

Death in the Amazon

institutional and political challenges of extraction

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Socio-environmental conflict over natural resource management in Latin America raises fundamental questions about current development models. The issue made international headlines on June 5th 2009, when police opened fire on several thousand protesters near the Peruvian town of Bagua. Ten protesters and twelve policemen were killed, and eleven policemen who had been held captive at an oil pumping station were murdered later the same day in apparent retaliation by indigenous people. While Peru's government opened high-level negotiations with Amazonian indigenous organisations, it is unclear whether this will avert future conflict.

The expansion of extractive industry is a critical factor in these protests. Concessions for oil and gas exploration cover three-quarters of the Peruvian Amazon. Blocks overlap with reserves for indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation, with lands titled to indigenous groups and with protected areas. Two-thirds of Ecuador's Amazon is covered by hydrocarbon blocks while, as our research shows, Bolivia is expanding oil and gas extraction, including projects inside indigenous territories and protected areas.¹

The mineral frontier has been equally expansive, in historic and non-traditional mining countries alike. In Peru, fifteen major watersheds have over a quarter of their surface under mining concession while the figures for each of the three main drainage basins supplying metropolitan Lima range from 30% to 41%. This raises uncertainties about the future of water resource management and destabilises rural land markets and livelihoods.²

Meanwhile, the Initiative for Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) is developing a network of inter-oceanic roads, ports, waterways, hydroelectric plants and pipelines. Planned hydroelectricity projects on Peru's eastern slopes to provide power primarily to Brazil will displace communities. One project would flood over 100 km. of the recently asphalted Brazil-Peru Interoceanic Highway, one of IIRSA's most iconic projects.

Drivers for this expansion include: (i) growth in global demand for minerals and hydrocarbons; (ii) Brazil's increased economic and political protagonism in the region; (iii) growing investment in extractive industries from non-traditional sources (China, India, Brazil, Russia, South Korea etc.); and (iv) technological changes. Also important are (v) the policy commitments of both neoliberal and "post-neoliberal" governments for

whom extractive industry can finance social policy and other expenditure deemed necessary for their political projects.

These processes are transforming territories that are occupied by peasant and indigenous peoples and provide water to urban and rural populations. However, levels of prior consultation with these groups are inadequate and issues of indigenous claims, rural livelihoods, or vulnerable ecologies often overlooked.

Intense socio-environmental conflict is an unsurprising outcome, but what will it produce? One possibility would be institutional change to enable more inclusive development planning – early experiments with participatory water monitoring and land use planning suggest this is possible.² Another is that it leads to authoritarian responses by governments determined to force through this development model. There is also evidence that this is occurring. A third possibility is that recurring cycles of conflict become constitutive of the new territorial dynamics emerging across much of the continent. Whether governments can transform contention into more inclusive forms of development will determine the viability of the political economic models being pursued by their administrations.³



Further reading:

For more information on the research programme and publications^{1,2,3} on which this note is based see: <http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/research/andes/publications/>

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Our work has combined case studies of territorial dynamics, national quantitative and political economy analysis, spatial analysis, participation in policy debates and a network of academic and non-academic partnerships facilitating these activities.

Box 1: Policy points

1. Avoid authoritarian language and repressive strategies when confronted with social conflicts.
2. Engage in rigorous participatory land use planning with the power to define "no-go" areas for extractive industry.
3. Work towards establishing autonomous environmental authorities with ethical and professional legitimacy.
4. Develop institutions or mechanisms that help reduce asymmetries between project promoters and local communities in negotiation processes through training, advice, information dissemination, etc.

These last two suggestions might draw lessons from the successful human rights Ombudsman's office in Peru.

References:

1. Anthony Bebbington, 2009. "The New Extraction? Rewriting the Political Ecology of the Andes." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 42(5) September/October, p 12-20.
2. Anthony Bebbington and Jeffrey Bury, 2009. "Institutional challenges for mining and sustainability in Peru," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.
3. Anthony Bebbington *et al.* 2008. "Contention and ambiguity: Mining and the possibilities of development," *Development and Change* 39(6): 887-914.