of benefits from our oil, so that it can serve the poorest while respecting the environment" (Einhorn & Andreoni, 2023). After the termination of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, government leadership continued to promote the perceived benefits of oil development to local communities. Some Indigenous peoples agreed with this narrative. Cristóbal

Kasent, a Shuar Indigenous leader, spoke to the importance of the 150,000 jobs that oil development in Block 43 helped create ("With protection action," 2023). However, many communities were disappointed by the government's choice to develop oil in Block 43 and started organizing as collective activists after 2013. These activists called themselves Yasunidos, a combination of the words Yasuní and unidos, meaning united in Spanish (Barzallo, 2023). The Yasunidos were made up of a diverse group of individuals, including youth and Indigenous peoples (Chivers, 2023). Through community organizing, Yasunidos used activism to assert their power against the state.

Yasunidos harnessed local community power through democracy to make their voices heard. Yasunidos gathered 750,000 signatures, almost double the requirement, to put Block 43 on the ballot as a referendum (Watts, 2023). This allowed citizens to determine the future of oil development in the region rather than the government. On August 20, 2023, Ecuador voted 58.95% to 41.05% to keep the oil in the ground (With Protection Action, 2023). According to Donziger (2023), "The Yasuní referendum proves that real democracy that respects the popular will can be a powerful tool for transitioning to a sustainable future." The referendum required oil companies to stop drilling immediately and gave them 18 months to dismantle their operations (Chivers, 2023), successfully redistributing power from government leadership and corporations to local communities.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Yasuní-ITT Initiative and ensuing citizen activism aimed to uphold justice for both the environment and the people who call that environment home. The initiative created a structure that can "enhance international intergenerational justice due to the fact that it combats climate change in different ways, preserves biodiversity, protects [Indigenous] rights and implements the use of sustainable energy sources on [a] long term basis" (Larrea & Warnars, 2009, p. 223). Its proponents sought a sustainable future that generated the economic resources Ecuador needs without exploiting the land where vulnerable communities live. Imagining the Yasuní-ITT Initiative's possible termination, Davidov (2012, p. 15) wrote, "[A]s an assertion of sovereignty it will have succeeded regardless of the outcome." Despite its failure, the initiative impacted ideology and narratives about oil development, the assumed need to exploit land, and accountability for the economic costs of upholding environmental justice. The initiative reflected Ecuador's pursuit of environmental justice while citizen activism demonstrated the power of popular will. By introducing a referendum to the ballot, Yasunidos framed Block 43's oil resources as a commons that the whole country should administer, not a commodity awaiting exploitation.

Ecuador's efforts to protect Yasuní and the Indigenous communities who live there serve as a blueprint for similar protections in other countries. In a speech, Bolivian President Evo Morales (2008) called upon humanity to protect nature through "solidarity, complementarity and harmony with nature in contraposition to the reign of competition, profits and rampant consumption of natural resources." Morales views Ecuador's stand against exploitative transnational corporations as part of a more widespread movement to prioritize environmental justice over profit. Still, Ecuador was uniquely situated to make this decision with its constitutional environmental protections and a democratic referendum.

Despite the referendum win, the failure of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative means that Ecuador bears the cost of conserving Block 43 alone. Thus, Ecuador, a country with a comparatively small emissions footprint, must bear a disproportionate economic consequence. In an ideal world, the

economic costs of climate change might be distributed proportionally given a country's wealth and emissions. However, until there is an international agreement on this responsibility, the Yasunidos stand as an example of an impressive democratic win in the face of transnational oil corporations.

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