
Ecuador: Stories of Dispossession and Deforestation Caused by the Extraction of Palm and Wood

The expansion of oil palm and logging in Wimbí is a fact. And in both cases, the protagonist is the same: the land trafficker who allowed the palm company, Energy & Palma, to enter. This new cycle of dispossession, which is even more violent than previous ones, threatens the culture and survival of the community.

The community of Wimbí is located in Esmeraldas on the northern Ecuadorian coast. It is fighting to defend its territory against the advance of African palm, spearheaded by the company, Energy & Palma. This is a story of plunder, wherein **the increase in deforestation in the Chocó forest has gone hand in hand with the expansion of this crop. Powerful actors of the Ecuadorian agroindustry are perpetrating this plunder, along with logging companies** and the complicity of the State—which is unable to guarantee the ancestral rights of communities who have been living in this area for more than 300 years.

The production of African palm for the export of its derivatives began in the eighties in Ecuador. However, in the last 20 years, there has been significant growth of this crop in the country. In 1995, there were 105,855 hectares of the crop; while in 2017, this figure rose to 319,000 hectares (1). Almost half of the national production occurs in the province of Esmeraldas (2). **In this province, it is estimated that palm plantations have deforested at least 100,000 hectares of mangroves and cloud forests in Chocó** (3).

Since March 2017, the Critical Geography Collective of Ecuador (CGCE, by its Spanish acronym) has been working with the community of Wimbí (4). Faced with **growing pressure from palm companies and land traffickers**, community members decided to seek help in surveying and systematizing geographic information related to the conflict. This is all in order to support the judicial processes that the community has underway to defend their lands.

A Long History of Extractive Conflicts

The Chocó forest is inhabited by diverse traditional and indigenous communities; it is here that Energy & Palma is advancing. The interest of industries in the Chocó forest is not new, however; its history must be understood largely in relationship to the successive waves of investment, the expansion of the agricultural frontier and the dispossession caused by successive attempts to integrate Esmeraldas into the national economy and world market.

The territory of the Wimbí community went through the banana “boom” in the 1960s. Small-scale mining has also been a constant activity. However, new forms of illegal mining, introduced progressively in recent decades—and often carried out by people from outside the community—involve the use of large amounts of chemicals that pollute the water and have serious effects on the health of inhabitants. Additionally, logging companies have advanced upon community territory over the last 30 years—in some cases through negotiations and pacts, and in many other cases simply through actions. This is all compounded by the most recent conflicts with oil palm companies.

The Entry of the Energy & Palma Company

The Energy & Palma company is part of the La Fabril group, which was created in 2006. Formerly called Palmeras del Pacífico, **Energy & Palma is the third largest company in this sector in Ecuador, concentrating 10% of national production.** It has both its own plantations and processing plants in Esmeraldas and Santo Domingo, and it recently obtained “social responsibility” certifications. This is part of its sales strategy to appear to produce “sustainable palm oil” (5). The reality in the affected communities, however, shows what is hidden behind these certifications.

Conflicts between Energy & Palma and the inhabitants of Wimbí began to escalate with a process of purchase and sale of land that the company completed with Mr. Miguel Egas. Egas, in turn, is tied to lawsuits over the sale of lands and rezoning of communal areas in this region (6). At that time, several families grew food crops for their own consumption on plots, which were claimed by the company. While the community fought to recover their land, the judge ruled that the purchase and sale had been legal, and that the company could use the land.

However, **before the trial, the company had already tried to convince community members to sell their land in exchange for jobs on the plantations.** The overwhelming refusal of community members, who had been warned by the experiences of many other communities and neighboring villages, led the company to seek other ways to expand in the area. Wimbí is located right on the frontier of the expansion of oil palm companies, bordering their plantations.

For decades, Wimbí has been demanding that the Ecuadorian state recognize its ancestral territory. Anthropological studies proving the existence of a culture, and ties between these people and the land they have inhabited for 300 years, have supported this request. Official recognition is of vital importance to the community, given that the Ecuadorian Constitution protects these kinds of areas and their peoples—by guaranteeing regulation of their territory through specific demarcations.

Nevertheless, according to the manager of Energy & Palma, the communities of the region are the ones invading the land and taking advantage of the companies, whom they extort to obtain some kind of revenue.

Thus, the expulsion of community members from this part of their lands, and the destruction of communal cultivation areas, took place in early 2017, with judicial support. But **the residents of Wimbí have not stopped fighting for what they consider to be theirs.** In August 2017, members of the community took back part of these lands and re-planted coffee and citrus trees—in an act to reclaim their territory.

The Territory of Wimbí Today

Community members report that their territory covers approximately 22,000 hectares. We can divide this area into three zones based on land tenure. Zone I (16,286 ha) is the largest, and is the Wimbí territory that is formally part of the Río Santiago Cayapas community. Zone II (5,050 ha) is in a legally uncertain situation, given that there are no formal deeds for most of it. And Zone III (664 ha) is the only area for which the community has a title. CGCE’s work has focused mainly on Zone II, as this is the area with the most conflicts and greatest danger of dispossession at this time.

The company has already dispossessed a total of 100 hectares in Zone II. Its interest is to expand by approximately 1,430 hectares on the lowest lands, where the establishment of plantations would be more economically viable.

To the northeast of the community, Wimbí also shares a border with the logging company, Plywood—belonging to the Peña Durini group. The community reached an agreement with the company about its presence in their territory a good while ago. The community currently has a relatively peaceful relationship with this company; the conflict seems to have concentrated on the oil palm activity. This may be due to the fact that **palm plantations make any other kind of activity impossible in the territory where they are located, and they have a major impact on the social and economic relations of the place.** Community members' loss of their crops places more pressure on them to seek salaried work elsewhere—including at the palm company that evicted them. However, relations with loggers are not always peaceful.

According to information from community members—several of whom frequent the area to go hunting—**loggers look for timber trees in a perimeter all along the road, going down to the rivers.** However, they avoid going down with the logs so as not to be seen by people from the community. Instead, they take the wood out in pickup trucks along the path going northeast, to where this path joins other secondary roads.

Once again, land trafficker Miguel Egas is involved. Community leaders themselves have discovered that the workers are leasing the timber extraction permit [to Egas]. Nonetheless, **logging activity is following the road that has been cleared, affecting community lands.** Moreover, we could see that the collection points for the wood are located next to Zone III—that is, the area for which the community *does* have formal titles.

The Territory of Wimbí Over Time

Through conversations with community elders, we learned that just two generations ago, it was common practice for some inhabitants of Wimbí to be spread out—in order to grow food on the borders of the rivers, pan for gold and hunt in the rainforest. But as time went by, there were fewer and fewer of these inhabitants. The drastic drop in the price of bananas, the increase in migration abroad and the harsh living conditions upstream led to the abandonment of houses located in areas along the rivers.

Another factor is the old railroad track in the northeastern part of the territory. While the train was still active, several families from the community had their crops near the railroad, as it was relatively easy to take their produce to port by loading it in the train cars. The discontinuation of the railroad in the 90s meant that farming at such distances no longer made sense, and these people abandoned their lands.

One of the most recent pressures specifically involves the logging company, Plywood. This company is currently on land that formerly belonged to the community. In conversations with community members, we were able to clarify that the presence of the logging company today is the result of a negotiation by mutual agreement. **Before the company arrived, the river was the only possible way to get to Wimbí. Its inhabitants agreed to the company operating on those lands on the condition that it open up the only (and current) vehicle-accessible road—a road in precarious conditions.** This considerably improved the community's connection with the rest of the province; now, "it only takes two hours to get to the paved road."

"The state did not make this road. We sacrificed the mountain so they [the logging company] would give us the road in exchange. This is a logging road; they would take their production out along this road." (Interview with Wimbí resident 1, 2018).

Thus, in a context of abandonment by the State and pressing needs for infrastructure and services in the territory, the companies were able to negotiate their entrance and establishment in the community. “Sacrificing the mountain” was the only option left for the community members.

Thus, we see how over the course of its history, the territory of Wimbí has been changing, becoming smaller. **The redrawing of community boundaries over time is also the result of these processes of negotiation, intervention, conflict and abandonment.**

The incursion of oil palm is already happening, and it threatens to expand. Meanwhile, the community is affected by the illegal extraction of wood, whose main protagonist is the same land trafficker who allowed the oil palm company to come in. The entry of Energy & Palma, and the land trafficker’s activities, are part of a new cycle of dispossession—this time more violent than in the past, and with more complicity on the part of some officials. If these officials ultimately do not exercise justice and guarantee the rights of Wimbí inhabitants, there is a strong possibility that the community could end up losing once again.

This article is based on the study (with complete references and maps), “[Mapping and social survey related to land conflicts in the community of Wimbí, San Lorenzo.](#)”

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(1) See, Potter, L., [La industria del aceite de palma en Ecuador: ¿un buen negocio para los pequeños agricultores?](#) M.Eutopía, Num. 2, 2011 and Lasso, 2018

(2) Surface and Continuous Agricultural Production Survey, ESPAC, 2016.

(3) PLAN V., 2017

(4) For several years, the Critical Geography Collective of Ecuador (CGCE) has accompanied various territorial conflicts that affect the fundamental rights of communities, neighborhoods and indigenous peoples throughout the country. CGCE’s contribution focuses mainly on being able to offer a geographic perspective of the disputes that occur in these actors’ living spaces.

(5) [El Telégrafo, 2018](#)

(6) The story of this trial and of Miguel Egas is long. This man was one of the plaintiffs against the association of Santiago Cayapas River Association (CRSC, by its Spanish acronym), of which Wimbí is a part. After a prolonged process, in which the plaintiffs ending up winning the lawsuit against the dead (the original founders of the CRSC), MAGAP carried out a rezoning process of communal boundaries that affected Wimbí. Since then, Miguel Egas has been fragmenting parts of this territory to sell or extract rent, without the community’s permission. Miguel Egas is also tied to the Peña Durini group, which for decades has been involved in timber extraction from the CRSC territory.