
Peru: Resistance and community organization for the defense of the rainforest

The Putumayo River basin covers an area of 12 million hectares and represents 1.7% of the Amazon basin. Its headwaters are in Colombia, and it demarcates a large part of the border between Ecuador and Peru, until finally flowing into the Amazon River in Brazil. It is one of the few Amazonian rivers that still flows freely.

A large portion of this river basin spans indigenous territories, as well as protected areas that States have created—in disregard for the territorial rights of the peoples who live in the region. This is especially the case in Peru. In the Putumayo River basin there are also vast swaths of intact rainforest, where Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation live.

The Indigenous Peoples who today inhabit the Putumayo region faced what came to be known as the Putumayo genocide, which took place from 1879-1913, during the rubber extraction boom. It is estimated that close to 100,000 indigenous people from the Amazon region were brutally exploited, abused and tortured by rubber companies (1).

The curse of resources

Like other areas of the Amazon, the Putumayo basin is suffering from the terrible impacts of deforestation and forest degradation, in particular as a result of mining and logging. And in recent years, the mafias that control these two businesses have become intertwined with the drug trafficking mafias and armed guerrillas (2). As a result, there has been an increase in armed criminal gangs. This is coupled with the absence of the State, which should be guaranteeing the rights of the people.

The peaceful life that indigenous communities used to have on the banks of the Putumayo River is being lost. Violence has become a daily problem. Drug traffickers are using the region to expand coca cultivation, putting indigenous territories under threat. Communities are unable to prevent their territories from being invaded by drug traffickers. Meanwhile, the complete absence of state programs aimed at generating alternative livelihoods—in particular for the youth—make it tempting for youth to join criminal gangs.

Peru is the country with the second largest area of Amazonian rainforest, after Brazil. It also has the third highest deforestation rate, after Brazil and Bolivia. A recent report estimates that, in the last two decades, 2.7 million hectares of forest have been lost—in large part due to the expansion of oil palm plantations (3).

At the beginning of the year, the Peruvian Congress approved a series of amendments to the Forest and Wildlife Law; this act further complicates the future of Amazonian forests and the numerous indigenous communities that have occupied these territories for thousands of years. Indigenous and civil society organizations denounce that the law was passed hastily, without respecting parliamentary timeframes. They also denounce that the amendments promote deforestation and

facilitate the transfer of rights to their forests to third parties. "They have violated our rights to consultation and to free, prior and informed consent. Even more serious is the fact that this amendment will promote the plunder of our whole, ancestral territories and will increase threats to the lives of indigenous environmental defenders. It will also threaten biological, cultural, environmental and spiritual life and integrity," they stated in a letter sent to congressional authorities (4).

The Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDESEP, by its Spanish acronym), an organization that brings together numerous indigenous Amazonian peoples, issued a statement rejecting the modifications to the Forestry Law. Among their arguments, they state that the most harmful aspect of this amendment is the change in land use for forestry purposes, and the conversion of lands under protection to lands for agriculture and livestock production—which previously only occurred in exceptional cases and in compliance with technical regulations. "However, changes can now be made 'legally' without respecting technical criteria, making it possible to attack forests with impunity—forests which protect us from the impacts of the climate crisis," they warned (5).

The modifications mean clear benefits for agricultural sectors, such as oil palm, which can now accelerate their expansion in the Amazon.

Despite the difficult context, communities living in the Putumayo River basin are still resisting and seeking ways to remain in their territories.

WRM spoke with Arlen Ribeira, an indigenous member of the Witoto People in Peru:

WRM: Arlen, tell us a little about yourself

My name is Arlen Ribeira. I am an indigenous Witoto [also called Muina Murui by its members]. I live on the border of Peru and Colombia, and previous generations of my family have been victims of the rubber boom. Part of our family that survived escaped La Chorrera in Colombia and settled along the Putumayo River, in order to survive and not be persecuted by the rubber bosses.

Since I was a child I have been with my grandparents and with older adults, the wise ones. I have been raised in the maloca. The maloca is our traditional indigenous house, the house of wisdom. So I have very strong roots in the struggle of our peoples. I have promoted territorial and human protection of Indigenous Peoples in isolation and initial contact, as well as participated in numerous events related to the defense of the territory, in Peru, and internationally.

WRM: The "Network of Indigenous Territorialities of the Amazon Basin for Self-determination" (Tica Network) was recently created. Could you tell us what this network is about and what its objectives are?

This network just began to take shape last year (2023). It brings together four federations that have a lot of protected natural areas, in which Indigenous Peoples in isolation and initial contact also live (in their territories).

The organizations that make up the Tica Network include the Federation of Native Border Communities of the Putumayo; the Matses Community, which is located in Loreto and has one of the largest territories and includes protected areas; the Iskonawa brothers and sisters from the Iskonawa Association for Development are also part of the Tica Network—they are in the Sierra del Divisor region; and finally, the Federation of Native Communities of Purus, which also has the largest

protected area in Peru within its territory; they are in Pucallpa, Ucayali.

The combined territories of all these communities and federations span some 13 million hectares [an area the size of Nicaragua]. Part of what we are demanding and fighting for is for all of these protected natural areas—which have been created by the State, often without the adequate knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples—to be recognized as our territories that were taken from us. This situation should be reversed, in one way or another. Or, failing that, there should be a regulation that guarantees our rights to these territories, to our customs, to our sacred spaces and to use of the forest—which we have always had as our source of livelihood.

Additionally, we are seeing that States are allegedly undertaking a huge fight against climate change. But on the ground, it is the Indigenous Peoples who are fighting climate change—through our forests. Our territories generate rainfall, and this rainfall goes to different places—it reaches Argentina, passes through Brazil, and crosses the world. In other words, it plays a very important role.

We also want our territories and contributions to be recognized in the fight against climate change. But we do not want carbon projects, such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). We do not want carbon projects as they are currently designed, because they are a serious threat to our land tenure. Furthermore, the way they are designed makes them contribute to global warming, because the companies doing REDD projects are not reducing their emissions.

Companies are demanding that forests be taken care of, but they are still polluting. And this REDD project, like all carbon deals, comes with a series of loopholes in which Indigenous Peoples lose title to the land. The threat is dispossession of territory, of biological resources, and of human and collective rights. Moreover, these projects cause displacement and hunger, because they entail 20- or 30-year contracts that do not take into account the future of the indigenous peoples of the region. And the (economic) resources that REDD-type carbon projects supposedly generate for communities are just lies, nothing more. The paltry resources that sometimes reach communities only engender internal conflicts and division among its members. And these internal conflicts create a situation in which some families make the decision to sell the forests.

So what we seek is to guarantee our own autonomy. Indigenous autonomy is what has been contributing to the sustainability of biodiversity, the forests and our planet. What this means is that, through our knowledge, we are the ones sustaining the planet. And what we want is to call the attention of States and the international community. Indigenous Peoples have the climate solution, and it doesn't require destroying societies or plundering territories, as we are currently seeing.

Many protected natural areas have also been created through REDD; this is very serious and detrimental to our rights. To effectively combat climate change, more consideration should be given to Indigenous Peoples' proposals—for example at the Conference of the Parties on Climate Change. We have so many protected natural areas, and yet we don't even have access to, nor do we benefit from, climate or conservation funds. This is our big problem. Our ancestral territories alone cover some 13 million hectares, upon which they have created protected natural areas; and yet the four federations do not receive any type of benefit related to conservation or climate change. So, what we are seeking is to govern our territories—autonomously and with self-determination. In accordance with ILO Convention 169 and the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

WRM: How did the Tica Network end up forming a critical position against REDD policies?

Well, I have worked with our brothers and sisters from Purus, and with Matses and Iskonawa brothers and sisters. We have had conversations. Naturally, we have wondered: what is the role our territory is fulfilling, and why are they taking it away from us? Then we see them talking about so many billions of dollars; then a lot of NGOs arrive in conjunction with the Ministry of Environment—and they are the ones who have taken away our territories; then they hold workshops and assemblies; and now they have limited our use of our territories. And we wonder: why do these things happen? What is the reason? So from our limited knowledge—because we don't have much access to trainings—we have analyzed this and determined that there is a dark business that nobody is telling us about. And that dark business is carbon.

For example, the Sierra del Divisor National Park has been created in the Iskonawa territory. How are the Iskonawa brothers and sisters participating? Their territories have been divided up, and now the Iskonawa do not have access to resources; they feel dispossessed of their own territory and they don't have titles to the land. When the Iskonawa want to settle in an area, they are removed from it. In other words, we become nomads once again. They take our spaces away from us, and we can no longer live in our ancestral territory.

This is why we have created the Tica Network, but it is a long process and a hard fight. And we call on institutions to show solidarity, to support us. Because when we assert our claim to our territory, we also suffer threats. We suffer from the actions of both the Peruvian state and NGO authorities, who band together and try to divide our organizations and destroy our territorial unity—so that we won't be able to demand our rights.

We are concerned about how we are going to live 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, if they keep reducing our territory. We would no longer be able to satisfy our basic needs, such as food, hunting, gathering and fishing. And the State is not creating alternative projects. On top of this, illegal loggers are coming in, miners are coming in, roads are being built over our indigenous territories, and more protected areas are being set up. Our future is very uncertain.

And if we do not stand up now, with support and solidarity so that our voice can be heard, the future will be very hard for our communities. I think there will be more poverty, more needs. And you know that in the Peruvian Amazon the government is absent. We do not live from the government. We live from the forest.

And what will happen later on when there is a need to make use of more ancestral territories? Because we have not destroyed the Amazon. We have always had our forests; wherever there are indigenous people there have always been forests. It is over those forests—that we have conserved—that the State has created protected natural areas. This is our huge concern.

The position of governments at the Belém Summit

Last year there was a meeting of presidents from the Amazonian region, the Belém Summit in Brazil, which led to the Belém Declaration. In it, the presidents lay out their vision for the future of the Amazon, citing the need to continue with development as a way to fight poverty, and the need to promote extractive projects—agribusiness, mining, etc.—to create jobs, wealth, etc. They claim this is necessary to combat "illegal" activities. So, for example, they do not contest mining as long as it is "legal." This is how we've ended up with one of the largest mines in the world, owned by Vale, in the middle of the Amazon—with all the valid licenses and permits. The declaration also establishes the need for protection and for REDD-type policies.

WRM: What is your opinion about this vision that governments have to continue supporting "legal" extractivism?

I was at the Belém Summit. That meeting was about statements and nothing more. Imagine: Peru, one of the signatories of the declaration, has just passed a new forest law that practically authorizes land dispossession and territorial invasions. In other words, governments do comply with their own laws, and governments do not improve the quality of life; on the contrary, they impoverish us. They say: "We are going to develop Putumayo, we are going to build roads." Roads mean more poverty, invasions and crime for indigenous people. Roads bring more illegal miners, illegal loggers, drug trafficking, violence, human exploitation, territorial dispossession and migration from other areas. Roads serve the interests of businessmen who want to extract all of the resources that exist in a place... The only thing that indigenous people have to do is not believe in these declarations, not trust this kind of declaration. Rather, what we must do is work for our self-determination, and protect our territory and our rights—and that is what we are going to live from. As my grandfather told me: "I don't have money, I don't have wealth; as far as your eyes can see in the forest, that is where you can go—and that is what you are going to live from. Take care of and observe how we grow our food; we have abundance, we have health, we are not lacking in food or sustenance." This is our wealth.

- (1) Thomson, N.; Pineda Camacho, R. [El libro rojo del Putumayo](#), 1913.
- (2) Rio de vida y muerte, [Rio Putumayo](#).
- (3) Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), [New report exposes illegal Amazon deforestation as Peru approves scandalous 'amnesty' law forgiving past forest crimes](#), February 2024
- 4) [Organizaciones indígenas nacionales rechazan la modificatoria de la Ley Forestal que atenta contra los derechos indígenas](#), January 2024
- (5) Pronunciamiento: [Rechazamos aprobación de la modificación de la Ley forestal y de fauna silvestre que vulnera derechos colectivos de los pueblos indígenas y pone en riesgo la Amazonía](#), December 2023