

Advocacy in the Amazon and the Camisea gas project: implications for non-government public action

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The article considers international advocacy concerning the exploitation of gas reserves in an area inhabited by an isolated indigenous group in Peru, the Machigengua. Considerable international advocacy activity was centred mainly in Washington, DC. Poor communication between those directly affected and international environmental NGOs characterised very different and not always compatible agendas. The article concludes that this failure to adapt the international lobby both to the views of the indigenous population and to political realities in Peru severely weakened the impact of the international advocacy work.

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Introduction

Increasingly, NGOs are defining themselves in terms of their emerging role in advocacy and policy-influencing work. Indeed, some 'back donors' seem to feel that NGOs have a duty to engage in policy debates on behalf of civil society.¹ Arguably, this move was initiated by the larger international NGOs (INGOs)² in the early 1980s, which reacted with some frustration to their inability to resolve structural problems of poverty through direct small-scale development activities with the poor. During the 1980s, high-profile lobbies against apartheid in South Africa and in support of aid to Cambodia grabbed international headlines,³ as did international advocacy on the abuses of human rights in Central America during the same period; at the same time, in the field of humanitarian aid some INGOs tried to redress the balance of a misleading approach that invariably treated 'disasters' as acts of nature rather than being the results of conflict and hence made by people. Once many crises previously designated as 'natural disasters' (especially in Africa) had been recognised as linked to conflicts in the region, a completely different profile emerged for European NGOs engaged in areas such as the Horn and Mozambique. Discussions about the political conflicts behind the 'famines, droughts, and floods' were thus forced into the open.

At the micro level, NGOs often took up local issues, either through funding local advocates or publicising a local grievance, usually because a group with whom they were working were the victims of some injustice. Gradually NGOs, and in particular INGOs, tried to make links between wider global trends and development issues, and to look for causality between these and the localised poverty with which they were concerned. Thus, some of the first generalised campaigns started addressing issues related to debt, trade, and so forth. There was an undoubted pressure to try to link campaigning themes to specific issues affecting poor people in developing countries, such as involuntary displacement due to dam building, or reductions in health and welfare services because of cutbacks in public expenditure.

To cite one example, I was involved in research that examined the effects of 'bad projects' on poor people, which led to engagement with people in India opposing the Narmada Dam. Many Northern lobbyists already felt that engaging with the rights and wrongs of a specific dam was less important than attempting to influence the policies and decision-making processes of the multilateral banks that would eventually be contributing towards the funding of such infrastructural projects. Thus the local example became part of a global statement or movement. Concepts such as 'working from the micro to the macro' were the logical consequence of this approach, and they dominated much thinking about advocacy for many years.

In more recent years, however, there has been growing criticism of many campaigns, not only from those at the receiving end of advocacy, but also from civil-society groups representing local people who, in theory, were meant to gain from the efforts of the lobbyists. Although in the research on which this article is based we, of course, found examples where advocacy had worked to the benefit of the marginalised and excluded, we were less certain in other cases that the whole picture was being presented with honesty. We were particularly concerned that a certain Northern view might have been dominating discussions and agenda-setting for international lobbying to be carried out by INGOs.

INTRAC recently conducted a case study of lobbying activity where both international and local civil-society groups were engaged in an issue recognised as having both local and international significance. The focus of the study was the extraction of natural gas in the southern Peruvian Amazon, in an area known as Camisea. The natural-gas extraction project is a complex and contested issue that has attracted significant international debate, involving the multilateral financial institutions, the private sector, the Peruvian government, INGOs, local Peruvian NGOs, and several organisations representing the affected indigenous population.

The full story of the Camisea gas project and the relationships between the various non-government actors involved is covered in more detail in an INTRAC research paper (Earle and Pratt 2006). This focuses in particular on conservation NGOs and their interaction with COMARU, the local organisation of the Machiguenga people, who are the principal indigenous group in the area affected by the exploration and exploitation of the Camisea gas fields. As the research project on Camisea progressed, we felt it necessary to amend the focus of the study. Initially, we planned to investigate the co-optation of the local indigenous organisation/social movement by external NGOs, as hypothesised in much of the literature on social movements. Experience elsewhere has shown the danger of local civil-society organisations (CSOs) becoming clones of their donors. In fact, this had not happened. Indeed, the problem seemed to be the opposite: although many different groups claimed to be working with COMARU, in reality very little direct practical support seemed to be on offer to the organisation. If there was any co-optation of COMARU's agenda, it was from a distance, by INGOs claiming to speak and act on its behalf without COMARU's agreement or knowledge. On the ground there was far less support for COMARU than we expected or had been led to believe from the INGOs' websites. Indeed, only one INGO had significantly tried to support COMARU over a number of years, and even this support had been financially modest.

Summary of findings

Detailed findings of the broader research project will be published in an INTRAC occasional paper. This article summarises the findings specific to the Camisea advocacy campaign, which we felt were worthy of wider debate and discussion beyond the specificities of the Peruvian case.

Choosing a target for advocacy

Overall, the INGOs dominated international lobbying on the subject of Camisea, and one of the most obvious problems was that a great deal of energy was spent in Washington, DC chasing various banks, especially the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which were potential lenders to the energy consortium that was developing the gas fields. This kept the focus of the campaign in Washington and on the conditions that would be placed on loans. It was probably the case that the exploitation of the gas fields was never going to be stopped, and that whether conditions on these loans were agreed or not, the whole enterprise would continue anyway. It became clear during our research that the IDB was playing for time. It delayed the final decision on whether or not it would lend to the consortium, but by artificially prolonging the negotiations it avoided being seen as the agency that ensured that the Camisea project would happen. However, by remaining engaged in these discussions, the IDB by default provided the project with international legitimacy, as it had not rejected it. Thus, given that many perceived IDB support as a stamp of quality – almost a hallmark for the conservation and social aspects of development – then this was indeed provided to the Camisea project, despite the slow process of decision making.⁴ The indigenous organisation, COMARU, complained that by engaging in negotiations with the IDB over Camisea, the international conservation organisations were also giving the project legitimacy, through a type of ‘greenwashing’.

This focus on the multilaterals and activities in Washington also took energy, resources, and focus away from Peru, where the real action was taking place between the companies and Peruvian government.⁵ By the time a decision was made by the IDB, a large proportion of the project investment (some have estimated 70 per cent) was already completed.⁶ So, what were protestors hoping for by this time? The answer: stringent conditions on the loan, which would oblige the Peruvian government and companies to address their concerns. However, subsequent events demonstrated that compliance with these conditions was weak, in large part due to complicity between the companies, the Peruvian government, and the IDB. Also, some external lobbying groups were more interested in general policy and standard setting for multilateral banks than with employing the best tactics for the specific case of Camisea. Thus, the needs of the Machiguenga inhabitants living in the affected area came a poor second to wider international goals. As we discovered, lobbyists regarded Camisea first and foremost as ‘emblematic’ or symbolic of a broader class of issues concerning multilateral bank policies and procedures, and hoped that the decision regarding conditions on the Camisea loan would serve as a precedent for similar lending in the future.

The insufficient focus on Peru and the decision not to pursue the Peruvian government were perhaps a mistake on the part of the INGOs. Perhaps the power, influence, and resources of the multilaterals were overestimated, compared with those of many national governments. While debates raged in Washington, DC, the Peruvian government was pretty much let off the hook. There is a range of obligations on the Peruvian state to protect the environment and the rights of people and their communities. Several legal controls that were meant to be in place were honoured mainly in the breach. Despite elaborate arrangements being made and agreed with banks and others, none of the safety mechanisms was considered worthwhile if it

impeded the government's efforts to get the gas flowing by the optimistic date that it had publicly announced and constantly repeated. The government wanted the royalties and income but was less keen to accept its responsibilities.⁷ The question must be asked: was the failure to engage the Peruvian government due to the fact that it was non-Peruvian actors who were setting the pace and controlling the strategy and funds? Were INGOs ignorant of Peruvian politics and entertaining a blind belief in the importance of the international banks? Or, as some INGO representatives articulated in interviews with us, was it that there were limits to their willingness to alienate the Peruvian government, because of their other 'substantial investments' in the country? In one way it makes sense that an international NGO should consider the limitations on its possible actions within a host country, but in this case those limitations then constrained the ability of local organisations to take up these issues, because the INGOs dominated the distribution of resources for this work.⁸ And many felt that their investment in their own local offices and staff was sufficient in itself as a commitment to Peru. There is a major issue here which requires debate: if INGOs do feel inhibited about carrying their lobbying into a host country, then should they be taking the lead themselves, or rather supporting local organisations to do so?⁹

International support for local civil society

International support for Peruvian civil society decreased during the late 1990s and continued to be insufficient into the present decade, as discussed below. More recently there seems to have been a change of approach among donors, and support has reappeared for Peruvian groups, both indigenous and NGOs. It is probably too early to judge how far this will go to redress the balance of resources that at present favours international rather than local NGOs.

In previous years the main approach to NGO funding in Peru had been what some call the 'partnership model', whereby INGOs and others supported local NGOs. However, a shift then occurred from partnership funding to INGOs' support for their own programmes. This move was observable not only among conservationists but also among some of the development INGOs, which increased their own staff and 'programmes' to the detriment of local NGOs.¹⁰ This led to a weakening of local civil-society institutions in Peru at a time when civil society was required to do things that foreign agencies could not. This policy on the part of INGOs probably undermined their own advocacy work in Washington and elsewhere, because it reduced the potential of Peruvian groups to lobby their own government, which would complement international campaigning. Some INGOs need to review whether their decision to develop local activity so as to become 'a local actor in development', rather than support the development of local institutional capacity, has actually reduced the overall strength of local civil society. The case of Camisea would suggest that local branches of INGOs did not have the same commitment and ability to deal with local issues that members of national civil society demonstrated.

Civil society in Peru was probably at its strongest in the late 1970s and early 1980s, demonstrated especially by active and vibrant NGOs allied to strong peasant movements, co-operatives, and others. Understandably, this was significantly weakened by the civil war and the subsequent neo-liberal policies implemented by the Fujimori government. Many Peruvian NGOs never fully recovered from the war, and some of the important links to popular movements also seemed to suffer during this period. Not only were the links between NGOs and popular organisations weakened, but the popular organisations themselves also suffered; some virtually disappeared or became mere shells of their former selves. In part because of the war, many people and NGOs retreated to Lima, being forced to abandon their work in more remote areas and their support for those most affected by the war. In the post-war period there seemed to be a slow

response by donors to renew development activities, and in some cases Peruvian groups failed to resume their former work in difficult areas such as the jungle. Meanwhile, many INGOs built up their own capacities, rather than those of local institutions, spending their resources on developing their own programmes on subjects of interest to them, rather than supporting local groups to address local issues. Many INGOs, both environmental and developmental, found that their priorities were driven by the international profile, strategies, and objectives of their organisations, rather than those specific to Peru. This dominance contributed to the undermining of local institutional capacity and commandeered resources that might have been otherwise available to local actors.

Conservation vs. indigenous rights

During the period of our study, we identified many rapid policy changes by the major international NGOs, and inconsistencies in policies towards Camisea generally and indigenous peoples in particular. At certain points, environmental groups were arguing that they were working closely with indigenous groups; then they seemed to change tack in favour of arguing a purist biodiversity line, which excluded local inhabitants – or even counted them as a part of the problem, not the solution.¹¹ Many mistakes were made by these organisations in the way they related to indigenous groups, and in the way they prioritised the use of their own resources. The phrase ‘parks not people’ summarises the attitude of some agencies in their attempts to establish reserves regardless of local priorities. Our study showed how one major environmental NGO was accused of pushing to get a park established, to the detriment of the land rights of local indigenous groups. Thus, where international and local groups should have been able to find at least the basis for a common agenda, they found themselves distrusting each other. Some INGOs felt that indigenous groups could not be trusted and were not interested in preserving the environment, while indigenous groups felt that some INGOs were determined to steal from them their lands and natural resources through bio-piracy (stealing local genetic resources and patenting them).

The end result was that advocacy strategies such as the INGO lobby over Camisea were not entirely successful, and on the ground their practice was also found to be wanting. Even if one accepts that the IDB decision to put strict conditions on its loan to the energy companies was important, the lack of follow-up on the part of the INGOs brings into question the end goal of their strategy. Neither the INGOs nor the national organisations devoted the resources (time, energy, creativity) needed to monitor the implementation of the conditions. This is the real lesson to be learned from Camisea: it is not enough to win policy decisions, because the real impact depends on their effective implementation – and this requires less glamorous follow-up and monitoring. Meanwhile the Machiguenga were left with too few allies for a crucial period during the actual construction of the pipeline and initiation of production. Within the past year, however, an NGO alliance in Lima has been resurrected and strengthened, and new programmes with COMARU are being planned. This would suggest that INGOs are trying to establish common ground with local indigenous groups.

The distance between policy departments and field offices

When INGOs began work on Camisea, particularly those involved in conservation, they did not start by identifying common ground with local NGOs and indigenous groups. Instead, many of their actions undermined local positions, something that some of them did eventually realise, but often too late. Thus, while the largest INGOs engaged in debates with the banks behind

closed doors, important time was lost when crucial preparatory work should have been carried out in Peru to equip both local community groups and others for the forthcoming debates and lobbying in Peru. It should be of more general concern that much advocacy is pursued by professional policy departments and agencies without due reference to those for whom they 'advocate'. In some cases, we can see that the division between policy departments and operational departments in certain NGOs has led to a huge schism between them, and an increasing distance from the reality of local people's lives and those claiming to work on their behalf. In the case of Camisea, the change of policy and new contacts now being developed between the various stakeholders will, one hopes, lead to more coherent and consistent impact from their joint activities.

Conflicts of interest

In addition to the issues raised above, it also became clear that there is an urgent need to ensure that any conflicts of interest are made transparent within an organisation before it discusses potentially controversial subjects with other external actors. At different points in our research we found several sensitive areas. For example, some of the US conservation agencies had long-term strategies to build programmes and alliances with major companies engaged in raw-material extraction and had received funds from them. It should also be noted that COMARU had received funding from the gas companies at work in Camisea, although they had argued that this was one of the conditions for exploitation in their region, and was also required because of the shortage of other forms of financial support. Other institutions, such as NGOs, quasi-government bodies, and academic groups were simultaneously competing for funding and for contracts to work as environmental monitors or researchers for the companies, international banks, and government.

Although there have been recent moves by some of the INGOs to try to identify common ground with local indigenous groups, it would appear that the indigenous discourse is more radical than that of the conservation groups. This has caused problems where some of the funders (private as well as government) in the USA in particular are signing up to a relatively apolitical view of conservation. Therefore, there is some degree of concern that private companies and certain conservation NGOs increasingly share views or are able at least to identify the sorts of compromise that indigenous groups perhaps find less appealing. Thus, the idea of parks and reserves that do not take into account indigenous claims to the land is a common and attractive funding option, as are some of the less transparent carbon-offsetting arrangements negotiated by international NGOs with little consultation with local groups.

The need for capacity building

Finally, it became clear to us in the research that the failure, until recently, to engage adequately in building the capacity of the Machiguenga and their organisation COMARU was a major mistake on the part of the INGOs. There was, with one international exception, little evidence of any concept of longer-term support from the INGOs for the indigenous organisation, in part because it is expensive, as there are logistical difficulties.¹² But considering the large offices and staff complements of many of the INGOs in Peru, it is hard to believe that resources could not be identified for a longer-term programme of capacity building. And when both local and international NGOs agencies have tried to engage with the Machiguenga, either they have used very poor methods (big workshops) or they seem more driven by the agendas of their own agencies than by the needs of the indigenous peoples in the area.¹³

Final remarks

In conclusion, by examining the strategies adopted by those engaged in the case of Camisea, we have identified several problematic areas that are probably illustrative of wider concerns. For INGOs there is a clear message to build alliances and work on several fronts, rather than being seduced by the apparent power of access in places like Washington, DC. There is a pressing need to create a more robust division of labour in international lobbying and advocacy. This was missing for most of the time in the case of Camisea, to the detriment of the final result. Any division of labour should be established in a way that takes into account local concerns and abilities. The extent to which a common agenda can be constructed should be discussed openly, and each organisation's priorities should be known to the other actors involved. It is tempting to conclude that INGOs have overestimated their own roles and power, but this is probably also a reflection of the fact that the power of some of the financial institutions too has been overestimated, especially in the case of middle-income countries with access to alternative forms of finance and commercial contracts.

The problems with the Camisea advocacy campaign meant that the focus and energy were not always applied to the main show. The attempt to internationalise the issue did little to reinforce the power of civil society in Peru, either nationally or locally within the affected region. Indeed, it could be argued that civil society has actually been weakened by the INGOs' policy of building their own institutions rather than developing the capacity of their erstwhile partners, along with their decision to follow their own strategies and agendas rather than respond to needs in the Peruvian Amazon. As such, they seem to have moved away from their traditional comparative advantage in being able to work with civil-society groups at the community level, in favour of a programme of closed dialogue with a small range of policy makers at the international level. Although as the case progressed there was evidence of a major change in approach and a greater degree of sharing and joint work among the different stakeholders, levels of trust among the Machiguenga had already been damaged. INGOs must be much more explicit about their priorities and much clearer about the extent to which these match up with those of indigenous communities. Ultimately, far more transparency is needed when international organisations take on issues that affect the livelihoods of vulnerable communities.

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Notes

1. Certain donors, including the UK government's Department for International Development under the direction of Clare Short, argued in favour of advocacy and against direct service delivery.
2. In this article I have referred to Northern-based NGOs working in several countries as International NGOs (INGOs) rather than Northern NGOs (NNGOs), as this seems to be the common term, although I am not convinced that their governance and other structures make them truly international.
3. To begin with, in the UK, it was suggested that these lobbying activities were putting 'charities' outside the law. However, Baroness Chalker, head of overseas development assistance under the Conservative government, argued that British NGOs should be more, not less, engaged in such work.
4. Some lobbyists argued, however, that the delay in reaching a final decision in the IDB on the loan approval was not due to stonewalling, but reflected the attempts by the US representative to define a

set of conditions on the loan which would make it acceptable on the one hand to the INGO lobbyists and their allies (in Congress and the media, among others), and on the other hand to the company, the consortium, and the Peruvian government and their allies. However, in a confidential interview for the study, an IDB staff member remarked that it was the companies and the Peruvian government that benefited from the delay in reaching final agreement on the loan.

5. It has been argued that while the project's critics were focusing their attention on the decisions in Washington, DC, the project was progressing on the ground. However, some of those involved argue that this was not only or even mainly due to the imposition of an INGO agenda over that of their Peruvian allies, but that the energy companies and the Peruvian government had consistently shown a lack of interest in listening to the critics, whereas the IDB, especially after the visit to Peru of (former US Ambassador) Alexander Watson as an IDB consultant, was perceived as an actor that could be influenced by lobbying.
6. In a sleight of hand, when it became clear that external funding would be delayed and might not be available in the quantities required, the government of President Toledo engaged in some dubious manoeuvres to obtain financing from national resources such as private banks and pension funds.
7. The *Defensoría del Pueblo* (official state ombudsperson), one of the few mechanisms respected by people at large as effective and legitimate, withdrew from involvement with the project when without consulting the *Defensoría* the Peruvian government contracted the services of a unit in the Catholic University to act as ombudsperson for the Camisea project. The Camisea ombudsman was widely regarded as partial to the companies and ineffective. At the time of writing it had yet to be seen whether the new government's involvement in the Camisea project would have a more beneficial impact on the Machiguenga.
8. Some of those involved felt that the focus of Peruvian NGOs and others on the IDB was due not to INGO dominance but rather to the fact that they perceived an opportunity to influence the IDB, whereas they saw no chance of influencing the government of Peru.
9. In the particular case of Camisea, the INGOs began with their own agendas and concerns but did eventually adapt them in the face of a broad coalition of (more than 20) Peruvian organisations. The larger environmental organisations were obliged to abandon their interest in negotiating a contract with the IDB to manage a Camisea Fund for the environment, whereas smaller activist organisations had to abandon their message of an outright 'no' to Camisea in order to support a more nuanced message and accept a loan with conditions.
10. Confidential interviews in 1999 during an evaluation of a major environmental NGO showed the organisation moving from funding partners to building up its own programmes run by its own staff. Similarly, at the time a large development INGO increased its own staff significantly, while reducing its grant making to local partners.
11. See Chapin 2004 as well as interviews conducted by the author in 1999, 2005, and 2006 with major agencies working in Peru.
12. The international exception was the financial support from Oxfam America, although one should also note the long-term support from CEDIA, a local NGO. This organisation has recently encountered serious problems in raising resources for its work, despite having worked in the Camisea region for more than 25 years.
13. Overall the ability of COMARU to absorb funds was limited by the capacity of its own staff, but the capacity building offered to them often seemed to be very short-term or poorly conceptualised and failed to promote a longer-term strategy for COMARU.

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