
Post-petroleum societies: For the defence of forests and peoples' rights, for harmony between human beings and nature

The first steps

International discussion around the impacts of oil industry activities gained particular relevance in the early 1990s, largely as a result of two significant events. The first was when local communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon filed a lawsuit in the United States against Texaco for the social and environmental impacts of its operations. The second was the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa along with other activists in Nigeria. Before these two events, the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989 had received major news coverage, but it was viewed as an isolated incident and was only granted importance between it happened in Alaska.

What was happening in Ecuador and Nigeria was a reflection of what was taking place at the local level: communities had been taking action, for many years already, to fight back against the onslaught of oil companies, and were fully aware of the impacts of oil operations on peoples' rights and on the environment.

These two events also inspired the creation of the Oilwatch network in February 1996 in Quito, Ecuador. In different countries – Guatemala, Colombia, Brazil, Cameroon, Nigeria, Indonesia, Burma, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador – there was growing reflection on the need to halt the expansion of the oil frontier in fragile areas and indigenous territories.

All stages of oil industry activities cause impacts, local and global, social and environmental, from the first incursion into local communities by the public relations representatives of oil companies, to exploration, drilling, transportation and refining, to the burning of fossil fuels or the production of toxic agrochemicals and plastics. The loss of forests is one more of the consequences. In the case of Texaco's operations in Ecuador alone, it is estimated that over a million hectares were deforested, including the land cleared for seismic lines, drilling rigs, highways, camps and other facilities. Other countries face the same problem.

Efforts to stop the exploitation of oil reserves became an imperative for local organizations and social movements who were witnessing the devastation of their territories by fossil fuel extraction.

The first proposal was that of resistance. Different strategies began to be used, such as forcing out oil companies or preventing their entry, filing lawsuits, and linking opposition to oil drilling with other issues such as the defence of biodiversity, human rights, the external debt, the battle against the power of transnationals, and climate change. A life and death struggle had begun.

In Kyoto in 1997, Oilwatch and hundreds of other organizations called for a moratorium on oil, gas and coal exploration. In 2002, during the Rio+10 Summit, a moratorium on oil industry activities was

Oilwatch's central proposal: "We cannot deny the mounting scientific evidence demonstrating that climate change is caused by the burning of fossil fuels. [...] Oilwatch therefore declares a moratorium on oil activities. This moratorium can be promoted from government levels [...] and from local community spheres, through the sovereign decision of the peoples and their resistance and struggle to keep their traditional territories from being opened up to new oil exploration." The moratorium could be exercised through the declaration of "untouchable" protected areas or oil-free zones.

An alternative needed to be built on the basis of energy sovereignty, understood as an opportunity for countries and peoples to exercise control over their space, their culture and their future, including control over the entire energy process, beginning with its acquisition and processing, based on clean, decentralized, renewable, low-impact and diversified energy sources.

In 2004, in Malaysia, Oilwatch and Friends of the Earth, together with WRM, issued a joint declaration in which they stressed the need to halt extractive activities like mining and oil drilling in order to protect forests, biodiversity and the rights of indigenous peoples. But it was in June 2005 in Montecatini (first meeting of the Working Group on Protected Areas) and subsequently in December 2005 in Montreal (COP 11 of the Framework Convention on Climate Change and SBSTA 23 of the Convention on Biological Diversity) that the path to a post-civilization was clearly marked out in the Oilwatch Eco-Call. This call proposed linking all matters related to the conservation of biodiversity, soils and air, climate change and the rights of the peoples, particularly indigenous peoples, in a common strategy that would include leaving oil reserves underground. The first step could be taken in a specific location like Yasuní National Park in Ecuador. The road of resistance looked towards the horizon in the form of the Yasuní initiative.

Since that time, the Yasuní proposal has matured and become probably the most concrete proposal for moving towards a non-petroleum-based civilization. It represents the transition from rhetoric to practice; from the hypocrisy of climate negotiations to concrete solutions; from darkness to a new utopia for leftist movements that had run out of solutions; from disillusionment to hope for young people.

This is why the Yasuní proposal earned such a positive reception and endorsement from the international community as it became better known, as well as considerable support from some of the world's governments. But it was in Ecuador that the initiative achieved the greatest impact, to the point where 75% of Ecuadorians agreed on the need to protect what was left of Yasuní, which means leaving the crude oil in the ITT oilfield (Block 43) underground.

The Yasuní proposal, in Ecuador, was born with four objectives:

- Leaving 840 million barrels of oil untapped, which would prevent the burning of over 400 million tons of CO₂.
- Protecting the territory of indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation.
- Protecting the area's forests, rivers and biodiversity.
- Taking the first step towards a post-petroleum Ecuador.

The proposal to not extract more oil, in Ecuador and the world, raises discussion around the problems associated with oil that looks beyond the market, technology, compensation, corruption of the sharing of profits. It means addressing the question, What kind of society do we want to be?

The Yasuní proposal and the defence of forests and peoples' rights

The relationship between hydrocarbon extraction and forests has several points of connection. One of these is, as mentioned earlier, the loss of forests due to direct or indirect deforestation in the areas around oil operations. But another is one of the false solutions for climate change, namely the REDD mechanism, which incorporates forests into the markets for carbon and other environmental services. REDD allows forests that have been protected by indigenous communities to be converted into carbon credits – in other words, licences to pollute. In practice, REDD is permitting the continued extraction and burning of oil.

This is why declaring areas like Yasuní as oil drilling-free zones not only prevents the consumption of more crude oil, but also frees forests from serving as providers of environmental services.

In addition to deforestation, hydrocarbon extraction is also a direct cause of human rights violations. To begin with, in order to pave the way for the advance of the oil frontier, the first thing that happens is that community relations representatives arrive in local communities with no advance notice, arrogantly disrespecting community decision-making processes. In most cases, communities simply find themselves faced with the presence of machinery ready to go to work. Once oil companies begin operations, they cause local pollution that seriously affects people's health, destroy the ecosystems that are a source of livelihood for local populations, rupture the social fabric and damage community relations. There are countless negative impacts that have been quite widely documented. Thus the proposal to leave the oil underground aims to bring an end to the rights violations suffered by local communities.

In addition, in the case of Ecuador, the Yasuní/ITT initiative also seeks to respect the will of the Tagaeri and Taromene peoples to live in voluntary isolation.

The Yasuní proposal, climate justice and new international relations

The indigenous peoples resisting the expansion of the oil frontier and defending their forests, lands and territories are in practice building post-petroleum societies, as well as helping humanity, since they are contributing to combating climate change.

Under the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, the industrialized countries of the North have an obligation to reduce pollution at the source. The countries of the South with forests, such as Ecuador, have the responsibility to protect them and to respect the rights of the peoples who live in them and take care of them, which means respecting the decision of communities who are opposed to the extraction of oil in their territories. .

The Yasuní proposal also represents the exercise of climate and environmental justice, since it implies social and environmental reparations for vulnerable peoples, the restitution of their rights, and the recovery of their territories for the reproduction of life. A post-petroleum society must consider reparation of the ecological debt generated by climate disasters and a commitment to non-repetition, as a form of justice.

When Ecuador launched the Yasuní-ITT initiative in 2007, one of its objectives was to bring an end to international relations of domination, plunder and environmental racism. The aim was for a small country to be recognized for its courage in foregoing the extraction of oil, and to be supported in this effort by international solidarity. International cooperation could make a radical shift, away from the creation of indebtedness, profiting from disaster, using the countries of the South as carbon sinks, military intervention, and the impunity of corporations from the North operating in the South.

The Yasuní proposal: Sumak Kawsay vs. capitalism

Because the highest stage of capitalism is rooted in petroleum, its economy and its technology, the institutions and foundations of the petroleum society must also be changed. This process must begin by taking away the primary fuel of capitalism: oil. We cannot wait for this change to take place at the level of consumption: we need to shut off the source.

The proposal of a post-petroleum society also helps to highlight the contradictions of capitalism and to question development. Contradictions like technology vs. nature, or the value of the use/transformation of nature vs. its intrinsic value – including oil, which has an intrinsic value where it is buried – must be resolved as we advance towards a post-petroleum society.

With regard to energy, today we see its manifestation – and our need for it – in terms of movement, heat or electricity. But from the perspective of different cultures and peoples, it is something else. Indigenous peoples and peasant communities perceive energy from the point of view of good food, good health, and healthy territories. For traditional peoples, energy is a matter of time, space and relations. Energy is not scarce, nor is there an energy crisis, because energy is infinite in their territories. What could be happening is the theft of energy from their territories and the introduction of different energies. For example, the extraction of the energy of petroleum, which is harmless underground, and its transformation into everything from gasoline for cars and electricity to toxic agrochemicals and plastic garbage; or the dispossession of the energy of the peoples through the introduction of ways of life of immediate gratification and violence, which break the bonds between humans and nature.

Oil industry activities are among the most destructive activities carried out by human beings. They entail drilling deep into the heart of the earth and opening fractures in the underground world, in addition to the destruction of all forms of life on the earth's surface. A petroleum-free society must rebuild sovereignty in terms of health, food, culture and technology as well as energy.

Sumak Kawsay, an Andean philosophy, signifies harmonious relations between human beings and nature. Many indigenous peoples around the world have this same principle, with other names. But the premise is that Sumak Kawsay must be pursued without oil.

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