

Indigenous Communities in Latin America: Fighting for Control of Natural Resources in a Globalized Age

by Laura Carlsen | July 26, 2002

Since the resistance to colonization, native peoples in the Americas have fought to protect their dwindling territories and their right to manage the natural resources found there. But in this globalized age, that battle has intensified and taken on distinctive characteristics, posing new and profound challenges for the region's indigenous communities.

Many of the natural resources found on Indian lands have become more valuable in the context of the modern global economy. Several factors have spurred renewed interest in natural resources on Indian lands in Latin America, among them the mobility of capital, ecological limits to growth in developed countries, lax environmental restrictions in underdeveloped nations, lower transportation costs, advances in biotechnology, cheap third world labor, and national privatization policies. Limits to logging in developed countries have led timber transnationals overseas. Increased demand and higher prices for minerals have generated the reopening of mines and the proliferation of small-scale mining operations. Rivers are coveted for their hydroelectric potential, and bioprospecting has put a price tag on biodiversity. Originally considered lands unsuitable for productive activities, the resources on Indian lands are currently the resources of the future.

Indian land rights and decisionmaking authority regarding natural resource use on territories to which they hold claim threaten the mobility of capital and access to resources—key elements of the transnational-led globalization model. Accordingly, increased globalization has generally sharpened national conservative opposition to indigenous rights in the Americas and elsewhere in the name of “making the world safe for investment.” The World Trade Organization (WTO), free trade agreements, and transnational corporations are openly

hostile to any legislation that might create barriers to investment or the unlimited exploitation of natural resources on Indian lands. The result has been a growing number of conflicts between indigenous communities and governments and transnational corporations over control of natural resources.

Even nonrenewable resources legally defined as national property—and therefore exempt from indigenous laws recognizing the right to resource control—have sparked conflicts between transnationals and Indian peoples. For example, pollution from oil exploitation routinely destroys local ecosystems in Indian territories and deprives communities of traditional economic activities, as spills kill off fish populations and contaminate farmlands.

Land battles also focus on changing land use patterns in indigenous regions. Advanced technological changes, such as genetically modified plants, and intense global competition between giant food and agriculture conglomerates have transformed agricultural practices. These factors work to expel subsistence farmers and replace the sustainable farming methods that are the backbone of indigenous communities with monopolized chemical and biotechnological packages. A growing alliance between Indian and campesino organizations has begun to identify the threats and make common cause in defense of the campesino economy.

Development “megaprojects,” aimed at more fully integrating indigenous lands into the international economic system, constitute another, related challenge. Currently being implemented in most Latin American countries as precursors to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), these projects imply monumental changes in land use, resource exploitation, and social organization—changes that threaten the cohesion of indigenous



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peoples, their cultural survival, their physical well-being, and frontally contradict Indian values. A classic example of megaproject logic is the Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), which encompasses nine southern Mexican states and Central America. The imposition of this plan has provoked opposition from a growing network of peasant and indigenous groups. These groups claim that the plan will cause environmental damage, break up collective land use patterns, transform traditional farmers into maquiladora workers, and spur emigration.

Resistance on multiple fronts

As a result of these trends in Latin America, deepening economic integration has been accompanied by a proliferation of citizen movements in opposition to plans for economic integration based on creating links to the global economy. In the absence of strong environmental movements, these protests are frequently led by indigenous peoples in defense of their communities. Highways that attempt to connect communities to nodal points of international commerce rather than traditional markets (often destroying vast tracts of forest or farmland in the process) have met with unexpected resistance, as have transnational logging activities, massive water projects, and industrial corridors. Indian communities are explicitly rejecting transnational penetration into their lands and are instead placing a higher priority on the environment, cultural preservation, and traditional economic organization.

In Bolivia, indigenous communities in the Chiquitano forest region have organized to resist a natural gas pipeline built by Enron. The Rarámuri of northern Mexico recently registered a complaint before the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation claiming that the government has ignored its own laws in order to promote transnational logging on indigenous lands. Also in Mexico, a broad coalition of indigenous groups and NGO allies are mounting a large-scale, well-organized effort to counter the Plan Puebla-Panama.

Similarly, the U'wa Indians of Colombia spent most of the past decade organizing resistance to oil exploration by Occidental/Shell Oil on traditional

U'wa lands in the eastern Andes. Citing the "threat to our home, the animals and plants we eat, the water we drink, and our culture, which is based on the forest," the U'wa have blockaded construction sites, conducted protest tours in the United States, lobbied U.S. legislators, and even took their case to the Organization of American States. After the Colombian Supreme Court overturned a lower court ruling in their favor, spiritual leaders announced last October that they would walk off a cliff before allowing oil exploration on their lands. Members of the community did just that to avoid colonization by the Spanish in the 17th century. In July 2002 Occidental's first exploratory well on U'wa land turned up dry, and at its May 3, 2002 annual shareholder meeting the company announced that it would return its oil concession near U'wa lands to government control. Despite this victory, advocates note that other companies might seek to develop the concession.

Indigenous leaders in the Americas have also taken the lead in the fight against the patenting of life forms. In Mexico, the Council of Traditional Medics and Midwives of Los Altos in Chiapas recently forced suspension of a bioprospecting project between the University of Georgia, the transnational Molecular Limited, and a local academic institute.

At the global level, international indigenous forums and conferences on the issue of biopiracy and bioprospecting have resulted in major declarations protesting the practices and the intellectual property regimes that give rise to them. In the Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples, drawn up in June 1993 in New Zealand, indigenous delegates from 14 countries declared their right to self-determination and proclaimed indigenous peoples as the exclusive owners of their cultural and intellectual property.

On July 25, 1999, indigenous groups meeting in Geneva released a document criticizing Art. 27.3bi of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The document, entitled "No to Patenting of Life!" concludes: "it [TRIPs] will lead to the appropriation of our traditional medicinal plants

and seeds and our indigenous knowledge on health, agriculture, and biodiversity conservation.” The indigenous groups demanded systems that: protect the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and farmers, allow seed saving and sharing and the free use of medicinal plants, prevent the theft and piracy of indigenous materials and knowledge, and integrate the principle and practice of informed consent and the right of indigenous peoples to veto any bioprospecting activity. The Indigenous People’s Seattle Declaration, on the occasion of the Third Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in December 1999, also condemned the patenting of life forms.

Partially as a response to such organizing, most Latin American countries are now beginning to hammer out regulations regarding biodiversity and indigenous rights. Many have signed the Convention on Biological Diversity, which obligates companies that utilize plant material for profit to share benefits with some nations and communities. Ecuador and Venezuela grant indigenous peoples collective intellectual property rights under their constitutions, and the Mexican National Indigenous Congress recently supported a nationwide call for a moratorium on bioprospecting activities.

Forging crossborder links

International organizing against IMF austerity programs, free-market policies, Plan Puebla Panama, and the FTAA has galvanized alliances between indigenous movements and other social sectors, although still on a small scale. Central American and Mexican Indian peoples have participated in numerous forums to protest the PPP, and Amazon peoples have been meeting to oppose infrastructure projects that destroy wetlands, forests, and river basins in that region. As those most affected by global efforts to exploit biodiversity and impose megaprojects, indigenous peoples have recognized the radical nature of their demands regarding globalization and have played an increasingly important role in the global justice movement.

The links being formed between indigenous organizations and the global justice movement have been critical in three areas: creating national coalitions on issues of common concern, whether specifically

indigenous or not; publicizing and supporting indigenous groups in defense of their lands and rights; and funding autonomous development projects.

Although national indigenous movements have found new allies among the antiglobalization movement and now have Internet tools to fight their isolation, opposition to their work has consolidated under the mantras of free trade and foreign investment. Rapid economic integration is producing stark conflicts of interest, pitting indigenous peoples seeking to protect their rights and natural resources against transnational corporations backed by national governments. Legal reforms they have recently won have been met with growing resistance on the ground and in the courts and legislatures. Still, while Indian peoples have found new enemies as well as new friends, they found new strength in a world where their discourse on sustainability is gaining renewed vigor and offers an alternate vision to market-blinded development.

Laura Carlsen is a researcher affiliated with the Center for Rural Change in Mexico located in Mexico City and has written extensively on the Mexican Indian movement. This commentary was adapted from a longer report on Indigenous Autonomy in Latin America produced by the IRC’s Self-Determination in Focus Project. The full 12-page report may be viewed on the SelfDetermine.org website at <http://www.selfdetermine.org/regions/indigrights.html>

RESOURCES:

ANALYSIS AND INFORMATION

Abya Yala Net

<http://abyayala.nativeweb.org/>

Aguinda vs. Texaco

<http://www.texacorainforest.org/>

Indigenous Peoples in Latin America | LANIC/UT-Texas

<http://www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/indigenous/>

Mexico Conflict Profile | Self Determination In Focus

<http://www.selfdetermine.org/conflicts/mexico.html>

Pueblos Indígenas: por un cambio real | Americas Program, July 10, 2002

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/citizen-action/focus/020710pueblo.html>

Self Determination and Autonomy in Latin America |

Self Determination In Focus, July 2002

<http://www.selfdetermine.org/regions/indigrights.html>

INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND SOLIDARITY GROUPS

Amazon Alliance for Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the Amazon Basin

<http://www.amazonalliance.org/>

Amazon Watch

<http://www.amazonwatch.org/>

Ashaninka Peoples, Peru

<http://ashaninka.inictel.gob.pe/>

Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (CONFEIAE)

<http://www.unii.net/confeniae/>

Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas del Ecuador (CONAI)

<http://conaie.org/>

Confederacion de Pueblos Indigenas de Bolivia (CIDOB)

<http://www.cidob-bo.org/>

Congreso Nacional Indígena de Mexico

<http://www.laneta.apc.org/cni/mh.htm>

Cultural Survival

<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/>

Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN)

<http://www.ezln.org/>

First Peoples Worldwide

<http://www.firstpeoples.org/>

Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Centre

<http://www.itpcentre.org/>

Indigenous Environmental Network

<http://www.ienearth.org/>

Indigenous Peoples Biodiversity Information Network (IBIN)

<http://www.ibin.org/>

Mapuche People, Chile

<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/7718/>

Organizacion Nacional Indigena de Colombia (ONIC)

<http://www.onic.org.co/>

Rainforest Action Network

<http://www.ran.org/>

Shinai Serjali, Peru

<http://www.serjali.org/>

The Pachamama Alliance

<http://www.pachamama.org/>

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