

Your Definition and My Own Definition of Being a Subject of Development

-Ecuador's *Sierra* Indigenous Peoples' "Personal" Views on Development-

Abstract

Modernizing indigenous peoples in the Andean regions has been a core project of development. The concept of development and its policy often derived from outsiders' definition of "indigenous people" rather than indigenous people themselves. In terms of defining indigenous people, there is a significant contradictory image created by outsiders. That is, indigenous people are considered subjects to be romanticized, but also subjects to be modernized. Due to this circumstance, it is important to explore indigenous peoples' own self-definition and how they perceive the phenomenon of being cast as subjects of "development". To extend this discussion, the study examines whether international cooperation agencies take indigenous peoples' side of criticism and cultural sensibility into account. In my qualitative examination of these research questions, I utilize mainly interview data and observation notes obtained from my field research in Ecuador, which took place in the summer of 2007. Three prominent tendencies found in this study are: (1) not all indigenous people resist the idea of development; however, they feel that there is a lack of appropriate 'respect' for indigenous people in "development" projects; (2) indigenous people mention that they are capable of protecting their culture and identity by themselves unlike the image of indigenous people constructed by 'outsiders'; (3) international agencies' approaches in Ecuador reflect an incorporation of critiques to "development" projects although they still need to reform their approaches such as providing autonomous space for indigenous people in the design of development programs.

Latin American states imposed on indigenous people the ideology of "*mestizaje*", which mandated that indigenous peoples and other ethnic groups assimilate into the *mestizo* value of life. Latin American states believed that "*mestizaje*" policy was a way of building a so-called "developed" and "modern" country. Also, the notion of "modernity" is still used as a legitimatizing tool to encourage so-called "appropriate" development for human beings all over the world.

Where the idea of "appropriate" development for human beings came from? The notion of modernity related to the idea what "appropriate" development is. Modernity is

an essential part of the creation of the ideas of “civilized” society and “primitive” society. Intellectuals such as Escobar and Quijano mention that there is no modernity without colonialism. The origin of modernity is deeply related to the conquest of America after 1492; the phenomenon of colonialism, post-colonialism and imperialism are all related to the notion of modernity (Escobar; Quijano). In other words, western European society thought it was superior to the rest of the world such as the societies in America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Based on this idea, they divided the world into two simple categories “civilized” or “primitive”.

The model of “civilized” society, culture, and history is always Western society. The characteristics a “civilized” society has included the strong presence of the state, law, written language, a specialized or diversified subsistence economy, capitalism and science. On the other hand, the characteristics of a “primitive” society such as a hunting-gathering based archaic society are almost always classed negatively, as if lacking; thus, the image of “primitive” society is considered as the society without a state, without writing, without a market, even without history (Clastres).

Modernizing indigenous peoples has been one of the major projects of development. The concept of development and its policy often derives from outsiders' definition of “indigenous people” rather than that of indigenous peoples themselves. In terms of defining indigenous peoples, there is a contradictive image created by outsiders. For instance, anthropologists sometimes regard indigenous people as subjects to be romanticized and have tried to prevent indigenous people from losing their culture and traditions. At the same time, indigenous people sometimes have been regarded as subjects to be modernized by the states and international communities under the project of

“development”. Due to this circumstance, it is important to explore indigenous peoples’ own self-definition and how they perceive the phenomenon of being cast as subjects of “development”.

This study is based on interviews I carried out in Ecuador in summer 2007. Key informants of this study are leaders and members of indigenous organizations as well as non-indigenous informants who manage issues related to indigenous peoples and development in Ecuador. I included the voices of non-indigenous subjects because Ecuador as a whole is considered underdeveloped.

This paper explores (1) some aspect of who indigenous people in Ecuador ; (2) whether indigenous people’s personal views on “development” is equivalent to the view from outsiders or not; (3) whether international cooperation agencies take indigenous peoples’ side of criticism and cultural sensibility into account it in terms of examining Peace Corps’ approach to indigenous communities in Ecuador.

Who Are Indigenous People in Ecuador? : Views from Ecuador

Defining who is indigenous is a controversial topic because each indigenous group in Ecuador has its own distinctive cultures and languages. According to data from the CONAIE¹ website, they explain their identity by categorizing indigenous populations into their “*nacionalidad* (nationality)” and “*pueblos* (people)”. One part of the identity is based on their *nacionalidad*, which would be *Cofán, Secoya, Quichua, Shuar-Achuar* or *Chachi* for example. CONAIE emphasizes that Ecuador is “*un estado plurinacional* (a plurinational state)” and that maintaining native languages is a key to respecting and

¹ CONAIE (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*) is Ecuador’s largest indigenous organization. CONAIE’s political agenda includes recuperation of land rights and positive indigenous identity and opposition to neoliberalism. Official website of CONAIE: www.conaie.org

preserving ethnic identity, including their traditions and knowledge transferred from their ancestors.

In addition to the concept above introduced by CONAIE, the following passages introduce four different Ecuadorians' both indigenous and mestizo personal opinions in response to the question of "What is your personal definition of indigenous people in Ecuador?"

Indigenous people came here thousands of years ago. Indigenous people, we originally live in countryside and have been able to grow our plants by ourselves since we came here. Indigenous people are those who have our own language, traditions, cultures, customs, dresses and foods (*alimentación*); that is, we are the people who have our own economic systems.

-An indigenous male, leader of an agricultural organization in Riobamba-

We are the natives in this land. "Indigenous people" is not the proper name of our group and this way of calling our group is not a respectable way because the conqueror that came from the western world named us indigenous people or Indian. However, we also accepted this term and used it for referring to our own groups.

-An indigenous male working at *oficina de educación bilingüe* in Ibarra-

Indigenous people in Ecuador are an ethnic group, which have a manifestation of proper culture, a view of the world. Indigenous people are the aborigines here; therefore, in my personal opinion, indigenous people are an original ethnic group of Ecuador. However, the name of "Indian" was invented by Columbus who had the mistaken idea that this continent was the India of Asia and we still use it...

-A mestizo male, official in the municipal department of education-

Indigenous people are groups that have their own way of living, culture, language, food and religion....There is no category for who are indigenous men/women because all groups of indigenous people here have a distinctive culture and language. I do not prefer to call them "indigenous people", you should call them by their "*nacionalidad* (*nationality*)" such as Otavalo or Shuar...We have indigenous people from the Andean mountain regions, Amazon areas and Coastal regions and they each have a different "*nacionalidad*"... Even though the city of Otavalo and communities in Chimborazo are located in the Andean mountain regions, their living conditions are very different. Another important issue is regarding the reality of their racial ideology, *autodefinicion* (defining oneself) of indigenous people. For instance, according to the latest census², only 6 percent of indigenous people defined themselves as Indians although many demographical reports say the

² Census Ecuador 2001

indigenous population consisted of 30 to 40 percents of the whole Ecuadorian populations. This census results tells us “*indigenas no quieren mirarse ante de nosotros como el indigena* (Indigenous people do not want to see themselves as indigenous when asked by us).

-A *mestiza* Female, Professor of Anthropology in *Universidad de San Francisco de Quito*-

As each passage expresses, the definition of indigenous people differs from person to person. All interviewees mention the distinctiveness of indigenous culture; they used the word, “*propio* (own)” for describing indigenous culture, language, organizations and view of the world. Also, they considered indigenous people as original ethnic groups of Ecuador. In addition, as some of them stated, the custom of referring to “indigenous people/Indians” is another controversial point. It relates to the Ecuadorian feeling against colonizers who came from the western world. Moreover, as the 2001 census data (Araki 2006a 113-114) and the statement of a *mestiza* professor mentioned, the self-definition of indigenous people is also problematic as she commented. Although Ecuador is one of the leading countries for the indigenous movement, the 2001 census data depicts another side of reality, which some indigenous people do not want to see themselves as indigenous.

Who Are Indigenous People in Ecuador? : ‘Outsiders’ Views’

Ecuador is one of the leading countries in indigenous movements around the world. Plant states, “Ecuador probably has the most developed structures for representing indigenous interests before national legislative and planning bodies” (Plant 220). Ecuador has a strong national indigenous organization, CONAIE (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*), that succeeded in achieving their long-term

goals of having the constitution recognize Ecuador as a pluricultural and multiethnic state in 1998 (Cott; Beck and Mijeski).

United Nations and the World Bank have pointed out the high correlation between poverty and ethnicity. While indigenous people in Ecuador have received a high reputation by leading successful indigenous movements, statistics consistently indicate they are much poorer than non-indigenous populations. The Washington Post mentioned that annual per capita income in Ecuador stood at \$1600; however, among indigenous people it stood at approximately \$250 (Davis 228).

In addition, the impact of globalization on indigenous communities has been a controversial topic in the academia since the end of 20th century. Globalization has led to an increase in the participation of international organizations in indigenous communities under the name of “community development”. They introduce new values and standards of life based on western cultural perspectives into indigenous communities. For instance, World Vision, which is one of the largest Christian relief and development organizations in the world founded in the United States, introduces indigenous communities to the western style of agricultural technology, housing, and clothing. For instance, housing construction from the traditional *choza* thatched roof hut changed to Western-style housing and from the traditional dress toward synthetic materials such as polyester and nylon (Cruz).

Also, Bebbington (1997) states that the Andean region’s adjustment to neoliberal policies brought a change in the role of NGOs. These started working close to the state and fostered rapid modernization; the NGOs have been compensating for the role of the state rather than resisting the state and supporting popular sectors. In the scholarship,

these phenomena are dangerous and considered a menace for indigenous culture; that is, “community development” led by globalization contributes to the loss of the traditional way of life and identities.

What Kind of Cooperation Do Indigenous Communities Need?

Even though there has been a considerable literature that has studied and generalized their demand for improving their communities, this section introduces four different indigenous people’s opinions of what kind of cooperation would be effective in improving the life of indigenous communities. I carried out approximately 15 interviews during fieldwork; however, I selected only four comments listed below due to limited space.

We prefer receiving international aid in the area of education. In my opinion, developing human capital is very important because all powerful countries have advanced education systems and provide education for everybody. Ecuador also should provide education for all the different class and racial groups here.

—An indigenous male, member of a labor organization in Quito—

The most important goal for us is to gain “*vida digna* (dignity in life)”, “*economia digna* (dignity in our economy)” and “*atención digna* (dignity in the attention we receive)...”

—An indigenous male, leader of an agricultural organization in Riobamba—

... The dollarization made a serious impact on rural indigenous communities; therefore, we want to learn and find the way of adjusting this new economic system led by dollarization.

—An indigenous male official at bilingual education office in Ibarra—

Organizing an infrastructure system such as system of potable water and electricity is necessary for not only indigenous communities but also for poor people living in remote areas. The current educational system for indigenous communities was built based on the western education system. However, beside our native language, we consider developing our own educational system based on our culture. Education is very important to recover and maintain our ethnic pride.

—An indigenous female politician in Otavalo—

According to these four indigenous informants, they considered education as an important factor for the development of their communities even though their backgrounds and location of their communities are different. Also, they believe that the improvement of the education system is a key to lifting their self-esteem and their own cultural pride. In addition to this, they mentioned the lack of basic needs in indigenous communities such as access to food, infrastructure and health care. They emphasized aid donors should think about developing their programs to make communities accomplish sustainable development. Moreover, the comment regarding dollarization reflects that indigenous people feel they need to learn how to adjust to some phenomena caused by globalization.

In summary, these twenty indigenous informants showed great interest in receiving not only monetary aid, but also international volunteers who are able to teach new knowledge and technology into their communities and their bilingual schools³. For instance, a survey done by a Japanese volunteer showed that indigenous people especially want to receive elementary school teachers who are able to teach English.

Although Indigenous bilingual schools were initiated with the goal of recovering indigenous cultural pride, they also included a demand to teach English to provide better business opportunities as is the case with other racial groups such as *mestizos*. That is, even though some scholars were concerned about an identity crisis of indigenous communities, some indigenous groups demanded to learn useful tools in order to adjust themselves to new world phenomena through project of “development”.

My interviews revealed that there is a strong demand for development agencies to show ‘respect’ to indigenous people and their way of life. Most of my indigenous

³ Bilingual schools mean elementary schools located in indigenous communities that taught in Spanish and *Quichua/Shuar* (main indigenous native tongues in Ecuador).

informants mentioned receiving development programs is welcomed, regardless of whether they are domestic or international programs. However, my informants feel that they are categorized as immature or as in need of protection by ‘outsiders’ such as academics and international cooperation agencies. Regarding the issue of identity crisis through “development” projects, some indigenous informants have insisted that they are able to protect their identity and cultural pride by themselves if they have been regarded as an ethnic group equal to dominant groups. The following passage summarizes the opinions I encountered in my field work about “development”.

The most important thing that we need is to receive respectable attention and treatment. To connect to respectable view, we demand autonomy in our own politics and their projects of development. We desire to be regarded as a group, which has a fully developed culture and ideology just as the other ethnic or racial groups. Also, who wears a poncho and hat dose not matter because if we focus on who is indigenous or not, we lose a wonderful opportunity to meet new ideas. We want to cooperate with the people who want to work with us. Race and ethnicity are not important for us. Sharing the same goal and philosophy is more important. Actually, throughout development projects we have encountered various new ideas from foreign volunteers; in exchange, they also have understood and learned from our culture. This is an ideal type of cooperation...sharing each other’s sense of value and culture...

—An indigenous male, a leader of an agricultural organization in Riobamba—

Peace Corps Approaches to Ecuador

The Peace Corps started sending volunteers to Ecuador on August 7, 1962 when it sent 47 volunteers. Since then, more than 5,600 PCVs⁴ have served without interruption in Ecuador; currently there are approximately 150 PCVs serving in Ecuador. There are four areas on which the Peace Corps focuses in Ecuador: (1) Health, (2) Environment and Natural Resources Conservation, (3) Agriculture, and (4) Youth and Family Development. Peace Corps Ecuador would like to provide “basic skills” to the

⁴ “PCVs” is abbreviation of Peace Corps volunteers.

Ecuadorians rather than transferring high technological skills. In this case, PCVs focus on leading health guidance programs such as birth control and sanitation education, especially in the urban areas.

The Peace Corps' has also provided some training for developing a better understanding of Ecuadorian culture and its society. According to a Peace Corps handout titled, *Participants of Peace Corps/Ecuador's Training Program, Omnibus "98"*, which describes in-country training, Peace Corps Ecuador has developed programs such as "Community Based Training" and "Cross Cultural Training" in addition to a language training program. During the "Community Based Training", PCVs are required to live with families in a community for several weeks in order to have unlimited opportunities to gain an understanding of culture and language; also, they have daily opportunities to identify challenges and local resources. In addition, the same brochure mentioned that the Peace Corps has set up "Cross Cultural Training" to help PCVs further understand Ecuadorian culture by seeing all aspects of life rather than only "Traditions" and "Folklore"(Peace Corps Ecuador).

The recent Peace Corps aid policy towards Ecuador reflects Ecuadorian's negative perceptions of the U.S. presence in Latin America, especially in the mottos of Peace Corps Ecuador. The mottos- "*No inventar nada* (Do not make up anything)" and "*No queremos cambiar nada* (We do not want to change anything)", as explained by a Peace Corps official in Quito, demonstrate Peace Corps Ecuador's serious intent to respect Ecuadorian culture.

These mottos show in part, Ecuadorian perceptions and images of the U.S. presence in Latin America. According to my Ecuadorian informants who work closely

with development, education and culture in the Andean mountain regions, their image of the U.S. clearly correlates with the Peace Corps' mottos. For instance, Mr. Valdez who is *mestizo* and works in the department of education of the municipality of Ibarra states:

By looking at U.S. history, my image of the United States is a selfish country; also, its people are self-centered and cold, too. They forget a sense of respect for nature and cultural humanitarian relationships; they have been searching for only economical advantages and benefits for the U.S.

Also, Ms. Tituaña who is a female indigenous politician working at the municipality of Otavalo states, “The United States did many negative things towards Latin America. My image of the U.S is that they like to invade our culture and force their culture on us and oppress our people”. Even though their opinions about the U.S do not reflect all Ecuadorian perceptions towards the U.S, the mottos of Peace Corps Ecuador—“*No inventar nada*” and “*No queremos cambiar nada*”—shows that the Peace Corps seriously considers anti-U.S. sentiment in both Latin America and Ecuador and incorporates it into Peace Corps aid policy towards Ecuador. In addition, Peace Corps Ecuador’s training program also aims to follow this philosophy.

Peace Corps Approaches to Indigenous Communities in Ecuador

In the 1970s, there were some prominent projects targeting indigenous communities led by Peace Corps Ecuador; for example, Peace Corps volunteers led projects that involved developing elementary level bilingual texts (Spanish-indigenous languages); however, according to the interviews conducted in the Peace Corps Ecuador office, there are no more plans to lead and participate in further projects related to bilingual texts for indigenous communities. As this change tells, the Peace Corps no

longer regards indigenous communities as its primary target populations. Although Peace Corps Ecuador continues to send PCVs to indigenous communities, they mainly focus on areas of agriculture, communal banks and health. Since as Ms. Perez from Peace Corps Ecuador expressed, the Peace Corps is characteristically “generalists”, it makes sense that their target population is all Ecuadorians.

This change in its aid policy also correlates with Ecuadorian perceptions towards U.S involvement, especially those of indigenous groups who are some of the leading organizations of indigenous movements in the world. As a female indigenous politician, Ms. Tituaña expressed, there is a negative image of the U.S. Some indigenous people seem to be disagreeing with the U.S. presence in Latin America. Dr. Terán, a specialist studying foreign aid influences in indigenous communities, states that many indigenous people seem to be suspicious/unwelcoming of the U.S. because they have negative perceptions of the U.S-Ecuadorian relations, regardless of whether they have all the facts.

On the other hand, the Peace Corps staff member Ms. Perez mentioned some difficulties in sending volunteers to indigenous communities. According to her, some indigenous communities and organizations are too politicized to deal with; also, from her view, some indigenous communities and organizations have received tremendous aid from various foreign countries. Because of that, some of them have tended to show their interest in only obtaining funds rather than in the services provided by the Peace Corps such as volunteer projects. Compared with past efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, Peace Corps Ecuador tends to send fewer volunteers to indigenous communities. Regarding the difficulty of sending volunteers to the indigenous communities, Ms. Perez used an

example of PCVs' volunteers' experience of women's development project in indigenous communities. Perez mentioned:

We think that it is important to empower indigenous women in Ecuador. Usually, indigenous women play the role of master of house and household and they work very hard compared to indigenous men. Also, there are some serious problems in indigenous communities led by indigenous male such as domestic violence and alcoholism. That is why the Peace Corps considered women as a development project. It is an important project to protect and empower indigenous women. However, this area is a very difficult one for Peace Corps to accomplish its programs. White male young PCVs have especially faced difficulties because indigenous women do not easily open their mind to American males. In addition, their husbands follow their wives when PCVs try to talk to their wives. There is no privacy for indigenous women.

The issues of women's development and cultural norms are always correlated; moreover, this is a sort of sensitive issue for every culture. Each country and each ethnic group has a different point of view; therefore, it is very difficult to improve women's conditions through short-term foreign volunteer programs. However, in general, the Peace Corps often sends volunteers to work in areas that touch on other cultural norms such as family planning, sex education, and youth development.

The Peace Corps' response and its programs for indigenous communities have undergone a transformation. This change was in response to indigenous peoples' critiques regarding the U.S. and western style of cooperation. A Peace Corps' publication *40 years of Peace Corps Ecuador* celebrates and illustrates 40 years of Peace Corps Ecuador's history by introducing significant projects and volunteers' contributions. Relating to agriculture in indigenous communities, in the section depicting the beginning of the 1980s, Peace Corps introduced their work as, "Peace Corps Volunteers helped revolutionize farming practices and crop diversity, drastically improving production in the central sierra" (Zorovich 25). These PCVs studied and improved soil conditions and

introduced new modern crops to small Andean farmers. This magazine mentioned that as a result of PCV's study, they found that the combination of the use of chicken manure as fertilizer and traditional agricultural techniques caused unproductiveness. This point illustrates one aspect of globalization's negative impact on indigenous communities. This way of 'improving' the productivity of small farmers possibly promotes the denial of indigenous traditional knowledge.

However, another article in the same magazine, "Growing Organic Quinoa: A Traditional Crop Finds New Markets" introduces the contribution of seeking business opportunities for local indigenous organizations by exporting a traditional organic Andean crop, quinoas, in the late 1990s. It mentioned:

Because of ERPE's⁵ influence, farmers had already come to realize the benefits of planting organic crops. For health and economic reasons, many farmers had shifted from using hazardous and costly chemicals to the more environmentally-friendly organic approach (Zorovich 47-48).

Compared with the 1980s' way of referring to their cooperation, this comment shows that the Peace Corps tried to encourage and respect traditions and find business ventures based on them. This is one example that shows how the Peace Corps has adjusted its policy towards indigenous communities' cultures and feelings.

In terms of analyzing the approaches of the Peace Corps towards indigenous communities, its' aid policies reflect indigenous people's image and critique of the U.S. In particular, the Peace Corps responded to some negative images of the U.S. such as its imperialistic character in the Americas by taking their critique into Peace Corps' policy. For instance, Peace Corps Ecuador's motto -"*No inventar nada*" and "*No queremos cambiar nada*" -showed their way of taking cultural and historical sensitivity into account

⁵ERPE (Escuelas Radiofónicas Populares del Ecuador) is an organization formed by *campesinos* (mainly indigenous farmers). See their official website <http://www.erpe.org.ec/erpe/>

in their policies towards indigenous communities. Moreover, they think that sending volunteers to indigenous communities is not an easy task. This may be one reason that Peace Corps Ecuador is not actively sending volunteers to indigenous communities compared with before.

Conclusion

In short, three prominent tendencies found in this study are: (1) not all indigenous people resist the idea of development; however, they feel that there is a lack of appropriate ‘respect’ for indigenous people in “development” projects; (2) indigenous people mention that they are capable of protecting their culture and identity by themselves unlike the image of indigenous people constructed by ‘outsiders’; (3) international agencies’ approaches in Ecuador reflect an incorporation of critiques to “development” projects although they still need to reform their approaches such as providing autonomous space for indigenous people in the design of development programs. Consequently, these tendencies show that indigenous people are becoming “active” recipients rather than “passive” recipients in terms of development subjects.

Regarding definitions of indigenous people, Ecuadorian informants emphasized the distinctiveness of indigenous culture by using the word “*propio* (own)” for describing indigenous culture, language, organizations, and worldview. Also, some informants mentioned their feelings against colonizers who came from the western world and defined indigenous people. In addition to this, the result of the 2001 census made me question whether drawing the line between indigenous and non-indigenous is worthwhile. The most important insight that I gained through this study is that it is imperative to mutually seek ways of understanding each other. Positive interaction will provide

opportunities to develop better projects. Before determining the contents of effective development programs, it is meaningful to first find ways of ending unequal power relations in the area of “development”.

Appendix A
List of General Questions for Interviews (Ecuador)⁶

1. ¿En su pensamiento, quienes son los indigenas en Ecuador?
¿Cuál es la definición de indigenas ecuarioanos?
¿Cuales son las caraterísticas comparados con los indigenas en otros paises de Latino America? ¿Cuales son las diferencias?
2. ¿En general, cuál es la demanda de los indigenas acerca de la ayuda que necesitan para mejorar su situación de vida?
3. ¿Usted piensa que los indigenas ecuatorianos necesitan ayuda de organizaciones extranjeras o unicamente de organizaciones nacionales?
4. ¿En su opinión, como consecuencia de recibir voluntaries de otros paises en las comunidades indigenas, se produce en impacto en la identidad de los indigenas (el proceso de recobrar de identidad de los indigenas)?
5. ¿Cuando las agencias de cooperación planean el proyecto de ayuda para la comunidad indigena, en que punto tienen que prestar atención a propósito de evitar a cambiar la identidad de los indigenas?

⁶ This interview sheet made by Kawachi used this when she interviewed with all Ecuadorian informants. These interviews were conducted in Spanish.

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