



REIMAGINING THE HUMAN- ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

Socioterritorial Voices for Climate Justice: Protest and Resistance in the Andean Amazon

Maritza Paredes



UNITED NATIONS
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This paper forms part of the volume *Reimagining the Human-Environment Relationship* for Stockholm+50. This curated collection of ideas captures, interrogates, and elevates alternative paradigms of the human-nature relationship – existing and new, and from various disciplines and societies – creating a space to recast our relationship with the environment and inform future policymaking.

About the Author

Dr Maritza Paredes is a political sociologist who specializes in the politics of the environment. She researches and publishes on environmental conflicts, the local politics of climate change, the political economy of extractive industries, illegal economies, and indigenous peoples' mobilization. She is the director of the Doctoral Program in Sociology at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and an Associate Professor in the Social Sciences Department. In recent years, she has published relevant work related to the political impacts of the global extractive industries on local and indigenous communities, focusing on the legal mining industry and the illegal global market of cocaine. Currently, she is working on a climate justice research project looking at the local political effects of international climate policy regimes in the Peruvian Amazon.



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Introduction

From the large dissemination of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s to the global activism unleashed recently by Greta Thunberg's Fridays For Future (FFF), civil society mobilization has demanded that global authorities take more radical measures to limit humanity's negative impact on the environment. These mobilizations have flourished and acquired multiple generational, cultural, and territorial manifestations. While youth organizations have received much of the spotlight to date, this article focuses on the voices of territorial movements from the Global South, particularly how the experience of indigenous Amazon communities can contribute to a better understanding of climate justice.

Territorial movements within the Global South demand climate solutions that recognize the historical and contemporary characteristics of their territories, the localized effects of extractivism and the climate crisis, as well as the deeply entrenched power of national governments. These movements are especially relevant today as the Amazon is one of the four largest carbon reservoirs of tropical forests globally¹ and faces the highest deforestation rates in the world.² As a result, governments in the Andean Amazon in countries like Peru and Colombia are receiving growing international support to combat deforestation and save carbon emissions.³ Unfortunately, these forms of support tend to mirror the same discriminatory practices that have led to large-scale dispossession and extraction in indigenous territories in the first place.⁴ In this context, indigenous grassroots organizations play a crucial role in resisting territorial imposition – their experience is central to the concept of climate justice.

The paper is organized into six sections. The second section explains territorial movements and their central role in climate action in the Global South. The third section describes their behaviour, focusing on their multi-scalar interaction with the global justice movement. The fourth section focuses on indigenous movements in the Amazon, explaining their particular meaning of justice, drawing on their experiences of dispossession, extraction, and exclusion. The fifth section offers a case study on the Andean Amazon in Peru to illustrate how climate policies tend to reproduce patterns of dispossession and exclusion of vulnerable peoples. The article concludes with a call to more systematically include the voices of territorial indigenous rights groups in the global climate debate – their experiences are central to the concept of global climate justice and should be the basis for global governance policy.

Socioterritorial Voices for Global Climate Action

Young people's moral authority and smart use of social networks to exercise pressure on those responsible for institutional political decisions in the face of today's climate crisis have increased the visibility of the climate global social movement.⁵ Represented largely by educated young women,⁶ the climate movement in Europe and the United States has demanded that authorities base political decisions on scientific evidence and has framed the climate conflict as a mainly intergenerational dispute.⁷ The FFF movement is an iconic example of this "historical change in climate activism," including the widespread use of social media to generate large-scale action.⁸

In the Global South, particularly in Latin America, mobilization formats, such as FFF, have also been deployed and spread among young people. Although these groups are made up of students from universities and middle-class schools in several countries, Zitterbarth argues that young Latin

Americans take a critical stance toward their peers in the Global North.⁹ Latin American climate activism goes beyond calls for changes in individual lifestyle, “listen to science,” or the fight for 1.5 degrees¹⁰ and adopts a specifically decolonial, anti-extractivist, and even an anti-capitalist frame. In this context, Latin American youth activism looks to build alliances with territorialized and historical movements in their countries and to “defend the defenders,” in reference to territorial and indigenous leaders, as a crucial strategy.¹¹

While social/territorial movements have led the climate movement in the Global South, the emphasis on territorial movements is particularly strong in Latin America. In contrast with the “post-materialist” environmentalism that characterized the so-called “new social movements” in the Global North at the end of the previous century,¹² territorial movements are a form of “ecologism of the poor.”¹³ They act towards the defence of livelihoods, related ecosystems, and local cultures¹⁴ and resist the imposed burdens of contamination and extraction on their territories.¹⁵ In Latin America, multiple grassroots organizations, local environmental NGOs, farmers, town leaders, and indigenous peoples, among others have emerged to carry out coordinated political and environmental climate actions.¹⁶ What is central to this “ecoterritorial turn”¹⁷ is their ecosystems’ “double exposure.”¹⁸ On the one hand, they face the impacts of climate change and, on the other hand, they struggle against the negative consequences of the globalization of the economy, particularly of extractivism.

The territory is a defining feature of these social movements, and its appropriation is the main point of contention.¹⁹ According to Elden, the territory is not just an administrative demarcation that arises from formal authorities or a container of natural resources. Instead, the territory is “a historically and geographically specific form of organization and political thought.”²⁰ The notion of territory addresses the power relations and the connections between the actors that inhabit and transit through a particular space and ecosystem. In the past three decades, groups of farmers, peasants, indigenous communities, and other actors have experienced a collision with dominant government political projects as part of both the expansion of extractivism²¹ or of conservation policies intending to mitigate the global climate crises.²² In both forms, the power of the State and global capital are central to these projects, attempting to restructure contemporary rural life, rights to land and other central natural resources, and the burden of environmental degradation.²³

Territorial movements represent a call for local agendas to drive climate adaptation and resource management, while also helping to mobilize global-level climate action. Increasingly, these movements are articulated as social network organizations coordinated around actions of protest and resistance,²⁴ often combining highly localized forms of protest with national and global agendas.²⁵ Paradoxically, the globalization of the economy, whose consequences they have suffered, has allowed territorial movements to gain greater visibility and world recognition. The loss of power at the national level produced by globalization creates the possibility of new forms of political power at the local level to confront supranational decisions. In a more globalized system, local territories, even though they are geographically limited and have few resources, have become spaces with greater potential for informal actors to engage in politics and contribute to the formation of “global public spheres.”²⁶

Territories and Global Climate Justice Activism

The territorial movement in the Global South has roots in both global climate justice and the environmental justice movements. Early influences included the environmental and civil rights

movements in the 1970s and 1980s, protesting the disproportionate effects of pollution on African American and Native American communities.²⁷ More recently, ineffective State responses to the Katrina catastrophe – which clearly had a heavier impact on minority communities, have demonstrated that vulnerability to the environmental crisis remains highly unequal²⁸ – led to a rethinking of the conception of justice in the context of the climate crisis.²⁹ CorpWatch in San Francisco first conceptualized the notion of ‘climate justice,’ which from early on was linked to forms of resistance against the fossil fuel industry.

Over time, transnational advocacy work helped bring movements in the North closer to the local struggles of indigenous peoples and other rural communities of the Global South. Transnational advocacy emerged as a force in global politics in the 1980s.³⁰ A “transnational advocacy network” (TAN) that has “the structure and logic of an ecosystem”³¹ serves to unite in collective action various platforms composed of grassroots organizations, NGOs, and academics across the world. Thus, in issues such as the rights of indigenous peoples, the environment, women’s rights, and human rights, these multi-scalar connections have been improving the prospects of a “counter-hegemonic globalization,”³² bringing local voices into the global scene. These TANs were essential to connecting the leaders of the territorial, indigenous, and peasant organizations with various platforms of international struggles, such as the human rights movement, the environmental movement, and more recently the climate justice movement. Environmental justice already had an important echo among territorial movements in the Global South, as poor and vulnerable communities struggled with the disproportionate burden of environmental degradation due to the expansion of the extractive frontier.³³ However, platforms in Latin America, such as the Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), the Panamanian indigenous organization, and Vía Campesina, the contemporary transnational agrarian movement, have made it possible to articulate with the international environmental justice movement.³⁴

Territorial movements have played an increasing role in defining the demands of the climate justice agenda, including through different platforms such as the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative in 2001, the famous ten principles of climate justice of Bali in 2002, or the delimitation of 4 principles by the networks Climate Justice Now! and Climate Justice Action during 13th Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) in 2007.³⁵ In this last COP, demands for renewal, clean energy, and biodiversity conservation were complemented by territorial group demands to recognize indigenous rights to territory, and the sovereignty of local peoples over energy, forests, land, and water.³⁶

A turning point in the history of the climate justice movement occurred in 2009, during the COP15 process in Copenhagen.³⁷ The product of the negotiations was disappointing for civil society organizations. They considered the commitments proposed, year after year, around the activities of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to have failed: they were seen as false solutions defending a type of capitalist economic system that was actually what had to be changed.³⁸

As a direct response to the shortcomings of Copenhagen, territorial movements actively collaborated with the Bolivian Government of Evo Morales to organize the first World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in 2009 in the city of Cochabamba. Evo Morales, together with his Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) allies,³⁹ the Presidents of Venezuela and Ecuador, took advantage of the synergy with these territorial

social movements to strengthen an alternative “anti-capitalist” bloc in the climate negotiations.⁴⁰ However, Evo Morales’ proposals did not substantially impact international negotiations in the COP16 in Cancún.⁴¹ More important than the failure of the ALBA coalition at the Cancun COP was the failure of these governments to be able to articulate synergies with the territorial movements of their countries due to the incoherence of their rhetoric.⁴² Morales’ redistributive policies were highly dependent on intensive extractivism and his Government was part of what Svampa has called the consensus of the commodities in Latin America.⁴³

The break between the Morales Government and the territorial movements in Bolivia was precipitated by the conflict over the Isiboro-Sécure National Park Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS). The Government decided to promote a road project that would cross this territory to join the departments of Beni and Cochabamba, in the provinces of Moxos and Marbán in Beni and Chapare in Cochabamba.⁴⁴ The Government sought to avoid the indigenous consultation and made it clear that it was seeking to open indigenous territories protected by the struggles of their organizations to extractive megaprojects. To the surprise of the indigenous movements of Beni, they announced the exploration of gas in indigenous territories and protected areas and accused the indigenous movement and its allies, other territorial organizations, of being “fundamentalists” and “enemies” of Bolivia.

As in the case of Morales in Bolivia, despite the rhetoric of respect for “Mother Earth’s rights,” the Correa Government’s policy objectives in Ecuador followed an intensification of the extractive economy.⁴⁵ Some of the moments with the greatest tension in this regard were the approval of the mining law that opened the country to large-scale extractive activity⁴⁶ and the closure of the Yasuní ITT Initiative that sought to leave the hydrocarbon underground in exchange for an international cooperation fund, and the start of its oil exploitation.⁴⁷ Like Morales, after these controversies, Correa accused the territorial movements in Ecuador of being “fundamentalists” and “infantile environmentalists” who hindered economic development, deepening their misunderstandings with these movements.⁴⁸ Both cases clearly express the appropriation struggles that are unleashed over the territories between local communities and their national governments and how their fights go beyond coalitions of left or right and demand solutions with a broad perspective of social justice.

Indigenous Territorial Movements in the Andean Amazon

The participation of territorial movements in the global climate justice movement has contributed to broadening the notion of justice, taking it beyond aspirations of equity and redistribution, and demanding recognition of these territories’ collective history, ecological crisis, and experience of dispossession. Organized in international networks such as the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities and, more formally, in The International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC), these groups demand less bureaucratic and more meaningful forms of participation, ensuring their voices count in the policies designed to overcome the climate crisis.⁴⁹

In response to a hegemonic narrative of the Anthropocene that ambiguously blames humanity as a whole and makes invisible the role of industrialization, fossil capital, colonization, and the expansion of the nation-State in the origin of the climate crisis,⁵⁰ indigenous peoples demand recognition of the history of ecological dispossession at the origin of the crisis. In his book, *Facing Gaia*, Bruno Latour complains that NASA offered us a beautiful single representation of the blue planet, but it erroneously reinforced the unreal idea of nature as a unitary globe. He claims that there

is no unitary nature or a unique human imprint on the natural world.⁵¹ Indigenous peoples in the depths of the Amazon Forest have had essentially nothing to do with the anthropic origin of climate change, not at least until politicians provided them with chainsaws,⁵² as part of political projects of colonization, expansion of the agrarian frontier, and the insertion in the global economies.⁵³ On the contrary, indigenous peoples are already living in the critical climate future the rest of the world fears, a certain form of dystopia.⁵⁴ According to Whyte, a Potawatomi academic, indigenous peoples' ecosystems today are unrecognizable to their ancestors; they have lost relationships with hundreds, if not thousands, of plants and animals, and most of their habitats have been eliminated and transformed by States to reflect the cultures of other dominant peoples.

Nevertheless, in practice, indigenous peoples and local communities manage more than a quarter of global land and care for 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity.⁵⁵ The forests they inhabit are crucial to the fight against deforestation and carbon emissions, and despite the multiple threats indigenous peoples and local communities face due to growing urbanization, expansion of the agricultural frontier, and illegal activities, there is incontrovertible evidence that they are best placed to preserve the forests.⁵⁶ Despite the central role that territorial movements play in preserving ecosystems, today's global conversation about climate mitigation largely ignores them. Indeed, the hierarchical approach to concepts like "green growth," "sustainable development," and "technology transfers" often fail to account for local experiences of territory and the environment, overlooking their own parameters for sustainability.⁵⁷

Territorial and indigenous movements openly dispute approaches to climate adaptation based on the commodification of nature by the State. For example, a dominant approach to forest conservation has been to commodify it and protect it as an owned resource, an economic entity that can generate carbon savings.⁵⁸ This commodification fails to account for indigenous uses of forests, and indeed tends to lead to the kind of colonial extractive approaches that generate large-scale inequalities. Territorial counter-movements take a different approach, identifying other non-economic functions played by forests and rejecting an approach that sees forests as a function of the carbon exchange market.⁵⁹

Of course, not all conservation efforts reproduce inequalities and are seen by communities as the appropriation of territory and nature for ecosystem purposes. Nonetheless, it is counterintuitive to find increasing territorial conflicts between communities and conservation authorities.⁶⁰ These adverse results flew in the face of Indigenous organizations when they pioneered decades-long struggles in the national and international arenas to protect nature, as their cultures and livelihoods often depend on the conservation of better-preserved ecosystems.

In this context, the strong role of the State in driving environmental policy revives the old problem of the developmental and authoritarian State in Latin America, particularly in the Amazon.⁶¹ Under the developmental paradigm, State standardization and measurement criteria tend to simplify and standardize local and complex realities and the multiple interactions of the inhabitants with their territories to produce large-scale transformations.⁶² Furthermore, the persistent existence of prejudices among State experts and technicians about the ability of populations to conserve the environment and the creation of narratives about the misuse of natural resources serve to legitimize the dispossession and displacement of indigenous communities.⁶³ In extreme cases, State officials' attitudes can lead to local communities being seen as encroaching, criminalized, excluded, and even violently evicted.⁶⁴

There is growing evidence that conservation policies, when guided by the imposition of territorial visions opposed to the local and ancestral uses and meanings of indigenous peoples, can generate extreme situations of deprivation.⁶⁵ These policies make it more difficult for indigenous families to face today's challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and security crises while illegal extractive activities continue to threaten them. The marginality of indigenous populations is reproduced, preventing their ancestral knowledge from enriching the environmental governance of the territory. However, these hegemonic efforts are also contested, giving rise to new forms of conflicts in the Amazon in defence of participation in climate policies, in opposition to the unilateral control of the territories and stereotyped views of their inhabitants.⁶⁶

The Case of Cordillera Escalera Park in the Peruvian Amazon⁶⁷

In the north of the Peruvian Amazon, the Cordillera Escalera Regional Conservation Area (ACR-CE) in San Martín was established in 2005 with 149,870 hectares through the Supreme Decree, DS 045-2005-AG. Although it was supported at the local level, its creation also responded to the growing commitment of countries like Peru to the fight against deforestation and to conserve valuable forests' carbon reserves. New climate governance funds have led to the greater extension of natural protected areas in the Amazon of Peru, which have tripled in the last two decades.⁶⁸ Since 2008, the country has been part of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programme, and the ACR-CE was listed in 2008 as a pilot.⁶⁹ Moreover, international climate funding has provided economic and technical support to the governments for incrementing the capacities of public conservation organizations at the national and subnational levels. In this process, the region of San Martín was pioneering, establishing stronger and more capable environmental institutions.⁷⁰

This last section illustrates the situations of inequality and injustice emerging from territories; as well as the concerns of grassroots indigenous organizations and their confederates on national platforms, such as the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDSESP) and the pan-Amazonian COICA. For instance, these two organizations expressed their criticism and opposition to programmes like REDD+ in the Iquitos Declaration, "no rights, no REDD+." Their main concern was that REDD+ could undermine indigenous self-determination, land and resources rights, and participation and consent for measures directly affecting indigenous peoples.⁷¹ The ACR-CE protects valuable water resources and biodiversity for the people of San Martín and the fight against climate change. However, they also overlap with the ancestral territories of the Awajún, Shawi, and Kichwa indigenous peoples. In creating the ACR-CE, the authorities of the regional government of San Martín have ignored the uses and rights of Kichwa indigenous peoples over this land, providing an excellent example of how indigenous rights vulnerability is revived in the context of climate mitigation policies.

The creation of the ACR-CE did not impact those indigenous communities who had land titles. The park's borders were specially designed so that titled communities were left out. In the eyes of those who created the ACR-CE, the communities that did not have titles were not a legal problem. They could have the right to "use" the lands according to the conditions of the new administration, but could not have tenure. After establishing the ACR-CE, the Kichwa communities realized that they could no longer obtain collective property titles over their ancestral territory since titling is not allowed within protected areas in Peru. The Ethnic Council of the Kichwa Peoples of the Amazon (CEPKA), which represents the indigenous communities in the ACR-CE, argues that by creating

the ACR-CE, the regional government once again ignored and made invisible their land rights. These communities were in the process of legally claiming their titles of the territory they had occupied for a considerable period, and they were well known within the community.

Climate justice in the light of the struggle of these communities expresses the urgency to embrace the historical roots of these communities' positions and how that history permeates climate change policies. Since the mid-20th century, Kichwa communities have been displaced and ignored by successive efforts of the Peruvian State to exploit the forest. The same State that today seeks to conserve, had carried out developmental interventions that sought to expand the agrarian and oil frontiers towards the Amazon in the 1960s.⁷² These developmental efforts were done under the conception that the Amazon was an empty space⁷³ waiting to be "conquered" and saved from the waste and misuse of its original and "savage" inhabitants, the original indigenous peoples.⁷⁴ The Amazonian indigenous organizations that emerged in this period fought against these discriminatory ideas⁷⁵ and against the advance of new extractive activities and the invasion of new settlers whose arrival was promoted by State colonization policies. However, since the 1970s, when indigenous communities gained official recognition for their communities and lands (Law 21175 of 1978), the State has done little to secure land rights legally.⁷⁶ The legislation did not recognize the patterns of land use and other resources through hunting, fishing, slash-and-burn horticulture, and the migratory nature of these peoples,⁷⁷ but also agricultural land titling institutions have historically been incapable and corrupt.⁷⁸

San Martín was probably one of the regions most affected by these State political projects to transform the Amazon Forest.⁷⁹ As a result, this region suffered the highest deforestation rates prior to the 1980s in Peru,⁸⁰ and massive displacement and discrimination of their original peoples. For decades, indigenous communities believed that their traditional ways of subsistence and their ancestral cultures were considered primitive and a waste of the earth's resources. It is no coincidence that the San Martín region has the lowest rate of recognized indigenous communities with legal titles to their land among the departments of the Amazonian region: only 19 per cent.⁸¹ Nor is it a coincidence that communities fearing discrimination have only recently organized themselves to achieve recognition of their rights. For example, CEPKA was only founded in 2002 and represented the largest number of communities affected by the ACR-CE.

Finally, the same legalistic criteria that conceal the struggle of indigenous peoples for land were used to deny prior, free, and informed consultation in the conception of the protected area and its management. According to the directors of the ACR-CE, there was no obligation to carry out the consultation stipulated by the International Labour Organization Convention 169 and ratified by the Peruvian State in 1994 to create the ACR-CE. The reason was that there was no approved prior consultation law in 2005 as the Prior Consultation Law was only approved in 2011 (Law N° 29785). Kichwa communities organized in CEPKA have denounced the fact that there has been no willingness to consult with them whatsoever. Neither the first nor the subsequent Master Plans – the most important government document of the protected areas – carried out any consultation with indigenous communities nor did they seek their approval despite the demands of indigenous communities and the existence of the 2011 Prior Consultation Law.

Conclusion

The literature on ecologically unequal exchanges and ecological debt has claimed different responsibilities and obligations regarding the climate crisis between the Global South and North. Territorial movements, however, also denounce the scalarity of this ecological inequality. Rural and local territories have been historically sites of ecological extraction and dispossession of centralized political State projects in the Global South. The territorial movements that have joined the voices of protest for climate justice thus express climate governance's scalar and temporal complexities.

First, these movements raise the urgency of going beyond technical, legalistic, or administrative solutions managed by States. They raise the question of whether the climate can be fixed without complex political and structural solutions and negotiations between State and local populations at different levels on very conflictive issues like the redistribution of rights to land and resources. Ultimately, the key to coexistence between populations and protected areas is the legitimacy of political arrangements that allow the organization of productive, economic, social, and cultural life.⁸²

The case of the Andean Amazon of Peru illustrates these complex effects of conservation policies in the context of local histories of extraction and dispossession that have left local populations disadvantaged, vulnerable, and ignored. Second, it also underlines the danger of overlooking power relations between the State (its officials and governments) and these communities. Leaving these relationships as they are, while simultaneously working on sophisticated mitigation programmes, undermines the possibility of meaningfully including local and indigenous voices in resolving the climate crisis and of producing less conflictive, more effective, and sustainable solutions.

Third, although the participation of local communities has been highlighted by the international community and has received considerable attention within international negotiations,⁸³ local participation in policy design and implementation has been quite limited. Indigenous and local communities distrust the official forms of participation that have been created. The different forms of participation they have been experienced in the recent past, such as prior consultation processes, have taught them that they are often asked to participate in consultation processes on several subjects, but the fundamental decisions are already defined in advance and they are not allowed to bring the topics they care about to the table. Likewise, the highly technical nature of many of these policies and programmes limits the participation of indigenous peoples.

Finally, the continuous mobilization of these territorial organizations enunciates the intention of these movements to continue increasing their level of participation in international negotiations as a strategy to influence the process. The global governance of climate change requires ways to work more effectively with these organizations in response. National governments are undoubtedly a constitutive part of global climate governance. However, climate policies must consider direct work with non-State local actors, such as social and territorial organizations, knowing that the historical relationship of national States with local territories and specific populations has been authoritarian and highly mistrustful. Climate policies must strengthen the agency of both sectors – the public sector and local civil society – to make mechanisms, such as the REDD+ safeguards, work. These mechanisms are not enough without external (non-State) and binding monitoring and accountability to protect indigenous peoples and other local communities from dispossession, displacement, and further vulnerability.

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