
[Amazon: Peoples in flight](#)

*Image: Approximate location of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation and initial contact.
Source: Pueblos Indígenas en aislamiento voluntario y contacto inicial, IWGIA – IPES – 2012.*

Close to 90% of the isolated indigenous peoples still in existence live in the Amazon region, in territories protected by geographical barriers which, to an ever lesser extent, have kept the white man away from the forests where ecosystems and biodiversity are most highly preserved. These peoples have sought isolation as a way to defend themselves from contact that experience has proven to be destructive. Sometimes they have learned this directly through conflicts waged with the white man; at other times they have learned indirectly from the experiences of other peoples who have entered into contact with the outside world.

Their determination to remain isolated is demonstrated by acts of resistance with weapons, traps, and symbols and signs of warning and threat aimed at invaders. Above all, however, it is demonstrated by their systematic flight towards territories ever further removed from the frontiers of the expansion of “Western civilization”, where they attempt to maintain their traditional forms of social and material reproduction. These territories are growing increasingly scarce, and increasingly threatened by the greed and speed with which every centimetre of land is now being mapped, “georeferenced” and demarcated for the transformation of “nature” into “natural resources”. This is a “global undertaking” promoted by big capital, and it has no room for isolated peoples or territories, only for inputs that can be incorporated into productive processes or recycled “by” and “for” these same processes. These ever shrinking territories are pockets of resistance and the determination to exist.

Currently, in Brazil, according to information from FUNAI, the government agency responsible for indigenous affairs, there are records of some 70 groups of isolated indigenous peoples and another 15 of groups considered to be living in a stage of “initial contact”.

The Brazilian constitution recognizes the particular vulnerability of indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact, and guarantees them the right to “their social organization, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions, and their ancestral rights to the lands they have traditionally occupied.” It is a fact that indiscriminate contact with these groups has historically led to a significant reduction in their populations. It is in the framework of the recognition of their vulnerability and right to self-determination that “isolated Indians” are guaranteed the right to remain in isolation, and it is the state that is responsible for protecting and enforcing respect for the necessary conditions for their self-determination. Now, what would be the necessary conditions required by indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact to ensure respect for their self-determination?

Indigenous groups in isolation and initial contact live in close relation with their ecosystem and depend on its natural resources (fauna, flora and water resources), as well as sharing a spiritual relationship with their territories.

These circumstances are fundamental for ensuring their sociocultural reproduction. It is only by placing priority on them that the state will be able to effectively guarantee that indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact can maintain their own ways of education, health, eating, housing, work, leisure, safety and protection of mothers and children, thus respecting “their social organization, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions.”

Therefore, guaranteeing an ecologically balanced territory is a basic condition for these groups to have what is essential for their self-sustenance and self-determination. In addition to the essential need for territory for indigenous groups in isolation and initial contact, it is also necessary for these territories and their surroundings to be protected against invaders, as well as against external factors that provoke environmental imbalances and the transmission of diseases that are foreign to their immune systems. In the case of indigenous groups in initial contact, it has been determined that in addition to the essential requirement of territory, these groups also need “cultural interrelations” in order to affirm their identities, with the search for unity based on diversity.

The two faces of the state: Protective agent and threat factor

Even for “contacted” indigenous peoples – who are able to express and exercise their civil rights through their organizations and are less vulnerable to Western (and surrounding) society – there is widespread disregard for their rights on the part of both state and private institutions in Brazil. But in the case of indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact, the state, which is supposed to be responsible for their protection, is in fact one of the main threat factors facing them, because its agents and institutions are geared towards the “acceleration of growth”, which includes infrastructure and natural resource exploitation projects as absolute priorities.

Within the South American regional framework, the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA), the 2012-2022 Strategic Action Plan of the South American Council of Infrastructure and Planning (COSIPLAN) of the Union of South American Nations (known as IIRSA-2), and the Brazilian government’s Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC) all share a common goal: the development and integration of transportation, energy and communications infrastructure, i.e., “economic infrastructure”. To boost trade, they plan to establish transportation corridors (for air, road, rail and water transport) and production chains directly connected to the exploitation of renewable and non-renewable resources, linked with international markets, mainly in North America, Europe and now, above all, Asia. To carry out these mega-projects, according to their promoters, it will be necessary to remove certain “barriers” – meaning the Amazon and the Andes Mountains, along with their ancestral populations. This entails major legislative reforms to harmonize the national laws of the 12 countries involved in IIRSA-2, and the “integration” of strategic regions with “low population density” but large reserves of raw materials and biodiversity.

It is important to understand the persistence of the same model of coloniality in the different biophysical and sociocultural contexts of Latin America. It is the persistence of this coloniality that helps to explain the advances and setbacks experienced by indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact in Brazil in recent years. And it also helps to explain this new chapter in the “developmentalist” saga that places the South American governments at the service as the same masters as always, although in some cases – unlike other periods of accelerated modernization – they are now led by subjects who were historically oppressed by colonial policies, but pose the risk of reshaping the model of exploitation and giving a new face, more concealed and intensive, to slavery.

This article is based on: “Povos indígenas isolados e de recente contato no Brasil. Políticas, direitos e problemáticas”, by Antenor Vaz, April 2013, submitted by the author and available at:

http://wrm.org.uy/es/files/2013/09/Povos_Indigenas_Isolados_e_de_Recente_Contato_no_Brasil.pdf;
and “Povos indígenas isolados, autonomia, pluralismo jurídico e direitos da natureza, relações e reciprocidades”, Antenor Vaz, *International Committee for the Protection of Peoples in Isolation and Initial Contact*, and Paulo Augusto André Balthazar, researcher at the Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, <http://oniteaiken.com.ar/ver/boletin15/3-1.pdf>