Critical Transitions: My HRC Fellowship and Imposed "Development" in the Peruvian Amazon

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Introduction: In search of a cause

In the engine room of globalization pounds a stark contradiction: In the "developed" world, above all in the United States, there is a widespread sense of entitlement to cheap commodities, especially in the form of energy from fossil fuels. Yet in the "under-developed" or "developing" nations where these natural resources are often extracted, fundamental rights that we in the Global North take for granted, such as the ability to bring up one's family in a safe, secure and healthy environment, are frequently unmet.

It was my preoccupation with this paradox, its causal nature, and the complex human rights repercussions springing from it that motivated me to apply for the Human Rights Center's 2004 Summer Fellowship. Initially, I had no concrete focus, just the broadest, abstract parameters, for my proposed work, academic and practical: I wanted to work around a subject in Latin America that would incorporate both "environmental" and "human rights" aspects. I was also looking for a subject that I could use for my thesis. Above all, I wanted to find a controversial problem where my work might have a beneficial if modest impact on the eventual outcome.

As a result of an extremely productive meeting with Rachel Shigekane, Senior Program Officer at the Human Rights Center, I had a list of several NGOs, including the International Rivers Network, the Rainforest Action Network and Amazon Watch (AW) to contact. During initial conversations, it quickly became apparent that AW would be the

most open and receptive to my project. After discussing several possible areas with them, ranging from the proposed damming of the Rio Xingu by the Brazilian government to the campaign against Chevron-Texaco over the corporation's contamination of the Ecuadorian Amazon, AW Executive Director Atossa Soltani and I decided that I should work on the Camisea Gas Project, in the Peruvian Amazon. The basis for this decision was that the situation caused by Camisea was the most urgent, and that the indigenous peoples affected by it were the most likely to benefit from any kind of support.

Camisea and the Matsigenka

AW regards Camisea as possibly the most damaging single development currently in the Amazon. Two international consortia, led by Hunt Oil, of Texas, and PlusPetrol, of Argentina, have begun extracting natural gas and natural gas liquids from the Lower Urubamba basin, an inaccessible corner of Southeastern Peru. The Urubamba is home to some of the last indigenous Amazonians living in isolation. In fact, three of the current four large drilling platforms are inside a reserve created specifically to protect two "isolated" indigenous groups. Other ethnic groups in the area, principally the largest, the Matsigenka, numbering some 10,000 people, are also being critically impacted by Camisea, which has rapidly accelerated the process of acculturation in which they were already engaged. Additionally, the Urubamba is one of the most bio-diverse regions on the planet with abundant flora and fauna, many species of which are endemic and have yet to be documented. One study by the Smithsonian Institute found that tree species densities in the Urubamba are "among the highest known to date anywhere in the world" (Dallmeier and Alonso: iii).

According to AW, impacts on the Matsigenka include dramatic reductions in fishing and hunting yields, on which they depend, as a result of a complex series of causal chains apparently including the noise of helicopters and heavy machinery in this remote area, and heavy erosion leading to sediment in the rivers. Other problems include inappropriate and asymmetrical consortia relations with the Matsigenka, a refusal to take the Matsigenka's wishes into account, inadequate "compensation", and changing diet and life survival systems as a result of the consortia's largely unregulated employment of the Matsigenka. For many Matsigenka, this marks their first step into the monetarized economy. Since the turn of the millennium, during the construction phase of the project, relationships of dependence have thus been suddenly built up between the Matsigenka and the consortia. Many of these relationships are now being disrupted just as abruptly now that Camisea moves from the construction to the operation phase, with highly destabilizing effects on Matsigenka society. All these developments come despite the special rights of the Matsigenka as an indigenous people, special rights recognized by international law.[1]

The Background: Latin America and the Amazon in the Global Economic System

Since its "discovery" by Europeans, Latin America's position within the larger, international economic system has been marginal, with the region's "development" strategies often subordinated to the demands of other economies in Europe, North

[1] Peru is a signatory of ILO 169, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989, a binding statutory instrument that commits the Peruvian state in various ways to uphold indigenous people's rights, including the general obligation, in Part 1, Article 4, towards: "safeguarding the persons, institutions, property, labour, cultures and environment" of indigenous groups.

America and now Asia. Although there is wide variation in levels and types of development both state by state and region by region within Latin America, the overall pattern is frequently one of under-development in the form of economies overly reliant on the extraction of natural resources; indeed, this pattern was established by the original, commercial purpose underlying Columbus's first mission to "the Indies". It was consolidated by the gold-hungry conquistadors and then the Spanish colonial system. After independence, the overall pattern remained similar, with other Europeans, especially the British, and subsequently US interests, increasingly controlling and directing the principal economic activities of these countries. Today, from the *maquiladoras* of the US-Mexican border to huge tracts of land in Argentinian Patagonia, which once belonged to Mapuche "Indians" and are now controlled by Italian retail giant Benetton (BBC), the lopsided relationship continues in many ways. This is notwithstanding the many, varied attempts of Latin American states to step out of the economic shadow of Europe and the US, especially during the era of Import Substitution Industrialization following the Second World War.

Nowhere is the asymmetry between international capital and Latin Americans more profound than on the Americas' final frontier, the Amazon. Attempts to penetrate and transform this enormous biome, and harness its natural resources for economic purposes, did not begin in earnest until the late 19th Century. Since then, resources including timber, chicle, animal pelts, barbasco, cascarilla, oil and gas have all been extracted. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes incidentally, this process has caused massive damage to both the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon and to the biome itself. This has included murder, rape, slavery, the widespread theft of indigenous land,

and ecocide, as well as literal and cultural death for many of the Amazon's indigenous peoples: from 1900 to 1957, extinction reduced the number of indigenous Amazonian cultures from 230 to 87 (Sponsel: 269).

All these atrocities have been present in the Peruvian rainforest. Both slavery and massacres have taken place in areas near the Urubamba as recently as the 1990s.[2] Lack of political will, and state reach and capacity has allowed these conditions to flourish. A moderated and sanitized but equally exploitative pattern appears to have been established during the hydrocarbon boom in the Peruvian Amazon which began in the 1970s, including in the exploration and exploitation of the Camisea gas reserves, first discovered by Shell in the mid-1980s during a search for crude oil. In the 1990s, in the wake of the Niger Delta fiasco, Shell, with its global brand image, was alert to the environmental and social sensitivities of Camisea. The lack of concern for these issues shown by the consortia that have stepped in to take the place of Shell during the production phase, and the continued failure of the Peruvian state to enforce its own legislation, are at the root of the current problems in the Urubamba.

The Plan

After discussing my background and skills, including my journalism experience and Spanish fluency, with Ms Soltani, it was agreed that I would go on a wide-ranging research mission to Peru, including to the Urubamba. The purpose of the research was not clearly defined, although there were several broad goals. The principal goal was to

[2] Campaigners on behalf of the Asháninka, ethnic neighbors of the Matsigenka, were recognised for their work by the London-based NGO Anti-Slavery International in 1996. (García: 149) During the same decade members of the armed Maoist group Sendero Luminoso also killed several thousand Asháninka, according to the same and other sources.

provide data and photographs that would prove that the consortia were misrepresenting the truth when they claimed to be avoiding or minimizing environmental and social impacts, and when they claimed to be meeting the social and environmental conditions imposed upon them as a result of civil society pressure, led by AW, on the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB). This information could then be used tactically in a variety of ways, including in the media and in direct quasi-legal representations to the IDB. In addition, my mission included making new contacts or maintaining existing ones between AW and civil society groups in Peru and, when necessary, helping AW with its media campaigning around Camisea.

The Reality

I believe I fulfilled these basic goals during my time in Peru, albeit that their vague nature prevents a more precise appraisal of my performance. My 11 weeks in Peru began on May 24 with a four-week period based in Lima, broken up by a week in early June in the northern rainforest city of Iquitos to represent AW at the annual conference of the Amazon Alliance, an umbrella group of environmentalists and Amazonian indigenes. I was then in the Urubamba from June 21 to July 8. That was followed by another week in Quillabamba, the capital of the province of La Convención, which includes all of the Urubamba. After taking off two weeks in Cusco, with the exception of a couple of interviews, I returned for three last days in Lima before returning to the US on 7 August. Once in the US, I spent several more days writing a 8,000-word report of my principal findings for AW and its civil society partners (Tegel[3]).

[3] I give a comprehensive report of my findings in the Urubamba and the impacts of the Camisea Gas Project on the Matsigenka in this document.

Most of this time, I was carrying out research of one form or another, including through interviews, observation, gathering and processing of documentation ranging from official environmental and social impact reports of Camisea to local media coverage. I was also in touch with journalists on several occasions, from Reuters, *The Guardian*, and Peruvian print and broadcast media, although, ultimately, this aspect of my proposed work only ended up consuming a fraction of my time in Peru.

During my various stays in Lima I met with a wide range of people including anthropologists, journalists, human rights campaigners, including a representative of Peru's national human rights ombudsman's office (Defensoría del Pueblo), lawyers, development workers and environmentalists. I also met with senior members of ProNaturaleza, a Lima-based environmental NGO that is involved in the "monitoring" of the impacts of Camisea. ProNaturaleza is directly contracted to the consortia and there has been much criticism of its role for legitimizing a monitoring system that is viewed by AW and others as structurally flawed by its lack of independence and extremely limited purview. These interviews helped to give me a better understanding of the (inadequate) institutional framework regulating Camisea. They also provided me with empirical information which I was able to pass on to AW subsequently for use in the Camisea campaign.

My week in Iquitos was above all useful to me educationally. Meeting indigenous representatives from across the Amazon and hearing their stories was a vivid reminder of the common threats faced by their communities. Many of them revolve around land tenure and the problems are caused by intusive extractive operations such as logging, mining and damming of rivers to generate hydroelectric power. Increasingly though, the

search for subsoil hydrocarbons seemed to be a major threat, particularly in the Upper Amazon. Colonization and drug-running were also significant challenges. Some of the representatives were veterans of the Amazonian indigenous movement while others were relative or complete novices. Some of those in the latter category were learning as much or more than me and would return to their far-flung communities with important news from elsewhere in the Amazon, redressing the informational asymmetry that often exists in negotiations between TNCs and isolated indigenous communities; reaching a realistic assessment of the value of a TNC's promise to extract oil, say, without damaging the ancestral lands under which it is located, becomes more likely when community members are aware of the pattern of failure to honor such promises elsewhere in the Amazon and beyond.

Another instructive experience in Iquitos was hearing the arguments between some environmentalists from the developed world and some of the indigenous representatives about issues such as women's rights, the use of funding and whether the burgeoning Amazon Alliance was likely to subvert the Amazonian indigenous association COICA (the Spanish acronym of the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin). These debates, which tended to be time-consuming and inconclusive, were a valuable lesson for a neophyte, such as myself, in the arena of indigenous rights, in the need for patience and sensitivity in my dealings with the Matsigenka. At Iquitos, I also met Roger Rivas, "chief" of COMARU and began to discuss an itinerary for my time in the Lower Urubamba.

The climax of my time in Peru was, of course, the two-and-a-half weeks I spent in the Urubamba. This was a fascinating, disturbing and far too brief period. The lack of

Western comforts, including such things as basic sanitation, along with the heat, rain, mud, insects and poisonous snakes did not bother me in the slightest. However, establishing relationships with most Matsigenka took more time than I ultimately had. In Shivankoreni, the first of the four communities I stayed in, I did not get to speak to the community chief until the last of my six days there. For the first two days he was not in the village and for the next four days, I was told by other Matsigenka that he was too "busy" to see me. Most other Matsigenka would happily chat to me but not give formal interviews. When I did finally meet the chief, there were many questions that he was not able to answer. This was problematic for my research. It was also, of course, an important finding in itself; even senior community members did not understand or know much about the extraction project taking place on their ancestral lands, how it would affect the community, or the community's rights regarding that development.

I had read that the Matsigenka had "verve" (Johnson: 8). This compliment referred to their capabilities as hunters, fishers and swidden horticulturalists; the ability to quickly and apparently effortlessly catch enough fish to feed one's family, say, in a challenging natural habitat is indeed admirable. The compliment also had, I think, a more existential inference; although constrained in many ways by their environment, the Matsigenka were also liberated by the nature of their relationship to the rainforest. This freedom manifested itself in the smallest, quotidian ways as well as, perhaps, in the grander scheme of their existence. Lacking any social hierarchy outside of the family, the Matsigenka (or at least the male heads-of-household!) had no boss and did what they wanted and when. The "needs" they would attend to only took up about half their waking hours, and these needs were usually basic, immediate and universal rather than socially

constructed. The communities with which I stayed no longer lived this idealized existence, not least because of the impact of the Camisea Gas Project. However, there were still plenty of elements of it in their lifestyle. Without wishing to romanticize the complex challenges faced by the Matsigenka in their daily efforts to maintain a life for themselves from the rainforest, I could not help but wonder how much we in the "West" might be able to learn from them, while at the same time offering them (rather than imposing on them) the elements of our culture that they might want to adopt.

Again, I regard my time in the Urubamba as extremely brief and would have to add that qualification to all of my research findings. One of the other outsiders I met during my time in the Urubamba, a Dominican priest from the Basque Country, told me that he felt the three years he had spent in the Urubamba was far too short a time to come to any firm conclusions or to really "know" the area and its human population. I would have to humbly agree. Logistics and cultural barriers make research in the area a laborious process. Without my journalistic background, I suspect I would have found out very little. As it is, the data I did gather (Tegel), although useful to AW, is largely based on the views of other people rather than my own observations. This was probably the only way to gather much information in a short period of time in the Urubamba. There was also, of course, the methodological challenge of assessing socio-cultural change during a single short visit to the region rather than during repeated visits over time.

Conclusion: Lessons learnt, intangible results

My time in Peru working with AW was a positive but inconclusive experience. Personally, I had a fascinating time and the satisfaction of feeling that I was doing

something truly worthwhile with my summer. I learnt many things. Obviously, I am now far more knowledgeable about the Matsigenka and the Camisea Gas Project specifically, and about the Amazon and indigenous cultures and rights more generally. I have also witnessed and learnt about the moral and practical complexities of "development" and social activism. The experience will stand me in good stead, I believe, when I come to look for jobs in the non-profit sector on graduation from Berkeley. Equally, I made good contacts with AW and other environmental and developmental NGOs that may prove fruitful in my job search.

Being self-critical, I feel that I could have responded far more proactively to the demands of AW's work; my background in journalism has left me with plenty of initiative and confidence but it was usually expressed within vary clearly defined parameters, namely the need to produce one or two news stories of several hundred words on a set subject every day. AW is a tiny organization with minimal hierarchy looking for any point of leverage it can find on an issue such as Camisea. I feel I was slow in realizing the opportunity I had to "think out of the box" and offer AW new tactical options rather than just work hard on the tasks they gave to me. Equally, my background as a journalist gives me many skills that could be very useful in the non-profit sector but I lack any experience of organizing, an area I will need to work on in the future.

Finally, what difference did I make regarding the implementation of the Camisea Gas Project? Well, the results of my summer are probably intangible. When I emerged from the Urubamba, AW wanted me to immediately provide them with all the information and photos I had about non-compliance with IDB conditions as the bank was

on the point of "closing" a large loan to the consortia, claiming that all conditions had been fulfilled. As a result, I sent from Quillabamba three e-mails totaling some 5,000 words to AW, Environmental Defense and other US-based NGOs. I also sent by express mail a CD of photos of some of the things I had seen, particularly erosion. I gather that this information was regarded as very useful by the NGOs although the loan was still disbursed. I also understand that AW is continuing to use the photos as well as the information in my final report, and video footage I shot, in a number of ways. For example, one AW staff member from San Francisco is, at the time of writing, carrying out a media workshop in Peru for COMARU and other local partners. Some of my footage was being used to illustrate the workshop.

My report may also have contributed to a better, more current understanding of the problems on the ground in the Urubamba, as the Matsigenka see them, on the part of US civil society. This may have come too late for most of the Matsigenka but, as AW is aware, the Peruvian state now plans to open up large areas neighboring the Urubamba to hydrocarbon exploitation. AW may be able to incorporate the information I gathered in its strategic goals and tactical campaign around that proposed development.

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