

## Indigenous perspectives on Social, Developmental, and Environmental Conflicts within the Amazon Basin

This project was conceived out of a desire to engage in dialogue to fundamentally reexamine the definition of conflict, resolution and transformation, with a focus on those perspectives not traditionally included in academic topics in this conversation. This project focused on communities that occupy a unique yet powerful space in the global imaginary: Indigenous communities living in the Amazon basin. In total this project engaged in dialogues with leaders and thinkers from over 9 different ethnicities in communities surrounding Leticia, Colombia, in the Pastaza region of Ecuador, and with communities and organizations near Nauta and Pucallpa, Peru. Project goals: 1<sup>st</sup> To explore through dialogue the perspectives of diverse indigenous communities on how they conceptualize, understand and respond to conflict at various levels. 2<sup>nd</sup>: To engage in conversations as to how communities related this conversation to their surroundings, the incredible environment that is the Amazon.

### Connections to degree program

Alex: As a student of conservation policy and environmental conflict this project offered me the opportunity to profoundly explore both of these topics. I found it fascinating to watch the multivariate ways in which conservation ngos were perceived by communities. While certain ngos were cited as being vital partners others were criticized as operating in a neocolonial fashion. A major takeaway for me is there is no set playbook for conservation and when western conservationists partner with indigenous communities it is essential that the partnership be one of support and respect for different cultural approaches to these problems.

Dylan: As a student focusing on Conflict Resolution, Reconciliation and Development, this project offered a powerful opportunity to further explore how development processes impact conflict processes. A powerful realization from this is that development can be a driver of conflict if not first preceded by a shared building of vision and goals ( which many communities pointed out was simulated but not fully pursued through practices of prior consultation). It is my hope to take the lessons learned from this project into redefining my own approach to conflict resolution and to how we can make the development of communities a more localized and culturally sensitive process.

**Recommended Additional Readings and Viewings: The best sources for continuing these dialogues are with local indigenous communities or those indigenous thinkers who are available to you. These following readings and viewings offer some good primer/supplemental material by which to guide future discussions on themes discussed in this project.**

- Davis, Wade. (2010) *The wayfinders : why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world* / Wade Davis UWA Publishing Crawley, Canadian Broadcasting Company W.A
- Slutkin, G. (2013). *Violence is a contagious disease*. The Contagion of Violence. Institute of Medicine. [www.cureviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/iom.pdf](http://www.cureviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/iom.pdf)
- GINTY, R. M. (2008). Indigenous Peace-Making Versus the Liberal Peace. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 43(2), 139–163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45084517>
- The Territory (2023) Documentary featured on Disney+
- Mihnea Tanasescu (2013) *The rights of nature in Ecuador the making of an idea*, Vrije Universiteit Brussel,

**Causes/ types of conflict: On the whole, this project explored the many different types of conflicts faced by different communities across the amazon, which were highly varied in nature and complexity. The following is a short list of the larger patterns identified:**

Culture Clash and Identity Conflicts: Several communities identified the clashing of different culture norms and values as among the more pressing types of conflict faced on a regular basis. In line with the identity theory of conflict, these conflicts primarily occurred when communities were faced with processes that challenged or eroded collective sense of identity and belonging. Some of these conflicts were overt in nature (direct disagreements with outsiders on values or goals) while others were identified as being more subtle (the progressive erosion of cultural norms and practices as a result of changing needs/attitudes/contexts).

Extractive Industry: Many of the communities were concerned with the encroachment of extractive industries such as oil companies, logging companies, and agricultural expansion into territories. The extractive practices of these companies represent land use practices that are antithetical to how many of the communities understand their relationship to the environment. Moreover, it was expressed to us on a number of occasions that many of these companies as a tactic to advance their projects generate conflict within communities through bribes or promises of regional economic development that result in internal divisions within the communities.

Territorial: Among the conflicts most frequently experienced in the Pastaza region of Ecuador were conflicts over territory. Many of the territorial conflicts experienced between communities were the result of the Ecuadorian government delineating territorial lines that were not congruent with the ancestral territories. These ancestral territories were defined nominally but understood by the communities who lived there. Furthermore, many of the communities did not traditionally live in communities as such, but were more dispersed. Government efforts to bring electricity and water to the indigenous communities also came with forcing communities to live in a community fashion that differed from the ways communities previously coexisted, creating conflicts between neighbors over space and resources that previously had not been a source of contention.

**Reconceptualizing conflict and its transformation:** Deeper within this project was a desire to fundamentally reexamine how we think about the terms of Conflict, Peace, and Resolution. Conversations focused on trying to explore new perspectives on these topics as a means of transforming how we approach the conflict process.

Conflict as disease: Many of the communities who participated in this project described conflict as being similar to a disease- a process with strong internal components yet that has the capacity to rapidly infect others. Attitudes towards what it means to “resolve” conflict focused largely on the curing or treating of conflict, a restorative take on resolution that was frequently identified as somewhat contrasting to the more procedural attitudes that indigenous communities typically experience from governments/international organizations..

Peace as harmonization/restorative- Several communities also presented the concept of Harmonization as a key tenet to their definitions of what constitutes peace. For many communities this concept of harmonization is not just social in nature- it refers rather to the need at the end of a conflict to seek harmonic balance within oneself, with one's community, and with one's environment (including spiritual entities). In conjunction with this, dialogue with several indigenous leaders indicated that the transformation of the environment and of communities has significantly impacted the ability to maintain “peace”, as many communities find it difficult to harmonize with a larger community/ environment that is shifting in ways beyond many of our understanding.

Plants/Con Res: While every culture in the Amazon has its own distinct cosmovision that influences how they perceive and resolve conflicts a major theme that continued to appear was the use of plants in the conflict resolution process. Plants like mambe and ambil for the Bora and Huitoto Muri in Colombia, or Guayusa for the Kichwa, Andwa, and Shiwiar in Ecuador, or piri piri and ayahuasca for the Shipibo Konibo in Peru all played significant roles in conflict resolution. Many of the communities expressed the need for a reciprocal relationship with the environment and that in caring for the environment the environment would in return give them the resources to resolve conflicts that arose in the community.

Structuralized Peace Building: While our experiences in Colombia looked at how conflict resolution was done traditionally, our experiences in Peru and Ecuador focused more on how are indigenous communities adapt and change to deal with conflicts at the structural national and international scales for which traditional conflict resolution methods had never been designed. This has prompted many communities to build incredible governance, advocacy, and education structures in an effort to manage conflicts in systems that are deeply foreign to their own, but these structures struggle to maintain the financial and technical knowledge needed to successfully navigate westernized governance and justice systems.

**What you found out:** While perhaps an obvious conclusion, it is nonetheless an important finding to restate: The indigenous communities of the Amazon basin are not homogenous in their beliefs, and many of the conflicts that arise between communities and the outside world have resulted from being treated as such. Each community has a distinct cosmovision and history that influences their attitudes about conflict and peace, and which play into their own self image and identity which are critical to understanding how these communities position themselves when faced with conflict.

La Fiebre de Gaucho: Or the *rubber boom* as it is known in English was a period of time from 1879-1912 and then again from 1942–1945 where western nations namely the United States and United Kingdom extracted high rates of rubber from the Amazon Basin. The crimes rubber barons committed against the indigenous peoples of the Amazon were tantamount to genocide and were continuously cited by the communities we worked with as being a significant cause of cultural loss and shared trauma.

The ecosystem of conflict and resolution as gardening: Certain community elders shared a perspective tied to individual community cosmovisions that likened the process of conflict management to that of gardening. For many communities in the Amazon, life (and conflict which is a part of life) is regarded as an ecosystem - Humans fulfill a function similar to a gardener, tasked with the maintenance of themselves, and of the area around them. This ecosystem view of conflict is where social and environmental conflict most clearly intersect and is why, for many elders, it is fundamentally impossible to separate these two conflict dynamics.

## **Reflection:**

Reflecting on this project within the context of conflict transformation, one of the biggest takeaways for us is the realization that even within the conversation about conflict, how we resolve it, and what peace is, there are fundamental conflicts around our understanding of these terms. For the indigenous communities of the Northern Amazon basin, conflict, its place in the world, and the elements actors and structures needed to address the phenomenon of conflict are at times at odds with the systems of justice, resolution, and development that are often presented by international systems and nations. It is important to realize out of this the need to dialogue around our individual understandings and where we want to go. Rather than immediately going to how we can transform this conflict into something. Ask ourselves what is the conflict in our minds? What is the goal in “transformation”? Is the guiding of this process evolving from a shared valuation? Or are we simply perpetuating our understandings and views without the reciprocity of dialogue. Identity is one of the largest elements of conflict, as it defines not only how people perceive themselves and others, but also how we position ourselves in conflict and seek to engage others when confronted by it. Communities are fighting to preserve their identity, their culture, their tradition, even as they manage systems of conflict and justice foreign to their own. And this struggle has been born of the reality that thus far, the world has been transformed not by a shared vision but an imposed one. As we move forward in discussing how we transform conflict we must be willing not only to bring perspectives like those shared here to the table but further be willing to question, converse, and re-examine even what we fundamentally believe so that we can truly transform ourselves and the conflicts in which we participate.