

LFFU

Leave Fossil Fuels Underground at a Glance

LFFU in Ecuador: The Yasuni National Park

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Yasuní National Park, Ecuador: The first global initiative to LFFU

The *Yasuní* conflict at a glance:

- In 2007 the Ecuadorian government announced at the General Assembly of the United Nations the proposal to LFFU in the oil fields ITT (Ishpingo, Tambococho and Tiputini) of Yasuní National Park (YNP) in exchange of financial support of the international community.
 - It became the first global concrete initiative of an oil dependent country to address climate change by LFFU.
 - YNP is considered one of the most biodiverse places in the world, and is ancestral territory of voluntary isolated indigenous tribes.
 - In 2013 the government declared the failure of the initiative, blaming the industrialized countries of their lack of support and allowing oil extraction.
 - The same year the collective Yasunidos emerged to gather the necessary signatures to call for a referendum to decide democratically the future of the YNP. The National Electoral Counsel (NEC) denied the referendum by invalidating the signatures.
 - In 2019 public institutions recognized NEC committed fraud against the referendum required by Yasunidos. The mobilization to LFFU continues.
- **Key actors:**
 - Indigenous groups living in the YNP
 - Yasunidos
 - Civil society
 - Ecuadorian government
 - International Community
 - **Key arguments against the oil extraction:**
 - To protect the indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation, who live in YNP. The constitution bans extractive activities in their territory.
 - YNP is the world's most biodiverse place.
 - Avoiding CO2 emissions. Fossil fuels should be phased out to tackle climate change
 - Ecuador's oil dependence hasn't taken the country out of poverty.
 - **Key arguments in favour of the project:**
 - Revenues can bring development to the country.
 - Only 1% of the total territory of the park would be damaged.
 - **Key dates:**
 - 1990-2006: Civil society proposals for an oil moratorium and to LFFU in YNP.
 - 2007: The government proposed the Yasuní-ITT initiative at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly
 - 2009: At the COP15 (Conference of Parties 2015) Ecuador's president called-off last minute the signing of a Trust Fund administered by UN for donors to deposit their contributions.
 - 2010: The UN Trust Fund for the Yasuní- ITT initiative is launched.
 - 2013: The government cancelled the initiative. Yasunidos emerged and started a national campaign to collect the signatures to call for a referendum.
 - 2013: The National Assemble declared of 'national interest' the exploitation ITT
 - 2014: The collective Yasunidos presented to the NEC the signatures required for a referendum. Months later the institution annulated many of the signatures and blocked a referendum.
 - 2016: Starts the oil extraction of the ITT oil block
 - 2019: Public organisms recognized NEC committed fraud against the referendum required by Yasunidos

In 2007 Ecuador surprised the international community at the General Assembly of the United Nations with the Yasuní-ITT initiative. An idea that almost become the first global concrete proposal to address climate change problem in a radical way: 'leaving the oil in the soil'. Despite being an oil dependent country, Ecuador committed not to exploit the oil reserves located in the ITT oil block in Yasuní National Park (YNP), in exchange of a contribution of the industrialized countries to cover half of the revenues Ecuador would otherwise receive. This national park located in the Amazon is one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth and ancestral territory of the Huaorani people and the tribes in voluntary isolation Tagaeiri and Taromenane. Therefore, the proposal was about respecting indigenous rights, protecting unique diversity as well as a first step towards a post oil civilization. The Yasuní-ITT proposal was the product of decades of popular organizations efforts to resist oil operations and denounce its impacts.

Oil extraction in YNP started already in the decade of 1980 and in the early 2000s the park biggest proven oil reserves were discovered in the oil blocks *Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini* (ITT), with more than 800 billion barrels of oil. The interest of the government and oil companies of exploiting the reserves in the Amazon region generated an organized opposition in the civil society, motivated by the experience of the "trial of the century" against Chevron-Texaco; when indigenous and peasants of the Ecuadorian Amazon in 1993 sued the transnational for the aftermath of its operations in the country (Beristain, 2009). Popular organizations started to develop ideas to encourage the government not to extract the oil reserves in YNP and call for an oil moratorium. In 2001, the first proposal was to suspend the country's foreign debt in exchange of preserving the Amazon. The proposal evolved until 2005 when the organization Oilwatch laid out a position paper proposing LFFU in YNP in an international expert meeting of protected areas (Acosta, 2014).

In 2006, the idea was adopted by the presidential candidate Rafael Correa as part of his campaign. Alberto Acosta, close to ecologist sectors and Correa's first Ministry of Energy convinced him to do so. A technique negotiating team worked on fine-tuning the proposal to LFFU in YNP's ITT oil block: The government of Ecuador would not touch the oil reserves in the ITT in exchange of 3.600 million dollars paid by the industrialized countries (around half of the expected revenues of the oil reserve), over 13 years. The initiative had four fundamental bases 1. To protect the territory and life of the indigenous tribes in voluntary isolation within the park 2. To protect the unique biodiversity of the place 3. To reduce the harm done by oil consumption in terms of air pollution, avoiding 410 million tons of CO₂, and 4. To give the first step to stop the economy's oil dependence (Acosta, 2014). Environmental organizations, international organisms and the public received the initiative positively, for promoting the transition from the current oil based development model to a new one based on sustainability and equality (United Nations, 2011). In 2010 a Trust Fund administered by the United Nations Development Program was launched so that the donor countries could deposit their contributions. Among the guarantees of the Trust Fund the contributions would be invested in conservation, forest regeneration projects and renewable energy projects in Ecuador, which were estimated to help prevent the deforestation in 4.8 million hectares, 19% of Ecuador's territory, allowing the Tagaeri and Taromenane indigenous people to remain in voluntary isolation. Lastly, the project was supposed to promote social development through investments in health, education, technical assistance and productive job creation for the people near the Yasuní National Park (Larrea, 2009).

Six years later, President Correa canceled the widely celebrated initiative. He declared "*El mundo nos ha fallado*" (the world has failed us), as the initiative only collected 13,3 million dollars (0,37% of the total) (Estupinyà, 2013). The government blamed the financial crisis of 2008 but also the world's hypocrisy and the logic of power above the logic of justice. But Roque Sevilla, leader of the technical commission of the project, and other critiques of the decision, blamed President for its contradictory position that didn't reassure potential contributors (BBC,2013; Martínez Allier, Basse & Bond, 2013;

Mena, 2013). In August 2013 the Assemble accepted Correa's petition to declare oil exploitation of ITT of 'national interest' and the operations started with the promise of a damage of less than 1% of the area of the park. Right after the initiative was cancelled the social organizations asked for a popular referendum to define the future of the project. In June 2013, the poll "*Perfiles de Opinión*" showed that 93% of the people in Quito and Guayaquil (the main two cities) approved the initiative and 66% said the oil must be kept underground even if the funding does not meet its goal (Mena, 2013). As a response to the government's refusal to call for a referendum, the collective Yasunidos emerged to carry out a national campaign to call for a citizen's-initiative national referendum about oil extraction in YNP (Yasunidos, 2016). After six months, and despite the efforts of the government to obstruct the collection of signatures (Yaunidos, 2014), the collective, composed by mainly young people, presented to the NEC 727.947 signatures. It is above the 600.00 equivalent to the 5% of the voting population required to activate a national referendum. However, NEC invalidated the signatures and denied the referendum, while the collective denounced irregularities in the process (FOEI, 2014). These irregularities were recognized in 2019 (El Telégrafo, 2018; El Comercio, 2019)

Even after the failure of the initiative for a referendum, Yasunidos kept working for the protection of YNP denouncing their situation in the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights, participating in the Climate Change Summit in New York and being involved in other international events. In 2014, the collective was nominated to the Human Rights Tulip granted by the Dutch government (Yasunidos, 2016). In short, the Yasuní-ITT initiative was the result of decades of popular mobilization to stop oil extraction damage and it opened the way to the emergence of new social actors to continue with this effort. Although the initiative didn't materialize, it contributed to establish debates and mechanisms for launching similar initiatives in the future. An important first step.

Questions for future research:

- Is it possible to create a similar initiative that is not dependent on the will of the States but on the people (national and global community)? Which are the opportunities and challenges of such a possibility?
- How has the Yasuní-ITT initiative inspired other LFFU ideas around the world and how likely is to launch a successful initiative that counts with the commitment of the international community?

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