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# Youth Activism and Climate Change in Latin America: Indigenous and Peasant Youth in Defence of Their Human Rights and Territories



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this policy brief is to generate public policy recommendations on the role of indigenous and peasant youth in the defence of their human rights, their territories and the actions they are carrying out to mitigate climate change in Latin America. Indeed, indigenous and peasant youth in Latin America are currently expressing a renewal in the leadership of rural social organisations, they are leading a large part of the mobilisations in defence of their territories, the environment and climate change actions, and they are the ones who have most successfully adapted to the use of new informational technologies.

For this reason, it is indigenous and peasant youth who can best assume the role of spokespersons and build bridges between academic knowledge and the traditional knowledge of these peoples and communities in order to find concrete solutions to the regional and global environmental and climate change crisis.

The current Latin American context is characterised by the global climate crisis, the advance of extractive activities and territorial disputes over natural resources.

In this scenario, young people emerge as strategic actors in activism in defence of the environment and territories that are threatened by extractive activities. They are the social actors that can change the relationship between societies and nature for future generations in order to mitigate the climate change process. Therefore, it is important to promote the participation of indigenous and rural youth on the debates regarding climate change and environmental issues at local, regional, national and global levels.

## INTRODUCTION

For decades, even centuries, Latin America has had a distinctive feature: it is the most unequal region in the world. It seems that it cannot overcome the tragic destiny of the conquest and colonisation of its peoples and territories by European empires.

Despite the progress made in recent decades towards reducing structural poverty and marginalisation (CEPAL 2020), poverty still reaches worrying rates with 30.50 per cent of the population in poverty and 11.30 per cent in structural poverty in the region and a Gini Index of inequality around 0.460 (CEPAL 2020). Last but not least, the rate of land distribution is also the most unjust in the world, where 1 per cent of the agricultural holdings own 51.19 per cent of the cultivable land in the region, with a Gini Index of land distribution of 0.79, very high in comparison with Europe (0.57), Africa (0.56) and Asia (0.55) (OXFAM 2016).

The successive and pendulant crisis that the Latin America economies have are marked by their dependency on the extractive productive matrix, based on the intense use of the surprisingly still vast natural resources in the region (Svampa 2019). When commodities rise in the international market, this extractive matrix allows certain relief in the national accounts. However, when the prices are down, the economic crisis increases its intensity and combines with the historic crisis related to the region's external debts. This reinforces the dependency and inequality processes globally and also impacts at a local scale, where the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, even in the countries that have experienced a higher economic growth in the last decades (OXFAM 2020).

In a complementary fashion, democratic systems in the region are still fragile. The political systems of representation suffered successive crises,<sup>1</sup> with many examples of institutional coups to restore conservative policies made to face advances from progressive policies as well as rebellions organised by civil society and

Latin-American social movements. These movements resist neoliberal policies, the structural corruption of the political class and the dynamics of extractivism. This last process is pushed by different governments, either progressive or conservative ones, which the Argentinian sociologist Maristella Svampa defined as 'commodities consensus' (Svampa 2019), a foundation to 'development' in Latin-American societies.

In the mobilisations and activism carried out by civil society, Latin American youth stands out. According to Vommaro (2015), they play a leading role in the protests, both resuming old repertoires of protest and creating new demands and repertoires of collective action, in many cases related to information and communication technology (Caballero & Gravante 2018).

In this context, the role of indigenous and peasant youth is key to place environmental and climate change issues on the public agenda from the perspective of these peoples and communities. They can combine the use of new informational technologies with traditional knowledge while bringing experience in mobilisations in the defence of their territories and the environment. Furthermore, diverse young peasants and indigenous people are emerging as new leaders who are renewing rural social movements and building intergenerational bridges that reinforce the exchange of knowledge and experiences in caring for the environment and in productive and cultural practices that mitigate climate change.

In addition to this fragile scenario of inequalities – marked by the dramatic extractive march over nature to find the longed-for 'path to development' – the environmental and global climate crisis strongly affects Latin America. Not only do droughts, floods, vast fires, drastic changes in rainfall rates and glaciers and ice caps melting affect the region, but Latin America also suffers the environmental, social and health consequences of mining, hydrocarbons (petroleum and gas) and forestry and agribusiness extractivism that pollute water sources, deforest native forests and rainforests, destroy wetlands, cause

<sup>1</sup> In 2018 only 48 per cent of the Latin American population expressed confidence in the democratic system, compared to a peak in 1997 where confidence was 63 per cent (Latinobarómetro 2018).

diseases, and become push factors for people to move away from rural areas (mainly youth indigenous, peasant and Afro-descendant people) (Rojas Hernández 2016; Svampa 2019).

## PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

In a context of extractive activities and climate change, the indigenous peoples of Latin America – especially women, youth and children – appear as one of the most vulnerable populations in the region, along with peasant communities, Afro-descendants and other traditional peoples.

Indigenous peoples and peasant communities suffer processes of territorial uprooting, the destruction of their forests and rainforests, the dismantling of their traditional ways of life and the denial and/or stigmatisation of their knowledge and traditional lifestyles (Oviedo & Fincke 2009).

Traditionally, in indigenous peoples and peasant populations, the role of the new generations was often relegated by the greater centrality of the adults and elders of the community. However, in times of crisis this logic is disrupted and the youth protagonism allows for a broadening of the horizons of understanding and action of these social actors. This is what is currently happening in relation to the advance of extractivism, the environmental crisis and climate change.

However, they also resist and create real alternatives to these conflicts, as well as propose their own models of relating to and producing with nature. Rebuilding their own knowledge and ways of life helps them mitigate the consequences of environmental crisis and climate change, since they make rational and sustainable use of natural resources or nature's common goods (Wahren 2017). In this sense, Gregorio Mirabal – leader of COICA, the biggest indigenous organisation of Amazonía (*Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica*) – said 'the inability of our governments to solve this (climate) crisis is calling us to do this ourselves, hand in hand with the youth and any others in goodwill who want to join' (Rowling 2019).

A recent report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (FAO) and Fund

for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (FILAC) indicates that indigenous people play 'vital roles in global and regional climate action and in fighting poverty, hunger, and malnutrition on the continent' with the communal governance of the forest in Latin America (FAO & FILAC 2021). The study demonstrates, based on exhaustive scientific evidence, that indigenous people are the most effective actors to protect the forest in the region while, at the same time, create jobs and produce food without the destruction of the environment.

Indigenous and tribal peoples are involved in the communal governance of between 320 and 380 million hectares of forests. Furthermore, the report asserts that these territories store about 34,000 million metric tons of carbon per year and are also 'home to an enormous diversity of wild fauna and flora and play a key role in stabilizing the local and regional climate' (FAO & FILAC 2021). This role of indigenous and tribal peoples as a kind of 'guardians of the forests' can be extrapolated to peasant, Afro-descendant and traditional communities throughout Latin America and other natural scenarios – such as grasslands, mountains and wetlands among others – where these actors play the same role to care about the environment and climate action.

In both resistance and creation of alternatives, indigenous and peasant youth play a fundamental role in their own communities and outside of them. As they contribute experiences and knowledge regarding environmental and territorial issues, they become a key actor among Latin American youth activists. The indigenous and peasant knowledge and the input on how to develop productive and social alternatives to face the global ecological crisis are, for the most part, in their hands, since they share this invisible knowledge with the rest of society. One young peasant leader from Moche region in Peru, Fabiola Sánchez Montero, asserts that 'with ancestral practices we can protect our ecosystems' (UNICEF 2020a). It is therefore imperative to promote the voices of indigenous and peasant youth in the search for solutions to the climate change crisis.

In that direction, several indigenous organisations have organised a platform to participate

in the climate change global debates, ‘Minga Indígena for the Climate’, where indigenous leaders ‘uphold the right of traditional Indigenous governments to represent themselves and have a say about decisions that are extremely likely to affect their sovereignty and territories’ (Valenzuela Pérez 2020). In these sense, the indigenous and peasant youth become potential ‘guardians of the forest’ for climate action in Latin America, combining their traditional knowledge with the new informational technologies and the experience of resistance to extractivism and defence of their ancestral territories.

## RATIONALE FOR ACTION

Indigenous peoples and peasant communities that inhabit part of their ancestral territories and still struggle for their lands have many powerful international legal instruments to support their territorial claims. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) (UNDRIP), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (2018) (UNDROP) and the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (1989) (ILO Convention 169)<sup>2</sup> are a few examples. Indigenous populations are also identified as highly vulnerable groups by several briefs and declarations from the United Nations on the global environmental crisis and climate change that identify them as highly vulnerable groups (ILO 2017).

Even in those countries where the indigenous land rights have constitutional hierarchy, their peoples and communities still need to defend their territories, threatened by extractive activities that are not properly regulated by governments. This, in turn, underpins climate change on a global scale, for example, through deforestation of native forests and rainforests, the loss of biodiversity, the intensive use of the soil for monocultures and the contamination of water sources caused by ‘mega-mining’ (open-pit mining), hydrocarbons (conventional and unconventional) and agribusiness (Brown & Reynolds 2017). In this context, Samela – an

indigenous young leader from the Brazilian Amazonas – claims that ‘indigenous people are the main defenders of the Amazon, threatened by the action of illegal loggers, burning of forests and mining exploitation. There are many attacks on our territory, so for us the climate fight is a question of survival’ (UNICEF 2020b).

Among the indigenous peoples and peasant movements, the new leaderships of young people acquire new protagonism. They energise the indigenous and peasant movements of the region with the incorporation of new demands, new repertoires of protest and new technologies. These young indigenous and peasant leaders wear their traditional clothes, but they also post on Instagram, Twitter, Tik-Tok or WhatsApp. Both in rural areas and in large cities, they combine the traditional features of their peoples with current youth dynamics, which intersect with new technologies and the new global environmental awareness. This concern for the environment finds an echo in their traditional worldviews, with values of respect and reciprocity with nature. In this sense, it is precisely this knowledge ‘that has protected their environment, and which may be useful in terms of their participation in global governance of the environment’ (Etchart 2017: 2).

However, despite the prominent environmental legislation of some Latin American countries (Bolivia and Ecuador recognise the rights of nature in their constitutions), the promotion of extractive activities and the lack of policies to mitigate climate change pushes territories to environmental degradation through, among other causes, the intensive use of natural resources in favour of the supposed development of the region (Svampa 2019).

Regarding educational policies, with some exceptions in Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico, Latin American countries do not promote intercultural pedagogical and training processes that allow the enhancement of the capacities and traditional knowledge of indigenous youth. To overcome this, for decades indigenous organisations have put into practice autonomous

<sup>2</sup> Many Latin American countries have given constitutional hierarchy to ILO Convention 169, available at [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/fp=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312314:NO](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/fp=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300:P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312314:NO)

training spaces at different levels (primary school, secondary school and/or university), in some cases with an open opposition from the state (Zibechi 2017).

In terms of migration, there are no effective policies that promote the rural roots of indigenous and peasant young people. Many of them move to the cities to continue with their education and/or to obtain jobs that are scarce in their territories. Most of them no longer return to their communities.

There are no specific policies that enhance the political participation of Latin American youth in environmental debates or focus on indigenous and peasant youth. However, as in other regions, in Latin America young people are essential protagonists of environmental struggles, both in large cities and in rural territories, where the impacts of climate change and extractivism are more intense.

## POLICY OPTIONS/SCENARIOS

In relation to climate change and extractive logics, we can envision three policy options: a) conservationist/neo-liberal policies; b) neo-development policies; and c) *buen vivir* (living well) policies.

Firstly there is the option of a policy of unrestricted promotion of extractive activities to boost the comparative advantages of the region's natural resources, linked to free trade policies that accept a subordinate position of Latin American economies in the global trade scenario, and where climate change can be managed by trading carbon emissions for green bonds or other financial instruments. It is a scenario where the environmental issue is addressed, at most, from a conservationist perspective and the compliance with environmental mitigation policies. With the exception of countries that have high industrialisation rates such as Brazil and Mexico (Argentina to a lesser extent), they do not have great difficulties in complying with greenhouse gas emission quotas, for example.

In this scenario, the promotion of extractivism is accompanied by the implementation of neoliberal policies that encourage free trade and the export of commodities and strategic natural resources with low tariffs and taxes (soya

and other extensive crops, and minerals such as gold and silver, lithium and hydrocarbons among others). Some of the Latin American countries that are paradigmatic of these conservative environmental policies and the promotion of extractivism are Chile, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama and Paraguay. Uruguay, Brazil, Ecuador and El Salvador are currently joining this group.

Secondly, there are policy options that promote extractivism within a neo-development framework. It is based on the intensive use of natural resources to promote both industrial development and a limited process of distribution of wealth through social assistance plans, on the development of science and technology within the country, and on a greater regulation of extractive activities, including processes of (re)nationalisation of natural resources, such as hydrocarbons in Bolivia and Argentina.

Even though the environmental agenda goes beyond the conservationist perspective of the first policy option and incorporates a limited participation of civil society (at least, in Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina, there are cases of co-management of territories' protected natural state with peasant and indigenous communities), the second policy options still subsume the environmental issue to economic development, in the sense that although the appropriation of natural resources serves to sustain national development, they are still used intensively, generating the same environmental, health and social costs as in the previous scenario; but with a fairer distribution of the wealth obtained through extractive activities.

The countries that we can place in this scenario are those governed in recent decades by 'progressive' parties or coalitions that promoted certain wealth redistribution policies, mainly based on the rents produced by extractive activities in their respective territories. Countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Mexico (in recent years) are some examples of these policies. Until a few years ago we could also include countries such as Brazil and Uruguay.

In both scenarios, the impulse of extractivism implies certain levels of violence and repression against indigenous and peasant populations, which further aggravates the vulnerability of

the human rights of these social actors (Wahren 2017; Friggeri 2021; Gasparello 2021; Hadad, Palmisano & Wahren 2021; Smolski & Lorenzen 2021).

There is a variant of these last policy options of the neo-development scenario. This version, synthesised in the notion of *buen vivir* (living well), expresses a will to rescue indigenous and peasant knowledge related to nature. It can be seen in public policies and laws that promote the recognition of the rights of nature, land rights and indigenous and peasant knowledge. However, it is counteracted by policies that promote extractivism, as for example in Bolivia and Ecuador, where the renewed national constitutions themselves recognise the rights of nature, promote care for the environment, as well as the protection of indigenous and peasant territories and autonomies. However, in practice, extractive activities linked to the exploitation of hydrocarbons, mega-mining and the expansion of agribusiness have been maintained and intensified.

Lastly are the policies fully immersed in *buen vivir*, an option that addresses the concept not from a public policy perspective, but from the indigenous and peasant communities themselves. This allows them to combine their traditional ways of living with scientific knowledge in agro-ecological proposals, which produce healthy food at affordable prices while caring for the environment (they avoid industrial chemicals, pesticides, herbicides, fertilisers, hybrid and/or transgenic seeds or large machinery that emits greenhouse gases).

With ideas such as food sovereignty, agrarian reform, territorial autonomy and a relationship of harmony and reciprocity with nature, the *buen vivir* worldview provides alternatives to both the hegemonic extractive development and the neo-development notions. This policy is sustained for diverse indigenous and peasant movements around Latin America.

Unfortunately, these policy options have yet to be taken up by Latin American governments. However, they remain strong in vast rural territories of the region, in urban social movements, such as the Latin America sections of Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate and Extinction Rebellion, among other environmental local

social movements and in scientists and intellectuals from different universities and research centres (Svampa 2019).

For all of this, this paper proposes to promote the participation of indigenous and peasant youth on the debates on climate change and environment.

Furthermore, it proposes to limit or stop the extractive activities that endanger the environment, as well as indigenous and peasant territories. For this, access to land and territory must be guaranteed to indigenous peoples and peasant communities, with special emphasis on the territorial roots of young people.

Thus, intercultural educational processes, environmental awareness and life in harmony with nature must be strengthened, promoting the exchange of traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and peasant communities with scientific knowledge.

To conclude, the scenarios that show any degree of extractive logic tend to generate a greater deepening of the problems related to climate change on a regional and global scale. In addition, the participation of young people in general, and of indigenous peoples and peasant movements in particular, tends to work within a paradigm that analyse the climate change crisis in a more integral way. This paradigm relates the crisis to extractivism and promotes alternatives related to food sovereignty, agrarian reform, territorial autonomy and a relationship of harmony and reciprocity with nature, notions that come from the indigenous peoples and peasant communities of Latin America (Etchart 2017). Those voices, silenced for hundreds of years, must be heard. In the present, their most valuable interlocutor are the indigenous and peasant youth.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Training and exchange of knowledge between universities and peasant and indigenous communities. This could be done through intercultural education projects at primary, secondary and university levels to support the education of indigenous and peasant professionals by using both traditional and academic knowledge, so that they can study



in their communities or return after.

- Promoting a full insertion of peasant and indigenous youth in their communities, in community work and in technological and productive innovation processes that prioritise harmony with the environment. This would strengthen the community and promote greater dialogue between actors from both the rural and urban civil society with state public policies.
- Reducing or stopping (if possible) extractive activities, particularly in territories inhabited by indigenous, peasant and Afro-descendant populations in order to allow alternative developments to extractivism, reduce conflict and rural violence, while favouring processes of autonomy and self-determination of indigenous and peasant populations.
- Promoting agroecology, agrobiodiversity and indigenous and peasant agriculture to produce healthy food at accessible prices, as well as marketing channels between producers and consumers.
- Promoting the participation of indigenous and peasant youth in environmental debates, and those about climate change, locally, nationally and regionally. This would imply consultations in the territories, their institutional and political participation in electoral processes, as well as traditional forms of collective deliberation through community meetings, assemblies and other forms of indigenous and peasant participation.
- Promoting awareness, environmental care (forests, air, water, land) and the value of young peasants and indigenous peoples' role, by empowering them through training or educational projects that focus on community leadership and the use of new technologies.
- Promoting the access to land and territory for indigenous and peasant communities with a special focus on young people, in order to enhance alternative practices to extractivism.
- Promoting community forest management and territorial self-governance for peasant and indigenous people.
- Promoting sustainable and decentralised alternative power sources that allow the collective management of solar, wind and hydro energy, reducing the environmental impacts of its production and use, as well as its effects on climate change.
- Promoting the respect and supporting the rights to interculturality, autonomy and self-determination of indigenous peoples and peasant communities in América Latina.

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