

## 2. ‘They want to change us by charging us’: drinking water provision and water conflict in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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### From oil conflicts to drinking water provision

The literature on extractivism has focused on conflict and the main theories of oil conflicts come from political ecology. Two frameworks, notably, have emerged to study the conflicts arising between indigenous people, on the one hand, and extractive activities on the other. Known as ecological and cultural distribution conflicts and developed by Martínez-Alier (2002) and Escobar (2008) respectively, they postulate that indigenous people, because of their ecological and cultural ‘difference’ (Escobar, 2008) – a special attachment to the environment as a provider of livelihood or cultural identity – oppose oil extraction projects which threaten these environments. The two frameworks were influential in the study of Latin American indigenous movements (Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010). They are particularly suitable for the Amazonian context where, according to Rival, ‘the forest constitutes the infrastructure people need’ (Venkatesan et al., 2018, p. 47) and ‘counter-narratives articulated around notions of incommensurability tend to prevail’ (Venkatesan et al., 2018, p. 14). Water, and notably the struggles for the preservation and control over traditional and natural sources of water, is central to those accounts (Jiménez et al., 2014; Dangl, 2007 for Bolivia), which often highlight the different values (and valuation) of water (rivers notably) in relation to indigenous people’s cosmologies (see for instance Boelens et al., 2014). In some instances, ‘difference’ is not only analysed as ecological and cultural but also ‘ontological’ (de la Cadena, 2019)<sup>1</sup> – a point where political ecology becomes ‘political ontology’ (Blaser, 2014). In that respect, water is also

1 According to Blaser, when we treat difference as ‘ontological’ rather than ‘cultural’, we acknowledge the existence of ‘multiple realities or worlds’ rather than just ‘multiple perspectives or cultural representations’ of one unique ‘reality or world out there’ – which he calls the ‘modernist ontological assumption’ (2014, p. 4).

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central to what has come to be known as the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology (see for instance [Wilson and Inkster, 2018](#)).

In Ecuador, against this background, the various agreements found between indigenous people and large extractive companies operating in their territories have become the focus of increased ethnographic attention in the recent years.<sup>2</sup> For the authors trying to make sense of indigenous people’s decisions to accept an oil extraction project in their territories (see for instance [Fontaine, 2004](#); [Reider and Wasserstrom, 2013](#); [Sabin, 1998](#)), the focus is no longer on ‘difference’ but on the diversity of indigenous people’s claims<sup>3</sup> and notably the material needs of communities at the local level – in the Amazon region in particular, marked by poverty ([Perreault, 2001](#); [Perreault, 2003](#)) and the historical absence of the state ([Bustamante, 2007](#); [Juteau, 2012](#); [Muratorio, 1991](#)). Those needs are contrasted with the potential benefits brought by large oil companies to their territories. Interestingly, such benefits often come in the form of basic services, and (drinking) water (provision) is also central to such accounts – in territories where the pollution (of the rivers in particular) is sometimes already a daily reality, as well as a long-standing issue, unaddressed by the state. In such cases, infrastructure tends to be demanded and celebrated – as is more common in the literature on infrastructure<sup>4</sup> than in the Amazonian literature. Typically missing from such accounts, however, is an investigation of the challenges associated with the provision of basic services, drinking water in particular, to indigenous communities with different worldviews and practices. This has to do, more broadly, with the question of indigenous people’s ‘difference’ in their quest for ‘equality’<sup>5</sup> ([Escobar, 2006](#)). This is not only true of Ecuador: as highlighted by [Jiménez et al.](#), ‘compared to the challenges and conflicts around competing water uses and water resources management, there is far less attention paid in the literature to the challenges related to the provision of water services to indigenous populations’ (2014, p. 284).<sup>6</sup> One of such challenges has to do with payment for water services – an understudied aspect of the already scarce literature on basic services provision in indigenous territories ([Jiménez et al., 2014](#)).

2 They have been analysed by [Becerra, Paichard, Sturma, and Maurice \(2013\)](#); [Fontaine \(2009\)](#); [Guzmán-Gallegos \(2012\)](#); [Haley \(2004\)](#); [Juteau-Martineau et al. \(2014\)](#); [O’Connor \(1994\)](#); [Orta-Martínez and Finer \(2010\)](#); [Rival \(1998\)](#); [Rival \(2017\)](#); [Sawyer \(2004\)](#); [Valdivia \(2005\)](#); [Vallejo \(2014\)](#); [Ziegler-Otero and Ziegler-Otero \(2006\)](#).

3 Which are not only ecological and cultural, but also economic, social, political, and ethical ([Fontaine, 2004](#)).

4 See for instance [Hetherington](#) for infrastructure as ‘a promise’ of ‘development, civilization, or simply progress’ (2014, p. 197), and [Harvey \(2018\)](#) on ‘the promise of roads’ in ‘the promise of infrastructure’.

5 [Escobar](#) defines ‘equality’ as the ability not to be treated as hierarchically inferior. The concepts of ‘difference’ and ‘equality’, however, are not given a fixed content *a priori*.

6 This is based on a review of 185 papers ‘focusing on indigenous population and ethnic minorities in relation to water, sanitation and hygiene’ ([Jiménez et al., 2014](#), p. 279).

The present chapter analyses a conflict between the municipality and the inhabitants of Samona, a Quichua community of the Napo River in the Ecuadorian Amazon, revolving around the monthly payment which comes with the provision of drinking water to their community as part of the 'social compensation' from oil extraction. It tells a story of infrastructure as celebrated, yet potentially disruptive, which will ultimately result in a non-conflictive, yet problematic situation, with 'equality' being granted at the expense of 'difference' and where 'difference' is, as in Neale and Vincent, taken as fluid, contextual, and pragmatic – 'a category invoked in manifold settings whose meaning is always contingently articulated' (2017, p. 433) – but also heterogeneous (Cepek, 2016) and multidimensional. By analysing the claims of the inhabitants around the drinking water service, which reveal clashes of worldviews with the municipality and a certain conception of 'difference', the chapter describes how 'difference' is reshaped, influenced, and reframed in the search for 'equality' (and equal access to the drinking water). It identifies some of the questions that arise in the search for infrastructure compromises which would be able to incorporate 'difference', and ultimately highlights the importance of investigating those cases where infrastructure is desired, necessary, and demanded by the communities.

## Research context and methods

This research was conducted during the second mandate of President Correa (2013–17), a period which arguably marks a narrative shift at the governmental level, from 'difference' to 'equality' – as the 'social compensation' became institutionalised by the state following the failure of the Yasuní-ITT initiative (2007–13).

Launched by the Correa government in 2007 with the stated goal of mitigating climate change (Rival, 2012), the initiative proposed to leave 20 per cent of the country's oil reserves permanently underground in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) fields of the Yasuní National Park (YNP), in exchange for a monetary compensation from the international community. The park of 982,000 hectares, created in 1979 and declared 'Man and Biosphere Reserve' by UNESCO in 1989, is home to indigenous people (Finer et al., 2008) and an example of biodiversity in the Amazon (Bass et al., 2010). The initiative thus also aimed to protect its biodiversity, and the rights of the different indigenous groups living in it (Finer et al., 2010). In a country where oil extraction represented 56.8 per cent of the total exports (Banco Central del Ecuador, 2013), the initiative arguably made an unprecedented step towards the recognition of the incommensurability between economic development and the rights of nature and indigenous people. Such recognition was further

anchored in the 2008 constitution, which not only forbids extractive activities in protected areas (Finer et al., 2009) but also gives rights to nature.<sup>7</sup>

After the failure of the initiative, however, Correa's discourse shifted towards a new extractive compromise, emphasising the need for oil extraction to finance poverty alleviation (Acosta, Gudynas, Martínez, and Vogel, 2009; Barrientos, Gideon, and Molyneux, 2008; Bebbington, 2009), education, and health (Aanestad, 2011; Reygadas and Filgueira, 2010). To meet the new rhetoric, the state nationalised the oil industry (Juteau-Martineau et al., 2014): the Law of Hydrocarbons, reformed in 2010, modifies the status of oil contracts with multinational companies from participative contracts to contracts of services to increase the revenue of the state (Cevallos, 2014). In line with the 2008 constitution – which gives rights to prior consent<sup>8</sup> to the local communities, as well as participation in the benefits and indemnities for the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of extractive projects (Simbaña, 2012) – a complex scheme of economic and social redistribution was implemented at the local level. This arguably marked a rupture with 40 years of unregulated and uncompensated oil development, in the Amazon region in particular – where the history of oil development is widely recognised as 'one of massive ecological and social disruption' (Finer et al., 2008, p. 178).<sup>9</sup>

Oil extraction was finally allowed in the ITT fields of the YNP in 2013 – in direct contradiction with the 2008 Constitution. The abandonment of the initiative also meant the launch of the 11th round<sup>10</sup> of oil extraction in the country, in the context of which 30 agreements of social investments were signed with community leaders and local governments (Vallejo, 2014). While the end of the initiative marked a rupture between Correa and the national indigenous movement (Bebbington, 2009, 2012; Jameson, 2011; Lalander and Peralta, 2012), which had supported him in the 2006 presidential election, indigenous communities at the local level responded favourably to one of the first processes of prior consultation ever held in the country (Vallejo, 2014). In the ITT fields, the process was carried out in 2013 among the different

7 Accepted in 2008 by more than 64 per cent of the Ecuadorian electorate (Lalander and Peralta, 2012), it was considered the most radical constitutional text in the world, along with Bolivia's, in relation to the provision of legal protection of nature (Lalander and Peralta, 2012). It was also said to represent 'significant and dramatic gains for indigenous aspirations' (Becker, 2011, p. 57).

8 The right to prior consent was already in the 1998 constitution but its application was subordinated to another law which was never passed (Simbaña, 2012). Article 1 of the 2008 Constitution states that all the rights of the constitution are directly applicable.

9 For the environmental, social, and cultural impacts of oil extraction in the Amazon see Beristain, Páez Rovira, and Fernández (2009); Bissardon et al. (2013); Finer et al. (2008); Hurtig and San Sebastián (2002); Jochnick et al. (1994); Juteau-Martineau et al. (2014); Kimerling (1990); Larrea (2017); Orta-Martínez and Finer (2010); Paichard (2012); Sabin (1998); San Sebastián and Hurtig (2004); Sawyer (2004).

10 The 11th round consists of 21 blocks in total, in Pastaza, Morona-Santiago, Napo, and Orellana, including the ITT block (Vallejo, 2014).

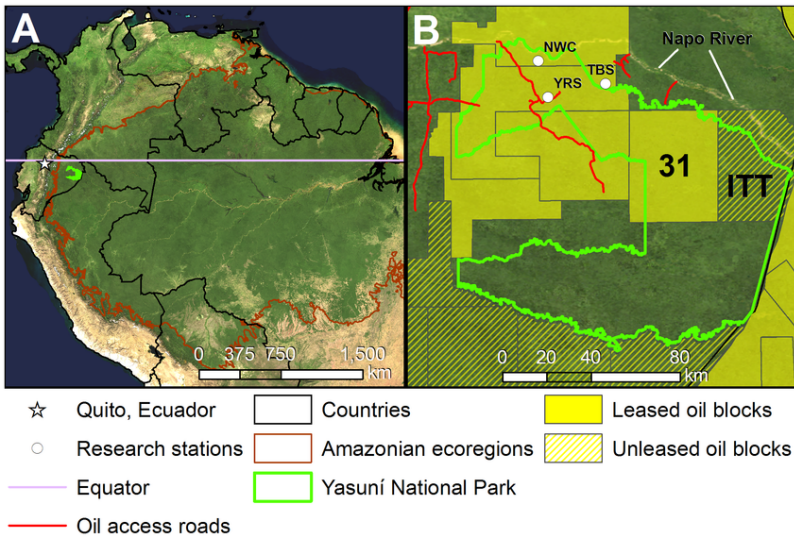


Figure 2.1 Oil blocks 31 and 43 (ITT) along the Napo River and inside the Yasuni National Park. Source: Bass et al. (2010). CC BY 4.0

Quichua communities living inside the block, and the first barrels were extracted in March 2016.

Figure 2.1 shows the overlaps between both the ITT block and block 31, the YNP and the Napo River along which 16 Quichua communities have settled since the 1920s.

I travelled to the Ecuadorian Amazon in August 2016 for an eight-month period of fieldwork, as part of my doctoral research which investigated oil decisions among the Quichua inhabitants of the lower Napo River. I first travelled to Samona – a two-hour canoe trip from Tiputini<sup>11</sup> further up the Napo River – in September 2016, to give English classes to the children of the community school.<sup>12</sup> Samona overlaps block 31,<sup>13</sup> another (and older) oil

11 Tiputini is the village of 500 inhabitants surrounded by the Quichua communities of the lower Napo River and the ITT block overlapping them.

12 It would be more accurate to say I was 'sent' to Samona by Juan Carlos, a councillor from the municipality who offered the president of Samona my services as an English teacher for the children of the community – a mission I accepted, as I was curious to discover a setting where oil extraction had already been present for 16 years. What at first felt like a less-than-ideal place and moment to make progress in my research – oil extraction was no longer a topic of conversation among the inhabitants – would eventually become an ideal setting to make sense of what happens once the 'social compensation' has been provided to the communities. The shift happened as I let go of my focus on oil to investigate the only issue the inhabitants were interested in discussing, and which would increasingly capture my interest: the conflict around the payment for the drinking water.

13 See Figure 2.1.

block, in operation since 2000. It was thus ahead in the oil extraction process compared to the communities of the lower Napo River (overlapping the ITT block where oil extraction had only started a few months before). As I explain in more detail below, while the communities of the ITT block were in the process of negotiating the benefits with the oil company, Samona had already received such benefits – the drinking water plant in particular (Figure 2.2).

I discovered the conflict during my first day in the community, where an exceptional *asamblea*<sup>14</sup> had been organised to discuss it with the *municipio* [municipality]. I would spend my next three visits to Samona, between October and December 2016, investigating the claims of the inhabitants and observing the unfolding of the conflict – while hanging out with them in the centre of the community, playing football with the women, attending the different gatherings which happened while I was there (*asambleas*, *mingas*,<sup>15</sup> and other celebrations) and occasionally conducting formal interviews with the inhabitants and oil workers. The rest of the chapter is the result of such investigation. It also draws on my interviews and conversations with the inhabitants of Tiputini and the communities of the lower part of the river, as well as with different actors from the municipality, whom I observed (and sometimes followed) in their attempt to make sense of the claims of the inhabitants (and find solutions to the conflict). The chapter finally uses the analysis of official documents from the municipality.

## Oil extraction and the drinking water plant

I first met Jaime Salazar, grandchild of Vicente Salazar (who gave his name to the community he first arrived in), during a ‘tour of the communities’ with the municipality<sup>16</sup> at the end of October (2016). After complaining about the ongoing disappearance of the Quichua culture, he described in great detail the changing needs in the communities, and the reasons why their inhabitants need basic services that they did not need before. According to him, living without those basic services equates to living in poverty. ‘I don’t like it when people come to say that here, everything’s good, and that we need to continue living like that’, he told me. ‘The *indígena* too has the right to progress’. ‘What is really important is to reach progress without losing our culture’, he concluded.

I was given the opportunity to witness the practical challenges associated with such an ideal during subsequent journeys to Samona, a Quichua community of

14 Monthly gathering between the *socios* of the community to discuss different matters. A *socio* is a member of the community who is over 18 years of age.

15 Monthly gathering between the *socios* of the community to carry out communitarian work (agricultural, cleaning, building, etc.).

16 Jaime works for the municipality in Tiputini.

115 *socios*, the first community in the *ribera*<sup>17</sup> to ask for, and obtain, drinking water from state oil company Petroamazonas (PAM).

'The plan for drinking water comes from the compensation. I'll tell you the story,' Saul, the president of the community, explains, as I interview him in the centre of the community during my second stay in Samona in October 2016.<sup>18</sup> Petrobras, a Brazilian oil firm, arrived in the *ribera* in 2000 to carry the seismic study in oil block 31, which overlaps the territory of Samona. After three years of negotiations, the community and the firm came to an agreement regarding social compensation. Drinking water was part of the agreement, together with a computing centre, a communal house, electricity network, and a retaining wall along the river. There were also grants for the students, and some health-related benefits. The agreement was finally signed in 2005.

### *Need and desire*

The inhabitants recall with a lot of pride their idea of demanding the drinking water from the oil company. Marcia, a Quichua woman, *socia* of the community and teacher in the community school, remembers, 'it was decided during an *asamblea*. We started asking, "what do we need?" because we were going to receive some money'. Saul insists that 'it was our idea, nobody trained us'. 'I was the promoter of that idea', he adds proudly, 'but everyone agreed. We are the only community with drinking water.' And Paul, a *mestizo* and a sociologist working for PAM's department of communitarian relations, similarly recalls that 'in Samona, there were two to three people with this strong idea (...). And the community asked this. So we did it.'

Before the water plant was built, people would drink the water from the Napo River, which is both polluted<sup>19</sup> and the source of various health issues. They had access to *agua entubada* (piped water) only in the centre, where the standpipe was located – as it is the case in most communities of the *ribera*. While Marcia considers that she does not 'have the knowledge to say if that [piped] water was good or not, Inocencio, an elderly, Quichua man and *socio* of the community, remembers that '[before], the water was dirty'. For Marcia, 'this is a good decision from the *asamblea*.' 'For health', she adds. (...) 'Of course we are happy to have this water now in our houses!'

17 Another name given to the Napo River and communities which surround it.

18 The following summary comes almost exclusively from Saul.

19 While the extent of such pollution is not known with accuracy – because of the absence of 'technical studies' (conversation with a technician in the health centre) – it is common knowledge among the communities. According to the *plan de manejo* of Vicente Salazar – a document produced and edited every year by the Provincial Council – the river is polluted because of different contaminants which are frequently discharged in the upper part of the river, such as *aguas negras* [black water], and pollution related to oil extraction, agriculture, and livestock. It is most often assigned by the inhabitants to oil extraction projects further up the river.

Saul concludes, ‘people are happy [about the drinking water]. Only about the payment they are unhappy.’

### *Involvement of the municipio*

The project was delayed as Petrobras left in 2007, due to a change in the Ecuadorian law requiring strategic activities such as oil extraction to be carried out by state-owned companies. ‘And they left us like this’, Saul goes on, ‘without any construction work done. Only the written agreement’. In 2008, the oil field was handed over to state company PAM. ‘As a public firm, they didn’t have the same possibilities. They removed the matter of the grants, the building of classrooms and of a health centre.’ And in 2009, after two years of negotiations, the community finally reached an agreement with PAM, ‘with the same five constructions’ including the water plant. But the US\$900,000 project, too expensive for the public firm, required the involvement of the municipality, which in 2013 added US\$450,000 to the US\$520,000 invested by the community with the money from the social compensation – as confirmed by the mayor. ‘And now they gave us the drinking water’, Saul concludes. The plant was finally built in the centre of the community in 2014, through a *convenio*<sup>20</sup> between Petroamazonas and the *municipio*.

From June 2015 onwards, the *municipio* was in charge of the service (water provision) and maintenance of the plant. They started charging the inhabitants monthly and according to their consumption. Katy, a Quichua woman from San Roque (further up the river, near Coca) married to a *socio* of the community, is responsible for the maintenance of the plant in the community. She also controls the water meters once a month. She explains to me – while showing me her office inside of the plant, ‘The plant started to work in January 2015 (...) but the municipality just started being in charge last June [2015], and I started my job too.’ While the cost for standard consumption (less than 15 cubic meters) used to be US\$2,<sup>21</sup> ‘the mayor came to *socializar*<sup>22</sup> in August 2015 that the cost would rise to \$2.70, and later \$3.70’.<sup>23</sup> The municipality justifies the reform (resulting in an increase in the price, which had not changed since 2004) by a ‘technical study’ underlining the rising costs, as well as the improved quality of the service, ‘it’s also increased because the water is now

20 A *convenio* in this context is an agreement between the company and the local administration whereby both parties will finance the infrastructure, which will be built by the company and later managed by the municipality.

21 US\$1, plus US\$1 of administration.

22 There is no good English translation for the Spanish word *socializar*. It means to inform and explain at the same time and is often used by the communities and local governments to talk about state ‘projects’ being offered to indigenous people or carried out in indigenous territories. I sometimes translate it as ‘socialise’.

23 Both amounts include the US\$1 administration fee.



drinkable, not just *entubada*, the mayor tells me. ‘And the people accepted. But they didn’t pay then.’

### *The water conflict*

In July 2015, three months after the service started, many families had not paid anything yet. ‘They were asking for exoneration’, the mayor explains. The municipality decided to exonerate the inhabitants for three months – and the mayor, in his own words, ‘put [his] own salary into that’, which meant they would have to pay from August 2015. ‘But they did not, and the conflict went on.’

From January 2016 onwards, the monthly cost for standard consumption increased to US\$3.70 as previously announced by the mayor. However, ‘a year and a half later, only five people are paying for the water’, Katy summarises. According to official documents from the municipality, the 81 households in the community benefiting from the service had accumulated a debt of US\$3946 to the municipality during the first 11 months of operation (since August 2015), and only four households had paid all their bills in July 2016. More than half of them (44 households) had accumulated 10 or 11 months of bills since the beginning – meaning they had either never paid or paid only for one month of water consumption.

### **The water for free**

During our first interview, Saul, the president of Samona, tells me, ‘The people are not going to pay. They are not going to pay even a cent. This is why, it seems, the mayor is upset. He didn’t come to the meeting on the 2nd [of October – when an exceptional *asamblea* was planned between the community and the municipality to discuss the conflict]’.

During my first stay in Samona, it was very clear that the inhabitants wanted the water for free. They were not short of arguments.

### *The plant and the water are ours*

First, there was a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding surrounding questions of rights and competence, the role of the oil firm, the ownership of the social compensation – and the question of who is responsible for paying, in a context where the community had put their own money into the construction of the plant, which is, as a basic service, a competence of the municipality to provide, and comes as a compensation from oil extraction, which pollutes the river. For Saul, ‘The municipality can’t do anything. The plant and the water are ours.’

### *Money from the compensation*

While the municipality was charging the community ‘only the operative and maintenance costs’, most inhabitants seemed to think they were being charged



Figure 2.2 The water plant in Samona. Source: González Toro (2017, p. 136).  
Photo: Patricia González Toro<sup>24</sup>

to repay the plant – which was unfair, in their view, since they had put what they considered to be their own money – the money given by the oil company as part of the ‘social compensation’ – into the construction of the plant. ‘This is our money’, Roque Andy, a Quichua man, *socio* of the community, tells me. ‘If it was the municipality’s money’, he adds, ‘we would have been happy to pay.’ ‘Maybe after two years of exoneration though’. He was also under the impression that ‘if PAM had done the project it would have been free’. Instead, ‘the municipality did it, with the money from the community, and now they are charging the community’. For Ángel, a young Quichua man, *socio* and secretary of the community, this is how

the conflict started, 'From then on, the people (...) started thinking: how come we need to pay if the plant is ours? This is where the conflict comes from.'<sup>24</sup>

The municipality had put half the money too – as the mayor and vice mayor reminded me countless times, 'They say the money is theirs!' the vice mayor exclaims. 'Sure it's theirs, but with the 500,000 they could not have afforded a plant like this one. It's one of the best which exists.'

### *Water as a right and competency of the municipio*

Marcia was aware of the involvement of the *municipio*, and thought such involvement was the reason for the monthly payment. In a conversation, she told me, 'The water, let's see. It's from Petroamazonas. Or Petrobras, I am not sure. Then, they let it to the municipality, because it's their competency. The municipality said they put their part. This is why they are charging us for the service'. 'But', she exclaims, it's a basic service, it's a right, it's not a business.' And, she adds, 'it's an obligation for the municipality to give us water'.

The second misunderstanding came from the fact that the provision of water, as a basic service, is the legal responsibility of the municipality – which for many people meant it should be provided for free. In theory, each *Gobierno Autonomo Decentralizado* (GAD) [Autonomous Decentralised Government] receives money for that purpose from the central state – something that the inhabitants were often aware of. But as Franklin Cox, the mayor, clarifies, 'the construction is one thing and the service is another. It should always be charged for.' Indeed, as underlined by César, a Quichua man working for PAM, 'The water system needs a generator, which consumes a lot of fuel. And people are needed for the maintenance.' Katy similarly considered that 'We have to pay because it's a good service, because it's being maintained by people who know what they are doing. Here, in the community, we wouldn't know.' According to Inocencio, 'The people don't understand that when there is a service, it has to be charged. It costs the municipality to *manejar* [operate] the system.' And for Marcia, the explanation was that 'Here we are not used to pay for basic services. We never had any!'

### *Deception...*

I finally understood, while talking to Juan Carlos, a councillor, *mestizo*, and *socio* of the Quichua community of Vicente Salazar, that the real issue was the initial investment made by the community, which should have been made by the municipality – as part of its responsibility to provide for the drinking water. 'They ask for basic services [as part of the social compensation]. It's fine, on the one hand, but on the other hand it's the responsibility of the municipality to provide for the water. And the mayor pushes them a bit to ask the company such things', he explains. 'PAM gave the money to the community, as

<sup>24</sup> The picture was taken in 2016 by Patricia González Toro and was originally named 'Nueva era petrolera en Samona Yuturi, bloque 31' (González Toro, 2017, p. 136).

compensation, and the community gave the money to the municipality for them to do the work. They want this service for free. It's very logical', he adds. 'If we analyse the case of Samona well, he goes on, what happened is that they had to sacrifice this money from the compensation for a work which normally the municipality should pay with its own money, as an institution of the state. And they have to pay for the service, when they could have invested that money in other things, which would have provided a return, instead of a cost' – an argument with which Marcia concurred, as she exclaimed, 'The community could have done something else with the money from the compensation.'

'The issue is the deception', Juan Carlos concludes, 'PAM gave them money from the social compensation, they had to pay the municipality to build the plant, and now the municipality is charging them for the maintenance. They feel tricked.' As a prospective mayor of Aguarico (*Pachakutik*) and opponent to the mayor (*Alianza País*), he had his own idea of the way he would deal with the conflict in Samona, 'I would (...) discount the 500,000 they have put for the payment of the service. Then they pay.' 'It's normal that they pay', he adds. 'It's not that they had to put their own money for the construction.'

### **'We supported you!'**

According to Juan Carlos, 'There's also a personal issue with the mayor. They voted for him, they supported him, and he's changed his behaviour. He doesn't *atiende* [look after] them anymore. The conflict is very political', he goes on. 'If it was my project, they would pay me. Because I do respect their freedom when they speak with me.'

### *Corruption and 'paternalism'*

The inhabitants were effectively upset by the mayor, and the community's support for him was called into question by the conflict. A group of young men tell me, 'We've been supporting the mayor for 15 years. Because he was a good mayor. But it's no longer the case. Now we are going to support Juan Carlos. He helped us a lot, with advice and with money too.'

They also complained that in Chiro Isla and Centro Ocaya, two neighbouring communities, the inhabitants are not paying for the water. 'How can this be?', Saul asks. After some investigation, the reason appeared to be twofold. First, the community of Chiro Isla did not have drinking water but piped water, which does not involve the same operating costs. Saul confirmed that in Chiro, 'the water is not drinkable and isn't good'. Still, that did not justify the difference in treatment for him, 'But it can't be!', he adds. 'Either they don't charge anyone, or they charge all of us!' Second, while the communities are usually being charged by the *municipio* even for *agua entubada*,<sup>25</sup> it seemed that Chiro Isla had a 'political

25 US\$1 per month for the standard consumption, which increased to US\$2 after the 2015 reform of the ordinance, as explained in the first section.

agreement' with the municipality. Juan Carlos reframed it that way, 'In Chiro, they do not pay for the water because the people whom the mayor likes do not pay. There's a lot of corruption.' He adds, 'The municipality is like the oil firm. They cheat the people. (...) in our country, all which is from the State is corrupted'.

### *Lack of consultation*

Moreover, the inhabitants complained that there had been no proper discussion between the municipality and the community, but a decision imposed from above.

While the mayor maintains that 'we socialised a lot in the community that the water was going to be charged for (...) – and they agreed', according to Saul, the people did not know they were going to pay, because 'it was not *socializado*'. For Roque Andy, 'The issue is that they socialised after the plant was built.' Other *socios* argue that the municipality had actually socialised the introduction of the payment, but that it was only when the first payment was due that they realised it was actually not fair to be charged so much. Ángel concludes, 'the people accepted without knowing. *No somos preparados* [we lack knowledge].'

Whether the people were actually informed is one thing. But the issue seemed to be one of negotiation, and discussion, rather than mere information. Inocencio explains the difference to me, 'There was no consensus, they did not consult us on the price. If they had, we could have reached an agreement.' Juan Carlos concurs, 'It was "*socializado*" rather than "consulted". *En el pueblo* you "socialise" that, but in the communities, due to the cultural difference, you have to "consult" them, meaning you have to ask them whether they are in favour or not.<sup>26</sup> This is in one of the laws of the municipality, but we don't respect it as a municipal council. (...) Here there wasn't any [fiscal education].' He adds, 'The municipality is like a dictator. It imposes things.'

## **'We are free people'**

### *Free from taxes*

One day, coming back from Samona, Juan Carlos tells me, 'I realised the issue is not political, it's custom. They are not used to paying services and taxes. They are free people. (...) People are used to drinking, spending money to share, etc., but *recaudacion* [taxes] no, they don't want this, they want to be free'. Two months later, returning from another meeting in Samona, he adds, 'Good that you didn't come. They were screaming at the mayor. That they would not pay anything. That they are free. That they want to remain nomads. The mayor was not willing to negotiate either. They say this: they want to be free. Like the other communities which are not paying the water.'

<sup>26</sup> *Pueblo* usually refers to the village (Tiputini) or the city (Coca and Quito).

### *Influence of Juan Carlos?*

For the municipality, opposition was triggered by Juan Carlos himself. ‘The councillor, Juan Carlos, walks around telling them that they shouldn’t pay. Because he wants to get elected in the next elections.’ ‘It’s because of Juan Carlos, who *se ha metido en esto* [got himself into this].’ He continues, while explaining the issue to Julio, a fellow worker of the municipality, during breakfast in Tiputini. He’s putting into people’s heads that [water] shouldn’t be charged for’. The vice mayor also complained that ‘the fat guy [Juan Carlos] always visits them and tells them not to pay. They are in a mechanism of opposition to the mayor.’ And indeed, Juan Carlos was now defending publicly that ancestral communities should not pay for the water, ‘(...) They have that right, as native people. This is in the constitution, they must not pay taxes. (...) It will change the culture if they charge them.’ He concludes, ‘The mayor *desconoce* [ignores] the law, and he *desconoce* their culture too.’

For the mayor, this is not true. During the same breakfast in Tiputini, he adds, ‘The constitution says that the legalisation of territories should not be charged for. But the basic services do. Juan Carlos is misinterpreting the constitution.’ In the meantime, the argument of some opponents to the municipality was being fed by Juan Carlos indeed. During an interview, Roque Andy tells me, ‘Now we are writing a letter to talk about an article in the constitution, stating that ancestral communities should not pay. Juan Carlos told us so.’

Katy, the operator, disagreed with such view. ‘What’s that?’ she exclaims. ‘We no longer live in a world where everything is free. It’s no longer like that. *Hay que pagar para vivir* [You need to pay in order to live].’ She goes on, ‘They do the native discourse, but they all know they have to pay to get services. *En el pueblo*, it’s normal to pay for the water. They say that we are natives and I don’t know what. But I think we have to leave this discourse of natives etc. Most of us know *el pueblo* by now and we know that it’s normal to pay for services.’

### **‘We don’t have the money to pay’**

#### *Lack of money – or money mismanagement?*

The inhabitants finally complained about the lack of a monthly income. According to César, an oil worker, ‘The issue is that many people do not have a fixed salary. They cannot pay. This is why there is a conflict.’ Saul tells me, indeed, ‘Nobody’s got an income. Before, there were jobs with the company. But there aren’t anymore. With the crisis, they cut all the staff. They need technicians, but unqualified people, better at home!’ It seemed that after the period of abundance of short-term low-skilled jobs offered by the oil company (in a seismic study), the inhabitants no longer had jobs and argued they did not have the money to

pay for the water – an argument which Katy dismissed. ‘No, there isn’t that’, she exclaims. ‘We all have an income, from what we sell from the *finca*.’<sup>27</sup>

In fact, it seemed that as they had engaged in wage labour, the inhabitants had abandoned the *finca*. Many of them thus no longer had an income from agriculture either. Inocencio summarises the situation, ‘People do not have money to pay for that. From agriculture: no money. From oil extraction: they drank and ate everything.<sup>28</sup> Or they built small houses, or they bought beer and beer and even more beer.’ And according to Marcia, ‘(...) Here it’s passive. There is no trade. Production is long term; it’s not monthly. So some people could pay and some others could not.’

Katy was still not convinced, however. ‘Some people say that, she goes on, but you realise that here, there’s a shop. We buy rice, US\$2. We buy jugs of beer; it costs US\$22. They have money for petrol [for the canoes].’ Money mismanagement was also the preferred explanation of the municipality – as made clear on various occasions, in particular during the *asamblea*. For the mayor, ‘It’s because of their culture, *Plata que se coge se gasta*’ [money which you get has to be spent]. They don’t want to invest, they drink, they go and *farrear* [they go out drinking] with friends in Coca and done. Everything’s over.’ It appeared, in fact, that due to the lack of income, the inhabitants bought most of their products from the shop on credit – and the different debt accumulated by the *socios* was a recurrent issue raised during the *asamblea*.

### *More expensive than in the city*

In addition, the cost for standard consumption (15 cubic meters per month) – US\$3.70, including US\$1 for administration – was considered too high – when compared to the *pueblo*, Coca and Quito in particular, where some of the inhabitants have relatives or, more rarely, have lived. Saul tells me, ‘In Quito for example, they pay US\$1. And here, they charge us almost US\$5 for the basic amount.’<sup>29</sup> How come we are going to pay 5 if they pay 1 in Quito?’ Providing water to indigenous communities is more expensive than for cities, because of the size of the territories and the distance between the houses. Indeed, the territories span thousands of hectares, with only one house every 200 metres. According to the *municipio*, this fact, coupled with the small number of inhabitants in the community, justified why people were being charged more than in the cities of Quito and Coca. Katy explains, ‘People say that it’s less

27 The *finca* includes the Quichua house and the *chakra* [farm], which includes both crops and animals. Every family normally has one and they usually grow yucca and plantain.

28 The inhabitants had also spent the *indemnización*, an amount of money which is paid by the oil company to the inhabitants to compensate for the use of territory and which is decided by the Dirección Nacional de Avaluos y Catastros (DINAC) (National Directorate of Valuation and Land Registry) according to the quality and quantity of land used. In Samona it amounted to some US\$3,000 per *socio*.

29 This exaggeration of Saul is probably due to the fact that people often consume more than the basic amount, as I explain below.

expensive *en el pueblo*, it's true, because there are 2,000 inhabitants! Here we are 83 [people]. So of course it's more expensive for each person.'

*Huge bills: measurement problem or overconsumption?*

While the standard cost was already considered too high, the issue was further amplified by huge bills that the people did not understand – something I understood as Juan Carlos tells me, 'People want to pay US\$1 or 2 (...). At the moment they are paying bills of 20, 5, etc.' According to Marcia, 'It's very expensive. I lived in the city before and I am surprised by the prices here. For four people, I've received bills of US\$20, 23, 30.' The inhabitants sometimes thus accused Katy of not measuring it well. 'I am currently paying US\$27 per month, Saul tells me, and I don't consume more than 5 cubic meters. It could be that the woman in charge does not measure it well, I don't know what it could be.' Katy, on the other hand, was convinced that people simply wasted the water. 'They wanted to have a meter in each corner of the house!' she says. 'They had huge bills. And they say it's the operator's fault, because she does not see well!'

What was sometimes considered a 'measurement problem' was simply due to overconsumption, for the municipality, '(...) People use too much water. They don't take care of it, they leave the taps open.' The argument, made extremely clear during the *asamblea*, was recurrent during subsequent interviews and conversations and was shared by some of the inhabitants. Inocencio, for instance, considered that 'the problem is that the people consume too much: they leave the taps open. The same happens with the lights. Sometimes they are on the whole day.' Marcia thought, for her part, that 'maybe for lack of knowledge, we didn't save the water enough at the beginning?' Overconsumption was, for Ángel, a good reason why the water should be paid for. 'We have to pay for the *operadora*', he tells me. 'If it's free, people consume too much.'

*Accumulation over time*

A related issue was the total amount of the bills, accumulated over months. Katy, while showing me the list of all the indebted people, exclaims, 'some people owe 15 months of water! Look. This *señor*, Roque Andy: he has two meters. In total he owes something like US\$80. Of course, if you accumulate, it's a lot.' Ángel comments, 'I think US\$3 is good, if you pay it monthly. Obviously, it becomes huge if we let the months go by and pay everything at once.' Marcia seemed to accumulate both issues. 'I have invoices of US\$200 since the beginning [for 11 months],<sup>30</sup> she tells me. And I consume almost nothing. My family is small.' She concludes, 'The price is towering. And in Coca [where Marcia used to live], they pay US\$20 a year!'

<sup>30</sup> According to official documents from the municipality, in December 2016, Marcia has accumulated a debt of US\$189 for 17 months.



## Attempts of resolution

### *The community in charge?*

At some point, Juan Carlos concludes, 'What they want is to be able to manage it themselves. That's what I understood yesterday. It's not so much an issue of paying, but of paying the municipality. They want to do it themselves.' The mayor had reached the same conclusion already. In an interview, he tells me, 'For me, the only way to solve the crisis is to put the community itself in charge of the maintenance of the plant. If they don't pay, I'm going to contact the *Senagua*<sup>31</sup> to see if they could give them some training, so that they can manage the project themselves.'

But none of the inhabitants I talked to saw this as a possible way out. They thought they did not have enough resources, knowledge, and organisational skills to do it, and that it would be the end of the drinking water. Rodrigo, an ex-president, explains, 'The mayor also told us that he would transfer the maintenance to the community. But it's not a good idea, as our operator [Katy] would disappear. At the moment, she's getting paid by the municipality. And there will be no more water.' According to Marcia, similarly, 'The community cannot be in charge, because it's not a public firm. The community does not have the training to manage that, nor the resources to pay for the operator.' For once, Katy shared the view of the rest of the community. She thought that 'people don't want to be in charge of the service either, as the mayor has been proposing. Because we don't know how it would be managed. I personally think that if we take over the service, it's going to be much more expensive. People don't want to pay US\$3, where are they going to find the money for the operator, etc? It will be much more than US\$3. (...) Even if *Senagua* is directly in charge, I think they are going to charge us. Maybe more than now. And they are not here so it's better to deal with the mayor [who is in Tiputini].' Ángel summarises, 'The mayor has to pay for the *operadora*. So, the mayor says, "OK, you can be in charge of the whole thing." But we don't want that either. The people want the municipality to pay Katy and to give us the water for free.'

As I ask Katy whether the mayor will end up cutting off the water from people who do not pay, she responds, 'But if they cut the water completely, we'll have to go back to the river. How awful! I can't even imagine that.'

### *A way out*

By December, the stance of the community seemed to have changed following the November *asamblea*. They were now asking for i) a period of exoneration and ii) a water bill of US\$1 per month. Marcia later tells me, 'Of course we would be happy to pay, but not this price (...) People want to pay US\$1.

31 *Secretaría Nacional del Agua* (National Water Secretariat) is a state institution in charge of managing the water resources and access in Ecuador.

Because it's a right we all have, it's a basic service, it's something vital. We are all very surprised by the price.' One dollar, however, was still not an option for the mayor, 'There are only 80 families, and with US\$80 we can't repay any of the costs. Ten years ago it was enough, but it's not anymore.'

Some alternative proposals were made, 'What we want is to pay only half of the price. Because the project is not only from the municipality, but from Petroamazonas too. More than half of the money. Therefore, Petroamazonas should pay for half of the service.' And, according to Marcia, 'US\$1 or 3 we could agree. Even barter. We could exchange it with local products.'

On 5 December, I learnt from Juan Carlos that a resolution had been found. He tells me, 'The conflict is now solved. The mayor went there and proposed to decrease the cost [of the standard consumption] to US\$2.70 instead of US\$3.70. It seems that they agreed.' When I returned to Samona, two weeks later, I was told about the meeting which had been held on 4 December, 'We agreed on US\$2.70. Now they agreed and they need to pay.' 'Some people are starting to reimburse.'

Katy explains to me, 'The people committed to pay. They are already starting to pay. The financial director came too, in the *asamblea*, to explain well that they are not charging us for the water (the water is not a business, it's free) but for the work [maintenance] they have to do. And the people understood. This helped a lot because, as you said before, the issue was that they said the water was theirs. Now they know that the cost is not for the water. The municipality also agreed to buy some food [yucca and plantain] from the community, so that people can use that money to pay.' 'But the money that people had to pay for a year now is not going to decrease', Ángel clarifies. 'And there is a 30 per cent fine for paying late.'

That day, however, Saul still disagreed: 'We want to pay US\$2 instead of 2.70. And without the *moras* [fine]. Nobody is paying this.'

And official documents from the same municipality indicated that, in January 2017, the total debt had reached US\$4,896, and 32 households had either never paid, or just paid one month, to the municipality in 17 months of provision.

### **'The same will happen everywhere': questioning Juan Carlos's prediction**

One day, while returning from Samona, Juan Carlos tells me, 'The same will happen in Puerto Quinche and in Bello Horizonte', two other communities further down the Napo River. Indeed, as part of the social compensation from the ITT oil project, which entered the *ribera* in 2016, most of the communities have asked for some kind of 'basic services' – drinking water, electricity, and a sewage system in particular – often through similar *convenios* between the oil firm and the municipality.

In the communities on the lower part of the river, where I discussed the conflict in Samona with the inhabitants as a way to understand their views and perceptions on the idea of paying for the water, I often heard, indeed, that ‘they must not charge us’, ‘there is no reason for us to pay the municipality’ because ‘the water is from the community’, or that it comes from the company which ‘is using our land’ and ‘affecting fauna and flora’. For Franklin, a Quichua man and *socio* of Vicente Salazar, ‘as a “frontier”, as a community, as a Quichua people from that community, they don’t have any tax to pay to the state.’ Instead, his view was that ‘The institutions have to give this opportunity to the people who never had it.’

‘They want to change our culture by charging us!’, his sister Carmen exclaimed. ‘The municipality, because it puts meters, wants to charge them, but the people are not used to paying’, Franklin concluded.

Alongside the arguments against the payment, however, I also heard from the presidents and *socios* of different communities that ‘it’s going to be charged for’ but ‘at a minimum price’, ‘less than in Samona’ or that ‘the amount of the investment should be deduced [from what they charge]’ – although Alicia considered that ‘maybe if it’s PAM, they will do it for free.’ Vicente Salazar, with a relatively high number of *mestizos*,<sup>32</sup> of salaried workers, and of *socios* who have a second house in the village, Tiputini, where they are already used to paying for water (in this case for *agua entubada*), was particularly heterogeneous. ‘We have to pay, Jaime Salazar told me. Here, the politicians *nos pusieron en la cabeza* [made us believe] that everything was free, but it’s not like that. *Las cosas se pagan* [You have to pay for things].’ When I asked whether the fact of paying could change the culture, his response was unequivocal, ‘No, because the culture is not to be poor.’

The issue was even reframed as a technical one by Efren, another *mestizo*, *socio* of the community, who considered that ‘Here, some people *se dedican al trabajo* [work]. If we all had a job, it would no longer be a problem, [because anyway], the maintenance is not free.’

While in this part of the river the inhabitants are given jobs (by the same oil company) before (or at the same time as) they are provided with different ‘basic services’, it does make sense to question Juan’s prediction and imagine that there might be much less resistance to the idea of paying for those services.

## Discussion

### *Drinking water, ‘difference’ and ‘equality’*

This chapter discusses a case where the oil company comes with a drinking water plant, as compensation for the pollution of the Napo River, which is already

<sup>32</sup> *Mestizos* are people of combined European and indigenous descent. In the lower Napo River, it refers to anyone who is not indigenous or comes from another part of Ecuador.

polluted, largely due to past extraction projects further upstream, thereby furthering (while at the same time fixing), a long-standing issue which has not been addressed by the state. The provision of drinking water to the inhabitants, however, does not come without difficulties. The chapter shows how the need and desire for drinking water, which has motivated the inhabitants to ask for a drinking water plant as part of the social compensation from oil extraction, slowly leads to a conflict between the municipality, in charge of the service, and the inhabitants, most of whom refuse to pay for such a service. The conflict is multidimensional and reveals clashes of worldviews between the municipality and most of the inhabitants, on multiple levels which are at least legal, political, cultural, and economic. As Goodwin and Alderman put it in the Introduction, infrastructure is a 'contested space[s] where different meanings and practices collide and interact' (p. 3). In this particular case, the water plant holds ideas about money, what should be paid for, and who should pay for things. It also acts as an accelerator of change, and as in other chapters of the book, infrastructure has the potential to shape the recipients in particular ways. More specifically, this case sheds light on the mechanisms through which the inhabitants will slowly negotiate and compromise on what they consider to be fair, until they ultimately agree to a compromise (which involves a payment) that they are nonetheless apparently not willing to meet. Analysed from a 'difference' and 'equality' perspective, the only available alternative offered by the *municipio* (paying for the service) presents an inherent tension between two claims of the inhabitants: the right to have clean water (which is arguably and mostly about 'equality'), and the right to have water for free (which is arguably and mostly about 'difference'). While embracing change (paying for the water service) implies a change of paradigm on many levels, resisting change (by refusing to pay for the water), in the present case a source of conflict, could potentially lead to health issues if the water ended up being cut off from the inhabitants – an 'awful' prospect, according to Katy. All in all, the need for drinking water legitimises certain worldviews while rendering others impractical, and the inhabitants necessarily have to 'change' (and compromise on their worldview) to gain 'equal' access to basic services. In that vein, one can predict that even Saul – who reminds us, towards the end of the conflict, of the fact that the new agreement is not what the people initially wanted – will end up accepting, because his position is simply untenable in the present context. The chapter finally suggests that in the lower part of the river, where the inhabitants obtain jobs in the oil company at the same time as they are provided with the different basic services which come as part of the social compensation from oil extraction in the ITT block, the issue could be reduced to its more technical aspect (lack of income) and be solved with the provision of jobs. It would thus result in further change – the transformation of the inhabitants into wage labourers – and a potentially much less conflictive situation. The infrastructure here acts as a turning point in the oil extraction process. It has the potential to 'transform its users into modern citizens' (Introduction, p. 13).

*'Difference-in-equality' in practice: who should pay for the water?*

As pollution levels rise globally, instances where the forest may no longer constitute the infrastructure people need are multiplying, leaving many indigenous people around the world living in poverty, vulnerability and dependence. In that vein, Neale and Vincent question 'the extent to which the kinds of Indigenous or ontologically alter worlds that scholars seek out are extant, or are better understood as fundamentally enmeshed, in violently unequal ways, with "our" world' and 'argue for the importance of engaging with contemporary Indigenous realities' (2017, p. 418). The question of access to 'equality' for indigenous people with different worldviews has thus become a crucial one – in a context where, according to Escobar, development is often about providing 'equality' at the expense of 'difference',<sup>33</sup> thus denying people's right to what he calls 'difference-in-equality'<sup>34</sup> (2006).

At a second, more practical level, the chapter raises the question of how 'difference' – which, as Goodwin and Alderman highlight in the Introduction, has been largely ignored by states in the Latin American context in the case of indigenous people – can be taken into account in infrastructural projects and basic service provision. While rights to clean and free water claimed by the inhabitants of Samona are easily compatible in settings where clean water is available in abundance in the natural environment, it gets trickier in the present situation tainted by the pollution of the Napo River, which means someone has to pay for the drinking water. The matter is further complicated by the size of the land holdings (which means the service is more expensive than in the cities), the impecuniousness of the inhabitants (who are often part-time farmers without a regular income), and their apparent vulnerability and dependence on the Ecuadorian state: while the management of the water plant by the community itself could potentially reduce the operative costs of water provision, the inhabitants do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable or qualified to be able to organise their own provision, in contrast to arguably more empowered and better organised indigenous communities in highland Ecuador.<sup>35</sup>

The case raises equally difficult questions regarding legitimacy and fairness. Who should invest in the drinking water plant, given that it is a legal obligation of the *municipio* to provide the communities with drinking water, but that the river (which is public) has been partly polluted by oil firms, because of present and past oil exploration and extraction projects? On the other hand, why would

33 Different illustrations of this extremely common tension can be found in Dinerstein (2015), Sheild Johansson (2018), Carrasco (2016), and Alderman (2021) in the Latin American context.

34 For Escobar, development presents the opposite problem of colonialism, which recognised 'difference' but denied 'equality' – while both enterprises deny 'difference-in-equality' (Escobar, 2006).

35 See for instance Goodwin (2019).

indigenous communities benefit from free water when other Ecuadorian citizens have to pay for it? Is it a cultural right, or a mark of poverty, as Jaime Salazar sees it? More generally, how can considerations of ‘difference’ be reconciled with the need to pay for infrastructure provision, in those cases where the forests (and rivers) no longer constitute the infrastructure people need? And where can the answers to such questions be found? In law? In international law? In the Ecuadorian constitution, or in indigenous institutions and rules?

These difficult yet fascinating questions cannot be avoided in the search for concrete translations to the abstract concept of ‘difference-in-equality’ – a policy goal which is not mine here. They can only be raised through the investigation of cases where (changing) economic and ecological situations mean that ‘difference’ might be sacrificed in the search for ‘equality’ – or, in Neale and Vincent’s words, ‘where “they” are not as different as “we” might hope them to be’ (2017, p. 417). Indeed, and in relation to water more particularly, sidelining such situations has arguably resulted in a ‘dearth of knowledge regarding culturally adapted sanitation and hygiene promotion strategies and culturally acceptable solutions for indigenous communities’ (Jiménez et al., 2014).

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