Development-Induced Displacement of Indigenous Communities in Ecuador

This article examines how large-scale mining and oil extraction in Ecuador's Amazon systematically displaces Indigenous communities through "dispossessive engineered migration." Analyzing displacement at the Mirador and San Carlos Panantza mines and in Yasuní National Park, the piece shows how over 1,200 Indigenous people have been removed from ancestral territories through militarised evictions, manipulated consultation processes, and environmental degradation that makes land uninhabitable. The article argues that displacement is not an unintended consequence, but a deliberate strategy driven by state and corporate interests, effectively treating Indigenous Territories as disposable assets. The piece calls for demilitarising development projects, enforcing Free, Prior and Informed Consent as binding law rather than bureaucratic formality, reforming compensation frameworks to account for cultural loss, and strengthening Indigenous leadership in development decisions.

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Introduction

The displacement of Indigenous communities in Ecuador was officially recognised in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with increased oil exploration in the Amazon region (Bernal and Holst 2023). Despite the subsequent constitutional recognition of Ecuador as a plurinational state, multinational oil companies, with government approval, began large-scale extraction activities in previously untouched Indigenous Territories. While exact numbers are difficult to determine, displacement has been happening for years and keeps affecting multiple Indigenous groups across the country (Ortiz 2024). These events should mark the beginning

of a larger awareness of the environmental degradation and human rights violations tied to resource extraction.

Background

Ecuador's Indigenous population represents approximately 7.7% of the country's total population, with around 1.3 million Indigenous People divided into 14 different groups spread across the highlands (Sierra (68%), Amazon (Oriente (24%), and coast (Costa (8%) (Ortiz 2024, 361). It should be noted that Indigenous organisations often contest these figures, claiming underrepresentation and estimating higher numbers (Minority Rights Group 2023).

These Indigenous communities, each with their own unique language, cultural traditions and territorial practices, are an important element of Ecuador's cultural diversity. While the Kichwa of the highlands are the largest group, with nearly 800,000 people (Ortiz 2024, 361), the dynamics of displacement are particularly acute in the Amazon, a region rich in natural resources and biodiversity.

The Amazon rainforest is home to several Indigenous groups, whose territories often overlap with areas where the state has granted companies rights to mine or drill for resources. The Shuar, exceeding 100,000 people, live in the provinces of Morona-Santiago, Zamora-Chinchipe and parts of the southern Amazon (IWGIA 2025). Their territory has become a focal point for conflict between ancestral land preservation and global capitalist pressures. Smaller groups like the Achuar (6,000 to 8,000 people) and the Waorani (5,000 people) live in resource-rich provinces like Morona-Santiago, Pastaza and Orellana (FLACSO Ecuador, n.d.; Joshua Project, n.d.-a). The Waorani are among Ecuador's most isolated groups, yet they face increasing encroachment (Minority Rights Group 2023). Furthermore, the Tagaeri and Taromenane remain in voluntary isolation within Yasuní National Park, using it as a protective measure against external threats (Goyes and South 2019, 90). The Ecuadorian government has recognised their right to isolation, yet enforcing protections remains a significant challenge (Goyes and South 2019, 98).

Ecuador's constitutional recognition as a plurinational state theoretically grants all these groups specific rights, including territorial autonomy

(Minority Rights Group 2023). Nonetheless, these rights are inconsistently enforced and often sidelined by economic interests. The lack of proper consultation and consent processes has resulted in conflicts and resistance movements as communities fight to defend their territories against exploitation (Ortiz 2024).

Case Studies: Displacement in the Amazon

Large-scale mining, hydroelectric plants and oil drilling are a few of the development projects central to Ecuador's economic growth strategies. However, cases like Mirador Mine, San Carlos Panantza Mine and oil extraction in Yasuní National Park demonstrate how large-scale resource extraction systematically displaces Indigenous people, disrupts traditional ways of life, affects cultural heritage and undermines their self-determination.

Zamora-Chinchipe

Mirador Mine, located in Zamora-Chinchipe province of the "Cordillera del Cóndor", is Ecuador's first large-scale copper mining project. Operated by the Chinese consortium Ecuacorriente, it has become a symbol of the clash between development goals and Indigenous rights. The Mirador project has displaced over 200 Indigenous Shuar families, a number that grows as mining operations expand (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 668). The mine's construction required the clearing of extensive areas of land, including Shuar's ancestral territories. Here, displacement occurred through both direct and indirect mechanisms.

Direct displacement involved forcing Shuar families to relocate from Tundayme, the mining's epicentre. Evictions were often carried out under coercion, with little to no consultation or compensation packages (Mantuano and Erazo 2021). In contrast, indirect displacement resulted from environmental degradation caused by deforestation, soil erosion and water contamination. Such impacts have made nearby lands uninhabitable, forcing communities to abandon their homes.

Additionally, the arrival of migrant labourers into the area has disrupted social ties among the Shuar, exacerbating the cultural and social separation caused by displacement (Quiliconi and Rodríguez 2021, 87). Despite the Ecuadorian constitution recognising Indigenous right to prior

consultation, the Shuar were excluded from negotiations, leading to widespread protests and violent clashes between communities and security forces.

Cordillera del Cóndor

San Carlos Panantza Mine is another large-scale mining project operated by Ecuacorriente in the "Cordillera del Cóndor". Since the project began, approximately 1,000 people have been displaced, with more at risk as the mine expands (Rose 2024). Their displacement is characterised by militarised evictions and the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty. In December 2016, violent confrontations erupted as Indigenous land was cleared for mining infrastructure. Militarised evictions were carried out in the name of national development, but they violated their right to control their lands and resources specified in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), to which Ecuador is a signatory (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 672). Beyond forced eviction, the mine's environmental impact has also increased displacement. The contamination of rivers, which are vital sources of drinking water and irrigation for the Shuar, has affected traditional agricultural practices. The ecosystem's degradation has also weakened the Shuar's spiritual connection to their land, an important part of their cultural identity. Furthermore, the construction of infrastructure has opened previously isolated areas to illegal logging and other exploitative activities, endangering Indigenous Territories (Terminski 2013, 3).

Yasuni National Park

Yasuní National Park is one of the world's most biodiverse areas and is also a site for oil exploration and extraction. Oil reserves occupy most of the territory and four oil-access roads cross the park (Puthuparambil 2022, 5). Since the 1990s, oil extraction in Yasuní has displaced Indigenous populations, including the Waorani, Tagaeri, and Taromenane. The Waorani, in particular, have been displaced by the construction of oil wells, pipelines, and access roads, which has fragmented their territory and disrupted their traditional way of life (Puthuparambil 2022, 13-14). Additionally, oil companies, operating under state concessions, have destroyed forests and built infrastructure in areas previously inhabited by Indigenous communities. Oil extraction has also had serious environmental consequences. Pipeline spills and leaks have contaminated

rivers and soil, creating long-term health problems for Indigenous people and making traditional food sources unsafe. This has internally displaced people to urban areas where they often face marginalisation and economic hardship (Sigal 2016, 22).

Meanwhile, an inflow of migrant workers has caused cultural displacement, which is the dominance of newcomer norms (Hyra 2025, 1754), introducing new social and economic dynamics that undermine Indigenous traditions and practices (Pichilingue 2021). For the uncontacted Tagaeri and Taromenane, the expansion of oil operations into their territories threatens their survival by exposing them to diseases to which they have no immunity and disrupting their isolation.

In 2007, the Ecuadorian government established the Yasuní-ITT initiative to protect the park by leaving oil reserves untapped in exchange for international financial contributions. However, the initiative failed to raise enough funds (Goyes and South 2019, 90). By 2013, the government announced that drilling would proceed in the ITT block, resulting in further displacement and environmental destruction.

The Mechanisms of Displacement

To understand the type of displacement in Ecuador, it is important to examine the interests driving it, the strategies used and the consequences for the displaced communities.

Economic and political interests of the government and multinational corporations primarily drive displacement. The Ecuadorian government sees extractive industries as crucial for reducing fiscal deficits and repaying external debt. In 2024, mining and oil accounted for nearly 11% of Ecuador's GDP, with the government projecting increased revenues from increasing resource extraction (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 665). Ecuador’s debt has incentivised this prioritisation, particularly to Chinese lenders who often tie loans to resource concessions (Quiliconi and Rodríguez 2021, 83).

In this context, Indigenous Territories are often viewed as disposable assets essential for national financial stability. Politically, these projects are frequently portrayed as symbols of modernisation, narratives used to justify displacement as a necessary sacrifice for national development. For

instance, former president Rafael Correa defended extractive projects as part of the “Citizen’s Revolution”, emphasising their importance for funding social programs and reducing poverty (Mantuano and Erazo 2021). However, these claims often hide the unequal distribution of benefits and costs, with Indigenous communities bearing the burden of environmental degradation and social disruption while the state and corporate actors profit financially.

Beyond economic and political motives, there are also geopolitical considerations. Ecuador’s strategic location in resource-rich areas allows the country to compete in the global market. This has encouraged the government to accelerate resource extraction despite the social and environmental costs. For multinational corporations, Ecuador’s relatively relaxed regulatory framework and cheap labour offer additional incentives to invest in resource extraction operations (Newcombe et al. 2013, 158).

Coercion in the form of forced evictions is the primary driver of displacement. In the case of Mirador Mine, Shuar families were removed from their homes under the threat of violence, with security forces destroying property and demolishing entire villages (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 672). In some instances, community members were offered inadequate compensation packages, which created economic pressures and leaving them with no choice but to abandon their lands.

Legal frameworks have also been key in enabling displacement. Although Ecuador’s 2008 constitution recognises Indigenous *right to prior consultation*, this process is often manipulated or entirely ignored. For instance, environmental impact assessments are typically conducted without the involvement of affected communities and development projects are approved despite widespread opposition (Rose 2024). Moreover, legal instruments like land expropriation laws and resource extraction permits are used to legitimise the annexation of Indigenous Territories.

Militarisation is another key strategy. State or private security forces accompany development projects to suppress resistance and ensure compliance. The military has been deployed many times at San Carlos Panantza Mine to evict Indigenous families and protect mining infrastructure, leading to violent clashes and human rights violations

(Mantuano and Erazo 2021). The presence of armed personnel not only intimidates local populations but also creates a climate of fear, discouraging collective action.

Lastly, propaganda and disinformation are used to weaken Indigenous Land claims while portraying opposition as anti-development. State and corporate actors often describe Indigenous communities as obstacles to national progress, selfish or unpatriotic (Quiliconi and Rodríguez 2021, 86). This narrative weakens public support for Indigenous rights and their land claims.

The consequences of displacement in the region are multidimensional. Socially, it destroys community bonds and traditional ways of life. Many displaced families are forced into urban areas where they experience discrimination and uncertainty. For example, displaced Shuar families often end up in informal settlements on the outskirts of cities, with limited access to basic services like education and healthcare (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 674).

Economically, displacement exacerbates poverty by removing communities from their land, without providing viable employment alternatives (Terminski 2012, 14). The loss of agricultural land deprives families of their principal source of subsistence, forcing them to rely on precarious wage labour or government assistance. In the case of Yasuní, the contamination of rivers and soil has disrupted traditional fishing and farming practices, leaving displaced families with limited economic alternatives (IWGIA 2025).

Culturally, displacement threatens the survival of Indigenous traditions and systems. The loss of sacred sites, combined with community fragmentation, affects cultural heritage and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Indigenous people have been removed from territories with spiritual and cultural significance, disrupting traditional practices and weakening their sense of community (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 674). The Tagaeri and Taromenane are particularly vulnerable because displacement and environmental degradation disrupt their isolation, exposing them to external influences that endangers their way of life (Pichilingue 2021).

On top of that, the relatively low official numbers of displaced individuals mask the true scale of displacement. Many displaced people are not formally registered, either because they migrate internally, or the state does not recognise the displacement (Pichilingue 2021). This underreporting obscure the full extent of the problem and restricts efforts to address it.

Strategically Engineered Migration?

The displacement observed in these case studies align with Greenhill's (2008, 7) concept of strategic engineered migration, which refers to "the manipulation of population movements for political, military, or economic ends". Specifically, it meets the criteria for dispossessive engineered migration, where the goal is to permanently remove specific populations to facilitate land acquisition, resource exploitation, infrastructure development or other state-driven objectives (Greenhill 2008, 8).

Ecuador's development projects are motivated by the need to generate revenue and repay external debt. The government frames these as essential for economic growth, using legitimising narratives to minimise the visibility of displacement and projecting billions in revenues by attracting foreign investment (Quiliconi and Rodríguez 2021, 83). The resulting expropriation of land highlights the core objective, which is the permanent removal of populations to access resources.

In a more detailed analysis, the mechanisms used to displace Indigenous communities align with Greenhill's concept. Coercion is a central strategy, evident in the forced evictions of Shuar families from the Mirador and San Carlos Panantza mining areas. Security forces sent to these sites have used violence, property destruction and intimidation to clear Indigenous Territories, reflecting Greenhill's argument that engineered migration often involves "the use of force or its credible threat" (2008, 10).

Legal frameworks further enable dispossessive engineered migration by providing a sense of legitimacy. The Ecuadorian government repeatedly disregards Indigenous *right to prior consultation*, approving development projects despite prevalent opposition. Environmental impact assessments are often manipulated to downplay the risks of displacement, while expropriation laws allow the state to seize Indigenous lands under the pretext of public interest (Ortiz 2024).

These legal instruments institutionalise displacement, confirming Greenhill's observation that engineered migration relies on "legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to achieve its aims" (2016, 61). As for militarisation, the deployment of armed forces shows how state power is used to suppress resistance and guarantee compliance. The presence of military personnel creates a climate of fear, discouraging Indigenous communities from resisting or seeking legal action. This tactic highlights the strategic nature of these displacements by reducing the likelihood of prolonged conflicts that could delay resource extraction.

This alignment confirms that the displacement of Indigenous communities in Ecuador is not an accidental side effect of development, but a strategically engineered process driven by state and corporate interests at the expense of vulnerable populations. The resulting land expropriation and cultural loss highlight the profound impacts of this type of engineered displacement, underscoring its role as a tool for advancing state and corporate interests at the expense of vulnerable populations.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The displacement of Indigenous communities in Ecuador is a systemic issue driven by a development model that prioritises resource extraction over human rights. To address this, the Ecuadorian government must move beyond rhetorical recognition of the plurinational state and implement concrete policy changes.

First, the government must demilitarise development projects. The deployment of military personnel to enforce evictions exacerbates tensions and leads to violence, eroding trust between communities and the state. Removing military presence would demonstrate a commitment to dialogue and respect (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 672). Nonviolent methods of engagement like mediated negotiations, can improve relations while preventing human rights abuses.

Second, there is an urgent need to reform compensation and resettlement practices. Current mechanisms fail to account for the cultural and economic losses suffered by displaced communities. Transparent, participatory processes are needed to ensure fair compensation and to guarantee that resettlement does not lead to

further marginalisation. (Terminski 2012, 12-14). Resettlement programs must ensure access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities while minimising disruptions to cultural practices.

Third, the government must work towards strengthening legal protections and monitoring. This includes upholding the right of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN General Assembly 2007) and reinforced by the Constitutional Court of Ecuador (Case 1296-19-JP, Corte Constitucional del Ecuador 2025), rather than treating it as a bureaucratic hurdle. Additionally, inviting independent third-party monitoring of displacement events can ensure compliance with international human rights standards. It can provide impartial evaluations, increase transparency and restore confidence among Indigenous groups and civil society (Greenhill 2016, 47; Terminski 2012, 20).

Finally, government should allocate resources for capacity-building programs that increase Indigenous leadership and participation in decision-making processes. Recognising Indigenous autonomy and integrating Indigenous Knowledge (IK) into environmental management will reduce the marginalisation that drives displacement in the first place (Sempértegui and Báez 2023, 674). By empowering Indigenous communities, Ecuador can promote equitable development for all.

It should be noted that while these recommendations offer a pathway to reduce displacement, their implementation comes with significant challenges. The government appears to pursue displacement as a goal, motivated by the substantial economic incentives linked to resource extraction. For policy recommendations to be effective, the benefits of collaboration with Indigenous communities must outweigh the short-term financial gains of extractive industries. Achieving this balance requires demonstrating that sustainable development and inclusive governance can produce long-term economic, social and environmental advantages that exceed the immediate profits of extractive projects. Consequently, to align economic goals with ethical governance, realistic progress will require continued civil society advocacy, international pressure and stakeholder cooperation.

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