

Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational experience No. 18



Against the Stream and in Direction to the Future

AGAINST THE STREAM AND IN DIRECTION TO THE FUTURE

Yasuní, a park in a secluded jungle area located in the Ecuadorian Amazon, has become an international icon of the civic struggle in favor of life, biodiversity and nature as a matter of rights, as mentioned in Ecuador's constitution. The change achieved in the imaginary of Ecuadorian society is perhaps very initial and reduced, but challenging from the society for the first time the pre-established developmental paradigm. "YASunidos" is an open group of young people who work on this task.



Yasuní, a park in a secluded jungle area located in the Ecuadorian Amazon

"Amazon in favor of life"

The fundamental pillar of Ecuador's economy is the exploitation and sale of oil. The deposits of this fossil resource are located in the eastern part of the country, the Amazon region. In 2007, a group of environmental and other social organizations, along with many young people from the cities, resumed the campaign "Amazonas por la vida" (Amazon in favor of life), a campaign that was born in the late 1980s, to denounce the damages caused by the operations of Texaco in the region. Plans to expand the oil frontier in the

Amazon and particularly the arrival of the oil industry to the Yasuní national park had awakened the concern of the citizenship. The site of the ITT oil field, abbreviated to the Ishingo, Tambococha and Tiputini sectors, in the middle of the park is home to a large biodiversity, where more species of trees are found, per square kilometer than in the whole United States. At the same time, indigenous people live in this part of the Amazon (Kichwa or Naporuna, Waorani), some of them uncontacted or in voluntary isolation (Tagaeri and Taromenane).

The beginning

Antonella Calle, a social communication student and Patricio Chávez, whom everyone calls Pato, are two members of the YASunidos youth movement, a name in allusion to Yasuní. "The initiative to stop the oil exploitation in the Yasuní subsoil came the Ecuadorian civil society. The government of President Correa, in the context of seeking anti-systemic initiatives, assimilated it," explains Pato. In fact, the Ecuadorian state invited the international community to participate in a moratorium on oil extraction in the area by paying the half of the market value of the oil as a financial contribution to a trust fund. The idea of



Activists of the Yas-unidos movement

the moratorium was unprecedented and attracted much attention, not only in the country but at the international level. But because of the ambiguity with which the government handled the proposal, the invitation to reward the non-extraction of the Yasuní oil caused little echo, which is why the president decided to cancel this initiative.

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YasUNIDOS – a youth movement in a plain world
Three years ago, a group of young ecologists and wildlife activists decided not to step back in their struggle to save the Amazon. In order to ensure that citizen resistance continues, they conformed the YASunidos movement, which mainly obeys two rules: a non-political posture, not allowing the movement to be manipulated by political parties or the media. “There are no leaders or representatives, we all represent YASunidos, the role of spokesperson rotates and we do not want someone to be exposed at the collective cost”, explains Antonella. YASunidos did not remain with the arms crossed when the government changed the direction about the Yasuni topic. While the state apparatus began to discredit the movement, speaking of middle-class youth with good intentions but manipulated by the political opposition, even linking YASunidos with terrorist acts (the Ecuadorian Group for Social Research produced a document on strategies of repression and social control of the Ecuadorian

state, where the question arises, where is the constitution? YASunidos case), the movement with the support of several organizations decided to collect signatures to open the way to a popular consultation.

6 months non-stop

Pato recalls: "For six months we abandoned our normal student life, gathering signatures to achieve popular consultation. Sometimes we would discuss for more than half an hour with people in the street explaining what the consultation is about and our initiative to save Yasuní from extractivism; without knowing if the person would sign or not". At the end, more than 755,000 signatures were collected from the ecuadorian civil society. A resounding success if you take into account that Ecuador is a country with an oil tradition. To achieve the admission of a popular consultation 485,000 signatures were required. But the National Electoral Council as a verifier, in scandalous circumstances, annulled approximately 60% of the firms; after challenging the dubious first verdict, 10% more firms were admitted. But still the path to the popular consultation was shut down. YASunidos brought the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights - IA-CHR, and still awaiting the verdict of the court.



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Scene change – the risk of entering the economy logic

Oil extraction in the Yasuní-ITT has apparently just started, something inexplicable, considering the high cost of production because it is a little explored area and the drop in the price of crude oil. "It is dangerous to enter into the economic logic with the motto of low price - no risk for indigenous people and biodiversity", says Pato. It is impressive how much the actions of YASunidos impacted on the imaginary of the common citizen: while a survey in 2007 showed that out of every 5 people interviewed 1 had heard from Yasuní, in 2012 the most relevant political event in the perception of society had been The Yasuní - ITT initiative of the government. A year later, the majorities demanded to be consulted on whether or not oil should be extracted in the Yasuní. The Yasuni theme had become a symbol.

Yasuni es everywhere

"Today, Yasuni is everywhere", says Pato, and despite all the government attacks, the movement continues to exist, with activists in 8 of the 24 provinces of the country. In Pacto, rural parish of Quito, the mining concession for the exploita-

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Activists and actions



tion of gold is monitored. Kimsacocha is generating resistance to an open-pit gold mine, the same is happening in Intag with copper mining, in Sucumbíos with oil pollution, Pastaza with the expansion of the oil border, among others. "There is a group, small but previously inexistent", Antonella explains her assessment around YASunidos. The particularity of YASunidos is that it has been young people of the cities that took the first step articulating the movement. "Currently, we organize many activities of national character but realizing them at a local level, strengthening

in this form our initiatives in the provinces; each group continues to work on the subject of extractivism in their environment", says Pato.

The cover syndrome

"Meanwhile, we have recovered from the syndrome headline. During the signature collection YASunidos was in the spotlight of the media, this is over. We first had to get used to it and we realized that our actions were no less important now, even without media attention" Pato says. YASunidos

has many ideas and future projects to offer: The decentralized energy supply to remote regions based on regenerative sources (biogas, water turbines); this is intended to replace the diesel engines currently in use and are subsidized by the state. This initiative seeks to connect more the urban and rural groups. YASunidos, in general, is thinking much about shifting synergies between the south and the north, between the city and the country, and inside civil society. Another project is to make a film that follows the process of the movement. The actions of YASunidos are supported by Misereor as well as others; but the most important capital of the movement is undoubtedly the commitment of its activists.

First balance: between euphoria and frustration "YASunidos has lived moments of euphoria and frustration. Maybe we have decreased in number of militants, in fact there is no record, but we have been in existence for 3 years as a group or movement and sometimes we do not know how to do everything we have in mind", shares Pato.



They often organize trips to Yasuní with groups of children and teenagers, exchange experiences among local groups. "It is a challenge for YASunidos to sustain the level of dynamism since the militant should not become a martyr and volunteerism has limits; it's all about finding a balance". Twice a year the group holds an assembly to agree on the next steps. The last assembly concluded in two directions: to keep our position on the Yasuni topic as a movement of young ecologists and to work local agendas in the framework of the threats of extractivism". The local agendas also fit in our program since there are small Yasunís in many parts. It used to happen that these local agendas and problems were often invisible to our mission, linked to Yasuní", says Pato. "People, rather than questioning the extractivist approach, have become aware of the importance of protecting nature and its biodiversity. On the other side, the right to self-determination of uncontacted indigenous peoples is still in the background. There is a pending debt", summarizes Antonella.

"At the moment we organize many activities of national character but do them at a local level, strengthening our group initiatives in the provinces; which continue to work on the topic of extractivism in their local environment", says Pato.



Messages to the future

- Younger people have a power of imagination that makes it easier for them to overcome thinking patterns and paradigms that are the obstacles to the further development of our civilization model. It is exciting when, as in the present case, they take the public opinion on the journey.
- Critical masses within society do not have to be large in order to achieve symbols that direct the path to an alternative development.
- The example shows that there are situations in which the formal spaces to express opinions and decisions are submitted to particular interests, and where it is necessary to go against the stream and in direction to the future.

The text, which is based on visits and discussions on site, was created by Jorge Krekeler (Misereor adviser), but initially made consensual with the people visited. Special thanks are due to Antonella Calle and Patricio Chávez from the YASunidos collective.



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STORIES OF SUCCES

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