

The Amazon — The challenge of communicating diversity

The cases of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru

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Foreword

Freedom of information and expression for the Amazon region

The Amazon rainforest is one of the last remaining areas on earth where the human impact is low. Its largely intact ecosystems play an important part in the global climate. However, the immense forests are being reduced further and further by slash and burn agriculture, cattle breeding and soy plantations. While in the industrialized countries we see shocking media reports, and argue about political consequences at international climate conferences, the local people in the Amazon region find themselves in a dilemma between the need for the fastest possible economic development and the preservation of the natural environment.

DW Akademie has been present in Latin America for many years, including countries belonging to the Amazon region such as Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. The goal of the DW Akademie projects is to work with local partners in order to strengthen the human right to freedom of information and expression. For people in the Amazon region it is particularly difficult to exercise this basic right. Few local media outlets are in a position to guarantee a reliable supply of information. The capitals such as Bogotá, Lima or Quito are far removed, and the national media outlets based there report at best sporadically about the Amazon region.

This study paints the current picture of a region in which the destruction of natural resources advances rapidly, and whose inhabitants lack the necessary communication media to inform themselves and in turn pass on their own information. Where people do not know their rights and consequently are unable to take control of political decisions about their region, the risk of violent conflicts increases.

DW Akademie sees this seemingly hopeless situation as an incentive to contribute towards the improvement of the supply of information, both within the Amazon region and to the outside world. This includes strong local media and qualified journalists who seek dialogue with their local audiences, and who work on an equal footing with the national media.

This is not only in the interest of the people within the affected countries, but in the long term also in the interest of Europe and the world. In order to be able to preserve the Amazon rainforest, it is absolutely essential that the people who live there have access to free and reliable sources of information and can exercise their right to freedom of expression without threats.



Carsten von Nahmen, Managing Director, DW Akademie

Introduction



Santa Rosa, Peru | Bathing in the Amazon River. In the background, on the opposite bank of the river: Tabatinga, Brazil, and Leticia, Colombia — the Triple Frontier.

The challenge of communicating in the Amazon

Research in dialogue



© María Clara Valencia, Colombia

Orito, Putumayo, Colombia | This study was carried out using a mixed methodology that included documentary research, interviews with experts from different fields of knowledge, and field visits to Amazonian communities. In addition, a series of workshops and discussion meetings on alternative communication strategies was carried out in Peru, Colombia, and Germany. The goal of this process was to stimulate dialogue between community communicators and journalists from the Amazon and other regions.

We are losing the Amazon rainforest. According to data from Global Forest Watch¹, an organization that monitors forests around the world and provides tools for their protection, in 2018 alone we destroyed 4 million hectares (40,000 km², an area the size of Switzerland) in the region. Protecting the Amazon is the responsibility of all humanity because every single decision we make, from what we eat, to the energy we use or our means of transport, can have a direct or indirect impact on the region. Experts warn that we may be reaching a tipping point when the Amazonian biome² will lose its capacity to function, transforming the forest into a savanna—a scenario that unfortunately seems to be getting nearer and nearer. The Amazon region makes up more than half of the world's total tropical rainforests, and it plays a key role in the planet's health as a carbon sink (thereby reducing global warming), and by regulating rainfall, temperature and oxygen availability around the world. For these reasons, the future of the Amazon must have the highest priority for the entire international community. To achieve this goal, we must improve existing channels of communication and create new ones if necessary.

However, communicating in the Amazon is an enormous challenge, not only because of the environmental problems there, but because the term “Amazon” refers to an immense and highly diverse territory inhabited by a wide range of different cultures. According to the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (OTCA), 35 million people live in the Amazon region³.

DW Akademie, together with its partners in the countries of the Amazon basin, is seeking to strengthen processes enabling communication in the region, and increase the visibility of both its biological and cultural diversity and its social and environmental conflicts in order to boost public debate on possible solutions. It is important that the inhabitants of this vast region be the protagonists of these debates, that their voices be heard, and that they have access to the information necessary for participating actively in decision-making processes. In other words, in order to save the Amazon rainforest, it is necessary to empower its inhabitants so they can better defend their territories and ecosystems. One cornerstone in this regard is the fundamental right to freedom of expression and access to information, set forth in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The aim of this study is therefore to make a diagnosis of the current situation of communications processes in the Amazon. The data presented here are the results from a research process that took place between October 2019 and February 2020. The research methodology was mixed, comprising an analysis of written sources, interviews with experts from different areas, and field visits to Amazonian communities. In addition, a series of workshops and discussion events on alternative communication strategies were carried out. The first workshop took place in October 2019 in Cusco, Peru during the International Meeting of Indigenous Communication (EICI). In December 2019, DW Akademie invited a group of community media producers, researchers, and community network builders from the Global South to Berlin, Germany for an exchange of experiences on alternative forms of communication under adverse circumstances. In February 2020, the project results were discussed at a meeting organized by DW Akademie in Leticia, the capital of the Department of Amazonas in Colombia. The event was attended by more than 50 journalists, community media producers, academics, and community activists from four countries of the Amazon basin.

The goal of this process was not simply to gather data, but also to stimulate dialogue between community reporters and journalists from the Amazon region and from other areas, and to identify needs, good practices, and perspectives for the fu-

ture. One of the most important elements of the process was the fieldwork carried out by three researchers: María Clara Valencia in Colombia, Clara Robayo in Ecuador, and Franklin Cornejo in Peru. They documented the situation in the Amazon territories of each of the three countries through conversations, dynamic workshops, and interviews with community reporters, activists, experts, and leaders in the different territories. Their aim was to gain insight into the region and explore the existing communication and information capacities, as well as the needs and ideas that arise from the region in a constant dialogue between researchers and the local population. This part of the study, which took place between October 2019 and February 2020, explored the perspectives of the people that inhabit the region, with the understanding that it is both necessary to protect the different forms of existing knowledge in the region and, at the same time, develop ways of conserving the Amazon in all its complexity based on the experiences of the territories themselves.

nities face the environmental threats identified in previous chapters and showing examples of their communication strategies for making these problems visible and protecting their territories. The fifth and final chapter offers some community communication alternatives developed in the region, which may be a source of inspiration for those seeking to improve the flow of communication within and from the Amazon.

“**In this region, territory, culture, and organizations are all key to understanding the communication processes.**

Jorge Agurto, SERVINDI (Intercultural Communication Services), Lima, Peru

This paper summarizes the results of the entire research process and is divided into five chapters. The first chapter deals with cultural and ethnic diversity in the Amazon and shows the region to be a meeting point of different perspectives on the world and nature. The second chapter explores the existing infrastructure: transport routes and means, energy capacity, the Internet, and the media and communications landscape. The multiple social and environmental conflicts that affect the region are the subject of the third chapter, in which interviews with inhabitants of the Amazon, and with government, academic, journalistic, and NGO sources are the basis for documenting the impact of destructive interventions such as deforestation, mining, oil extraction, large infrastructure projects, and illegal plantations. The fourth chapter presents the results of the fieldwork carried out in 16 communities in Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia, describing how these commu-

¹ Weisse, Mikaela y Goldman, Liz (2019), The World Lost a Belgium-sized Area of Primary Rainforests Last Year, Global Forest Watch, www.bit.ly/3dgEsJf | Costa, Camila (2020), La gran mentira verde: cómo la pérdida del Amazonas va mucho más allá de la deforestación, BBC Mundo, www.bbc.in/3jOTOcc | Amigo, Ignacio (2020), ¿When will the Amazon hit a tipping point?, www.go.nature.com/3ejb3zn

² A biome is a specific region of the planet with a shared climate, flora, and fauna.

³ Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization, OTCA (2020), “Our Amazon”, www.bit.ly/3hKIPzK

1. A diverse territory and its particularities

The Amazon basin



Source: The political-administrative limits of the Amazon according to PNUMA (2009), GEO Amazonía: Perspectivas del Medio Ambiente en la Amazonía, www.bit.ly/2CTkk3u

Urban context



© DW/D. Olmos

Puerto de Leticia, Colombia | The cities of the Amazon attract people from very diverse places. Here, traders from the Andean region meet people from different indigenous groups that inhabit the rainforest. The cities are political and administrative centers offering important health and education services.

The territories that make up the Amazon basin share certain political, socioeconomic, and environmental characteristics, but are geographically very diverse. The region includes both huge plains and mountainous regions (including part of the Andes), and extends to the Atlantic coast in the east. Each country, department, province, town, and community has its own specific characteristics, and to understand the region it is important to identify these differences. This approach forces us to reject a preconceived, homogeneous, and unrealistic vision of the Amazon, and to recognize it as a diverse biome and a highly complex inhabited territory.

The region that was the subject of this research project only comprises a fifth of the 8.387.590 km² that make up the large Amazon basin⁴, which in its entirety is about twice the size of the European Union and covers 46 percent of the South American continent. It spans nine countries⁵ and displays an enormous degree of geographic, economic, and cultural diversity. According to the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (OTCA), 420 different indigenous groups speaking 86

languages and 650 dialects live in the Amazon basin⁶. In Peru alone, 41 languages belonging to fifteen different linguistic families have been identified; in Colombia, ten linguistic families; and in Ecuador, four. At least 60 of these groups live in complete isolation. However, it is important to note that although the inhabitants of the indigenous communities are descendants of the original inhabitants of the region, they do not form the majority of the population. The largest segment of the population consists of communities of mestizo settlers who carry out small-scale agriculture, and additionally albeit to a lesser degree Afro-descendent communities. Although this study places larger emphasis on the indigenous groups, there is no doubt that the new settler communities also suffer from the consequences of environmental conflicts, and that communication strategies for overcoming these conflicts must be inclusive. At the same time, an analysis focused mainly on the ethnic minorities is justified for two reasons. First of all, the changes to ecosystems and sociocultural systems are endangering natural spaces and consequently the subsistence of these groups and cultures. Some groups already face the danger of extinction. The second reason for their relevance as a group of study in this project is their ample knowledge of the ecosystem, thanks to the experience of multiple generations living in close contact with their habitat. There is no doubt that the search for ways towards a sustainable future for the Amazonian rainforest must take the ancestral knowledge of its original inhabitants into account.

Although it is true that the indigenous organizations of the Amazon, united in the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin (COICA), have been able to create spaces for their participation in international environmental meetings such as the world climate summits, they demand greater inclusion in decision-making processes that affect their habitat. If this does not occur, these conferences will be nothing but “a trade fair for indigenous territories”⁷

“Our wealth lies in our diversity, but things are becoming homogenized, in part because of the influence of outside cultures.

Testimony of a female social leader in the Department of Amazonas, Colombia⁸

⁴ Sinchi Institute, The large Amazon basin, www.sinchi.org.co/region-de-la-gran-amazonia

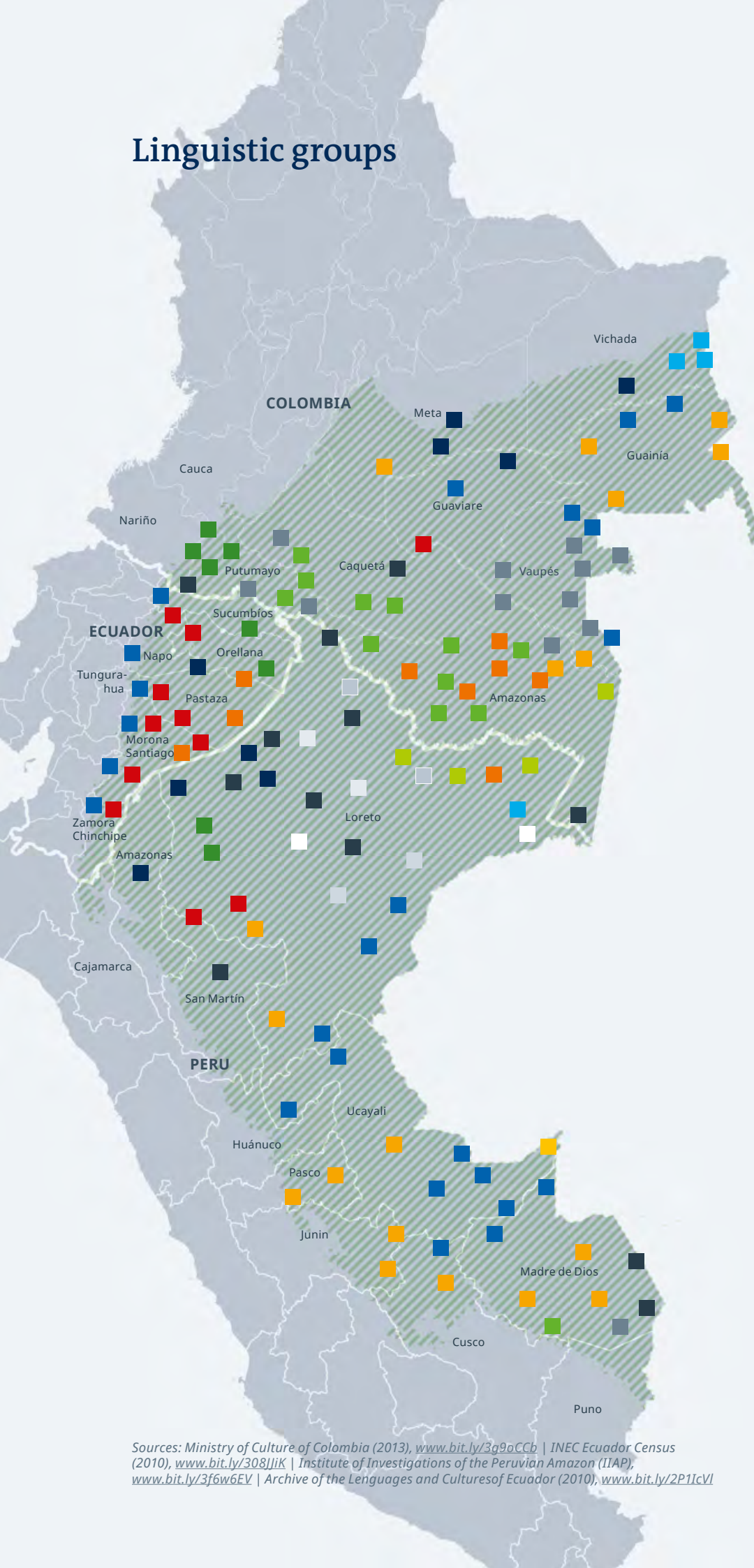
⁵ Eight countries form part of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (OTCA): Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, Surinam, and Guyana. In addition, French Guiana also contains Amazon territory.

⁶ OTCA (2020), Nuestra Amazonia, www.bit.ly/3hKIPzK

⁷ Robinson López, Coordinador de Cambio Climático y Biodiversidad de COICA, in “COP25: Pueblos Indígenas, los más afectados, los más invisibilizados”, DW (05.12.2019), www.bit.ly/38fE3WF

⁸ Due to the high level of violence in the country and the risks facing social leaders, we have decided not to publish the names of those interviewed in Colombia for their protection.

Linguistic groups



COLOMBIA

- **QUECHUA**
 - 1 Inga
 - **WITOTO**
 - 1 Uitoto
 - 2 Okaina
 - 3 Nonuya
 - **TUPI**
 - 1 Cocama
 - **ARAWAK**
 - 1 Achagua
 - 2 Piapoco
 - 3 Curripaco
 - 4 Baniwa
 - 5 Kawayari
 - 6 Yukuna
 - 7 Tariano
 - 8 Baniba
 - **BORA**
 - 1 Muiname
 - 2 Bora
 - 3 Miraña
 - **CARIBE**
 - 1 Karijona
 - **GUAHIBO**
 - 1 Sikuani
 - 2 Guayabero
 - **MAKU**
 - 1 Puiname
 - 2 Yuhup
- 3 Cacula
 - 4 Nukak
 - **SALIBA**
 - 1 Piaroa
 - **TUKANO**
 - 1 Coreguaje
 - 2 Siona
 - 3 Kubeo
 - 4 Pisamira
 - 5 Piratapuyo
 - 6 Wanano
 - 7 Dsano
 - 8 Carapana
 - 9 Tucano
 - 10 Tatuyo
 - 11 Taiwano
 - 12 Barasana
 - 13 Bará
 - 14 Macuna
 - 15 Tuyuka
 - 16 Yuruti
 - 17 Siriano
 - 18 Tanimuka
 - **ISOLATED LANGUAGES**
 - 1 Andoke
 - 2 Tinigua
 - 3 Tikuna
 - 4 Yagua
 - 5 Cofán

ECUADOR

- **TUCANO**
 - 1 Paikoka/Baikoka
 - **ZÁPARO**
 - 1 Zápara
 - 2 Shimigade
 - **JÍVARO**
 - 1 Shuar Chicham
 - 2 Achuar Chicham
- 3 Chiliar Chicham
 - **QUECHUA**
 - 1 Kichwa Amazónico
 - **ISOLATED LANGUAGES**
 - 1 Wao Todedo
 - 2 A'Ingae

PERU

- **ARAWA**
 - 1 Kulina
 - **ARAWAK**
 - 1 Ashaninka
 - 2 Caquinte
 - 3 Chamicuro
 - 4 Iñapari
 - 5 Matsigenka
 - 6 Nomatshiguenga
 - 7 Yine
 - 8 Resigaró
 - 9 Yaneshá
 - **BORA**
 - 1 Bóoráá
 - **CACHUAPANA**
 - 1 Shawi
 - 2 Shiwilo
 - **CANDOSHI**
 - 1 Kandozi
 - 2 Chapara
 - **HARAKMBUT**
 - 1 Harakmbut
 - **HUITOTO**
 - 1 Muriu
 - 2 Ocaina
 - **JÍBARO**
 - 1 Achuar
 - 2 Awajun
 - 3 Wampis
 - **PANO**
 - 1 Amahuaca
- 2 Capanahua
 - 3 Cashibo Cacataibo
 - 4 Cashinahua
 - 5 Matsés
 - 6 Shipibo Conibo
 - 7 Yaminahua
 - 8 Chitonahua
 - 9 Isconahua
 - 10 Sharanahua
 - **PEBA**
 - 1 Yagua
 - **QUECHUA**
 - 1 Kichwa
 - **TACANA**
 - 1 Ese Eja
 - **TUCANO**
 - 1 Secoya
 - 2 Maijuna
 - **TUPÍ-GUARANÍ**
 - 1 Kukama
 - 2 Kukamiria
 - 2 Omagua
 - ZÁPARO**
 - 1 Arabela
 - 2 Iquito
 - 3 Taushiro
 - ISOLATED LANGUAGES**
 - 1 Ticuna
 - 2 Urarina (Shimaco)

Sources: Ministry of Culture of Colombia (2013), www.bit.ly/3g9oCCb | INEC Ecuador Census (2010), www.bit.ly/308JiK | Institute of Investigations of the Peruvian Amazon (IIAP), www.bit.ly/3f6w6EV | Archive of the Languages and Cultures of Ecuador (2010), www.bit.ly/2P1cVI

In Ecuador, 245,000 indigenous people belonging to 14 ethnic groups live in the Amazon region. They represent a third of the population in that part of the country. In Colombia, according to official records, 86,000 indigenous people belonging to 56 ethnic groups live in the country's departments in Amazon territory, where they make up 9,8 percent of the local population. In Peru, 51 ethnic groups with a total population of 333,000 live in the Amazon-territory departments, corresponding to only 9.1 percent of the population in these areas⁹.

“Through religion they have taught us to be afraid of spirits, but for the Awá, meeting spirits was normal.

Indigenous leader of the Awá tribe, Putumayo, Colombia

Although they do not represent a majority, the key role of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin in the protection of the environment is generally recognized. In fact, due to these peoples' relationship with their habitat—a relationship based on ancestral traditions closely tied to nature—their territories, although not devoid of conflicts and tensions, are the best conserved. For this reason we decided to place greater emphasis in this study on the forms of communication of the different indigenous groups, as well as on their existing capacities and the challenges they face.

The way in which indigenous cultures live and interact sustainably with other living creatures is expressed through their own forms of communication, such as rituals and a permanent dialogue with spirits, animals, and plants. In order to understand the region, it is therefore essential to take these forms of communication and the indigenous languages themselves into account.

Indigenous groups in the Amazon

	COLOMBIA	ECUADOR	PERU
Indigenous population in the Amazon	86.417	245.014	332.975
% of total Amazon population	9.8 %	33.12 %	9.1 %
Number of indigenous groups in the Amazon	56 indigenous peoples	11 nationalities and peoples	51 ethnicities
Names of the indigenous groups	Andoke, Apuyo, Bará, Barasano, Bora, Cacua, Carapana, Cocama, Coreguaje, Cubeo, Desana, Guahibos, Guanano, Guayaberos, Huitoto, Hupda, Inga, Kabiya, Kamsá, Karapana, Karijona, Kawiyari, Kofán, Kurripaco, Ivfakú, Makuna, Matapi, Miraña, Muinane, Murui, Nheengatu, Nonuya, Nukak-Makú, Ocaina, Piacoco, Piral, Piratapuyo, Pisamira, Puinave, Siona-Secoya, Siriano, Taeryo, Taiwano, Tanimuka-Letuama, Tariano, Tatyuyo, Tikuna, Tucano, Tuyuka, Wanano, Yagua, Yahuna, Yauna, Yujup, Yukuna-Matapi, Yuruti	Andoa, Chachis, Cofán, Épera, Huaoarani, Kichwa Amazónico (Napo Kichwa and Pastaza Kichwa), Secoya, Shiwiar, Shuar, Siona, Zápara	Achuar, Amahuaca, Arabela, Asháninka, Asheninka, Awajún, Bora, Capanahua, Cashinahua, Chamicuro, Chapra, Chitonahua, Ese eja, Harakbut, Ikitu, Iñapari, Isconahua, Jíbaro, Kakataibo, Kakinte, Kandozi, Kichwa, Kukama kukamiria, Madija, Maijuna, Marinahua, Mashco piro, Mastanahua, Matsés, Matsigenka, Muniche, Murui-muinani, Nahua, Nanti, Nomatsigenga, Ocaina, Omagua, Resígaro, Secoya, Sharanhua, Shawi, Shipibo-konibo, Shiwilu, Tikuna, Urarina, Vacacocho, Wampis, Yagua, Yaminahua, Yanesha, Yine

Sources: SIAT-AC, Census (2005), www.bit.ly/3gtZuq1 | OPIAC, www.bit.ly/3kk9y7w | INEI Peru, Nacional Census (2007), www.bit.ly/2D1OyBt | CONAIE, www.bit.ly/31lr6aq | INEC Ecuador (2010), www.bit.ly/3ljYrjc

Another factor that underlines the importance of indigenous peoples in projections for the region is land ownership. Although the process to formally register land rights is complex in all three countries, indigenous peoples generally possess most of the territory. In Colombia, for example, the indigenous lands in the region that are recognized by the state comprise more than 50 percent of the country's Amazonian territory¹⁰. In Ecuador, 64 percent of its Amazon territory is registered in title deeds held by indigenous peoples. It must be noted, however, that these are only temporary deeds that must be renewed periodically, leading to a situation of permanent conflict¹¹. In Peru, on the other hand, indigenous peoples own less than 20 percent of the approximately 700,000 km² of Amazon territory in the country—a low percentage that belies the actual situation: Since 1978, indigenous communities in Peru have only received deeds for land that is used for agricultural purposes, and the rest of the territory they inhabit, consisting of rainforest, belongs officially to the state but is granted to them for their use. In addition, there are forms of collective land ownership for communities, and indigenous reserves for communities in isolation. Ultimately, however, despite the existence of these different legal forms, the communities in all three countries continue to fight for the state to recognize and respect their territories.

However, it is important to also take into account the remaining inhabitants, mestizo settlers and Afro-descendent communities that came to the region through different migration processes (including forced displacement). These migration flows have contributed to the commercial and urban development of the region but also to the destruction of ecosystems. The settler communities not only contribute to the expansion of the agricultural frontiers, but also to the growth of urban centers in the rainforest. In Ecuador and Colombia, for example, most of the inhabitants of the Amazon live in rural areas. In Peru, on the other hand, almost half of the Amazonian population is concentrated in eight cities, the largest of which, Iquitos, has a population of half a million.

The history of Amazonian cities has always been closely tied to the exploitation of natural resources and labor for international markets. Iquitos, for example, was a crucial center for the rubber boom that existed between 1880 and 1914, creating huge amounts of wealth at the cost of a cruel exploitation of the indigenous population¹². After rubber, investors set their

Rural context



© DW/M. Kopp

Chorrera, Colombia | Many indigenous communities are located in the middle of the forest, at great distances from each other. This allows them to maintain their traditional ways of life to a certain degree. The communal house is a place where important rituals for community cohesion are carried out.

sights on other resources such as gold and oil. Nueva Loja, the largest city in the Ecuadorian Amazon, for example, is known as “the oil capital of Ecuador.”

Despite the significant differences between rural and urban life in the Amazon, they are closely related. The cities function as administrative centers, seats of regional government, and as accumulation and distribution sites for both products from the rainforest and those from outside. They also offer important services for the inhabitants of the rainforest, such as hospitals, banks, and secondary schools, as well as airports that connect the region with the political and administrative centers of each country.

⁹ Official population figures in all three countries are rarely up to date and are therefore not always reliable.

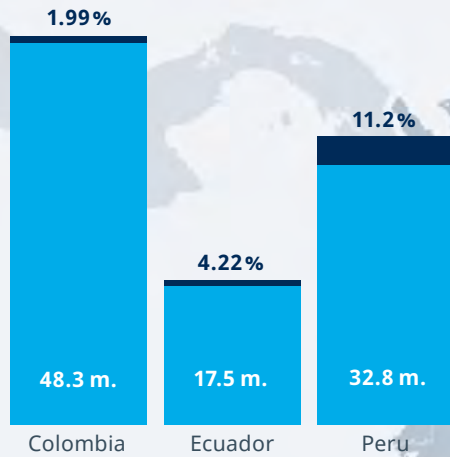
¹⁰ Territorial Environmental Information System of the Colombian Amazon (SIATAC), Indigenous reservations, www.bit.ly/2Br8JHL

¹² García, Fernando y Sandoval, Mare (2007), “Los pueblos indígenas del Ecuador: derechos y bienestar”, Flacso, www.bit.ly/37HEU1Y

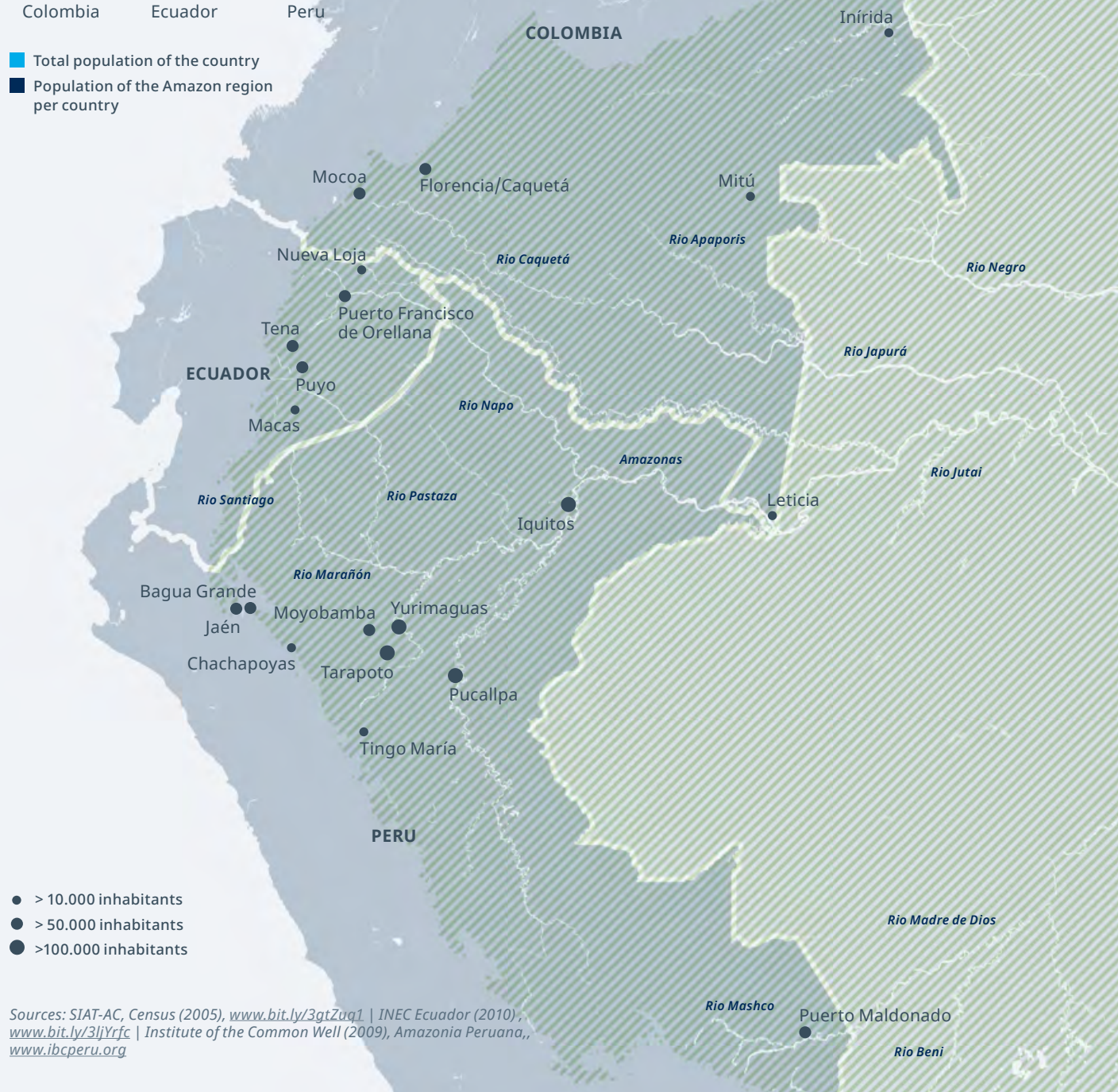
¹² In 1910 the diplomat Roger Casement documented the atrocities committed by Casa Arana, a Peruvian rubber company listed on the London Stock Exchange. Subsequently, the genocide committed by the rubber companies has been the subject of academic studies, novels (including the classic “The Vortex” by José Eustacio Rivera and “The Dream of the Celt” by Mario Vargas Llosa), and recently of the film “Embrace of the Serpent” by Colombian director Ciro Guerra, nominated for an Academy Award in 2016. In 2012, the then president of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos symbolically asked the indigenous peoples of the Amazon for forgiveness.



Population of the Amazon



■ Total population of the country
■ Population of the Amazon region per country



- > 10.000 inhabitants
- > 50.000 inhabitants
- >100.000 inhabitants

Sources: SIAT-AC, Census (2005), www.bit.ly/3gtZuq1 | INEC Ecuador (2010), www.bit.ly/3ljYrfc | Institute of the Common Well (2009), Amazonia Peruana, www.ibcperu.org

2. The communication infrastructure

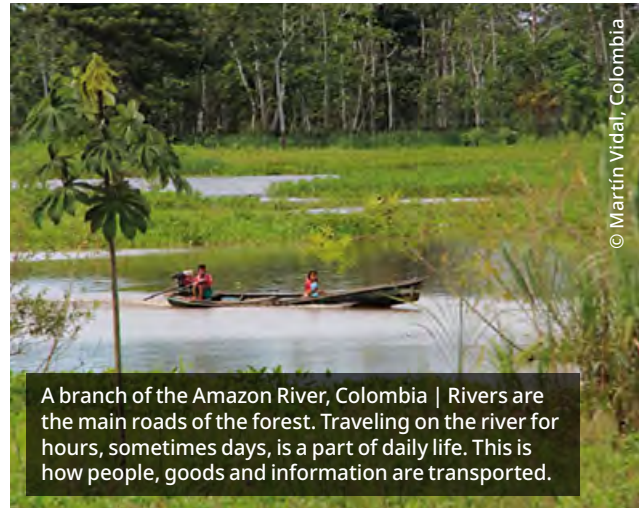
Both the size of the Amazon and the geographic fragmentation of its population pose significant communication challenges. These factors are compounded by climatic conditions, such as intense heat, extremely high humidity, and the frequent occurrence of electrical storms that make it difficult to operate electronic equipment. Furthermore, the infrastructure in this region is generally less developed than in other areas of the three countries, as seen in transport and power supplies, as well as other basic services such as telecommunications.

To a large extent, this underdevelopment is caused by the Amazon region's low level of political priority in each country, as its inhabitants only make up a very small percentage of each national population. In Colombia they only represent 2 percent of the population; in Ecuador, 4.2 percent; and in Peru, 11.2 percent, according to official sources¹³. This is also the reason why all three countries place a much greater emphasis on their belonging to the "Andean community" than to the Amazon basin when it comes to defining their national identity—a situation which is, in turn, reflected in the level of investment in the region.

2.1 Transport: A remote region becomes connected

In the rainforest, rivers are crucial communication axes, natural borders, and sources of integration, as they often retain their names regardless of national borders. In the absence of other geographical reference points, rivers set natural territorial boundaries. In addition, they serve as communication channels, enabling a flow not only of products but also of news and information. Rivers connect communities separated by the immense distances of the rainforest and also create opportunities for spreading information through digital means in areas without Internet access. For example, in a workshop conducted in the framework of this study, one proposal discussed was the possibility of creating communication networks using riverboats that could transport information stored on digital devices such as USB storage devices.

Although the river system is important in all three countries, its characteristics are different in each one. In Ecuador there are no commercially important river ports for large companies. In Colombia the government has developed a river master plan¹⁴ that foresees the construction of new ports in the region and the modification of the waterways of the Putumayo and Amazon rivers. However, although it was announced that the project would be carried out in an environmentally friendly way, there is no official environmental plan.



Peru's river system is the largest in the Amazon region after that of Brazil, with 6000 km of navigable rivers covered by an extensive system of traditional transport and commercial routes developed over time. However, the degree to which these rivers can be navigated by different types of vessels varies significantly depending on the season, which has led to a controversial waterway construction project in the framework of the Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA). The project contract was first awarded to the Brazilian company Odebrecht and then to an international consortium led by the Chinese state company Sinohydro¹⁵.

Land transport is limited to a very small percentage of Amazon territory. In Colombia the road system barely reaches the border of the Amazon, ending in the cities of San Vicente del Caguán (Caquetá), Calamar (Guaviare), Santa Rita, and Puerto Carreño (Vichada). In Ecuador there is only a north-south trunk highway connecting the most important cities and areas for oil extraction. This highway begins in Puerto El Carmen, on the Colombian border and ends in the city of Zamora, close to the Peruvian border. The eastern Amazonian region in Ecuador is not accessible by road. In Peru, land routes only connect a small part of the region—mainly large cities close to oil extraction sites, such as Santa María de Nieva, Moyobamba, Yurimaguas, Tarapoto, Pucallpa, and Puerto Maldonado. There are plans in all three countries to extend the road network, but these extensions carry with them the risk of significant negative social and environmental consequences, as the building of roads opens the door to deforestation, large-scale cattle farming, and illegal land appropriation¹⁶.

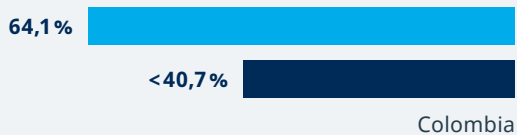
¹³ SIAT-AC, Census (2005), www.bit.ly/3gtZuq1 | INEC Ecuador (2010), www.bit.ly/3ljYrfc | Institute of the Common Well (2009), Amazonia Peruana www.ibcperu.org

¹⁴ National Planning Department (2015), River master plan for Colombia, www.bit.ly/2V2upkG

¹⁵ El Comercio, Perú, 6.7.2017, www.bit.ly/3hNxeji

¹⁶ Calle, Helena (2017), "Tres carreteras que amenazan al Amazonas", El Espectador, www.bit.ly/2YQycTk

Internet usage



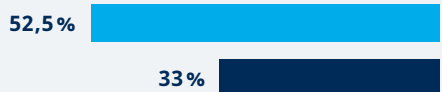
Colombia

According to figures from the Colombian government, between **20** and **40.7%** of the inhabitants of the Amazon over the age of 5 used the Internet at some point in 2018. In addition, they reveal that **67.2%** of the inhabitants of the Amazon, more than two thirds, possess a smart phone. However, very few households have an internet connection. In the Department of Amazonas only **1.4%** of households have fixed Internet, **4.5%** have Internet access through mobile devices.



Ecuador

In Ecuador, according to the National Employment Survey of 2016, **47.7%** of the inhabitants of the Amazon over the age of 5 used the internet at some point in the last 12 months. Outside urban centers, the main places to connect are the **191** Community Infocenters. These spaces have trained 60,000 citizens since 2011. In terms of mobile internet access, the Amazon is the region with the lowest percentage of activated cell phones in the country with **38.6%**, without distinguishing whether they are smart phones or not.



Peru

Internet connectivity in the Peruvian Amazon has been promoted by private companies and not by the central government. According to the National Household Survey of 2018, **33%** of the inhabitants of the Amazon regions over 6 years old used the internet in the last 12 months. **63.3%** of those who used the Internet in the Amazon used the service on a daily basis, **31.2%** used it once a week and the rest less frequently.

■ National internet usage ■ Internet usage in the Amazon region

Sources: INEI Perú (2016 y 2018), www.bit.ly/2XosRCT y www.bit.ly/3hK9HyQ | INEC Ecuador (2016), www.bit.ly/2P7yIb2 | Ministry of T elecommunications and the Society of Information Ecuador, www.bit.ly/3furGru | DANE Colombia (2018), www.bit.ly/3g9EIJd

In terms of air travel, there are services between the capitals of all three countries and the most important Amazon cities. In addition, there is a small-plane service for some of the most remote communities in the region. Plans have been made in all three countries to improve airways to and from the rain-forest, providing an alternative with a significantly reduced environmental impact in comparison with land routes. Nonetheless, it is highly unlikely that these projects can be economically viable without state participation.

It is important to question whether these plans for transport policies correspond with the local needs, or whether they are merely dictated by extractivist visions from outside of the region. Transport in the Amazon is a topic that has the potential to fuel mayor social and environmental conflicts.

2.2 Electricity: Power for the rainforest

Ensuring access to electricity is a significant challenge for a region that is so far away from national power supply networks. On the one hand, electricity is indispensable for providing access to telecommunications services and the Internet. On the other hand, if renewable energy sources are not used, an increase in power generation will have a negative environmental impact.

Although access to electricity is relatively widespread in Ecuador and Colombia (97 percent and 84 percent coverage, respectively), a significant percentage of the communities without electricity in these countries are located in the rural areas of the Amazon. In Peru, according to the latest National Household Census carried out by the National Institute of Statistics and Information Technology (INEI)¹⁷, 42 percent of rural communities in the rainforest do not have electricity. One possible solution for these areas is the local generation of power through hydroelectric dams. However, the construction of dams is controversial due to the environmental and social damage caused by flooding lands. Many rural communities are therefore currently dependent on diesel generators as their sole source of electricity, but this fuel is very expensive in the region and is highly polluting.

2.3 Internet: On the edge of digitalization

Without electricity there is no Internet. In the three countries studied, cell phone and Internet coverage is therefore limited to cities. This means that people living in communities in the rainforest must sometimes travel for days in order to access these services. However, the governments in all three countries have made efforts to improve connectivity. In Ecuador, this government program has consisted in creating so-called “Infocentros”, which are huts with Internet access in rural areas. In 2019, 176 units had been installed in Amazonian communities. Regarding mobile phone coverage and data, only the municipal capitals have 3G coverage. As of 2020 there are plans to install 4G networks. In the meantime, many users are dependent on cybercafés in the cities for Internet access.

“You have to climb the trees like a bird to get a signal.

Popular saying in the Amazon

In Colombia’s Amazon region, Internet speed is slower than in the rest of the country, despite the fact that telecommunications companies such as Claro (the largest tele-communications company in Colombia) announced that it would make 4G accessible in many areas. At the same time, Internet access for the Amazonian population there is below 50 percent. Official sources state a level of connectivity of up to 50 percent, which actually means any figure below that mark¹⁸. In general, people complain about the lack of connectivity as an obstacle to communication initiatives. For example, young people cannot access online classes because the Internet speed is too slow. The government and private sectors have been announcing improvements in connectivity for years, but the results have been unsatisfactory¹⁹. The government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), for example, created the program “Puntos Vive Digital”, through which community centers with satellite Internet were installed in some remote regions (some of them in the Amazon). However, this program is now being dismantled by the current government of Iván Duque due to irregularities in its execution²⁰.



Puerto Nariño, Colombia | More and more communities in the Amazon now have satellite television and Internet.

No comparable programs exist in Peru, but in 2018 the government announced the creation of a fiber-optic network called Internet Service for Connectivity and Social Development in Isolated Areas, which would include a total of 726 localities in the Amazonian departments of Loreto, Ucayali, and Madre de Dios. Currently, private companies such as Loon and the consortium “Internet para Todos” (Telefónica Peru, Facebook, BID Invest, and CAF) control access to mobile Internet in the region.

¹⁷ INEI (2019), www.inei.gob.pe

¹⁸ Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications, www.bit.ly/2V19fn6

¹⁹ El Tiempo (2019), “Inició proyecto para llevar internet a indígenas del Amazonas”, www.bit.ly/2zNutzN

²⁰ Nicolas Larroca, TeleSemana, “Se reestructura el plan de conectividad rural en Colombia”, www.bit.ly/2DpBx4Z

Although none of the three countries studied have reliable, verifiable, and, much less, exhaustive data on Internet use in the Amazon, it was clear during field visits that, despite coverage problems, mobile phones enjoy widespread use. Young people are the main users, and Facebook and WhatsApp are the most common applications. However, some people believe that these new technologies are driving the younger generation away from their communities and making them lose interest in their traditions.

Media Development



There are no journalism schools in the Amazon, and of the few universities in the region only one, the Amazonian State University in Puyo, Ecuador, offers a degree in social communications. One initiative that seeks to improve this situation is the Servindi Itinerant School²¹, a Peruvian organization that promotes intercultural communication and seeks to train media producers to improve information with an indigenous perspective. Similarly, in the School of Indigenous Communication of the Macro-Amazon in Leticia, Colombia²², young leaders take advantage of technological means in order to tell their stories, in the different native languages and from the worldviews and nuances of each indigenous group. In Ecuador, the Coordinadora de Medios Comunitarios, Populares y Educativos de Ecuador (CORAPE)²³ operates through the Amazon Intercultural Radio Network. Through this network, the media and its staff receive access to training and advice.

2.4 Communication and the media: Between technology and tradition

International efforts to ensure a better future for new generations, such as the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement), seek to “guarantee the full and effective implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean of the rights of access to environmental information, public participation in the environmental decision-making and access to justice²⁴.” Diverse and robust communication mechanisms are crucial for strengthening and disseminating these efforts.

Existing data on communication media in the Amazon show that radio is the predominant means of communication in the rainforest. However, there are also technical, budgetary, and capacity-related limitations to the medium’s potential as a tool of information dissemination. First of all, the enormous distance between communities means that radio signals do not reach many of them. The radio stations are generally located in urban areas and therefore do not have an AM frequency—which has a greater range but also higher costs—but only a short-range FM signal. In addition, maintaining radios can be expensive for communities and many of those that are officially registered are not actually in use.

The options available in terms of media development initiatives are limited, not only because of lacking infrastructure but also in terms of training. Especially training initiatives that take local languages and forms of communication into account are needed. Indigenous organizations in the region are practicing their own forms of communication, but further training is needed to make the identity, culture as well as the defence of their territories visible.

“ Indigenous communication has a political dimension, but in general in the Peruvian Amazon community media producers are self-taught, discovering an interest in communication on their own.

Jorge Agurto, director of SERVINDI, Lima, Peru

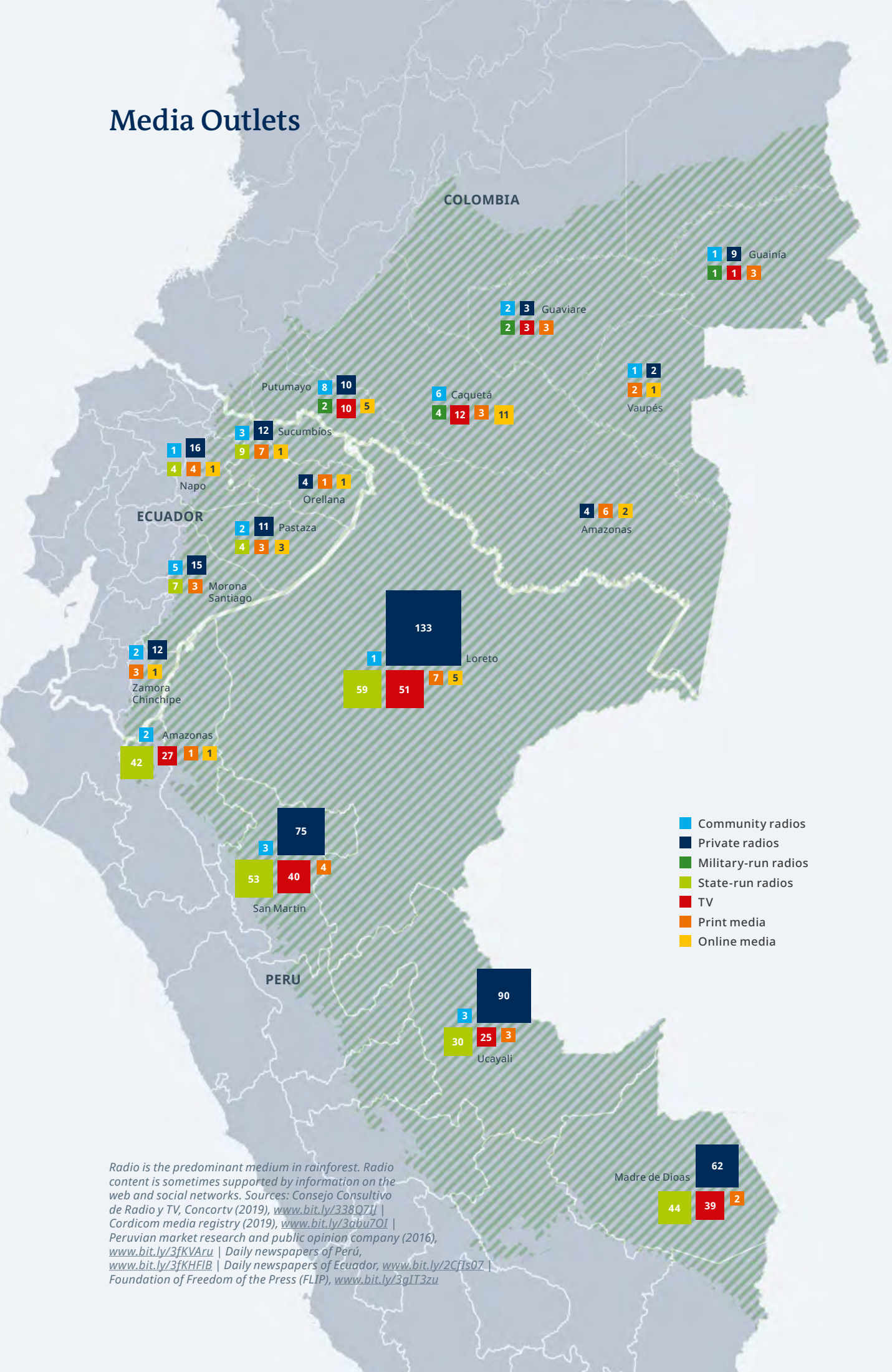
²¹ Servindi, Itinerant School, www.bit.ly/2EozjCZ

²² School of Indigenous Communication of the Macro-Amazon in Leticia, www.bit.ly/3a27wUK

²³ Coordinator of Popular and Educational Community Media (CORAPE), www.bit.ly/3gBDRho

²⁴ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2018), Escazú Agreement, www.cepal.org/es/acuerdodeescazu

Media Outlets



Radio is the predominant medium in rainforest. Radio content is sometimes supported by information on the web and social networks. Sources: Consejo Consultivo de Radio y TV, Concoartv (2019), www.bit.ly/338Q7UJ | Cordicom media registry (2019), www.bit.ly/3abu7OI | Peruvian market research and public opinion company (2016), www.bit.ly/3fKVAru | Daily newspapers of Perú, www.bit.ly/3fKHFB | Daily newspapers of Ecuador, www.bit.ly/2CfIsO7 | Foundation of Freedom of the Press (FLIP), www.bit.ly/3gIT3zu



Santa Rosa, Perú | Television brings images of the world created from within the capital cities to communities in the rainforest.

Throughout the region the predominance of frequencies owned by the private sector with commercial interests restricts open spaces for debate and balanced information. In the case of Colombia, another factor is the strong presence of military broadcasters, the result of communicational strategies developed in the context of armed conflict. In all six Amazonian departments of the country, the police and military broadcasters are the ones with the greatest range. All of this limits the participation and representation of civil society in the media.

With regard to other media outlets, the study showed that there are very few local television channels, Internet platforms with local content, or printed newspapers. In Colombia, for example, there are 18 Internet news sites operating from the six Amazonian departments, and 11 newspapers with a limited range and a mainly urban presence. In addition, there are 26 TV channels. The Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP) states that the Colombian Amazon is one of the regions of the country with the highest number of “silent areas,” a term used to refer to localities without any local news channels²⁵. In the Colombian Department of Amazonas, 47 percent of the population lives in silent areas, and in the Department of Putumayo, this situation affects 70 percent of the population.

There are also media sources from outside the Amazon that have specialized in providing in-depth information about the region and its social and environmental issues. One example that stands out is InfoAmazonia²⁶, a Brazilian platform dedicated to reporting the threats affecting the nine countries of the region based on georeferenced maps. Another example is Mongabay, a news website based in the USA that focuses on conservation and environmental sciences and frequently co-

vers problems affecting the Amazon basin²⁷. However, in the Amazon there are also traditional forms of communication different from those in the West that are intrinsic to the relationship between the inhabitants and their environment. In general, these forms are ritualistic in nature: dances; music; the use of traditional instruments such as the maguaré, which can be used to call others to meetings and can be heard at a distance of up to 20 km; sounds; storytelling; the use of sacred plants such as tobacco, yagé, coca leaves, or pumayuyo, to mention a few, that enable communication between humans, plants, animals, and the spirits of the rainforest. All of these communication practices are steeped in a tradition of knowledge that is connected with nature and forms part of the complexity and cultural wealth of the region. In places where radio technology is not feasible because of the distances involved and the difficulty and cost of maintaining the equipment and frequencies, traditional forms of communication are necessary.

“Dance is a complex communication system tied to relationships in the ecosystem, the treatment of diseases, the sowing and harvesting of crops.

Selnich Vivas, specialist in indigenous communication, University of Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia

In some towns, local information is broadcast through amplified speakers in public spaces, a simple technological solution in places where maintaining radio equipment and frequencies is too expensive²⁸. In Puerto Nariño, Colombia for example, an initiative broadcasting these speakers help to compensate for the lack of a local radio station. In addition, communication in these communities also occurs through a wide range of traditional meetings such as those for festivities, assemblies, or community work. Communities also organize at different levels to share information via the river, from mouth-to-mouth, from the communities in the rainforest to the leaders in the cities carrying out advocacy work, and from the latter back to the communities. As we see, the oral tradition still plays a major role.

Each of the hundreds of peoples that inhabit the Amazon ecosystem has its own rituals and forms of communication in its native languages. In many cases these forms of communication connect distant peoples through “sabedores”²⁹, mutual visits, and participation in traditional festivities and rituals.

²⁵ FLIP (2019), Information maps, www.bit.ly/3djHDQ6

²⁶ InfoAmazonia, www.infoamazonia.org

²⁷ Mongabay, www.mongabay.com

²⁸ In Puerto Nariño in Colombia, for example, there is a broadcasting initiative that uses loudspeakers to make up for the lack of a local radio station.

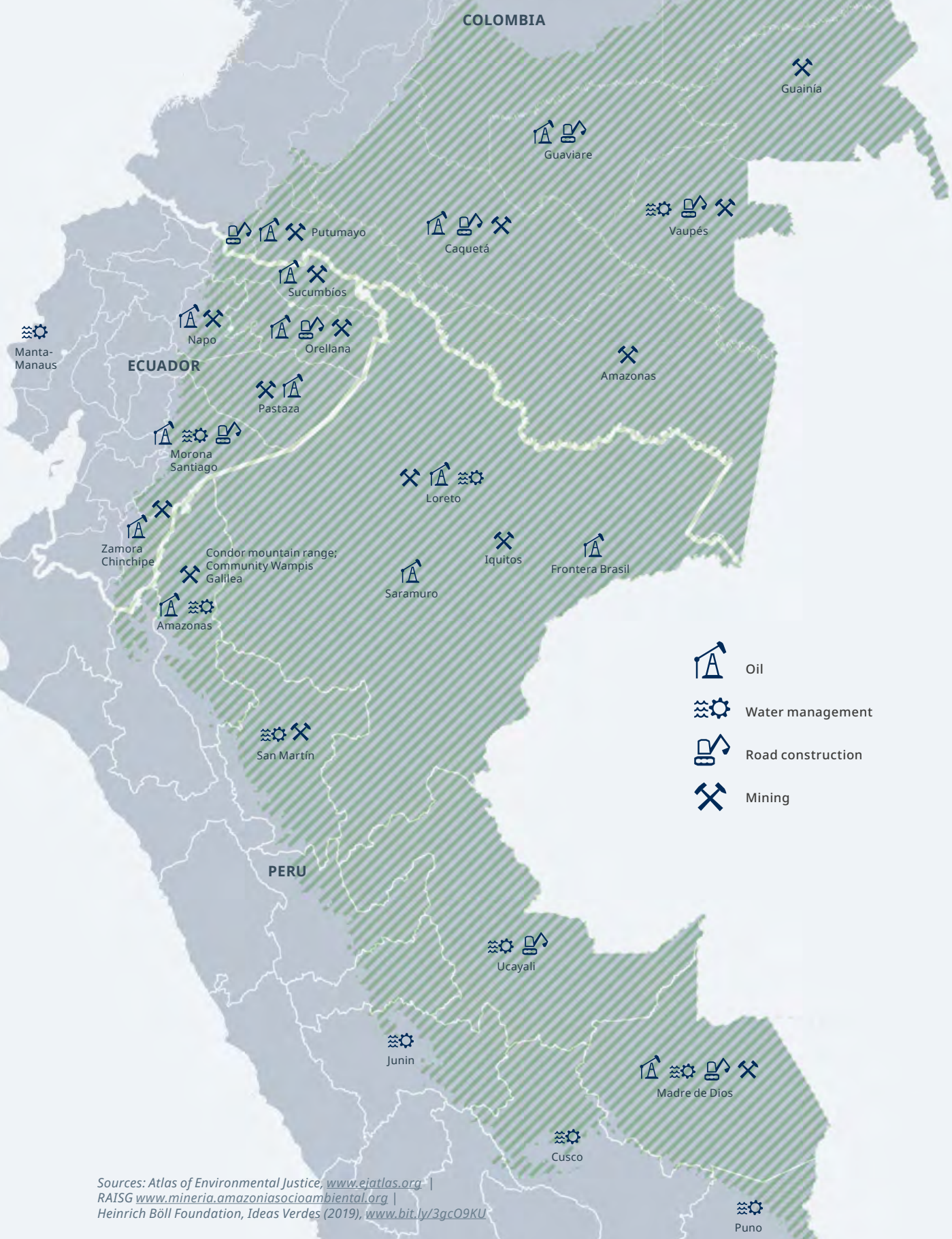
²⁹ “Sabedores” or “wise people” are traditional authorities responsible for preserving ancestral knowledge.



Cerro Azul, Guaviare, Colombia | Representations of the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples have existed in the Amazon for a very long time. Some of these prehistoric paintings are estimated to be more than 10,000 years old.

3. Social and environmental conflicts

Infrastructure projects and natural resource extraction



Sources: Atlas of Environmental Justice, www.ejatlas.org | RAISG www.mineria.amazoniasocioambiental.org | Heinrich Böll Foundation, Ideas Verdes (2019), www.bit.ly/3gcO9KU

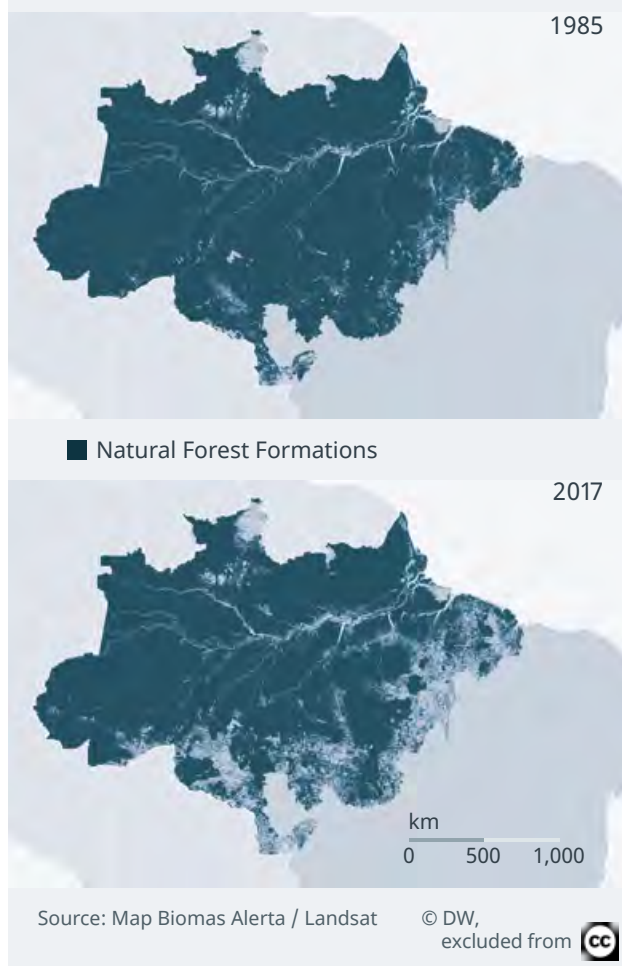
The damage that the Amazonian ecosystems have suffered and continue to suffer underscores the urgent need for communication within and from the region³⁰. In the Amazon rainforest, a wide range of agendas and interests come together and generate innumerable social and environmental conflicts that must be made visible in order to be discussed, analyzed, and combated through the informed participation of local communities. The fact of the matter is that many of the different development plans carried out by the governments for the Amazon region are mutually exclusive: extractivism, conservation efforts, sustainable consumption projects, the building of infrastructure, investment plans — all of these require analysis, context, dissemination, and confrontation.

The most visible and discussed conflict in the Amazon is deforestation, which is closely tied to factors such as crop and animal farming, the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, and mining. These are compounded by migration and the lack of opportunities affecting local populations and consequently the environment, as communities are pressured to work in extractive industries.

In Colombia, according to official statistics, deforestation decreased significantly in 2019 compared to the previous year (in the last trimester of 2019 it decreased by around 50 percent compared to the same period in 2018). However, according to data from the Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development, which monitors the rainforest with the support of organizations such as USAID and the Rainforest Foundation Norway³¹, after the first five months of 2020 the loss of rainforest had already surpassed the amount lost in the entire previous year. This means that by the end of May 2020, more than 750 km² of rainforest had been destroyed, mainly to be used for cattle farming and illegal plantations in the departments of Caquetá and Guaviare. In addition to the expansion of agricultural and cattle farming industries, in Colombia there is an additional problem caused by the peace treaty between the state and the FARC guerrillas in 2016: Many hectares that had been occupied by the guerrilla groups up to that point were left unprotected after the demobilization of combatants, because the state has not had the institutional capacity to occupy them and guarantee their conservation.

For its part, since 2001 Peru has registered one of the highest rates of loss of Andean-Amazonian rainforest³² in the basin. The highest levels of deforestation have been registered in the regions of Ucayali and Huanuco in the center of the country, mainly due to cattle farming and large-scale agriculture.

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is the largest in the entire region



In Ecuador, the products posing the greatest threat to the rainforest are palm oil, coffee, cocoa, sugarcane, and dairy products. Palm oil from the Amazon comprises 13 percent of national production, and Ecuador is the sixth largest producer worldwide. From 2001 to 2018, 4,290 km² of rainforest were deforested in the country, a situation which reached its peak in 2017 with a total of 630 km² destroyed. Community leaders in the region have denounced the “lack of incentives to conserve the rainforest, leading to dozens of peasants selling their land to palm oil producers³³.”

³⁰ Atlas of Environmental Justice (s.f.), www.ejatlas.org

³¹ Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development (FCDS). (2020) Colombian Amazon Deforestation Report 2020. www.bit.ly/2BqbV6w

³² Piotrowsky, Matt; Ortiz, Enrique. (2019) “Nearing the tipping point. Drivers of Deforestation in the Amazon Region.”, Inter- American Dialog, www.bit.ly/3dq6PVu

³³ Aguilar, Daniela. (2016) “Palma africana: una amenaza para la Amazonia de Ecuador.”, Mongabay., www.bit.ly/3HjdhtS



Deforestation of the Amazon seen by satellite, showing the typical fish-bone pattern.

German cooperation projects support environmental protection in the Amazon, both through consultancy at a government level and projects for local capacity-building. The German agency for technical cooperation GIZ has carried out projects with communities in the three countries in this study. In Peru, for example, it has strengthened co-management structures between indigenous communities and government entities for the conservation of biodiversity and has contributed to the creation of plans for rainforest management³⁴. In Ecuador, the Program for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Natural Heritage supports environmental work in the country aimed at the protection and sustainable use of the Amazon region's biodiversity³⁵. In Colombia, it has contributed to the creation of a digital information platform on the Amazon, where it is possible to find radio programs, virtual forums, and documents related to environmental protection in the Amazon³⁶.

However, deforestation is not the sole problem and a series of other threats are converging on the Amazon. In addition to oil extraction and mining, both of which pollute water and soil, there is the problem of infrastructure projects for which land must be cleared, as well as illegal drug plantations that cause soil degradation, mainly in Colombia and Peru.

“ Here everybody is growing coca, because it's the only thing that puts food on the table.

Female social leader in Putumayo, Colombia

The Brazilian climatologist Antonio Donato Nobre has observed that, even if not all the vegetation is destroyed, different forms of environmental degradation, such as the burning of forest areas or the building of roads, are reducing the ability of the rainforest to regulate the local climate and provide a buffer against strong winds, among other problems. In addition, researcher and tropical rainforest expert Erika Berenguer, from the University of Oxford, UK, states that, “each hectare deforested means part of the ecosystem ceases to function, and this affects the rest”³⁷.

In the following section we provide a more detailed look at some of the main socioenvironmental conflicts affecting the Amazon region.

3.1 Oil: The polluted rainforest

Oil extraction is one of the main sources of socioenvironmental conflict in the region. In the three countries, the communities that live in and near areas where oil is extracted suffer from the effects of soil and water pollution as a result of this ever-expanding activity.

Throughout the Amazon, indigenous peoples have taken up arms in the political and media struggle as guardians of the rainforest faced with fossil fuel extraction projects in territories considered sacred and with high biodiversity. In Saramuro, Peru, for example local inhabitants have fought Petroperu due to the environmental impact of its oil extraction activities. In addition, the indigenous leaders of the communities inhabiting the basins of five tributaries of the Amazon River (Pastaza, Corrientes, Marañón, Tigre, and Chambira) have denounced oil spills polluting the region and demanded support for alternative development projects³⁸.

There are also ongoing conflicts due to oil spills with Petroperu and Oxy in Loreto, in Achuar territory³⁹, where the community has demanded that the environmental damage be remedied. In Madre de Dios, there is a conflict between the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve and Hunt Oil and Repsol over an oil project affecting 402,000 hectares in an area where six rivers have their source. The community denounces the fact that there was no consultation process before the government granted the company authorization to access the area.

“ When the oil companies came more than 40 years ago they caused a lot of damage: cultural damage, because it divided the communities; and environmental damage, because it destroyed the water, the soil, and the air. Today we have high cancer rates because the whole territory is contaminated.

Celso Moreta, leader and communicator of the Shuar people in Sucumbíos, Ecuador

In Ecuador there are oil-related conflicts in Pastaza, Morona Santiago, Zamora Chinchipe, and Napo. Another emblematic case is the natural park and biosphere reserve Yasuní, located between the provinces of Pastaza and Orellana. This park received global attention after ex-president Rafael Correa (2007-2017) proposed leaving the oil underground if the countries belonging to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change paid the South American country economic compensation. An agreement was not reached and Ecuador green-lit the exploitation of the Yasuní reserves. There are also conflicts in Orellana and Sucumbíos due to pollution caused by Petroecuador. Two other companies that have been active in these provinces are Dayuma Oil and Chevron-Texaco, accused of multiple cases of environmental damage. Local communities accuse the major media outlets of remaining silent on these topics. This vacuum can be filled by alternative and community media. Radio Sucumbíos, one of the region's community broadcasters, regularly reports on these conflicts.



Bagua Province, Amazonas, Peru | Oil spill from a Petroperú pipeline in the Chiriaco River in 2016. Three thousand barrels of crude oil contaminated the waters and crops of indigenous communities.

In Colombia, more than 90 percent of the oil exploration and extraction projects are located in the Amazonian departments of Caquetá and Putumayo. The communities there have denounced the pollution of both water and soil.

3.2 Mining: Unfettered extractivism

Mining has created problems in all three countries due to the pollution caused by the use of heavy metals such as mercury, arsenic, or lead, and because it is driving deforestation. The journalistic project “Amazonia Saqueada”⁴⁰ (“plundered Amazon”) reports 2,312 illegal mining sites in the region and 245 non-authorized areas where gold, diamonds, and coltan are extracted.

“Oil has polluted our rivers. Before we could fish in our rivers; you could see the fish. Today the fish have mutations and are contaminated, here very close to the Marañón River.

Leonardo Tello, community reporter for Ucamara radio, Iquitos, Peru

In Ecuador, illegal mining is especially rampant in the provinces of Sucumbíos and Orellana. In the latter, the Mining Regulation and Control Agency (Arcom), has had to confiscate illegal machinery on various occasions⁴¹.

³⁴ www.giz.de/en/worldwide/31266.html

³⁵ www.giz.de/en/downloads/Factsheet%20GIZ%20Patrimonio%20Natural%20ES.pdf

³⁶ www.pidamazonia.com

³⁷ Costa, Camilla. (2020) “La gran mentira verde: cómo la pérdida del Amazonas va mucho más allá de la deforestación.” BBC Mundo. www.bbc.in/312vf4C

³⁸ García, Francesca. (2019) “Loreto: ¿qué está ocurriendo en la Estación 1 de Petro-Perú?”, www.bit.ly/37N1cPC

³⁹ Federation of the Achuar Nationality of Peru (FENAP). (2018) “Petroperú paga millón y medio a empresa para ingresar con engaños al territorio achuar.”, www.bit.ly/3eniaGY

⁴⁰ RAISG. (s.f.) “Amazonia saqueada.”, www.mineria.amazoniasocioambiental.org

⁴¹ Mining Regulation and Control Agency (s.f.) “Duro golpe a la minería ilegal en Sucumbíos y Esmeraldas.”, www.bit.ly/2YeRW3I | y Campaña, Marieta. (2020) “Tres campamentos de minería ilegal, destruidos en Sucumbíos.” Expreso, www.bit.ly/2YW979k



La Pampa, Madre Dios, Peru | Mining contaminates the rivers of the Amazon with heavy metals, such as mercury and arsenic.

In Peru, illegal gold-mining activities have been recorded in Madre de Dios, affecting the Tres Islas native community and the Tambopata national reserve, among others.

In Colombia the problem mainly affects the departments of Guainía, Amazonas, and Vaupés, where coltan, gold, and construction materials such as sand and gravel are illegally extracted.

3.3 Water conflicts: Who do the rivers belong to?

Another cause of conflict in the region are megaprojects like hydroelectric dams and waterways. These affect the water currents and cause serious damage to ecosystems.

One example in Peru is the controversial Ucayali “Amazon waterway”, located between Loreto, Ucayali, Amazonas, and San Martín. This project is aimed at improving river transport along a 2,687 km stretch in the Peruvian Amazon and connecting the departments of Piura and Loreto. Multiple indigenous organizations are against this project because it will involve dredging the river bed, which would cause “a modification and alteration of the habitats and dynamics of the rivers and an increase in their turbidity, with possible consequences for fishing⁴².”

In Ecuador, the Manta-Manaus corridor was a source of conflict. This hub was intended to bring together different for-

ms of transport in order to improve access to the Chinese and European markets. The corridor planned to connect the Ecuadorian port of Manta on the Pacific coast with the Brazilian industrial city of Manaus in the heart of the rainforest, with access to the Atlantic through the mouth of the Amazon River in Belem. This initiative, that was criticized for being an “expansion of the oil border⁴³”, never materialized.

With regard to hydroelectric dams, in Loreto, Peru a series of small hydroelectric dams have been built on the Marañón River, causing conflict due to the clearing of rainforest for the project and the flooding of areas of rainforest next to the river⁴⁴. Moreover, the new infrastructure has a negative effect on the ecosystems downstream. In Junín, the Ashaninka⁴⁵ people also opposed the building of dams in the valley of the rivers Ene and Tambo, because the project would entail flooding indigenous lands and could damage the currents, consequently endangering their ability to fish for food⁴⁶.

Although for the time being Colombia’s Amazonian rivers are free of hydroelectric dams, the previously-described projects in neighboring countries also have an impact on Colombian ecosystems and biodiversity. They disrupt the migration routes of fish and therefore have a negative impact on fishing activities, among other effects. However, there is a project in Colombia to improve the navigability of the Vaupés River that is suspected of merely responding to extractivist interests and not those of the inhabitants of the region.

3.4 Roads: Intrusion into the rainforest

A large number of roads continue to be built into the rainforest to transport products extracted there to the interior of these countries. Many of them are built illegally without the corresponding permits and cause deforestation. In Colombia, for example, according to a report by the Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development (FCDS), the building of illegal roads caused the deforestation of 75,000 hectares of Amazonian rainforest in the first five months of 2020 alone⁴⁷.

In this country multiple illegal roads have been built for trafficking illegal products (drugs, weapons, ore, wood) mainly in the northwestern Amazon region. After the signing of the peace treaty with the FARC it was revealed that the guerrilla group had built 490 km of roads between the Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park, the Tinigua National Natural Park and the Nukak National Natural Reserve⁴⁸. In addition, between the departments of Guaviare and Vaupés a multimodal (involving different means of transport) project to connect Calamar (Guaviare) with Mitú (Vaupés) and Yavaraté (Brazil) is currently in a prefeasibility stage⁴⁹.

In Ecuador, multiple illegal roads have been built in the province of Morona Santiago, and tertiary roads have been built in the Yasuní Park for oil extraction. Another source of controversy has been the Via Auca road built by the Texaco oil company a decade ago, which has opened up the doors to environmental pollution caused by this extractive industry. In addition, the massive arrival of new settlers not only changed the social dynamics in the area, but also accelerate deforestation⁵⁰.

In Peru there are multiple conflicts due to illegal roads built in the Amazon. However, the roads that have been built legally are not exempt from controversy either. This is the case of the impact produced by the building of the road between Purús and Iñapari, and the Southern Interoceanic Highway built in Madre de Dios. The latter was first conceived in 1980

as part of the IIRSA project to connect Peru and Brazil⁵¹. It has also been the subject of intense public scrutiny due to the excessive construction costs. One of the companies involved in the project was Odebrecht, which is currently under investigation for the payment of bribes to authorities in various countries.

3.5 Other conflicts

Other issues raised by local communities are, for example, vulnerability to undesired contact in the case of non-contacted communities, and biopiracy: the illegal, irregular, and/or unequal use of biological resources and their derivatives.

In addition, there are also a series of cross-border conflicts in the region. The border areas between the neighboring countries of Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil are witness to social conflicts that often have a negative effect on the environment. Above all, border areas are used by organized criminal groups carrying out different types of illegal trafficking: wood, drugs, fuel, minerals, and people. In addition, the borders have served to expand the extractivist model in the Amazon and are often subject to conflicts due to the social impact of migrations, for example the migration of Venezuelans in recent years, or the case of populations displaced by violence. The presence of armed Colombian groups is also felt on the borders with Ecuador and Peru.

All of these conflicts are marked by cultural differences, and the different perceptions and worldviews that inhabit the Amazon. That is why it is so important to transmit information to and from the interior of the region, and at the same time to communicate with the outside world. However, it is necessary to take into account that although media outlets can be used to denounce, mobilize, and create awareness, they can also be a part of the problem when they are used to misinform, confuse, and divide. In such complex contexts, the quality of information is therefore crucial. Both journalists and activists

⁴² Semana. (2019) "Hidrovia amazónica, una nueva amenaza para el planeta.", www.bit.ly/30W50wR

⁴³ Wilson, Japhy y Bayón, Manuel. (2016) "Fantasías interoceánicas y lo real del capital: El corredor Manta-Manaos en Ecuador." Ecología política, www.bit.ly/2ASp8oT

⁴⁴ SPDA actualidad ambiental (2018). "Hidroeléctricas en la cuenca del Marañón: ¿cuáles son los riesgos de iniciar su funcionamiento?" www.bit.ly/2CpNK8Y

⁴⁵ International Rivers. (2009) "Pronunciamento de los Ashaninka del río Ene sobre la hidroeléctrica de Pakitzapango.", www.bit.ly/30ZcgbD

⁴⁶ SERVINDI. (2009) "Perú: Proyecto hidroeléctrico Paquitzapango amenaza a pueblos indígenas de selva central.", www.servindi.org/actualidad/7345

⁴⁷ Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development. (2020) "Un depredador que marcha por la selva amazónica en medio de la pandemia.", www.fcds.org.co

⁴⁸ El Espectador. (2017) "Las Farc habrían construido más vías que Odebrecht y los Nule juntos.", www.bit.ly/30ZeHud

⁴⁹ Ministry of Transport. (2019) "Gobierno Nacional ratifica su compromiso para conectar la despensa agrícola del país con inversiones en modo carretero y fluvial.", www.bit.ly/2V1wGfW

⁵⁰ Asar, Rodolfo. (2019) "Vía Auca Orellana: La selva agoniza en los confines del Ecuador." La Hora, www.bit.ly/2YQVJDv

⁵¹ Rioja, Guillermo. (2010) "Los impactos de la carretera interoceánica en la Amazonia sudoccidental." Universidad Amazónica de Pando. www.bit.ly/2AW0TGe



Sinangoe, Sucumbíos, Ecuador | The opening of roads in the Amazon is accompanied by deforestation. In the image the forest is recovering lost space, after a river flood destroyed the road.

working in the region have received threats for trying to denounce the problems that exist there⁵².

The project “Tierra de Resistentes” (“Land of Resistant”)⁵³, led by Colombian investigative journalist network Consejo de Redacción (CdR), has documented the threats made against human rights activists in the Amazon basin. The project provided evidence that those who are trying to defend the Amazon, mainly community leaders of ethnic minorities, are the target of attacks and criminal interests⁵⁴.

3.6 Development plans

As the mentioned examples demonstrate, the visions of development for the Amazon conceived in the capital cities, in government offices and big companies, on many occasions clash with the needs of the local communities that inhabit the region.

In Peru, for example, the program “Visión de Futuro” of the National Center for Strategic Planning (CEPLAN⁵⁵) seeks to turn the Amazon into a strategic region for the country’s development through oil projects. As part of this program, until May 2020 permits were granted for 64 fossil-fuel lots in the region, making up 72 percent of the Peruvian Amazon.

In Colombia, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, mayors, governors, and directors of autonomous regional corporations signed an agreement to reduce defo-

restation in the Amazon. This “Visión Amazonia” pact, signed in January 2020, follows the conservation approach of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and seeks to reduce the level of deforestation to zero by 2030⁵⁶. The pact seeks to coordinate the actions of national, local, and environmental authorities in the fight against deforestation⁵⁷. However, in spite of this commitment, the appropriation of lands for uses other than conservation continues to expand in the region (see the section on Colombia in chapter 4).

In Ecuador the government has implemented many development programs in the Amazon. Among them is the project “Managing Landscapes with Multiple Uses and a High Conservation Value for the Sustainable Development of the Ecuadorian Amazon Region” (2016) led by the Ministry of the Environment and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The initiative seeks to bring together national efforts to reduce greenhouse gases with the country’s agendas and productive sector policies for reducing deforestation and promoting a sustainable use of natural resources⁵⁸. There is also the “Plan Integral para la Amazonia” (“Integral Plan for the Amazon”) (2016)⁵⁹ that proposes models for generating public policies based on sustainable development, taking into account the perspective of indigenous communities. This proposal also seeks to consolidate regional integration of the countries in the Amazon basin by channeling efforts through multilateral bodies, and to articulate plans to protect shared ecosystems. Furthermore, there is the Productive Transformation Agenda—Sustainable Agro-productive Reconversion in the Ecuadorian Amazon⁶⁰, a project led since 2015 by the



Puyo, Ecuador | Members of the indigenous Waorani Nation celebrate after a court granted their request to stop a bidding process for the search for oil on their ancestral land.

National Secretariat for Planning and Development of Ecuador that seeks to implement integral planning systems for transforming grasslands for crop diversification and reforestation. According to the official documents, the project will be applied over 3000 km² in the six Ecuadorian Amazon provinces: Sucumbíos, Orellana, Napo, Pastaza, Morona Santiago, and Zamora Chinchipe. All of these projects, at least on paper, claim to take into account the principles of “buen vivir”, an indigenous concept that refers to living a full life, in harmony and balance with nature.

⁵² MTZ, Cesar. (2018) “Tres periodistas de Putumayo denuncian amenazas.” InfoAmazonia, www.bit.ly/30YtRjr

⁵³ Carried out with the support of DW Akademie and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

⁵⁴ Tierra de resistentes. (2020), www.tierraderesistentes.com

⁵⁵ National Center for Strategic Planning (CEPLAN) (s.f.) “Visión del Perú al 2050.”, www.ceplan.gob.pe/visionperu2050

⁵⁶ Visión Amazonia. (s.f.), www.visionamazonia.minambiente.gov.co

⁵⁷ Visión Amazonia. (2020) “Autoridades locales firman gran pacto por deforestación cero.”, www.bit.ly/3ejSrPN

⁵⁸ National Biodiversity Institute. (2019) “Programa Integral Amazónico de Conservación de Bosques y Producción Sostenible.”, www.bit.ly/2NfN1cE

⁵⁹ National Secretariat for Planning and Development. (2016) “Plan Integral para la Amazonia.”,

www.extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/ecu166986anx.pdf

⁶⁰ Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. (s.f.) “Agenda de Transformación Productiva Amazónica Reconversión Agroproductiva Sostenible en la Amazonia Ecuatoriana.”, www.bit.ly/2YikhGz

4. A look at some of the communities of the Amazon

Participating communities



The coca leaf: a fundamental part of Amazonian cultures



For the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, the coca plant is sacred. The leaves are first toasted and then ground in a mortar. The resulting powder is then chewed with an extract of tobacco and other plants. Coca and tobacco are used in rituals and in daily life for healing and communicating with the spirits of nature. The exploitation of coca to produce cocaine for global markets is causing huge environmental and cultural damage in the Amazon.

Despite significant deficiencies in the communications infrastructure compared to other regions, and the high level of conflict in the region, the availability of new communication technologies opens up perspectives for diverse communication strategies in Amazon territories. Some of them can be focused on defending the environment, others on reinforcing cultural identity. Whichever the case, technologies that enter the region from the outside must be adapted to the possibilities and needs of the inhabitants of the Amazon rainforest.

In this section we will take a closer look at Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, in order to talk more concretely about the possibilities and limitations for the communities of the Amazon region to exercise their right to information and freedom of expression. This chapter is based on information obtained through the fieldwork of three researchers: Clara Robayo (Ecuador), Franklin Cornejo Urbina (Peru), and María Clara Valencia (Colombia). They engaged in dialogue with a total of 19 communities in the three countries and spoke with local community reporters, and environmental activists. Workshops, focus groups, and individual interviews were organized. The main criterion for selecting the communities was for them to have had some experience with community media.

In Ecuador, six Amazonian communities were visited, three of them in the province of Sucumbíos (Sinangoe, Yamanunca and Atari), two in Napo (Amupakin and Rukullakta, both in the Archidona canton), and the third was the Shuar Arutam people in the province of Morona Santiago.

In Peru the communities studied were: Nauta, the capital of the province of Loreto in the region of the same name; Puerto Maldonado, the capital of the region Madre de Dios; and Pucallpa, the capital of Ucayali.

In Colombia, six workshops were carried out with members of indigenous and settler-peasant communities, three of them in the department of Putumayo and three in Amazonas. In Putumayo, the participants came from the communities of Puerto Leguizamo, Puerto Asís, Puerto Caicedo, Orito, San Miguel, and Valle del Guamuez. In Amazonas, work was carried out with people from the capital, Leticia, and from various neighboring communities.

The field studies focused on the communication strategies that the communities had created to face the threats to their natural environments and to their cultural identity. This enabled the identification of commonalities in the three countries. One generalized problem is the growing extractivism in the region; be it illegal logging activities, pollution caused by oil extraction and mining, or illegal plantations.

Faced with these threats, the main concern in all the communities visited was to defend their territory and preserve their own culture. One common characteristic of the different indigenous communities is their close relationship with the natural environment, expressed through rituals and songs that communicate directly with nature. These traditional forms of communication, as well as the use of indigenous languages instead of Spanish, are important resistance strategies when confronted by an external culture that is perceived as aggressive and dominant.

At the present time, many indigenous communication initiatives combine aspects of their traditional cultures with the tools of modern electronic media, mainly radio and Internet. Despite huge infrastructure gaps, digital networks are increasingly present in the rainforest and offer new alternatives for communication that are especially attractive for young people.



4.1 Colombia

A central problem in the Colombian Amazon region is the armed conflict that is closely tied to the exploitation of natural resources. Illegal crops, different monocultures (including palm oil and, more recently, eucalyptus), cattle farming, mining, and oil extraction are all threatening—in an increasingly violent way—the Colombian Amazon ecosystems. Many of these economic activities entail the appropriation of large swaths of land by illegal armed groups, as well as the forced displacement of communities.

It was expected that the signing of a peace agreement between the State and the FARC guerrillas in 2016 would reduce armed clashes and murders in a country suffering from over 50 years of armed conflict, and would lead to a better regulation of land ownership, which is largely the origin of the problem. However, these expectations were not met. Although the treaty put an end to armed clashes between the FARC and the Colombian army, the threats to and murders of social leaders, many of them environmental activists, have increased. In the first three months of 2020 alone, 47 social leaders were murdered in the country (compared to 25 in the first trimester of 2019), six of them in the Amazonian Department of Putumayo⁶¹. In such a violent context, it is extremely difficult for communities to unite and better defend their territories.

In Putumayo, which is considered one of the most violent departments in the country, fear has silenced the population. Expressing opinions about the conflict means exposing oneself to the violence of armed groups. Often these groups act anonymously, making it difficult to know the origin of individual threats. Violence can come from dissident factions of the FARC who refused to lay down their weapons, other guerrilla groups that are still active such as ELN, or paramilitary groups in the service of large landowners or organized crime. The inhabitants of the Colombian Amazon often use the general term “new actors” to refer to these groups.

“As long as the government has vested interests, and the world sees the Amazon as a business, it won’t be possible to protect it.

Anonymous social leader in Putumayo

In many places, violence stops local communities from exploring their rainforest environment and learning about the diversity that surrounds them. In Putumayo, for example, there are certain no-go areas for the community. However, the violence is constantly shifting and the actors are hard to loca-

⁶¹ Data published by the human rights organization “Somos Defensores”, www.somosdefensores.org/boletines-trimestrales1



© DW/M. Kopp

Puerto Nariño, Colombia | The use of technology is becoming increasingly important in the region. Social media and digital messaging serve to communicate immediate events among people with access to the Internet. The information is then relayed by word of mouth.

te—threats can appear in different places on different days. Fear stops communities organizing to defend their territories and build communication processes.

“You can’t think about the environment when they’re killing people and throwing them into the river.

Testimony of an anonymous community reporter in Putumayo

The result is a dismantling of social structures, which jeopardizes the transmission of ancestral knowledge to new generations. In the Amazon, the well-known saying, “when an elder dies, a library is lost forever” is a palpable reality. According to renowned French anthropologist Philippe Descola, an adult hunter can tell hundreds of different birds apart, imitate their songs, and describe their habits. He does not kill more animals than are necessary for the survival of the family group, and therefore helps to maintain an ecological balance⁶². Western science has only recently begun to understand the complexity of the rainforest ecosystems.

In Putumayo, the expansion of illegal mining and oil extraction activities, and of illegal plantations, is causing new diseases because of the water pollution. The mota fish, which was one of the most eaten species in the region, can no longer be eaten due to its high mercury content. An indigenous leader in one of the workshops stated, “We Kichwa live off fish because we live next to rivers. This is poisoning us. There are diseases like hydrocephalus that are increasing exponentially.”

The pressure on the rainforest from Western lifestyles is increasing and leading to changes in behavior that include

communication. Now it is normal to see communal houses, traditionally places for dancing and storytelling, furnished with satellite antennas and televisions. Instead of the stories of their elders, people listen to actors in soap operas made in the capital. Due to a lack of economic alternatives, the diesel needed for power generation, as well as the satellite and phone services, can only be paid for by extracting more resources from the forest and rivers.

In the Department of Amazonas, the context of violence is different from Putumayo. Amazonas is known as the “department of peace.” However, the lack of job opportunities is forcing many young people into work on illegal plantations, mainly coca plantations, which is bringing new problems to the region. Coca plantations not only cause deforestation but also water and soil pollution due to the use of chemicals. In addition, local workers are often not paid in money, but in freebase cocaine, a pre-product of powder cocaine, which they later sell in their communities. This creates deep-rooted conflicts in a culture that traditionally values the coca leaf as sacred.

In the Department of Amazonas in Colombia there are no community broadcasters that provide information on these problems. There are only commercial broadcasters and those of the security forces. In addition, there are six newspapers and two news websites that give out information on local topics, but these are located in the department capital of Leticia and do not reach the more isolated communities.

The general perception of the participants in the workshops conducted in this research project is that the media do not represent them, and are not transmitting information about what is happening in the territories or shedding light on problems such as corruption or increased deforestation. “There

are few journalists, and there are many radio hosts that stoke up tensions” explained one of the participants.

However, a series of media projects are also seeking to give increased visibility to the relationship between the rainforest and its inhabitants. In Leticia, some indigenous communities are working with professors from the National University⁶³ to develop a digital application for disseminating the translations of ancestral songs. For communities participating in this process, it is an opportunity to reflect on their culture and native language. In a community of the Bora ethnic group near Leticia, a bird-watching app is being developed in the Bora language. It is an exercise to teach children about the wonders of their environmental heritage, and at the same time to strengthen their language, as well as their skills in the use of new technologies.

In addition to projects that seek to apply new technologies to the cultural context of the Amazon, the political organizations of ethnic groups are interested in their use for political communication and the building of leadership skills. For example, the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC) has founded a school of political communication. Together with other indigenous organizations and traditional authorities in Colombia, OPIAC has created a public policy of indigenous communication for the country. This focuses on their own forms of communication, with nature, the environment, and spirituality. “We indigenous peoples need to be in permanent communication with nature. That is the main difference in this regard between us and the West. That is why we need guarantees for the protection of and access to special spaces in our territory: spaces where we practice communicative exercises and rituals, which are crucial for the survival of our people and our culture. Cases of disturbance, disrespect, pillaging, displacement, and appropriation of sacred indigenous sites are rampant⁶⁴.”

Until recently, it was normal for indigenous reporters to work in non-indigenous media, producing news for their communities that were occasionally in their native language. Today, the political, cultural, and educational organizations of the different ethnic groups see the need to create their own media sources, and emphasize the importance of autonomous communication processes. This has led to the creation of a series of training initiatives, such as the Mobile School for Indigenous Communication led by Nelly Kuiru of the Murui Muina people, which

promotes training processes and has created various collectives of young media producers throughout the Department of Amazonas⁶⁵. The Colombian State, although it has been open to dialogue with indigenous organizations on communication policies, has not been very proactive in this area, despite its importance for the democratic participation of a population that has traditionally been excluded. However, the Ministry of Culture supports the training of indigenous community media producers through courses, media advisory services, and scholarships for the production of content⁶⁶.

On the other hand, the colonist-peasant communities have initiatives such as theater collectives, sporting events, training schools, communal action boards, associations, and other groups. These activities connect different generations and promote community development. These activities are very important in a region where Internet access is severely limited. One example is the Cantoyaco (“song of the water”) initiative based in Puerto Caicedo, 60 km south of Mocoa, the capital of the department of Putumayo. Cantoyaco is a network of community broadcasters and artistic collectives from different parts of the department. In addition to its radio programs, Cantoyaco organizes fun activities designed to enhance integration as well as training sessions. Its goal is to work towards social and sustainable development, and to “build structures for living together at a very delicate time in the history of Colombian conflict⁶⁷.”



⁶² Descola’s most important work, “Beyond Nature and Culture” (Buenos Aires, 2012), is the result of decades of studying the Achuar people in Ecuador.

⁶³ Angarita, Emilio; Vento, Roberto; José, Javier; Manduca, Marcelino, Ramos, Hugo. (2010) “Cantos del ritual de la pelazón tikuna.” Universidad Nacional, www.bit.ly/3ekyKHr

⁶⁴ Opiac (2016), “Política pública de comunicación indígena.”, www.opiac.org.co/comunicacion-indigena

⁶⁵ Ministry of culture (2017), “Escuelas y procesos de formación en comunicación indígena.”, www.bit.ly/3fFRtX

⁶⁶ Management Report, Directorate of Communications, Ministry of Culture (2018), www.bit.ly/2P5r5Sh

⁶⁷ Cantoyaco, www.radioscomunitariasdelputumayo.blogspot.com



4.2 Ecuador

In Ecuador's Amazonian region, as in the greater Amazon, radio is still the most important means of communication. The community broadcaster Radio Sucumbíos, for example, in Nueva Loja, the capital of Sucumbíos on the border with Colombia in the north of the country, has been functioning since 1992. Its signal covers a large part of the province with its 250,000 inhabitants. Founded by Catholic priests who were followers of liberation theology, the radio is committed both to evangelizing and spreading news and information on the matters that affect the communities of this Amazonian province. However, although the radio is broadcast in a region where six different languages are spoken, the programs of Radio Sucumbíos are broadcast solely in Spanish and Kichwa.

The radio's content is produced in constant feedback with the information provided by its listeners. A recurring topic is the environmental impact of the oil companies operating in the province. For community activists, Radio Sucumbíos is a very important medium because when there are consultation meetings with the oil companies, the radio is invited to report on developments. Moreover, whenever the oil companies fail to fulfill their agreements, the situation is denounced publicly through Radio Sucumbíos.

Recently the broadcaster started to become involved with

digital technologies. Programs are transmitted via live stream on the radio's website and some of its content is shared on social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. This makes it possible for the programs to be heard by people who live outside the region. Together with 35 other community broadcasters in Ecuador, Radio Sucumbíos is a part of the national network CORAPE⁶⁸.

During the government of Rafael Correa (2007–2017), Ecuadorian community radios received an important boost thanks to the Organic Communications Law decreed in 2008 and approved via referendum in 2011. This law established that a third of the radio frequencies in the country should be reserved for community broadcasters. However, the law was highly controversial because it also imposed significant restrictions on the private media sector. Its opponents referred to it as the "gag law", and it was amended after the change of government in 2017.

Under Correa, 14 indigenous communities, 10 of which live in the Amazon region, received broadcasting licenses and technical equipment including antennas and transmitters. These measures were part of a government campaign to strengthen the constitutional right of indigenous peoples to free and intercultural communication⁶⁹. However, at the time of this research project, only five of these new indigenous broadcasters in the Amazon were still active. Most of the other community media in the region belong to chur-

ches. In 2020 the government started a tender process for radio frequencies for community broadcasters. However, due to high maintenance costs and lack of financing, most community broadcasters are now in an extremely precarious situation.

Many new communication initiatives are based on digital media. One example is the project of the Cofán people of Sinangoe that inhabits an area of 55,000 hectares (550 km²) in the province of Sucumbíos. Supported by environmental NGOs, this community has designed digital strategies, including the use of drones, to provide information on what is happening in their territory⁷⁰. On a joint website managed together with other indigenous communities, the Kofán denounce the destruction of their environment caused by oil extraction: “Our way of living is changing; the water and forests are becoming polluted by oil extraction. The logging industry is cutting down the forest, and the planting of African palm trees is drying out our wetlands and changing the ecosystems⁷¹.” To monitor their territory, the Kofán use camera drones to identify and denounce illegal mining and logging activities and identify cases of river pollution. They have used the information collected as evidence in a lawsuit against the government for violating their right to prior consultation. In 2018 they achieved a ruling favorable to the community that suspended all mining concessions in the area⁷².

The Shuar Arutam people who live between the rivers Kuankus and Cenepa in the province of Morona Santiago, at the southeastern edge of Ecuador on the Peruvian border, also use drones to defend their territory from oil and hydroelectric companies. The images they obtain are also used in lawsuits and shared on social networks⁷³.

Many of the people interviewed during fieldwork stated that conventional media outlets often create a negative image of indigenous peoples, especially in the context of social protests, leading to racism and discrimination directed against leaders and communities. In response, indigenous organizations have developed strategies for strengthening internal forms of communication between peoples through statements, assemblies, social media, and radio broadcasts in their own languages.

Using drones to defend indigenous territories



© Clara Robayo

The Cofán indigenous people of Sinangoe (Sucumbíos Province), Ecuador, monitors its 550 km² of territory using drones, GPS information, and camera traps. These tools allow them to identify illegal mining and logging activities. The information gathered is then published on the community’s website, social media, and other channels. This has helped them put pressure on the State to take measures to protect their territory.

One communication platform created by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) provides Amazonian groups with information related to the activities of the indigenous movement. The organization comprises 1500 communities belonging to the ethnic groups: Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Waorani, Sapara, Andwa, Shiwiar, Cofán, Siona, Siekopai, and Kijus⁷⁴. One of their communication strategies is the initiative “Lanceros Digitales” (“Digital Lancers”) that brings together community reporters media producers, especially young people. Since its launch in 2017, more than 100 young people have been trained to report on their reality and problems affecting their communities. In order to disseminate this information they use social media such as Facebook and Twitter,

⁶⁸ The other CORAPE (Coordinator of Popular and Educational Community Media of Ecuador) broadcasters in the Amazon are located in the provinces of Zamora Chinchipe (Radio Voz de Zamora), Morona Santiago (Voz del Upano), Napo (Radio Stereo Ideal), and Pastaza (Radio Interoceánica).

⁶⁹ Ministry of Telecommunications. (s.f.) “Nacionalidades indígenas recibieron equipamiento para sus radios.”, www.bit.ly/3jVl7lq

⁷⁰ Basantes, Ana Cristina. (2019) GK. “Confianza en el antejo, no en el ojo.”, www.gk.city/2019/11/05/cofan-de-sinangoe-mineria

⁷¹ Alianza Ceibo, www.alianzaceibo.org/alianza

⁷² Paz, Antonio. (2018) “Ecuador: justicia ordena frenar toda actividad minera en territorio del pueblo indígena Cofán de Sinangoe.” Mongabay, www.bit.ly/3gjeSFG

⁷³ Amazonia socio ambiental. (2019) “Tecnología para cazar delitos: monitores indígenas combaten la ilegalidad.”, www.bit.ly/3hNGH9x

⁷⁴ CONFENIAE, www.confeniae.net



in addition to online radio, which can be heard on the CON-FENIAE website.

It is clear that the digital revolution is transforming communication in the Ecuadorian Amazon. All of the communities visited seek to have their own media in order to defend their rights, denounce the appropriation of their territories, and better preserve their languages and customs. The need for such communication channels is evident, especially in places where there are no traditional media outlets to uncover the abuses of power that exist there.

“Oil didn’t bring progress. In the northern Amazon it has brought destruction, disease, poverty, death, and displacement.

Workshop participant in Ecuador

4.3 Peru

Just as in many other areas of the Amazon, indigenous organizations in the Peruvian part of the rainforest see themselves forced to defend their territories from the threats of oil extraction, illegal mining, palm oil monocultures, cattle farming projects introduced to the rainforest by radical religious groups, and solid-waste pollution⁷⁵. These phenomena, manifestations of an unfettered development model, clash in the rainforest with the integral cosmovision of the indigenous communities, in which forests and rivers, as well as farmed land, are all considered sacred spaces. In the Amazonian world, culture consists of a wide range of rituals and sociocultural practices that are celebrated and re-created in these territories, in which men and women, the natural and the sacred, and animals and the supernatural beings of their beliefs all form part of their ancestral memories and histories.

“The struggle of our Kukama people has to take place creatively by rescuing our memory and stories.

Leonardo Tello, director of Ucamara radio in Nauta, Ecuador



Pucallpa, Peru | Street art that represent the traditions of the Shipibo-Conibo people, their relationship with the animals, the plants and the spirits of the Amazon forest

For indigenous peoples, the efforts to achieve a recognition of their ways of life in the arena of public policy entail huge challenges. Generally speaking, the communities are neither consulted nor heard in the debates surrounding extractive projects. In addition, communities cannot participate in these discussions in their own languages, a fact which already restricts their participation in dialogue processes, leading to misunderstandings and an abuse of power.

The exercise of freedom of expression on the part of Peruvian-Amazonian indigenous peoples in the media and other communications spaces is severely restricted. This is because this social group does not have its own means or facilities for accessing radio and television in order to communicate their own identity and opinions. However, they receive support from third parties such as the Catholic Church and non-governmental organizations in order to organize programming or have access to radio space on private or community broadcasters.

Despite certain commonalities regarding ritual practices, there are differences in the way each community defends its territory. Some mainly carry out political work, such as the Awajún, who inhabit the Peruvian Department of Amazonas, as well as their neighbors the Wampis, who inhabit the northern region between the departments of Amazonas and Loreto. These peoples see themselves as warriors and defenders of their rainforest territories. The Wampis, a highly organized indigenous community, continue fighting for political autonomy and one of their projects is to become a nation. In addition, they have managed to establish their own radio station. This is an almost unique case, because the Peruvian state's communication policy does not contemplate providing Amazonian indigenous commu-

nities with any type of individual or community-managed communication tools.

On the other hand, it is also important to highlight the work of indigenous reporters and radio producers who, despite working at non-indigenous media sources, promote aspects of their local Amazonian culture such as their language. In their programs they talk about the rivers, the territories, and the various forms of daily life in their communities. These local reporters who broadcast radio programs in their own language are important for the development of a sense of community. Normally, those responsible for creating a community spirit are leaders, authorities, or shamans/healers, who do so through rituals, communal agricultural tasks, sporting activities, etc.

One communication program that stands out is Radio Ucayali in Nauta, a town with a population of 20,000. Nauta is located on the Marañón River, only kilometers away from where it joins the Ucayali River to form the Amazon River. A highway connects Nauta with Iquitos, the capital of the department of Loreto. Despite being attached to the Catholic Church (it belongs to the apostolic vicariate of Iquitos), Radio Ucayali is exceptional in its commitment to the local indigenous culture and cosmovision. The Kukama-kukamiria people that inhabits the region were enslaved during the rubber boom at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. As a consequence, many members of this community had to leave their lands in Nauta and flee to the Colombian Amazon region, which is very close to the triple border between Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Radio Ucayali seeks to revitalize the local culture by telling the life stories of the inhabitants of communities that live clo-

⁷⁵ In recognition of his work on the ecological and social devastation caused by extractivist policies in the Amazon, Peruvian journalist Joseph Zárate received the Ortega y Gasset Award in 2016 and the Gabriel García Márquez Prize in 2018. (Zárate, J., *Guerras del Interior*, 2018)

se to the rivers. Leonardo Tello, the broadcaster's coordinator, states, "The struggle of our Kukama people has to take place creatively by rescuing our memory and stories." That is the communicational strategy we work with at Radio Ucamarca." Part of Radio Ucamarca's project consists in mapping native communities that settle on the banks of the Marañón River in order to rescue the stories of the rivers, which are considered living beings where their ancestors rest. The radio also organizes competitions in which children and elders write stories and send them in. The best are then read on the radio.

Another organization, COHARIMYA, is located in the region of Madre de Dios. It brings together the Harakmbut, Yine and Machiguenga peoples and communities, who inhabit the region around the upper reaches of the Madre de Dios River and its tributaries. One of the environmental problems affecting these communities is the pollution of the rivers due to illegal gold-mining. On its website, COHARIMYA describes its mission as "defending territorial rights and contributing to the integral development of native communities"⁷⁶. There are no indigenous broadcasters in this part of the rainforest and the communities there do not have the means to create one. However, in 2020, the communities began the process of installing Internet to create a digital broadcaster with the goal of communicating the demands of indigenous peoples to decision-makers.

“ We need to bring radio to the communities. Although radio itself will not improve the quality of life in the community, it can be a means of bringing the demands of these peoples to decision-makers.

Sandra Bellido, communicator at Coharyima

In the Department of Ucayali, the Shipibo-Conibo people are traditionally known for their special way of speaking, singing, and telling stories on the radio. In the capital of Pucallpa and in nearby communities, various indigenous reporters have programs on local broadcasters. One of them, Cecilio Soria, has been active in different radio spaces in his region and is considered a voice of authority for his people. He studied at university in Lima in his youth and, despite not graduating, has honed his skills as a radio presenter and communicator through practice. Cecilio thinks that it is important to have a relationship with the global world, with the world outside, because it is the only way of having leverage in matters that are important for the Shipibos. He explains, "At the radio, Shipibo-Conibo presenters have two functions. They not only speak and provide information, but accompany their people and provide a sense of collective self-esteem."

Another Shipibo-Conibo reporter, Ronald Suárez Maynas, highlights the importance of indigenous media producers for the political process of the Shipibo-Conibo people, which has a population of 45,000 and is thus one of the largest in the Peruvian Amazon. Suárez Maynas leads the Shipibo-Conibo

“ We want the indigenous communities to use satellite Internet for defending their territory. In that regard, we also want to work with a radio service.

Alejandro Irey, president of Coharyima, of the Harakmbut people

council as well as Xetebo, an organization that advocates indigenous self-government. "We dream of having a communication system that belongs to the Shipibo-Conibo people," he says; "our own radio, television, our own newspaper, our own networks; that would be our communication." The Shipibo-Conibo have 40 years of experience making radio programs—four decades of continuous struggle for the right to communication. "We started out with a five-minute radio program, and then went to 15 minutes, then 30 minutes and then an hour. And they put us on at difficult slots and times so that nobody would listen to us, but we in our communities did listen; at five in the morning everybody is awake. Now we have eight radio programs on the same broadcaster at peak times and anybody can listen to us from their cars or from their homes and have an opinion."

Recently, the Shipibo-Conibo council and Xetebo began to expand their Internet communication activities. In Pucallpa and the neighboring areas there is good fiber-optic Internet connection. Through a Facebook channel, the organization broadcasts news about the communities and musical entertainment. One demand of this organization is that rural communities be connected. "If we achieved that, we would no longer be fighting to obtain an analog radio license," says Suárez Maynas.

In Lima, the Peruvian NGO SERVINDI (Intercultural Communication Services) uses a digital platform to shed light on the situation of indigenous peoples. SERVINDI works as a news agency that provides information on Peruvian indigenous peoples and facilitates workshops for community media producers and leaders of indigenous organizations. Jorge Agurto, the director of SERVINDI, highlights the difficulties that these organizations face due to the lack of training of their leaders. "Before there were political and leadership schools. Now that's all disappeared."

It is important to note that the Peruvian state has begun to offer more and more space for programs in indigenous



Rosa Gualinga, leader of the Shiwiar community in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Women in the Amazon work to strengthen their leadership.

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languages through its media outlets. In 2019, for example, the national television channel TVPeru launched a television show produced by Shipibo-Conibo producers in their own language. However, this program is broadcast in the early morning hours, so that it does not bother the mestizo, Spanish-speaking mass audiences. The ethnic diversity of Peru, a country inhabited by 55 indigenous peoples, is still not reflected in national media.

⁷⁶ Coharyima, www.coharyima.org/nosotros

5. Conclusions: Alternatives for communication



The information presented in the previous chapters makes it possible to identify various factors that limit freedom of expression and the free circulation of information. There are commonalities in the region that are not restricted by political borders: environmental pressure, social exclusion of the inhabitants, a lack of communications infrastructure, and the lack of educational possibilities are only some of them. These factors create an unfavorable situation for the citizens of the Amazon basin to participate in, influence, and bring relevant topics into the public arena. The populations of these regions say they need to create their own communication channels, which will allow them to defend the integrity of their territories, as well as to pass on information on the destruction of the ecosystem and local strategies to rescue it.

We have identified a great diversity of projects organized by local media producers, often in an alliance with other sectors of civil society that are interested in generating information offers from and for the Amazon. In general terms, the most promising initiatives for fostering democratic discussions in the region are those that take into account the following criteria:

- They work together with grassroots social processes in their respective localities.
- They strengthen cultural diversity and value the identity of individuals and collectives.
- They search for technological solutions adapted to the conditions of each place.

- They seek to form alliances.

The objective of this study was, in the first place, to identify the difficulties for communicating in the Amazon, but also to make proposals for change. In the different forums established in the context of this research, as well as during the fieldwork, it was possible to become acquainted with projects that seek to improve the participation of regional inhabitants in communication, information, and dialogue networks. Some of these projects have existed for years, while others are still in development. These proposals can be systematized according to their contribution to the creation of solutions for socioenvironmental conflicts from a communications perspective. We have thus identified four main areas:

5.1 Cultural diversity and biodiversity

It is clear that the protection of biological diversity and the Amazonian biome is closely tied to the cultural specificity and knowledge of the ethnic groups that have inhabited it for centuries without destroying it. At the same time, the increase in extractivist projects, monocultures, extensive cattle farming, and the associated migratory movements are endangering the survival of these cultures.

For this reason, many Amazonian indigenous communities are interested in creating communication processes to establish a symbiotic relationship between traditional forms of communication, such as ancestral stories, rituals, or dan-



Chorrera, Colombia | The transfer of knowledge and stories from elders to younger generations is essential for indigenous cultures. Digital media transform communication — they can be both useful and harmful.

ces, and new electronic and digital media. This would allow communities to extend their dissemination channels and the exchange of experiences. Furthermore, indigenous organizations are interested in creating their own communication outlets for strengthening their local cultures and the political participation of ethnic groups.

Radio Ucamara in Peru is one example: this broadcaster produces programs based on stories, traditions, and testimonies of the peoples who live along the rainforest rivers, so that it functions as a medium to promote the construction of identity and cultural memory.

For its part, the National University of Colombia supports Amazonian indigenous communities in the creation of digital applications for translating local languages and identifying birds.

What unites all these projects is their search for ways of promoting native peoples' cultural values and knowledge of nature through new communication technologies, permitting the creation of bridges for greater intercultural dialogue. These local communication initiatives can also serve as a link to involve other actors such as universities or journalists from the major media outlets in strategies for protecting the rainforest and its inhabitants.

5.2 Participation and sustainable development

The most significant problem for the region and its inhabitants is a development ideology imposed by external forces that do not respect the natural environment and do not see environmental sustainability as a crucial part of development. One main concern expressed by all groups consulted is the need for creating information and communication strategies that enable greater participation for Amazonian inhabitants, especially for ethnic minorities, in strategic decisions affecting the region, based on a vision of sustainable development for the environment.

In order to participate justly and efficiently in decision-making processes, people must have access to high quality, relevant information that meets their interests. Local and community media can play a crucial role in this sense, as long as they are well prepared for investigating and disseminating high-quality information. The community media collaborators consulted here highlighted the importance of their organizations in providing their communities with information, as national media outlets rarely show interest in local news. On the other hand, they stressed the great difficulties in fulfilling this role in a region where there are no possibilities of training in journalism and where investigating conflict situations can be a source of significant risk.

In order to contribute to a development vision in accordance with their ideas of sustainability, as well as to reclaim their rights, the inhabitants of the Amazon require both training and access to better information. Although formal participation mechanisms such as consultation processes exist in the legislation of the three countries under study, they are rarely implemented unless vigorously demanded by the affected population.

It was also clear that a lack of infrastructure is a significant factor preventing access to digital communication networks and therefore to participation in national debates relevant for the region. In the meetings and forums conducted during this research project we saw how well-organized communities find local solutions for improving connectivity by installing satellite antennas and local networks. For example, in rural communities without electricity, self-sufficient energy systems, such as solar panels, can create favorable conditions for communication.

However, we have also seen that connection to global information networks can produce ambivalent results. Although those consulted recognize the advantages of participating in Internet-based communication, there are also concerns about cultural changes that could follow the consumption of media content with no relation to local values. A major challenge is therefore to use new communication technologies in a way that serves the interests of the communities.

5.3 Managing communication autonomously

It is crucial to have favorable conditions for the creation of autonomous, self-managed media outlets in the communities—both urban and rural—of the Amazon. Communication networks can exert pressure on regional or national political processes for legislation that fosters a pluralistic information ecosystem. One example is the network of community media of Ecuador, CORAPE. In accordance with its general goal of “democratizing communication through citizen participation,” this association supports its 36 members spread throughout the country, 7 of which are in the Amazon.

The search for greater autonomy and communication also applies to the adoption of technologies. Thus, for example, in this study we have perceived that the use of free software and technologies can be very useful for community media in the Amazon. The community-based and collective philosophy of free software fits in very well with the principles of community media structures. One example of work with this type of software was when DW Akademie accompanied the radio stations belonging to the CORAPE network in Ecuador that were seeking a greater degree of technological autonomy, more efficient computer use, increased security, and the elimination of the high cost of licenses. In addition, these radios

promote free software as a way of exercising the right to communication in digital territories. Several of the CORAPE members have joined the Network of Community Radios and Free Software that unites more than 400 media outlets in Latin America and the Caribbean, thus creating a larger community beyond their own individual ones.

5.4. Forging alliances to increase the visibility of socioenvironmental conflicts

The communities that are affected the most by the destruction of the rainforest and the associated environmental damage are those that are farthest away from the main media outlets and international information networks. The inhabitants of the Amazon require training in order to carry out research and produce media content that can circulate on different information networks at multiple levels and serve as an input for political decision-making and for the execution of actions that seek to protect the Amazon ecosystem.

One of the main points of criticism heard throughout the activities in this study was that “external media sources do not consider us; they are not interested in hearing a direct account of what is occurring in the Amazon, but merely reproduce preconceived clichés.” Establishing ties between local community reporters and national media outlets, both for the education of journalists and for the joint production of contents, seems to be a promising strategy for overcoming this divide affecting the perspectives on the region. One good example of this strategy in action is the project “Tierra de Resistentes” conducted by the Colombian journalists’ organization Consejo de Redacción.

In conclusion, all of the researchers, academics, community reporters, journalists, activists, and members of the local population that participated in each of the phases of this study agreed that in order to communicate in the Amazon and empower its inhabitants through information and communication, it is necessary to create alliances across sectors. Once more, diversity is a strategic asset. It is only by involving different key players from different areas of society that it will be possible to increase the visibility of the issues necessary for healthy and sustainable development both of the Amazonian biome and for its inhabitants.

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