

[The Ecologist](#)

By Gerald Lebrun

With the collapse of the Yasuni-ITT Initiative, and the Ecuadorian President claiming he has no choice but to drill for oil in one of the world's most pristine areas of rainforest, Gerald Lebrun explains why we must resist and fight this harder than ever.....

'The Yasuni must become a symbol of the struggle for sustainable development.'

The Yasuní-TT Initiative was a unique scheme, supported by 90% of the Ecuadorian population, under which the Ecuadorian state agreed not to exploit, indefinitely, about 850 million barrels of oil in the Yasuní National Park.



The Park was designated by UNESCO in 1989 as a Biosphere Reserve and is one of the world's top 20 [biodiversity hotspots](#) . In the Yasuní territory there are also several indigenous populations, including members of the Waorani people, the Tagaeris and the Taromenanes, who live in voluntary isolation.

The thinking behind the Yasuní-ITT Initiative was to avoid atmospheric emissions of 400 million metric tons dioxide carbon, but it would also indirectly protect uncontacted indigenous groups and the biodiversity from oil exploration already present in the Ecuadorian Amazon jungle.

In exchange for this protection, the Ecuadorian government sought \$3.6 billion of financial compensation from the international community - equivalent to half of the profits that would have been earned from the exploitation of this resource.

However, in his televised speech of August 15, 2013, President Rafael Correa officially confirmed the termination of the Yasuni-ITT initiative, stating;

"El mundo nos ha fallado" "the world has let us down"

Rafael Correa ended the Initiative, stating he had only received \$13.3 million under the Yasuni-ITT agreement, but this figure is disputed with Ivonne Baki the manager of the Trust, the amount collected via the UN funds totaled \$376 million. (It is interesting to note too there was a distinct lack of financial support from the US and China - the two countries that contribute most to the greenhouse effect.)

But looking beyond this polemic on international contributions we find that it is actually a fallacious pretext. Whilst the Ecuadorian President appeared to champion the protection of a National Park, the Ecuadorian government was cutting the same Park into blocs for future exploitation. So how could Rafael Correa believe that the world would rally together and donate when he threatened to deploy "Plan B", i.e. the exploitation of the Park, if the international community did not pay?

Journalists, activists, campaigners and politicians have denounced the progress of oil exploitation in the Amazon, particularly the Biosphere Reserve of which Yasuni is a part, with increasing vehemence over the last decade. Yet the exploitation of Yasuni began as far back as the 1990s, with the drillings of the Maxus Company, after which the main road that allows access to the heart of the Park is now named. And currently over 40% of the Park is already divided into blocks that are allocated to domestic and foreign oil companies.

With a poor history of commitment to preservation plus the steady increase in oil activities around the Yasuni it is likely many countries may have been discouraged from donating. And from the very beginning, there has been a sense that this whole initiative is no more than a shameful employed masquerade to boost the green credentials of the Ecuadorian government.

Ecuador is totally dependent on its oil resources which account for over 50% of its exports. However, oil revenues have not been used to seriously develop the potential of other sectors such as agriculture.

The Pacific coast of the country has a fertile soil and a humid tropical climate and could develop tropical crops with a higher value than the current banana monoculture. Neither has the oil wealth benefitted the majority of working Ecuadorians - instead it has merely created an urban middle class who work for the oil companies, furthering societal divides.

The economic logic of Ecuador is primarily an extractive logic, but this approach has only a limited future. Oil reserves vary, according to estimates, between 4000 and 5000 million barrels. Currently the Ecuadorian production is roughly 500,000 barrels per day, with a government goal is to reach 550,000 barrels per day in 2014.

It is an optimistic assumption that this production allows 24 years of operation. The only additional activity seriously considered by the government is mining (especially for gold and copper extraction), another activity that will cause huge social and environmental impacts.

Oil exploitation is itself highly contaminating, leaving oil residues that infiltrate soils and contaminate rivers, killing wildlife and flora. Native peoples who were once hunter-gatherers lose their resources and end their lives as beggars in the cities created by the oil boom.

Roads and pipe-lines created to facilitate access to the operating area and the evacuation of production become an entrance to outsiders. These settlers greatly increase deforestation and environmental pressure, severley restricting the living space of the native populations.

This situation has given arise to a number of [violent conflicts](#) with the settlers or oil workers.

The number of these conflicts that result in human death are on the increase and other poverty-related issues such as delinquency, prostitution and disease have become part of the local life.

In his televised speech of August 15, 2013, President Correa tried to "sell" the decision to exploit the Yasuni oil, promising to fight against this poverty and to launch a series of projects (schools, hospitals, roads, etc.). He also promised that the operation would not affect more than 1% of the park and that the environmental impact would be zero.

The opposition to the exploitation of Yasuni led by environmental activists and indigenous people organisations called for a national referendum on the Yasuni and for a large demonstration on 27 August 2013. That day, the government banned access to the city center of Quito to the anti-extraction protesters and deployed large numbers of police, leading to clashes with protesters. The government organised its own event using administration officials and commentators brought from outside. And it was the pro-government demonstration that was widely presented in the official media.

The following day, in a televised interview, President Correa said that he is not opposed to a referendum on the Yasuni. However, the organisation of such a consultation will take time. In addition, the government has at its disposal all the media and almost every major newspaper in the country to 'prepare' public opinion. As noted by a Ecuadorian humorist, how can we win a game against an opponent who will choose the stadium, the players and the referees?

The fight for Yasuni goes beyond the mere protection of a natural park in Ecuador. All of Latin America is experiencing a wave of extractive projects, and local governments that have never been interested in sustainable development, try to impose these contaminating and damaging projects by any means, including force.

This short-term extractive economy exists to export the resources, make money for the minority and leave the problems for the local people and wildlife. Governments talk officially of development; it is true that a portion of the population benefits from this type of economy, but the majority suffers the consequences, loss of resource, expropriation, violence, contamination.

The Yasuni must become a symbol of the struggle for sustainable development on the continent

of South America, like the fight against the Yanacocha-Conga project in Peru or the fight against the Pascua Lama project in Chile. The struggle for sustainable development is primarily a fight for life.

"We must save the condors. Not so much because we need the condors, but because we need to develop human qualities to save them. For these are the very ones we will need to save ourselves."

For that, we must save the Yasuni.

Gerald Lebrun has spent 25 years collaborating with various NGOs working in the areas of human rights, environment and protection of indigenous peoples, specifically in Latin America.