

RESPECT FOR THE SELF-DETERMINATION AND PROTECTION OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN ISOLATION

AN ETHICAL GAZE FROM THE STANDPOINT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Beatriz Huertas Castillo



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Abstract. *This article addresses the resurgence of positions within anthropology that favor States taking the initiative in the establishment of direct and permanent relationships with those indigenous peoples, or parts of them, that live in voluntary isolation. The article analyses the context and the arguments wielded by the promoters of this position today, as well as the impact that similar initiatives have had on indigenous peoples. In contrast, the article exposes the historic processes of the approach that respects the self-determination and territorial integrity of these peoples, as well as its principles and achievements. In that same vein, the article highlights the importance of an anthropology that is respectful of the decisions made by the peoples in isolation with regard to their way of life, or the level of interaction or engagement that they wish to sustain with the surrounding population. At the same time, the article establishes the need to guarantee the legal security and protection of the territories of peoples in isolation, as well as the necessity of implementing preventive measures to avoid health issues and interethnic conflicts. Likewise, the article highlights the need to place the respect for these peoples' fundamental rights and those of the surrounding populations before academic, governmental, economic or other interests, at the time of taking any decision that may affect them.*

Introduction

Since the year 2014, in the context of the highest exposition of members of indigenous groups in isolation to interactions with neighbouring populations in Peru and Brazil, researchers, mainly from the field of anthropology, have promoted plans and actions oriented towards accelerating the establishment of direct and sustained State relationships with, not only certain individuals belonging to these peoples, but with the peoples in isolation in general. In some cases, this approach, also known as “forced contact” or “controlled contact”, has come hand in hand with the interest of performing anthropological and linguistic studies of these peoples, based on direct methodologies of data collection. Through this approach, a lot of elements are either left out of consideration or completely disregarded: the peoples' decision to distance themselves from surrounding society, their ways of life, and the risks that the so-called forced contact has historically implied for the physical, sociocultural and territorial integrity of these peoples. In order to justify this position, its promoters have distorted the approach that advocates for the respect of self-determination and the protection of peoples in isolation, which has been advanced since the mid 1980's by indigenous organizations, scholars, activists and international human rights bodies, such as the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Regarding this stance, the self-determination of these peoples, or the right that they have to decide over their way of life and their level of engagement and interaction with other people, has not only been simplified and reduced to what has been called the “leave them alone” stance (Walker & Hill, 2015, p. 1061), but has also been undermined and caricatured by attributing it to perceptions through which isolation is promoted and “fetichized” (Shepard, 2016, p. 135).



Another basis for the stance in favor of controlled contact (Walker & Hill, 2015) derives from the overestimation of the State's capacity to adequately manage the induced processes of direct and sustained engagement, among other aspects of the life of the peoples involved. Historically, forced integration has had devastating effects for the indigenous peoples in isolation due to its unleashing of violent conflicts, eruption of new diseases, mass deaths, demographic, social, economic and political un-structuring, and territorial loss (CDC, 2017; Barclay and García, 2014; Camacho, 2010; Cueva, 2008; Beier, 2008; Huertas, 2002).

As we shall see, the new momentum that this ancient practice has picked up in Peru during the recent years, even within the State itself, has had the effect of downsizing the principles and standards of protection for these peoples. The implementation of said principles had been conquered through the tremendous effort of activist and indigenous organizations throughout more than three decades of struggle. The risks implied by this downsizing of standards acquired special relevance in the context of the pandemic that has shaken the world since 2020, given the possibility that COVID-19 may reach a people in isolation or in the stage of initial contact. At the same time, it is significant to point out that the controlled or forced contact position has favored the expropriation of territories of the aforementioned peoples, with ends of exploitation of natural resources and promotion of investment projects within them, which have all become an important governmental priority.

This article develops the two opposing stances, and takes the side of the respect for the self-determination of the peoples in isolation and their fundamental rights, while also advocating for the adoption of preventive measures to face the epidemiological and violent conflict risks vis a vis neighboring populations. The text is subdivided in five parts: in the first one, we explain who we are referring to when we speak of peoples in isolation, as well as the limitations of this term to fully understand the sociocultural features of these groups from the standpoint of an anthropological gaze. Next, the history of the defense and protection of these peoples of Peru is described, drawing a distinction between three main stages. The latter are distinguished based on the dimensions and the complexity progressively acquired by the initiatives, the actions and the demands of this struggle over the period of three decades since its beginning. The principles of self-determination and territorial integrity that oriented the defense of the peoples in isolation are developed in the third part. Following suit, the text describes the foundations and implications of forced contact and controlled contact, and of similar proposals concerning these peoples. In the fifth section, some general guidelines are mentioned to address the challenges implied by situations of intensified interactions of peoples in isolation. At last, we conclude by drawing some final considerations.



1. Conceptual elements

In Peru, the term peoples in isolation has been used since the 1990's to refer to those peoples, or parts of them, who significantly limit their relationships with people foreign to their collectivities. Ethno-historical studies regarding the indigenous peoples of the southern Amazons of Peru (Zarzar, 1983; Álvarez Lobo, 1998; Huertas, 2002) demonstrate that the ancestors of many of these populations interacted with members of their greater ethnolinguistic group, or with other peoples, maintaining social relationships of trade, conflict, alliance, or of other kinds with their relatives or allies. Subsequently, with the emergence of the rubber economy towards the end of the 19th century, a series of phenomena were unleashed: persecutions, killings, relationships of slavery, abuses of different kinds and the expansion of diseases that decimated these collectivities. The foreign aggression, added to internal factors, such as the consecutive falling apart of intra and inter-ethnic relationships, lead numerous indigenous populations to move away from the frontiers of violence in order to survive.

These populations migrated towards distant locations, to the headwaters of rivers and streams, where they adopted a way of life and systems of production based on a high mobility, conditioned by climatic seasonality and the rhythms of reproduction of the forest and rivers' resources. In the second half of the 19th century, the invasion of the spaces they inhabited continued through the traffic of animal skins, the exploitation of wood and hydrocarbons, and in the last years, drug-trafficking. Given these conditions, in the case of the peoples of southern Peruvian Amazonia, isolation can be understood as a strategy of survival assumed under historic moments of intense aggression which, with the passage of time, acquired new forms and started to involve new actors (Huertas, 2012). There are also populations which have adopted isolation in the last decades (the end of the 20th century), such as the Mbya Guaranía, of Paraguay, who, after living in connection with the surrounding society, decided to reject the presence and the services of the State, as well as those of foreigners in their communities, limiting their relationships only to some leaders of their greater ethnolinguistic group. In these cases, isolation is relatively recent and demonstrates, yet again, that the relationships sustained with the surrounding population can revert to a very limited and selective interaction.

There are different levels of isolation and of limiting interaction with foreigners: going from populations that practice a series of strategies to cover up their traces, or that reject with hostility any external presence in their territories; to those that approach certain segments of their greater ethnolinguistic group that sustain interactions with the surrounding society, avoiding and keeping away from direct contact. Finally, there are also those that approach neighbouring towns to obtain manufactured objects, such as tools that are useful to them, thereby exposing themselves, in some measure, to being seen. In all cases, the



groups avoid sustained interactions with other people, whether those are members of their greater ethnolinguistic group or foreigners. This attitude would be a response to various factors, such as their fear of being assaulted or catching diseases, as well as their perception of the others and their way of life, in contrast to their own.

The term uncontacted peoples is inadequate, as it communicates the idea that there are societies which have lived completely on the margins of what transpires in their medium and that are somewhat frozen in time: something that has not existed nor currently exists in reality. The terms peoples in isolation or peoples in initial contact, which have become social categories legally established by the Peruvian State, also fail to express the complexity of the sociocultural characteristics and organizational, economic and symbolic systems of these peoples. Their use in the current article is framed under only two fundamental criteria: to highlight these peoples' choice of limiting their interaction with the surrounding population, and to point out their vulnerability, particularly in immunological, socio-demographic and territorial terms, which puts their survival at risk. In the same way, as we have seen, we utilize the term interaction instead of contact, given the active role that the population plays in isolating itself, and in the type of relationships that it maintains with its surroundings, as limited as these may be (Shinai Serjali, 2004).

Peruvian Amazonia is inhabited by a diversity of peoples, or segments of peoples, which live in isolation. They locate themselves in faraway forests of difficult access, like the foothills of mountain ranges, the central jungle and the cross-border zones with Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, or even Bolivia. The languages of the majority of these peoples are classified under the linguistic families of Pano and Arawak, but there are also other peoples whose linguistic category has been impossible to define to this day. The Ministry of Culture has officially recognized 20 peoples in isolation and six in initial contact. Considering the tragic disappearance of the Mastanahua population of the Alto Curanja region by the end of 2020, the new account suggests that, in reality, there are currently five peoples in initial contact within the country.

2. A brief history of the process to grant assurances of legal protection to the peoples in isolation and initial contact of Peru

Since the mid-1980's, indigenous peoples and organizations, with the support of allied national and international organizations, have consistently promoted the defense and protection of the peoples in isolation, with the goal of guaranteeing their survival. The guiding principles that oriented this struggle were those of legal security and territorial protection, as well as the respect for the peoples' decisions and ways of life. By analyzing the different dimensions that this process of struggle progressively acquired, both in thematic and geographic terms, as well as in terms of the engagement of different actors, it is possible to distinguish between three different stages: the initial stage; the stage of expansion; and, lastly, a third and ongoing



stage. In this last phase, simultaneously and paradoxically, there emerged the most forward-looking proposals for protection, together with some of the most regressive initiatives that had been dismissed years ago for their nefarious consequences on the peoples in isolation, such as the so-called “controlled contact” or forced contact initiatives. The first two stages were led by indigenous organizations, while the State joined in the process during the third phase.

a. The initial stage (1984-2002)

The tragedy confronted by the Nahua people as a consequence of forced contact during the mid-1980's (Shinaí Serjali, 2004; CDC, 2017) became the milestone that began the history of the defense and protection of the peoples in isolation and initial contact in Peru. In 1984, under a context defined by the pursuit of forced contacts by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (ILV), intense logging activity and the hydrocarbon operations of the Shell corporation in the headwaters of the Mishagua river, four members of the Nahua people which inhabited the zone were captured. This was followed by the forced transfer of all the Nahua inhabitants to the nearby village of Sepahua. Little thereafter, approximately 50% of the members perished due to the spread of respiratory diseases, which were transmitted to them by the population with which they came into direct contact, and for which they did not have a developed immune response (Helberg and Reynoso, 1986). Not long after, timber merchants arrived at their territory en masse, while Shell corporation continued with its operations. The forests inhabited by the Nahua people had been “freed” for logging and hydrocarbon exploitation at the cost of the very life of its members, and the risk of their overall extinction. While the government attempted to silence this new tragedy of an indigenous people, civil society organizations denounced the events at an international level, and demanded media attention for the peoples' members, as well as protection for their territories.

In 1986, during the 4th Congress of the Native Federation of Madre Dios and Tributaries (FENAMAD), a proposal emerged for requesting the State to create a reserve for the indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact from the northwestern Manu National Park, in the basin of the Urubamba River. This proposal was oriented towards protecting the territory of the Yora and Matsigenka peoples (Alfredo Garcia, personal communication, 2020).¹ Two years later, the Peruvian Foundation for Nature Conservation and the Center of Development for the Amazon's Indigenous People (CEDIA) formulated a technical proposal to conduct studies for the establishment of the reserve suggested by FENAMAD. The studies were conducted, and in 1990, the creation of the Kugapakori-Nahua Territorial Reserve was achieved. This was the first reserve established in favor of the peoples in isolation and initial contact in Peru, and was based on the Native Communities and Agrarian Development in the Jungle and High Jungle Regions Act (Decree Law No. 22175).

¹ At that time, the Matsigenka population in isolation was called Kugapakori.



Houses of Matsigenka-Nanti, Timpía river. Photo: INDEPA

Throughout the 1990's, the Interethnic Association of Peruvian Amazonia (AIDSESP), a national Amazonian indigenous organization that had been managing the legal regularization of the lands of native communities, proposed before the State the creation of four territorial reserves for the peoples in isolation of the department of Ucayali: Murunahua, Mashco Piro, Isconahua and Kakataibo. Their technical team was in charge of conducting the respective studies². The first three reserves were created between 1997 and 1998 through regional norms, while the fourth has not yet been established.

In 1996, faced with the government's granting of hydrocarbon exploitation rights over territories of peoples in isolation in the northern part of Madre de Dios to the Mobil Exploration and Producing company, the FENAMAD spearheaded legal advocacy efforts against the oil company and the State, in order to protect these peoples from the dangers that the oil operations would imply for them. The following year, the company withdrew, and little thereafter, the indigenous organization presented, before the governmental institutions of the department, a request for the official recognition of the territory inhabited by these peoples. The studies that supported the request were conducted by the technical team of the organization between 1991 and 2001. In 2002, the State established the Madre de Dios Territorial Reserve, covering a section of the proposed area, after an intense confrontation between the indigenous organization and the logging compa-

² For this end, it counted with financial support of danish cooperation, through the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA).



nies. The latter had the expectation of formally having access to the forests in the area in order to exploit its various resources of high commercial value. In fact, between 1999 and 2006, the largest sacking of caoba and cedar of all time took place within the area and, as a consequence, violent incidents also exploded, taking the lives of indigenous peoples in isolation and timber merchants alike.

b. The stage of expansion of defensive and protective actions (2003-2010)

In december 2002, during their 19th national congress, AIDSESEP and its grassroots organizations created the “National Program for the Defense and Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Isolation and in Initial Contact” (Programa Nacional de Defensa y Protección de Pueblos Indígenas en Aislamiento y Contacto Inicial). This decision was a milestone that represented the beginning of a new stage. The dialogue with the northern Amazonian indigenous leaders allowed the programme’s personnel to realize the existence of peoples in isolation in that part of the country. Simultaneously, the dialogue also opened up a space for some indigenous federations to submit a request before the State, asking for the acknowledgment of these peoples’ territorial rights, just as had been done with the southern Amazon during the previous decade.

As a consequence, between the years 2003 and 2005, the national indigenous organization and some of its grassroots organizations requested the State to create four new reserves for peoples in isolation, this time in the departments of Loreto and Ucayali (Napo-Tigre, Yavarí-Tapiche, Yavarí Mirim and Kapana-wa), and their National Program for the Peoples in Isolation and in Initial Contact was in charge of coordinating and conducting the execution of the corresponding technical studies. On its part, the non-government organization Institute for the Common Good (Instituto por el Bien Común), together with the Federation of Native Communities of Kakataibo (FENACOCA), conducted studies complementing the proposal of a Kakataibo territorial reserve, and requested the State, once more, to carry forward with its establishment.

Simultaneously, a law proposal was put together by AIDSESEP, called the “Special regime for the protection of the people in isolation and initial contact”. This proposal was presented and justified before the Multisectoral Committee (DS 024-2005-PCM), a body that also promoted the creation of the law, and which was charged with its elaboration and its submission before the Congress of the Republic. As Chirif and García (2007) point out, this initiative rested on establishing institutional grounds for the interactions with the peoples in isolation, prohibiting the settlement of other populations within their territorial reserves, and vetting any attempt to deliver part, or the totality, of their area through contracts for resource extraction, among others things. Following this same vein, in november 2005, the Defense Report 101 addressing the peoples in isolation and initial contact was approved via ministerial resolution. This document established recommendations for each sector of the State involved in the protection of these peoples. Among these recommendations was the approval of a legislative initiative establishing a special category for the intangibility of territorial reserves.



Temporary settlements of isolated indigenous families. Photo: Fenamad, 2009

As a result of these proposals and recommendations, as well as the advocacy work conducted by AIDSESEP, allied organizations and the Office of the Ombudsman, in 2006, The Protection of Indigenous or Aboriginal Peoples in Voluntary Isolation or Initial Contact Act (Act No. 28736) was enacted. Following the recommendation by the Office of the Ombudsman, this law established a new category, that of the indigenous reserve, and ordered the creation of a special trans-sectoral legal protection regime. However, the lobbies of the economic sector, particularly, of hydrocarbons, managed to dramatically debilitate the territorial rights of the peoples in isolation and initial contact. This opened the door for the possibility of authorizing activities of exploitation of natural resources, through the argument of public necessity within the indigenous reserves.

In this period, a bloc of indigenous and peasant organizations, constituted by the AIDSESEP, managed to create the National Institute for the Development of the Andean, Amazonic and Afroperuvian Peoples (INDEPA), charged, amongst its various functions, with the protection of the indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact.

This stage was also characterized by the deployment of efforts by indigenous and other civil society organizations to defend the rights of the peoples in isolation and initial contact, as well as the integrity of the Kugapakori-Nahua Territorial Reserve, in the face of the overlapping that the plot 88, or Proyecto Gas de Camisea, had with an important part of their surface area. Before the intense advocacy work of the Peruvian organizations in the national and international spheres, the Government and the Inter-American Develop



ment Bank (IADB), which had assumed the granting of a loan for the downstream component of the Camisea project, signed a letter of understanding with a set of commitments for the environmental and social management of the project. One of the commitments was the issuing of the Supreme Decree 028-2003-PCM, which increased the degree of legal protection for the reserve, established measures of control and limitations for the development of certain activities, forbade the establishment of settlements other than those of the benefitted indigenous peoples inside the reserve, and put in place restrictions on the development of economic activities. In this same way, the decree prohibited the granting of new rights that would imply the exploitation of natural resources beyond the Gas de Camisea project in plot 88.

In 2005, the growing conflicts between timber merchants and indigenous in isolation around Las Piedras river, in the Madre de Dios department, and the refusal of local authorities to admit the legal actions presented before it, led the FENAMAD to solicit the technical support of AIDSESEP to push for legal actions at the international level. So it was, that in that same year, a request for interim measures was presented before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) so that the State would protect the peoples in isolation before the invasion of their territories by timber merchants³

In 2006, AIDSESEP, FENAMAD and the Regional Organization AIDSESEP-Ucayali (ORAU) began the construction and operation of checkpoints and surveillance outposts in the access zones to the territorial reserves of Madre de Dios, Isconahua, Murunahua and Mashco Piro⁴ That same year, an international forum about peoples in isolation and initial contact in Santa Cruz de la Sierra⁵ Bolivia, facilitated the reunion of indigenous leaders from the seven countries of South America that have the presence of these peoples. The dialogue among them resulted in the decision to create a platform to coordinate between indigenous organizations, which adopted the name of the International Indigenous Committee for the Protection of Peoples in Isolation and in Initial Contact of the Amazon, the Gran Chaco and Paraguay's Oriental Region (CIPIACI). Their actions were centered around advocacy efforts before the United Nations Organization (UNO), the IACHR and the drafting of the UNO's Guidelines for the protection of the mentioned peoples, a process that was led by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

c. The role of the State, territorial corridors & the “controlled contact” initiative (2011-present day)

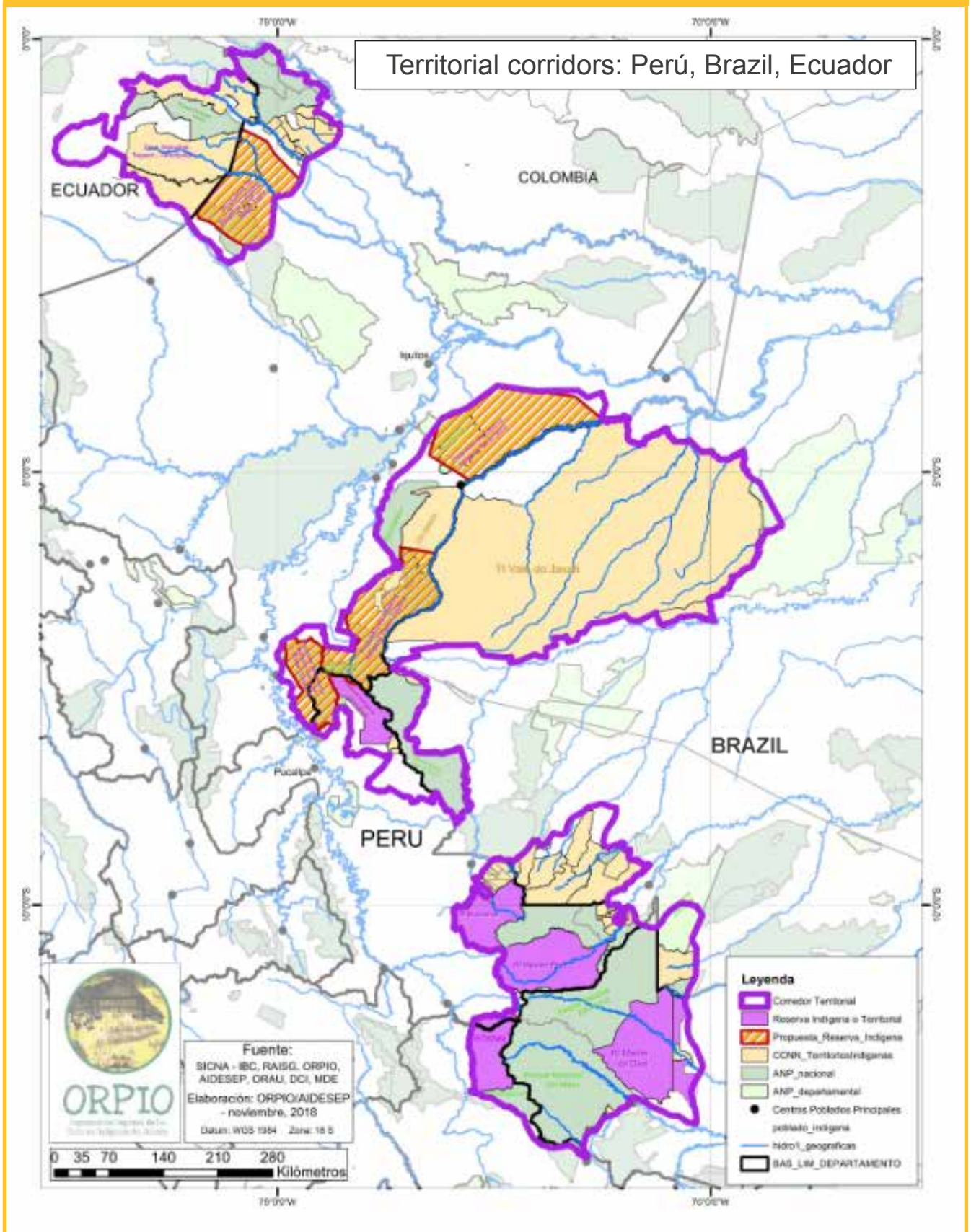
The third stage began with the change of government, in 2011, and with the momentary strengthening that it implied for the institutions responsible for the protection of indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact. While it is true that the law 28736, which established the multi-sectoral committee for the assessment of requests for indigenous reserves in favor of these peoples, was enacted in 2006, the truth is that,

³ Lawsuit admitted by the IACHR in 2007.

⁴ An initiative that received the financial support of the Rainforest Foundation from Norway.

⁵ Organized by the the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, the Bolivia's Vice Ministry of Land and the Confederation of Indigenous People of Bolivia (CIDOB).

Indigenous people in isolation near the borders of Ecuador and Brazil





said committee did not begin operating until 2011. It did so under the lead of the recently created Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs, under the Ministry of Culture. The INDEPA was fused into that Ministry and turned into an executive unit.

Ever since, the State assumed once more (to a certain extent) the administrative tasks for the establishment of the requested indigenous reserves. However, to this date (December, 2020), none of these reserves has been created, with 27 to 15 years having gone by since they were initially proposed. Under that context, in 2015, the ORAU transferred the management of the checkpoints and surveillance outposts which it had built and kept operating for almost 10 years, to the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs, in an attempt to protect the territorial reserves of Mashco Piro, Murunahua and Isconahua, in the department of Ucayali. In Madre de Dios, the FENAMAD also advanced the State's intervention at the checkpoints and surveillance outposts that it had installed in the zones near the indigenous reserve and the high Madre de Dios area.

In this third stage, indigenous organizations, with the backing of other allied organizations, have identified territorial corridors or continuous territories of peoples in isolation and initial contact (Huertas, 2015). The superposition of a diversity of legal categories over these territories, like those of protected natural areas and permanent production forests, has contributed to their fragmentation, imposing goals and uses which, in many cases, have implied risks for the referred peoples. The fact that many of these corridors are cross-border in nature, makes their protection that more complex, given that they are subject to different State norms and policies. As a response to that, the indigenous peoples and organizations, with the backing of national and international allied organizations, have been pushing for the integral protection of said territorial corridors. This implies binding the protection of the peoples in isolation and initial contact with the wellbeing of the indigenous peoples with whom they share territories, as well as carrying forward with the improvement and coordination, through a cross-border approach, of the policies and actions of the different sectors and government levels responsible for guaranteeing the integrity of those peoples (Huertas, 2015).

Paradoxically, in this third stage, regressive positions in favor of intensifying the direct contact with the peoples in isolation have attained wide diffusion, and in some cases, have been even taken to practice by the State. Since 2011, the recurring presence of a group of Mashco Piro in isolation, in a portion of the beaches of the Alto Madre de Dios river, has induced a risk situation, due to their increased exposure to physical interaction with foreign agents. In July of 2015, a month after the publishing of the editorial "Protecting isolated tribes", written by anthropologists Walker and Hill for the Science magazine, in which they proposed the initiative of "controlled contact" (2015, p. 1061), the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs publicly announced the adoption of this strategy, allegedly to improve the situation of the Mashco Piro.⁶ As a

⁶ <https://andina.pe/agencia/noticia-iniciaran-contacto-controlado-indigenas-avistamiento-inicial-565947.aspx>



consequence, many reactions of rejection arose among indigenous organizations, specialists and the very Office of the Ombudsman⁷ before the lack of solid arguments to justify this decision, given the risks that it entailed for the life and health of the isolated population, and the lack of minimum conditions within the State to confront its effects. In spite of the fact that, little thereafter, the representative of the Vice Ministry walked back on these declarations before the media, a set of anthropologists and other people tied to this institution organized public events oriented towards impetuously promoting the establishment of direct and sustained interaction with these populations, without taking much responsibility for the consequences that it could unleash⁸. Simultaneously, in the high Madre de Dios region, the interactions of the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs with the Mashco Piro population increased notoriously, attracting several members of this people, sharpening their dependence on introduced products, as well as the risk of aggressions (AIDSESP, 2017; CIDH, 2019). Very soon after began the struggles among the groups in isolation, who fought over the objects and supplies delivered by the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs, generating tensions and making the situation unmanageable.



Temporary settlements of indigenous peoples in Purus, Ucayali. SERNARP-ORAU, 2008

⁷ Report N° 0181-2015-DP/AMASPP, from the 24th of July, 2015.

⁸ For example, at the Forum on Progress and Challenges for the Protection of the Peoples in Isolation (Foro Avances y Desafíos para la Protección de los Pueblos en Aislamiento) (Lima, 10th of december, 2015), organized by the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs, and the panel Indigenous peoples in isolation: terminology, territory and processes of contact, conducted during the IXth Congress of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America, SALSA (Lima, 20th to 23rd of July, 2017) and organized by anthropologists, tied at that moment to the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs.



3. Territory and self-determination

As has been pointed out, the principles that guided the actions of the indigenous organizations and their allies in order to protect the peoples in isolation since the middle of the 1980's were, on the one hand, legal security and territorial protection and, on the other, the respect for their way of life, understood as their right to self-determination or the right to reject imposed or induced contact. Both principles are closely related: they both complement each other and have become tendencies within international law, as can be widely observed in, for example, the Guidelines of the UNO for the protection of peoples in isolation and initial contact.

The legal security of the territories was one of the demands around which the process of constitution of Amazonian indigenous organizations developed since the end of the 1960s. Its importance resided on the necessity to legally secure the indigenous territories before the intense process of colonization of the Amazons, promoted with a greater emphasis as a State policy since the 1940's. This was followed, a decade after, by the batching and granting of concessions for companies for the exploitation of natural resources and highway constructions. These governmental policies affected all the indigenous peoples, including those that were living in isolation. On top of this, there was the rapid expansion of the logging activities around highly valuable forest species, such as the mahogany and the cedar, whose profitability facilitated their exploitation in places as remote as those inhabited by the peoples in isolation.

It is worth noticing that throughout the years, as has been described above, it was precisely timber merchants, oil company workers and missionaries who largely indulged in situations of forced contact with indigenous people in isolation, after having penetrated their territories. This caused grave demographic and territorial losses for the peoples, as well as drastic shifts in their patterns of space occupation and use of natural resources, which had the overall effect of deteriorating their life conditions. Some peoples that confronted these processes in the last years were, for example, the Nahua, Chitonahua, Isconahua, Matsigenka, from the southern Amazons of Peru, currently considered in initial contact.

The case of the Matsés people, who live on the banks of the Yaquerana river, in Loreto, is an example of violence directly exercised by the State against an isolated indigenous people, in the context of a site reconnaissance prior to the construction of a highway. In 1964, during Fernando Belaunde Terry's first administration, a military expedition clashed against the Matsés, who belligerently rejected the intrusion of foreign agents in their territories. In retaliation, the military bombarded the malocas —the traditional huts of the Matsés— with napalm (Ángel Uaqui Dunu Maya, personal communication, 2020). The acts of violence committed by armed forces against indigenous peoples in isolation, with the purpose of building highways



or exploiting hydrocarbons or other resources, have been commonplace in Amazonia. A current form of aggression against indigenous peoples in isolation is the denial of their existence, which leads to the non-acknowledgement of their rights –more specifically, their territorial rights–, favoring corporations and other groups interested in exploiting their resource-rich territories.

Since the early 1990 's, indigenous organizations have included in their projects a request for the legal regularization of their territories. This has inaugurated the process of defense and protection of peoples in isolation, which is directed towards the establishment of territorial reserves, a category that was introduced in the Native Communities Law of the 1970's. Their high degree of vulnerability to diseases, their unwillingness to maintain continuous interactions with the surrounding populations, and the crucial importance of their territories for their subsistence, have led peoples in isolation to demand the prohibition of economic activities inside their territories, as well as the implementation of special protective measures.

The respect towards isolation as a way of life, also known as the indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, that is, to freely and voluntarily choose their ways of life, form of organization, degree of interaction with the surrounding society, etc. This right implies that the interactions with indigenous peoples should not be forced nor accelerated if they decide to limit them, taking into account the potential consequences on aspects such as health and subsistence patterns. Based on these criteria, as well as the historical precedents of forced contact, during the mid 1990's, in the context of the defense of the isolated peoples of northern Madre de Dios against a hydrocarbon concession in their territory, the leaders of the Harakbut, Ese'ejá and Matsigenka peoples demanded the government to respect their decision to live in isolation from the surrounding, dominant society and to reject external interference in their territories. Decades before, these peoples had lost most of their members due to the ravages of disease, caused by forced contact and sedentarization.

The forced contact was a result of policies implemented by several States, including Peru, to achieve the integration and assimilation of indigenous peoples to their respective national societies. In regards to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 107, an international legal instrument on indigenous rights that was approved in 1957 and included a forced contact policy, MacKay (2002) points out that, at the time, there was a widespread belief that, in order for indigenous peoples to survive, they had to be incorporated into the dominant society through integration and assimilation.⁹

This approach favored by some States and reflected in Convention 107, was the target of criticism from indigenous peoples and indigenous rights organizations, as it deepened the discrimination and oppression they suffered. José Martínez Cobo, special rapporteur for the United Nation's Sub-Commission

⁹ <https://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/default/files/publication/2010/09/iloguidejul02sp.pdf>



on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, compiled said criticism in a report titled Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations, published in 1987. In this document, addressing indigenous peoples' demand for autonomy, the special rapporteur pointed out that they, by their mere existence, had the natural and original right to freely live in their own territories, and that the respect of their autonomy was an essential condition for guaranteeing these rights. In this context, "governments must abandon their policies of intervening in the organization and development of indigenous peoples, and must grant them autonomy" (1987:21).

The right to self-determination also implies that, if indigenous peoples decide to increase their interactions with the surrounding society, this course of action should be respected, ensuring that their physical, sociocultural and territorial security is guaranteed, as well as the time and space necessary for them to develop immunological defense mechanisms and sociocultural means of adaptation for the plethora of new situations that arise as result of increased interaction. Therefore, the periods of adaptation could be lengthy, a gradual process that is not linear, but reversible, as indigenous peoples might decide to go back into isolation, just like it has happened with part of the Mashco Piro, Mbya Guaraní and Matsigenka peoples, among others. It is worth noting that none of the peoples that engaged in initial contact in Peru adopted this condition by their own accord; on the contrary, they were subjected to processes of forced contact by economic and religious agents, which led to severe losses in territory and population, as well as political and social un-structuring.



Houses of Matsigenka-Nanti, Timpía river. Photo: INDEPA



The search for healthcare by indigenous peoples facing emergency situations caused by the expansion of foreign diseases should also be handled carefully, ensuring that health personnel do not impose extended contact with the affected population.

The significance and appropriateness of the principles of respect for the territorial integrity and ways of life of the peoples in isolation is reflected in their admission into national laws and international legal instruments on indigenous rights. At the national level, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Ministry of Health are the institutions that have most clearly and decisively adopted said principles. In this regard, the Office of the Ombudsman's Report No. 101, titled Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact, approved in 2005, singles out the rights to life, territory, natural resources and self-determination as the most infringed ones. In 2007, the Health Ministry's National Center for Intercultural Health approved a health law and the corresponding guidelines for peoples in isolation or initial contact. Its guiding principles were prevention ("as direct healthcare interventions for peoples in isolation are not possible") and the high degree of vulnerability to diseases and death that contact entails (MINSA, 2008, p. 65). The term "disease" must be understood through the lens of a holistic and comprehensive meaning of health that acknowledges several types of vulnerability (biological, social, political, sociocultural), not only those caused by infectious agents (Neptalí Cueva, personal communication, 2019).

On the other hand, the Ministry of Culture's Law No. 28736 (2006) recognizes the right of peoples in isolation to decide the form and process of their relationship with both the national society and the State. It also recognizes their right to own the lands they inhabit and to establish restrictions on the entry of foreigners (except for activities of "public necessity", which are permitted inside indigenous reserves), as well as the free access to their lands and all the natural resources therein, which can be used for their traditional subsistence activities. The same law makes the peoples' property rights over their territories contingent on their adoption of sedentism as a way of life, in which case, a so-called native community is officially created. This condition is contrary to the recognition of their autonomy in terms of land organization and use, established by the Constitution¹⁰

On the international stage, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published, in 2012, a document titled Guidelines on the Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and in Initial Contact of the Amazon Basin and El Chaco. This document is the main frame of reference for international standards on the human rights applicable to these peoples. The principles and criteria that it establishes for the protection of their integrity are based on respecting and guaranteeing the right to self-determination, which is understood as their decision to live in isolation, without assuming that the situa

¹⁰ Moreover, the territories recognized as property of the native communities are only a small part of the surface they occupy. Most of this surface is classified as lands suitable for forest, which are owned by the State and only ceded for use.



tion of these peoples is immutable. Other basic principles include the respect for their lands, territories, resources and health, as well as the right to consultations with free and prior consent, which is essential for indigenous peoples in initial contact. Additionally, the document outlines the implementation of protocols oriented towards minimizing the consequences of direct interactions, if these were to happen.

Article 26 of the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2016) establishes that “indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or in initial contact have the right to remain in said condition and to live freely, under their own culture”, and that “States will adopt adequate policies and measures, based on the knowledge and participation of indigenous peoples and organizations, in order to recognize, respect and protect the lands, territories, environment and cultures of these peoples, as well as their life and their individual and collective integrity”.

4. The arguments and the implications of controlled contact and similar proposals on the peoples in isolation and their territories

According to Walker and Hill (2015), controlled contact is the best option to protect peoples in isolation, considering the difficulties that governments face when trying to protect their territories. The authors suggest that governments should initiate the “contact” with the peoples in isolation, once a well-organized plan has been already set up, following an efficient assistance strategy. This implies that the option of peoples in isolation voluntarily avoiding direct, sustained interactions with the surrounding society, and the reasons behind this decision, would be ignored. On the contrary, public servants and government-adjacent researchers, under an ethnocentric and colonialist perspective, would unilaterally decide what to do with these peoples. Thus, their right to decide over their own lives would be denied, imposing the government’s priorities over the peoples and their territories.

The aforementioned anthropologists also claim that “soon after peaceful contact with the outside world, surviving¹¹ indigenous populations rebound quickly from population crashes, with growth rates over 3% per year. Once a sustained peaceful contact occurs, it becomes much easier to protect native rights than it otherwise would be for isolated populations” (Walker & Hill 2015, p. 1061). Contrary to these claims, the effects of forced or controlled contact have been devastating of indigenous peoples in several South American countries. In Brazilian Amazonia, during the second half of the 20th century, amidst a context of economic expansion and the construction of highways across the national territory, the State, through the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), implemented a policy of contact with indigenous peoples as a condition for

¹¹ Emphasis added by the author.



their protection and incorporation into the national community. The harsh results yielded by the policy of attraction, contact and “pacification” of indigenous peoples resulted in serious questionings within FUNAI and among specialists, as well as indigenous and civil society organizations. Consequently, in the late 1980 's, there were policy and strategy changes in regards to the protection of peoples in isolation. New guidelines were adopted. The changes mainly consisted in a renewed stance: the protection of these peoples did not imply that the State should establish direct relationships with them, thus, the State would only take a series of measures to safeguard their territories.

The indigenous peoples of Peruvian Amazonia have gone through similar processes due to the great number of deaths caused by the diseases spread as a consequence of forced contact. The peoples that faced these situations during the second half of the 20th century include the Harakbut, the Matsigenka, the



Temporary settlements of indigenous families in Yurúa, Ucayali. Photo: ORAU, 2013



Ese'ija, the Amahuaca, the Nahua, among others. As expressed by the Ministry of Health, the vulnerability of populations in isolation to certain diseases is associated, first and foremost, to the exogenous origin or non-endemic nature of some infectious agents. "In the Amazon rainforest's case, studies have helped identify diseases with a possible exogenous origin. Some of the most prominent examples are measles, smallpox, influenza type A and B, parainfluenza 2 and 3, and rotavirus" (Minsa, 2003, p.36). Several authors consider that whichever the cause of the susceptibility to these diseases is, indigenous populations that have been vulnerable to exogenous viral diseases in the past will take three to five generations (90 to 150 years) to stabilize their reaction to these infectious agents. This explains the enormous deadly potential of epidemics that occur repeatedly, in different historical periods (MINSa, 2003).

By pretending to promote a process of sustained interaction to place peoples in isolation under observation or "protection" (Walker & Hill, 2015, p.1061), which necessarily implies their nucleation and sedentarization, the proposal of controlled contact imposes a way of life closely linked to an increased incidence of diseases, caused by concentrating the population in reduced spaces, along with the decrease of food sources and pollution. In the case of the Isconahua, Chitonahua, Mastanahua, Nahua peoples, as well as some Matsigenka subgroups in Peruvian Amazonia, who have been subjected to processes of forced contact, their immunological, sociodemographic and territorial vulnerability has translated into conditions of great precariousness (Huertas, 2015; CDC, 2017; AIDSESEP, 2017; CIDH, 2019). In all of these cases, their health status is critical. Infectious diseases recurrently affect them and the healthcare system is incapable of providing efficient, timely attention. As previously mentioned, the high incidence of diseases is related to changes in settling patterns and the environment, more specifically, nucleation and sedentarization, with such factors as houses clumped together, less water sources, increased pollution and the depletion of forest resources (CDC, 2017).

These changes also contribute to the prevalence of anemia and malnutrition, caused by parasitosis, which is a result of the closeness between houses, deficient sanitation measures (CDC, 2017) and frequent diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhea, which hinder alimentation and processes of recovery. Apart from acute infectious diseases, other health problems include tuberculosis, hepatitis B and sexually transmitted diseases; there's a great risk of HIV infection and high concentrations of blood mercury among the Nahua population. This situation calls for effective, sustained and culturally appropriate action, which Peru's healthcare system has been incapable of providing (Neptalí Cueva, personal communication, 2017).



Additionally, in cases such as the one experienced by the Chitonahua people, the displacement that took place during the process of forced contact entails difficulties in the provision of resources for their subsistence.

Another aspect of the proposal of controlled contact is the overestimation of the State's capability to successfully handle this type of actions and their consequences. In this regard, the intensified interactions with the Mascho Piro in the Alto Madre de Dios River, from 2015 to 2016, in which high-ranking public servants and anthropologists working as consultants for the Ministry of Culture had a leading role, triggered a series of highly dangerous situations for both parties. These situations included the attraction of some Mascho Piro towards nearby beaches; increased exposure to aggressions or forced contact; division and conflicts within the group to obtain the food provided by the State; as well as exhaustion and tension between the Ministry's agents (AIDSESEP, 2017; Viceministerio de Interculturalidad, personal communication, 2017). Said actions were executed as part of the Plan of Special Assistance for the Mashco Piro people on the beaches of Alto Madre de Dios and the Multisectoral Task Force for the Protection of the Rights of the Mashco Piro people in the Alto Madre de Dios River ¹²

People associated with indigenous organizations, who conducted an in-situ evaluation of the work done by the Vice Ministry of Intercultural Affairs, came to perceive the Alto Madre de Dios River as a human laboratory. This worrying appreciation arose from the identification of such practices as the Vice Ministry's personnel gifting bananas to the Mashco Piro in order to win their trust and obtain anthropological information. Some of the public servants involved in this affair alleged that hunger was the reason behind the ever-increasing presence of the Mashco Piro on the beaches of Alto Madre de Dios, and used this explanation at international academic events, to ask for the consummation of forced contact for humanitarian reasons. In reality, the main source of food for this population is the meat obtained from mountain animals in the forests they inhabit.

For the last few years, after protests by representatives of indigenous organizations and other people aware of the dangerous situation faced by the Mashco Piro and the surrounding population, the State's personnel made an effort to substantially decrease the rhythm of the interactions. Consequently, the number of Mashco Piro inhabiting the beaches of Alto Madre de Dios is much smaller than the one observed from 2015 to 2016, the years in which the Vice Ministry of Cultural Affairs implemented the Plan of Special Assistance. The tensions within the Mashco Piro population and the hostilities that involved the surrounding population have also substantially decreased. Nevertheless, State-adjacent anthropologists

¹² Ministerial resolutions N° 258-2015-MC y N° 362-2016-MC, respectively.



interested in studying this people, with methods of direct research, could set back the relative calmness that the zone has today, which implies risks for the indigenous population as well as problems that public servants have already experienced and could become even worse.

It must be recognized that the State's deficiencies in the management of risky situations during direct interactions extend to other aspects, such as territorial control and protection, as claimed by Walker and Hill. Peoples in isolation are jeopardized not only by the presence of economic agents engaging in illegal activities inside indigenous reserves, but by hydrocarbon concessions permitted by national laws, which demonstrates the importance given to this activity in comparison to the fundamental rights of peoples in isolation. Such is the case of the Kugapakori Nahua Nanti reserve, among others.

Several indigenous reserves created —or in the process of being created— for peoples in isolation are under the pressure of external agents and extractive activities; however, the limitations on territorial control (and menaces contained in the law itself, which enables the exploitation of natural resources inside the reserves) are no justification for the implementation of controlled contact, planned by the aforementioned anthropologists. These limitations should go hand in hand with the adoption of the territory's intangibility and the strengthening of protective mechanisms. Moreover, forced or controlled contact has historically been used by governments to clear out zones of their interest, inhabited by indigenous peoples, with purposes such as colonization, the exploitation of natural resources and the construction of highways and other forms of infrastructure. For example, this was the case of the activities of forced contact with various indigenous peoples conducted by the Brazilian State during the second half of the 20th century, which had catastrophic consequences for these peoples, due to the conflicts, diseases, mass deaths, social un-structuring and overall decline of living conditions that ensued. In Peru, territories inhabited by diverse peoples in isolation are under the sights of both the government and extractive companies interested in exploiting them.

In the Purus River basin —located in the Ucayali region—, the recent death of a family in initial contact, whose best-known member was an elder named Epa, has proved to be a tragic, serious symptom of the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs' incapability to protect the population in initial contact, who end up neglected. This family, part of the Pano-speaking people in isolation that inhabits the zone, was contacted by members of the evangelical group "Los Pioneros" in the early 2000's. Despite their efforts and tactics to forcefully contact the rest of the Pano-speaking people and the Mashco Piro, these missionaries did not succeed and eventually left the zone. Epa and his family continued to live in close proximity to the place



where they were originally contacted, near their own people, the Mashco Piro and the neighboring Huni Kuin people. In this position, not belonging to any of these collectivities, the family lived in precarious conditions; they were constantly sick and found themselves in tension with the neighboring peoples in isolation. The situation ended in the deaths of Epa, one of his wives and his mother-in-law, and the disappearance of a second wife.

This tragedy happened in a context of increased drug trafficking in the zone. There are testimonies of attacks against peoples in isolation. Throughout the years, on repeated occasions, external aggressions against indigenous peoples in isolation have caused displacements and hostilities towards neighboring populations (Huertas, 2002, 2015). The Ministry of Culture was aware of the risky, precarious situation in which Epa's family lived; moreover, it had a surveillance outpost near their house. Nevertheless, no measures were taken to make a deal with the family and protect their lives. There is not an effective form of protection against the illegal activities that take place in the zone, which represent a big menace for indigenous peoples in isolation or in established communities. Epa and his family, one of the six collectivities in the process of initial contact, have disappeared in broad daylight, even when the Vice Ministry for Intercultural Affairs knew they were in danger and was responsible for their protection.

5. Self-determination and territorial protection in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has deeply affected the world population, has offered important lessons on the way of life of peoples in isolation and the relevance of self-determination and territorial protection as essential principles for their survival.

In the first place, the pandemic has evidenced how lethal a virus can be on a population without the adequate immunological mechanisms. This is one of the characteristics of peoples in isolation, not only with regard to COVID-19, but to a great number of infectious diseases, common to most of the population, but not to them.

In the second place, isolation and social or geographical distancing are ancient yet still relevant practices for indigenous peoples, that have been used to elude epidemic outbreaks and protect their lives. These practices represent, at the same time, the exercise of their right to self-determination, that is, to choose their way of life and the degree of interaction with the surrounding population.



In the third place, legal security and territorial protection, as well as the prohibition of external interference and activities in the spaces they inhabit, are essential conditions for peoples in isolation and in initial contact to live in adequate spaces, according to their own ways of life and with minimal risk of contagion due to external presences. Law No. 4044, which seeks to grant absolute intangibility to indigenous reserves and thus restrict the so-called activities of public interest done inside these territories, has gained momentum during the pandemic and is a clear demonstration of the importance territorial integrity has for these peoples.

In the fourth place, during the pandemic, the State has failed to show the capability to implement effective strategies for the protection of indigenous peoples and, more specifically, the zones inhabited by peoples in isolation or initial contact, and to prevent the virus from spreading. The disease reached places as remote and allegedly protected as the Kugapakori Nahua Nanti territorial reserve and the Manu National Park, affecting peoples in initial contact. It remains unknown if neighboring peoples in isolation were also affected. On the other hand, illegal activities, which are a significant risk factor for COVID-19 —among other diseases—, were uninterrupted despite the quarantine declared by the State in indigenous reserves such as Yavarí Mirim and Atacuari, in Loreto.

Among the strategies for the protection of peoples in isolation and initial contact with regard to the spread of diseases, it has been proposed to implement a ‘cordon sanitaire’ in the communities and towns that surround indigenous reserves and protected natural areas. This strategy had already been included in the law and guidelines for the prevention, assistance and mitigation of health problems among peoples in isolation, published in 2007; however, it has not been implemented and thus, the protection it would have provided has not come to fruition.

6. Guidelines to handle risky situations due to increased interaction

It is necessary for the State and civil society, especially the academic sector, to adopt respectful policies and practices toward the way of life and the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples in isolation. This means guaranteeing the exercise of their right to self-determination, providing legal security and efficient protection for their territories and prohibiting the concession of rights within these territories to external agents. Simultaneously, it is necessary to implement strategies for epidemiological prevention and, in the cases in which there are tensions between peoples in isolation and neighboring populations, prevent these conflicts. These are some of the basic conditions to guarantee the physical and sociocultural survival of



peoples in isolation, as well as the peaceful coexistence with the surrounding communities.

In more concrete terms, political will, specialized personnel, logistics and a budget are needed to strengthen the protection of these peoples' territories, implementing surveillance systems in order to identify and eradicate menaces. It is necessary to listen closely to the population that shares territories with peoples in isolation, which is mainly indigenous, with the purpose of identifying potential conflicts and adopting adequate measures to prevent them. The tensions can be a result of either conflicts and schisms within the group in isolation, interethnic conflicts with the neighboring communities or external pressure. Intersectoral coordination and collaborating with the local population to prevent conflicts and deal with health emergencies caused by the potential spread of diseases seems to be one of the State's biggest challenges.

When facing risky situations that involve direct interaction with peoples in isolation, it is necessary to dismiss the possibility of manipulating said interaction in favor of academic, religious, economic or political interests; the integrity and the fundamental rights of these peoples must be guaranteed. The institutions involved in this process, such as academic ones, should establish codes of ethics and mechanisms to ensure that their practices do not promote or accelerate processes of direct and sustained interaction with these peoples.

If there is a case in which an indigenous people in isolation voluntarily seeks to increase the degree of interaction with their surroundings, the State must be prepared to guarantee that the necessary sanitary conditions, personal and collective integrity, territorial needs, food sources and time are provided, so that the population develops physical (immunological), psychological and sociocultural mechanisms to adapt to the changes and new situations they will face. Overall, attention should be directed to generating conditions that allow increased interaction with the surrounding population, preventing the negative effects that have historically put indigenous peoples under the risk of extinction.

Final remarks

Controlled or forced contact, or the stance in favor of public servants, anthropologists or other agents taking the initiative when establishing direct and sustained interaction with peoples that reject it, contains historically questioned attitudes, policies and practices, which have been forbidden in some countries, as they are a form of imposing a way of life without respect for decisions and cultural differences. This form of imposition has resulted in nefarious consequences for the indigenous peoples in the past.



As previously mentioned, contrary to the arguments used by promoters of controlled contact and similar projects, isolation is not encouraged, it is but a reality that arises from a decision taken by indigenous peoples (or groups within them). What is encouraged is to respect this decision and, consequently, the right these peoples have to choose their way of life, organization and degree of interaction with the surrounding society. Likewise, the processes of territorial recognition and protection are not done with the objective of confining these peoples and keeping them on the margins of the surrounding society. This would not only be an imposition, it is unfeasible. The objective, then, is to guarantee that their territories can serve as the material and immaterial basis of their existence. At the same time, there is a demand for the State to implement protection mechanisms and to prohibit activities –economic ones or of any other kind– inside these territories, so that the peoples that inhabit them are no longer exposed to processes of cultural and physical disappearance, which have been historically linked to the pursuit of economic growth.

The principles of respect for self-determination and territorial integrity, based in empirical evidence that demonstrates the dramatic effects of forced contact on indigenous peoples, have been incorporated into international legal instruments for the defense of indigenous rights.

The stance in favor of “controlled contact” also overrates the State’s capability to handle the effects of increased interaction with peoples in isolation. The recent violent death of the Mastanahua people, as well as the troublesome situation of indigenous peoples in initial contact, in terms of health, territory and subsistence, demonstrate the State’s shortfalls. It is also undeniable that the State has not managed to ensure the protection of indigenous reserves and other areas inhabited by peoples in isolation. Nevertheless, the solution is not for the State to abandon these functions, as suggested by Walker and Hill to initiate controlled contact. The government has the responsibility to improve territorial protection. This requires great political will from the public servants in charge, an increase to the institutional budget, an effective coordination between the different government sectors and levels involved in territorial protection and a greater degree of collaboration with the communities and indigenous organizations that share territories with peoples in isolation and have protected these territories for decades.

The announcement of the adoption of “controlled contact” by the Peruvian State, almost immediately after the endorsement of this stance by a publication in a scientific magazine halfway through 2015, made this proposal even more dangerous, as it was now under the cover of a State policy and practice. This policy had previously been forbidden in other countries due to its consequences for the peoples in isolation.



The reaction shown by civil society to said announcement had a positive impact, as it made the State declare a retraction. Nevertheless, the intensification of direct interactions and their practical consequences, as well as the economic benefits of lifting the restrictions on the territories inhabited by peoples in isolations, show that forced or controlled contact is still a potential menace for these peoples.

Contrary to the suggestions made by the promoters of forced or “controlled” contact, which allude to the inadequacy of the stance that respects the decisions and ways of life of peoples in isolation and avoids to forcefully interact with them, had it not been for advancements in the respect for self-determination and territorial integrity, many indigenous peoples that currently have protection mechanisms would have been ravaged by epidemics and conflicts, or, at the very least, would have been displaced. Had this occurred, their territories would have been left available for logging, oil exploitation and drug trafficking, and would nowadays be cut across by forest roads and highways.

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