DECOLONIZING AGRICULTURE

A Case Study of Chakras in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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INTRODUCTION

The future of indigenous people was at the forefront of the UN's 2018 Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Of high importance for the Forum, and the world, was the representation of land and natural resources as **"life for indigenous people, not mere commodities."**[1]

Outside forces such as colonization, that underpin policies and practices of today's globalized society, have rarely worked to the advantage of indigenous peoples even when they "own" valuable land and resources.

Indigenous peoples have routinely been dispossessed of their traditional hereditary assets, among these being agricultural practices.

Not only do indigenous people recognize a deeper connection to nature, they are disproportionately affected by transgressions against the environment.

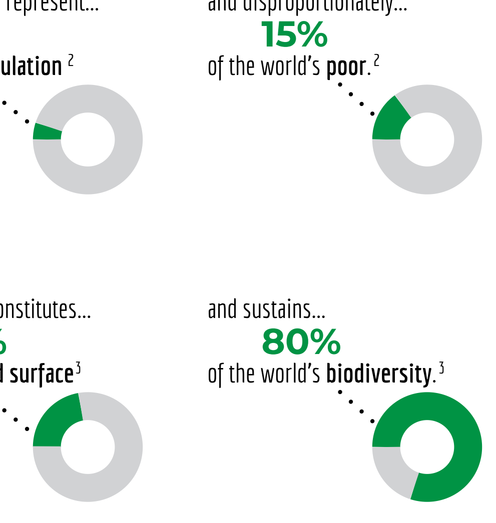
INDIGENOUS PEOPLE GLOBALLY

Indigenous people represent... **5%** of the world's **population**[2]

and disproportionately... **15%** of the world's **poor**.[2]

Indigenous land constitutes... **22%** of the world's **land surface**[3]

and sustains... **80%** of the world's **biodiversity**.[3]



CHAKRA USE IN ECUADOR

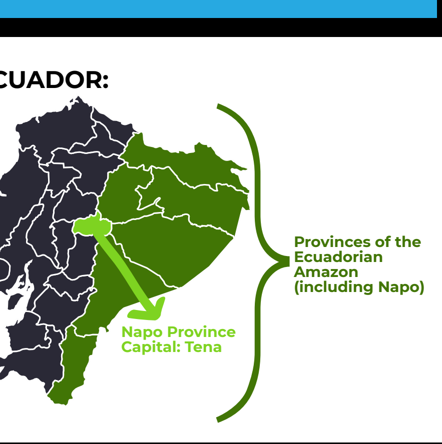
WHAT IS A CHAKRA?

Chakras are agroforestry plots that consist of trees and shrubs growing amongst a variety of different plants. They are modified forests and provide habitat for numerous animal and insect species. For the Kichwa, this traditional method of growing food is an important part of their culture and demonstrates the strong tie they have to the land.

KICHWA OF THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON

The Kichwa are one of several indigenous peoples residing in the Napo Province of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Many of the Kichwa are subsistence farmers who traditionally grow crops in chakras.

ECUADOR:



"..the cultural meaning of the chakra system for local populations is directly related to the conservation of the Amazon landscape."[3]

ECOSYSTEM GOODS & SERVICES

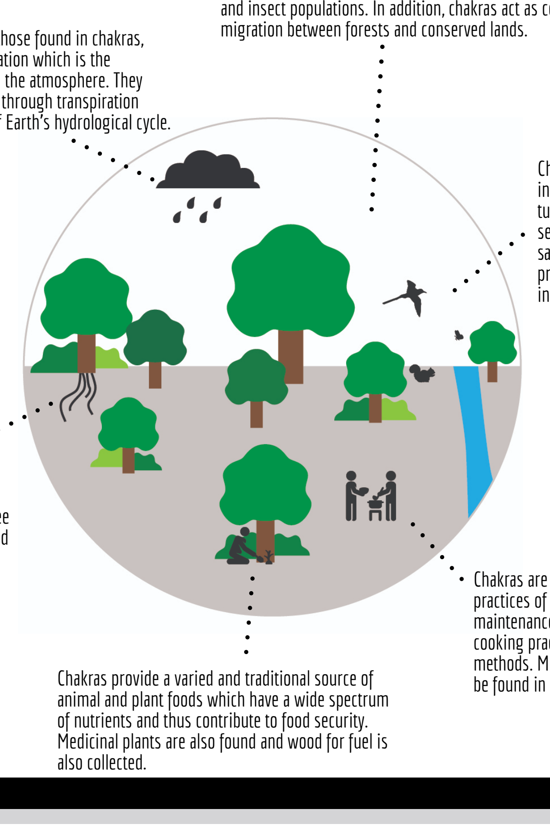
"Ecosystem goods and services produce the many life-sustaining benefits we receive from nature ... (and) are important to environmental and human health and well-being, yet they are limited and often taken for granted."[5] Goods and services such as food, water, timber, air purification, soil formation and pollination are essential for sustaining human life. Ecosystem goods and services are also key for economic and social development around the globe.[6]

In chakras, farming is in harmony with plants and animals. Chakras play a crucial role in climate regulation, carbon sequestration and many other vital ecosystem goods and services. Chakras provide food, medicinal and nutritional resources to the Kichwa and are also intrinsically linked to their livelihoods through the production and consumption of a variety of traditional foods as well as the representation of cultural practices and traditions.

By providing natural habitat, chakras help maintain biodiversity which is essential for the continued health of our planet. Scores of plant and tree species exist with numerous animal and insect populations. In addition, chakras act as corridors of migration between forests and conserved lands.

Amazonian trees and plants, like those found in chakras, play a key role in carbon sequestration which is the absorption of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. They also add water to the atmosphere through transpiration making them an important part of Earth's hydrological cycle.

Chakras give food and habitat to insects and other animals, who in turn pollinate plants and help with seed dispersal. Chakras act as a safety net during hard times providing foraged plant, animal and insect products to supplement diets.



Trees, bushes and plants in chakras provide dead wood, leaf litter and other plant matter essential for nutrient cycling. Tree roots prevent soil compaction and create "root mats" which prevents soil erosion and the sedimentation of local rivers during intense rains.[7]

Chakras are closely tied to the culture and practices of the Kichwa which their maintenance helps to preserve. This includes cooking practices, medicinal uses and growing methods. Materials for rituals and art can also be found in chakras.

Chakras provide a varied and traditional source of animal and plant foods which have a wide spectrum of nutrients and thus contribute to food security. Medicinal plants are also found and wood for fuel is also collected.

PROBLEM LANDSCAPE

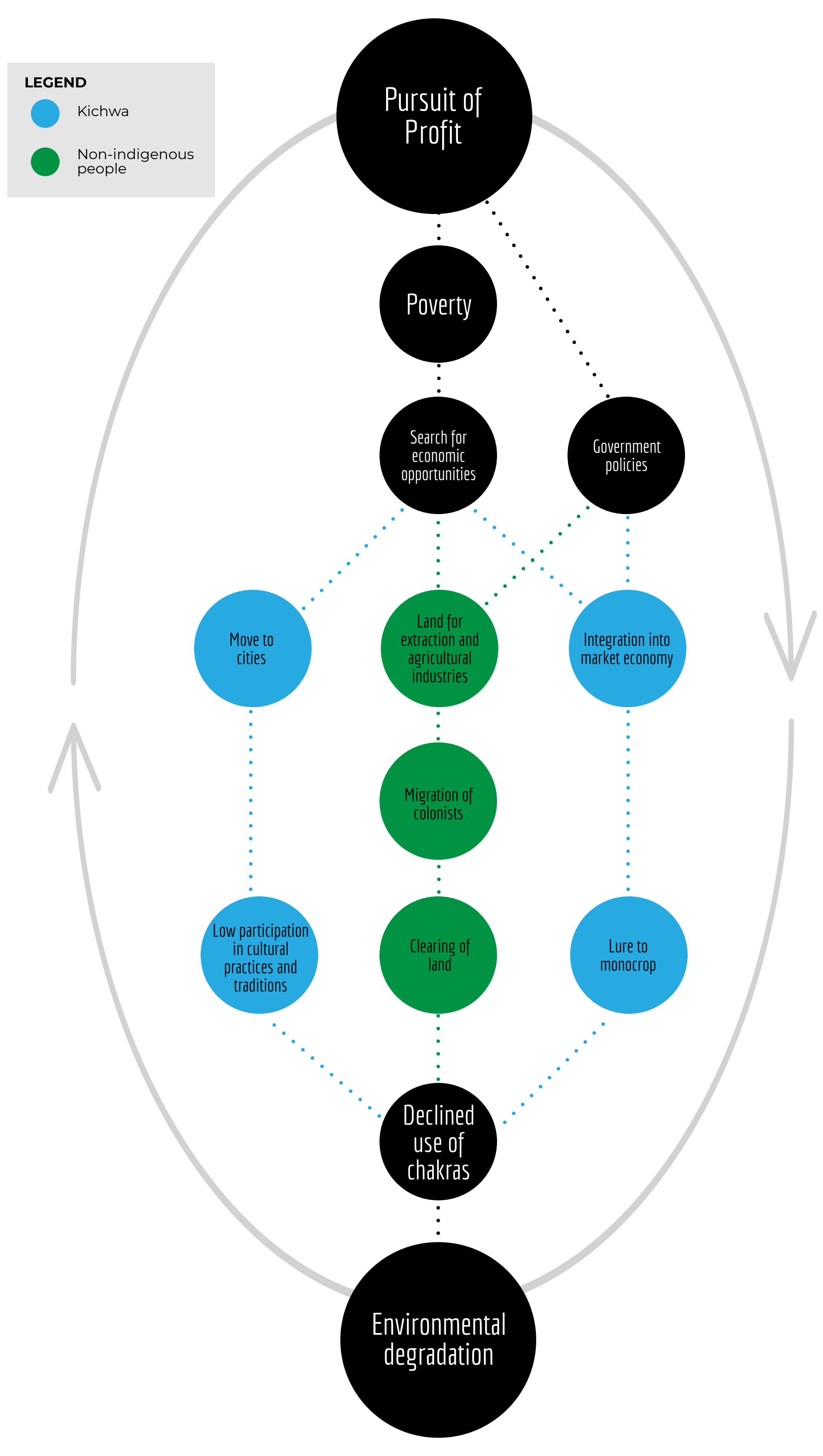
DECLINED USE OF CHAKRAS

In some areas of the Alto Napo in Ecuador, the importance of chakras had declined as far back as the 1990s.[8] "Given the lack of a trade-based economy, to rebuild their chakras, houses, and communities, indigenous people had to integrate into the post-colonial way of life. Once in the capitalist system, their survival depended on income."[9]

The land traditionally used for chakras is rich in resources such as petroleum, minerals and trees for timber. Driven by the potential for economic gain, the government prioritizes the use of Amazonian land for extraction industries, which often conflicts with indigenous land rights. These activities, in turn, attract colonists, from other regions of Ecuador and from other countries like Venezuela, whose participation is motivated by economic insecurity and government incentives.

The migration of colonists exacerbates issues of land scarcity that were already present due to the destruction of land from extraction industries and issues of land titling and ownership. This, along with economic insecurity, motivates many Kichwa, especially the youth, to leave the Amazon and their traditional practices to move to cities in search of economic opportunities.

As chakra use decreases, the ecosystem goods and services they provide also decrease leading to accelerated environmental degradation. In addition, the immediate livelihood of the Kichwa are affected, as they now lack the resources provided to them from the chakras, and the next generation of Kichwa lose connection to and knowledge of an important cultural practice.



SOLUTIONS LANDSCAPE

LOCAL-SCALE INITIATIVES

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY

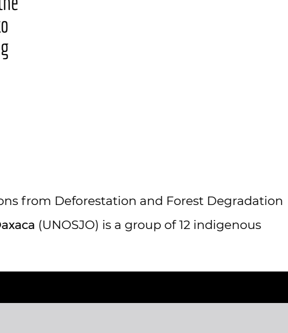
- Ecuador's *Socio Bosque* program provides direct monetary incentives to Indigenous for voluntary conservation of native forest or native ecosystems.[10]
- Ecuador's national development plan, *Plan Nacional del Buen Vivir*, is based on Indigenous principles, which is indicative of a shift in national values surrounding Indigenous peoples and their knowledge[11]

BUSINESS AND PRIVATE SECTOR

- Social enterprise models, such as *Waykana* and *Runa*, promote chakra use through defining growing criteria that includes chakra methods[12] and buying a variety of chakra products from each of their farmers[13]

NGOs AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

- *Canopy Bridge* helps Amazonian indigenous family farmers establish supply chains to high-end restaurants in Ecuador's capital, Quito, increasing economic security and exposure to indigenous growing and culinary traditions to outsiders[14]
- The UN REDD* program enhances chakra growing methods through logistical and financial support to farmers. The program also collaborates with the Ecuadorian government to create mechanisms to protect chakras and implement a benefit-sharing system attached to their forest management strategies[15]



GLOBAL-SCALE INITIATIVES

INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM

- Mexican indigenous organization, UNOSJO**, has gained national and international recognition for exposing contamination of local corn varieties by GMO crops, taking legal action to block future contamination, and supporting traditional varieties of maize through the creation of local seed banks.[16]

NGOs AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

- *First Peoples Worldwide*, an Indigenous-led nonprofit, facilitates the use of indigenous knowledge and collaborates across sectors to connect indigenous people with resources they need including securing land rights.[17]
- The UN's *Jatun Sach'a* grassroots project has helped over 4,000 indigenous families in Bolivia achieve food and nutrition security through training on local plant use and helps support farmers' cooperatives in addition to protecting indigenous lands[18]

RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA

- The value of indigenous knowledge and their growing methods is becoming increasingly recognized, and has led to the creation of programs such as the *Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative* through the University of Arkansas. The program works to, "promote Tribal sovereignty through food and agriculture",[19] by providing strategic planning and technical assistance to support indigenous agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources with the ultimate goal of improving economic security.

*The UN Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation

**La Unión de las Organizaciones de la Sierra Juárez de Oaxaca (UNOSJO) is a group of 12 indigenous Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, Mexico.

GAPS & LEVERS OF CHANGE

THE WAY FORWARD

GAP: CHALLENGES OF LAND OWNERSHIP

Land is an important commodity in every country and particularly to indigenous people, who have suffered the loss of much with the advent of outsiders. For farmers and hunters, land is the basis on which their livelihoods rest. Issues of land use and land ownership are complex among the Kichwa, and there are some problems with the titling of property, the use of property and the inheritance of property.

LEVER: PROPER LAND TITLING AND RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

There is a need for proper titling and recognition of indigenous land. Clear and transparent laws and policies are needed as well as observance of the land rights of the Kichwa and just and accessible means of resolving land disputes. Even Kichwa in remote communities must be protected from those who try to dispossess them of their land.

GAP: BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

Indigenous people around the world are frequently in the position of having their lives and futures decided by others. Programs are rarely successful if they are planned and implemented with little or no input from the people most affected. The Kichwa are often marginalized when it comes to policy making and programming.

LEVER: ADOPT A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH IN POLICY-MAKING AND PROGRAMMING

For lasting transformation to take place, a collaborative, participatory approach is necessary. The government at all levels, NGOs, the business community, etc., need to include the Kichwa from the start to the end of their deliberations and in leadership positions. This cannot be a token inclusion; the participation must be real and meaningful.

GAP: VALUING OF ECOSYSTEM GOODS & SERVICES

Many ecosystem goods and services are free and available to all. Because of this, they are often misused and/or wasted. In addition, many decisions are made ignoring or not paying attention to the environmental consequences of the actions taken. Deforestation, monocropping, mining, construction of roads into the interior, conversion of land into pasture, petroleum exploration, etc., all have negative consequences which affect the Kichwa profoundly.

LEVER: APPROPRIATE VALUATION OF ECOSYSTEM GOODS AND SERVICES

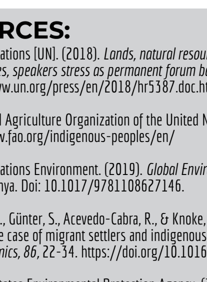
A system of appropriately valuing ecosystem goods and services would greatly help to ensure that such decisions would be taken with more care, thought and foresight. Laws, policies, business models and various programs should recognize the significance of ecosystems goods and services and adopt practices and accountability structures that take them into account.

GAP: ACCOUNTABILITY OF PRIVATE SECTOR

Money is a great motivator and many atrocities and wrongs have been committed in the name of profit. The lack of accountability for environmental misdeeds allows or even encourages the private sector to keep exploiting the Indigenous. The poisoning of water, the destruction of forests, the indiscriminate killing of animals, the polluting of air, etc., all happen with impunity. This needs to stop.

LEVER: CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES AND DISINCENTIVIZES TO ECOLOGICAL PREDATION

Individuals, corporations and even governments should be held accountable for their misdeeds. No one should be above the law. Strong deterrents should be put in place and stiff penalties should be meted out to offenders. The Indigenous peoples of the world need to be protected.



"Protecting the forest is important for the people and for our children's future, because the forest is, in reality, a mother to us all."[15]

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