

#ICan'tBreathe and Environmental Racism in Ecuador

Nathalia Bonilla, Acción Ecológica

The death of George Floyd in the US has once again demonstrated that racism plays a prominent role in the dominant system and that its violence and cruelty can reach unimaginable limits. The incident quickly led to a wave of repudiation in many places, which could be observed in social media.

At the same time, it has been shown that condemning others' racism does not necessarily imply a willingness to confront one's own. One only has to look at the numerous forms of racist violence that Indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and Montubio peoples consistently face, as is currently being demonstrated by the State-promoted activities that have put more vulnerable populations at risk of COVID-19 contagion.

The Constitution declares Ecuador a plurinational and intercultural State, but it has become the norm for a part of society and for the State to look the other way when those Peoples denounce that public policies are destroying their territories and their lives under the guise of development and progress. These policies can be so ruthless that one may wonder whether their true intention is to remove the original inhabitants from these areas to make way for extractivism.

There is a systematic disrespect for the human, collective and environmental rights of Afro-Descendant people. According to the Representative of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, the province of Esmeraldas, where 68.25% of the population is of African heritage, is one of the poorest and most excluded in Ecuador. In the province, 84.6% of people live below the poverty line; 15.3% are illiterate and only 23% have access to basic services. According to official numbers, Esmeraldas has the highest rates of maternal mortality, gender-based violence and adolescent pregnancies.

Among the many ways in which racial discrimination manifests, environmental racism is one of the most atrocious because of its immediate and long-term impacts. This form of racism is manifested when governments and society consider that there is no problem with Indigenous, Afro-Descendant and

Montubio peoples being stripped of their lands and territories to make way for private interests related to mining, oil and agribusiness projects. As María Moreno (2019) indicates, “environmental racism results from extractive or productive processes that create certain benefits that go directly to external actors outside of the province, while racialized local populations are left to deal with the risks, impacts, and harms.”

Under these conditions, communities are forced to live with environmental liabilities such as deforestation, land and water pollution, the emergence of diseases such as dengue, malaria, chagas disease, and others linked to contact with heavy metals and pesticides, without there being punishment for these crimes, let alone redress.

Based on a racist ideology, upon which capitalism operates, an arbitrary assessment of certain phenotypic characteristics, especially skin colour, was imposed to ensure the supremacy of whiteness which minimizes the other who is infantilized or hypersexualized and seen as ignorant given that ancestral knowledge is denigrated. Plunder and exploitation are thereby justified.

Environmental racism normalizes the idea of Indigenous and Afro-Descendant peoples living amidst pollution, being stripped of their livelihoods, and being subjected to higher levels of poverty and violence due to the presence of armed guards connected to extractive or agribusiness activities. This is because the areas where they live have been illegitimately transformed into areas to be sacrificed, and people themselves are considered second class citizens, bodies that can be sacrificed for the benefit of national and global elites.

The impacts of these injustices on racialized groups fall disproportionately on women, who are usually tasked with caring for their families and the community. Lack of water, the deterioration of collection areas and increased illness due to pollution requires them to exert greater effort resulting in a deterioration of their physical and emotional wellbeing. Further, they are exposed to increased levels of sexual violence at the hands of individuals connected to extractive or agribusiness activities.

Colonial rules that, in several ways, made it possible for the inhabitants of Abya Yala to be classified as inferior – as was later the case with enslaved bodies brought from Africa – continue to be upheld. These populations were de-humanized. They were thought of as having no soul as they did not know the White God and, thus, had no right to have their life, freedom, cultures and territories respected.

Below are some examples of racism in Ecuador:

- In 2017, the Afro-Descendant community of La Chiquita and the Awa community of Guadualito won case No. 08100-2010-0485 against the company Palmeras de los Andes. However, to date, the Court of Justice of Esmeraldas has not disclosed the ruling in public forums nor has it notified the parties, and the palm oil company has not been forced to stop polluting the rivers and repair the damages. As a result, local communities are forced to continue using water from water trucks, available every other day, because the pollution produced by the company continues to be discharged into the rivers.
- Palm oil companies have stripped the Afro-Descendant community of Barranquilla of their ancestral territories, to which the latter hold titles. The territories are then registered under a different “owner” through notaries, filed with the Land Registry Office and endorsed by the Land Secretariat. However, this violation of their collective rights continues in impunity.
- The neighbourhood of La Propicia, located in the city of Esmeraldas and home to a majority Afro-Descendant population, was severely affected by the fire resulting from the spill of crude oil in the Teaone River in 1998, on whose banks it is located. The State managed to find ways to skirt its responsibility to adequately redress the damages caused.
- The precautionary measures issued in 2011 in relation to ruling No. 0058 by the San Lorenzo Court have yet to be enforced, even though their objective is to protect the lives of more than 89 Afro-Descendant communities in the cantons of San Lorenzo and Eloy Alfaro, in the north of Esmeraldas, who have been affected by the pollution of about 32 rivers due to mining activities. The Mining Regulation and Control Agency (ARCOM) continued issuing operation licenses until 2018 and institutions such as the Ministry of the Environment, Health, Interior, Autonomous

Decentralized Municipal Governments (GADs), among others, fail to fulfill the obligations set out in the ruling.

- In response to the massacre of Tagaeri and Taromenane people in Yasuni (2003), the prosecution service stated that it “cannot carry out any investigations because the casualties did not have identity cards.” Since then, the State has acted negligently in relation to these deaths and has silenced societal debate about the events.
- By making the Yasuni National Park buffer zone no longer intangible, and taking advantage of the health emergency presented by COVID-19 to authorize the construction of a road that leads directly to the intangible zone, the State is exposing the Indigenous Peoples living in Voluntary Isolation to death.
- The SOTE and OCP pipeline bursts last April affected thousands of indigenous families whose livelihoods depend highly on the Coca and Napo rivers, where the crude oil flowed into; however, Petroamazonas did not take immediate emergency measures and has not taken action to provide redress to these families. It is focusing most of its energy on justifying its actions.
- Indigenous and *campesino* communities in Molleturo face an imminent threat from State-supported mining projects seeking control of water and *páramo* areas, stripping hundreds of families of their place to live.

In Ecuador, many Indigenous, Afro-Descendant, Montubio and *campesino* communities CAN'T BREATHE, they feel the unbearable pressure of racism, extractivism and agribusiness, which chokes, threatens their lives and denies them justice.

Acción Ecológica

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More information:

foresta@accionecologica.org