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# Amazonians in New York: Indigenous Peoples and Global Governance

By Linda Etchart and Leo Cerda

## Abstract:

This article is the product of ongoing collaborative work over three years between indigenous intellectuals and western scholars in creating a new vision of New York as it has evolved as a centre of first-nation environmental and climate activism. It examines efforts of governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental communities and social movements from across the Americas to come together in New York City to challenge consumer capitalism and the fossil fuel industry--powerful forces that drive the destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems. The article gives precedence to the voices of the first nation peoples of the Amazon basin, from Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, who spoke up during Climate Week in New York in September 2019 to defend their land rights, the Amazon rainforest and the Rights of Nature. Indigenous peoples of the Americas have taken a leading position in lobbying individual corporations -- and the governments who support them -- to rethink their ongoing extractive operations that are devastating national parks and protected areas over the continent. From a postdevelopment perspective, quoting directly from the voices of indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples in their engagement with the modernity of the city, the authors reveal the narrative fusion of the global and the local, the postmodern and the pre-modern. The article challenges binary divisions between the urban and the rural, the material and the spiritual, in an analysis of the confluence of Amazonians' cosmivision of *sumac kawsay/buen vivir*, "life in plenitude", and the environmental demands of climate activists and scholars of the Global North, at a time when the ancestral peoples of Turtle Island (North America) and Abya Yala (South America) are joining together with the support of colonisers to reclaim the continent for themselves and for nature.

**Key words:** indigenous peoples; global governance of the environment; environmental movements; *buen vivir*; rights of nature; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

## Introduction

New York has almost one million millionaires, more than any other city in the world (Elk 2019). Yet around one in five New Yorkers lives in poverty, and nearly half of the city's households are considered nearly poor. The legacy of slavery has resulted in an "ecology of poverty" (Fullilove 2019) in the city, with divisions along racial lines, in parallel with inequalities documented over the rest of the country (Fadulu 2019). Comparisons can also be made between life for the poorest in the richest city in the world, and life for indigenous people in the Americas, who are construed by mainstream media and "development" theorists and practitioners as being among the poorest on earth, in terms of income and even of wellbeing.

Concepts of poverty and underdevelopment were constructed in the post-Second World War period for the purpose of justifying Western interventions in the Southern hemisphere

(Escobar 1995). To illustrate this point, hunter-gatherer peoples of the Amazon, by their own definition, regard themselves as “wealthy”, blessed by abundance. In parts of the Amazon, many indigenous communities continue to live off the land in harmony with nature, in accordance with their philosophy and tradition of *sumac kawsay* (in the Kichwa language) or *buen vivir* (in Spanish), sometimes translated as “living well”, “life in plenitude” or “fullness of life” in English (Villalba 2013; Cubillo-Guevara et al. 2016, Cuestas Caza 2018: 54). Their lives may be austere in Western eyes, in that they lack running water from taps, or piped sewage systems, roads or cars, but the air they breathe is pure and their stream-water clear, in areas untouched by the extractive industries. Moreover, they have control over their destinies and over the land. The Sarayaku Kichwa, who comprise 1,200 people, have accommodation in the forest over an area of 135,000 hectares, which they were granted by the Ecuadorian government in 1992 (Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional 2011).

While in terms of ownership or control of land, particular indigenous groups are therefore privileged in *legal* terms, this has hitherto not been the case with regard to social hierarchies. Their *social* status in their home countries, for example, in Bolivia, Ecuador or Peru – among elites of European or part-European heritage – continues to be one of inferiority (Wearne 1996, Paez Victor 2019). In contrast, at the United Nations Secretariat in New York, Abya Yalan (Latin American) indigenous representatives command a position of respect as the leaders of their nationalities, on a par with the first nation representatives of North America (named ‘Turtle Island’ by First Nation peoples).

The heightened regard for the indigenous peoples of the world is most evident in New York, USA, in April each year, where indigenous leaders congregate at the United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). At the 18<sup>th</sup> session of the Forum in 2019, representatives of 164 indigenous organisations, alongside 99 NGOs with consultative status and 57 academic institutions, inhabited the central hall of the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and surrounding rooms, spreading out over the city to take part in hundreds of associated side events over a two-week period. Their annual sojourn in New York in which they are able to function as actors in global governance, is augmented by attendance at other events in the cities of the world throughout the year. Indigenous representatives have participated in, or led, climate events and demonstrations, which has enabled them to communicate their advice to the industrialised and post-industrialised world with regard to how to save the planet. In this way, indigenous peoples have become the conveyors of wisdom, teachers of ways of being, rather than perceiving themselves, or being perceived by Europeans, as recipients of superior western knowledge (Spivak 1984).

This written intervention is designed to highlight the strategic importance of the city of New York as a centre of global indigenous power, with a special focus on the UNPFII, and New York Climate Week of September 2019, which occurred at the same time (Figure 1). It demonstrates the ways in which indigenous peoples’ politics and ideology work to build bridges and erode boundaries between the rural and urban, and between Western and indigenous epistemologies. As the borders of urban and rural space are contested, so, more widely, is the logic of enclosure, property, colonial occupation, modernity and capitalism.

### Figure 1 Climate Strike New York (Source Clement Guerra 2019).

Global governance, in as much as it exists at all, is conducted at a range of levels and in different arenas of human activity. It is not merely a question of rules being negotiated at the level of nation-state governments at the UN or being applied in the form of inter-governmental, multi-lateral or bi-lateral treaties, but takes the form of ideas that percolate from the grassroots upwards, from the Amazonian rainforest to the high-rise buildings of urban America (Conca 2015); from the top down, and from the bottom up, practices of governance diffuse through global public and private institutions, formal and informal networks, through personal interaction and through social media.

Evidence of the transfer of knowledge from indigenous communities to the world's global governance institutions can be located in the United Nations' General Assembly's adoption of the Resolution on Harmony with Nature on 20 December 2018 (UN 2019), which "noted" (p.2) the Peoples' World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, hosted by the Plurinational State of Bolivia in Cochabamba in April 2010. Indigenous peoples' ways of life and cosmovision are an implicit part of the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature 2010a) and explicitly so in the Tungurahua Volcano Declaration of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature of September 2010 (ibid., 2010b).

#### **Methodology**

By presenting New York City from the perspective of representatives from first nation peoples of the American continent, namely, indigenous Amazonians from Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil, the article seeks to limit mediation by quoting directly from the voices of indigenous people: the aim is to transcend the binary divisions between theory and practice, between the theoretical and the empirical, between the individual and the collective, analysing structure and agency without giving primacy to either.

The article demonstrates the ways in which indigenous individuals and collectivities have asserted their agency, challenging systems of racial domination dating back to the early days of the European empires and the Enlightenment (Said 1978), and provides examples of ways in which they have claimed their rights to a voice and decision-making powers at all levels of government.

#### **Indigenous peoples' relationship to capitalist development, modernisation and governance**

Central to the worldview of indigenous peoples is a challenge to a teleological view of history and human development, and a rejection of the concept of development itself. At the same time, only those communities who have *no* contact with modernity, with the outside world, such as the neighbours and cousins of the Huaorani, the Tagaere and Taromenane of the Ecuadorian Amazon, wish to remain practising "the art of not being governed" (Scott 2009), as far as can be deciphered from their hostility to even their closest cousins. The rest, such as the Sarayaku Kichwa, from whom the concept of *sumac kawsay* or

*buen vivir* is derived, *do* wish to be strategically engaged in the global economy and polity, but on their own terms.

The ideas of the Sarayaku Kichwa parallel those of postdevelopment scholars such Arturo Escobar (1995), Catherine Walsh (2010), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016), as well as those of a number of critical theorists who espouse Karl Polanyi's view that the market is a "conscious and often violent intervention by government" (1944, quoted in Sachs 1996: 19). Postcolonial theorist Wolfgang Sachs saw development as a lighthouse with cracks "starting to crumble" (1996: 1), a view shared by Gustavo Esteva (in *ibid.*, 1996), Gilbert Rist (2007), and also by former Ecuadorian government minister Alberto Acosta, architect of the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008 (2017). Their view is that "development" is a colonial enterprise. The project of "buen vivir" was incorporated into the Ecuadorian Constitution by Acosta, though later diverged from what was envisaged at the outset (Villalba 2013). *Buen Vivir* in its first incarnation was presented as an alternative *to* development, not an alternative development, and one that required a "decolonización intelectual" (Fernández Retamar 1997: 37) echoed in Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's book, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986).

Within the postdevelopment paradigm, therefore, the state itself is an object of suspicion, as it represents the capacity to oppress in the form of colonialism: forces that seek to invade, plan, modernise and industrialise, bringing consumer capitalism to those who may wish to remain uncolonised and who do not have a concept of progress. By the 1990s, postdevelopment theorists had embraced the ideal of a de-growth or non-growth economy, an alternative vision that, if implemented, has the capacity to contribute to the common good of humankind and other species. *Postdevelopment* ideas fed back into indigenous institutions in the 1990s at the time of renewed indigenous political mobilisation in Latin America. The cross-fertilisation of ideas among indigenous leaders, indigenous *and* non-indigenous intellectuals, combined with a rejection of neoliberal policies imposed by Western financial institutions, was a factor in the incorporation of indigenous rights and associated Rights of Nature into the new "plurinational" state constitutions of both Ecuador and Bolivia, led by presidents Rafael Correa and Evo Morales respectively. The institutionalisation of indigenous participation in government by means of new constitutions in both countries contributed to the dissemination and adoption of indigenous ideas continent-wide (Gudynas 2011; Acosta 2017). Ironically, indigenous peoples' very resistance to colonisation and to modernity has carried them into the global public sphere, where they have been able to consolidate a degree of power. At the grassroots level, however, their wish for self-government has frequently resulted in conflict with local states and municipalities that have engaged in, or endorsed, an expansion of the occupation of the rainforest and indigenous lands, rendering even *municipal* government as a project of colonisation (Melo Cevallos, interview 2016a). Indigenous peoples have paradoxically resisted being subjected to local (municipal) jurisdiction while wanting at the same time to be economically engaged with the outside world. This has been manifested, for example, in

Amazonian indigenous peoples' development of their own tourist industries. They have also more recently, for example in 2019 in Ecuador, attempted to stand for elected positions in local government as a means of resistance to incursions by oil and mineral companies (Larrea 2019). Added to this, in the last 25 years, the necessity of protecting their territory and, by extension, the environment, has enabled indigenous peoples to share a common cause with Northern and Southern climate scientists and environmental campaigners, who believe that nature should not be subordinated to the interests of consumer capitalism. It is here, then, that we encounter a narrative fusion of the pre-modern with the postmodern.

### **Indigenous peoples take the lead in environmental governance**

In terms of indigenous peoples' involvement in *global governance* of the environment, their participation was initially limited. Indigenous peoples were not given a voice or decision-making powers at the Rio de Janeiro 1992 Earth Summit – the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) – although their contribution to environmental protection were recognised there for the first time. Indigenous representatives, however, *did* participate in the simultaneous parallel NGO conference in Rio, the Global Forum '92 (Cultural Survival 1994). Thereafter indigenous groupings were able to mobilise on a global scale, partly as a result of the advent of the internet and social media (Gatehouse, M. in Gatehouse, T. 2019), and the UNPFII has been a key site in this context.

### **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)**

The two weeks of the New York UNPFII annual conference in April each year has provided indigenous peoples with opportunities to collaborate with each other across the continents, to consult with (I)NGO and government representatives: meet with indigenous leaders and UN officials, and dialogue with both allies and detractors of their claims for indigenous sovereignty over their territories and resources (Etchart 2017). The conference has been the scene of indigenous peoples' representatives' face-to-face critiques of their own governments, whose ambassadors have had to attempt to defend state policies that undermine indigenous rights.

It was particularly notable that Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, was labelled a "terrorist" by the less-than-liberal ruler of her homeland, President Duterte of the Philippines in 2018 (Sengupta 2018, Tauli-Corpuz 2019). Tauli-Corpuz is from the Kankanaey community on Luzon, the largest of the Philippine islands, where her parents were the first of her community to receive an education. Not speaking the dominant language of the states in which they live is a hindrance to indigenous peoples' participation in wider-scale governance. However, increasing numbers are receiving a university education such that there is a body of indigenous intellectuals emerging around the world, not least of whom is Nina Pacari of Ecuador, who was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2003: the first indigenous woman in Latin America to head a ministry (Fernández 2017).

The New York UNPFII annual conference in April is supported by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, which, in association with INGOs, provides resource centres and conduits

for indigenous peoples' access to Western institutions, creating the documentation that they require to enable them to present their case at UN conferences (DOCIP 2019).

The city of Geneva, on the border between Switzerland and France, is second only to New York as an indigenous focal point. Immediately prior to the New York Climate Change events in September 2019, indigenous leaders had attended an event entitled "The Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Ecuador" at the Palais des Nations, the UN's headquarters in Europe. The presence there of female leaders such as Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, Alicia (Weya) Cahuiya Iteca, Vice President of the Association of Women of the Waorani (Huaorani) of the Ecuadorian Amazon (AMWAE), and Nema Grefa Ushigua (President Sápara Nationality Organisation, also from Ecuador), demonstrates the visibility and status in international events of women leaders of indigenous nations (Sengupta 2018).

### **The Role of Indigenous Peoples at New York Climate Week 2019**

Aware of the failure of state governments and intergovernmental institutions to combat climate change effectively since the 1990s, indigenous peoples' representatives came to New York in September 2019 to add their voices to those of the rest of the world's environmentalists in an attempt to put pressure on governments and the extractive industries to refrain from fossil fuel extraction. Their participation in climate action was in the context of the United Nations Climate Summit on 23 September that was an integral part of the 74<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly (23-30 September), and New York Climate Week (23-29 September). New York Climate Week is an annual event hosted by the City of New York attended by world leaders from the public and private sectors.

The protection of land and the environment is key to the survival of indigenous peoples of the world, who occupy 80 per cent of the world's rainforests. According to Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, indigenous lands and forests store 300 billion metric tons of carbon, 33 times the amount of carbon released by the energy sector in 2017 (Tauli-Corpuz 2019). The world's rainforests, particularly in Brazil, have been decimated by the advance of agribusiness, related to palm oil plantations, ranching, and logging. Forests are also vulnerable to damage and contamination by the extractive industries, including mining and oil drilling (Global Witness 2018; Anderson 2019a; Etchart 2019). At New York Climate Week 2019, indigenous peoples were able to argue that the future survival of humanity depends on the protection of indigenous lands and culture. Their claim is that it is due to their carbon-free lives under the forest canopy, and their resistance to encroachment from logging, cattle-ranching, agribusiness and the extractive industries, that the rest of humanity has oxygen to breathe.

The deliberate deforestation of the Amazon was one of the main causes behind the large number of forest fires burning in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and surrounding countries, in the summer of 2019. This was a central theme of the New York UN Climate Summit and Climate Week. Indigenous climate activists were at the forefront of events inside and outside the UN New York headquarters. Among them were leaders from indigenous communities from the Amazon rainforests of Brazil, Ecuador and Peru, some of whom have been subjected to death threats in their home countries as a consequence of their environmental and land rights activism. Of the 207 murders of environmental defenders in 2017, 60 per cent were in Latin America, many of them indigenous (Global

Witness 2018). At Climate Week, Indigenous Amazonian environmental activists denounced the policies of their governments, particularly those of President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, who had openly called for the opening up of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest for agribusiness and ranching, through road-building and deforestation, and the forced assimilation of indigenous peoples into the modern world.

In 1998 Jair Bolsonaro was reported as saying, “it’s a shame that the Brazilian cavalry wasn’t as efficient as America’s, who exterminated their Indians” (Bolsonaro quoted in Watson 2018). Bolsonaro proselytised this belief in the expendability of Brazilian indigenous culture through to his accession to the presidency in January 2019. Then, at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2019, he claimed that the Brazilian forests were “practically untouched”, blaming a “lying and sensationalist media” for propagating “fake news about their destruction” (Anderson 2019b). This speech was made partly in response to some members of the Brazilian Congress decrying his rhetoric and policies at a New York University (NYU) conference entitled “Deforestation and the Future of the Amazon”. The keynote speaker was Marina Silva, the former environment minister of Brazil, who was responsible for a major reduction in the rate of deforestation under the presidency of Luiz Inácio da Silva (Lula). Silva spoke of the dense fog of pronouncements by Bolsonaro and highlighted the US\$40 million that Bolsonaro had spent on advertising to challenge protests against the burning of the Amazon rainforest. The extent of the resources devoted to propaganda campaigns provides an illustration of the battle to control the narrative in the press and on social media. In contrast, Silva described indigenous peoples’ activities as protecting Brazil’s sovereignty. This view was endorsed by Domingo Peas of the Achuar people, representative of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), who also participated in the conference. Peas emphasised the need for an anti-capitalist alternative to Bolsonaro’s policies, and advocated a broad unified alliance:

I call on young people, students and scientists to come together to protect life. We have to look within ourselves to protect Nature, which protects us. I call on institutions and investors to take their money out of destructive industries. We come into the world with nothing, and we leave with nothing. We must open a new road away from the path of self-destruction. I want to thank Marina (Silva) for the beautiful message she brings. We must change direction and seek a new mode of life ... We have to communicate to the world that seems to want only money--only material wealth--that we must change our way of thinking. We need to live in harmony with nature.

Peas explicitly stated that he comes to the city of New York to seek alliances, “That is why we have come here, to look for allies so that we can all work together. I am a leader of this project to protect the Amazon basin [COICA]... and am here in New York as representative of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon [CONFENIAE]’ (Peas, 2019).



The Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin (COICA) initiative involves nine countries that are building an alliance for a common vision to protect 30 million hectares of rainforest across national borders. Peas also called for a transcendence of rural-urban borders, describing the rainforest as “a gift for all humanity, for the forest and the climate... We must bridge the gulf between the rural and city and build trust” (Peas, 2019). Among the New York Climate Week speakers was Julio Cusurichi Palacios of the Shipibo people of Peru, winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2009. Here he describes how the current model of development is destructive, not only for indigenous peoples, but for everyone, on a planetary scale:

We are considered underdeveloped and living in extreme poverty. It is the reverse: we have our bank of traditional knowledge, our bank of biodiversity, our bank of water. It is the value of our own stock exchange, beyond the paradigm [of wealth] imposed upon us. The feeling comes from our hearts. We are not thinking about ourselves, but about the entire planet. We have been coming to climate summits for 25 years, but there is no true commitment by the governments of the world... Their model has forced us to come together to take to the streets. We live at the heart of the world, the lungs of the world, our Amazon is polluted and needs to be protected (Cusurichi Palacios, New York, 22 September, 2019).

Julio Cusurichi Palacios is also President of Federación Nativa del Río Madre de Dios y Afluentes (FENAMAD) which works also to protect communities living in voluntary isolation in the Madre de Dios region of Peru. Many indigenous environment defenders have been killed in Peru, as in Brazil, in their efforts to protect their livelihoods and the forest (IWGIA 2013; Global Witness 2017; Romo 2019; Etchart 2019). FENAMAD have joined alliances with other indigenous Peruvian organisations to take cases to prevent illegal logging on indigenous territories to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Washington DC, fighting on the legal front in another key US centre of urban governance. The legal battles are fierce. Chief among the oil companies that are contesting their responsibility for having contaminated the environment and their obligation to restore that damage is Chevron, whose lawsuit against New York lawyer Steven Donziger, among a number of lawyers in the case, has cost the company US\$2 billion (Marr 2017). Steven Donziger attempted to obtain compensation for 30,000 people in the Lago Agrio region of the Ecuadorian Amazon who were affected by an oil spill caused by Texaco (1972-1992), described as the Amazon’s ‘Chernobyl’. This resulted in Donziger being put on trial in the New York courts for racketeering. At the time of the UN Climate Summit and Climate Week in 2019, he was still under house arrest in the same city (Ofrias 2017; Klasfeld 2019).

### **Street demonstration outside BlackRock’s New York headquarters**

Meanwhile, during the September 2019 New York climate events, contestation continued, not only in the universities and conference centres, but also on the city streets, with demonstrations and rallies by indigenous peoples and other environmental activists calling for the prosecution of President Bolsonaro for his crimes against nature (Londoño 2019). An effigy of Bolsonaro was paraded on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, Manhattan, on 24 September, outside the

headquarters of BlackRock, the world's largest financial firm and top US investor in Amazon deforestation. The demonstration highlights how the city is also tied into the rural via its quests to exploit, commodify, and financialise it. *Amazon Watch*, who led the BlackRock protest, delivered a petition with 260,000 signatures to BlackRock's CEOs, calling on them to cease investing in extractive industries in the Amazon. Demonstrators entered the BlackRock lobby, where they chanted and sang.

In the style of Swedish climate campaigner, Greta Thunberg, 17-year old Helena Gualinga of the Sarayaku Kichwa appealed (in English) to BlackRock employees and passers-by to join the protest: "Whoever is listening, I beg you to stop, to stand with us, as you are killing my people, and killing the world. Shame on BlackRock". (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** L to R: Helena Gualinga, Gloria Ushigua, of Ecuador's Sápara people, and Domingo Peas. (Source: Linda Etchart 2019).

During the New York Climate week, Amazon Frontlines, a charity working directly with indigenous communities to defend their rights to land, life and cultural survival in the upper Amazon (Amazon Frontlines 2019), hosted an Emergency Rainforest Summit in Brooklyn, supported by Amazon Watch and several international NGOs (Figure 3). Among the speakers was Emergildo Criollo, of the Cofán people of Ecuador, one of the nationalities affected in the ChevronTexaco legal case mentioned above. Sônia Guajajara, speaking for the Association of Brazil's Indigenous Peoples (APIB), pushed the point home that indigenous peoples are both at the sharp end and the forefront of fighting capitalism to protect the planet and its people:

We know that indigenous people around the world are protecting the rainforest, but our rights are being denied to us. By protecting the forest, we protect the planet. Taking the environment is taking our lives. Heads of government are rushing to destroy the environment to meet the demands of capital, of the economy.... It is understood that 13 per cent of Brazil is indigenous land, but 46 per cent of our land is in the hands of private landlords, primarily for agribusiness. The indigenous lands, compared with other regions, are the best-preserved lands in Brazil. It is precisely where we live, the land that we defend with our lives, that guarantees the water you have and the air that you breathe... Government policy is authorising the pollution of water, the exclusion of our people from our territories, the poisoning of our environment. Not only do we have the largest tropical forest in the world, we have the largest reserve of fresh water in the world. All of this is under threat from the private sector. Companies such as Nestlé and Coca Cola are trying to negotiate to purchase the largest aquifer in Brazil. Because of this, those of us who fight for our land are being threatened.

**Figure 3** Emergency Rainforest Summit, Brooklyn, 25 September 2019. (Source: Clement Guerra 2019)

Nemonte Nenquimo, leader of the Huaorani community in the Pastaza province of Ecuador, explained the significance of the rainforest in terms of an exploitative relation between the

urban and the rural, as the privileges of urban living are won at the expense of indigenous peoples' suffering (Figure 4):

I am an indigenous woman of the Amazonian rainforest. It has been hard for me to come such a long way to New York. They have taken the oil out of my territory to build these huge buildings for you. For you to have these privileges, we in the Amazon are suffering. For us, the Amazon is our market, our pharmacy, our everything. You talk about climate change, but oil extraction is destroying our forest. They are cutting down our trees. Now is the moment to resist and we are asking for your help. I call on you to work with us and say, 'Enough! –No more oil from the Amazon.' This form of development will kill the animals. If the animals die, we will die too. We are the guardians of the forest, we protect the forest. You must stand with us in this fight for our children and for the future. We will be the ones to die first, and then it will be your turn.

**Figure 4** Nemonte Nenquimo. Emergency Rainforest Summit, Brooklyn, 25 September 2019 (Source: Linda Etchart 2019).

Leo Cerda is co-author of this article, a Kichwa from Serena, Napo province, Ecuador, and founder of the Hakhu Foundation that enables Amazonian women to access markets and promote their handicrafts in New York and other metropolitan centres. He participated in the final panel of the New York Emergency Rainforest Summit on 25 September, calling for a more effective response to the devastation by fire in the Amazon. He argued that given that government and NGO efforts and resources were proving inadequate:

We must stop talking and take action. There are two points: one of the immediacy of the situation. First, we have to support people on the frontlines to put out the fires. Second, we need structural change. We cannot continue to put out fires every year. How can we make that happen? How can we prevent loggers, invaders, agri-business and the fossil fuel industry? We have the momentum right now... I am from Ecuador. I was raised in the forest, and moved to the city with my parents. I was invited to Brazil a few weeks ago to see first-hand what was happening. The indigenous people were trying to put out the fires themselves. They did not have water or masks. Brazil has received US\$20 million dollars to put out the fires. Where are those \$20 million dollars?

Alliances between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, and between forest and city dwellers, were portrayed as crucial by the indigenous participants. Helena Gualinga, moderator of the final panel of the Rainforest Summit, ended with the words, "We need you to be allies for the future, and for you to stand by these people who are with me. The future depends on this alliance between these two worlds." (Figure 5) New York, as a hub for indigenous people's resistance to climate change, is positioned to foster both inter-cultural and trans-Atlantic alliances with Europe. Greta Thunberg travelled to the two-week New York climate events in a solar- and sail-powered boat from Sweden, not only building alliances, but also adding weight to the symbolic battle for control of the narrative, as she attracted vital media attention.

**Figure 5** Helena Gualinga (Source Clement Guerra 2019).

## **Conclusion**

These narratives have presented some recent indigenous peoples' struggles, as they use print, social media, the legal system and, crucially, indigenous peoples' *presence* in the city and its spaces of governance, to draw attention to their plight, responsibilities and epistemologies regarding protecting the planet. They need and ask for recognition and support from the city dwellers of the world. They promote understanding about city-dwellers' role in, and danger from, deforestation and rural destruction. The participation of more than seven million people in the Climate Strike of 20 September 2019 across hundreds of cities in 185 countries (Laville and Watts 2019) indicates that there is rapidly emerging awareness amongst many urban dwellers of the dangers of climate change to all inhabitants and species on the planet.

Indigenous peoples see themselves as leaders on the global stage in the struggle to combat climate change and to protect the biodiversity of the world's remaining forests. The leaders of the major greenhouse-gas-emitting nation-states at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2019 reneged on their responsibility to serve the interests of the peoples by whom they were elected, as they failed to commit themselves to reducing carbon emissions to keep global temperatures below 1.5 per cent above pre-industrial levels by the end of the twenty-first century (Anderson 2019b). Indigenous peoples are on the frontline, first, on the ground in the forest where their cultures, lands, livelihoods and lives are threatened by illegal loggers; and also at the narrative frontline, as they travel the world to speak at conferences, fight their cause and build alliances across regional, national and global borders, in crucial city sites of governance, such as New York, Geneva, San Francisco, Washington DC, and Quito. They are to be found at the UN in high-level discussions with governments, international organisations and global financial institutions, and on the streets, claiming rights, spaces and solidarities. Their resources are minimal compared with those of the extractive industries, who, like Chevron, can afford teams of lawyers to defend their CEOs and shareholders' interests.

At the same time, under the weight and power of the extractive industries, the indigenous peoples of the Americas are taking their struggles to their local and national courts, in the USA and Canada, and at the International Court at The Hague. They have won battles at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) in Costa Rica (Melo Cevallos 2016b), and continue to present cases to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, DC.

The power and global reach of indigenous peoples both challenge the colonial and neocolonial logic of enclosure, property, capitalism, and extraction, and thus erode not only the boundaries between the city and the rural, but also the legitimacy of the nation state boundaries, based on the same logic of centralised occupation, exploitation, violence and the subjugation of marginalised peoples. The alternative ideology of indigenous peoples is, in contrast, premised on protecting the land in perpetuity, based on a logic of care and caretaking, to benefit the whole planet and its living inhabitants.

The voices of indigenous Amazonians presented here illustrate the way in which indigenous peoples have been able to adopt and use the Western language of international relations and international political economy to gain a hearing in the arena of global governance. While their linguistic interactions in this context necessarily express and reproduce the social structure of which we are all a part, they have been able to use their newly elevated status to challenge the primacy of economic and monetary capital and deploy their own epistemologies. The philosophy of *sumac kawsay/sumac qamaña (buen vivir/vivir bien)*, of the Kichwa people of Ecuador and Bolivia respectively, is an example of the “multiplicity of social universes that individuals live in” (Bigo 2019: 244), and the incommensurability of indigenous values with the imperatives of global capitalism. At the same time, their world view of nature’s abundance, their resistance to modernity and to the pursuit of the material wealth that is achieved at the cost of the maintenance of ecosystems, have penetrated upward through state institutions such as the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia to the level of global governance at the United Nations in New York, where they have taken the form of the UN Resolutions on Harmony with Nature, the tenth of which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018 (UN 2019).

It is here, therefore, in the engagement of indigenous peoples with the global polity, that we encounter the convergence of the rural and the urban, the particular and the universal, structure and agency, theory and practice.

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#### **Disclosure statement**

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