

THE MANTA–MANAOS PROJECT: NATURE, CAPITAL AND PLUNDER

Omar Bonilla - Acción Ecológica - Ecuador
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is the Manta–Manaos project, a transport corridor from the port of Manta in Ecuador to Manaus in Brazilian Amazonia. The objective is to identify the potential economic, environmental and social impacts of the project, while assessing its feasibility, and identifying the stakeholders that promote it and how these stakeholders would benefit once the infrastructure is built. Special attention is paid to the role played by the Ecuadorian state due to its position as a main productive agent within the country. In achieving its goal this article explores the underlying economic ideas and value systems on which arguments in favour of the project are based, so as to understand the ideology behind this venture. Local populations form the focus of the study as we believe that they have the capacity – through their potential to mobilize – to significantly alter the international dynamics at work. Local knowledge, as legitimate as Western ‘scientific’ knowledge, has been silenced during the planning of the Manta–Manaos project. The authors therefore use a combination of local knowledge and information obtained through research as the basis for arguments against the project.

Keywords: Social metabolism, material flows, transport infrastructure, Amazon, local knowledge, resource extraction conflicts, Chinese economy, free trade treaties, languages of valuation, commodity chains, commodity frontiers, mega-projects.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Manta-Manaos Project

The Manta–Manaos axis (**Figure 1**) is a planned transport corridor that will stretch from the port of Manta in Ecuador, to Manaus in Brazilian Amazonia. The axis will carry goods by road, hydro-way, port and airport, but also aims to encourage the construction of multiple modern industries in the territory, including “maquilas”, or factories.



FIGURE 1: Manta-Manaos Axis in South America

(Source: GoogleEarth)

The Manta-Manaos axis is part of plans made under the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA), a set of projects that aims to reorganize the South American territory, making it more functional to the needs of global goods production and circulation (**Figures 2 and 3**). The axis is part of a larger plan to connect Latin

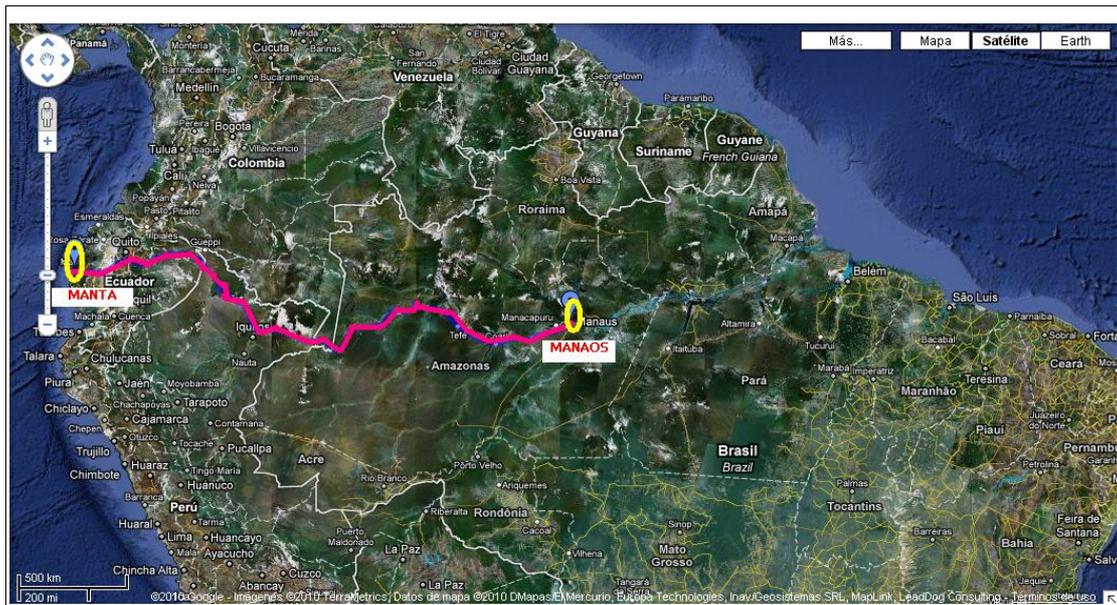


FIGURE 2: Manta-Manaos Axis and Amazonia basin

(Source: GoogleEarth)

America with Asian markets, by connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, and areas with high concentrations of strategic resources. Among the poles of development are the cities of Manaus and Belem, currently two important tax free zones, and the city of Manta in Ecuador that is increasing its port capacity.

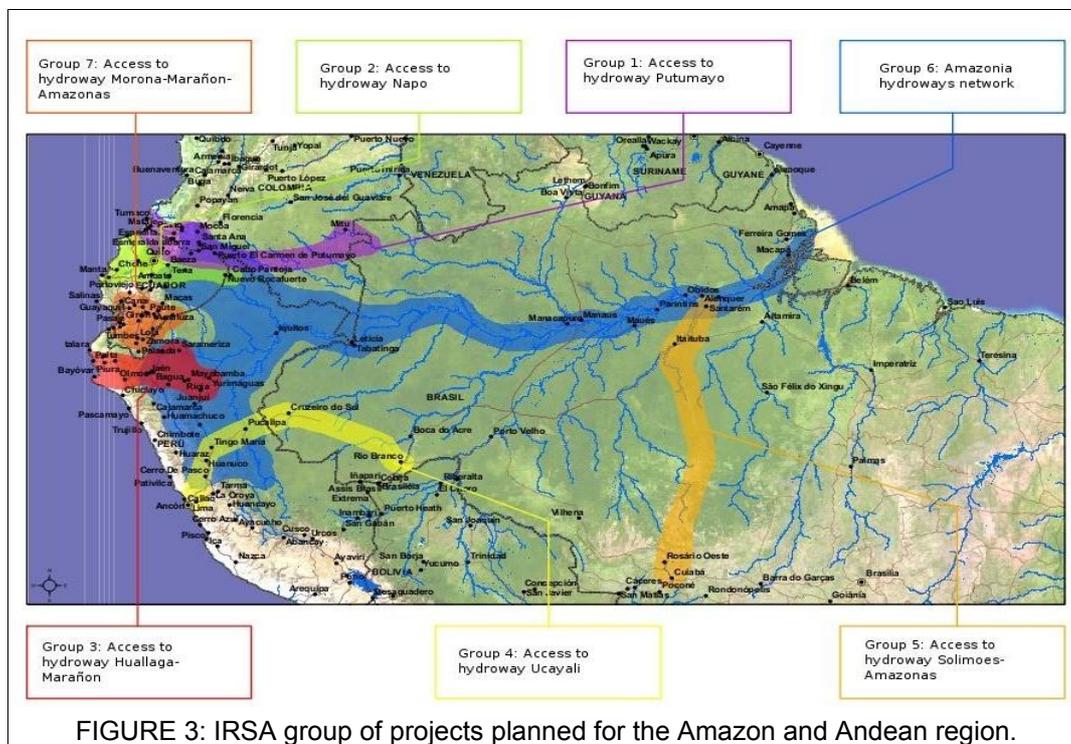


FIGURE 3: IRSA group of projects planned for the Amazon and Andean region.

(Source: IIRSA - <http://www.iirsa.org/>)

At the national level, different commodities would circulate through this route: hydrocarbons, mining products, agricultural and fishing products, wood and biofuels. The movement of industrial capital associated with the building of the Manta–Manaos axis is a necessary function of the ongoing global integration of **commodity chains**. In the case of Manta-Manaos, this integration requires the development of an intermodal transport system that will allow the rapid transport of containers between different production zones, with a view to enabling ever-faster links between various chains of production.

Completion of the axis will require the creation of a large number of networks, particularly roads, to enable access to strategic resources by key markets. Originally, this plan had a strong linkage to American and Brazilian interests in market expansion under the logic of free trade (see Stages of Implementation below), with proponents within the IIRSA claiming then as now, that the axis would lead to regional infrastructure development, and the physical integration of South America. It was agreed on in 2000 at a meeting of South American presidents that took place in Brasilia, and promoted by the Inter American Development Bank (IDB), the Andean Foment Corporation (AFC), the Financial Fund for the Development of the Plata Basin (FONPLATA), the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES). The estimated costs of the project are not clear. Initially, they were estimated at around 400 million USD, but the present government calculates that costs would total closer to 800 million USD for Ecuador alone, with some estimates significantly higher, up to 2 billion USD.

Stages of Implementation

The **first stage** of this project was promoted in conjunction with planning of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), promoted by the United States to gain control of strategic territories within the region. The axis was a fundamental part of the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA). The Minister of Public Works, under the presidency of Lucio Gutierrez, stated that the goal was “to create the infrastructure that promotes regional integration focusing on strengthening exports and the consolidation of the dollarization system”.

A **second period** began after the FTAA was rejected by several Latin American governments. Ecuador's was one such government, one that also had rejected a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States of America in the face of pressure from social protests in 2005. The Manta–Manaos corridor was promoted by Brazilian companies that saw its potential for integrating Brazilian-controlled oil territories that would benefit from infrastructure construction. However, due to irregularities in these companies (particularly Odebrecht) the Ecuadorian State was forced to deal with numerous difficulties that culminated in a crisis between Ecuador and Brazil in 2008.

The **third period** is marked by the commissioning of Chinese firms. Instead of being cancelled, the project was championed by a group of businessmen from Manta and Hutchinson, a Chinese company running the Manta port. However, these actors also abandoned the undertaking in 2009.

Technical innovations designed to increase the speed of transport have already reconfigured space across South America through the homogenization of infrastructure and vehicles and the standardization of containers. Across the Andean Amazon region a series of corridors have been designed in this manner, including the Andean Axis, and the Peru – Brazil – Bolivia and the Amazonas Axis, which includes routes between Perú and Brazil, the Puerto Maldonado–Rio Branco, and the Pucallpa–Cruzeiro do Sul (see www.iirsa.org).

1.2 The Future of the Manta–Manaos Axis

Since the beginning of this research the push to implement the Manta–Manaos project has lost urgency and a highway that crosses the Andean Amazon lowlands, called the Andean Axis, or “Troncal Amazonica” (IIRSA. 2010) in Ecuador, has gained support from the government. However, the Troncal Amazonica links oil and mining areas in Ecuador to other resource rich and often highly conflictive areas in Peru and Colombia. In Peru, the Andean Axis crosses the eastern foothills of the Andes via Bagua, an area that saw a clash on June 5, 2009 between military police and the indigenous population protesting against laws that would allow the construction of highways and the extraction of oil and minerals in that territory. On the Colombian segment, the Andean Axis connects several of the most conflictive and violent areas in the country, an area home to three American military bases. The Troncal Amazonica continues around Venezuela and Bolivia encircling Amazonia through highly biodiverse zones home of tens of thousands of indigenous peoples and several nations.

The connection to Asia through the Amazonian corridor could also be attained through two alternative routes, the main one being via the Putumayo River, which represents a smaller distance across the continent. However this route has two problems: the Putumayo River is too shallow in places, and its basin is a high risk area due to the Colombian conflict. The second alternative for the Amazonian corridor in Peru, a highway, is technically finished. Passing over the Marañón River, it crosses the Andes and ends in Paita. This route however has functionality problems due to the high cost of crossing the Andes, and while all corridors including the Amazonian axis suffer from Brazilian disinterest, there are other existing routes that connect the most productive areas of Brazil with the southern Peruvian coast, through Puerto Maldonado in Peru.

2 Potential Impacts of the Axis: A Social Metabolic Approach

2.1 The Manta-Manaos axis and the circulation of goods

The Ecuadorian Government officially describes Ecuador as a country that has abandoned neo-liberalism. This implies that the State will be an important agent in generating wealth and one in which economic development will be accompanied by various measures of social protection. The Government has also stated its aims to develop new economic relations by linking with other countries from the hemisphere, and its intent to prioritize contacts with Asian countries over traditional markets.

On the surface, the Manta–Manaos project appears to support this agenda. Yet, this project, linked to other infrastructure developments, in fact adheres to the neoliberal model: to extract, in the quickest way possible, increasing amounts of natural resources for the market. From its inception, this project was promoted by neoliberal interests and powerful proponents of free trade, including international financial institutions and development banks. The main project envisions the construction of ports, maquilas and electricity lines able to accelerate the extraction and transformation of raw materials for export. These plans are typical of neoliberal economic policies, yet they must also be understood as a requirement of the **social metabolism** of the industrial global system.

Sustainable metabolic processes imply that the species – including humans – are able to interchange energy and matter with Nature, expelling a certain amount of waste that is assimilated, but at a level that enables the survival of the species. This sustainable pattern was altered in the region through processes of urbanization, linked to the dispossession and destruction of peasant life. The area's metabolism has now reached a point where it requires an ever growing amount of resources and energy from Nature, and one in which the amount of waste produced can no longer be processed by ecosystems. Instead of ensuring the maintenance of the species, the production of goods (useful or not) has been prioritized, making less possible a sustainable exchange with nature (Foster, 2000).

The metabolism of metropolitan centres everywhere have come to depend on cheap imports of energy and materials. Most analysts seem to agree that China's primary interest in Latin America is to gain greater access to much needed resources – such as oil, copper and iron – through increasing trade and investments. China's imports from Latin America grew from almost \$3 billion in 1999 to \$21.7 billion in 2004, a more than 600% increase in five years. China's exports to Latin America have also grown considerably in the last five years, from \$5.3 billion in 1999 to \$18.3 billion in 2004, with major exports including electrical appliances, woven and knit textiles (Dumbaugh and Sullivan, 2005).

Furthermore, export markets and capital are no longer limited to Europe and the United States; they are expanding for example, to China and India. The Manta–Manaos axis must therefore be understood as part of a strategy to export from the commodity frontiers of Latin America to feed the social metabolism of industrialized and wealthy regions of the world. There is a general agreement on such policies amongst many countries with very different governments, as can be seen by the extraordinary willingness of Brazil to expand its exports of agrofuels.

Every day the manufacture and circulation of commodities, the production of raw materials and the emergence of new extractive industries increase. The Amazon has come to be seen again as *El Dorado*, an imaginary place of unlimited wealth, that will not only provide highly necessary raw materials but will also somehow also offer refuge from the destructive consequences of capitalist production, in the form of carbon sinks for example. This situation is clearly one of structurally **unequal ecological exchange** (Hornborg, 1998, Naredo and Valero, 1999), and whether a country's economic policies are neo-liberal or social-democratic is of no consequence. Brazil under President Lula for example, has become more of a bulk commodity exporter than ever in its history.

2.2 Social and environmental Impacts

This continuous circulation of materials enabled by the exploitation of Amazonian products – incorporating the Amazonian region into the logic of the global capitalist system – will have serious impacts on the economic logic and capacity for social reproduction of Amazonian societies, with of course serious impacts on biodiversity, since capitalist extraction does not only mean the production of commodities, but also of waste (see text box below for a summary of possible **environmental and social impacts**). For example in the oil industry, for each oil barrel extracted, 9 barrels of toxic wastes are produced. The project would also require storage and transfer areas for transport containers, and these would necessitate the construction of several infrastructures, namely (1) completion of the Salcedo-Tena highway, a route across the Andes that would shorten the distance between Tena and Manta; (2) the creation of Bi-national Centres of Border Attention (CEBAF) in Nuevo Rocafuerte–Cabo Pantoja (see www.iirsa.org); and (3) the modernization of the Manta Port, that has a population of 250 000 people. In Ecuador itself, the project would cross the Napo River basin, the Amazon, the Llanganates National Park in the Ecuadorian highlands, and other regions with delicate ecosystems on the Ecuadorian coast.

Environmental impacts

1. *Impacts on natural resources and reserves.* The ecological cost of this corridor would be very high. It would cut through the Limoncocha Biological Reserve, the Llanganates, the Yasuni National Park, Cuyabeno, Sumaco National Park and the Napo Galeras.
2. *New colonization pattern.* There would be settlement processes in the region with permanent or temporary populations generating more waste.
3. *Chaotic urbanization on sensitive sites.* An increase in transportation, and in general in contamination due to the expansion or creation of unplanned urban centers.
4. *High impact, new industrial activities.* Incentive for destructive activities such as wood extraction, expansion of the agricultural frontier and monocultures.
5. *Destruction of water habitats and riverbanks.*
6. *Pressure on wildlife.*
7. *Destruction of forests and alteration of hydrological and climatic cycles.*

Social impacts

1. *Displacement of peoples and communities.* The planned infrastructure would be built on ancestral territories – including those of voluntarily isolated indigenous peoples such as those in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon.
2. *Socio-environmental impacts.* The construction of highways, hydro-ways and dams and related extractive and agrobusiness industries would directly affect biodiversity and therefore peasant livelihoods.
3. *Militarization* is likely to occur in order to protect infrastructure and to confront social protests against the project.
4. The *reconfiguration of space* implies a redefinition of frontiers, not for human or even state necessity, but in response to the needs of external interests – specifically of the countries investing in the project.
5. *Loss of sovereignty.* With the reconfiguration of space, sovereignty would progressively be lost. Decisions over these territories would be subject to the interests of investors and companies operating along the axis

The Napo River basin crossing (**Figure 4**) would be particularly significant for indigenous communities and peasants that live on the banks of the Napo River (one of the main tributaries of the Amazon River), as this river would require dredging to make it a navigable hydro-way for the corridor. It has been estimated that initially it would be necessary to mobilize 82 million m³ of sediment, or 17 million truckloads, to be deposited in huge pools (Martinez, 2008). An important aspect to take into account is the fact that the Yasuni National Park is located nearby as well as hundreds of indigenous and settlers' communities (Accion Ecologica, 2008).

This is also a river in which other Amazonian rivers converge, so the presence of accumulated chemical waste means that sediment removal on such a large scale would create major impacts (Villavicencio, 2007). Furthermore, to remain navigable, the Napo River would require permanent ongoing dredging. This would constitute an environmental disaster for the region and its river. Although the Napo drainage proposal is complex and has generated much criticism across Ecuador, up until now it has only reached the stage of expanding Puerto Providencia, a small port near Coca that connects with Shushufindi.

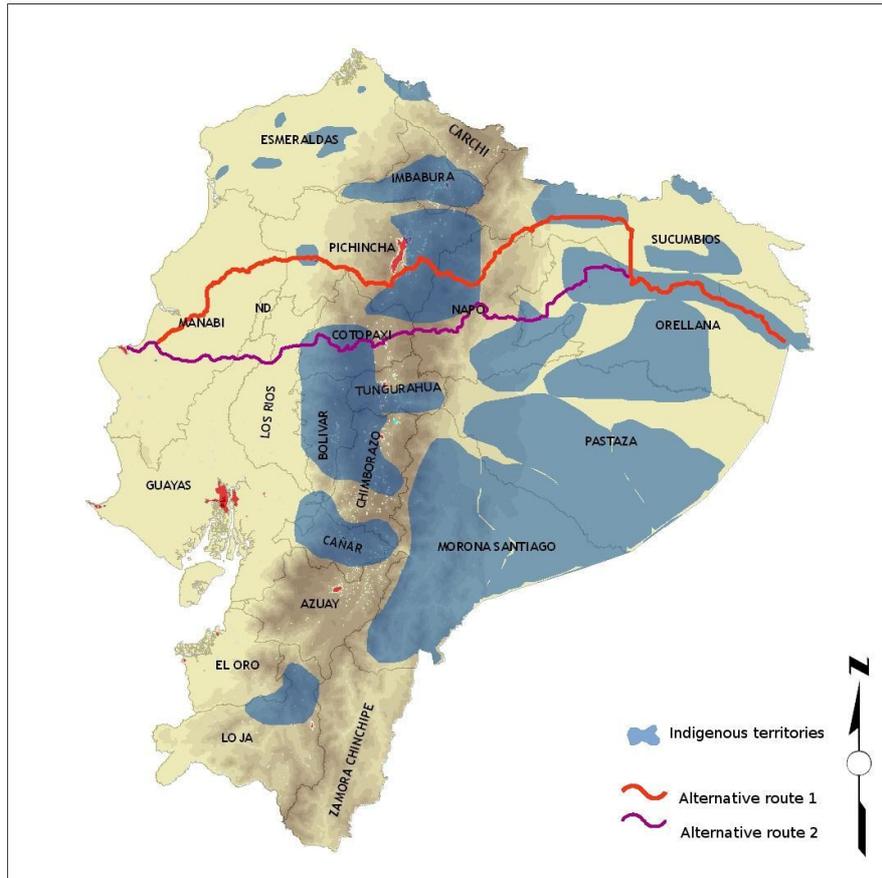


FIGURE 4: Alternative routes of the Axis Manta-Manaos and indigenous territories

(Source: Acción Ecológica. 2009)

3 Implementation: Promises and Probabilities

Many promises have been made by proponents of the Manta-Manaos axis regarding the benefits that would accrue to the development of industry, energy and trade sectors. Here we present an overview of some of those put forth by supporters of the axes, along with what we anticipate to be more probable outcomes of the implementation of the axis.

3.1 Industry

In the beginning it was hoped that the axis would be similar to multimodal transport corridors in Mexico, which featured the proliferation of maquilas. In fact, one of the promises made in the year 2000 was that maquilas would help the development of depressed economic regions. However, this promise was diluted later, as it was acknowledged that maquilas destroy other local productive forces and create dependency for local populations. In addition, most of the maquilas that were built in Mexico during the 1990s have now moved to China, where labour is cheaper.

As Ecuador has a minimum salary of 1 dollar and 30 cents per hour that the Ecuadorian government wants to be respected, maquilas have lost their promise of good business in Ecuador. Nor does the distance to the markets of the United States of America and beyond benefit the contribution of the axis to industrial development in the region. Existing industry on the route of the axis is minimal, and linked to extractive or agricultural export activities, with few maquila areas in Manta. This is not likely to change with the implementation of the axis (Barreda, 2010).

3.2 Energy

The plan for the axis at the outset was to integrate the different oil fields (**Figure 5**) located along the Napo route in Ecuador, Peru and Brazil (Efrain, 2006). Most of the concessions along the route belonged directly or indirectly to Petrobras, a Brazilian oil giant. Petrobras for example operated oil block 31 in Ecuador and wanted tried to gain control of the adjacent block 43, better known as ITT (Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini). In Peru (see

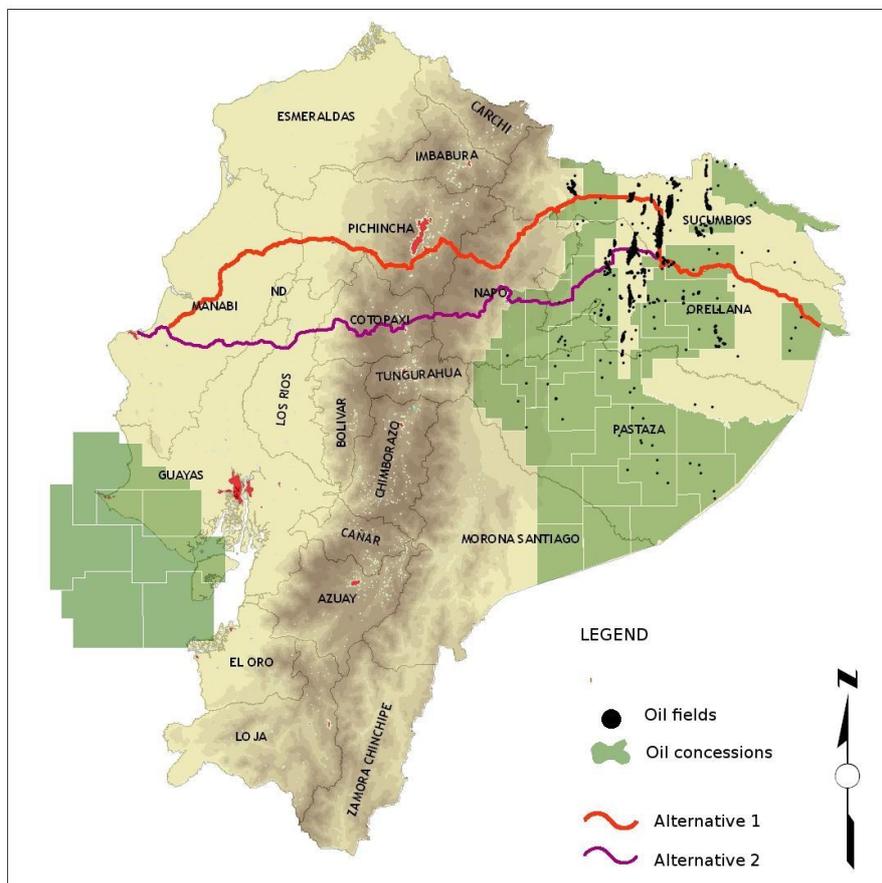
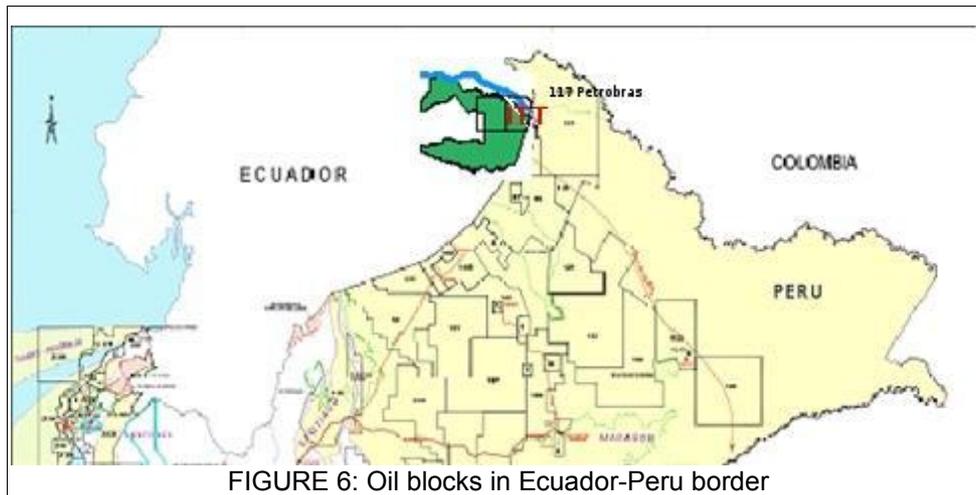


FIGURE 5: Alternative routes and oil concessions (Source: Acción Ecológica, 2009)

Figure 6), Petrobras have the concession of block 117 and together with Pluspetrol Perú the areas XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII, and XXIX located in the Napo Basin.



(Source: Perupetro, adapted by Acción Ecológica, 2010)

When Ecuador launched the initiative of not exploiting oil in ITT however, and block 31 went back to State control, the oil companies lost interest in the axis, leaving only agrofuel companies interested. One of these companies was EMEPA, the Argentinean construction company that is also involved in the agrofuel business. National agrofuel companies such as Palmeras del Ecuador and Palmeras del Río are now interested in this project because they have expanded their territories to the Orellana and Sucumbios provinces around the Manaos–Manta axis (**Figure 7**). The appeal is that they are able to buy land and labour cheaply due to the amount of environmental degradation inflicted by oil companies in the area. It has indeed been easy for them to buy land because pollution forced peasants to abandon their lands or sell them to palm oil companies. The government is also planning to add 100 000 hectares of oil palm and 100 000 of sugar cane (El Comercio, 2009).

3.3 The petrochemical complex and refinery

In Manabi province, the construction of a petrochemical complex and refinery is planned, with the aim of transforming Manta into an international connection port. The Pacific Refinery, is a 6.6 billion dollar project run by Petroecuador and PDVSA (El Universo, 2008) for refining heavy oils and producing agrochemicals. This project will go ahead with or without the Manta–Manaos axis, and is projected to have the capacity to refine 300 000 barrels of oil per day, but the curious fact is that there is no heavy oil to refine at the moment, because the 125 000 barrels already being produced are going to the existing refinery in Esmeraldas. This implies future intentions to refine oil from the ITT (Accion Ecologica 2008), or to import heavy oil for refining. Numerous environmental impacts are foreseen with the operationalisation of this refinery: intensive contamination that comes along with this type of infrastructure; destruction of the region’s remaining forests; and competition for water in one of the driest areas of the country. For the time being, Venezuela has lost interest in this project. Yet, President Correa maintains it is on stand-by, and has presented it on his tours to Iran and China.

3.4 Trade and transport

The objective of the axis is to integrate the Atlantic with the Pacific through the development of highways, hydro-ways, ports and airports, all designed to articulate transport throughout the route.

There could be a marginal amount of trade in Ecuador if the whole corridor was a free trade zone; however the trade that would be encouraged is mainly linked to the industrial centres of China. The Chamber of Commerce of Ecuador has anticipated an increase in agricultural products and tuna fish exports, however, this would only be possible with the roads that connect Manta with Quito and Guayaquil with southern Colombia completed.

Hutchinson Port Holding, a Hong Kong-based company specialized in container transfer, signed a contract for 3 years with the government of Ecuador in November 2006, initiating a port mega-project in Manta. This new port was to be part of the Pacific–Atlantic bi-oceanic corridor seen as an alternative route to the Panama Canal for cargo transport. The goal of Ecuador is to take advantage of its geopolitical situation and its deep water port. However, the contract was cancelled in 2009 due to issues of non-compliance and the company left the country.

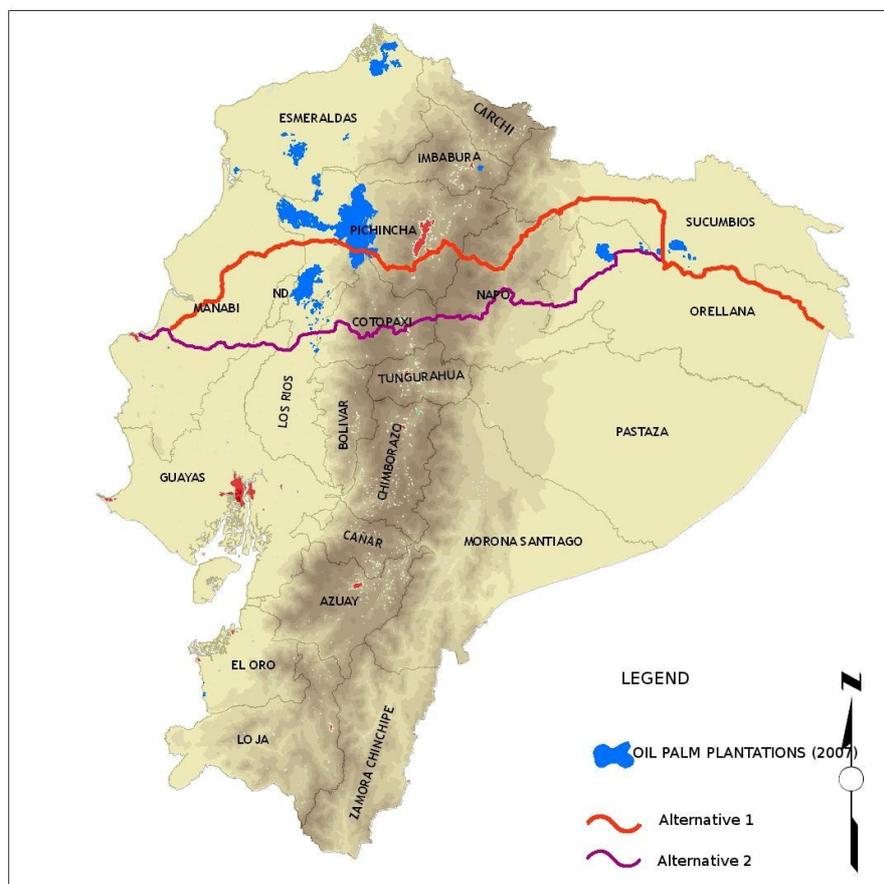


FIGURE 7: Alternative routes and oil palm plantations

(Source: Acción Ecológica, 2009)

While promoters have promised benefits with the implementation of the axis in terms of industry, energy and trade, there are important arguments over the feasibility of the project. The tonnage of goods that would circulate through the axis has never been seriously estimated, although proponents claim there would be clear economic advantages compared to going through the Panama Canal. Gallo *et al* however have questioned this assumption arguing that low water levels during the months of the dry season could impede transportation on the Napo river. This could actually make the cost of transport higher and add days to the journey (Gallo et al, ND).

4 Conflict and the Manta Manaos Axis: A Clash of Values

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, from the beginning the project has been supported by powerful interests dominated by an underlying neoliberal economic ideology, an ideology that values the generation of profit by large companies over all else. Opponents to the project in contrast, prioritise a range of different values that cannot be compensated for in monetary terms should they be threatened by the implementation of the axis. Thus the issues presented by the existence of different **languages of valuation** are key to understanding the conflict surrounding this project.

4.1 Promoters of the project

4.1.1 Financial institutions

Financial institutions have played a fundamental in promoting and funding the implementation of the Manta–Manaos project. Their role was linked initially to the creation of Free Trade Zones that would supposedly address problems of underdevelopment and promote the economic integration of Latin America. The Inter American Development Bank was the first organization interested in the project. It loaned significant sums, including an 800 000 dollar loan to carry out a study aimed at assessing the feasibility of navigating the Napo River, a study that was never completed. In recent years, the state-controlled Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES), in its efforts to displace the World Bank as a major lender, has presented itself as a financing source more sensible to the realities of the region. This bank is closely linked to Brazilian companies and has been proven to be protecting certain illegal investments, as shown by an external debt audit carried out by the Ecuadorian government itself. After the audit, several of its loans were suspended.

4.1.2 Business interests

In the beginning, construction companies were able to negotiate with local authorities to adjust infrastructure plans in line with local demands. The Brazilian Norberto Odebrecht Company, for example promoted the idea of creating jobs for local people. However, its life in Ecuador was cut short as explained previously, and its role was handed to the Army's Engineer Force in 2009.

There have been other notable parties interested in the development of the Manta–Manaos axis. These have included the Brazilian construction companies that, before the conflict with Odebrecht, were selected to build the infrastructure of the project. Petrobras, as already mentioned, wanted to control the oil fields along the Napo river basin in Ecuador and Peru. There are also the Manta port authorities; the Argentine company EMEPA that would dredge the Napo river; and the oil palm companies of the Ecuadorian Amazon. While the key interest of building contractors lies in the potential revenue to be obtained for infrastructure construction, other groups (like traders exporting to China through the axis) are focused on the economic advantages of more rapid commodity transport and acquiring areas in which to set up maquilas.

Business interests in Manta related to the port have been particularly active promoters of the axis, to the point of succeeding to appoint their most influential agent, Trajano Andrade, as Minister of Transport and Public Works. However, Andrade resigned in 2008,

and while there are many actors still promoting the construction of the axis, the most important ones are now constrained for a variety of reasons: among them the geopolitics and energy strategy changes of Brazil, the financial crisis, and other national priorities.

4.1.3 The public sector

For a long time the Manta–Manaos project has had the support of Ecuador’s President. The promotion of the axis was a top priority throughout 2008 and part of 2009 nationally, and in bilateral negotiations. More recently however, it has featured in a more marginal way, presented as one of a group of projects necessary for the development of the country. Even so, the Ecuadorian government argues in favour of this project, maintaining that it will yield high economic returns by enabling the increase of exports, and linking Ecuador to world markets. In addition, it is said that Ecuador will gain a better position in geopolitical terms by becoming closer to Brazil and China, two BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). In a country like Ecuador, the presence of the public sector tends to be complex due to the fact that the State has poorly delimited functions and deficient internal coordination. With the rise of Rafael Correa, the modernization of the public structure has been prioritized. However, the fact that such a low feasibility project has maintained its importance shows that bureaucratic inertia still serves neoliberal interests.

4.1.4 The army

The army is of great political importance in Ecuador, and features an Engineer Force that sometimes works in association with other construction firms. This Force is also in charge of customs as well, and is temporarily in charge of the management of Petroecuador. Although its mission is to protect national sovereignty, the army has to a certain point a particular interest in building the axis. Nevertheless, in contrast to other potential beneficiaries, the army sees the potential problems as a risk.

4.2 Opponents of the project

4.2.1 Peasants

What peasants value most is the land for its importance as a place for producing food but also, the produce it yields for sale. Peasants also value their animals such as cattle, chickens, horses, etc. Large families value the possibility of living together as well as of having good relations with their neighbours. They also value the possibility of staying where they are now established, in a context where many peasant families have had to migrate to cities, due to low levels of income, land shortages, and indebtedness.

4.2.2 Indigenous communities

For indigenous communities, the territory that surrounds them is of **incommensurable value**, including plants and animals, but also the air, water and land. Within the territory, sacred sites are of particular importance, including the ancient paths where the ancestors’ spirits live. Self-sufficiency in agriculture remains practiced and valued. The knowledge of elders is also respected as it enables survival in the forest.

4.2.3 Conservationist organizations

Some conservationist organizations have had an important role in denouncing the impacts of the axis and demanding transparency for the project. Nevertheless, these organisations have tended to take a mainstream stance, focusing on negotiating the mitigation of environmental impacts, rather than confronting the impacts of, or ideology underlying the project. Their main objective has been to work to ensure the reduction of environmental impacts and to facilitate consensus negotiations in which they advocate as intermediaries.

4.2.4 Ecologists and human rights organizations

Ecologists and human rights organizations that work in the area have shown their opposition to the project, aware of the environmental and social impacts of extractive activities and transport infrastructure construction. Their opposition that privileges the wellbeing of communities and nature however, tends to be stigmatized as insensitive to the country's need for economic growth. However, the initiative to leave the oil underground in the Yasuni National Park has also raised the profile of criticisms of the Manta–Manaos axis.

5 Conclusions

The promise of development implied in the Manta–Manaos axis is still to an extent seen as a priority for the government. However, this project would create economic, social and environmental impacts by disturbing the area's ecological balance and destroying the existing social web. Moreover, it would increase the foreign debt of Ecuador, forcing larger amounts of exports to pay it off. It would also undermine the multiple metabolic systems in the Amazon and viable ways of living. National governments and multinational organizations have not seen the potential environmental impacts of the project and related extractive activities as obstacles to be carefully considered, nor have they taken **activist knowledge** into account. A few voices against this project, such as the Mayor of Coca and those of some local organizations, such as the Amazon Defence Front and the Forests Network, have been heard, but these constitute a small minority. Meanwhile some important environmental organizations – with the justification of making the project more transparent – have collaborated to facilitate the construction of the axis.

Through a variety of different modes, the Amazon will be connected to new developed areas – especially in the Asian-Pacific area – thereby responding to the old development dream of creating more inter-oceanic routes. The most sophisticated proposal is the Manta–Manaos axis. It will accelerate the already existent extractive industries such as oil and logging. It will also support the creation of new industries such as agrofuels, increase the transportation of agricultural products, and boost the arrival of industries to the free trade zones. Ecuador's multiannual Plan of Development claims to hold sustainability as its central axis, but in practice this is not the case. The multimodal corridors are not aligned with a strategy of geographical integration designed for the needs of local populations and their social structures. Rather, this project has been engineered in response to shifts in the geopolitical interests of the United States, Brazil and China.

This project has ultimately been elaborated from a narrow logic of development that considers the accelerated extraction of resources more important than the conservation of biodiversity.

It is based on a logic that excludes knowledge and experiences of the farmers and original inhabitants, as well as critics of this development model. The contemporary history of Ecuador is full of instances of community resistance against infrastructure projects or extractive enterprises that occupy their territories or use their resources. Some communities have recently begun to refuse to take part in the prior consultation process, and while some legal cases opposing infrastructure projects have resulted, these have so far only managed to slow down, but not prevent their implementation.

It is certain from the authors' point of view that the Manta-Manaos axis will fail to deliver anticipated benefits of economic integration given its low feasibility. If implemented, it will instead seriously damage fragile areas and indigenous lands. In Ecuador, many unviable projects have been executed under the promotion of private and business interests with serious social and environmental consequences. For the time being, the project's promoters still lack the physical, economic and social conditions to launch the Manta-Manaos axis. But if at some point, they achieve these conditions, improving the project's technical feasibility, decision-makers will have to face and consider different valuation systems. This very preliminary glance however allows the authors to assert with certainty the counter-productiveness of this project to the long-term wellbeing of the majority.

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