



# International NGOs and indigenous social movements

Lucy Earle, January 2007

*This paper gives an overview of an 18-month research study carried out by INTRAC during 2005–06 on the relationships between an indigenous movement in the Peruvian Amazon and international NGOs. This study was financed by the British Government's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)<sup>1</sup> as part of a broader programme of investigation into non-governmental public action.<sup>2</sup> It aimed to investigate the engagement between two different types of non-governmental actor: international conservation NGOs and indigenous social movements. In particular the research project sought to understand how financial and technical support from an international organisation might impact upon the way a localised, radical group functions, both in terms of its relationships to members and the way it presents itself to external actors.*

The study addressed the following question: How does engagement with international non-governmental actors impact

upon indigenous social movements in terms of their mission, activities, membership and self-presentation?

This was explored through a case study of one indigenous organisation, COMARU (Consejo Machiguenga del Rio Urubamba, or Machiguenga Council of the Urubamba River). COMARU represents 30 communities of predominantly Machiguenga people in an isolated area of the Peruvian Amazon. Until the arrival of prospecting groups from oil companies in the mid 1980s, there had been very little communication between the Machiguenga and national society. Their ancestral territories are located in an area of both high biodiversity and also the largest natural gas reserves in South America – the Camisea gas fields. The presence of energy companies has been growing steadily over the past decade, and the Machiguenga organisation has begun to mobilise increasingly radical protest in order to protect the livelihoods of its member communities. It should be

<sup>1</sup> This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The ESRC is the UK's leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns. ESRC aims to provide high-quality research on issues of importance to business, the public sector and Government.

<sup>2</sup> For more information please visit [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/NGPA](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/NGPA)

understood that Camisea is an extremely high profile infrastructure project in Peru, and one on which the former president Toledo staked his reputation. Working to a tight deadline to start production by August 2004, the project involved building extractive platforms in the Amazon region and two pipelines (one for natural gas and the other for liquid natural gas) stretching over the Andes to Lima and the coast. The Camisea project was marketed to the Peruvian people as crucial to the country's development: it would provide cheap gas for Lima's residents, but would also transform Peru into an exporter of gas, potentially to richer, more powerful countries such as Brazil and the US. Since the project was in part funded by the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB), it also gained an international reputation. On the one hand, some in the IDB wanted Camisea as a model for investors, proving that it was possible to undertake large infrastructure projects in areas with delicate eco-systems and vulnerable peoples without causing extensive damage to either. On the other, some campaigning groups in the United States believed that such a large-scale project would pave the way for further destruction of the Amazon region.

The research project involved extensive fieldwork, with researchers spending a total of three months in Peru – in Lima; at the headquarters of the organisation in the tropical Andes; and in the Amazon region. The researchers also made a brief visit to Washington DC to carry out interviews with representatives from international NGOs.<sup>3</sup>

Historically relationships between conservationists and indigenous peoples have been problematic. In their efforts to preserve biodiversity, conservation NGOs have often been accused of displacing indigenous groups from their ancestral lands or preventing them from carrying out their traditional

livelihood practices, such as hunting, fishing and the extraction of other forest resources. More recently, efforts have been made to find common ground, through initiatives that involve indigenous people in the management of protected areas, and joint conservation and sustainable development projects. However, some observers are still highly critical of conservation actors and deny that they are giving adequate attention to the rights and priorities of indigenous peoples. In Peru indigenous groups have become increasingly well organised over the past 25 years, and have formed federations at local, regional and national levels to assert their rights to self-determination, and the protection of their land and cultural traditions as provided for in international conventions.<sup>4</sup>

## Theoretical Questions

This study looked at the relationship between COMARU, and international conservation NGOs through the lens of social movement theory. Scholars of collective action assert that radical grassroots organisations will become co-opted and formalised once they accept support from external non-governmental actors. It is argued that the agenda of the richer and more powerful 'partner' will begin to overshadow the priorities of the grassroots organisation, and that bureaucratic burdens placed on it will dampen characteristically spontaneous activities. Taking into consideration the strong discourse amongst Amazonian indigenous organisations on their rights to land, development and natural resources, this study asks whether COMARU has in fact managed to negotiate common ground with international conservation actors, rejecting projects with too much of a focus on protecting biodiversity.

A large amount of material has been produced by social scientists on social movement theory, particularly since the 1960s. Priority has been given to the analysis of movements that have emerged

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<sup>3</sup> This research project was carried out by Brian Pratt, INTRAC's Director and Lucy Earle, Associate Researcher.

<sup>4</sup> See the ILO's Convention 169 on Indigenous Rights. The Peruvian government is a signatory.



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in the West and the resultant theory is centred on experiences in these contexts. Southern social movements have received relatively little attention. In the literature that is available, there is a noticeable lack both of empirical case studies and analysis of INGO interaction with Southern social movements. This is surprising, given that in international development, social movements are often courted by INGOs as 'partners'. The complex interrelationships between local social movements and INGOs are challenged by movements' evolutionary nature. They can rise, fall and disappear in response to changing political circumstances and levels of success or failure. Geared as they generally are to specific, quantifiable goals, membership will drop off if these are achieved, or if success seems highly unlikely. However, not all social movements will disappear after success or failure. In some cases a social movement will transform itself into an organisational form more akin to an NGO. This transition can be problematic if it occurs as an unintended consequence of donor support for a radical movement, or without the prior knowledge or consent of its members. McAdam notes the "destructive forces of oligarchization, cooptation, and the dissolution of indigenous support [all of which] tame the movement by encouraging insurgents to pursue only those goals acceptable to external sponsors" (quoted in Piven & Cloward 1995:159-160).

## Research Findings

### *Limited engagement*

Working with archive data and anthropological studies, the research drew up a picture of the characteristics of the Machiguenga and their relationships with external actors. Traditionally conflict avoiders, the Machiguenga had also been very cautious about entering into partnerships with NGOs on conservation projects, particularly after two experiences in which externally-led projects appeared to be wresting control and management away from COMARU. While COMARU leaders use the discourse of environmentalism in publications and

speeches to external audiences, in internal meetings their emphasis is much more on sustainable development and use of natural resources. In-depth fieldwork with the leaders of the organisation showed that they were acutely aware that collaborating with INGOs could damage their standing with member communities, largely because of previous bad experiences with such organisations. Conservation and other international organisations that have worked in the Camisea region have been accused of redrawing the boundaries of protected areas so as to reduce the extent of Machiguenga communal land, and of engaging in 'biopiracy' – stealing specimens of endemic wildlife in order to patent them overseas. Through communications with the representative body for Amazonian indigenous peoples, AIDSESEP, COMARU and its member communities hear of similar experiences in other parts of Amazonian Peru. For example, one conservation organisation working on sustainable resource extraction with logging companies had, almost literally, wiped indigenous communities off the map, by using outdated cadastral surveys.

In some cases, these conflicts between indigenous groups and international conservation and development organisations are the result of innocent misunderstandings, or poor communication. In other cases, dedicated conservationists appear to have put their own priorities before those of local communities. The climate of mistrust causes difficulties for COMARU as an organisation, since it needs to find financial support to respond to its members' demands and maintain pressure on the energy companies in the area who flout their own codes of conduct. The struggle to strike a balance between raising resources and maintaining autonomy is one that marks the work of the organisation. For example, activists in Peru and the US have criticised COMARU's leaders for accepting funding from the energy consortium that leads gas extraction in Camisea. These activists advocate complete distancing between indigenous groups and oil and gas companies, and encourage protest against exploration of natural resources. However, COMARU's leadership is determined to

ensure that the organisation remains the most important indigenous actor in the region and has negotiated grants from the companies involved in gas extraction to help to ensure this. Leaders and members value the prestige that results from enlarged headquarters (including a hostel for visitors to Machiguenga) and from the tertiary education of a number of young Machiguenga in the provincial capital, Cusco. These types of investment will maintain membership and loyalty from Machiguenga communities (who could otherwise affiliate themselves to a rival local organisation) which in turn will give COMARU more weight when making demands of local government for basic infrastructure in Machiguenga communities, such as drinking water and electricity. COMARU's leaders explained that they had negotiated grants from the companies involved in extracting and transporting gas in the region, as financial support had not been forthcoming from other sources, such as INGOs.

Examining the engagement of INGOs in the area, the researchers soon discovered a disconnect between the discourse of international actors and the situation on the ground in the Camisea area. Although a number of conservation-based NGOs claimed to be working at the grassroots level with COMARU, in practice engagement was extremely limited. The principal involvement of these organisations in the Camisea gas issue is Washington-based lobbying that aims to minimise the negative impacts of energy companies in the Amazon. They regard Camisea as 'emblematic' of what can go wrong with major infrastructure projects in culturally and environmentally sensitive areas and use it to press for changes in the way that public money is used to finance such mega-projects. These goals are quite distinct from COMARU's calls for the protection of Machiguenga rights to traditional livelihoods in the face of environmental damage caused by the energy companies. This situation seems to suggest that COMARU is being co-opted at a distance by large conservation agencies that use the name of the organisation to give their own campaigns greater legitimacy. It

also highlights the difficulties of coordinating advocacy campaigns by a diverse group of actors with differing interpretations and priorities. Some of the policy issues raised as a result of this part of the study are discussed at greater length in a separate briefing paper.

The lack of grassroots support led the researchers to introduce an extra strand to the project, to examine why so little international support was forthcoming to protect both indigenous rights in the face of gas extraction by energy companies, and the delicate and unique ecosystem in the area. COMARU is mobilising increasingly radical protests, using social movement-style strategies to campaign against the pollution of rivers caused by leaks in the gas pipelines. This leads external actors to label COMARU's activities as 'political'. Indeed, indigenous activism in general is often considered 'political' and as such difficult for 'neutral' INGOs to support. Beyond this, the Peruvian government's promotion of the gas extraction project makes any support for a radical grassroots group problematic for INGOs since the latter rely on host government approval for their conservation investments, which, in some cases, can involve millions of dollars.

### *Problems of mobilising collective protest*

If on the one hand, international conservation organisations were steering clear of direct support for 'politicised' and perhaps unpredictable indigenous groups, other campaigning organisations criticised COMARU for not being radical enough. In late December 2004, less than six months after gas extraction had started from the Camisea platforms, there was a rupture of the pipeline close to Machiguenga territory, contaminating drinking water for communities in the area and killing fish stocks. Three further leaks from the pipeline occurred in 2005. During that year, three protest events were organised by COMARU against the government and the energy company. The first of these was a protest march during which Machiguenga banged on empty oil cylinders and shouted



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slogans. The march halted a public hearing of an Environmental Impact Assessment being held in a Machiguenga community. With the knowledge that expansion to gas extraction could not go ahead without the public hearing, and angered that the demands the organisation had put forward with regards to safety and compensation after the first rupture of the pipeline had not been met, COMARU organised a boycott of the rescheduled public hearing. Despite this initial defiance, Machiguenga leaders were eventually persuaded by company representatives to allow the hearing to go ahead. After the fourth pipeline accident later in the year (the second to occur close to Machiguenga communities) a river boycott was mounted that prevented supplies from reaching the extraction platforms in the Camisea area for eight days.

COMARU, however, was not able to sustain its protest response in the long-term and was perceived by a number of campaign organisations to have capitulated to the pressure, threats and cajoling of the energy companies. The Machiguenga leaders were thought to have compromised the autonomy of their organisation by striking financial deals and compensation agreements with the energy consortium. Representatives of activist organisations also expressed frustration that it had taken so long for COMARU to protest against the energy companies (exploration work began in earnest in the mid-1990s) and that they were only moved to organise after a serious accident. Most of these activist groups take a hard line on cooperation with oil and gas companies, and do not believe that indigenous groups should allow them onto their territories. During the research study, representatives of these organisations were interviewed and asked their opinion on the outcome of the protest activities. Their explanations for COMARU's apparent inability to sustain collective action and willingness to negotiate with the consortium reveal entrenched stereotypical perceptions of indigenous communities and social organisation.

One respondent from a Lima-based organisation made negative comparisons between COMARU and another indigenous group in the far north of the country that has maintained its defence against oil exploration on its territory for the past ten years. This group has forced a number of different companies to withdraw plans to begin work in the area. This particular respondent believed that the explanation for the Machiguenga's inability to follow suit must result from years of marginalisation and oppression and their deeply disempowered state. For another respondent, the fact that the former leader of COMARU had agreed a deal with the energy companies against the wishes of his people, showed that he had lost his 'indigeness' due to extensive exposure to Western ways through international travel to conferences and meetings in the US and Europe. Similar complaints of the Machiguenga's loss of cultural tradition were made by another NGO worker with reference to the difficulty her organisation faced in encouraging the Machiguenga to engage in community level development projects and monitoring activities. She particularly criticised the requests of COMARU's leadership and community monitors to receive a salary for their work.<sup>5</sup> She believed this to be evidence that they had lost their sense of 'Machiguenga cosmovision'. Further she, along with other NGO respondents, believed that had legislation on 'Native Communities' from 1974 allowed for a more holistic notion of Machiguenga ethnic territory, that encompassed collective security of land and water (rather than division into separate, small communities), then the notion of an overarching indigenous identity might have been better fostered amongst the Machiguenga.

These NGO representatives and observers of the situation in the Lower Urubamba appear to base their criticisms of COMARU and the Machiguenga on certain assumptions of indigenous behaviour, social organisation and relationship to the environment. The Machiguenga are expected by these external

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<sup>5</sup> This is far from an unreasonable demand on the part of COMARU's leadership, who currently only draw a small stipend. With the advent of the energy companies to the region this has become a full-time job with a demanding workload that does not permit time for other income-generating activities.

actors to work together as an ethnic group in the aggressive protection of their territory and traditional livelihoods. But while neighbouring groups in the Amazon used to engage in headhunting and violent raids, the Machiguenga have traditionally retreated from perceived external threats. Furthermore, anthropological accounts from the 1970s showed that the Machiguenga lived in very small family groups of around 12 people, did not have leaders and rarely came together as a community (Johnson 2003). Although the Peruvian government and religious missionaries have encouraged the Machiguenga to live in population settlements in the 'Native Communities', recent events have shown that it is still very difficult for COMARU, as their representative organisation, to mobilise collective action. This is in part because ideas of 'community' amongst the Machiguenga are not based on an "organic bond between people, place and language" (Rosengren 2003: 222), contrary to some outsiders' expectations of Amazonian tribal behaviour.

Under the impression that the Machiguenga are not behaving as they should, a couple of Peruvian NGOs have elaborated proposals for community level projects that aim to recuperate the Machiguenga's 'traditional culture and identity'. However, as the anthropological studies mentioned above illustrate, it could be argued that they are attempting to reinstate a non-existent past. These studies suggest that is far from 'natural' for the Machiguenga either to organise as a group or to engage in activities that are likely to bring them into conflict with external actors. With reference to the protest activities described above, it is significant that any protest was mobilised at all in response to the spills from the gas pipeline, and shows the extent to which the presence of the energy companies has become to be considered a threat. Not only is this type of activity uncharacteristic of the Machiguenga, in contrast to certain stereotypical perceptions of indigenous attitudes towards ethnicity and territory, but the use of strategies such as the protest march and the river blockade are taken from contexts outside

Machiguenga experience. The idea of marching while banging on oil cylinders, and indeed, the labelling of this event as the 'cilindrazo' were explicitly borrowed from the 'cazerolazo' demonstrations of the most European of South American cities, Buenos Aires (during which people take to the streets banging on pots and pans). At the time of the pipeline spill, an Argentinean anthropologist/NGO worker was staying in one of the affected communities, and suggested the strategy as a way of halting the public meeting and showing defiance towards the plans of the government and energy companies to expand gas extraction in the region. Similarly, the river blockade mirrored a similar blockade organised some months earlier by residents of Sepahua, a non-native settlement further downstream, who were demanding that royalties from the Camisea project be invested in their province. This in turn echoed the strategies of strikers elsewhere in Peru, who have attempted to bring the country to a standstill by building road blocks. Only the boycott of the rescheduled public hearing, in anticipation of which Machiguenga community members simply disappeared into the forest, appears to reflect a traditional Machiguenga response to external threat. Indeed, our field research would suggest that the use of social movement-style strategies that were unfamiliar to the Machiguenga may have damaged the relationship between the community members and the organisation's leadership.

## Conclusions

Although the literature on social movements argues that they are liable to be weakened or co-opted when they enter into joint initiatives with organisations that have much greater levels of resources, access to information and power, this research study showed how social movements can behave strategically to try to avoid these types of negative outcome. Although there are examples from the Camisea area where conservation priorities have been put forward at the expense of the demands and desires of the Machiguenga communities, the indigenous organisation in the case study was not blind to the potentially negative consequences of collaborating with international conservation



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and development organisations. Both the leadership and the community members expressed their fears that COMARU's agenda, and those of the people it represents, might be compromised were they to accept funds from external actors. COMARU weighs up its alliances carefully, and may be achieving some kind of balance by striking deals with both the energy companies and the NGOs and by being cautious in its approach to collaborative initiatives. Surprisingly, however, there were few initiatives being put forward by international conservation organisations to work in the Camisea region, despite its status as an area of high biodiversity. This reluctance may relate to the difficulty conservation organisations perceive in working with politicised and increasingly mobilised indigenous organisations.

While COMARU is able to act strategically at the local level, negotiating with different funding sources and proceeding with caution into alliances with conservation organisations, it does not have this level of control at the international level where high-level lobbying is being undertaken. The priorities of the large conservation organisations who have chosen to focus on Camisea because of its 'emblematic' status, and its potential to open the door for more multilateral funding of infrastructure projects in the Amazon, differ considerably from those of COMARU and the Machiguenga who are affected by the negligence of specific energy companies at the local level.

Finally, some of the activist organisations that are engaging at the local level with the Machiguenga have been encouraging COMARU to behave in ways that are not necessarily in line with the Machiguenga's experience and traditions. Although support is needed for COMARU, this should be channelled towards realising the indigenous group's current aspirations, rather than based on a stereotypical interpretation of how the Machiguenga ought to be engaging with their environment and community. Activist organisations have a tendency to view extractive industry in somewhat black and white terms, and have

difficulty in supporting the more nuanced view held by COMARU, that sees the development benefits its communities could receive through cooperation with the energy companies. For organisations that wish to work at local level with indigenous organisations, a more thorough understanding of the specific nature of that indigenous group's social organisation is necessary, to avoid recourse to potentially harmful stereotypes.

## Policy implications

- Maintaining autonomy and organisational identity is a top priority for indigenous organisations and social movements. Relationships with the membership can be damaged if outsiders' agendas appear to be privileged.
- Indigenous leaders are often elected for their ability to represent their people and speak in public rather than their managerial or administrative capacity. The latter may be very weak.
- The indigenous organisation is likely to employ environmentalist discourse or 'green rhetoric' to appeal to a broader international audience. However, this may belie quite different internal social development goals.
- Supporting indigenous groups that have been marginalised for many centuries will inevitably entail a degree of 'politicisation'. Work on rights and on empowerment cannot be carried out in a power vacuum, and INGOs must be ready to assume the risks involved.
- International activist organisations that try to encourage social protest amongst indigenous groups should take into account levels of community cohesion and past experience of disruptive activities. Using strategies outside the traditional repertoire can cause internal problems and the organisation may not be able to withstand backlash from the authorities.

- International advocacy campaigns are an opportunity to work in collaboration with indigenous movements, but complex situations will generate a wide range of strategies, potential advocacy targets and overall goals. All actors involved should make their individual aims clear from the start and discuss the extent to which one campaign can cover a wide range of demands.
- Indigenous organisations faced with large scale infrastructure on or near to their lands will come to have regular contact with power holders – local and national governments and international companies. They will need support if they are to be able to present the demands of their peoples effectively and engage in dialogue and negotiation.

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## About INTRAC

INTRAC, the International NGO Training and Research Centre, publishes briefing papers on policy developments that affect the work of civil society organisations worldwide. The current briefing papers, funded by Swedish development agency Sida, deal with two main topics from a civil society perspective: the securitisation of development and the 'War on Terror', and the Paris Declaration and aid effectiveness agenda.

Over 2006/07, INTRAC ran a series of workshops on the role of counter-terrorism measures in international development. These were held in Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, North America, and among the Somali diaspora in Europe. Many of the issues we discuss in these briefing papers were first

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