

Policy Briefing Paper 9
Collaborative Engagement – Conflict Avoidance – Cooption at a Distance:
INGOs and indigenous social movements

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Background to the research

INTRAC has recently completed an 18-month research study 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) ¹ as part of a broader programme of investigation into non-governmental public action.² The aim of the study was to investigate the engagement between two different types of non-governmental actor: international conservation NGOs and indigenous social movements. It focuses on a case study of one indigenous organization that represents communities of Machiguenga people in an isolated area of the Peruvian Amazon. The ancestral territories of the Machiguenga 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 organization has had to mobilise increasingly radical protest in order to protect the livelihoods of its member communities. The research project had an extensive fieldwork component, with the researchers spending a total of three months in Peru – in Lima, at the headquarters of the organization 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.³

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 use 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 desires 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-

¹ 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.

² For more information please visit www.lse.ac.uk/collections/NGPA

³ This research project was carried out by Brian Pratt, INTRAC's director and Lucy Earle, Associate Researcher

determination and the protection of their land and cultural traditions as provided for in international conventions.⁴

Theoretical Questions

This study examines the relationship between the Machiguenga organization, COMARU, and international conservation NGOs through the lens of social movement theory. Scholars of collective action assert that radical grassroots organizations will become coopted 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 organization, and that bureaucratic burdens placed on it will dampen characteristically spontaneous activities. Taking into consideration the strong discourse amongst Amazonian indigenous organizations 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 the protection of biodiversity.

Box 1: Social Movement Theory

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

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

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

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 organization 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 organizations. However, COMARU 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 organization. For example, activists in Peru and the US have criticised COMARU's leaders for having accepted 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 organization remains the most important indigenous actor in the region. This requires substantial financial support that has not been forthcoming from other types of actor.

Examining the engagement of international NGOs 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 the NGOs claimed to be working at the grassroots level with COMARU, in practice engagement was extremely limited. The principal involvement of these organizations 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 coopted at a distance by large conservation agencies that use the name of the organization to give their own campaigns greater legitimacy.

The lack of grassroots support led the researchers to introduce an extra strand to the research 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 they rely on host government approval for their conservation investments.

Box 2: Problems of mobilising collective protest

Stereotypical perceptions of Amazonian tribes revolve around an idea of close-knit communities that will aggressively defend their territory against incursions from outsiders. But while neighbouring groups 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. Although the Peruvian government and religious missionaries have encouraged the Machiguenga to live in population settlements, recent events have shown that it is still very difficult for their representative organization, COMARU, to mobilise collective action. In 2005 three protest events were organized against government and energy company plans to increase gas extraction after a number of ruptures of the first gas pipeline. However, the organization could not sustain these protests and the use of social movement-style strategies that were unfamiliar to the Machiguenga may have damaged the relationship between membership and leadership. Theories of social networks help to explain the lack of success of collective protest: both the difficulty of the terrain where the Machiguenga live and their history of family-level isolation hampers information flows between communities and from the 'outside world'. The Machiguenga also lack forums in which to discuss the rapid changes to their livelihoods, to air grievances or to debate how best to manage these events.

- Maintaining autonomy and organizational identity is a top priority for indigenous organizations 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 organization 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 organizations 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 organization 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.

Box 3: Dissemination of the research

INTRAC plans to

- Publish a full research report
- Produce briefing papers on international advocacy with grassroots groups
- Publish an article on representative organizations and their use of social movement strategies
- Translate the report and briefing papers into Spanish
- Take part in a dissemination workshop for interested actors in Peru

References and further reading

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