It's not too late to stop a devastating 'clean energy' project in Ecuador: The Santiago Hydropower Dam

In the southern Ecuadorian Amazon, a devastating “clean energy” project is underway: the Santiago Hydropower Dam. Located in the Morona Santiago province, this dam could become the largest in Ecuador and one of the ten largest in Latin America, with a capacity of 3,600 MW. The project is expected to submerge 3,000 hectares, destroy a vast and biodiverse region, and jeopardize the lives of more than 91,000 people who live near the project site. Although construction has not yet begun, the government is pushing to make it happen as soon as possible—by, among other things, criminalizing resistance to projects that (like this one) are presented as "strategic for development."

Ecuador's state-owned electric company (Corporación Eléctrica del Ecuador, in Spanish) is in charge of the project for now. The dam would be built on the Santiago River, about two kilometers downstream from the confluence of the Namangoza and Zamora Rivers. Of the 3,000 hectares under threat, 70 percent are native forest. There is enormous biodiversity in this area, with 532 species of flora, 205 species of land animals, 193 species of birds, and 29 species of fish – many of which are endangered (1).

Image

On the map, the communities that could be directly affected by the construction of the Santiago Hydropower Dam (Source: ACOTENIC Cía. Ltda.)

The storage capacity of the area that would be submerged would be almost 1.64 million cubic meters of water. This would simply obliterate 45 km of the Namangoza River and 24 km of the Zamora River. As a result, at least 45 communities and 9 villages along these rivers would be directly affected (2).

Those who would suffer the most from these impacts are the Shuar People, the main inhabitants of the region. Two Shuar communities, Yuquianza and La Unión, run the risk of being completely submerged and having their populations resettled. The rest of the communities would suffer due to flooding of the lands where they grow food, as well as significant changes to the river on which they depend. Such changes would include disruptions in river transportation, the natural flow of the river, and fishing itself – which would be drastically and irreversibly affected due to the extermination of migratory fish and mass fish deaths. These changes would seriously threaten the food sovereignty of these populations. Specifically, the communities of Mayaik, Paantam, San Luis, San Ramón, Shariam, Yunkumas and Coangos would lose their main connection route as a result of the river's submersion (3).

The Santiago River is also the main transportation artery for the Shuar in Ecuador and the Wampis and Awajún nations in Peru (4). For these Peoples, the Santiago River is known as Kanus. The destruction of the natural flow of the river threatens to socially and economically isolate the communities, disrupting age-old navigation routes used for trade, family communication and the exchange of foods, spices and knowledge. Currently, part of this route is also used for tourism.

For the Shuar People, the significance of this region cannot be captured in technical environmental impact studies. It is sacred territory. The waters of the Santiago River – or rather, the Kanus River – are inhabited by Tzunki, a sacred spirit that maintains the flow of life within these waters (5). The capitalist worldview, with its logic of offsetting or compensating for destructive megaprojects, is incapable of understanding how burying waterfalls, rivers, and even ancestral territories – such as the Cueva de los Tayos – would affect the Shuar People's way of life.

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that the destruction and suffering caused by the construction and operation of a project like this one extends far beyond those directly affected. The environmental, hydrological, demographic, and economic changes associated with a project of this magnitude are already well known. These impacts include uncontrolled population growth, an increase in land conflicts, and threats to the local population's traditional way of life. Additionally, there would be increased deforestation, river pollution, a greater risk of contamination from mining projects along the Santiago River, severe erosion, and increased sedimentation – which could even compromise the very functioning of the hydroelectric plant. All of this would negatively affect about 91,000 people, some of whom have ancestors who have lived in the territories surrounding the project for thousands of years.

Despite all these impacts, the project has had an environmental license since 2023, and the government is moving full steam ahead to begin construction as a Public-Private Partnership, an investment model that allows the private sector to partner with the government and benefit financially from the project. The government estimates that construction would take six years, and that commercial operation of the hydropower dam would begin by 2032.

For indigenous, peasant, and human rights and environmental organizations that oppose mining or hydropower megadams – such as the Santiago project – resistance has become increasingly risky. Between January 2024 and June 2026, the Ecuadorian government declared more than 25 states of emergency, adopting a new regulatory framework that has served to undermine the rule of law.

As often happens in Latin American countries, the official justification for this state of emergency has been allegedly to combat organized crime, but the reality is very different. These measures have expanded the State's capacity to unduly surveil people who defend human rights and nature; this has gone hand in hand with increased criminalization of indigenous and peasant individuals and organizations, heightened violent repression, and the State's continued failure to ensure accountability and provide reparations for victims.

It is necessary to pay attention to what is happening in Ecuador: beneath the enforced silence that the State imposes on the country, destructive extractive projects like the Santiago Hydropower Dam project are moving forward – while human rights and environmental defenders face serious threats.

WRM International Secretariat

References:

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