
A New EJOLT Report: Towards a Post-Oil Civilization. Yasunization and Other Initiatives to Leave Fossil Fuels in the Soil

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A NEW EJOLT REPORT: TOWARDS A POST-OIL CIVILIZATION. YASUNIZATION AND OTHER INITIATIVES TO LEAVE FOSSIL FUELS IN THE SOIL

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WITH COMMENTS BY SUSANA FONSECA AND RICARDO COELHO

A new report from the EJOLT project argues that leaving oil and other fossil in the soil is a necessary, effective and feasible way to avoid more climate change, biodiversity loss and risky exploitation, and to move towards an energy transition.

EJOLT stands for “Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade” and is an FP7 EU funded project with 23 partners from around the world that aims at promoting mutual learning between civil society organizations and academic researchers around concepts such as Ecological Debts (or Environmental Liabilities) and Ecologically Unequal Exchange. We focus on the use of these concepts in science and in environmental activism and policy-making to support struggles for environmental justice.

EJOLT is geared to support research on two key issues of immediate interest to society. “Which are the causes of the increasing ecological distribution conflicts at different scales?” and “How can such conflicts be turned into forces for environmental sustainability?”

EJOs are Civil Society Organisations locally or globally involved in conflicts over the unequal distribution of environmental entitlements, burdens of pollution and uneven access to natural resources and environmental services. The information base of this project lies not in academic research but in the incredibly large amount of work that has been done by Environmental Justice Organizations, or EJOs and their activist

knowledge. For example, calls to Leave Oil in the Soil originated from the work of EJOLT partners Acción Ecológica, Ecuador and ERA, Nigeria.

LEAVING OIL IN THE SOIL

The word yasunizar has the following origin. Ecuador proposed in 2007 (when Alberto Acosta was minister for Energy and Mining) to leave oil in the ground (850 million barrels) in the Yasuni ITT field – in order to respect indigenous rights, keep biodiversity intact, and avoid carbon emissions. The proposal implies avoiding carbon dioxide emissions of about 410 million tons from eventual oil burning, equivalent to French emissions for one year. The original idea came from civil society. The government of Ecuador asked for partial outside compensation, 3.600 million US\$ – roughly about one half of lost revenues. The Trust Fund under UNDP administration was set up in August 2010. Investments would go for energy transition and social investments. This is an initiative to be imitated. We cannot burn all the oil, gas and coal in the ground at the present speed because of climate change. The question this report poses is: how to select the places where it is best to keep oil, gas or coal in the ground?

As we argue in the conclusion, Yasunization entails a “glocal” perspective that has been able to transcend and unify place-based and universal environmental justice struggles and to create democratic spaces for action in ways that are both defensive and pro-active. Its emphasis on structural changes to the economy, to restorative rather than retributive justice and its emphasis on sovereignty and direct action provide a blueprint for an alternative to development that has the power to shift the terms of the climate debate towards new models and away from carbon counting. This report aims to act as a call for further strategizing, coordinated debate and sharing of tactics among climate justice activists from all ends of the pipeline to work towards post-oil civilizations and global environmental justice.

As (Hildyard & Lohmann, 2013) write in a recent paper on Energy Alternatives for The Corner House:

Far from being a movement of simple refusal, the original Yasuni initiative encompasses a broader questioning of extractivism, a striving to strengthen community livelihoods, and a collective investigation of the possibilities of post-petroleum civilization, and coordinates with efforts developing different approaches to energy... Yasunisar signifies the spread of similar approaches to other regions and countries worldwide, in the sense neither of the application of a universal formula nor of a “scaling up” of the principle of keeping oil in the soil, but in the sense of an alliance of movements growing out of specific histories of

resistance, working toward a post-fossil civilization, and continually discovering and developing what they are. **To “yasunize” is to engage creatively and autonomously in a complex of collective resistance and social construction and reweaving that cannot be reduced to an application of scientific principles or concepts of global governance.**¹

It is in this line that we argue that while most governments may not be enlightened enough to engage with such a project, the Yasuni discourse holds significant power to create solidarities that connect local-based struggles, global movements and other democratic spaces for action in ways that are both defensive and pro-active, and that can contribute to shifting the terms of the climate debate towards new models. This report aims to act as a call for further strategizing, coordinated debate and sharing of tactics among climate justice activists from all ends of the pipeline.

This report builds mainly on the experience for over two decades of two EJOLT’s partners, ERA in Nigeria and Acción Ecológica in Ecuador. In 1995, immediately in the aftermath of the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his companions in Nigeria, they came together in a meeting in Lago Agrio in the area devastated by Texaco in Amazonia of Ecuador, and they founded a south-south network, Oilwatch. The idea of “leaving oil in the soil” (against climate change and against local damages from oil extraction) arose already in 1997, and it was put forward in the parallel meetings to the Kyoto protocol in that year. In Nigeria there was an outcry against Shell for damage in the Niger Delta. Shell has been operating in the Delta for over 60 years, causing widespread pollution that a recent UN report qualified as the most oil-polluted place on the planet. Authors of this report have been at the vanguard of such grassroots discussions and proposals for many years. In Ecuador, the Yasuni Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) proposal got government support in 2007, when Alberto Acosta was Minister for Energy. This contributed powerfully, as this report explains, to popularize in the world at large the idea that, in order to prevent carbon dioxide emissions, the simplest strategy was to leave fossil fuels in the ground. Often, there were locally many other powerful reasons for doing so, including human rights, indigenous territorial rights, biodiversity values.

The idea of leaving fossil fuels in the ground has reached other countries and contexts, as we see in this report, from the Ogoni to the Ijaw in Nigeria to the Raizals in San Andres and Providencia, to the Masetens and Tsimane in Bolivia, to the inhabitants of Madagascar, Ghana, South Africa, Europe, Quebec complaining against tar sands and shale gas extraction, to the government of the Canary Islands and the

¹ Hildyard, N.; Lohmann L. (2013), *Energy Alternatives: Setting the Table*. Corner House. Available at <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/sites/thecornerhouse.org.uk/files/Setting%20the%20Table.pdf>.

fishermen of the Lofoten islands, it is firstly about the right of communities to decide what happens in their territories. It features successful campaigns in places such as Colombia, where governments have decided marine biodiversity and some of the most unique coral islands on the planet should not be tainted by oil. It charts the rise of “Fracktivism” (in America, Europe and Africa) against shale gas and explains why the dirtiest and heaviest forms of crude – such as tar sands that are being targeted not only in Canada, but also in Madagascar, Nigeria and other African countries – should be left untouched.

On 15 August 2013 Rafael Correa announced that since the funds had not been forthcoming from the International community, he would permit crude oil extraction in the Yasuni-ITT. In October, congress also approved the drilling in the Nationally protected area. However, the opponents of drilling have now mounted a new campaign, and counting on widespread public support of the proposal, they have been granted approval from the country’s Constitutional Court for a national referendum on the issue. A coalition of citizens groups called Yasunidos now has six months to collect 680,000 signatures – five percent of the country’s electorate – as a prerequisite for such a plebiscite, for the vote to be held.

Whatever the final fate of the Yasuni ITT proposal, it is an inspiration to communities around the world that are creating new frontiers of resistance against the opening of fossil fuel frontiers. These struggles draw upon mutual inspiration and become linked and coordinated with each other, creating true resistance corridors. Such has been the case with the links between groups sharing information in the fight against the “shale gas revolution” as well as the struggles against the Canadian tar sands and the related pipeline infrastructure.

Further, as Patrick Bond argues², Yasuni could and may still be the inaugural climate debt project par excellence.

The report offers a set of policy recommendations:

- EU governments should urgently revise their mining laws to rule out any further exploration for fossil fuels on their territories and marine zones, and start negotiations for a global ban on fossil fuel exploration. Current policies head in the opposite direction: Italy has recently reversed its ban on offshore drilling, Spain is forcing exploration in the Canary Islands against the wishes of the regional government and Greece is stirring up dangerous waters with Turkey. Better would be to invest in solar and other renewable energy sources in those sunniest places in Europe, supported by a framework for accelerating the spread

² <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/08/yasuni-itt-is-dead-blame-president-correa/>

of solar-based energy. To save taxpayers' money they should stop subsidising exploration, and end the tax deductibility of exploration expenses (as was done a few years ago for expenses for bribery).

– Which one third of proven reserves shall we consume, and which are the two thirds to be left in the ground? Even if all further exploration is stopped, the choice which reserves are to stay in the ground should be based on an assessment of socio-environmental costs associated to drilling and pumping oil or gas, and for digging coal in each place. Europe must define criteria regarding which sources of fossil fuels are acceptable for consumption (such as the import criteria for agrofuels). The environmental impact, in particular the carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, land use and water consumption should be minimised, the rights of local communities, indigenous or not, must be respected and their territories protected, and it should become mandatory to ask local populations, often victims of an expanding commodity frontier, for their prior informed consent before any new drilling happens.

– Capping the carbon input would complement existing policies and enhance their effectiveness. Unlike CCS (carbon capture & storage) and geo-engineering, capping on the input side is technically and socially feasible if the political will is there. This goes beyond the Energy Efficiency Strategy that the EU agreed on and has started to implement, albeit with difficulties due to the failure of the ETS scheme. Other strategies are needed: social innovation, capping resource use (quotas), resource sufficiency indicators, and strategically developing an economic system based on a sustainable supply (not exploiting resources when the environmental and social cost is not justifiable).

Initiatives for 'leaving oil in the soil' in socially and environmentally vulnerable reserve locations should be supported politically and financially as a first step towards establishing an inventory of 'unburnable reserves'

Fragile ecosystems are places uniquely unsuited for fossil fuel extraction. Halting of the oil frontier should begin there, and safeguard the social, economic and environmental rights of local resident communities. This applies as well to shale gas fracking in Europe, which is limited in volume, comes at comparatively high cost (as compared to the US fracking bubble), poses environmental risks and threatens to undermine environmental legislation if mining companies are being permitted to inject substances into the ground without declaring which chemicals they contain.

– The Ecuadorian Yasuni ITT area deserves immediate support. In this area, one of the richest biodiversity hot spots of the Earth, indigenous peoples are in danger right now. As the trail blazer of this new and important policy, the first step

to identifying the 2/3 of fossil fuels to be declared unburnable and to stay in the ground should start there. Stopping new drilling in the Niger delta is not less urgent.

–As an immediate measure, the EU should consider a fund for contributing to such initiatives in line with its commitment to so-called responsible extractivism, this should be done as an immediate measure. In the longer run such compensation mechanisms could be institutionalised through a Daly-Correa Tax on oil exports levied by OPEC countries. The tax income would be deposited into a fund (perhaps under UN administration) to help finance a world energy transition away from fossil fuels, supporting also poor countries without oil, and supporting those declaring reserves ‘unburnable’ e.g. for biodiversity conservation and social integrity in places like Yasuni or the Niger Delta.

COMMENT BY SUSANA FONSECA

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The report “Towards a Post-Oil Civilization” brings us experiences from several social movements that have been occurring in different parts of the world, aiming at similar results – to build a stronger society by creating a sense of community and connection with others (humans and non-humans). While talking about initiatives to leave “oil in the soil”, a connection with climate change is almost immediate. And yet, reading some more we can see that yasunization is much more than that. Leaving oil in the soil is not mainly about reducing greenhouse gas emissions (although it is a direct contribution for that to). It is a new perspective on what is more relevant to our existence as a species. On how we can prevent future problems by learning from past experience and how important it is to understand the unbalanced share of benefits and costs that has been happening for centuries. And for that, we need to go far beyond we have gone so far. Climate change is not the only relevant issue, as the present report points out.

By no way wanting to diminish the relevance of all the work that is being done to raise the awareness on the seriousness of climate change, I can’t help feeling that, as overwhelming as climate change may seem as a global issue with intra- and intergenerational effects and consequences, there is yet another wider picture, an even wider context to be taken into account that is at the heart of these and other environmental and social problems – consumption and production.

The numbers are striking. During the 20th century the amount of natural resources extracted increased by a factor of 34. The yearly *per capita* consumption of natural

resources in Europe is 16 tonnes, with around one third being wasted and ending up in landfills.³ Of the 16 tonnes, at least 3 are imported from other regions of the globe making Europe the continent with the highest net-imports of resources.⁴

This increased pressure on natural resources, despite the efficiency gains that have been achieved in the last two decades, has resulted in more and bigger environmental problems. In fact, in the last three decades Europe managed to achieve a 30% increase in efficiency for each euro generated. But the continuously increased consumption of goods and services has completely overridden such an achievement. Such a tendency can be seen in resources in general and in energy in particular (Bertoldi *et al.*, 2012;⁵ EEA, 2012).⁶

Mankind is currently living on credit for the last four months of the year. And this ecological debt is far more worrying than the financial debt we have all been talking about and suffering the consequences in recent times. Besides demonstrating an unbalanced relation with our natural basis for survival (humans depend on nature for their existence), it is a clear evidence of an unbalanced distribution of resources. People in developed countries consume up to 10 times more natural resources than those in developing countries. People in North America consume 90 kg of resources per capita per day and Europeans consume around half (45 kg), whereas in Africa the average consumption is around 10 kg per day.⁷

In such a context we must think beyond the usual solutions. Equilibrium won't be reinstated unless structural changes take place. And yet, despite the potential for the present financial crisis to highlight the need to "turn the boat around", no matter where we look, contradictory signs emerge. This would be the right moment to look for experiences like the ones presented in this report and taking the best out of them to build a truly sustainable society, where the four pillars (environmental, economical, social and governance) go hand in hand and where the economy performs its true task

³ COM(2011) 571 final - Roteiro para uma Europa Eficiente na utilização de recursos. Accessed on 5 of September 2013, at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0571:FIN:PT:PDF>.

⁴ SERI, Global 2000 and FOEE (2009), "Overconsumption? Our Use of the World's Natural Resources", Vienna/Brussels. Accessed on September 5, 2013 at http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2009/Overconsumption_Sep09.pdf.

⁵ Bertoldi, Paolo; Bettina Hirl e Nicola Labanca (2012), "Energy Efficiency Status Report 2012 – Electricity Consumption and Efficiency Trends in the EU-27", Joint Research Center, Report EUR 25405 EN, Itália. Accessed on 5 of September, at <http://iet.jrc.ec.europa.eu/energyefficiency/sites/energyefficiency/files/energy-efficiency-status-report-2012.pdf>.

⁶ EEA - European Environmental Agency (2012), "The European Environment – State and Outlook – 2010". Copenhagen: EEA.

⁷ SERI, Global 2000 and FOEE (2009), "Overconsumption? Our Use of the World's Natural Resources", Vienna/Brussels. Accessed on September 5, 2013 at http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2009/Overconsumption_Sep09.pdf.

of providing wellbeing within the constraints placed by the fact that there is only one known “Earth”.

Personally I don’t automatically discard some movements that are trying to establish a “green economy”. As with every other concept, different perspectives emerge, and there is a lot you can do with it, as long as you take the present knowledge into account. But as several reports have shown, that won’t be achieved by “business as usual” strategies. Proposals like the “resource cap policy” presented on the EJOLT report can give an important contribution. But even considering the limits of the green economy concept, we are so far from getting there. Considering just the energy resources extraction, the unsustainable irrationality of exploring tar sands or gas fracking is so evident that it is difficult to understand how a short time perspective can overshadow all the evidence of the disaster that will result from such investments.

These are not memorable times. In fact, they are quite the opposite. But even if the present moment may pose challenges to activists and concerned people, reports such as this can have a stimulating effect. Seeing what has been done in such constraining and difficult situations, the results that have been accomplished so far and the ability communities and activists demonstrated to connect to others, even if physically and culturally distant, can only be an inspiration. It shows us that new ways of thinking and doing are possible, desirable and needed, not only for those directly involved, but for the common good of present and future generations.

COMMENT BY RICARDO COELHO

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The climate crisis is upon us. If we want to have a livable planet for present and future generations, and there is no reason why we shouldn’t, we need to leave most of the fossil fuels reserves in the ground, no matter how profitable it is to extract and burn them. Yet, many countries in the global South derive an important part of their income from fossil fuel extraction. Given that this income can be used to improve living conditions for the many of the world’s poorest, the global North should compensate these countries to stop extractivist activities.

This is the basis of the Yasuní ITT initiative, born from the struggles against the devastation caused by extractivism in the South, which are documented in the EJOLT report. The initiative was supported by Ecuadorian groups like Acción Ecológica and by the then Minister of Energy and Mines Alberto Acosta and explicitly followed the indigenous principle of “buen vivir”, which states that economies should be based not

on endless growth but rather on the satisfaction of people's needs, respecting the planetary boundaries. This is not a new idea, not even in the North, namely due to a long tradition of Aristotelian philosophy on the contradictions between the “good life” and limitless material accumulation.

With the Yasuní initiative, the world was put on trial. Ecuador was to abandon plans for oil extraction in a part of the Amazon and it would be compensated for it through a crowdfunding campaign, where governments, organizations and individuals, mainly from the North, would contribute financially to the cause. There were three principles underlying these donations, though, which are worth analyzing in detail.

The first principle is the compromise of directing the funds to projects that improve people's living conditions and contribute to nature preservation. This is fundamental to assure that the funds are not used in projects that aggravate fossil fuel dependence, like new highways or airports. Not complying with the rules would imply that Ecuador would have to give the money back to donors.

The second principle is the rejection of blackmail. Compensating a country for not doing something that causes harm on people all over the world makes sense, but opens the door for, say, having countries with tropical forests demanding money from the rest of the world not to chop down trees. To avoid accusations of blackmail and assure that the Yasuní initiative would not create a bad precedent, Ecuador had to make sure that the oil would stay in the ground, even if it didn't succeed in getting the required donations.

The third principle is the non financialization of the initiative. This means that the Yasuní initiative would not be linked to carbon trading or other environmental markets and, consequently, that its certificates would not translate into a right of polluting the atmosphere or destroying natural habitats. This is a fundamental principle to assure that the initiative actually delivers an environmental gain, as the reduction in future emissions achieved by not extracting the oil would not be offset by an increase in future emissions from polluters that bought carbon credits through the initiative. Furthermore, linking Yasuní certificates with carbon credits would make funding for the initiative dependent on carbon markets, which, as all financial markets, face volatile prices.

The two last principles were disrespected by the Ecuadorian government. In 2008, merely a year after the Yasuní initiative was launched, Ecuador was already proposing in climate negotiations that donations would translate into carbon credits. To be clear, this means that donations would no longer be donations at all, but rather a commercial transaction, by which rights to pollute are traded, following the perverse logic of carbon trading. Worse still, the second principle was recently abandoned.

In August, Ecuador announced the cancellation of the Yasuní initiative, alleging lack of interest by potential donors. This implies that oil extraction will be approved in an area that is highly biodiverse and where indigenous peoples, including tribes living in voluntary isolation, live. The decision follows a general attitude of growing hostilization towards social movements and praise of extractivism from the government.

Does this mean that the dream of “Yasunizing the world” is dead? Of course not. The initiative was important to show how a mechanism for financing a transition to a post-fossil fuels economy can be designed, respecting the principles of climate justice, which imply rejecting false solutions like carbon trading that only serve the interests of polluters. This a part of the fundamental work of broadening horizons and making utopias palpable that we as activists and/or researchers must do, learning from the experience of resisting the destruction of the planet for profit that the EJOLT report summarizes so brilliantly.

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