Oil, Forests and Climate Change

Oil is a driving force behind climate change, the globalized unequal trade and the new landscapes of colonization. Yet, oil frontiers have multiplied and economies remain deeply petroleum-dependent, albeit concealed behind a “green” cloak.

The importance of oil for analyses of climate change, and even the crisis of civilization (1), cannot be ignored. **Oil is the driving force behind climate change along with unequal trade, globalization and new landscapes of colonization.** It explains the metabolism of production and the market inherent to globalization.

Despite the constant denials of the oil industry and governments, we now know that **the burning of fossil fuels causes disruption to climate systems** that has directly resulted in global climate change. This certainty can be traced back to 1992, when climate and biodiversity were placed on international agendas as major threats to the environment. Numerous scientific reports, evidence gathered around the world and a widespread awareness in society place oil at the center of the causes of climate change, not only because of the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere caused by the burning of fossil fuels, but also because of **the industrial agriculture models and the transport of merchandise and raw materials, which depend entirely on oil.**

But there is also another certainty. All phases of oil production include impacts at the local level that affect societies, their territories and nature. Exploration, drilling, extraction, transportation, and even refining and consumption cause **environmental devastation, violence and the impoverishment of local communities**. **Deforestation and fragmentation of ecosystems and habitats** have been recorded in all phases, along with **the contamination of surface and groundwater**; **acid rain** caused by the burn-off of gas at oil wells; and the **unbearable noise** and pollution of oil facilities, which are transported far and wide by the natural circulation flows of water and wind.

There are thus **two clear dimensions of** oil-related activities: it is the cause of climate change at the global level and it leads to environmental devastation at the local level.

However, and despite the clear warning signs at the local and global levels, the oil frontiers of exploitation and exploration have multiplied and **economies remain deeply oil-dependent.**

Globally, the so-called "peak oil" (maximum point of oil extraction) and the depletion of "cheap" sources of crude have not led to the necessary transitions. Instead, they have unleashed a race **for the control of oil resources**, no matter where they are located or the social and environmental costs involved.

Oil frontiers have extended to almost every corner of the planet, including delicate and supposedly "protected" habitats, as well as the territories of indigenous peoples, endangered ecosystems, and deep ocean waters. Oil remains an **essential factor in the expansion and globalization of capitalism** - **even under its guise of green capitalism -, and now old and new hegemonies compete for access.**

A perspective from the territories

It is clear that there is a global socio-ecological crisis that requires global responses and strategies. Since 1996, the Oilwatch network (2) has proposed **a moratorium on oil exploration** as a measure to address climate change. This proposal also has made it possible to identify oil consumption as the main cause of climate change and has contributed to our understanding of the local impacts caused by exploration and extraction processes.

Although climate-related catastrophes are increasingly being recorded and reported, now with the use of sophisticated technological devices, governments have done little to curb the expansion of oil frontiers. In fact, if some positive results have been achieved in this respect, they have only come about because of the pressure and resistance of local communities.

New atmospheric science, which allows us to observe the fires of the Amazon in real time as well as the behavior of winds, ocean currents and heat and cold waves, has contributed more to normalize such problems while advancing the idea of "inevitable catastrophe." This would supposedly be resolved through the use of military and/or geo-engineering interventions or new businesses, such as the payment for environmental services.

But if we look at this situation from the territories, we can understand the reasons for so much resistance to industrial oil extraction projects around the world.

Take tropical forests, for example. When a forest is exposed to some form of intervention, changes have been documented in the microclimate at up to 100 meters from the edge of operations. If you take the butterflies into account, the impact of such activity extends to 300 meters from the edge. These changes are known as **"edge effects."** The impact of extreme levels of **pollution on water, soils and air** has also been documented, as a continuum exists between forest, water and air. Tropical forests have complex water recycling systems and are actually **freshwater reserves.** Oil extraction also involves the creation of **roads and highways** to be used by heavy-duty trucks, as well as **pipelines, worker camps**, among many others. Such infrastructure is also guarded by military or security personnel, which increases the **violence** generated against communities, **especially for women and girls**.

Life in the forests is full of relationships and sensations. Relationships of interdependence and cooperation that allow people to live and nature to reproduce. Olfactory signals, vibrations, attraction to pollinators by the shape or color of flowers, are adaptations that make the forests a setting full of deep eroticism. **This is life in its broadest and most existential sense, and goes beyond issues of food and health.**

Each polluted river, each drilled oil well, each road that crosses territories to extract materials rather than providing connections among people, each enclave with oil infrastructure installed on it has been rejected or at least repudiated at the local level.

Awareness of and concern for the destruction of nature have spread throughout the world, and this has not been due just to television reports of global catastrophes. Local populations are rebelling and offering new meaning at the global level and to the global movement.

An extractivist Ecuador in crisis

Since the first oil fields were discovered in Ecuador, the country's various governments have

introduced policies and measures that favor the oil industry, even at the cost of food and energy sovereignty.

The oil companies and governments of the moment, with which different models of pressure and control were established, built an imaginary of an oil-producing country and created **institutional and administrative models designed to favor the oil industry.** This has included contracts that are always beneficial to oil companies; numerous kinds of subsidies; roads and the promotion of a car culture; constant agreements and policies to maintain and increase the oil extraction activity as the axis of the Ecuadorian economy; deregulation of environmental standards, including wide-ranging measures to evade social and environmental responsibilities.

After 50 years of extraction, especially in the Amazon, the **new reserves are located in areas of difficult access and of high risk, such as the Yasuni National Park.** Moreover, the country's remaining oil reserves consist of heavy crude oils that demand high supplies of energy (which implies mega-infrastructures for electric power generation) and complex investments, such as roads, pipelines, crude oil heating stations, and refineries for this type of crude, among others. Despite this, the aim to continue with oil extraction has been maintained.

The oil legacy in terms of the devastating environmental, social and economic impacts, especially with the evidence presented during the **trial against the activities of Chevron-Texaco in Ecuador** (3), has forged a critical mass against such operations. To this was added the **campaign for the defense of Yasuní** (4) - recognized as the zone with the most biodiversity on the planet. All of this has placed nature and people on the other side of the scales as the sacrifice for oil production. Furthermore, an assessment of the past 10 years reveals how the oil industry hid a **complex web of corruption** that led to a severe economic and institutional crisis in the country.

The idea of oil as an agent that can generate jobs and income or allow the population to escape poverty has lost all credibility. That is the backdrop of recent protests in Ecuador.

In October 2019, the **Ecuadorian government decided to eliminate fuel subsidies. The advantages - and subsidies - for the oil industry itself were not affected.** On the contrary, the actions taken with respect to fuel subsidies were introduced alongside **additional measures to increase oil extraction**: these included laws to deregulate environmental controls, commitments to cover the arbitration costs of oil companies, and economic measures that maintain the central role of oil in the country's economic and production activities. The argument offered by the government was that these were measures in line with global environmental demands.

The protests have been led by indigenous peoples, who have historically played a leading role in the country's anti-extraction struggles. Today, these peoples allege that the government initiative was in fact an attack on the impoverished economies of the rural sector and the city. The mass protests forced the government **to suspend the proposed elimination of fuel subsidies** and to engage in a discussion about an economic agenda for the country.

The **Parliament of the Peoples** that has been convened by indigenous organizations has now presented its proposals: these include a series of adjustment measures along with taxes levied on the wealthiest companies and sectors of the country. Yet, they also include proposals for a shift in terms of national policies in order to recognize plurinationality, good living standards and the rights of nature. (5)

The proposals also include no further extension of the mining and oil extraction frontier and the

continuation of consumer subsidies until issues related to food and energy sovereignty have been resolved. To date, those areas have been undermined by the oil industry model on which the Ecuadorian economy is based.

Esperanza Martínez,
Acción Ecológica, Ecuador, member of the Oilwatch network

(1) There is a general consensus that the current crisis is not only economic, environmental and about energy sources, but that it represents a complete breakdown of human civilization itself, revealing the exhaustion of a model of economic, productive and social organization that is reflected in all areas of life.
(2) Oilwatch is a network in the Global South, which promotes resistance to oil activities in the tropical zones. The network's international activities are presently coordinated in Nigeria.
(3) More information can be found on Frontpage: www.texacotoxico.net
(4) More information can be found on www.yasunidos.org
(5) The document can be downloaded at: CONAIE, Presentation of an alternative proposal to the social economic model