

How Indigenous Communities in Ecuador Have Developed Social Movements to Combat Climate Change- the Case of Yasuní-ITT

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The Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil field in block 43 of Ecuador's Amazon basin lies on the Eastern side of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve. This land is also home to the Waorani and Kichwa indigenous people and the Taegari and Taromenane peoples- who live in voluntary isolation (Rainforest Foundation, 2023). This Biosphere Reserve "has been considered the most biodiverse place in the Western Hemisphere" (Larrea, 2014). It has floodplains, swamps, and successional forests (Rickerby et al., n.d.) - all largely important in maintaining ecosystem functions and supporting rich biodiversity. The indigenous communities in this region depend on the ecosystem for their livelihood. Due to the way Ecuador has developed, indigenous people have been left out of decision-making and othered in their own country, even though they make up about 34% of the population (Yashar, 2005). The indigenous community in Ecuador is facilitating social movements to get their voices heard and needs met. The case this paper will be focusing on is called the Yasuní- ITT initiative and its successors. The basis of the Yasuní-ITT initiative is to prevent deforestation, halt oil extraction, and mitigate the culminating effects- worsening climate change.

The question this paper will analyze is how indigenous people in Ecuador facilitated social movements to combat climate change, with the case of Yasuní-ITT. Firstly, this paper will

investigate the physical science of the Yasuní-ITT region: the geography and background of Yasuní, the biodiversity of the region, the oil resources within the ITT oil fields, and the links between all of these factors and climate change and environmental degradation. Secondly, we delve into the social aspects of the Yasuní-ITT case: the context and history of indigenous people in Ecuador, the othering and political disconnection between indigenous and contemporary Ecuador, the history of indigenous movements, and finally focusing on how the indigenous community shaped the outcome of the Yasuní initiative. Lastly, this paper will discuss the future that is to come with a changing political sphere, how the indigenous community can triumph in fighting to alleviate climate change, and finally policy recommendations.

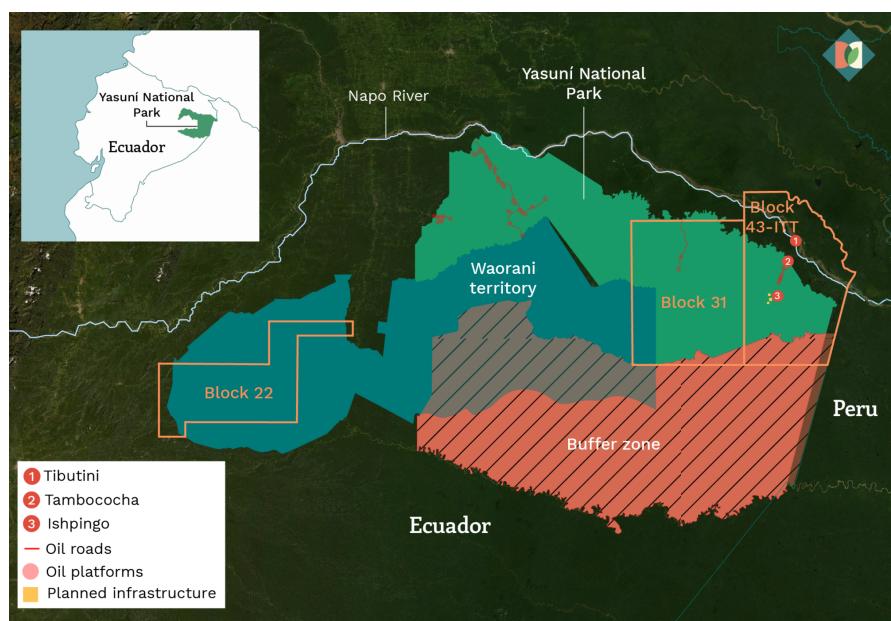


Figure 1. Map of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve and its buffer zone, indigenous land, the ITT oil field, and the Napo River

(Panchana & Jiménez, 2022)

The Yasuní-ITT initiative is at the nexus of climate change and social change, in this section, we will zoom into the physical science of the Yasuní-ITT initiative to give a background

of how it is deeply interwoven into the discussion of climate change. To give context, the ITT oil fields encompass 20 km², 1 km² of which lies in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve, and a small portion idling in Peru (Panchana & Jiménez, 2022). The Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (Figure 1) is located in the Amazon region in the province of Napo, to the East of the great Andes mountains, and in the northeast of the country (UNESCO, n.d.). Yasuní's protected area spans about 9,820 km², with a ten-kilometer buffer in all directions, except the Peruvian border (Bass et al., 2010). The Yasuní Biosphere Reserve covers an “area larger than Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires City, Mexico City, Lima, São Paulo, Bogotá, La Paz, Quito, and Caracas combined” (Panchana & Jiménez, 2022). The predominant ecosystem is a humid tropical rainforest, with warm temperatures averaging 24-27°C, and high precipitation with an annual average of approximately 3,200 mm (UNESCO, n.d.) (Bass et al., 2010). Yasuní Biosphere Reserve also protects the headwaters of some of the major tributaries of the Amazon River (Figure 1), namely the Napo River (The Rainforest Foundation, 2023). Additionally, the Biosphere Reserve intersects with the ancestral Waorani land (Figure 1) and is also populated by at least two other indigenous groups who live in voluntary isolation (Bass et al., 2010). The humans and other species living in and around Yasuní are at risk of displacement due to active and proposed concessions of oil like the ITT oil field.

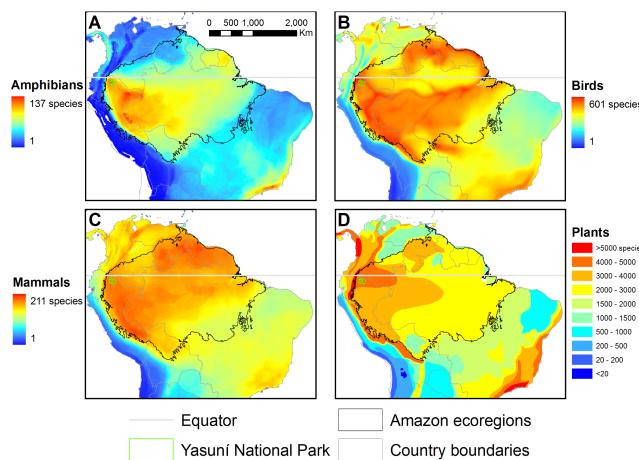


Figure 2. Biodiversity map of Northern South America, depicting the rates of species of Amphibians, Mammals, Birds, and Plants.

(Bass et al., 2010)

Biodiversity is largely important in this case, as the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve is considered one of the most biodiverse places in the world (Figure 2) (Bass et al., 2010). Even though Yasuní only makes up 0.15% of the Amazon's total area, its species accounts for a large proportion compared to the species of the Amazon as a whole. Some notable ratios of species found in Yasuní compared to species of all Amazonia are reptiles at 33%, Birds at 34%, mammals at 27%-33%, and amphibians at 28% (Bass et al., 2010). Additionally, 99.73% of the vegetation in Yasuní Biosphere is assumed to be the original baseline vegetation (UNESCO, n.d.). Protecting the Yasuní-ITT region is imperative if parties want to protect biodiversity. Yet research for Yasuní's conservation is still in its infancy. We still don't understand all the environmental interconnections the Biosphere Reserve harbors. Scientists say the Amazon might soon reach its tipping point, due to the deforestation from oil mining and other industries which is linked to reduced rainfall, moreover, the demise of the Amazon could be exacerbated (Al Jazeera, 2023). Protecting the Yasuni's biodiversity is important not only to the species that live there but to ecological systems functioning as a whole.

Geologists estimate that 846 million to 1.5 billion barrels of oil are in the ground under the forest, making the ITT oil field the second largest in Ecuador (Rickerby et al., n.d.). As discussed previously, 5% of the ITT oil field lies within the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (Panchana & Jiménez, 2022). As of 2010 four oil access roads had already been built into the Biosphere Reserve and its buffer zone, which have allowed for deforestation, habitat fragmentation, colonization of indigenous groups, and ecosystem degradation (Bass et al., 2010). In 2020, a 148

million dollar contract was awarded to a Chinese oil company by Petroecuador (Panchana & Jiménez, 2022). The 24 new wells that would be drilled in one of the three ITT oil fields would produce 7,500 barrels of oil per day (Panchana & Jiménez, 2022). Recently, Ecuador's energy minister Juan Carlos Bermeo, started developing a drilling campaign in the environmentally sensitive Ishpingo oil field that will result in 40 new wells by the end of 2023 (Panchana & Jiménez, 2022). The staggering amount of oil in the ITT oil field will return a huge profit, an incredible amount of emissions, and a variety of environmentally degrading factors that will indirectly affect climate change.

The Yasuní-ITT initiative is pertinent to climate change due to the direct impacts of emissions and deforestation. The oil emissions from the estimated 1 billion barrels in the ITT oil field would be equivalent to 410 million tons of carbon dioxide (Finer et al., 2009). Based on estimates made by MIT climate scientists, it would take approximately 164,000 trees to sequester that amount of carbon (Moesman & Harvey, 2022). Meanwhile extracting oil in the ITT fields calls for deforestation of that area. Creating an exacerbated system with more carbon being trapped leading to greater warming of the atmosphere. Based on the 2023 IPCC Report Summary for Policymakers, continued emissions will only go to further changing all major climate systems (IPCC, 2023). For example, with each increasing increment of global warming: weather extremes could amplify, increasing the variability in the global water cycle, and land and ocean sinks are estimated to sequester a slimmer proportions of emissions (IPCC, 2023). Drilling in the ITT oil fields has a strong potential of making the predictions a reality. With the increased amount of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, we are on the projected path to have a more than 1.5° C increase in temperature by 2100, which will have incredibly detrimental effects on the Environment and species in it. Some impacts projected to be seen due to climate change are an

increase in species loss, heat and humidity risks, food production changes, sea level rise, and freshwater security (IPCC, 2023). Whether on a local or global scale, the emissions and deforestation of the ITT oil field will impact climate change.

Additionally, the impacts of drilling will cause environmental issues- such as habitat destruction and environmental degradation. From 1964 to 1990 an American oil drilling company, Texaco, operated not far from Yasuní (Rickerby et al., n.d.). Texaco dumped over 80,000 tons of toxic waste, causing an increase of locals suffering from “cancer, miscarriages, and various other health problems,” (Rickerby et al., n.d.). History might repeat itself with the drilling of the ITT oil field. Drilling the ITT oil field would degrade the environment due to the 65,000 m³ of solid waste and 390,000 m³ of liquid waste from drilling which could be discarded into river systems (Rickerby et al., nd). Linking back to the geography of Yasuní, the headwaters of one of the major tributaries of the Amazon River lie within the park (Figure 1). Therefore, if a spill were to occur, it would affect not just the communities that live in the park, but the entire Amazon River basin.

Ecuador has a lively history of indigenous social movements, as it has the fourth-highest estimated percentage indigenous population in Latin America (Yashar, 2005). The coalescence of social movements that indigenous people in Ecuador developed is a direct response to the government shutting them out of democratization. An example of indigenous groups turning to their community and allies to make change in the country is the case of Yasuní-ITT. To further look into how indigenous populations of Ecuador have developed social movements to combat climate change, this section delves deeper into the disconnections between indigenous people and the modern political state, the history of indigenous movements, and finally looks at the social side of the Yasuní initiative.

The historical disconnect of indigenous communities to the modern political structure of Ecuador was largely due to military regimes that previously controlled the country (Bainbridge, n.d.). Politics in Ecuador have historically “implemented disadvantageous socio-economic reforms that challenged local autonomy, but they also failed to institutionalize channels for [indigenous communities to participate] in national politics- which in turn made [them] turn ever more forcefully to local indigenous communities and authority structures” (Yashar, pg. 142, 2005). Therefore for a long time, the indigenous community was isolated from democracy in Ecuador and instead became insular in their communities. The connection began to come about in 1979 when a democratic president became elected, he promoted “respect for and support of indigenous peoples and cultures,” (Bainbridge, n.d.). Yet indigenous people still had little say over what that respect or support looked like and could not actively have a say in politics. While indigenous leaders were protesting to have their voices represented in federal policies and projects, an economic downturn made indigenous political involvement even more important (Bainbridge, n.d.). The 1970 Ecuadorian oil boom was followed by a steep decrease in oil prices in the 1980s made for foreign debt and an economic crash. This acted as a double-edged sword because this same oil boom oil industries drilled on indigenous land, meanwhile they never saw any of the profits. Additionally, the indigenous and lower-class communities suffered from declining standards of living, loss of jobs, decreasing demand for products, and lessening availability of government services (Bainbridge, n.d.). Though in some ways this example of political and indigenous disconnect brought the indigenous community together, along with many other instances that emboldened the group in their need to unify and create change.

The birth of uniformed indigenous movements was not created in a vacuum. As mentioned before, leading up to the late 80s there was a lot of ostracizing of the indigenous

community, even though they make up 30-38% of Ecuador's population (Yashar, 2005). This proportion has formed coalitions, groups, federations, and organizations. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) was established in 1986 and has been instrumental in giving "indigenous Ecuadorians a voice on the national stage after decades of relative silence, and the organization's efforts have influenced national politics," through peaceful protest, constitutional reforms, and electoral politics (Bainbridge, n.d.). The confederation promoted the mobilization of the indigenous community in Ecuador and put their political rights on the national agenda (Bainbridge, n.d.). The group facilitated the merging of indigenous people around the country in governmental processes which in turn increased unity and solidarity among the different communities.

Indigenous leaders based around Yasuní Biosphere Reserve and the Waorani Ethnic Reserve developed grassroots movements to keep the oil beneath the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve in the ground. This section will dive deeper into how indigenous leaders rose to be change-makers in protecting Yasuní-ITT.

Before indigenous leaders took over, President Rafael Correa, of Ecuador, introduced the Yasuní-ITT initiative to the UN in 2007 (Puig, 2013). This project was based on the hope that Ecuador would not extract resources from the ITT oil field. However, mining oil would be tempting as the amount found in the ITT oil field is equivalent to 20% of the country's supply and would generate an estimated \$3.6 billion in profits (Puig, 2013). Additionally, oil exports make up the greatest portion of Ecuador's GDP, at 25% (Rickerby et al., nd), so it's fair to assume the country has great economic interest in drilling the ITT oil field. Correa asked the international community to contribute \$3.6 billion, "in exchange for a ban on drilling" in the ITT oil field (Al Jazeera, 2023). Ultimately in 2013, Ecuador received only 0.36% of the

compensation it asked for and the Yasuní-ITT initiative failed (Rickerby et al., nd). According to Ronda Petrolera SurOriente, in 2018 a new president Lenin Moreno opened the South-East Oil Round which aimed to open up the ITT oil field for bidding to the petroleum industry (Cited by Brown, 2018). And the industry responded, with potential international and national buyers like ExxonMobil and Shell (Brown, 2018).

However, hope was not lost, indigenous leaders fought to protect Yasuní and ITT lands to keep oil in the ground and leave the forest untouched. In 2018, “18 Waorani communities launched an international petition... asking the world to sign to demand oil drilling stays out of their territory in the... Amazon” (Brown, 2018). Additionally, the indigenous community fighting to protect the ITT, worked with Amazon Frontlines to stop the sale of land to buyers interested in extracting oil (Brown, 2018). The fight between the government and the indigenous community lasted for years. Through mobilizing, the indigenous community’s initiative to protect Yasuní caught on and gleaned the support of citizens around Ecuador.

CONAIE took the lead role in launching a campaign to get support for a referendum that would keep oil under the forest of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (Rainforest Foundation, 2023). This came after years and years of work on grassroots movements facilitated by indigenous people and environmental activists who were seeking to protect their forests. The Yasunidos (Yasuní united) and the broader indigenous community had been attempting to call for a referendum before CONAIE’s involvement, but the government consistently shut it down despite “hundreds of thousands of valid signatures in favor of concessions to oil companies and government corruption” (Rainforest Foundation, 2023). The government's economic interests in oil completely overshadowed the environmental activists and indigenous people who were trying to protect the land in Ecuador.

Yet, through persistence and hard work from the indigenous groups around the country, the referendum was finally accepted in 2023 (Rainforest Foundation, 2023). It was part of a snap general election in August, the vote to ban drilling in the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve got 60% of voters' support (Al Jazeera, 2023). Meaning indigenous social movements- protests, being elected into positions of power, coalitions, and so on- were all worth it

In the past few years, indigenous leaders have been further organizing themselves, like Nenquimo, a Woarani woman who is the president of the Waorani organization of Pastaza province, the co-founder of Amazon Frontlines, and the Ceibo Alliance (Osborn, 2021). Ecuadorian people within and outside indigenous communities attend Constitutional court hearings related to resource extraction in the Amazon and have educated themselves and made their voices heard to protect the Yasuní-ITT region (Osborn, 2021). Additionally, some people from the indigenous communities are becoming legislatures and running for office to make bureaucratic change, like Salvador Quishpe a member of the Saraguro indigenous group (Osborn, 2021). Stemming from the grassroots momentum, indigenous communities, with help from their leaders in high-standing positions, were able to successfully gain hundreds of thousands of signatures to vote to halt drilling in the Yasuní-ITT (Collyns, 2023), a historic accomplishment that highlights social change at the nexus of climate change.

The future of Yasuní-ITT, the people living on that land, and the people fighting to protect it are all at an intersection of change. Earlier in October a new president was elected, he is thought to be more on the conservative side and had spent parts of his earlier career as a businessman (Bertelli, 2023). Therefore, it's hard to predict what will happen in the future of Yasuní-ITT with political decisions being largely influential on drilling. However, one constant hasn't changed throughout the history of the Yasuní-ITT's development while under different

political agendas. That is the indigenous people's strength and perseverance to protect the ITT oil fields and greater Yasuní land. They have risen to positions of power, mobilized on the streets to protest, formed coalitions, helped write governmental documents, and so much more. To protect against climate change and the land and livelihood of indigenous communities, people must continue to fight against drilling for oil in environmentally sensitive places like the ITT oil fields.

Indigenous people are thought to be stewards of the land, living in harmony with it unlike most of Western society. As the climate is changing and the environment deteriorates, it's time to shift our attention to and learn from those who know the land better than anyone. The Amazon rainforest is noted as the lungs of Earth, being the largest rainforest in the world. If indigenous Amazonians are telling the international and national communities to stop deforestation and resource extraction on the Amazon, the world should listen. As Ecuador is in this transitory period between presidents, indigenous voices should be uplifted and brought even more into democratic processes. This looks like getting our information straight from the indigenous community, supporting their social movements, voting with indigenous objectives in mind, and communicating and learning with them. Throughout recent history, the indigenous community in Ecuador has shown itself as a force to be reckoned with, and it's them that the rest of the country should be listening to in terms of the future of Yasuní-ITT.

Even though the indigenous community is valiantly strong, several policies should be set in place so indigenous social movements to combat climate change are not in vain. Firstly, the country should set out to research the importance of ecosystems, to provide scientific backing for how they are important. Not only are these ecosystems important for human health, but for the incredible array of species that make Ecuador and surrounding areas so biodiverse and ecologically important. From there, policies should set forth protection on these sensitive

environments making it illegal to drill or deforest that land. Additionally, Ecuador should develop policies to better protect and restore ancestral indigenous land, including the communities that live in voluntary isolation. To do this the country should work with indigenous leaders to map their land using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and give them representation over that land. Next, like how local areas- provinces, cities, etc.- have a seat in government, it would be beneficial if each indigenous community could have a representative position in government as well. This could be done through the facilitation of CONAIE, which would help elect representatives from each indigenous group around Ecuador. Therefore, the community would be able to have greater democratic power as well as be able to have their voice and rights heard in the long term process of obtaining equitably. Though this is only the beginning, the future of indigenous social movements in Ecuador to fight climate change is still in its infancy, with more representation, the community is bound to make great strides in making change.

The Yasuní-ITT case shows the intersection of climate change and indigenous social movements to a tee. This paper contextualized the physical science of Yasuní-ITT's geography, biodiversity, oil resources, and climate change, delved into the social issues around the Yasuní-ITT case understanding the history of indigenous people, the disconnect between them and the modern political structure, the rise of indigenous social movements, and the Yasuní initiative from indigenous perspectives. Finally, this writing analyzes what the future of the Yasuní case might look like, how people can learn from indigenous leaders, and policies that might lead Ecuador in the direction of institutionalizing indigenous social movements to protect against climate change.

From the physical science perspective, there were various key aspects regarding how Yasuní is deeply interwoven with the issue of climate change and environmental degradation. Notably, the oil resources in the ITT field make up Ecuador's second largest reserve, its emissions would directly affect climate change by increasing the amount of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. Secondly, the headwaters of one of the major tributaries of the Amazon River lies within Yasuní Biosphere Reserve, therefore an oil spill would be detrimental to downstream riparians. The ITT oil fields lie within one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, meaning that drilling for oil would cause habitat destruction and decrease biodiversity.

The social side of the Yasuní-ITT case investigated how indigenous movements have played a role in fighting against climate change. In understanding that, this paper synthesized the historical context of how indigenous peoples in Ecuador had been excluded from politics. CONAIE's role in unifying the indigenous population was instrumental in involving them in politics and making changes based on the indigenous agenda. Next, the indigenous community formed social movements to protect Yasuní Biosphere Reserve from oil extraction, and finally got the majority vote to stop the drilling.

In analyzing the Yasuní-ITT case through the lens of how indigenous-led movements worked to fight against climate change, we can look forward to the future. To take away, it is unknown what is to come due to changing politics, yet the strength of indigenous movements will shape the coming time. Additionally, Ecuador should turn to and uplift the indigenous community to understand the importance of protecting the environment and how to do so. Finally, policies should come into action like highlighting and protecting ecosystems, protecting and restoring indigenous land, and having indigenous leaders of each community be represented in government.

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