



The riddle of leaving the oil in the soil—Ecuador's Yasuní-ITT project from a discourse perspective[☆]

Cristina Espinosa^{*}

Institute of Forest and Environmental Policy, University of Freiburg, Tennenbacher Str. 4, 79106 Freiburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

The preservation of the cultural and biological features of the Yasuní biosphere reserve in Ecuador has been historically in conflict with oil activities. Astonishingly, in 2006 the government announced that this area, encompassing one fifth of the country's confirmed oil reserves, would be left indefinitely untapped if the international community contributed at least half of the revenue that the extraction of this oil would generate. Given Ecuador's oil dependency, this seems to be a riddle. Using a case study approach, this article applies concepts of discourse research to examine how the Yasuní-ITT project came about. It is shown how discursive elements related to indigenous peoples' rights, biodiversity conservation and climate change were drawn together and triggered a discontinuity in the dominant tradition of oil extraction. The specific socio-historical context in which these interwoven story-lines were inserted into formal politics is examined. Finally, a discussion is presented assessing the underlying discursive mechanisms that contributed to gaining government support as well as the institutionalization difficulties faced by the oil-moratorium.

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1. Introduction

On 26th of June 1972, oil started to flow through Ecuador's "main artery," a 503 kilometer-long pipeline stretching from the Amazon to the Pacific (Acosta, 2009, p. 40; Kimmerling, 2006, p. 415). During the inauguration ceremony of this infrastructural project, General Rodríguez-Lara, the head of state, declared that:

Petroleum would help us in a prominent way to resolve the problems afflicting the country and particularly the Ecuadorian people, and from amongst the Ecuadorian people, the marginalized part, the pauper, which, because of humanity's sarcasm, lingers in misery, in slums, in the lack of health services (Noticiero Nacional, 1972)*.¹

Ever since, Ecuador's identity has, to a large extent, been constructed around petroleum. Yet, 35 years later, president Correa (2007) announced before the UN General Assembly that:

For the first time, an oil producer country, Ecuador, where a third of the resources of the State depends on the exploitation of the above mentioned resources, forgoes this income for the well-being of the whole of humanity and invites the world to join these efforts through a fair compensation, in order that together we can lay the foundations for a *more human and fair civilization* (original emphasis 2007).

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^{*} Tel.: +49 761/203 3730; fax: +49 761/203 3729.

E-mail address: cristina.espinosa@ifp.uni-freiburg.de.

¹ All quotations marked with * were translated by the author from Spanish to English.

Through this official declaration the Yasuní-ITT project became known worldwide. This is an internationally binding agreement through which Ecuador refrains from the extraction of 20% of its confirmed petroleum reserves in exchange for an international contribution of at least 50% of the revenues the state would receive from extracting this oil, \$USD 3.6 billion (Larrea et al., 2009, p. 7). This decision is puzzling considering that contrary to the promises made by Rodríguez-Lara in his 1972 speech, Ecuador's population continues to suffer from poverty (World Bank, 2004) and the state's budget continues to depend heavily on oil revenues.

From the perspective of positivist policy analysis, the Yasuní-ITT project would be understood as the result of a rational decision making process. This reading would assume that decision makers first empirically identified a problem, then formulated objectives leading to an optimal solution, and after assigning a numerical value to each cost and benefit associated with the consequences, selected the Yasuní-ITT project because it was the most effective and efficient alternative (Fischer, 2003, pp. 4–5). In this article, a different reading of the Yasuní-ITT story is presented, because adopting such a positivist approach would disregard the ways in which meaning is collectively created and ascribed to socio-political realities. In interpretive policy analysis the way socio-political realities are perceived and interpreted is seen to be a crucial aspect as it determines the nature of policy responses (Hannigan, 1995, pp. 2–3). Departing from this criticism, this article seeks to answer the question of how the Yasuní-ITT project came about from a discourse research perspective. It argues that the decision of "leaving the oil in the soil" was enabled by the creative assemblage of elements from discourses related to the area where this oil is found: the Yasuní. Thus, after presenting concepts of discourse

research in Section 2 and explaining the methodology applied in Section 3, Section 4 reconstructs how the story-lines related to territorial rights, biodiversity conservation, climate change and human rights were drawn together. Afterwards, Section 5 depicts how, at a given socio-historical moment, key political actors were forced to accept the rhetorical power of this discursive formation. Moreover, this section explores the complexities of introducing a pioneer policy project challenging the hegemonic option of oil extraction. The article concludes with a discussion of the underlying discursive mechanisms that were crucial for the idea of the oil-moratorium to gain government support and of the institutionalization difficulties faced by the oil-moratorium.

2. Discourse research: concepts and definitions

Discourse research proves useful for studying the policy process because language plays a central role in the production and reproduction of meaning (Miliken, 1999, p. 29). Although there are various discourse approaches (Angermüller, 2011), this paper draws particularly on elements related to Foucault's insights on discourse. Foucault, in contrast to linguists and semioticians, did not focus on the study of language systems. Instead he was interested in "the law of existence of statements, that which rendered them possible—them and none other in their place" (Foucault, [1968] 1991, p. 59). Hence the Foucauldian tradition of discourse research takes broader socio-historic and institutional contexts in which statements were produced and reproduced in accounts (Hook, 2011, p. 524; Keller, 2011, p. 51; Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004, p. 193). This facilitates the examination of the "constitutive capacity of discourse" or how discourse actively produces society along various dimensions, including objects of knowledge, social subjects, relationships, and perceptual frameworks (Fischer, 2003, p. 38; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003, p. 13). Such elements position discourse research within the field of political action (Hajer, 1995; Hook, 2011, p. 523; Keller, 2005, p. 49).

More formally, discourse is defined as "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). As such, discourses are intrinsically bound with political power (Dryzek, 2005, p. 9; Hook, 2011, p. 524; Keller, 2011, p. 54; van Dijk, 1993, p. 255). Against this background, politics is defined as a struggle for discursive hegemony (Hajer, 1995, p. 59). Hegemony is a political relation (Howarth, 2010, p. 318) involved in the construction (and stabilization) of a dominant discursive formation (Torfing, 1999, p. 101). What is at stake is "the fixing of collective symbolic orders" (Keller, 2011, p. 52). Hajer (2006, p. 71) suggests that there are two dimensions involved in the process of attaining discursive hegemony: structuration and institutionalization. Structuration refers to the moment in which a discursive formation starts to dominate the way a given unit and its interrelation with other elements of the world are conceptualized, forcing central actors to accept its rhetorical power (ibid). If particular institutional arrangements and the policy process are directed according to such discursive formation, then institutionalization is attained (ibid).

The question of agency, relevant for discourse research, is a bone of contention. On the one hand, Foucault considers that subjects are not all-powerful agents, strategically producing and instrumentalizing discourses. Instead, he argues that discourse is "a space of differentiated subject positions and subject functions" (Foucault, [1968] 1991, p. 58). On the other hand, Keller (2011, pp. 52–54) notes that discourse should not account for the agency of actors and considers the processing of discourses through society as "a dialectical interplay between actors producing statements, and the pre-given as well as emerging structuration and socio-historical means they have to draw upon." This dialectical conceptualization of agency and structure is adopted in this article because it allows the assessment of actors' strategic actions who, according

to Hajer (1995, p. 54), are "selecting and adapting thoughts, mutating and creating them, in the continued struggle for argumentative victory against rival thinkers." During this struggle, they strategically produce frames to make others see situations according to their views (Tarrow, 2006, pp. 59–64) and seek to position other actors in a specific way. In other words, actors assemble story-lines (Hajer, 1995, pp. 66–67) which enable them to interpret bits of information and put them together in accounts of social reality (Dryzek, 2005, p. 9; Wagenaar and Cook, 2003, p. 156). Usually story-lines summarize complex arguments, are used as short-hand devices in discussions, and often conclude debates.

Story-lines are means through which support can be mobilized, acting as the cement holding together discourse-coalitions (Hajer, 1995, p. 66). Although discourse-coalitions can be understood in principle as political coalitions, the basis of the alliance between discourse-coalition members is language and not interests or values. Actors' interests are not given *a priori* but evolve via discursive interactions. In that sense, story-lines potentially change the previous understanding of what actors' interests are (Wagenaar and Cook, 2003, p. 156). The concept of discourse-coalitions also broadens the scope of policy analysis because it proposes that politics unfold not only in the state's institutions but in every milieu in which story-lines are being forged, including NGOs and scientific circles. Discourse-coalitions are moreover linguistic-performative configurations shaping social realities, as their utterances are realized through social practices (ibid, p. 142). In this regard, practices offer a "knowledge script about the "proper" way of acting" (Keller, 2011, p. 155), encompassing routines and repetitive actions through which actors produce and reproduce the set of story-lines holding them together (Hajer, 2006, p. 70). These observable discursive elements are secured by underlying discursive mechanisms.

This analysis of the Yasuni-ITT project applies the concepts of story-lines, discourse-coalitions, framing, practices, structuration and institutionalization, to reconstruct the process through which "leaving the oil in the soil" became a government policy. Thus the broader discursive field is only partially depicted, and the counter-arguments from the coalition supporting oil extraction are only briefly touched upon.

3. Methodology

Using a case study approach (Yin, 2003), the following data sources were consulted and analyzed: official government documents, speeches and presentations; academic articles and published books; in-depth expert interviews; and newspaper articles.

Official government sources were accessed through the web-sites <http://yasuni-itt.gob.ec/> and www.amazoniaporlvida.org. Additionally, during the 15th Conference of the Parties (CoP15) of the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) it was possible to obtain first-hand access to official governmental declarations about the Yasuni-ITT project which were taped and later transcribed. The academic sources were located using search engines such as JSTOR and Science Direct and through the virtual library of FLACSO Andes.

Expert interview partners were identified by reviewing published articles about the project, official documents, and through recommendations from other experts, applying a snowball sampling technique (Littig, 2009, p. 103). In total, seven in-depth interviews of about an hour each were conducted with indigenous representatives (1 interview), environmental and human rights activists (2 interviews), scientists (2 interviews) and government representatives (2 interviews) between December 2009 and September 2010. The interviews were taped and transcribed.

To complement the information provided by expert interviewees, contextualize specific statements, and reconstruct actors' positions, newspaper articles were collected. The digital archive www.explored.

com.ec from the group Hoy was principally used because it was the only website containing newspaper articles about Ecuador dating from 1990 onwards. The articles contained in this digital archive are mainly from the daily newspaper Hoy; however, this collection also contains some articles from other major newspapers in Ecuador such as El Comercio and El Universo.

The interactive process of creating meaning and relevance through the interaction with key informants (Littig, 2009, p. 102) complemented the information obtained through the above mentioned data sources and facilitated “the construction and interpretation of particular discursive formations within their specific socio-historical conditions” (Keller, 2005).

4. Assembling story-lines to strengthen the oil-moratorium

The Yasuní is found at the intersection of the Andes, the Amazon and the Equator where multiple black and white rivers flow through a landscape of moist evergreen forest (Rivadeneira-Roura, 2007, p. 235). This area has been home to the Waorani² and their relatives, Tagaeri, for centuries (Rival, 1994, p. 263). More recently, the Yasuní has had to accommodate new human populations, such as the Taromenane, Kichwa, and Shuar indigenous people as well as *colonos* (Martínez, 2010, pp. 78–81). Likewise, the Yasuní hosts an exuberant variety of flora and fauna (Bass et al., 2010). Based on these natural characteristics, the Yasuní National Park (YNP) was established in 1979 with an initial area of 679,000 hectares (Rivadeneira-Roura, 2007, p. 235). In 1989, it became part of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Program.

The maintenance of Yasuní's cultural and biophysical features has been repeatedly threatened by extractive activities (Narváez, 2007, p. 45), of which the intended drilling of the Ishpingo–Tambococha–Tiputini (ITT) oil fields is a recent example. Hence, in the following four sub-sections the configuration of a discourse-coalition around the idea of an oil-moratorium in the Yasuní area is depicted. Each sub-section examines one major story-line underpinning the Yasuní-ITT project: territoriality and cultural identity, biodiversity conservation, indigenous peoples' rights, and climate change mitigation. Although these accounts suggest a time sequence, there is chronological overlapping.

4.1. Territoriality and cultural identity

Anthropologists describe the Waorani as a semi-nomadic group of hunter-gatherers who were originally divided into four warring and dispersed clans living in the Yasuní (Rival, 1994, pp. 257–262). Accounts about the Waorani stress that they had limited contact with outsiders and that they defended their homeland fiercely. Based on the deadly attacks on workers of Royal–Dutch–Shell, it can be interpreted that the Waorani perceived the arrival of the company during the 1930s as an intrusion in their territory. Royal–Dutch–Shell was therefore forced to leave before it could drill the reserves of heavy petroleum it claimed to have found (Finer et al., 2009, p. 6). From that point on, the Waorani were discursively constructed as savages in need of “pacification.” This encouraged the activities of evangelical missionaries which resulted in the forced contraction of 80% of the Waorani population into less than 10% of their ancestral territory as part of the undertakings of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in the 1950s (Trujillo Montalvo, 2001, p. 87). Only the Tagaeri, one of the four Waorani clans, were able to avoid this evangelization campaign by fleeing into the most remote parts of the Yasuní (Cabodevilla, 2007, p. 111). Environmental activists and actors critical of oil activities framed this situation as the result of an alliance between the state, oil companies and missionaries to

enable oil prospection (e.g. Bravo, 2005, p. 13; Colleoni and Proaño, 2010).

As the SIL weakened and the surrounding forests were depleted in the early 1970s, many Waorani returned to what they perceived as their territory (Finer et al., 2009, p. 8). There they encountered *colonos*, who arrived in the area with the opening of the Auca road by Texaco in 1967. Tensions over access and use of the rainforest surfaced immediately. To strengthen their position in relation to incoming dwellers, the Waorani established the “Organization of Waorani Nationalities of Ecuador” (ONHAE)³ (Real, 1997, p. 317) which joined the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) as well as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). The ONHAE requested the government to grant the Waorani legal title over a portion of their territory (Rival, 1994, p. 261). Like other indigenous people from the Amazon (Sawyer, 1997, p. 70), they argued that the maintenance of their cultural identity was determined by their capacity to exert control over what they called their homeland.

Government officials considered the Waorani's opposition to oil activities as “subversive” and harmful to the modernization project that had taken-off with Texaco's discovery of the Lago Agrio reserves in 1967. Petroleum had become the medium of articulation of citizenship, nation, and sovereignty (Perreault and Valdivia, 2010, p. 694). Oil-revenues were invested in the construction of highways which, besides facilitating commercial exchange, assisted colonization campaigns linked to agrarian-reform programs (Kimmerling, 2006, p. 447). These revenues also financed various subsidies which strengthened the sense of citizenship among Ecuadorians. Hence, the government and oil companies justified violations of existing regulations to allow oil activities with the argument that the country's development depended on oil.

The YNP case is an illustration of this considering that its boundaries were modified twice to allow oil prospection and drilling. In 1986, for instance, blocks 14, 16, and 17 were leased to oil companies despite their being located within the YNP (Bravo, 2005, pp. 48–49). Some years later, an inter-ministerial decree established the Waorani Ethnic Reserve (WER), amputating block 16 from the park. President Borja framed this action as a symbol of his administration's respect towards the environment and indigenous rights. However, upon receiving the ownership titles, the representative of the Waorani people, Ayuma Tenco contested Borja's framing of the situation and reinforced his people's claims arguing that:

This ratification of our territory is not completely your will. It is the product of years of struggle by our people, of national organizations and of national and international solidarity. Furthermore, Mr. President, we ask that you immediately stop the construction of roads in our territory, that you evict the colonizers that have invaded our lands and the oil companies that are destroying our forests. Someday we will have nothing. If you do not meet our demands, we will defend what belongs to us with our own spears (SAIIC, 1990).

Paradoxically, the small print on the land titles granted by the Institute for Agrarian Reform and Colonization noted that the Waorani “are not allowed to interfere with mineral and oil exploitation by the national government or authorized individuals” (Martínez, 2010, p. 67). Thus the oil company Maxus took over block 16 in 1992 and was authorized to open a new road – the Maxus road – into the WER (Narváez, 1996, p. 54). Waorani leaders claimed that the new road “would bring in not only oil companies but also colonizers who, with their “civilization,” destroy everything in their path: our culture, our territory, our lives” (CONAIE, 1992). They proposed instead an “oil-moratorium” to avoid “an act of ethnocide destroying our natural life” (Hoy, 1994)*.

² The Spanish version of this indigenous group is Huaorani.

³ The ONHAE was later renamed “Waorani Nationalities of Ecuador” (NAWE).

More specifically, the Waorani requested the discontinuation of oil operations in the Yasuní for a decade, hoping to strengthen their representative organizations and to develop strategies to face the social and environmental challenges posed by oil activities in the meantime. They also expected that drilling technologies with less environmental impacts would be developed. Government officials and oil company representatives overlooked this proposal and focused instead on the 7th oil bidding round (Fontaine, 2003, p. 472). Nonetheless, the oil-moratorium request resounded in Ecuadorian and foreign NGOs concerned about the rainforest and the future of its native populations (e.g. Acción Ecológica and Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund) for whom the Waorani were a symbol (Rival, 1994, p. 255).

By that time, the campaign *Amazonía por la Vida* (Amazon for Life) had been launched, orchestrating the activities of about a dozen environmental NGOs against oil activities in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Varea, 1997, p. 217). Different practices were developed to attract media and public attention. For example, in August 1990, activists occupied the offices of the oil company Conoco in Quito (Hoy, 1990). Another important practice was marches enacted principally by indigenous people. Later on, this campaign supported and publicized the emblematic lawsuit enacted by 30,000 peasants and indigenous people against the multinational Chevron-Texaco (see Kimmerling, 2006).

Through interactions with environmental NGOs, the Waorani discourse against oil activities, originally built around territorial claims, started to incorporate discursive elements related to the environment. Thus, in an official press release from October 1992, the Waorani expressed their disapproval of Maxus' activities in their land and underscored that they were "protecting the environment for the good of all Ecuadorians and the world" (CONAIE). This discursive formation, which can be labeled as "eco-indigenous" (Pieck and Moog, 2009), illustrates how actors redefine their positions through discursive interactions.

4.2. The most biodiverse place on Earth

Several scientists were carrying out research in the Yasuní and witnessed directly the socio-environmental impacts of oil activities, especially those caused by the Auca and Maxus roads. Verónica Quitigüiña, policy, partnership and outreach analyst at the scientific organization Finding Species recalls that:

During the time we were there, when we were also entering, we saw lots of animals crossing the road, which is additionally a controlled road with restricted entrance because the access is controlled by the oil-company. Hence, even though the road was controlled, we saw the impact that this had on animals because each time we saw less animals on the road borders. This occurred because the road enabled Waorani and Kichwa indigenous people to hunt more as they had the facility that the oil workers could help them to transport the freshly hunted meat (Quitigüiña, unpublished)*.

As soon as a government permit allowing Brazilian Petrobras to construct a new road into the YNP, as part of the operations of block 31, was made public, scientists tried to forge alliances and protest against it. Nonetheless, most scientists working in the Yasuní had barely had contact with NGOs like Acción Ecológica engaged in actions against oil activities. They also questioned the conservation credentials of the ONHAE and were skeptical of aligning with Waorani leaders. They therefore built upon existing scientific connections and organized the "Yasuní Day Research Symposium" in October 2004 (Finer, unpublished). Through that event they were able to see how their particular expertise about the area fits into the bigger puzzle. Consequently a technical report was prepared, signed by more than 50 "Scientists concerned for the Yasuní National Park" (SCYNP)

and disseminated among policy-makers. Copies of this technical report were sent as an *amicus* for the legal proceedings that were initiated in 2004 as part of what became a distinctive practice of the discourse-coalition opposing oil activities in the YNP.

In the technical report, SCYNP advocated for a law prohibiting road-building in national parks where resource extraction was allowed and suggested that only off-shore drilling techniques should be used in environmentally sensitive areas (2004, p. 2). They predicted that a new road would inevitably trigger deforestation, colonization, migration, habitat fragmentation, commercial hunting, and acculturation (ibid). Using a mathematical language combined with memorable similes, they described how the Yasuní was "the most biodiverse place on Earth." For example, the greatly diverse tree community of 2274 tree and shrub species in this area was illustrated in the statement that "just one hectare in the Yasuní has more tree and shrub species than the entire United States and Canada combined" (SCYNP, 2004, p. 2). This became a short-hand device in discussions about biodiversity in the Yasuní.

The report endorsed a second story-line regarding the global conservation significance of the Yasuní. This story-line was related to the "refugial theory" (Haffer, 1969) which argues that, during the glaciation periods of the Pleistocene, species migrated to the higher areas of the Amazon basin. There, patches of rain-forest were preserved which, with the arrival of new species, turned into mega-diverse spots. The Napo-Ucayali region, where the Yasuní is located, is considered to be one of these Pleistocene refuges. Although scientific arguments have been presented refuting the "refugial theory" (Bush et al., 1990; Colinvaux, 1987), SCYNP adopted a similar line of argumentation, concluding an open academic debate. They suggested that while the Amazon basin might experience "savannization" due to global climate change, the Yasuní could retain its biophysical characteristics and become a refuge (SCYNP, 2004, p. 2). Additionally, they anticipated that the YNP as the largest strictly protected area in the Napo-Ucayali region "would be able to sustain viable populations of different species in the long term" (ibid, p. 3). Consequently this group of scientists vested Yasuní with new meaning by exalting the value of its biodiversity in the context of global climate change.

The actions of the SCYNP increased activism from scientific circles, which continued to reproduce these story-lines through letters written by collective authors (e.g. Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation, Smithsonian Institute) and diffused through online networks (e.g. Forest Conservation Blog, Environment News Service). The campaign *Amazonía por la Vida*, which was reactivated under the slogan *Yasuní por Siempre* (Forever Yasuní) in 2004, profited from these scientific story-lines that were made publicly available.

4.3. The last free people

Indigenous groups from the Amazon have resisted attempts at domination and evangelization since colonial times and have therefore largely been depicted as "ferocious, primitive and mythical beings" (Rival, 1994, pp. 265, 363). Nonetheless, as extractive activities in their ancestral territories expanded and resulted in violent confrontations, they started to be portrayed as victims of acculturation, who used violence in self-defense. Anthropologists constructed this image, proposing that after their "pacification," the Waorani turned their subsistence practices into commercial activities and obtained monetary income from work for oil companies, tourism, and the sale of handicrafts and timber (Lu, 2001, p. 427). They largely depicted Waorani as suffering from new problems like alcoholism and experiencing severe cultural shock and stress (Kimmerling, 2006, p. 459). The Waorani internalized this discursive position as is evident in a letter to the then president of Ecuador, Alfredo Palacio, dated 12 July 2005:

It has been 15 years since we came together as a people, but the industries have come to divide us. Now the Huaorani are leaving

their lands to work for the companies. And each time, we become poorer. The Huaorani buy alcohol with the money that they earn from the oil producers, and they are moving to live in Puyo. Others have been going to live on the Maxus highway; they no longer live as we lived before. They buy weapons and sell animals, and because of that, there are no longer monkeys; there is no longer food. They go out to Coca and drink beer. Our jungles are becoming empty, and in this way our nation is being killed (Waorani, unpublished).

Echoing the anthropological discourse about the Waorani and the Waorani's own nostalgic accounts, the discourse-coalition opposing oil activities in the Yasuní disseminated the idea that the harmonic relation with nature that the “pacified” Waorani lost was preserved by those groups living in isolation. In this regard, Cabodevilla, Smith and Rivas (2004, p. 120) argue that isolated people “can be considered as the true guardians of the rainforest and of the Waorani territory.” In this way the story-line of the “last free people” has been assembled, resembling the European myth of the “noble savage” that idealizes the innate goodness – in this case sustainability – of those human beings not corrupted by civilization (Ellingson, 2001, p. 1).

However, beyond these somehow naïve representations of people living in isolation are cases of severe human rights violation. These were provoked by the Ecuadorian state's failure to meet its obligations towards indigenous people enshrined in international agreements such as the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention. For many years the changing government administrations denied the existence of indigenous people living in isolation, constructing them as invisible and fomented oil activities in the Yasuní. They authorized the opening of roads for oil activities which encouraged illegal logging. When prized timber like *Cedrelinga catenaeformis* became scarcer, loggers mobilized the support of hostile Waorani and went deeper into the Yasuní to harvest it (Colleoni and Proaño, 2010, p. 20). Encounters with the Tagaeri and Taromenane triggered deadly confrontations which could have led to the suspected extermination of the Tagaeri (Proaño, unpublished). The massacre of at least 15 Taromenane – mainly women and children – that occurred in 2003 is also part of these series of forced contacts (Cabodevilla, 2007, p. 118). Human rights activists and indigenous representatives reached out to international institutions such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights pressuring the Ecuadorian government to ensure the protection of these groups (Bravo, 2005, p. 58; Real, 1997, p. 309).

Through these advocacy practices the government was forced to control illegal logging in the areas where the isolated people live by demarcating an “intangible zone” of 758,000 ha (Finer et al., 2009, p. 9). These practices were deficient and further pressure from human rights and indigenous groups resulted in the adoption of the National Policy for Isolated People in 2007 (Colleoni and Proaño, 2010, p. 37). Yet, the human rights activist Milagros Aguirre (2010) argues that even this program is insufficient because “These people are surrounded by petroleum, timber, colonos, without alternative. The contact is being forced. These groups are fenced.” Simultaneously, the oil-moratorium has been framed as a necessary measure to protect people living in isolation, and the story-line about respecting the “last free people” has become a corner-stone of the evolving discourse underpinning Ecuador's Yasuní-ITT project. The government has used the Yasuní-ITT project strategically every time human right activists claim that isolated groups inhabit other areas designated for oil activities (e.g. block Armadillo).

4.4. Mitigating global climate change

Another means of strengthening the discourse underpinning the oil-moratorium was by elaborating a more explicit link to climate

change. A first “entry point” was the scientific evidence showing that CO_{2eq} emissions stemming from the burning of fossil fuels in industrial processes were a principal cause of climate change (Giddens, 2009, p. 18). Accordingly, when governments agreed on reducing their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol they were aware that the use of fossil fuels needed to be diminished. Through cooperation and exchange with transnational networks like Oilwatch, Acción Ecológica borrowed elements of the climate change debate to strengthen the discourse around “leaving the oil in the soil.” It was argued that as fossil fuel dependence cannot be immediately eliminated, the non-extraction of petroleum should be prioritized in places characterized by biological and cultural diversity such as the Yasuní (Oilwatch, 2007).

Another discursive element drawn from the climate change debate was that of “common but differentiated responsibilities.” This notion is made up of three components: first, the common partnership among states in pursuing agreed norms; second, the different implementation capabilities; and third, the historical differences in states' contribution to specific problems (Brown Weiss, 2002, p. 366). Regarding climate change, governments recognized that the largest share of global GHG emissions originated in industrialized countries, while the per capita emissions in countries with developing economies were relatively low (United Nations (United Nations, 1992, p. 1). Against this background, it was argued that countries with developing economies had the right to increase their share of global emissions to meet social and development needs (ibid). Meanwhile, industrialized countries were assigned binding emissions-reduction targets and were required to provide financial and technical resources for climate adaptation and mitigation programs in developing countries (ibid). The discursive construct of “common but differentiated responsibilities” enabled the crafting of an argument for obtaining funding for the Yasuní-ITT project. This helped to sway national political concerns about the financial viability of the oil-moratorium (Sevilla, unpublished).

Indeed, once the oil-moratorium became an official government project, Ecuador sought to introduce it as a climate change mitigation mechanism in a post-Kyoto agreement and to access fresh funds. However, the request for financial compensation for “leaving the oil in the soil” in view of its contribution to climate change mitigation was framed as means of re-paying the ecological debt. Actors concerned with environmental justice, like Oilwatch, preferred using this discursive construct instead of appealing to “common but differentiated responsibilities” because it stressed that current environmental problems originated in colonialism when unequal exchange relations were established between the “core” and “periphery” (Oilwatch, 2000). Moreover, it considers that countries from the global north have recklessly used fossil fuels for their industrialization and hence abusively occupied the atmosphere, a global common, with their emissions (ibid). Through this story-line countries from the global north are represented as debtors to the countries from the global south. This challenges the hegemonic discourse of development in which the global north is an ideal which the underdeveloped world, constructed as its antithesis, needs to attain (Escobar, 1992, p. 411).

Members of the Correa administration borrowed the discursive construct of the “ecological debt.” The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Fander Falconí, argued during a promotional event of the Yasuní-ITT project at the Klimaforum⁴ that:

Non-industrialized countries are like passive smokers. We suffer because of the disproportionate burning of petroleum, gas and coal from rich countries. And also from the deforestation often caused by the external and badly paid demand for biomass (2009)*.

⁴ The Klimaforum was a climate summit held in Copenhagen in December 2009 as the global civil society counterpart to the UN conference.

Such borrowing took place because the “ecological debt” echoed the “21st century socialism” discourse of president Correa’s political party Alianza PAIS. This discourse underpins processes of political transformation occurring in other countries of the region like Venezuela and Bolivia and recycles ideas of Latin American independence heroes like Simón Bolívar, combining them with dictions of Karl Marx and Che Guevara regarding social equity and anti-imperialism (Wilson, 2008, p. 527).

Yet entering the climate change discursive arena presented new challenges. Essentially, the oil-moratorium was too “out of the box” (Kakabadse, unpublished) and did not really match the proposed mechanism of “Reducing Emissions from Decreasing Deforestation and Land Degradation” (REDD). This payments-for-environmental services scheme had dominated the discussions on how to incorporate countries with developing economies in the global emission reduction efforts. Hence, various questions focusing on the valuation methods used in the project design or emphasizing its dangerous precedent potential were raised (Larrea et al., 2009, pp. 25–36). The aim was to omit the Yasuní-ITT project from an eventual post-Kyoto agreement. At the end of the day, REDD was mimicked and Yasuní Guarantee Certificates (YGC) can be purchased and traded in carbon markets for offsetting emissions (Ecuador and UNDP, 2010, p. 12). Nonetheless, the carbon credits from the YGC do not stand for a certain amount of GHG emissions reduced but rather avoided.

Environmental activists and some academics feared that such a scheme would allow polluters to continue with their emission rates (Acosta et al., 2009, p. 441). As for indigenous people, they lamented the victory of a utilitarian logic over the ethical aspects underlying the oil-moratorium. Tito Puenchir, president of COFENIAE, expressed that:

First it was an initiative that gathered the communities’ concerns. It was from our own cosmovision, not in business terms, but rather with the purpose of protecting or maintaining the territory for the nationalities, according to their knowledge about how to administer and manage their territory. But now people talk about economic revenues. But what is going to happen with that? It is going to turn people into guardians or keepers and nothing more. So what is happening with the cultural part, with their crops and other activities? Because people make a living out of that, out of the forest and (out of) what they have administered and conserved for thousands of years (Puenchir, unpublished)*.

Environmental activists and indigenous people thus repositioned themselves before the government’s official policy project. Indeed, as the next section shows, they were excluded from the formal process of policy (re-)formulation.

5. Struggling for discursive hegemony: structuration and institutionalization

The story-lines reconstructed in the previous sections were assembled in a project proposal titled “An eco-logical call for conservation, the climate and rights” and presented by Oilwatch (2005) at the first meeting of the expert group on protected areas in Montecatini, Italy. Nevertheless, at that point the government had announced a new oil boom and planned to exploit the heavy crude of the ITT fields in the YNP (Hoy, 2004). In other words, the oil-moratorium completely lacked government support and was far from fulfilling the conditions of structuration and institutionalization explained in Section 2. However, the situation completely changed within a short period of time. This section depicts the socio-historical context in which government support for the oil-moratorium was achieved and how the struggle to attain discursive hegemony unfolded.

In 2002, Gutiérrez became the seventh president of Ecuador in 8 years (Shifter, 2004, p. 131). His administration enjoyed relative

support until late 2004, when the national mood flipped (Paltán, 2005, p. 52). Environmentalists expressed their disagreement with this administration at an early stage. The conflict around block 31 in the YNP mentioned in Section 4.2 was at the heart of this opposition. Due to corruption, disapproval of the Gutiérrez administration spread to other social groups. In April 2005, urban protests against his government converged into a “citizen revolution.” The protagonists of these actions were students, housewives and professionals voicing various complaints. While some called for more freedom and democracy, others requested multinational oil companies to leave (Unda, 2005, p. 136). Altogether they demanded a re-foundation of the system, forcing president Gutiérrez out of office. The negotiations for drilling the ITT that had been initiated by his administration were halted.

With the events of April 2005 still fresh, the electoral process of 2006 was marked by promises of profound political transformations. Of the 13 presidential candidates, the charismatic Rafael Correa of the new political movement AP represented the most credible personification of change and won the elections (Recalde, 2007, pp. 20–21). Different groups supported Correa during his presidential campaign and contributed ideas to his government plan (Acosta, unpublished). This is how environmental activists introduced the oil-moratorium into AP’s political agenda (see PAIS, 2006, pp. 48–49). Moreover, supporters of an oil-moratorium were included in Correa’s cabinet. Alberto Acosta, appointed as Minister for Energy and Mines, was a key figure in that sense. A trained economist, Acosta had voiced his criticism of the primary-export-based model set up in Ecuador and authored several publications on this topic. He also contributed to the dossier *Ecuador post-petrolero* published by Acción Ecológica in 2000 where the oil-moratorium project was explained in detail (Acosta et al., 2000).

Shortly after his appointment as minister, Acosta was requested by environmental activists to halt oil activities in the ITT. Thus, in January 2007 he catapulted the plan of leaving the ITT fields untapped. For the first time, a government official – and from the Ministry in charge of oil activities – referred to the ITT not only in relation to its oil-reserves, but as part of an area of extreme biodiversity, sustaining the livelihoods of the Tagaeri and Taromenane. Acosta (unpublished) recalls that “the idea in that moment was completely crazy, it generated surprise and stupor and I was seen as a person who, as Germans say “doesn’t have all the cups in the cupboard””. Through Acosta, discursive structuration began to be attained, as the story-lines underpinning the discourse of the oil-moratorium started to determine the conceptualization of the ITT. Central actors were forced to accept the rhetorical power of that discursive assemblage.

Whereas domestically president Correa’s position on the oil-moratorium was ambiguous, within international arenas he presented this policy as his star project. He received congratulations and applause at UNASUR (17 April 2007), the UN General Assembly (26 September 2007), and OPEC (18 November 2007). Through this controversial initiative Correa sought to position Ecuador as a global environmental leader and to mobilize international support for his broader political project of the “citizen revolution” towards “21st century socialism.” His suggestion of setting of an eco-tax on oil exports through which climate change related projects could be financed (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010, p. 135) contributed to the new green image of Ecuador he was trying to forge.

Moreover, the outcomes of the constitutional reform steered by Acosta, who had resigned his ministerial post, corroborated that Ecuador was turning into an environmental leader. The new constitution introduced *sumak kawsay*, or attaining human well being through a harmonious relationship with nature, as an overarching goal (Asamblea Nacional, 2008, p. 23). Additionally, Article 71 acknowledged that:

Nature or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and accomplished, has the right to be respected integrally in its existence and in the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structures, functions and evolutionary processes (ibid p. 55)*.

The adoption of this set of norms via a referendum on September 2008 was framed as evidence of the public support for leaving the ITT fields untapped (Acosta, unpublished).

In spite of these milestones, the government was incapable of maintaining a coherent position regarding oil activities in the Yasuní and the oil-moratorium lingered between institutionalization and complete failure. For instance, an environmental permit for drilling block 31 in the YNP was issued in October 2007 (Martínez, 2010, p. 39). Likewise, when Acosta announced the idea of the oil-moratorium, the CEO of the state-owned Petroecuador, Carlos Pareja, had started negotiations with oil companies for drilling the ITT fields. Therefore, president Correa decided to make an unusual “call-for-tenders” for the ITT fields open not only to oil-companies but also to environmental organizations. This resulted in what Acosta (unpublished) framed as a “desperate struggle between oil and life.” While oil companies such as Petrobras, Sinopec and Enap prepared their bids, environmental groups reactivated the campaign *Amazonía por la Vida* under the motto *Yasuní depende de tí* (Yasuní depends on you). Through this practice, they garnered support from key political actors and established new alliances with global NGOs such as Amazon Watch.

Partly through effective campaigning, countries such as Germany and Spain learned about the Yasuní-ITT policy project and expressed their interest in its concretization. They were attracted by the holistic approach and by the opportunity provided by this project to involve countries with developing economies in the reduction of global GHG emissions (Policy Advisor to the German Government, unpublished). This opportunity was framed as unique given the North-South stalemate in the climate negotiations before and during CoP15. Not surprisingly, by September 2009 Germany and Spain had pledged USD\$ 50 million and USD\$ 20 million over 13 years respectively (Martin, 2010, p. 40). However, important questions such as where to deposit the money and what assurances the government of Ecuador would grant the contributors were not yet resolved, suggesting that the policy process was not necessarily conducted according to the story-lines underpinning the oil-moratorium and that its institutionalization was blocked.

After Acosta left the Ministry of Energy and Mines to preside the Constituent Assembly, the Yasuní-ITT project was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There, a technical secretariat was established with the mission of designing the financial and institutional components of the project. This was the start of the solidification of the story-lines underpinning the Yasuní-ITT project in specific institutional arrangements. However, when the deadline that president Correa had set for collecting USD\$4.5 billion arrived in June 2008 little progress had been made in this respect. In July that year, a decree extending the time for collecting the funds until December 2008 was issued. Additionally, the Technical Secretariat was replaced by the Council of Administrative and Directive issues (CAD). The CAD started an intense effort to define the project's components and promote it internationally (Kakabadse, unpublished). It also initiated discussions with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) regarding the administration of an international trust fund where contributions to the Yasuní-ITT project could be deposited.

The trust fund, representing the materialization of the discursive construct of “common but differentiated responsibilities” and the institutionalization of the story-lines underpinning the Yasuní-ITT project, was expected to placate contributors' concerns about the management of the funds while ensuring Ecuador's sovereignty over this money (Sevilla, unpublished). It was agreed that contributions would go to the areas of conservation, forest management, renewable energy and social development (Ecuador and UNDP, 2010, p. 5). However, President Correa rejected the negotiated terms and forbade the signature of the agreement with the UNDP scheduled for December 2009 during CoP15. Minister Falconí (2009) explained that the signature of this agreement was postponed because there

were many technical details that still needed to be specified. He further commented that:

It should be taken into account that the oil industry exerted and continues to exert great pressure on the government to allow the extraction of the oil reserves lying under the Yasuní. There are also segments of Ecuador's public opinion that favor the extraction alternative, and they want a fast drilling of those reserves (ibid).

This episode raised new doubts about the government's commitment to the Yasuní-ITT project. In January 2010, just as CAD members were revising parts of the negotiated terms of reference for the establishment of the UNDP-overseen trust fund, president Correa announced that the contents of that document were “embarrassing” and dishonored national sovereignty (El Comercio, 2010b). These declarations triggered the resignation of two of the four CAD members and of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Fander Falconí who, in president Correa's words, was backed by a “circle of infantile environmentalists” (El Comercio, 2010a). Subsequently, president Correa radicalized his position and outlined a new time limit of a year for the collection of funds to keep the ITT field untapped; he threatened to extract the oil after this deadline (El Comercio, 2010c).

Finally, an agreement with the UNDP was signed in August 2010 and the Yasuní-ITT Fund was officially established, but the Yasuní-ITT had lost momentum and key partners like Germany reconsidered their support. The German Minister for Development Cooperation, Dirk Niebel (2011) voiced his concern about the accountability of the Ecuadorian government to the Yasuní-ITT Fund contributors. He further explained that this policy project could create a negative precedent for countries with developing economies which would then only fulfill their international obligations (e.g. biodiversity conservation) using financial compensation from industrialized countries. Germany's repositioning may have negatively influenced other countries' willingness to financially and politically support the Yasuní-ITT project. This is reflected in the meager contributions that have been made to the Yasuní-ITT Trust Fund (El Comercio, 2012).

6. Conclusions

The Yasuní-ITT project involving the maintenance of 20% of the Ecuador's oil in the soil seems to be a riddle in the sense that it represents a discontinuity with the country's tradition of oil extraction. In Section 4, it was argued that this governmental policy was the result of the creative assemblage of a set of story-lines about the area where this oil is found. Having reconstructed the story-lines that strengthened the oil-moratorium and examined the specific socio-historical context in which the struggle for discursive hegemony unfolded, this section presents a discussion of the discursive mechanisms contributing to the obtainment of government support and the institutionalization difficulties faced by the oil-moratorium presented in Section 5.

A major underlying discursive mechanism that can be identified in the story-lines underpinning the Yasuní-ITT policy project is moralization. Indigenous people and environmental and human rights activists appealed to values and moralities to establish the importance of their opposition to oil activities in the area. They framed oil activities as triggering the loss of culture and the destruction of nature. Moralization in that sense is evident in the requests made to the government to comply with its duties towards indigenous people. This discursive mechanism is related to the broader human rights debate in which every human life is vested with an intrinsic value as a result of the gradual importance given to individuality since Enlightenment (Bourke, 2011; Foucault, [1984] 1989, p. 59). Moreover, moralization is exemplified in the campaign *Amazonía por la Vida* which was reactivated at critical points of the struggle against oil activities in the area. The last slogan of this campaign, *Yasuní depende*

de tí urges citizens to be proactive and assume their responsibility to protect the “most biodiverse place on Earth” which is home to the “last free people.” At some points the discursive mechanism of moralization can be understood in terms of *legalization*. This can be inferred when considering that one of the most significant practices shared by the actors advocating for an oil-moratorium were legal proceedings as mentioned in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

A second underlying discursive mechanism which can be identified is that of mathematization. Foucault ([1970] 1994, p. 56) explained that by means of confident judgments based on intuition and serial connection, empirical knowledge is mathematized. Enumeration is thus possible and it was by these means that nature was inserted into the scientific order (Foucault, [1970] 1994, p. 54). Mathematization operates within scientific utterances listing the species numbers and taxonomical groups found in the Yasuní and comparing them – and comparison is a function of order (Foucault, [1970] 1994, p. 54) – with those found in other places (Bowker, 2000). Such numerical language helped to establish the uniqueness of the Yasuní, particularly in terms of biological diversity, supporting the argument of “endangerment” (Hannigan, 1995, p. 36) entangled in the oil-moratorium.

A third underlying discursive mechanism that can be identified in the discursive formation around the oil-moratorium in the Yasuní is that of economization. This discursive mechanism depends to a large extent on arguments of rationality, specifying benefits that would be gained if oil activities were halted (Hannigan, 1995, p. 36). The operation of this discursive mechanism is most evident when looking at the story-line related to climate change. This story-line contains notions like price, trade, income, and interests, all of which, as Foucault ([1970] 1994, p. 167) notes, are ascribed to the field of economy. The YGC to be traded in carbon markets are a concrete manifestation of economization. Through this underlying discursive mechanism it was possible to construct a mobilizing argument for solidifying the financial components of the project, principally through the notion of “common but differentiated responsibilities” and its “ecological debt” variant. In this regard, it is interesting to note that economization resembles moralization to some degree, as it touches the moral problematic of redistribution and fairness. Yet, the moralization mechanism is mainly evoked by non-governmental actors and actors from the Global South whereas the economization mechanism is more prominent among governmental actors and actors from the Global North.

A final underlying discursive mechanism which crosscuts the other three delineated above is legitimization. Legitimacy was co-opted from different sources. A first important source was international treaties like the UNFCCC or the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention. Making reference to these international instruments broadened the scope of the story-lines underpinning the Yasuní-ITT project, from local to global. Another source from which legitimacy was co-opted was prestigious politicians and academics such as Alberto Acosta and the scientists mentioned above. Borrowing legitimacy from these sources entailed entering the discursive order of Western modernity in which actors such as indigenous people have an underprivileged subject position. The recent repositioning of these actors as well as of environmental activists before the Yasuní-ITT project can be understood as a reaction against that segregation.

These discursive mechanisms contributed to the successful introduction of the oil-moratorium in the political agenda, which can be understood as discursive structuration. Ecuador's political crisis from 2006 facilitated structuration because it was in this particular socio-historical context that prominent actors opposing oil activities in areas of biological and cultural fragility became government officials. From those key subject positions it was easier to challenge rival thinkers favoring oil extraction and force central actors, like president Correa, to accept the rhetorical power of the oil-moratorium. Nevertheless, it was more difficult to overcome barriers to institutionalization. As presented in

Section 5, the institutional arrangements (e.g. establishment of the trust fund) of the Yasuní-ITT project were delayed several times and so far only few contributions have been deposited. The Correa administration has repeatedly announced that without the financial contributions of the international community, the extraction of the ITT crude will proceed.

Having in mind that the attainment of discursive hegemony can be assessed as a two-wheel process involving structuration and institutionalization, it can be concluded that the story-lines related to territorial rights, biodiversity conservation, human rights and climate change underpinning the Yasuní-ITT project reached an ambiguous and temporary form of hegemony over the otherwise prevailing option of oil extraction. Such ambivalent discursive dominance may be explained by the fact that the success of the Yasuní-ITT requires a major discursive shift which would have to occur simultaneously across local, national and global arenas. Some elements that would be at the center of this discursive struggle are the redistribution of existing wealth vs. the promotion of more economic growth; the acknowledgement of Nature as a subject of rights vs. nature as a stock of resources; cultural dominance vs. universality of human rights; and the privileged position of science vs. the multiplicity of forms of knowing. These processes of discursive contestation require a more nuanced and systematic examination which this article cannot provide. For now it is important to accentuate the centrality of discursive interactions in the definition and re-definition of actors' positions, interests and values. It was through these discursive exchanges that the ingenious assemblage of story-lines was possible, delivering an important form of agency which contributed to keeping the oil of the ITT in the soil.

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