PERUVIAN AMAZON

INDIGENOUS ORGANISATIONS: CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

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The local organisations

Organisation is a *sine qua non* for the existence of any society and, over the course of history, highly organised movements have emerged in the Peruvian Amazon to face up to invaders. Indigenous peoples’ organisations as we know them today, however, i.e., permanent structures with the overall aim of defending the rights of the people they represent, are a relatively recent phenomenon.

In the case of Peru, the oldest references to an organisational structure that could be termed modern, in the sense that it was more or less based on structures that are not typical of indigenous societies, is offered by Casanto, an Ashaninka from Perené who published an article on the subject (Casanto 1986). He notes that in Tсотани (Perené River), in 1959, around 120 indigenous delegates met to discuss the issue of their lands, then occupied by the Peruvian Corporation (a British company that had received 500,000 hectares from the State at the end of the 19th century) and by Andean settlers, impromptu immigrants that had settled there in large numbers, largely from the start of the 20th century onwards. Thus was born the Asociación de Nativos Campas del Perené, an association that managed to reach an agreement with the settlers’ committee in order to form a strategic alliance in opposition to the greater enemy: the Peruvian Corporation. The outcome of these initiatives is unknown, and there is no information as to how far their aims were achieved. But the seeds had been sown, seeds that were to shoot at the end of the 1970s, as we shall see further on.

Many years then passed before the birth of organisations as we know them today. As a result of work conducted by a US anthropologist among Yaneshas (then known as Amuesha) communities during the latter part of the 1960s, the Congreso Amuesha was established in 1969. This was to become the Federación de Comunidades Nativas Yaneshas (FECONAYA) in 1981, an organisation that is still in operation to this day.

The 1970s saw the arrival of many indigenous organisations which, *grosso modo*, all followed a similar pattern: a grassroots support base organised around native communities (*comunidades nativas* in Spanish, a concept introduced by law in 1974 and recognising their official status) with their representatives constituting a general assembly as the highest authority. This assembly would establish the organisation’s statutes and elect a governing body for periods of between two and four years. The governing body would be headed by a president, sometimes given the name of a traditional authority (*cornesha*, among the Yaneshas, *pinkatsari* among the Ashaninka and *apu* among Quechua-speaking and other peoples), and would include a variable number of officers with responsibility for specific issues (land, education, health, economy, women etc.).

The founding of the Congreso Amuesha not only coincided with but was also related to two important events. The first
was the beginnings of anthropological interest in the Amazonian indigenous peoples, inaugurated by the anthropologist Stefano Varese with his works on the “Campas” (the name by which the Asheninka were then known) of Gran Pajonal. In fact, his book La Sal de los Cerros, published for the first time in 1968, opened up a new field not only of anthropological study but also of commitment to the indigenous peoples, whose rights and human dignity were being violated.

The second event was the arrival of General Juan Velasco Alvarado to power who, following a coup d’état, established a regime that sought to bring about substantial changes to overcome the divisions existing in Peruvian society, characterised by a small minority holding all the power and an immense majority, many of them indigenous, at the far end of the scale: poor, humiliated and overwhelmed by injustice. It was in this context that the indigenous peoples of the Amazon first emerged as a concern of the State and as the subjects of rights that needed to be defined and enforced. It was Varese himself who began to work on these issues within the government, and who set out the first legislative proposal for them, which was finally approved in June 1974 as the “Law of Native Communities and Agricultural and Livestock Promotion in the Rainforest and Cloud Forest Regions”.

The drafting and consultation process for this law created opportunities for reflection with organisations - where they existed - or with community delegates, via workshops and other events. A number of indigenous federations were thus encouraged by SINAMOS (National System for Support to Social Mobilisation), an institution created by the government to support popular organisations through direct contact with them, to get some training. Most attempts in this regard failed, however, imposed as they were by outsiders rather than coming at the organisations’ own initiative. Even so, a breeding ground had been promoted by the government that was favourable to the emergence of indigenous organisations.

Various organisational efforts were to follow the Congreso Amuesha. During the mid-1970s, the Organización Kichwarauna Wangurina (ORKIWAN) was formed in the Napo River area in the north of the Peruvian Amazon, initially comprising 26 local grassroots communities. This number has now increased to more than 40. In this case, the organisational support provided by a Franciscan missionary from Canada was significant. This experience served as a model for the emergence of other organisations in this part of the country.

In the Upper Marañón area, inhabited by Awajun (Aguaruna) and Wampis (Huambisa) peoples, a programme of military settlements had penned in a large part of the indigenous population who, as a consequence of this process and the construction of schools, were gradually being settled into permanent locations that were to later become known as “comunidades nativas”, a large part of them located along the banks of navigable rivers.

A cooperative organised and run by Jesuit missionaries to try and create commercial links between communities and markets aroused criticism on the part of the indigenous population who, in 1972, chose to set up their own organisation, the Central del Cenepa, which was the embryo from which emerged, in 1977, the Consejo Aguaruna Huambisa (CAH). The support of a multi-disciplinary group of young Spanish professionals working primarily with the Cenepa River communities was important in this process. In its day, the CAH was one of the strongest organisations, both in terms of number of communities (some 80), sphere of influence - covering five river basins in the area (Marañón, Santiago, Nieva, Cenepa and Chiriyacu) - and in terms of demanding the rights of its communities and promoting actions that had a great impact on the world’s media, such as the expulsion of the German filmmaker Werner Herzog from its territory.

As previously noted, in the Selva Central (the Central forest region), and particularly in the Perené River valley, attempts had been made to organise since the 1950s, attempts that were always focused on the issue of land, something that is undoubtedly key to all indigenous organisations. In the case of the Perené, they also focused on agricultural production, given that the indigenous settlements in that area were by then already immersed in a market economy. As a result of these processes, the Federación de Comunidades Nativas del Perené (FECONAPE) emerged in 1976, changing its name a year later to the Central de Comunidades Nativas de Producción y Comercialización Agropecuaria del Perené (CCNAPCAPE).

A number of organisational efforts were also promoted by the governmental institution SINAMOS in this area of the Amazon, such as the Congreso Campa and others, although none of these came to fruition. Nevertheless, drawing on their own experience of 30 years earlier, along with the process by which the 1974 law was established, the Central de Comunidades Nativas de la Selva Central (CECONSEC) was founded in 1978, initially covering the area of Satipo and the Perené and Pichis basins until this latter subsequently broke away to form its own organisation.

The organisation described itself as a “central” (union) because of the strong influence of commercial cropping and the market economy in the area, which
had been receiving settlers since the latter half of the 19th century. This had had two consequences: indigenous peoples’ territorial spaces had been drastically reduced, restricting the communities to “islands” (local settlements), and the natural resources on which the indigenous economy depended - fish, wildlife and forest - had declined.

The 1974 law had also been designed primarily with this situation in mind since those involved in its drafting were, at that time, not aware of the situation of indigenous peoples in more remote areas, such as the lowland forests, where there were no settlers and the environment was still unspoilt.

At the same time, another two pioneering organisations emerged. One was the Federación de Comunidades Nativas del Ucayali (FECONAU), which was born out of various previous attempts (FECONASH, ORDISH). Its grassroots support base initially lay in around 120 Shipibo, Cacataibo and Cocama communities. The other was Chapi Shiwag, which grouped together communities from the Awajun, Shapra and Chayahuita peoples in what is now Datem del Marañón province. The two latter peoples did, however, eventually leave to form their own organisations.

In the ensuing decades, further organisations appeared, until they reached today’s total of around 60. It is not the purpose of this work to recount the history of each one of them but rather to explain how the first of them came into existence and how they gave rise to more complex levels of organisation.

**Towards the creation of the national coordinating body AIDESEP**

As we have seen, there were already in the latter half of the 1970s a number of indigenous associations organised along the lines of river basins. In addition to forming relations with emerging State bodies such as SINAMOS, these organisations also made contact with a number of national and international players. One such player was a group of independent individuals, of different professions, who were working with indigenous peoples in the region. Another group was made up of anthropology students from two universities (Católica and San Marcos) who had stated an interest in working with indigenous peoples and conducting field work in different areas. A third was made up of foreign donor agencies who were beginning to provide one-off funding to the activities of these emerging organisations.

From 1975 on, the State began to roll back the reforms that had been so favourable to the popular movement and, in 1978, the “Law of Native Communities” from 1974 was amended to allow large capital investors access to national forests, and to encourage a concentration of lands so that they could be turned over to agro-industry.

Against this overall backdrop, a coordination group constituted itself in 1976, initially bringing together professionals (both independent and State employees), students and coordinators from donor agencies. Representatives from the recently created indigenous organisations gradually began to be included in the coordination group’s meetings and, as they began to realise they had many problems in common, these organisations gradually began to forge closer bonds. They agreed to jointly arrange regular meetings in Lima, which they all had to visit every so often for administrative and lobbying purpose, given the centralist nature of the country’s structures.

In 1978, shortly after these joint meetings had become more formalised, the indigenous representatives expressed a desire to continue them without the presence of the professionals, students and agency representatives. This was clearly an effort to demarcate boundaries and affirm their autonomy. It was in this context that the Coordinadora de Comunidades Nativas de la Selva Peruana (COCONASEP) was founded.

A few years later it changed its name to the Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (AIDESEP). It gained legal status in 1985, as a civil non-profit making association because, to this day, there is no legal status in Peruvian legislation by which to recognise indigenous organisations.

From 1989 onwards, AIDESEP decentralised, establishing regional offices in San Lorenzo, Iquitos, Pucallpa and Satipo which, along with another two offices later created in Madre de Dios and Bagua (northeast), each gained its own official status and a greater degree of autonomy from the central office.

In the ensuing years, AIDESEP has maintained a presence throughout the whole Amazon region and has gained the recognition of the communities and the rest of the popular organisational movement in general. The favourable environment of the 500 Years of Resistance campaign in 1992, which encouraged a highly auspicious meeting between Amazonian and Andean indigenous organisations in other countries, did not result in a coming together of worldviews in Peru because of the armed conflict being conducted by the MRTA (Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement) and Shining Path. This conflict affected the indigenous population of the Amazon very severely, and resulted in the loss...
of many lives whilst defending their territories, their freedom and their independence.

Achievements of AIDESEP

It is difficult to encapsulate almost 30 years of AIDESEP’s institutional life, its successes and challenges, in such a short piece as this. The organisation’s first success was to establish, from its own autonomous perspective, a fully developed platform from which to express the main indigenous demands. During the earlier decades of the 20th century, indigenous issues had been handled by indigenist institutes with Andean links but never directly by the indigenous peoples themselves. Following enactment of the Agrarian Reform law during General Velasco Alvarado’s government that was in power from 1968 to 1975, the terms “indigenous” and “Indian” were banned from official language, being considered racist and discriminatory when, in reality, the negativity was in the way they were used rather than in the terms themselves.

The global indigenous movement, to which AIDESEP was linked from the very start as one of the organisations most active in its expansion, has clearly contributed to recovering the term “indigenous” as a sign of identity, and to constructing a platform with its own demands. The creation of the Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica (COICA) was also one of AIDESEP’s achievements, as they were involved in establishing this regional organisation along with the other national organisations in the countries involved.

In the same way, AIDESEP’s existence has also had reverberations among Peru’s Andean indigenous peoples who, having been concealed for decades behind the label of “peasant farmers” have taken up their identity as indigenous peoples once more, finding the energy to gel together in the face of new problems, in particular the devastation caused to their lands and economy by mining activities, and the legal and political measures that are now attempting to wipe out their communities.

In terms of affirming indigenous rights, the most well-known process undertaken by AIDESEP has undoubtedly been that of territorial consolidation. Via agreements with the Ministry of Agriculture, the organisation has managed to legalise indigenous lands in various parts of the Amazon, primarily as communal lands (collectively owned by a comunidad) but also as communal reserves (protected areas owned and managed by a comunidad) and territorial reserves, these latter to the benefit of the indigenous peoples living in isolation. For many years, and over the course of different Peruvian governments, AIDESEP – with the financial support of a number of indigenous rights organisations throughout the world, particularly IWGIA – has managed to coordinate with the Peruvian state to achieve the titling of large territories for indigenous communities, in a process that has not yet been exhausted.

It was in fact IWGIA, with resources obtained from the Danish government (DANIDA), that supported one of AIDESEP’s proudest achievements. Given the magnitude of the problem, the size of the population and the number of communities involved, and given its significance beyond mere titling, it is important to mention the work undertaken by the organisation, between 1989 and 1993, to rescue hundreds of indigenous people enslaved by logging barons and cattle ranchers in the area known as the Upper Ucayali, which covers the upper course of this river and the lower reaches of its tributaries (the Tambo and the Urubamba).

This work brought to light the way in which these people were forcing indigenous families to work for no money, subjecting them to humiliations of all kinds. In fact, not only were the people not paid for their labour, they also lived in insanitary huts and suffered physical punishment if they failed to comply with orders or attempted to run away. Such punishment frequently caused the serious injury or death of a person. (See AIDESEP 1991a, 1991b y 1991c, and García et al. 1998.). The results of this work were notable in that whole families were set free, communities were titled and organised into a regional association which, just a few years later, won the mayorship of Atalaya (provincial capital) town council in the local elections.

In terms of bilingual intercultural education, and in agreement with the Ministry of Education, AIDESEP has for the past 20 years been implementing a training programme for bilingual teachers, working with various of the region’s indigenous peoples. Its most important centre continues to be in Iquitos but, in recent years, it has decentralised in order to serve indigenous peoples in the Upper Marañón and central forest regions.

In the health sector, AIDESEP is also involved (along with the General Epidemiological Office of the Ministry of Health) in producing an Analysis of the Integrated Health of Indigenous Peoples which is establishing or (should establish) guidelines for cooperation between the State and the indigenous organisations when designing health programmes in different regions.
Along with other independent but friendly organisations (such as that of the Achuar people of Loreto), AIDESEP is closely monitoring processes related to the massive impact of the extractive (primarily oil and mining) industries on indigenous lands and is also monitoring regulations aimed at encouraging the commercial exploitation of collective territories. These regulations are a consequence of trade agreements that are seeking to free up large areas of land so that they can be handed over to agro-industrial investors.

It is important to note that, in recent years, organisations in areas of former oil exploitation have been able to force the companies involved to establish mechanisms by which to address environmental and human health issues, something the State had ignored for decades.

Crisis and problems

Like any longstanding organisation, AIDESEP has had its difficulties over time. Born of pressing forces, and with a rhetoric demonstrating great understanding of the needs of those it represents, it now finds itself having to respond to national issues and external interlocutors that mean it has to develop a language and deal with issues that are far removed from the day-to-day needs of its grassroots support base.

In fact, the significant progress made in theoretical discourse at the highest level in international fora does not always correspond to the real conditions in which community problems are discussed, and where people have to face up to daily problems with different economic players and their “development” rhetoric. It may be loggers winning over the support of part of the population by means of payments and small handouts; it may be State officials offering small sums of money for welfarist programmes, such as “Juntos” or “Crecer” (national support programmes), provided they agree, for example, to partition their collective lands; or it may be the oil companies’ PR people seeking to destroy community unity by means of bribes.

The quick pace of the organisation’s growth has meant that it has taken on new spheres and new responsibilities without having properly laid its own foundations. This means that the progress of work does not rest on solid bases, and discrepancies are often perceived between the demands of the central, regional and, above all, local levels. Weak relationships between the leaders of the different organisational levels, and between these latter and their grassroots, is one of the greatest challenges today facing the Peruvian indigenous movement. An event such as the recent national uprising against the FTA implementing measures announced by Alan García’s government demonstrates, however, that unity, mobilisation and organisational discipline do still exist, and resurface when a situation is perceived as being seriously detrimental.

Because of the growing distance between the different organisational levels, the organisation’s institutional vision has, in many cases, become bureaucratised. The past energy and responsiveness demonstrated by leaders and support teams in times of great tension and dramatic challenge have often given way to weak and slow approaches that make problem-solving dependent upon the existence of a project to finance the necessary activities. This is not the organisation’s fault alone; some of the international agencies must also take the blame because, with little knowledge of the organisation’s actual conditions or of the viability or usefulness of their proposals, they fund projects that seem more intended to fulfil their own targets for annual fund investment than to support processes of organisational consolidation.

As part of their integration into the national system, indigenous peoples have not only adopted market economy strategies that frequently distort their own social and trading structures but have also taken on the behavioural norms of criollo (society. One such norm is caudillismo, and this has created clashes between current leaders or between new leaders and outgoing ones, with the consequent tensions and expenditure of energy that lead to delays in formulating the movement’s long-term political proposals.

Like caudillismo, another activity originating in the criollo world is that of corruption, and this has already led to some serious crises as a result of the improper use of institutional resources at different levels of the organisation. The specific nature of a multi-ethnic organisation means that control mechanisms for such behaviour have to be highly circumspect, as accusations can often be taken as insults to the ethnic group to which the person in question belongs. Whether this is the reason or not, there are still no adequate procedures to put a stop to such irregularities or punish those responsible. The lack of a supervisory body to apply the statutes also means that people involved in such acts can apply for and occupy leadership positions.

A more recent organisational weakness, and which has unexpectedly surfaced with the latest uprising against the legislative decrees announced by President Alan García, has been the lack of an appropriate response that is in line with the severity of the current
Meeting of AIDESEP’s then President, Miqueas Mishari Mofat, with an Asháninka leader in 1992 – Photo: AIDESEP & IWGIA archives
Awajún communities’ march during the 2008 indigenous uprising – Photo: AIDESEP & IWGIA archives

(left-right) Two of Aidesep’s many meetings, at the end of the 1980s - Photos: AIDESEP & IWGIA archives
problems. Over the last 15 years or so, attacks on indigenous peoples have grown both in number and intensity. Policies aimed at opening up the Amazon’s resources to transnational capital have multiplied, as have regulations aimed at limiting the rights of indigenous peoples. Such tendencies were initially observed in the early years of President Alberto Fujimori’s government but have been unleashed with unusual fury over the last year by the current government. President Alan García has summarised his policy with regard to the country’s natural resources, development and the rights of indigenous peoples in three articles published in national daily newspapers, under titles all being variations on the proverbial theme of a dog in a manger, who neither wants to eat nor allow others to eat.

In his opinion, the lands and resources that are in the hands of the country’s indigenous and peasant farmer communities, and also the plots being farmed by Andean settlers over vast areas to the east of the Andes, are being misused or under-exploited through a lack of technology, a lack of desire for improvement and a lack of any business vision on the part of these people. They are not using the resources but nor are they willing to let others use them. The government’s solution is to clear these areas and put them back in the hands of businessmen with capital and technology, so that they can produce and create employment and wealth. In this way, the argument goes, their previous owners - the indigenous and peasant farmer communities - will benefit, transformed into labourers on what were their own lands. The sale of their lands would, moreover, supposedly provide them with capital with which to set up small businesses.

Never before has there been such unbridled aggression against indigenous peoples, peasant farmers and settlers nationally, and never before has it taken place in such an artful way. Laws that only a short while ago were being rejected by regional governments, grassroots organisations and, in some cases, by the legislative committees of Congress itself, have now been approved, their content split between innumerable legislative decrees approved by the Executive, taking advantage of the special powers granted it by Parliament to pass regulations aimed at facilitating the Free Trade Agreement between Peru and the United States. Under this umbrella, the government has approved everything: laws that disallow consultation processes for communities where mining contracts have been awarded, a new forestry law that permits forest privatisation, regulations restricting the requirements for dividing up indigenous commu-

nities and selling their lands to third parties, to name but a few out of a total of 99 laws.

Faced with the seriousness of these and other events that are severely affecting indigenous peoples, AIDESEP’s response in recent years had been slow, until 9 August 2008 in fact, when it headed a dynamic national-level indigenous protest that has created large-scale political upheaval.

It is clear that the perpetual criminalisation of indigenous rights (despite the fact that Peru has transposed ILO Convention 169 into its legislation and signed the UN Declaration) makes it very difficult to introduce any alternative thinking with regard to the indigenous population when national society is impoverished but bombarded by free market rhetoric. The weak (and often xenophobic) reception given to indigenous discourse by the country’s urban middle classes may, to some extent, explain AIDESEP’s slowness of reactions.

And herein lies another of the great difficulties facing Peru’s Amazonian indigenous organisation: its isolation and lack of ability to forge alliances with the rest of the popular movement. The remarkable explosion of solidarity amongst worker and peasant organisations during the last uprising spearheaded by AIDESEP shows, however, that the door is open to creating effective alliances that would enable the organisation to speed up and strengthen its capacity to respond to national events, closing ranks with the rest of the popular movement, who are also under attack from government policies.

**CONAP and other organisations**

It is not possible to discuss the Amazonian indigenous movement in Peru without referring to some of the other organisations that exist, even though – by their own admission – their aims are very different from those of AIDESEP.

The Confederación de Nacionalidades de la Amazonía Peruana (CONAP) was founded in 1987, that is, only a few years after AIDESEP, the first group to break away from the national organisation. The Congreso Amuesha was one of the federations that had promoted the national structure and been involved from the start. The politicisation of the indigenous debate that was taking place within it on the part of some external players was even expressed in criticisms of a linguistic nature, such as that a “congress” was not an organisation but a transitory “meeting” of people. The leaders of the then Congreso Amuesha came under attack and the organisation ended up being dissolved.
and replaced, in 1981, by the *Federación de Comunidades Nativas Yaneshas* (FECONAYA). The next steps were for the federation to affiliate to the CGTP (Peru Workers’ Union), distance itself from AIDESEP and affirm itself in class-based language. Indigenous people and settlers, said the new leaders, were part of the exploited class and, as such, had to seek joint solutions. Both needed land and there was no room for disputes between them. In an area that was heavily colonized during the second half of the 19th century, particularly by immigrants from indigenous Andean communities and where, as a consequence of this process, the Amazonian indigenous peoples had been left with only small areas of land, it was predictable that this rhetoric would be of more interest to the settlers who were occupying the communities (either as invaders or by having integrated into them, for example via marriage to indigenous women) than to the Yaneshas (formally known as Amuesha) themselves. At that time, AIDESEP was demanding indigenous rights and if, to achieve this, it had to confront the settlers, it was not prepared to change its actions for any political discourse.

Other actors were also playing an important role nationally in the rupture between AIDESEP and this part of its support base, and in the radicalisation of its aims, to the point of promoting another parallel national organisation. This related to a number of NGOs that were beginning to work in the Amazon. AIDESEP was highly critical of institutions of this nature, which it described as acting as intermediaries for indigenous voices, rejecting their work on the basis that indigenous people had the right and ability to work for themselves, and so the NGO field was being closed off to it. The debate even reached the international agencies which, with the intention of not exacerbating the problem, made their support to these NGOs conditional upon their work being coordinated with the indigenous organisations, something that was not always either possible or desired by the organisations.

One such excluded institution in particular took up the role of protagonist in the disagreement and, picking up FECONAYA’s class-based rhetoric, began to criticise AIDESEP, accusing it of being “developmentalist”. The best proof it could come up with was the name of the organisation, however: the *Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Amazonía Peruana* (the Inter-ethnic Association for Development of the Peruvian Amazon). Although the name certainly was not one of the best for an indigenous organisation, it was clear that it had, nevertheless, been chosen by the leaders themselves, and was possibly simply revealing of conditions at that time. In any case, and despite the name, AIDESEP’s actions throughout its institutional life can hardly be described as “developmentalist”, as constantly noted by the State and CONAP itself, since it has focused its action on defending its members’ rights.

The *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Peruana* (CONAP) was finally established in May 1987. Its main premise was that its role was to represent its grassroots support base politically, not undertaking - as AIDESEP had done - programmes and projects to title communities, skills training in the fields of education, health and other similar issues, which should remain in the hands of the support institutions. Out of step with AIDESEP and the global indigenous movement, which both focus primarily on territorial claims and the struggle for self-determination, CONAP stated from the beginning that land was not an exclusive right of the indigenous peoples but was also a right of the settlers, and that indigenous self-determination was an absurdity that merely concealed separatist desires. (See, in this regard, Chirif 1991.)

In the few documents in which CONAP sets out its plans as an organisation, land claims do not appear once. Moreover, in practice, the communities that make up one of its most solid and longstanding support bases, in the Upper Mayo region, have rented out their land to settlers. This is an area in which rice cultivation produces high yields due to mechanisation and irrigation. It seems clear that the longer these tenants remain, having invested in machinery and infrastructure, the more consolidated private property rights will become. Such property rights are now, moreover, beginning to be promoted by current legislation.

CONAP no longer uses class-based language. Its unwillingness to take indigenous rights seriously remains unaltered, however. The best way to define its current programme is to say that it consists of supporting the opposite of whatever AIDESEP proposes. This can be seen at the moment in the two organisations’ positions in relation to the greatest problem facing the indigenous peoples: the environmental contamination and damage to human health being caused by oil and gas exploitation. While AIDESEP and its support base are opposed to this activity, which destroys the indigenous territories and weakens the social bases of the economy and the people’s organisational structures, CONAP and its affiliates have become the bastions of support for the development of such activities on the part of the State and companies. In recent years, they have taken on the task of demonstrating, in national and international fora, the advan-
tages of having oil and mining companies on titled lands as one of the most significant ways of benefiting the indigenous communities.

At the height of the crisis between the State, the companies and the Federación de Comunidades Nativas del Corrientes (FECONACO), which was defending communities that were denouncing the deterioration in their lands and the fact that they as individuals were being poisoned with heavy metals, the now ex-President of CONAP, who was in post for 15 years, declared his support for oil activity, stating that it produced wealth and well-being for the communities. While, at the start of 2008, community members from the Awajun and Wampis peoples were refusing the entry onto their territory of an oil company with whom the State, in violation of the right to consultation, had signed a contract, CONAP leaders were defending the company and insulting the people, arguing that their opposition was caused by ignorance and a lack of desire for progress. Meanwhile, the same ex-President, now a CONAP advisor, announced in Washington at a meeting with oil companies that the Amazonian indigenous peoples awaited them with open arms.

This organisation is so clearly useful to business and State interests that, following the fierce rhetoric of Alan García against AIDESEP on the day that Congress was to debate repealing a legislative decree in order, more or less, to permit the free sale of indigenous lands, CONAP leaders and their ex-advisor appeared, defending this freedom and accusing AIDESEP (whose supporters were clashing with armed police contingents) of manipulating the indigenous peoples and, in turn, of being subordinate to an NGO.

A number of new organisations have emerged in recent years in support of oil activity and, where necessary, other official policies. All of them are financed by the companies themselves, although it is not clear if all of them fall under CONAP’s umbrella. We believe not, and many of them are in fact independently established by the companies themselves. With the weight of their financial and human resources behind them, these organisations seem to have decided that they can carry on their work independently. In this case, then, we can say that the companies are the centrales of these grassroots bases.

The role of the companies in this process still requires analysis, something that would complete the picture of biological pollution with that of the moral contamination they are encouraging by buying off leaders and promoting parallel organisations that support their rhetoric.

Towards the future

Given the history of the indigenous movement and of the indigenous peoples’ organisation under AIDESEP’s leadership, there is no cause for pessimism. The balance of its achievements is a favourable one. The indigenous peoples’ energy and capacity for struggle is being rejuvenated and, at each opportunity, they are offering further demonstrations of what really lies beneath their apparent weaknesses. The exploits of FECONACO and the Achuar of Corrientes, which reached their climax at the end of 2006, will pass into history due to their decision to place their dramatic situation before the eyes of Peru and the whole world and due to their strength in facing up to their problems. And it will also live on in achievements that go beyond our own borders, having managed to get a law approved that forces oil companies, in all new contracts, to re-inject industrial wastewater into the subsoil. In addition, their efforts mean that these waters will also be re-injected in relation to oil extraction contracts that still have decades to run on their own territory, thus creating a valid precedent for the whole country.

At the very moment that we are putting these thoughts to paper, a number of areas of the Peruvian Amazon are experiencing organised protests led by indigenous organisations demanding, in general, two things: the repeal of regulations overturning indigenous rights and seeking the dissolution of the communities and the division and sale of their lands; and the cancellation of oil contracts on their territories, all signed by the State without observing the right to prior and informed consultation, as stipulated in various international documents to which Peru is a signatory.

The problems that are looming will require great effort and commitment from the leaders and their support bases if they are to face up to the threats in a level-headed and persevering manner, and if they are to face up also to the corruption that the powerful sectors, by means of various strategies, are attempting to propagate.
Notes

1 In fact, all indigenous rebellions recorded in history, from the most complex such as that of Juan Santos Atahualpa, a leader of an indigenous rebellion in the Andean jungle provinces of Tarma and Jauja (Peru) in the mid-18th century, to the most simple and fleeting, have required a certain organisational maturity in terms of their design, strategy, tactics and assembly responsibilities in order to achieve their aims.

2 In early 2008, Peruvian President Alan Garcia approved more than 100 legislative decrees in order to bring the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the US and Peru into effect. Several of these new laws were not directly related to the FTA, but, as in the case of legislative decrees #1015 and #1073, they facilitated procedures for the fragmentation and sale of communal lands held by indigenous communities. From August 9th through 20th, indigenous demonstrations paralyzed various roads and energy installations, and on August 22nd, the Peruvian Congress saw no other issue that to repeal these two legislative decrees.

3 Criollo refers to a person of European (generally Spanish) descent.

4 Caudillismo – from the word caudillo meaning leader, chief – refers to a political regime or system where the authority (at the local or national level) is entirely in the hands of one specific leader.

5 See footnote 2.

6 For 35 years, the health and territory of the Achuar have been affected by the contamination from oil drilling. On 24 October 2006, after a 14-day occupation of Peru’s largest oil facility, representatives of the Federation of Native Communities of the Corrientes Rio (FECONACO), reached an agreement with the oil company PlusPetrol and the Peruvian government. The agreement gave the Achuar 98 percent of their demands.

References


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Los Aché del Paraguay: Discusión de un Genocidio
Alejandro Parellada & Maria de Lourdes Beidi de Alcântara (eds.)

LOS ACHÉ DEL PARAGUAY: DISCUSIÓN DE UN GENOCIDIO

The Aché (also known as Guayakí) live in the subtropical forest of Eastern Paraguay. Between 1968 and 1972, a series of events led to the drastic reduction of the population of the Aché under the government of Alfredo Stroessner. This book includes articles by prominent scholars who write about the history and situation of the Aché in Paraguay and discuss their fate as a case of genocide.

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