DEVELOPMENT FOR WHOM? COLONIALITY AND POWER IN SOCIO ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how power asymmetries and communication gaps manifest in the design and implementation of socioenvironmental development projects involving donors, NGOs, regional organizations, and indigenous communities in Ucayali, Peru. The study aims to understand how communication barriers, institutional mismatches, and colonial legacies affect the participation of indigenous actors in these types of projects. Using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, the research draws on 22 semi-structured interviews, four focus groups, participant observation, and document analysis. Fieldwork was conducted with Shipibo-Konibo communities in the Regional Conservation Area *Imiría* and semi-urban areas of Pucallpa, as well as with regional and international development actors.

Key findings highlight structural asymmetries in access to financial and administrative resources, decision-making authority, and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. While indigenous communities hold vital cultural and environmental resources, they are often marginalized in project stages (ideation, planning, execution, and evaluation) due to institutional norms rooted in Eurocentric capitalist logics. The research shows that despite individual actors' good intentions, practical horizontal collaboration is blocked by epistemic, linguistic, and power dynamics barriers. The thesis proposes actionable recommendations for donors, NGOs and regional organizations to enhance indigenous participation through shared governance, effective monitoring practices, intercultural communication, indigenous leadership, and political and structural transformations.

Keywords: power asymmetries, development, indigenous communities, Ucayali, grounded theory, coloniality, intercultural collaboration, international cooperation, donors.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NGO — Non-Governmental Organization

INGO — International Non-Governmental Organization

ACR Imiria — *Área de Conservación Regional Imiría* (Imiria Regional Conservation Area)

1. INTRODUCTION[2]

1.1. Problem Statement: What is the problem, and for whom?

We can't discuss ways to address climate change without including indigenous communities in the conversation. Indigenous peoples are key local and global actors in implementing climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, particularly in the world's most biodiverse regions (Brugnach et al., 2017; Mearns & Norton, 2010). Their ancestral, intergenerational, and local knowledge offers unique insights into sustainable territorial strategies, positioning them as vital partners in confronting climate change on the ground (Garai et al., 2022).

Despite growing international discourse and donor initiatives that emphasize indigenous inclusion in environmental governance (Ford et al., 2016; UNFCCC, 2021), indigenous communities are often structurally relegated to passive roles in the socioenvironmental development field. These projects, primarily funded and managed by international donors and intermediary NGOs, but executed in indigenous territories, frequently replicate asymmetrical relationships, where decisions are centralized in the hands of external non indigenous actors (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020). This reflects broader tensions in global environmental funding and governance, where donors and conservation NGOs operate at transnational scales while targeting indigenous territories for intervention (Ferraz et al., 2023; Garnett et al., 2018).

These tensions manifest across all phases of project implementation: design, execution, and monitoring, through disparities in access to information, resources, and decision-making power; misaligned expectations; differentiated roles; and persistent communication asymmetries (Brugnach et al., 2017). While international donors and NGOs provide resources and technical expertise, they often unintentionally reproduce hierarchical structures rooted in colonial legacies.

[2] Portions of this chapter were adapted from coursework originally submitted for thesis and research courses at Lund University and Central European University. This material was not previously submitted for another degree or for publication

These structures limit indigenous self-determination, marginalize local knowledge systems, and prioritize externally defined objectives over local priorities (Escobar, 1995; C. Mohanty, 1988; Quijano & Ennis, 2000).

The specific problem addressed in this thesis is how these asymmetrical dynamics are reproduced in socioenvironmental development projects in the Ucayali region of the Peruvian Amazon, particularly in the case of the Shipibo-Konibo communities. The research investigates: (1) how power is exercised and experienced by different actors, and (2) how indigenous communities articulate proposals for more equitable, horizontal, and efficient forms of partnership and negotiation. This is especially relevant given that many projects continue to fail in achieving genuinely collaborative or intercultural outcomes, despite discourses of participation and empowerment (Wahbe et al., 2007; White et al., 2023).

This problem is both urgent and significant. Indigenous communities are increasingly positioned as strategic partners in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss (Chhatre & Agrawal, 2009; Zhang et al., 2023). However, without addressing underlying power dynamics, asymmetries in communication, and diverging agendas among project stakeholders, development practices risk reproducing colonial patterns that not only constrain indigenous self-determination but also affect the long-term success and legitimacy of environmental initiatives.

While critiques of development, coloniality, and international cooperation are not new (Escobar, 1995; C. T. Mohanty, 2003; Quijano & Ennis, 2000), a critical gap remains in both research and practice. Specifically, there is a lack of attention to the ontological multiplicity of development projects (how the same project may be understood differently by each actor). Key questions emerge: Are Indigenous actors being misinformed? Is there a communication gap due to technical language, or do paternalistic practices persist? Are these misunderstandings the result of linguistic barriers or deeper forms of epistemic and structural neocolonialism? While most literature remains focused on technical outcomes or normative frameworks, this thesis focuses more on the lived

relational and institutional tensions that shape the partnerships in socioenvironmental projects (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020). Also, this thesis focuses on the indigenous experiences and epistemologies as the base foundation to understand the different dynamics in the socioenvironmental development sector.

This thesis addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences and epistemologies of indigenous actors in Ucayali as the foundation for understanding the relational, communicative, and institutional dynamics shaping socioenvironmental development partnerships. By engaging with indigenous community members, NGO practitioners, and donor representatives, and employing a grounded theory methodology informed by decolonial and power theories, this research seeks to identify both structural limitations and opportunities for more effective and horizontal partnerships.

In doing so, the thesis addresses an interdisciplinary problem between environmental funding projects, development theory, indigenous rights, colonization theory, and power studies. Its practical significance lies in contributing to a shift in how partnerships in socioenvironmental development are conceptualized and practiced. By centering indigenous perspectives, the research aims to generate actionable recommendations, shared with involved stakeholders in the form of a practical toolkit, to foster more equitable collaboration. Academically, it offers an original contribution by providing fieldwork-based insights into actor dynamics in the Peruvian Amazon from an indigenous-centered perspective.

1.2. Aim and Research Question

Indigenous and local communities are one of the best allies to address the effects of biodiversity loss and other climate change impacts at the local and even global levels. Without the experiential knowledge and input of indigenous people, the implementation of mitigation or adaptation measures would not be effective (Brugnach et al., 2017). Indigenous communities are the ones who live in the zones of most biodiversity in the world and are the ones who are willing to enhance the

actions needed for its conservation and to implement locally successful adaptation measures in the climate change context.

In addition, there is an increased interest among international cooperation, donors, NGOs like WWF and Conservation International, bilateral and multilateral organizations, and conservation scientists to invest in the identification and conservation of traditional knowledge, through models of comanagement and partnership to support indigenous rights and territories (Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

Yet, while the discourse of participation and intercultural collaboration has expanded, practical implementation often brings power asymmetries, communication barriers, and misaligned expectations between indigenous communities, NGOs, and donors. These challenges are pronounced in regions like Ucayali, in the Peruvian Amazon, where indigenous Shipibo-Konibo communities are engaged in socioenvironmental development projects that not necessarily align with local and cultural priorities.

For all the previous reasons, this thesis aims to understand and critically analyze the dynamics of power, expectations, and ways of communication between indigenous communities, NGOs, and international donors through different case studies in Ucayali, Peru. The research seeks to identify structural and relational barriers to intercultural horizontal collaboration and to propose contextually grounded tools and strategies for more horizontal, inclusive, and effective partnerships for socioenvironmental development projects.

In this sense, the main research question is: "How are the communication dynamics between donors, non-governmental organizations, and indigenous communities in Ucayali managed and which power asymmetries affect them?", and the sub-research questions are:

- What elements are creating tension, conflict, or misunderstandings between the different agents?

- How can these elements be identified and transformed to achieve more horizontal and effective project implementation?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK [3]

2.1. Context and Background

Indigenous people play a crucial role in the protection of their territory which translates to being guardians of the world's biodiversity (Brugnach et al., 2017; Garai et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020). Although they represent only 5% of the world's population, they have a high contribution to the conservation of 80% of the global biodiversity (Mearns & Norton, 2010). Moreover, their territories and lands are in constant resistance to economic activities that seek to exploit the natural resources and change their ancestral ways of living (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

Moreover, not only is biodiversity loss a main challenge for indigenous people but also the effects of climate change on their territories, livelihoods, and culture (Wahbe et al., 2007; White et al., 2023). The main causes of biodiversity loss such as land use change, deforestation, intensive agriculture, and land acquisition for economic activities are also drivers of climate change through the high emission of greenhouse gases that these activities produce. Indeed, Indigenous people are one of the most affected by the consequences of climate change due to their direct survivance on mother nature, especially in the Global South where social vulnerabilities exacerbate the climate hazards (Johnson et al., 2022). Nonetheless, at the same time, they are the best allies to implement local effective conservation and adaptation measures (Chianese, 2016).

Indigenous people have accumulated traditional ancestral knowledge about the territory that they inhabit. A constant relationship between them and nature dictates this special connection with their environment. They get their food from their environment, use traditional medicine with plants and herbs that grow in their territory, build their shelters with what is provided by nature, create clothes and handicrafts from seeds and fabric, communicate, and form social systems grounded in their

[3] Portions of this chapter were adapted from coursework originally submitted for thesis and research courses at Lund University and Central European University. This material was not previously submitted for another degree or for publication

territories. The knowledge has been constructed collectively through observation and practice of all the synergies and responsiveness of the ecological processes in their territories (Garai et al., 2022).

Overall, locally specific mitigation or adaptation measures cannot be better implemented than by the ones who have an active engagement in the territory and have valuable ecological and social knowledge to ensure the actions are enforced (Brugnach et al., 2017). For example, Zhang et al., (2023) conducted a study reviewing 160 marine and terrestrial protected areas and their different management systems, and indicated that the projects involving indigenous and local communities had better conservation and social outcomes. Also, high storage of carbon and livelihood improvements have been connected to the effective involvement of Indigenous communities in the projects (Chhatre & Agrawal, 2009).

Indigenous communities have experienced historical and ongoing colonization practices (Johnson et al., 2022). This situation translates into a lack of resources in terms of knowledge, power, and effective participation in the decision-making processes related to their development and self-determination (Brugnach et al., 2017). Due to this situation, external aid and cooperation is one way to provide the technical, economic, and networking resources to implement successful socioenvironmental development projects (Zhang et al., 2023). Indeed, the involvement of Indigenous and local communities in conservation projects has proven to have better environmental and social outcomes in comparison to the ones that do not include them (Zhang et al., 2023).

There are different forms of external aid. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are non-profit organizations that could have local, national, or international operation levels (NGO Global Network, 1998 as cited in Kang, 2011). According to Kang (2011), local-level NGOs are also called grassroots organizations (GROs), and the NGOs that are based in the Northern countries but are involved in community engagement activities in the countries of the south are called international

NGOs (INGOs). It is also important to take into consideration NGO's different sources of funding which could include private donors and foundations, self-founding through citizen contributions, business donations, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, and local governments of developed countries (we will refer to all these external funding sources as international donors). For effects of this pre-study, international donors are the public and private funding with their bases in the global North with frequent interventions in the global South (Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

Successful examples of international cooperation in socioenvironmental development projects have been previously documented (see Rubis & Theriault, 2020; Wahbe et al., 2007; White et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, in this context, it is important to acknowledge that socioenvironmental development projects financed by international cooperation could face challenges like different dynamics of power, lack of horizontal communication, and imposition of Western agendas (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

2.2. Power dynamics

To understand the dynamics of the "development sector" in Ucayali, Peru, it is essential to analyze the power relations among the various actors involved—particularly donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Indigenous communities. Power can be interpreted in multiple ways; however, for the purpose of this thesis, I will draw on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power. According to (Foucault, 1978) power is not simply repressive or exercised from the top down—it is productive, relational, and omnipresent. It emerges from everyday interactions across families, communities, and institutions, and it is constantly reinforced through discourse, knowledge systems, and institutional practices. Power, in this view, is not held but exercised, and it is always oriented toward specific aims and objectives. It shapes not only behavior but also how individuals see themselves and others, influencing subjectivities and social norms (pp. 86–87).

In the development context, this means that donors and NGOs do more than provide financial or technical support; they also shape narratives about who is in need and what development should

look like. Through their agendas, principles, and expectations, these institutions construct the image of the Indigenous communities as "underdeveloped" and "in need of support" (Escobar, 1995). In turn, Indigenous communities may internalize and perform these externally defined roles to meet expectations and access resources. However, as Foucault emphasizes, where there is power, there is also a plurality of resistances. Despite the persistence of colonial development narratives, Indigenous agency remains present and active. As de la Cadena (2015) argues, Indigenous peoples continuously negotiate, resist, and reshape these imposed frameworks, asserting their knowledge systems, values, and forms of self-determination.

Understanding coloniality is necessary to identify the colonial development narratives in the development sector. According to Quijano & Ennis (2000), coloniality is structured around two fundamental axes. The first is the codification of difference between the conquerors and the conquered through the concept of "race", which assigned biological inferiority to certain groups. The second axis is the control over labor, its resources, and its products (p. 534).

The invention of race as a social and mental category shaped social relations by creating hierarchical identities such as "Indigenous," "mestizo," or "Black," in contrast to European or Spanish identities. These labels were not only geographical or cultural markers; they were deeply racialized and became tools for social classification and assigned identity. Racial identity was thus instrumentalized to justify hierarchies, designate roles, and enforce colonial domination, embedding inequality into social organization (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 534). In this framework, the phenotypic traits and cultural characteristics of colonized peoples were constructed as inferior, and race became a central criterion for determining rank, social role, and power within power dynamics in society.

The second axis, the control of labor, was implemented through a system of exploitation based on the appropriation and distribution of resources and the global organization of labor through capitalist relations, namely, the capital-wage dynamic and the integration into the world market

(Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 535). This produced what Quijano refers to as a "racist distribution of labor" underpinning the exploitative structures of colonial capitalism.

The dominance of these narratives, linking race to social status and labor to exploitation, continues to shape the world power dynamics, potentially affecting the development sector as well. These colonial logics are not relics of the past but have been continuously reproduced and integrated into modern institutions, including international development frameworks. Nowadays, the modernity that had as its basis the colonization of America is affected by coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and capitalism (Quijano & Ennis, 2000).

The connection between the colonial influence in modernity and its economic and social institutions are explained by Quijano & Ennis (2000), coloniality links race and the division of labor in ways that continue to shape social roles and geohistorical hierarchies being mutually reinforcing. During colonization, a systematic racial division of labor was imposed, positioning Indigenous, Black, and mestizo populations as unpaid or underpaid laborers whose productivity served to enrich European powers (p. 536). Even ancestral practices of reciprocity were manipulated to justify new forms of servitude, such as serfdom. This Eurocentrification of capitalism ensured that the commodities produced by colonized labor gave white Europeans a commercial advantage, establishing Western Europe as the symbolic (creation of a new world identity) and material center of world capitalism (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p.537).

The Indigenous population was treated as disposable labor, later transitioned into serfdom without land ownership or protection. Rooted in racial ideology (the assumed racial inferiority), Indigenous peoples were seen as incapable of generating value for themselves, valuable only when their labor created profit for their owners or others. This racialized labor system continues today through global capitalist structures that assign different wages and roles based on racial identity. The modern Western hegemony not only controls labor and economic flows but also dominates the production of knowledge, culture, and subjectivities. Through binary oppositions such as East–West,

primitive–civilized, and irrational–rational, modernity has been defined as an inherently European experience (p. 542). This Eurocentric vision is based on the idea of natural development towards European civilization, and the differences between European and non-European development are about the race and not an "history of power," ignoring the sophisticated scientific and spiritual systems of civilizations like the Incas, Mayans, Chinese, Egyptians, and Indians.

Coloniality thus functions not only through material domination but also cognitively, when the Iberians colonized America they erased Indigenous identities by collapsing their rich diversity of roots, history, identities and culture into a single colonial label: "Indians"(Quijano & Ennis, 2000). This reclassification imposed a negative racial identity that placed them outside of history, culture, and modernity, portraying them in the history of colonial power as primitive peoples in need of development that could only produce inferior cultures. Moreover, their cultural and technological achievements, such as irrigation, metallurgy, and advanced agriculture, were ignored or appropriated, while Europe was positioned as the sole driver of historical progress, both materially and epistemologically, a new understanding of non-European knowledge and culture as inferior and primitive (Quijano & Ennis, 2000, p. 552). The so-called success of Europe as the new historic identity was built upon the extraction and exploitation of American Indigenous land, labor, and knowledge, including agricultural products like potatoes, tomatoes, silver, and gold (Viola & Margolis, 1991).

Quijano & Ennis (2000)identifies three key components of Eurocentrism: (1) dualistic logic that separates Europe from the non-European world (capitalist/pre-capitalist, civilized/primitive); (2) the classification of people through race; and (3) temporal and spatial relocation, placing Europe as the present and future, while relegating non-Europeans to the past (p. 553). These dynamics not only shaped colonial history but continue to influence how development is theorized and practiced today, often reproducing the same hierarchies and exclusions under the discourse of progress.

2.3. Development

Another central concept for this thesis is "development" which is often presented as inherently positive is deeply related to historical process of power dynamics (control) and domination. According to Escobar (1995) the modern discourse of development can be traced back to the post-World War II era, particularly to the 1949 Truman Doctrine, which framed the cost of economic progress as the solution to global inequality. Meaning that some underdeveloped societies must sacrifice their cultures, autonomy, and resources in the name of modernization. This hegemonic view justified large-scale interventions, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, under the premise of helping the so-called "Third World" catch up to the West (Escobar, 1995).

This hegemonic view of development is no longer acceptable with historical proof of "massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression" (Escobar, 1995, p. 4). Many critics came after the EEUU interventions in the so-called "third world", and different development theories from 1950 to 1970 appeared in the discussion of which should be the type of development in Africa, Latinoamerica and Asia (Escobar, 1995). It was possible to make a critique about the type of development, but not about the need for development.

Yet, as Escobar points out, by the 1980s it had become increasingly clear that decades of development initiatives had not only fulfilled their promises, but situations got worse. Instead of alleviating poverty, many development programs contributed to massive underdevelopment, exploitation, and oppression (p. 4). Although various development theories emerged between the 1950s and 1970s, ranging from modernization to dependency theory, they largely failed to question the underlying assumption that development was both necessary and inherently desirable. The debate focused on what type of development should be pursued, but not whether the notion itself should be questioned. That is why Escobar builds on Foucault's ideas of discourse and power to argue that "reality has been colonized by development discourse" (p. 5). In other words, development has become a dominant framework for understanding the world, one that shapes

how problems are defined, which solutions are acceptable, and who gets to participate in the decision-making. Escobar highlights Foucault's power theory, acknowledging that this discourse produces permissible ways of being and thinking, while disqualifying or erasing others. By framing the Global South as poor, passive, and in need of rescue, development discourse reinforces global hierarchies and legitimizes external intervention (Escobar, 1995).

Thinking the development as discourse helps to take into consideration the domination aspect and historical process of interventions from the Second World War. The discourse of the third world and its people "existing out there to be known through theories and intervened upon from the outside" (Escobar, 1995, p. 8). This can be seen, for instance, in Mohanty's (1988) critique of how Third World women are often portrayed in Western feminist theory taking as benchmark Western standard. These racialized women are frequently depicted through generalized, decontextualized characteristics such as passivity, poverty, and ignorance, traits that define them as subjects waiting for Western salvation. Moreover, they are not only victims but guilty for their underdevelopment because of their stubbornness linked to their "primitive" traditions. These representations of reality are instruments of power that shape how entire populations are perceived and treated (Escobar, 1995, p. 8). Escobar also emphasizes how development is inseparable from coloniality, functioning as a continuation of colonial strategies to exert control over "subject peoples" in the Global South. This is reflected in the geopolitical binaries of North and South, developed and underdeveloped, which structure global relationships to this day. Development, therefore, is not simply a technical or economic process, it is a discursive formation that organizes knowledge, practices, and subjectivities. It establishes an apparatus of power that defines what counts as progress, who needs help, and how they should be helped.

The critique of development took place in the late 1980s and 1990s, as scholars began to question the universalism of Western modernity as the only model for progress. Escobar continues arguing for the simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of the idea of development. Following

Mohanty's perspective, this means not only challenging dominant narratives but also putting in the agenda the collective struggles of social movements, especially those fighting not just for access to goods and services but for recognition of their own worldviews, definitions of life, economy, society, and nature. Such alternative ways of living and seeing the world must be acknowledged as equally valid to Western frameworks if the development idea is going to be reconstructed.

In the context of socio-environmental development projects, the production of knowledge is deeply political and often shaped by the power dynamics between international institutions, national governments, and local communities. Goldman (2001) introduces the concept of "authoritative green knowledge" which refers to the understanding of environmentalism and "the particular set of facts that are produced to differentiate, classify and categorize populations and their natural environments" (p. 194). The scholar uses this concept to describe how environmental knowledge is constructed and legitimized by powerful actors, particularly international financial institutions such as the World Bank (which it's intervention in Laos is the example he uses to explain this concept). This form of knowledge, often perceived as objective and scientific, functions to differentiate, classify, and categorize populations and their environments, reinforcing a global discourse that prioritizes certain narratives while silencing others.

Goldman continues explaining how in infrastructure-heavy development projects, the Terms of Reference (ToR) themselves become tools of knowledge production. The Bank, for example, defines not only what information is necessary but also how it should be presented, and often predetermines the conclusions that align with institutional goals. Methods like Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) are used to quickly and cost-effectively collect data, yet these methods are extractive in nature. As described by the IUCN (1998, quoted in Goldman, p. 197), RRA involves "outsiders learning about local situations" through iterative engagement. However, in practice, this process can be superficial and biased, especially when inconvenient findings are omitted from final

reports to align with institutional or economic interests, which are commonly linked. This kind of report has the power to shape reality for the economic resources owners' perspectives.

This leads to a subjugation of knowledge, where the expertise of transnational consultants, northern technocrats, and even local technical experts is privileged, while the lived experiences and understandings of local communities (seen as the object of study) are marginalized (Goldman, 2001). Local knowledge is often portrayed as irrational, static, or insignificant, especially when it contradicts the logic of commodification or global economic development (Goldman, 2001, p. 202). Non-commoditized social relationships and traditional economic practices are invisible or valueless, and the social categories and mobility practices of local communities are overlooked or misrepresented in reports.

Goldman continues explaining that even though public consultations are formally included in project planning, frequently fail to ensure genuine participation. These are often conducted using highly technical language in culturally inappropriate ways, resulting in local communities being present without truly understanding or influencing the decisions that affect their lives. In effect, consultation becomes a symbolic gesture rather than an active decision-making process.

The interactions between multilateral institutions and national governments also play a role in these interactions. The researcher explains that National political interests are often closely aligned with international institutional objectives, especially when large-scale investments and loans are involved. This alignment reinforces institutionalized forms of "green" knowledge, professionalized through capacity-building programs sponsored by Northern aid agencies and development banks. These processes transform environmentalism into an authoritative discourse that not only governs practices but also defines the terms of legitimacy in development spaces (Goldman, 2001). Even core environmental terms like "conservation" or "biodiversity" promoted by non-governmental agencies may be strange or foreign to local populations, underscoring the disconnection between global discourses and lived realities and a bias towards the neoliberal sustainability market.

Nonetheless, this globally sanctioned green knowledge holds significant economic value: the World Bank's data, analyses, and frameworks are treated as assets that allow lending and borrowing to "underdeveloped countries", reinforcing their authority regardless of the questionable methodologies behind them (Goldman, 2001).

The Laos case clearly illustrates how transnational actors control not only what knowledge is produced, but also how it is used, what institutions are involved, and the timeline for implementation, often dictated by investor interests. Despite the cuestionable nature of their knowledge practices, these institutions have global legitimacy, allowing their discourse to circulate without being challenged.

2.4. Decolonization Approach and Post-Development

The role of international cooperation and NGOs has been present since 1980 onwards in the development studies agenda (Islam, 2017, p. 480). NGO and international cooperation have had several stages in their work related to local communities, changing towards addressing immediate needs to get involved in sustainability and the combination of local action with national and international structural changes (Korten, 1990). Overall, NGO gives a flexible funding channel to ground-based communities and connect them with international donors (Islam, 2017). Although bottom-up development is one of the main values of NGO involvement in projects with ground-based communities, there are several power dynamics and political agendas that could replicate dispossession and Western agenda imposition practices (Kang, 2011; Rubis & Theriault, 2020). Especially in the case of indigenous peoples, the interactions with the climate change and conservation funding sector could be embedded in different scales of power, knowledge, and colonialism (Brugnach et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2022).

NGOs in the so-called "developing countries" are more focused on community empowerment, improving livelihood options, and development among vulnerable people (Islam, 2017). The strengths of NGOs working with community-based initiatives are the participatory approach,

facilitating communication channels, influencing collective actions, generating and mobilizing local resources creating a space for knowledge sharing with outside agents; being all of these features helpful for community empowerment (Islam, 2017; Kang, 2011). Nevertheless, some limitations were also found like the lack of real understanding of the local context and local people's demand which is translated into a lack of effective decision-making involvement, the commercial attitude of NGOs reinforcing donor dependency, the lack of flexibility to negotiate time, terms and conditions, and political NGO's roles (Islam, 2017).

The interaction between NGOs and international cooperation is common through the exchange of funding, technical knowledge, and staff members or they can also cooperate to implement projects together (Islam, 2017). The commonly known system of international cooperation works in this way: international donors or foundations have their agendas with prioritized thematics such as forest conservation, sustainability efforts, mitigation practices, gender equality, etc. Some examples of these donors are the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, among others. They create connections with national and local NGOs in specific developing countries (Kang, 2011). It is a common practice to form partnerships for community development between these actors, these partnerships involve various levels of coordination, negotiation, communication, and discussions ideally based on an equal power dynamic (Kang, 2011).

NGOs that can coordinate with these international donors or cooperation have minimum technical knowledge, and economic and network resources to get in touch with external actors (some minimum requisites like speaking English, having the capacity to spend a considerable amount of budget, and being able to create a narrative and financial reports of the activities). These national or local NGOs have relationships with ground-based or local and indigenous communities and normally know what their needs and challenges are creating a "legitimacy" image for external

stakeholders. However, not necessarily the local and indigenous communities trust local or national NGOs, but that is not commonly taken into consideration by international cooperation.

These national and local NGOs are the ones who coordinate with international cooperation and at the same time manage the socioenvironmental development projects on the ground in different ways. As we can see, there are several steps before international cooperation can reach indigenous communities and several communication channels in which they are not directly participating. This resource and communication asymmetry is important to consider in the execution of socioenvironmental development projects with indigenous and ground-based communities.

Some case studies show that regardless of the good intentions of government agencies and international NGOs and cooperation, the practices could encourage disruption, enclosure, commodification, and dispossession of indigenous knowledge and territories (Rubis & Theriault, 2020). These practices could involve objectification of indigenous traditions and practices as "resources" for conservation projects, avoiding addressing the political drivers of deforestation or displacement from their ancestral lands, tokenism, and disregarding indigenous cosmovision and self-determination to "educate them" with the Western values, ideology, and practices seen as superior (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). These kinds of practices not only are unethical and reinforce practices of exploitation, but are also impractical because there are proven stronger successful outcomes of conservation projects where indigenous and local communities have meaningful participation (Zhang et al., 2023). One theory to take into consideration to avoid replicating these practices is the post-development theory (Matthews, 2010). Which seek to revalorize other ways of knowledge and life practices besides the Western ones defending the local against the global (Matthews, 2010).

An aspect to take into consideration is that there are several stakeholders in each socio-environmental development project and rethinking the management dynamic could involve an inspiration in the collaborative governance decision-making system (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Collaborative governance is "a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets."(Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544). Although this pre-study does not contemplate public agencies or public policy directly, it is still important to integrate the concept of collaborative governance as a tool for partnerships that involve collaboration through collective decision-making. Also, this theory helps us to better understand the power imbalances of each agent or stakeholder and the implications these differences might bring to the problem. Some consequences are that stronger actors (international cooperation and NGOs) are more likely to manipulate the projects, and meaningful actors (local and indigenous communities) do not participate as is required, which is why considering an empowerment strategy for disadvantaged actors is needed (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

In this sense, some of the stakeholders that we could identify are the international donor agencies and their private, public, or public-private funding entities; the international, national, and local NGOs; the national, regional, and local indigenous organizations; ground-based and local communities; and- in some cases- government, public-private associations, and even businesses. They have different power dynamics between each other and resources to have meaningful participation in the projects. For example, often, the decisions taken by International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are influenced by bilateral and multilateral donor agencies' decisions and rules, putting these INGOs under pressure to obtain measured results to satisfy their donors (Kang, 2011). On the other hand, local and indigenous communities commonly accept the conditions without real negotiation because they need resources and technical aid.

Another theoretical framework to address this situation is the decolonization theory which implies projects inclined to reconciliation with indigenous knowledge and worldview through promoting sovereignty and self-determination (Johnson et al., 2022). Furthermore, the co-management is done

in congruence with the indigenous worldview of landscapes and ecosystem dynamics allowing them to apply their customary roles and traditional responsibilities (Johnson et al., 2022).

Finally, it is important to take into consideration as well models of partnerships as a practice for socio-environmental community development projects. These partnerships involve various levels of coordination, negotiation, communication, and discussions between international cooperation, NGOs, and local and indigenous communities (Kang, 2011; Wahbe et al., 2007). One central aspect of these partnerships is to build long-term capacities for community development that last longer than the specific partnership. This capacity building is done mainly by NGOs through assistance with technical advice, management training, knowledge, and economic resource sharing. The aim is for the local and indigenous communities to be independent and have agency for long-term community development and for this, it is mandatory to have institutional strength (Kang, 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, inductive methodology grounded in the principles of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) complemented by a decolonial and intercultural research lens. This approach is well suited to the aim of the thesis, to identify and analyze the power dynamics, expectations, and communication processes among indigenous communities, NGOs, and international donors in socioenvironmental development projects, because it allows the co-construction of theory based on the lived experiences and situated knowledge of research participants. Grounded Theory is particularly appropriate for examining complex, multi-actor contexts marked by asymmetric power relations and epistemic differences, such as those present in socioenvironmental development projects in the Peruvian Amazon (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Moreover, rather than testing a predefined hypothesis, this study builds theory inductively through participants' narratives, allowing for concepts to emerge from the data itself (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Charmaz, 2014).

Data was collected primarily through 22 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus groups, and fieldnotes and participant observation providing deep insight into how various actors interpret all the individual and collected lived experiences shaping contextual needs and priorities related to so-called "development" projects in the Peruvian Amazon territory. Interviews were conducted in Spanish (with Shipibo interpretation when needed), audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed, anonymized, coded, and the information analyzed by themes. Focus groups were facilitated using participatory techniques such as timeline mapping and collaborative storytelling with an intercultural approach. This research employs an interdisciplinary approach with decolonial and participatory methodologies, providing a novel framework for understanding and proposing changes to the dynamics of socioenvironmental development projects in Ucayali. Moreover, the methodological design is closely aligned with the theoretical framework and the research questions.

An initial actors mapping exercise was conducted to identify key actors involved in socioenvironmental development projects in the Amazon region. The actors were categorized into four primary groups:

- International cooperation agencies (donors)
- National NGOs
- Regional NGOs
- Indigenous communities

This mapping was built purposely based on my prior professional experience at the Fondo Socioambiental del Perú, where I had interaction with several of these organizations that influenced both the selection of actors and the development of thematic focus areas. Likewise, the choice of geographic focus was influenced by existing relationships with local actors in Ucayali, established through previous professional engagements and visits in the territory where socioenvironmental development projects were implemented.

Originally, the research design centered around three local organizations as case studies based in Pucallpa, selected for their direct work with indigenous communities and their direct and/or indirect financial links and dependency on international donors. However, as the actor mapping evolved and field realities emerged, the methodology was revised and aligned with Grounded Theory's flexibility and responsiveness to field realities.

The final case selection includes, as base cases, analysis:

- Four Shipibo-Konibo indigenous communities within the *Área de Conservación Regional Imiría (ACR Imiría).*

- Two additional mixed Shipibo-Konibo indigenous communities near the urban center of Pucallpa, Ucayali.

These cases reflect a shift from institutional analysis toward a deeper engagement with territorial experiences and community-level experiences.

3.1. Ethical considerations

This research was conducted with full respect for academic integrity, personal responsibility, and the ethical treatment of all participants. There is no risk of external influence or funding pressures that could compromise the independence or integrity of the findings.

In line with ethical responsibilities to human subjects, the study followed the general principles of ethical research as outlined in the Ethical Research Policy (attached as an Appendix to this thesis). All participants were informed of their rights and the scope of the research prior to their involvement. Informed consent was obtained in both individual and collective formats, particularly important in the context of focus groups with indigenous communities, ensuring that consent was free, prior, voluntary, informed, and culturally appropriate. Some modifications were taken into consideration for the Ethical Research Policy to be culturally pertinent during the research and its outcomes. All participants were clearly informed that their participation was voluntary, uncompensated, and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Efforts were made to communicate the research aims and process in accessible and culturally respectful ways.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process and will continue in the presentation of its outcomes. There is no harmful potential for the reputation, dignity, or privacy of the subjects. Personal identifiers have been removed, and no real names or identifiable information will appear in the thesis or related publications. Sensitive information was handled with discretion to avoid any risk to the reputation, dignity, or privacy of participants.

Importantly, the research findings will be returned to the communities and organizations involved in the form of a practical "toolbox" designed to support more horizontal and effective socioenvironmental project implementation. This reciprocity reflects the efforts for a decolonial and practical orientation of the study.

3.2. Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged in relation to both the methodological choices and the scope of analysis, conclusions, and recommendations of this study. While the use of Grounded Theory enabled the emergence of insights grounded in participants' lived experiences, the following constraints were present:

First, the findings of this research are highly context-specific and apply primarily to the Indigenous communities and organizations that participated in the interviews and focus groups. While the results may serve as a reference point or guide for understanding similar dynamics in other indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon, they are not necessarily generalizable beyond this specific setting.

Second, the limited time and financial resources available for fieldwork presented challenges in building deeper trust with community members. The total duration of in-person engagement within the ACR *Imiría* and surrounding communities near Pucallpa was approximately two weeks. Given that this thesis was self-funded, the fieldwork timeframe was constrained by the high costs of transportation, accessibility challenges, field support, and travel within Ucayali.

Third, language barriers and cultural differences may have contributed to misinterpretations or limited openness during interactions. Although efforts were made to communicate clearly and respectfully, the reliance on translation in some instances may have introduced communication gaps. Additionally, as a researcher perceived as an "external" actor potentially linked to NGOs, some participants may have felt doubtful to fully express their views. These dynamics could have

shaped the information shared and introduced partiality into the data. To mitigate this, the research integrated reflexive practices throughout the process, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and actively making efforts for dialogical, trust-based interactions as much as possible.

Fourth, certain themes identified during the analysis were not fully explored due to time and scope constraints. For example, the role of gender in shaping power dynamics, communication, and agency, especially the experiences of indigenous women, was not analyzed. Similarly, while international donor dynamics were discussed, the broader geopolitical and institutional context of environmental funding was not the primary focus, as the thesis emphasizes grounded case studies and relational dynamics at the local level. The limitations themselves point to promising areas for future research, particularly in relation to gender dynamics in socio-environmental development projects, long-term participatory engagement, and transnational and international donors and philanthropy governance structures.

3.3. Positionality[4]

As a practitioner from Peru with a background in socio-environmental development consultancy, I approach this study from the standpoint of an urban, educated and fluent in English woman from the Global South who is often perceived as white within my national context, though I do not necessarily identify or experience "whiteness" in the same way in abroad settings. My primary professional experiences have shaped my understanding of development dynamics, while also positioning me as both an insider and outsider in relation to the communities I engaged with during this research.

My prior work as a consultant for the *Fondo Socioambiental del Perú*, a national NGO that supports local and indigenous initiatives mainly in the Peruvian Amazon providing them with organizational, financial, and logistical support; exposed me to the complex ecosystem of actors involved in socio-

[4] Portions of this sub-chapter were adapted from coursework originally submitted for thesis and research courses at Lund University. This material was not previously submitted for another degree or for publication

environmental development projects. I worked on over twenty development projects led by indigenous and non-indigenous local organizations. These projects addressed themes such as climate change adaptation (for example, greenhouses, water harvesting), biodiversity conservation, circular economy practices inspired by nature, indigenous identity and collective rights, environmental defender protection, environmental education, and youth and women's empowerment through sustainable livelihoods.

While my role in these projects was often focused on technical or organizational support, I witnessed firsthand the deep disconnects and asymmetries between donors, NGOs, and indigenous communities. Many community members expressed concerns that NGOs operated like businesses, implementing externally driven agendas with limited grassroots involvement. Accusations included budget opacity, hierarchical communication practices, and a lack of transparency and respect for indigenous autonomy and needs, prioritizing Western agendas. In several instances, indigenous communities were unaware of how international cooperation functioned or who actually funded the projects in their territories. These experiences raised critical questions for me about the legitimacy of donors and local and national NGOs in their interactions with indigenous peoples and other local communities, particularly regarding how these interactions affect community agency and how intercultural communication is approached in development practice. A perceived lack of trust, transparency, and horizontal communication could interfere with the horizontal involvement of the indigenous communities in the projects.

In this sense, this research is informed by a dual perspective: as someone with prior working relationships and trust with local and regional actors in Ucayali, and as someone committed to critical reflection on the structures and assumptions in the development practice. My proximity to these actors offered access to insights and facilitated case selection, but it also introduced challenges of positional bias and the potential for perceived affiliation with NGOs. I actively engaged in

reflexive practices throughout the research process to interrogate my own assumptions, build trust, and remain attentive to power dynamics in interactions with participants.

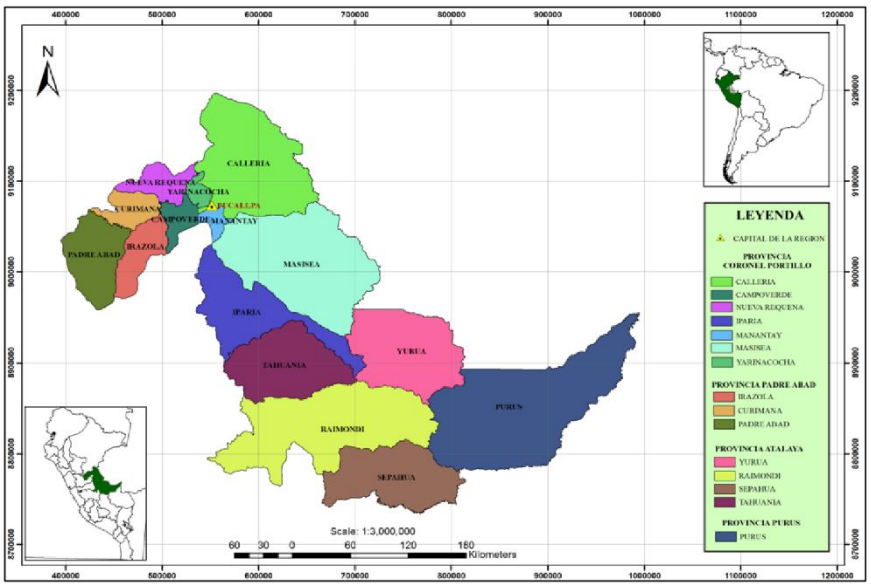
Importantly, while I had pre-existing personal and professional ties with several of the actors who participated in this research. My goal was not to evaluate or promote these actors, but to understand the broader dynamics of power, expectation, and communication that shape the implementation of socioenvironmental development projects in indigenous territories. I approached the research with an intercultural and decolonial lens as much as I could as a non-indigenous researcher, recognizing the historical legacies of exclusion and the need to amplify indigenous voices in knowledge production.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Ucayali is a key Amazonian region in Peru, notable for its rich Indigenous diversity and ecological significance (see Figure 1). It occupies 102,410.55 km², representing nearly 8% of the national territory, and is home to approximately 1.4% of Peru's population (INEI, n.d.). The capital city is Pucallpa. The region hosts 21 Indigenous peoples (which represents around 15.6% of the total population in Ucayali), some of whom live in isolation or initial contact, and supports around 16 indigenous languages (Ministerio de Cultura, 2024). Additionally, in Ucayali there are 305 indigenous communities and 480 localities with indigenous population (BDPI, n.d.).

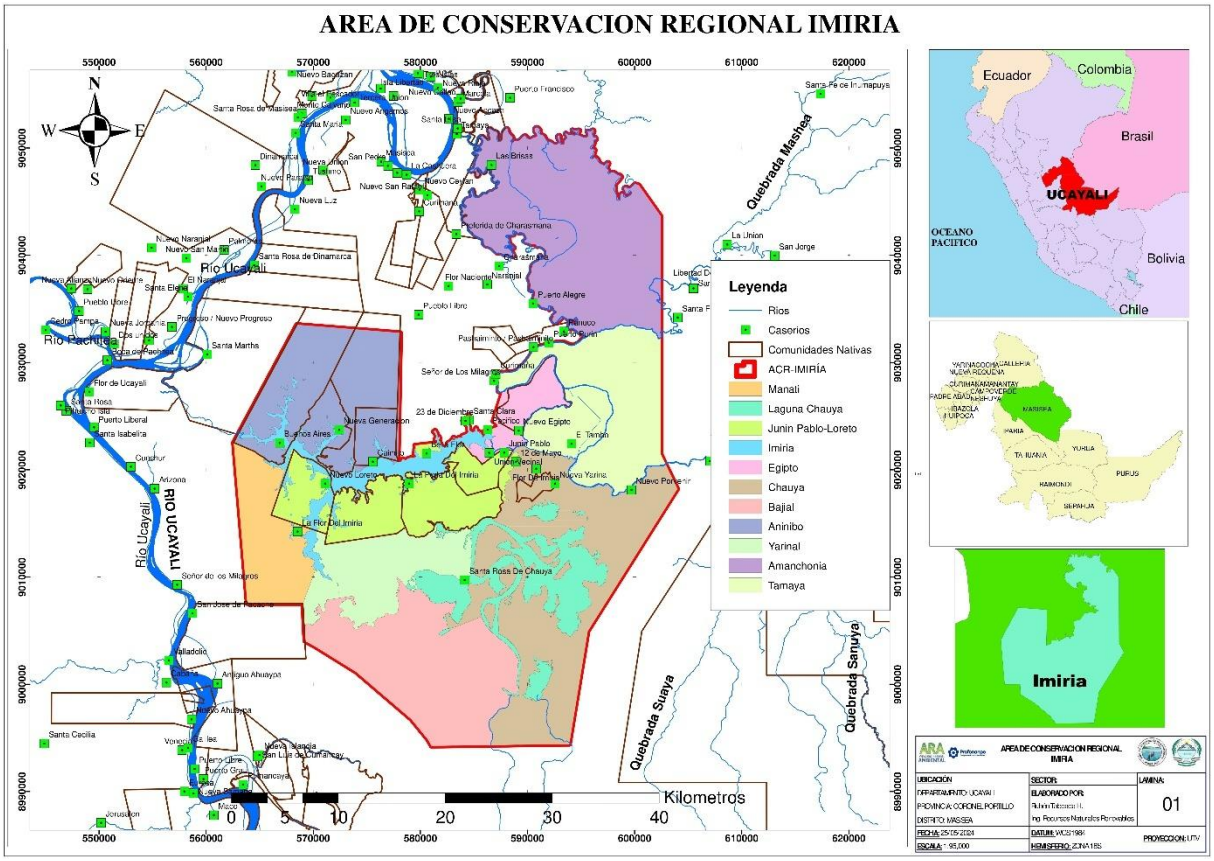
The Shipibo-Konibo people, who are central to this study, are among the most prominent indigenous groups in the region. The Shipibo- Konibo indigenous people have a series of cultural fusions between the Shipibo, Konibo, and the Shetebos (Ministerio de Cultura, 2024). Their communities are both in rural and urban settings, and they exhibit high levels of cultural resilience and adaptation. Ucayali hosts approximately 25,134 Shipibo-Konibo individuals, with 24,667 reporting Shipibo as their mother tongue (BDPI, n.d.). The district of Yarinacocha has the highest number of Shipibo-Konibo speakers nationally (Ministerio de Cultura, 2024).

Figure 1. *Map of Ucayali prepared by Panduro Pisco et al. (2015). Source: (Panduro Pisco et al., 2015)*



The Indigenous communities selected for this study are located either in proximity to Pucallpa city and within the *Área de Conservación Regional Imiría* (Figure 2), a regional protected area (RCAs in English). RCAs in Peru are classified as areas of direct use and fall under the administration of the Regional Government. While sustainable economic activities are permitted, they must align with the RCA's foundational conservation goals (SERNANP, 2013). This legal framework makes ACR Imiria a significant site for exploring the intersection between conservation policy, indigenous community livelihoods, and donor-driven development projects.

Figure 2. *Base of the ACR Imiria. Source: Shared by Samuel Cauper Pinedo - Head of the ACR Imiria*



4.1. Participant Selection and Access

The selection of research participants was a purposive (DeCarlo, 2018) and multi-step process that required establishing communication and coordination with three key regional organizations, which facilitated access, acting as gatekeepers and intermediaries to the indigenous communities included in this study. In accordance with the ethical protocol, which included confidentiality

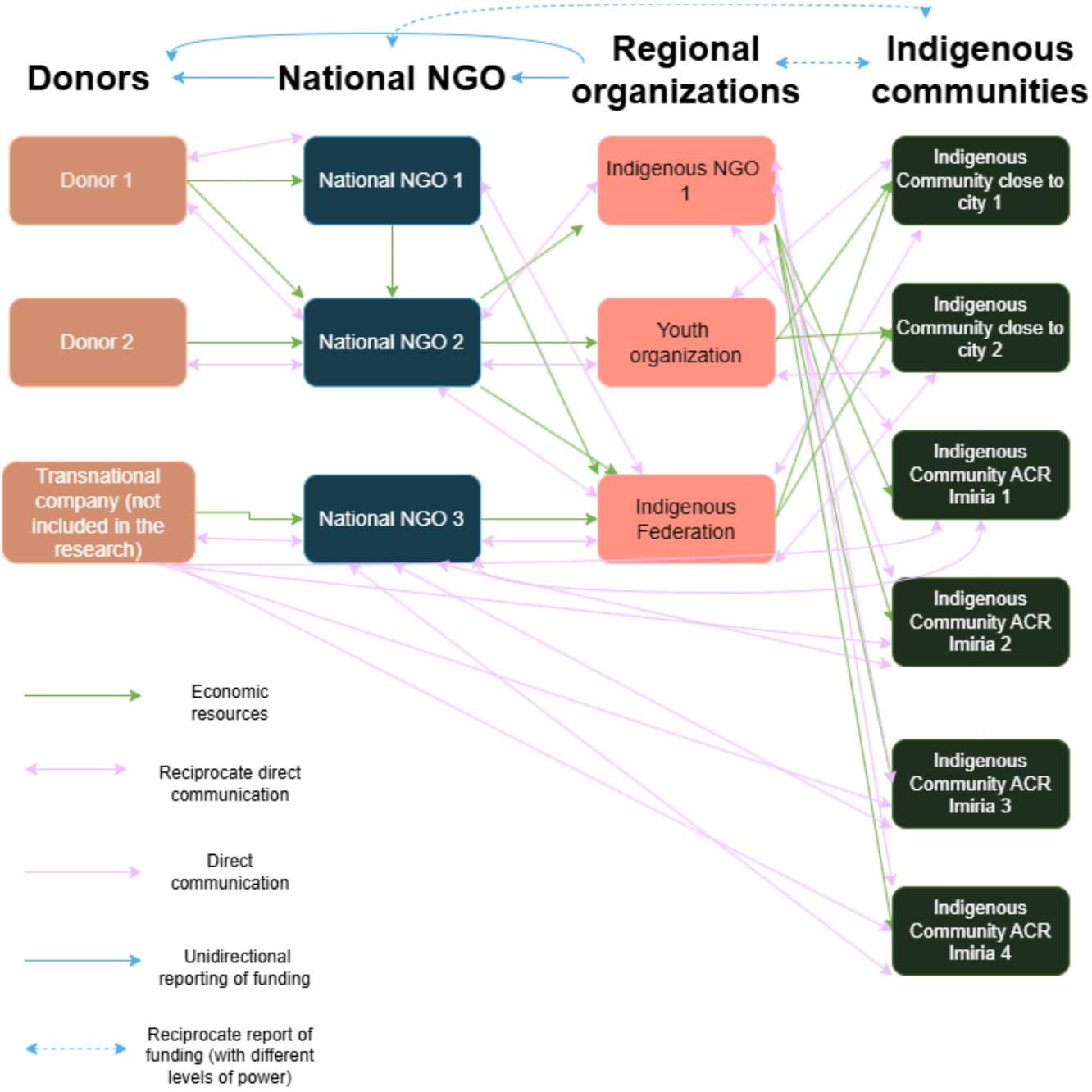
agreements made with participants, the names of all individuals and organizations involved have been anonymized in this thesis.

These organizations are interlinked and maintain relationships with three national NGO, which also participated in this research, including the one where I was formerly employed. One of these (National NGO number 3) which was not initially included in the actors mapping, was repeatedly mentioned by community members within ACR Imiría, thus making necessary its inclusion in the study.

In the case of donors, interviews were conducted with two major organizations that channel foreign funding toward socioenvironmental development projects in the Peruvian Amazon. These contacts were established with the help of the *Fondo Socioambiental del Perú*.

All these organizations are interconnected in various ways (see Figure 3: Institutional and Organizational Dynamics Map).

Figure 3. *Institutional and organizational dynamic map (created by the author)*



The diagram shows the complex network of relationships among the various actors who participated in this research. It highlights the flow of economic resources, ways of communication, and influence among donors, national NGOs, regional organizations, and indigenous communities:

- Donors:

The two donors included in the research are philanthropic organizations with global operations: (i) Donor 1 provides direct grants to individuals and organizations, managing a budget exceeding one billion USD annually. It funds initiatives related to democracy, human rights, environmental protection, and governance. (ii) Donor 2 is a philanthropic alliance that allocates grants to organizations working on environmental and climate change issues.

The research participants from these organizations were program officers, who play a central role in grant allocation and partner selection.

- National NGOS:

These organizations operate at the national level and serve primarily as first-level intermediaries, channeling international funding and implementing development projects on the ground: (i) National NGO 1 is one of the largest environmental NGOs in Peru, collaborating with over 20 different donors. (ii) National NGO 2 specializes in channeling international grants to support grassroots and local initiatives. (iii) National NGO 3 has more than 30 years of experience working in Indigenous territories and conservation areas. It currently implements carbon credit projects in the region.

Participants from these organizations were primarily senior staff at the director level.

- Regional Organizations:

These actors operate at the community and regional levels, often fulfilling multiple roles as implementers, intermediaries, and representatives: (i) Indigenous NGO 1 is led by a Shipibo director and focuses on territorial protection and Indigenous rights advocacy. It maintains close relationships with the communities it serves and was instrumental in facilitating fieldwork in four communities within the ACR Imiría. It also provided key logistical, technical, and translation support. (ii) The Youth Organization includes both indigenous and non-indigenous members and has implemented environmental awareness campaigns in two semi-urban indigenous communities.

This organization also assisted with both communities outreach and coordination. (iii) The Indigenous Federation is the official political representative institution of indigenous peoples in Ucayali. Contact was established through the head of the Women's Leadership Division, with whom prior collaboration on women's economic autonomy and artisanal crafts had taken place when I was working as a consultant. Interviewing this institution was essential given its dual role as a political representative and intermediary, often perceived by communities in similar terms to NGOs.

All participants from these organizations were presidents or high-ranking representatives.

- Indigenous communities:

All participating communities belong to the Shipibo-Konibo people, and are grouped into two categories: (i) Two semi-urban and mixed indigenous communities located near the city of Pucallpa. (ii) Four communities situated within the ACR Imiría, a state-protected conservation area subject to environmental restrictions.

Participants included community members involved in socioenvironmental projects, either directly or indirectly, and park rangers from the ACR Imiria who also belong to the local communities within the ACR Imiria.

This visualization helps ground the analysis of the power asymmetries, communication gaps, and relational dynamics explored in the following chapters. It helps to illustrate how influence, accountability, and collaboration are structured among actors in the field.

4.2. Data Collection Methods

The research design involved the following methods:

- Semi-structured interviews (n = 22).
- Focus group discussions (n = 4).
- Participant observation.

- Document analysis (project reports, policy briefs, institutional plans).

Key informants from each stakeholder category were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These included:

- Directors or senior staff from regional organizations and national NGOs
- Program officers from international donor agencies
- Indigenous leaders, both women and men, who had been direct beneficiaries or active participants in socioenvironmental projects
- Indigenous community members who had participated directly or indirectly in socioenvironmental projects

The key themes represented in the questions included:

- Actor interaction and communication patterns
- Project lifecycle processes (design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation)
- Power asymmetries and partnership models
- Perceptions of development priorities and environmental worldviews

All questions are included in the Appendix, customized for each participant type (NGO/donor and indigenous community member).

Regarding the focus group discussions were designed as interactive, collective knowledge-building activities. This method was particularly effective in the communities located within the RCA Imiría, where participants expressed greater comfort and confidence sharing their views in a group setting rather than individually. A total of four focus groups were conducted, three in the communities within the ACR Imiria and one in the community situated closer to the urban area of Pucallpa.

The focus group sessions aimed to explore community priorities in relation to environmental issues, their preferred strategies for addressing these challenges, and the obstacles they face. In addition, the discussions probed participants' perceptions of the roles played by NGOs and

external actors in project implementation, communication patterns, and the perceived effectiveness or not of development project interventions. Key guiding questions included:

1. What are the main environmental problems affecting your community?
2. What strengths does your community have to address these challenges?
3. How would you like these environmental issues to be addressed?
4. What difficulties does your community face in addressing these environmental challenges?
5. How could external support help to overcome these challenges?
6. Who are the main external actors (NGOs, donors, government, etc.) supporting your community?
7. How would you like external support to engage with your community?
8. What are the strengths of the current collaboration between your community and external organizations?
9. What are the weaknesses or challenges of these partnerships?
10. How do external organizations communicate with your community during a project? Do you feel your perspectives are heard and respected?
11. What improvements would you suggest to strengthen collaboration between your community and external organizations?
12. What values do you believe NGOs and donors should uphold when working with your community?

Finally, in order to facilitate engagement and maintain participants' attention, visual tools such as flip charts, post-its, and markers were used. Given that many participants were not fluent in Spanish, translation support from Shipibo to Spanish was provided during all focus group activities conducted in the ACR Imiria when needed.

The data collected are directly relevant to the thesis's core aims: understanding how indigenous communities experience and navigate power dynamics in donor-driven socioenvironmental

projects. Participants were selected to reflect diverse perspectives across the project lifecycle from donors and NGOs to indigenous communities.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, particularly power asymmetries, funding transparency, and intercultural communication, validity was ensured through:

- Triangulation: Cross-referencing interview, focus group, and document data
- Reflexivity: Positionality and potential bias as a researcher were critically examined
- Anonymity: Confidentiality was emphasized to encourage open responses

While the data are context-specific, their value lies in revealing patterns of interactions, communication, and legitimacy that could resonate beyond Ucayali. These findings may offer relevant lessons for future projects in similar socioenvironmental and intercultural settings.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. COSMOVISION AND CULTURE

5.1.1. Institutionalities and territory

> "The environment. A space we walk through, we find, we breathe, we dream about. Like pure air, without pollution. Without disease. Where the principle of nature reigns, so that everyone in the environment, everyone communicates, everyone knows each other. In the environment, as biological beings, we communicate. We understand each other because it's a house. That's my way of conceiving the environment as a Shipibo. Now, the issue of climate change. It's a disorder we've caused to nature... Therefore, climate change is about poor ways of living..." (Director of the Indigenous Regional NGO).

Indigenous communities such as the Shipibo-Konibo in the Peruvian Amazon govern themselves through relational, collective, and spiritually grounded forms of decision-making, rooted in ancestral ties to territory (BDPI, n.d.). Their systems include property held communally, decisions made through assemblies, and multi-scalar organizations ranging from local village authorities to regional and national Indigenous federations. These are not merely "informal" or "cultural" practices, but legitimate institutionalities shaped by history, cosmology, and collective identity (De la Cadena, 2015; Rappaport, 2005).

This chapter begins by examining how interactions with the six indigenous communities during this research reflect broader institutional and epistemic asymmetries embedded in development and conservation projects. My experiences engaging with communities near Pucallpa and within the remote ACR Imiria revealed a profound contrast, one that not only marked differences in infrastructure and access, but also exposed deeper questions around knowledge, legitimacy, and dependency.

The two semi-urban communities located near the city of Pucallpa were relatively easier to access, both in terms of logistics and language (see Figure 4). Because of their proximity to the city, the environment felt more familiar, basic public services, shops, restaurants, and other urban markers were present on a much smaller and rural scale. The focus group participants and interviewees in

these communities were comfortable conducting conversations in Spanish, even if they occasionally used Shipibo among themselves. Thus, focus groups and interviews could be carried out without the need for translation.

Figure 4. *Arrival at a semi-urban, mixed Indigenous community (photograph by the author). The image captures mototaxis, electrical cables, and small local shops, illustrating the semi-urban character and infrastructural blend present in this indigenous community.*

In contrast, accessing the Indigenous communities located within the ACR Imiria required extensive preparation and deep reliance on local actors. After eight hours traveling by a small wooden boat known as a "rápido", I arrived at the base of the Conservation Area, the shift in environment was immediate and overwhelming. Primary forest trees surrounded us with different

colors and sounds. You could feel the presence of the air and river. There was no cell signal, no roads, no electricity, no shops or health posts.

Upon arrival, I realized how deeply unprepared I was to navigate this place. I had no knowledge of how this forest worked, what animals or plants were dangerous, which paths to take, how to interpret its signs. The place was entirely foreign to me. I was completely dependent on the park rangers (see Figure 5), all of them also part of the indigenous Shipibo communities who lived there. They took charge of our safety and orientation (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. *The ACR Imiria park ranger team together with the author and field assistant (photograph by the author). This image was taken just before boarding a "rápido" to travel to one of the indigenous communities for a focus group session.*

Figure 6. *Park ranger's "rápido" used for transportation between communities (photograph by the author). The image shows the speedboat operated by the ACR Imiría park rangers, which was used to navigate between indigenous communities during fieldwork.*

They guided us, led us to the base of the Conservation Area which had electricity, water and internet (see Figure 7). However, the rest of the community did not have any of the services we are so used to as urban people. When we went to have dinner in one of the houses or "chozas" (see Figure 8) of one of the families, they had fished to prepare our meals prepared with fire of wood gathered from the forest. They knew which plants could heal a fever, which tree would provide strong timber, and which species were accompanying them. They knew the sounds of each bird, the trails left by animals, the moods of the river. What I totally lacked, knowledge of survival and connection to land.

Figure 7. *Focus group in the ACR Imiría base camp (photograph by the author). Thanks to prior coordination with the Regional Government of Ucayali, we obtained permission to enter the ACR and stay overnight at the base facilities*

Figure 8. *A traditional hut in the complete darkness of the Amazon (photograph by the author)*

In that moment, a reversal of dependency came to my mind. In this landscape, their territorial and intergenerational knowledge was not only valid, but it was also vital. Without them, I could not have moved, eaten, or communicated. And yet, in the logics of development and conservation funding, it is often assumed that indigenous people are the ones who lack "capacity" and must be "trained" or "empowered."

I began to wonder: do they feel the same disorientation in the city that I felt here? Do they navigate Lima or Pucallpa with the same sense of being external, "not belonging", struggling to access services, ignored in institutions that speak an unfamiliar language and follow alien rules? Do they feel that their knowledge is irrelevant unless put in foreign formal formats in English?

These experiences made visible the asymmetries that are often overlooked in development discourses. Conservation here depends entirely on the labor, knowledge, and presence of indigenous peoples, yet the structures of recognition and authority remain elsewhere urban, bureaucratic, and distant as we are going to explore further in the following chapters.

This chapter analyzes how institutional asymmetries in development projects reflect deeper epistemic and cultural hierarchies. Despite claims of participation and intercultural sensitivity, indigenous systems of governance, spirituality, and territorial knowledge are often devalued or made invisible. While donors, NGOs, and indigenous communities all operate within their own institutional logics and worldviews, the burden of adaptation mainly falls on indigenous actors, who must comply to Western bureaucratic and technocratic norms to access resources or participate in projects.

This dynamic reflects critiques of the coloniality of power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000) whereby modern institutions establish a hierarchy between knowledge and ways of organizing life, marginalizing non-Western epistemologies. Arturo Escobar's (2008) critique of development

similarly highlights how indigenous worlds are subordinated to Eurocentric notions of progress, rationality, and institutional legitimacy.

Donors and intermediary NGOs tend to operate through standardized, professionalized, and technocratic frameworks. Funding flows are tied to auditability, financial rationalization, and formal organizational structures (bank accounts and external fiscal audits) that it is almost impossible to accommodate indigenous realities. As a representative from a national NGO noted:

- Director of the national NGO 2: "There's a cooperating (donor) entity that asks you for the usual webinar, the same thing, an account number, your records, sometimes, US equivalent status, for that you must send your report. There are others that ask for an audit, that ask for financial statements … so they ask you for external audits, audited financial statements… And they investigate you, they investigate your website, that effectively your assembly and your bylaws are in order".

Such bureaucratic requirements reflect not only institutional power, but an epistemic order that privileges Western knowledge systems. Projects often fail to meaningfully engage indigenous institutionalities, resulting in top-down governance and representation gaps.

This tension became strikingly clear during all the focus groups participation. For example, in the first focus group developed in the close to city indigenous community number 1, I asked about different socioenvironmental development projects that were carried on in their community to create a timeline identifying what they like and did not like about the projects. One of them was a gender focused development project that was developed last year in the community. They mention that they don't know when the training will resume and they don't have effective communication with the NGO because even though they can contact them, they do not receive project details about the execution details:

- Laura: ": "We don't know anything … They don't say what they are going to do, they teach us what we should do" (these comments were seconded by all the other participants).

Indigenous participation in the governance of conservation and development is often limited to implementation roles, while strategic decisions and budgetary control remain mainly centralized in urban-based, non-indigenous institutions. Of all the NGO, donor staff and regional organizations I met during fieldwork, only two were indigenous, one leading a women's program in the regional indigenous federation and another directing an indigenous NGO. As highlighted by the indigenous NGO director:

- "We are an environmental NGO, with a focus on resistance, vindication, socialism, self-determination, a focus on human rights, and indigenous peoples… the issues of territorial, cultural, and human rights vindication. This is the big difference that donors still don't reach, fail to achieve, or fail to understand. Because native/indigenous organizations and indigenous NGOs lack the capacity, lack good technical formulation, and fail to achieve product success. In other words, that's the concept that all donors have in their minds. The indigenous organization must seek a partnership, an ally like other national NGO to receive the funds. But when you look for an ally, who consumes the biggest piece of pie? When I see that the donor determines what you're going to manage, then there's an imposition, a verticalism".

This comment refers to a common donor practice: requiring Indigenous organizations to apply for funding through a more "trustworthy" NGO intermediary (called fiscal sponsor) usually urban, established, and bureaucratically structured.

As mentioned by Smith's (2012) in her concept of institutional imperialism, where indigenous actors must conform to external logics to be recognized as valid participants. Such dynamics

reinforce colonial patterns of subordination, even within so-called participatory development agendas.

Moreover, these asymmetries are not just technical, they are cultural and epistemic. Indigenous cosmovision link territory, spirituality, and community in ways that challenge the development agenda logic. Their marginalization in project planning reveals a deeper unwillingness to accept indigenous knowledge as equally legitimate or valuable (Santos, 2015; Walsh, 2010).

5.1.2. Territorial Management and Governance

This marginalization can be perceived in how development interventions in indigenous territories in Ucayali are primarily shaped by hegemonic, Western notions of land management and governance, often subordinating indigenous priorities to external conservation or economic agendas. The data has shown that while indigenous communities advocate for territorial security through collective land titling, development actors frequently prioritize technical goals, such as conservation or carbon markets. This disconnect highlights the limitations of development in addressing local needs and rights (Matthews, 2010).

The Shipibo-Konibo people have historically faced exploitation and dispossession of their territories. Traditionally, they organize themselves in small groups forming communities around the rivers in Ucayali, and they are used to migration for climate reasons (Encinas et al., 2016). Their livelihoods are deeply connected to the forest and river ecosystems: they build homes from local trees, travel via canoe, fish, hunt, and cultivate crops. Artisanal crafts are sold for monetary income, allowing them to acquire industrial goods like fuel and packaged food (Encinas et al. 2016).

Historical narratives from shipibo historian and stories of wise indigenous men and women collected by the *Instituto de Investigación de Lingüística Aplicada de la Facultad de Letras y Ciencias Humanas (CILA) de la Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos* & Metadatos (2012) emphasize that initial contact with Western actors occurred through missionaries, rather than Spanish colonial forces

directly (Peru is one of the countries that was colonized by Spain and fought for its independency on 1824). Testimonies from elders recount how missionary access was often negotiated through payment to community leaders, marking the beginning of a long trajectory of contested external presence in their territories (CILA 2012). These exchanges brought some welcomed changes in the communities like access to goods and services provided in the cities but also concern about having their territory in dispute and in need of defense and protection.

Extractive activities in their territories, such as logging and mining combined with narcotrafficking, generated different levels of violence and conflict. Also, the colonial exploitation during the rubber boom (late 19th to early 20th century) led to enslavement and forced displacement, followed by the period of violence in Peru from 1985 to 2000 (CILA, 2012). Today, forms of territorial dispossession persist through extractive laws and private sector encroachment. The modification to the Forestry and Wildlife Law and other national legal frameworks often favor deforestation and industrial expansion (AIDESEP, 2023). AIDESEP (2023) and the Forest Peoples Programme (2019) document how such legislation contributes to land invasions and restricts indigenous self-determination. All these factors, combined with climate factors, lead the communities to migrate close to urban areas, as in the case of the two indigenous mixed communities that participated in the interviews. As it is explained, there are many interests regarding Shipibo indigenous territory motivated by economic exploitation, including infrastructure, agriculture, and logging.

In Ucayali, indigenous communities also express ambivalence or disagreement with the ACR Imiria (see Figure 9). While conservation aligns with some of their values, the area's restrictions on resource use for economic gain clash with community aspirations for economic activities and income. The four indigenous communities in the ACR Imiria that participated in the focus groups detailed the priorities in their territories and what projects they would like to be executed regarding socio development projects in their territories.

Figure 9. *Sign at the ACR Imiria base prohibiting the extraction of hydrobiological and forest resources (photograph by the author). Samuel Cauper Pinedo, Head of the ACR IMIRIA appears in the photography*

These demands are for collective land titling and locally led economic projects. Focus groups articulated concrete proposals such as community-run cacao and fish farming projects, highlighting an urgent need for investment in autonomy/independence-building activities.

Indigenous conceptualizations of territory and climate differ significantly from technical frameworks. For Shipibo participants, climate change manifests as intense seasonal cycles, drought, deforestation, and food insecurity. Their understanding of nature is holistic, spiritual, and tied to daily survival:

- Bertha from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "It's hotter than before, it doesn't rain like it used to, it doesn't rain in the summer. Earth properties are no longer the same; the fruits, the mangoes, don't yield as they used to. The fruits are small, and fish are

scarce".

- Director of the Indigenous NGO 1: "Climate change is also about loss, it's about the loss of habitat, it's about the loss of many natural resources, and the consequences that the natural beings and the indigenous peoples are experiencing in the territory. I say that in my own language (as indigenous). Not scientifically."

Figure 10. *Sunset in one of the Indigenous communities within the ACR Imiría (photograph by the author)*

By contrast, NGOs and donors often adopt technocratic definitions of climate action tied to global and mainstream climate change discourses, carbon markets and biodiversity indices. However, there are also some points of overlap with indigenous needs and priorities, for example, emphasis on sustainable income.

- Senior staff of national NGO 1: "Well, there's a conceptual framework that's part of the strategic plan. But basically, from a thematic perspective, it's divided into three parts: environmental management, the sustainable use of natural resources, and the conservation of biological energy".
- Senior staff and director of national NGO 3: "Adapting to climate change means adapting to a globalized market that also reaches communities... If you are not prepared, adaptation will not be possible".
- Director of national NGO 2: "This is how we are committed to issues that also contribute to climate justice. Many communities are affected by climate issues, so we address it in that way, addressing climate justice issues, including their sustainable economies, through their crafts, or through the various sustainable activities they consider to address climate change."

As we can see recognizing indigenous peoples as legitimate actors in the development sector, especially in activities related to their territories, requires moving beyond technical or conservationist framings and centering their historical, legal, and spiritual claims to land (De la Cadena, 2015).

5.1.3. Collectivity and Community

In order to put as central, the historical, legal and spiritual claims of indigenous communities in the development agenda it is important to understand how meaningful their collective participation and collective agency for the success and ethical integrity of socio-environmental development projects is. Despite persistent marginalization, research shows that conservation and development efforts are significantly more effective when indigenous peoples are involved in co-design and co-management (Zhang et al. 2023; Johnson et al. 2022). This challenges top-down approaches by advocating for partnerships rooted in respect, reciprocity, and long-term capacity building taking into consideration local dynamics (Matthews, 2010).

Focus groups and interviews with indigenous actors expressed a clear desire for direct access to funding, emphasizing transparency and autonomy:

- Maria from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "We have an association that should receive the funds directly (from the donors). But if it comes from an NGO, we don't get it, they don't give it to you, the money just stays with them, and in the end, you don't know how much money has arrived".
- Director of the Indigenous NGO 1: "So what we want, and what I propose, is that one day the budget will be 100% executed by indigenous officials with great capacity, extensive education, and extensive field experience, with administration skills, with transparency, leadership, and project management."

Communities articulated specific project priorities such as sustainable agriculture, aquaculture, ecotourism, and artisanal production. Additionally, they stressed the importance of territorial control, technical training like GPS, drones (to monitor the places they cannot reach) and safety equipment for forest monitoring. These demands reflect not only conventional "development" needs but also claims to economic sovereignty and self-determination.

- Indigenous women leader from the indigenous federation: "Because we as women don't just see the territory, we also need to work. For example, we work on crafts, and we are looking for our fairs, looking for where to sell, a fixed market, we always demand it as women".
- Manuel from indigenous community ACR Imiria 2: "Sometimes we, as vigilant (of our territory), don't just take care of things; we have to use them for our own consumption; we also need fishing materials".
- Carlos from indigenous community ACR Imiria 1: "The georeferencing of our territory is important. What we would like is for them (external funding actors) to support us in

obtaining community land titles. Because without that title, we feel uncomfortable; we can't work as a community, and there are always conflicts".

Field data also revealed failure and a lack of sustainability in time toward projects implemented without proper consultation and engagement with the community.

In the focus group discussions, I asked about what they dislike about the socio environmental development projects that were implemented or are implemented in their communities and they cited failed or unsustainable projects, including:

A) Reforestation initiatives, that although the intentions were good there was a lack of involvement and engagement of the community in this activity and the trees were not cared for because they "meant nothing" to participants.

- Martha from close to city indigenous community 1: "The students came to plant the trees, but the community members themselves don't take care of them because they didn't feel the effort, they didn't give their time, etc…. As long as you don't have the dedication, the sense of purpose, the desire to do it, you won't be able to achieve it. It's not just about giving talks, it's about taking action".

B) A Sacha Inchi production project that collapsed due to a lack of market analysis.

- Ernesto from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 2: "There wasn't much sustainability (the project lasted two years) or much expectation from this project for the family. In other words, the project didn't last, it wasn't sustainable, and it didn't generate income. We didn't like the project at all, even though there was funding" (this last statement was seconded by all the participants of the focus group).

C) A livestock donation from the national government without proper training or cultural pertinence leading to neglected animals and no economic benefit.

- Pedro from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 2: "They just gave us the cattle and that was it…".

Such experiences underscore that top-down models not only fail ethically but also practically. Community-led initiatives, by contrast, offer local and contextual knowledge, long-term commitment, and social cohesion. This is the case with the OLV (local surveillance agencies) that are being successful because of the engagement of the community in this activity. All the indigenous communities within the ACR Imiria that participated in this research expressed satisfaction with the creation, implementation, and capacity-building efforts related to their local surveillance organizations (*Organismos Locales de Vigilancia*, OLV). These are autonomous, community-led entities with their own internal governance systems, designed to engage local members in environmental monitoring and territorial protection. The OLVs were established through the initiative of regional indigenous organizations, such as the indigenous NGO involved in this study, and are supported by the national NGO 3. As one Shipibo community leader of the Local Surveillance Body in the indigenous community within ACR Imiria 4 noted:

- Pablo, president of Local Surveillance Body: "Well, the work we have been doing is in terms of surveillance, within our communal territory, of our resources, such as fish, timber trees and other resources that we have within our territory because before there were offenders, they cut down timber trees... many illegal activities. Now, with this control and surveillance... you no longer see all those activities that you saw before."

This successful project implementation led by indigenous community's needs, priorities and ideas show why sustainable and ethical development in indigenous territories must center on collective decision-making, cultural congruence, and long-term capacity building. Indigenous communities are not passive beneficiaries but political actors with legitimate institutions, worldviews, and rights to self-determination (De la Cadena, 2015).

5.2. PARTNERSHIPS

5.2.1. Overview of key projects and stakeholders

Another central aspect of this thesis is analyze who are the various actors involved in socio-environmental development projects Ucayali and how they build partnerships between them. The process of identifying and contacting these actors was both a methodological challenge and a revelatory exercise. It reflected not only my own positionality as a researcher but also the embedded hierarchies that shape relationships between donors, NGOs, regional organizations, and indigenous communities. Asymmetries deeply influence these interactions in access to resources, institutional power, and communication channels. These asymmetries were evident throughout my fieldwork and shaped the different levels of access I had to interview participants.

My first point of contact during fieldwork was with national NGOs based in Lima (the capital city of Peru). These organizations operate in the capital, Peru's economic and institutional center, and use conventional, impersonal modes of communication such as email and phone calls. Establishing contact with them was relatively straightforward and, in many cases, cordial and natural for me as a urban woman. The relationship felt horizontal, grounded in shared codes of urban, "educated", and technocratic professionalism.

In contrast, contacting indigenous communities proved to be and feel far more complex. I immediately became aware of my positional outsider status in relation to their cultural practices, worldviews, and language. Establishing initial connections depended heavily on territorial intermediaries and local actors (the regional organizations), which added layers of logistical and intercultural mediation. Especially because I was depending directly on them to get access to the indigenous communities. Although I had prior experience collaborating with these regional organizations and territorial intermediaries in the Ucayali region and even some of them became "friends", it became clear that regional cultural differences, historical tensions, and localized dynamics played a critical role in creating different behaviors in the actors. For example, the most

challenging intermediate actor to contact was the regional indigenous federation I partnered with, widely recognized as legitimate in Ucayali and with direct access to donors, which has adopted a bureaucratic logic aligned with donor expectations. They have consultants who speak English and help to create their agendas in sync with the international donors' funding strategies, they also manage a busy agenda and have the attention of many international and national funding organizations. As Quijano & Ennis (2000) theorizes, this reflects the "coloniality of power," in which Western bureaucratic and economic models are imposed as normative, relegating indigenous forms of organization to a subordinate status or as an inferior or insufficient way of organization.

In contrast, contacting indigenous communities, particularly those located in geographically isolated territories such in the ACR Imiría (see Figure 11), was challenging but for different reasons both logistical and relational, it required negotiation through multiple intermediaries like the territorial intermediary (the regional indigenous NGO) and the local government to get a permit to access the Area and a team of park rangers for safety purposes. I made deliberate efforts to foster horizontal relationships, aware of the mistrust often directed toward outsiders or "mestizo" people (this is the word that indigenous people use to indicate someone who is not indigenous). This mistrust, rooted in structural racism and colonial histories, associates whiteness and urban identities with power, surveillance, and extractivism.

Figure 11. *View of the primary forest within the ACR Imiria (photograph by the author)*

Although many participants understood Spanish, I conducted focus groups (see Figure 12) with the support of a Shipibo interpreter because some preferred to speak in their indigenous language, not out of necessity, but as a strategic form of reserve or resistance to my outsider presence. This aligns with James Scott's (2008) concept of "hidden transcripts," whereby subaltern groups use symbolic forms of resistance to protect themselves from dominant structures of power, from those who apparently want something from them or of them.

Figure 12. *Focus group in one of the indigenous communities within the ACR Imiria, held at the community center (photograph by the author)*

Conversely, establishing online interviews with donors was equally challenging, but for different reasons. The barriers were not linguistic or cultural but institutional. Donors were difficult to access due to heavy workloads, strict schedules, and professional detachment. Interviews with donor representatives were short, formal, and controlled. Power relations were evident: I needed their time and knowledge, while they had little incentive to reciprocate, especially having such big agendas worldwide. My analysis revealed significant disparities in the nature of communication and relational power among the three actor groups.

Donors not only provide funding but also shape narratives about what development is, who requires it, and in what forms (Escobar, 1995). Both donor program officers I interviewed expressed a clear preference for funding national NGOs due to concerns about administrative

accountability and organizational capacity in the capitalist economy. Even though the representative from Donor 1 had a background in activism and expressed a critical perspective on philanthropy, he nonetheless acknowledged adopting Western-style bureaucratic capitalist systems as an implicit prerequisite for accessing international funds. The representative from Donor 2, who came from an academic background, held a more institutional outlook, yet similarly emphasized the preference for channeling resources through national NGOs:

- Donor 1 program officer: "Basically, philanthropy follows the flow of the country's capitalist system. Therefore, the financial center of philanthropy in the country will most likely be the country's financial center. So, donations to Peru will be highly concentrated in Lima-based organizations".
- Donor 1 program officer: "You need to provide reports, budgets, and all of this because we're within an international financial donation system. It's not just that: 'I liked you, all right then, I will give you five hundred thousand dollars, and you don't even need to say anything about what you're doing with the money'. Quite the contrary, for example, all the organization's donations come from the United States. We need to be accountable to the United States government for what we're doing with these donations. So, indigenous communities that don't have a very good reporting process… they'll probably never receive anything from an international foundation again".
- Donor 2: "Our portfolios have been narrowing towards mostly national organizations".

Further donor interviews revealed that their funding strategies are created based on consultations with a select group of actors, expert advice, and alignment with international agendas. As mentioned by Escobar (1995) "underdeveloped" societies need to adapt to the demands of the "developed" ones. Organizations that do not fit into this predefined mold, especially those lacking bureaucratic infrastructure or fluency in dominant discourses, are systematically excluded. This

perpetuates a dynamic in which access to resources is contingent upon the ability to perform institutional legibility (Ferguson, 1994) rather than genuine alignment with local needs:

- Donor 1 program officer: "As a program officer, my job at the foundation is to talk to civil society organizations, understand their work, and read concept notes. I have a strategy to follow, and I ask for a more detailed proposal from the organizations that are closest to my strategy. And then I move forward in the process…The strategy is our directors', and we have a strategy-building process that we consult with organizations, depending on the issues in different ways… Okay, so let's say it's not only management's decision, but they also hire a specialist and do fieldwork".
- Donor 2 program officer: "And well, also at the international level, we have some other spaces to see how these agendas are linked to more global issues... have a connection at the international level of the issues that we worked on".

In the case of the national NGOs and regional organizations, they are aware of donor expectations and strategically adapt their proposals and discourses accordingly. The indigenous federation in Ucayali, for instance, employs consultants fluent in English and has experience with international advocacy spaces, allowing them to access funds directly. However, this also reflects a tension: to access support, they must adopt the language and logic of the very systems that historically marginalized them as mentioned by Escobar (1995):

- Director of the Regional indigenous NGO 1: "I've had direct contact with them. I've met these donors doing lobbying, participating in these types of events. So, therefore, I can say that I have direct communication with them, which I've taken advantage of by participating in these types of (international) events".
- Director of the Regional indigenous NGO 1 replied to the question whether it is easy or difficult to work with donors: "It makes it a bit difficult (working with donors) because to

meet certain requirements, the organization must have a highly developed program, experience in the investment area, and a proven track record on the team".

- Staff in charge of the Ucayali headquarters of the national NGO 1: "As I said, there are many opportunities, but (the organization) looks for those that are aligned with our work… We're always checking that the projects fit with what we're working on".
- Director of national NGO 2: "How we present ideas, well, it depends on the cooperator, sometimes the cooperator tells us that we need certain results."

In sharp contrast, the indigenous communities who participated in the focus groups often expressed that they did not know who funded the projects in their territories. Moreover, they did not know how the funding/ donor's system works. When asked about who the external funding actors are, they mainly mentioned national NGOs or regional organizations. Likewise, their communication with intermediary NGOs most of the time was sporadic or ceased entirely once the project concluded.

- Alejandro from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 1, after being asked whether there was direct communication with agents of a development project that finished its activities: "Right now we no longer communicate with them because also when the projects end, almost all leave. The group of engineers we work with also leaves the project, they start another job, and we no longer have that communication. That is the problem that we lose communication."
- Maria from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 2 as a reply to the question of whether they requested the implementation of a development project in their communities, which was implemented by the regional indigenous organization regarding technology and communication: "They come and implement it. We have not asked for it."

This gap highlights a structural contradiction in participatory development discourse. While inclusion is a stated goal, most communities are not treated as co-creators of projects, but rather as recipients of pre-designed interventions. What emerges is a development process that resembles a broken telephone: the further down the chain, the more the original intent and indigenous priorities are lost or distorted through the intermediary's interpretations and adaptations for the appealing of donors.

5.2.2. Communication and Transparency Challenges

This broken telephone dynamic reveals that communication within development projects is predominantly unidirectional, flowing from donors and NGOs toward regional organizations and to them to indigenous communities, using conceptual frameworks, vocabularies, and languages often unintelligible or misaligned with local realities. This structural asymmetry excludes indigenous actors from meaningful participation and reinforces their marginalization. Nonetheless, as Foucault (1995) emphasizes, "where there is power, there is resistance," indigenous peoples are not passive recipients. They have mobilized through indigenous organizations to establish an institutional voice and demand inclusion in development discussions. However, tensions persist even within these forms of representation, as many community members in the territories question the legitimacy of intermediaries, like in the case of the indigenous federation, and increasingly advocate for direct negotiation with donors.

However, interview data illustrate that donors often justify indirect funding models by citing indigenous organizations' alleged lack of "capacity", a term that encompasses fluency in donors' administrative language and alignment with Western technocratic norms. This perceived lack of capacity becomes a rationale for channeling resources through urban and bureaucratically familiar NGOs. As the donor 1 program officer explained:

- Donor 1 program officer: "For an international foundation/donor ... it is much easier at the administrative level to transfer ten million dollars to a super-structured indigenous or non-indigenous organization ... than to transfer one hundred thousand dollars to each small organization, considering that many times these small organizations do not have the capacity for implementation... So, there are legal matters, and the smaller organizations will not initially understand even with a training process, and I have examples... And like they are social movements, they do not have a vision that this budget is to do "this"... so if there is a demand from the movement, the entire budget that they have will be used for this demand and not to continue the project that they wrote... You will not receive more money".

His explanation highlights a fundamental epistemological gap. Donor 1 relies on abstract, rational, and bureaucratic logic (Western models of accountability), while social or local actors not necessarily prioritizing contextual needs and experiential outcomes.

Donors also acknowledged their reliance on pre-existing networks and concept notes, favoring organizations already embedded in their philanthropic circuits:

- Donor 2 program officer: "We already have a relationship, we already have networks, so they come to us with concept notes."

This dynamic supports Chandra Mohanty's (1991) critique of how development discourses construct indigenous populations as passive, incapable, or in need of rescue, legitimizing top-down control (Escobar, 1995). Such narratives could reproduce colonial dynamics by directing funds to Westernized NGOs that fit donors' technical criteria rather than to grassroots organizations embedded in the territories.

Additionally, the analysis reveals how NGOs and regional organizations often adopt donor language, terms such as "sustainability," "climate resilience," or "biodiversity", to secure funding,

even when these do not fully align with indigenous understandings or word use. The director of the regional indigenous NGO 1 described how his organization had to cultivate trust by building a portfolio aligned with donor expectations, often starting with small "seed projects." As Escobar (1995) notes, the development apparatus defines what counts as legitimate progress and who is qualified to pursue it. Despite being an indigenous NGO, the director reported a disconnect between his organization's structure and the customary governance practices of the communities they serve. Initially, communication with base communities was indirect; only after years of trust-building were they able to establish direct relationships. Still, donor expectations primarily continue to shape the parameters of project implementation. They are aware that they must adhere to the principles of what donors are asking for; otherwise, the project could fall apart.

- Director of the regional indigenous NGO 1: "So, that's very important. You have to look at the principle and what the NGO/ donor requires".
- Director of the national NGO 2: "So it has given us (the donors) a broad spectrum of what is justice associated with socio-environmental or social climate justice or issues with a gender focus."

Failures to meet project goals, even due to capacity constraints, often result in penalties, such as discontinued funding, rather than collaborative troubleshooting or support. As a means of discipline, as stated by Foucault (1995).

Indigenous participants also expressed frustration with the inaccessibility of project information and the imposition of external logics. The first time I heard about carbon credit projects was during a focus group in one of the semi-urban indigenous communities. A participant, whom I will refer to as Camila, a bilingual teacher with professional experience in different schools in indigenous communities throughout Ucayali, shared her perspective. She explained that while there are several capacity-building and informational initiatives related to carbon credit sales, these are typically

directed only toward indigenous federations and fail to reach the grassroots communities. There is significant local interest in these projects, largely due to the perceived financial benefits they can bring. However, many participants voiced distrust toward their own indigenous organizations, particularly the federations that serve as intermediaries for international funds, expressing concern that resources are not being distributed equitably.

- Camila from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "Pure talk is when it is mentioned that indigenous communities are the guardians, not owners at all. And now with this global warming there is a job that is known to being done by our federations and it is the sale of carbon credits and that money does not reach the communities… And they say this project will first go through indigenous organizations/ federations and then finally to the indigenous communities, and then the money reaches a tiny bit, nothing at all... Do those federations care? They don't, the representatives don't care".

The second time I encountered references to carbon credit projects was during discussions about the territorial protection initiative managed by National NGO 3, a project all the Imiria-area communities spoke about. This NGO was not initially mentioned in my methodology, but what caught my attention was the scale of its territorial presence. The organization provided economic incentives to local indigenous surveillance bodies (OLV) and had physical infrastructure for coordination in territory. When I asked community members in focus groups about this project, they only mentioned National NGO 3, no one referenced the large corporation funder or the fact that this was, in fact, a carbon credit initiative. It wasn't until I spoke with a park ranger, a Shipibo-Konibo community member, that I learned the project was indeed a carbon credit scheme. He noted that community leaders were aware of both the initiative and its budget. However, when I asked further questions about the mechanisms and finances of the project, he acknowledged the difficulty of understanding such concepts due to their highly technical nature. He added that the

communities would prefer direct communication with the corporate investor but, at present, could only interact with National NGO 3.

- Joel, indigenous member of ACR Imiria indigenous community 2: "But in reality, we don't know how it works. We should work directly with the investor, not just with the national NGO 3."

Additionally, the technical language used in Spanish, especially bureaucratic and development-specific vocabulary, could led to confusion and miscommunication. This gap between technical and community knowledge was also evident in how participants referred to project activities. Rather than using the term "conservation," participants commonly referred to "territorial protection," and when referring to adaptation to climate change, they mentioned activities such as agriculture and education.

- Alfonso from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 1 in response to the question about what types of projects they are currently implementing: "Territorial protection and also support for agriculture, education as well, the education issue, which is very important to us".

Figure 13. *Focus group in one of the indigenous communities near the city (photograph by the author)*

These communication barriers indicate that multiple layers of filtering, technical language, intermediary institutions, and externally imposed epistemologies, severely limit indigenous understanding and agency in development processes. Nevertheless, indigenous actors are demanding clearer, more horizontal forms of engagement that reflect their priorities and worldviews.

Another key finding is that, despite inclusive rhetoric, many development interventions instrumentalize indigenous identities and practices to meet externally defined goals such as biodiversity conservation or climate mitigation as they formulate it. This results in the objectification of indigenous knowledge, the reinforcement of political marginalization, and the erosion of self-determination. As Rubis & Theriault (2020) argue, even well-intentioned efforts can disrupt and commodify indigenous lifeways, enclose territories, and displace political agency.

Donor documentation often emphasizes indigenous "empowerment" or "capacity building," yet fails to establish concrete indicators of indigenous communities' meaningful inclusion. Both donors program officers acknowledge the absence of robust monitoring frameworks:

- Donor 2 program officer: "I don't know if we have indicators right now to see how this internal regional governance is working" referring to meaningful inclusion of indigenous community members in the projects.

NGOs, in turn, conduct workshops to "educate" indigenous communities and regional organizations using development and climate vocabularies that are frequently external to local needs and desires. These interventions tend to operate under the assumption that NGOs already know what indigenous communities require, often without meaningful consultation or adaptation to local realities. One staff member from National NGO 1, based in Ucayali, acknowledged that project designs frequently fail to account for basic structural barriers that indigenous women face when attending capacity-building workshops, such as the need for food for their children or childcare:

- Staff in charge of the Ucayali headquarters of national NGO 1: "And sometimes the projects say, 'there is no need' ... but they don't consider the needs that indigenous women have"

Such practices reflect a colonial logic in which indigenous communities are expected to assimilate into externally imposed systems and practices rather than engage on their own terms. Training is often framed as necessary to "overcome fear" or lack of capacity, which could implicitly place the burden on indigenous people, rather than addressing structural exclusion:

- Director of national NGO 2: "We organize workshops to help them overcome their fear ... they fill out [the forms] incorrectly ... to be able to generate that confidence or break down their barriers... and we do it through the monitors who are constantly there."

Further, evidence shows that indigenous communities are often involved in executing project activities without having effective decision-making power. A particularly illustrative case is the *Imiría Project*, a state-led public investment initiative which, despite its public origins, is widely perceived by communities as yet another externally imposed development project. The project, titled *Recuperación de las Microcuencas del Área de Conservación Regional Imiría*, aimed to restore ecosystems degraded by agriculture through the planting of 500 aguaje saplings, 300 pashacos, as well as bolaina and guaba trees (Gobierno Regional de Ucayali, 2023). Community members were engaged in reforestation activities under the promise of financial compensation, yet payments never materialized. This experience was perceived not just as a failure of accountability but as a betrayal of trust:

- Juan from the indigenous community ACR Imiria 2: "We feel that they have made a fool of us ... why should they leave a community in such need?" (all the other participants strongly seconded this statement).

These cases reflect broader patterns of dispossession and epistemic colonization, aligning with Quijano & Ennis's (2000) critique of coloniality as the exploitation of labor and resources through racialized hierarchies. Conservation discourses could be deployed not only to commodify forests but also to discipline indigenous agency and "educate them" under the guise of "green" development (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

5.2.3. Horizontal vs. Hierarchical Decision-Making

This becomes particularly evident when analyzing decision-making across the different stages of socioenvironmental development projects (ideation, planning, execution, and evaluation) where a gap emerges between the formal discourse of participatory development and its implementation in practice. As noted by Islam (2017) and Kang (2011), while NGOs working with indigenous communities are often praised for their participatory approaches and focus on empowerment,

these strengths are frequently undermined by a lack of contextual understanding and limited meaningful involvement of indigenous peoples in key decisions.

To illustrate these discrepancies, I examined the responses to the following questions of each actor: Who makes the final and most consequential decisions during each project phase, and why? What does each stakeholder desire and need, and how are these needs interpreted, and by whom?

Donors consistently occupy a leading role in shaping the projects they fund, particularly in the selection and planning phases. While both donors interviewed acknowledged differences in their internal procedures, they followed similar decision-making logics: program officers review concept notes submitted by NGOs and determine funding eligibility based on alignment with internal strategies and trusted networks. There is also a pattern of selective outreach to pre-identified organizations deemed "trustworthy," whether via prior relationships or consultancy-led mappings of capable grantees:

- Donor 1 program officer: "I often help smaller organizations write the proposal in the best way for the donor."
- Donor 2 program officer: "It's like a direct invitation... with most of them we already have a relationship... we already have networks."

Although the formal discourse portrays local organizations as having the "last word," in practice, NGOs adapt their proposals to fit donor expectations. This adaptation, however, must appear organic to the donors; radical changes to conform to donor agendas are discouraged and can result in concept note rejection.

- Donor 1 program officer: "Adapting your own strategy to the funder's strategy... of course, you can tighten up very specific things... but adapting only to get adoration is shooting yourself in the foot because it's not going to happen."

In the execution and evaluation phases, donors delegate project implementation to NGOs and monitor progress through narrative and financial reports. Their oversight remains distant, relying on consultants, annual meetings, and survey tools, with little to no direct engagement with indigenous territories or communities. This means they don't necessarily go to the territories, or make focus groups, or have robust evaluation systems of the inclusion of indigenous communities. They believe everything the intermediary organization puts in their reports, and mostly only meet with the directors of the NGOs (high-level communication to high-level communication); these high-level decision-making does not include the indigenous ground-based communities.

- Donor 1 program officer: "I have a consultant who works with me... we have an annual meeting with all my grantees…"
- Donor 2 program officer: "I don't know if we have any mechanism to evaluate in detail exactly how far these federations reach a certain territory or not."

Donor needs to center on aligning funded projects with broader regional, national, and international agendas, particularly within the climate change funding ecosystem. These needs are best understood and translated by intermediary NGOs embedded within donor networks and technical language.

- Donor 2 program officer: "I think it's super important when thinking about financing to break away from the project paradigm... to think that your impact goes much further."

Despite the magnitude of resources donors manage, their limited flexibility and contextual understanding often frustrate indigenous organizations. Timelines and priorities in the project are typically rigid, and NGOs that fail to comply may be excluded from future funding cycles. This way of discipline correlates to the concept Panopticism by Foucault (1995) where actors self-regulate based (restring themselves) on perceived surveillance.

- Director of regional indigenous NGO 1 referring to a past project that they could not reach the stated goals: "The cooperation will not be able to work with us because the result was not graded... I don't think they have been flexible... they have not trained us in feedback…"

In the case of intermediary NGOs and organizations both national and regional, they navigate between donor expectations and indigenous community needs. While most prioritize donor requirements, some NGOs attempt to center indigenous agendas by strategically adapting them to the dominant development discourse, aligning with what Escobar (1995) describes as the "grammar of development" necessary to secure funding.

- Director of national NGO 2 as a reply to the question about what is their strategy for approaching donors: "Basically, it was an institutional positioning strategy, constantly trying to sell what we did."

NGOs often function as translators, converting community-based knowledge and needs into donors' formats and language. Following Kang (2011) and Wahbe et al. (2007). This process occurs because in this type of interaction, various levels of coordination, negotiation, and communication are continuously happening. This translation process includes adapting activities and outputs to the logic of climate finance, often resulting in conceptual compromises.

- Director of national NGO 2: "I begin to propose activities... in the themes that they (donors) have established for us."
- Woman indigenous leader in the indigenous federation explaining how projects are funded according to matching agendas: "In my women's program area I have ten thematic axes... and the donors too (referring to their agenda) and they already support us in that way."

During implementation, intermediary organizations often maintain closer ties with indigenous communities. Project coordination typically flows from NGOs to indigenous federations (often

they can also receive direct funding from donors), and then to community-level authorities (called "*apu*s"). This hierarchical chain is reflected in reporting practices, where NGOs provide different reports for donors and indigenous communities, each tailored to their respective expectations.

- Woman indigenous leader in the indigenous federation: "We coordinate with the Apus... they make the call so that communities can be informed…"
- Director of the regional indigenous NGO: "The information we provide to the donor is external information. Because the information will arrive through their report, their partial and their final report… with the beneficiaries is summarizing everything, all the activities, and asking them: "How are you, brothers? How did it go? How are you feeling now? What are we missing?" Of course, they realize how it was like before and after the project. Before, they didn't know, but now they know how to use drones and they know how to interpret maps. They already know how to navigate, locate alert points, and know how to explain their territory, their geography. So, the mastery is evident, especially the management of their territory and therefore also how to work their territory…So that's a lesson learned, a successful lesson from the project".

From the side of indigenous communities, they frequently express frustration with the top-down behaviors of external actors. Although they depend on external funding, they increasingly demand transparency, direct communication, and more equitable participation in decision-making processes.

- Camila from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "They don't know how to reach communities (external funding organizations) ... many organizations only profit from communities, they don't do grassroots work".

- Javier from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 1: "Horizontality and transparency are what we ask for", this statement was strongly seconded by the other participants.

Another key finding from the analysis is the presence of emerging efforts, and possibilities, for shifting development decision-making from hierarchical structures toward more horizontal, collaborative, and decolonial models. These suggest that greater alignment between donor intentions and some practices, NGO strategies and focus, and indigenous community agency may foster more equitable practices in socioenvironmental development.

Following Mohanty's (2003) perspective, this shift requires not only challenging dominant development narratives but actively centering the collective struggles of marginalized groups. In the context of indigenous communities, this means moving beyond mere access to goods and services, and toward the recognition of indigenous worldviews, cosmologies, and definitions of economy, society, and nature as equally valid and legitimate as those of the Western paradigm.

In this sense, donors expressed growing interest in supporting indigenous-led initiatives, particularly in thematic areas such as indigenous peoples' rights, climate change resilience, racial justice, and gender equity. There is a stated intention to provide more direct funding and to engage indigenous actors more meaningfully in governance and oversight roles.

- Donor 1 program officer: "The project implementation process is effective so that the organization continues to implement its vision or mission."

However, these progressive intentions remain largely dependent on the discretion and priorities of individual program officers. Structural changes in funding mechanisms have not yet materialized on scale. In rare instances, donors have considered unprecedented practices such as including indigenous leaders in decision-making bodies like advisory or executive boards.

- Director of national NGO 2: "They (one donor) have even suggested that we send them a recommendation for an indigenous leader to serve on their board of directors. And that's unusual".

These examples illustrate a growing recognition of the importance of indigenous participation and strengthening their institutions, though current practices still rely heavily on personal initiative rather than institutionalized policies of inclusion in donor practice.

In the matter of national and regional NGOs and organizations, they act as intermediaries who attempt to align indigenous community agendas with the demands and metrics of international development. This often involves a strategic adaptation process, in which community needs are translated into donor-friendly language and formats (Wahbe et al., 2007; Kang, 2011). This happens more in the federation-level agendas. Despite these compromises, some NGOs, especially Ucayali regional indigenous-led organizations, are increasingly working from the ground up, co-creating agendas through direct and interactive engagement with ground-based indigenous communities.

- Director of the regional indigenous NGO 1: "we dialogue with the communities and then having them propose their feelings and needs. That is the most famous diagnosis, isn't it? And that is how we figure out what they want and what we do".

Another promising strategy includes the establishment of physical technical bases or *"casas técnicas"* within indigenous communities. These bases allow field personnel to remain in the territory longer and strengthen trust and relational proximity between implementing organizations and indigenous residents.

- Director of the national NGO 3: "In that technical house... they also have the basic conditions for the technical team to stay there... they can do a better job".

Additionally, the rise of international indigenous political platforms, such as COICA (*Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica*), has helped shape global development agendas and increased the visibility of indigenous perspectives at funding and policy levels. These networks provide a platform for local agendas.

Perhaps the most significant finding lies in the increasing demand by indigenous communities for direct communication, participation in decision-making, and management of their own funding. Fieldwork revealed multiple community-led efforts aimed at establishing horizontal negotiation channels and greater autonomy over project governance. These include the creation of local surveillance institutions and women's associations that seek direct financial support and co-decision authority:

- Bertha from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "I would like to. We have an association, to which the funds should go directly. But if they come through an NGO, they don't get it, they don't give you anything. The money just stays with them, and in the end, you don't know how much has gone."

Figure 14. *Focus group conducted in one of the indigenous communities within the ACR Imiria. It was held inside the "technical house" built by the national NGO 3 (photograph by the author)*

These voices illustrate the gap between current NGO-donor structures and indigenous aspirations for self-determination and financial sovereignty. The demand is not merely for participation but for structural transformation of decision-making processes, rooted in indigenous ways and governance systems.

As a conclusion, despite being formally framed as participatory, development projects in Ucayali remain deeply hierarchical. Structural dependence on donor funding, coupled with the central role of intermediary NGOs and regional organizations, and limited mechanisms for true community participation, perpetuates asymmetries. Indigenous peoples are often positioned as recipients rather

than co-creators of development, with little influence over decisions that directly affect their territories.

However, emerging efforts suggest that more inclusive and horizontal models are both possible and increasingly demanded. Drawing on Mohanty's (2003) insights, participatory development must extend beyond token inclusion to actively elevate indigenous worldviews, economies, and governance structures as legitimate frameworks of action. Collaborative governance, as theorized by Ansell and Gash (2008), offers a pathway forward, one where intentional strategy empower structurally disadvantaged actors, such as indigenous communities, to co-decide and co-lead development processes.

5.3. POWER DYNAMICS

5.3.1. Historical Oppression

This section builds on the previous analysis of actors and how development projects and stakeholder interactions reinforce hierarchies through normative discourses such as "capacity," "efficiency," and "good administration systems." Moving beyond partnership configurations, this argument focuses on how power is exercised and internalized across donors, NGOs, regional organizations, and indigenous communities. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of power as diffuse, relational, and productive rather than merely repressive, as well as Quijano & Ennis's (2000) theory of the coloniality of power, the analysis reveals how development actors internalize roles that sustain and legitimize asymmetrical relationships.

Foucault's theories help explain how power operates not only through external control but through internalized norms that shape self-perception and conduct. Donors, for instance, occupy the position of evaluators and gatekeepers. They justify excluding indigenous communities from direct funding based on "lack of technical capacity, a discourse that masks structural inequalities behind a facade of professionalism. In turn, national and regional NGOs mainly replicate these narratives

of uneducated, unorganized, and incapable indigenous communities, often invoking the risk of corruption or inefficiency to justify their intermediary role, even when acknowledging that indigenous organizations can now engage donors directly.

- Senior staff of national NGO 1: "Funding channels are now direct. They (indigenous organizations) talk to donors, although some mistrust persists due to perceptions... and also bad experiences. But those channels do exist. Intermediaries continue to insist and still have their share of the pie, but it's not as big as it used to be...".

What emerges is a layered relationship in which proximity to international networks and the ability to perform bureaucratic literacy determine access to resources. This hierarchy of access reinforces a division between "legitimate" (educated, urban-based) and "non-legitimate" (rural, indigenous) actors. As explained in the previous chapters, this also justifies the movement of resources between the organizations based in the urban center of economic resources and power centers like the capital cities, which are far removed from the indigenous communities' territories they seek to support.

Donor strategies, shaped in global financial centers like Lima and Washington, are implemented in territories distant not only geographically but epistemologically from the lives and needs of indigenous communities. This dislocation reflects on Quijano & Ennis's (2000) concept of the colonial matrix of power: knowledge, economy, and authority centralized in Euro-modern institutions, while indigenous realities are marginalized.

Furthermore, the way actors relate to each other varies across positions of power. Donors are selectively accessible, to be reached often through closed networks or curated invitations to international events. Indigenous communities are approached via local intermediaries like regional organizations, NGOs or indigenous federations, through field visits and their needs mapped through consultants' studies, whose outputs are accommodated to meet donor expectations. For

example, director of national NGO 2 recounts their initial fear in approaching donors, underscoring how performance, alignment with donor agendas, and familiarity with international discourse were critical for trust-building and eventual funding.

In contrast, indigenous testimonies suggest that negotiation is minimal, projects arrive pre-defined from all intermediary actors including the indigenous federations, and internalization of inferiority discourses is present:

- Martha, from close to city indigenous community focus group 1, response to the question about what they would like development projects and donors to consider when implementing activities: "Not to lose our cultural identity, but to learn to be entrepreneurial. So as not to depend on those who profit".
- Cesar from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 2: "The internet is good for now, we enjoy it because it doesn't cost us anything... If we don't pay, we won't have anything, just as nothing will be. We need community support... We don't have the income to contribute to paying for it. The community has no income, so where will we get money for the internet? We need to expand the service until we have the money."

These dynamics illustrate that power is not merely enforced but also normalized and enacted by actors through embodied roles: gatekeeper, intermediary, and recipient, reproducing hierarchies under the guise of neutrality and professionalism (Foucault, 1978). Thus, development could serve as a disciplinary apparatus that shapes actors' conduct through internalized expectations.

Following this analysis, the data shows how colonial logics of labor exploitation and racial hierarchies persist in contemporary development and conservation initiatives in indigenous territories. Drawing on Quijano & Ennis's (2000) coloniality of power and Cattelino's (2006) critique of the "natural steward" trope, this analysis demonstrates that unpaid or underpaid

indigenous labor continues to be extracted through racialized and romanticized narratives embedded in conservation and philanthropic agendas.

Quijano & Ennis (2000) identifies two foundational axes of coloniality: the control of labor and the racial classification of populations. The colonial model, historically responsible for the extraction of indigenous resources and cheap labor to enrich dominant economies, can be reflected in the philanthropic and environmental agendas of international development. Under this system, indigenous communities are often required to adapt to externally imposed rules, bureaucratic procedures, and worldviews to access to these extracted economic resources. Moreover, the expectation that indigenous peoples contribute their time and labor freely, especially in conservation and monitoring efforts, is frequently justified through romanticized narratives, such as the "noble savage" or "natural steward" tropes, as mentioned by Cattelino (2006). These are visibly reproduced in development practices that assign indigenous people the role of unpaid "guardians" of nature. Conservation projects and environmental funding schemes routinely rely on indigenous work, monitoring, patrolling, reforestation, not as formal employment but as volunteer contributions justified by identity.

This is particularly evident in two case studies:

A) Imiría Project: Though funded publicly, indigenous communities perceived it as an externally imposed development project. They were mobilized to reforest specific species under promises of compensation that were never fulfilled.

- Ramiro from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 2: "The Imiría Project. It caused a lot of problems, debt, and accidents. They haven't paid for the reforestation".

This episode is remembered as one of deception, danger, and exploitation, illustrating how indigenous labor is both undervalued and taken for granted.

B) Carbon Credit Project: The National NGO 3 is working with 21 communities under a carbon-offset scheme financed by a major petroleum company. The communities, however, have not been directly included in the negotiations with the investors. While the NGO will profit for managing the negotiations, implementation and technicalities, indigenous participants receive symbolic "incentives" and development projects in governance, conservation and sustainable livelihoods. The indigenous communities were also promised financial compensation when carbon credits are generated in the long term.

- Mateo from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 4: "We need more financial incentives because when we patrol, we leave our families behind (the family's economic support). Two to three patrols are conducted monthly. They cover three sectors and are deployed depending on the threat in that sector, and the patrol is a full day..."

These practices reproduce the colonial logic where indigenous territories are commodified and indigenous bodies are instrumentalized, expected to perform labor without remuneration, justified by narratives of environmental duty like "natural stewards". As Cattelino (2006) warns, this "ecological nobility" obscures labor relations and erases demands for economic justice under a veil of cultural valorization.

Figure 15. *Timeline of environmental development projects carried out in the territory of one of the indigenous communities within the ACR Imiria. Green indicates positive outcomes, and red indicates negative outcomes (photograph by the author)*

Moreover, these dynamics are sustained by broader global inequalities where race remains a determinant of political and economic worth. As Quijano & Ennis (2000) argue, coloniality is not a residual condition but an active logic embedded in contemporary capitalism. Development projects, even when well-intentioned, could become vehicles for the ongoing extraction of value: territorial, cultural, and labor from indigenous populations under the label of "philanthropy" or "support."

- Fernando from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 1: "We don't have much security as security guards, because we also have quite a few enemies… There are people who don't like what we do, and so that's what worries us, and they (the external actors) should support us in terms of more implementation, more materials, security materials".
- Alfonso from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 4: "We left the family… the monitoring is a full day."

These testimonies expose the cost of unpaid or underpaid labor, not only economic but also social and physical, imposed under a development model. As Quijano & Ennis (2000) argue, the capitalist system of labor and racial classification is not a historical artifact but an active mechanism of current global inequality.

5.3.2. Resources

This section extends the analysis by showing how indigenous territories, labor, and knowledge are often instrumentalized in conservation and development projects through deeply asymmetrical value systems and economic arrangements. Building on the work of Viola & Margolis (1991) as well as decolonial and post-development critiques (Escobar, 1995; Quijano & Ennis, 2000), this argument examines how indigenous actors contribute ecological expertise, unpaid or underpaid labor, and access to biodiverse territories, while receiving minimal compensation (none of the projects it is executed 100% or mainly by indigenous communities), limited recognition, and virtually no decision-making power.

Despite rhetorical commitments to inclusion, almost none of the projects studied in this research are executed primarily by indigenous communities (otherwise we can considerer the case of the indigenous federation, but indigenous communities perceive them in the same way as intermediaries), nor do most indigenous representatives hold positions of power such as seats on the boards of directors of implementing NGOs (there are a few exceptions, but it is not the rule).

This governance architecture reproduces colonial modes of extraction, where indigenous contributions are essential but structurally devalued. As Quijano & Ennis (2000) argue, the coloniality of power continues to define which knowledge and actors are deemed legitimate, perpetuating a racialized global division of labor within development.

A clear pattern emerges in the data: donors delegate execution mainly to non-indigenous NGOs or consultants, generating high overheads while only a fraction of funds reaches communities. Donor institutions position themselves as facilitators and financiers but often lack proximity or direct accountability to indigenous communities. As one donor interviewee put it:

- Donor 1 program officer explaining how he meets with the representatives of the organizations he funds, normally directors: "I have a consultant who works with me… she does monitor and evaluation with all my grantees and I have a kind of annual meeting with all my grantees to understand everything that is happening with them and this meeting also helps me to have a kind of database because they answer surveys and all of this… I also have databases of the things that they achieved, difficulties, areas that need capacities… this also helps me to look at the needs".

The knowledge extracted through such monitoring is aggregated and circulated within donor spaces, quantified, categorized, and detached from the lived experiences of the communities themselves. Another donor interviewee described their limited role in project execution:

- Donor 2 program officer: "We don't execute... so we have a way to be involved through participation in these spaces for dialogue. Because in execution, we're not as present".

This model privileges data collection and performative consultation over participatory decision-making. It also aligns with the logic of "technocratic development", where "participation" becomes procedural rather than political (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

A striking example of this logic is found in international climate financing. Despite public commitments such as the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use at COP26, which pledged $19 billion for forest protection and $1.7 billion specifically for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), the actual disbursement of direct funds to Indigenous actors remains insufficient. According to a 2023 report by the Forest Tenure Funders Group, only 2.1% of the $494 million disbursed in 2022 went directly to indigenous peoples and local communities. This marks a decrease from 2.9% in 2021 (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2023).

Moreover, donors can act as re-granting agencies of donations made by philanthropy individuals or organizations, retain control over these flows, often absorbing the resources through their own operational budgets.

- Donor 2 program officer: "So, part of the function of (the organization) as a legal entity distinct from it's foundations is to help foundations develop a strategy… and to be able to define joint lines of work between foundations, so that's part of my job as a program officer for an alliance like (the organization) is very specific, right? And the other task is to do re-granting, that is, to receive funds from foundations and channel them to civil society organizations".

These dynamics expose the gap between rhetorical support for indigenous communities and the persistence of financial and political exclusion. In effect, development financing often reproduces the colonial separation between owners of capital and providers of labor and land (Quijano & Ennis, 2000).

- Martha from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "They only asked us if we were okay with planting trees, and we said 'welcome'. Nothing more. And we've filled the place with trees."

- Camila from close to city indigenous community focus group 1: "And sometimes you hear it when you come to the city, you are told that there was an organization that supported a particular community, but it never reached the community."

This logic is starkly illustrated in the conservation project that involves carbon offsetting. Indigenous communities are expected to protect forests, conduct monitoring, and even reforest areas, yet they are excluded from substantive participation in the design, governance, and benefit-sharing frameworks of these schemes. While the director of national NGO 3 stated that community leaders have access to the project budget and help determine implementation activities, these decisions occur within a pre-established framework negotiated between the investor (the large corporation) and the NGO, prior to any indigenous community engagement. Although efforts are made to involve communities meaningfully during implementation, significant gaps remain. For example, there was a suspension of project activities that was not clearly communicated, leaving many community members confused and uninformed about the project's continuity:

- Alejandro from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 4: "The project has been cut short and there is no information about what happened or the continuity of the project."

When asked about this, the director of national NGO 3 clarified that the project had not been canceled but was affected by budget cuts:

- Director of national NGO 3: "What is probably causing confusion is that we no longer have the same level of funding as before, so we can't deploy as many resources. Initially, there was a lot of money going to the community. Now, we are still waiting to deliver carbon credits and regularize things. Very little funding is being disbursed."

Despite technical personnel from the National NGO 3 are present in the territory, communication remains ineffective and unclear:

- Domingo from indigenous community ACR focus group 1: "We have this technical regency house, where we come as authorities and communicate directly with the engineers who aren't present, but they also already have a date for when they'll arrive here... And since they work with 21 communities, there's an engineer in charge who's within that area. He comes and goes, comes and goes.

These situations reflect a clear asymmetry: NGOs retain decision-making power over budget and project design, while indigenous communities are mostly limited to roles of compliance and operational support. This aligns with critiques by Cattelino (2006) who argues that indigenous people are often positioned as "natural stewards" within environmental governance, romanticized for their knowledge but excluded from economic benefits and political authority.

Moreover, the data reveals growing tension within communities about the constraints imposed by externally defined conservation priorities (Maynas, 2024). While the ACR Imiria restricts commercial extractive activities, many indigenous residents seek to develop sustainable economic practices such as agroforestry, timber management, and small-scale agriculture, initiatives not necessarily supported by conservation NGOs.

- Mateo from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 1: "We cannot work on a large scale because we are within the conservation area, and it is not allowed… we want the master plan (of the conservation area) to consider us because we do need to work."

These perspectives reflect not only frustration but also a claim to economic sovereignty: the right to use collective territories for culturally and economically meaningful production (Kuokkanen, 2011). However, under the prevailing development model, producing for others, for example, through conservation or carbon markets, is rewarded, while producing for one's own community is often restricted or delegitimized. This dynamic sustains what Escobar (1995) identifies as the

coloniality of development: a model in which indigenous life projects are subordinated to global environmental and market agendas.

Finally, there is a community preference for indigenous-led NGOs, which highlights a demand for governance grounded in cultural understanding, respect, and horizontal relations. As the director of the indigenous NGO remarked:

- Director of the regional NGO 1: "I mean, there are many donors, but how is the balance after 45 years? Is the territory still not secure? Its natural resources are still very underdeveloped. Illiteracy. There is no education, above all. And there is still poverty… Building a good bridge between the donors and directly with the organized indigenous peoples, I mean, an active community with degrees, and directly, breaking down the barriers of intermediaries or lobbyists. A new model of technical cooperation with the beneficiaries".

This call for a "new model of cooperation" emphasizes not only direct financing but also the dismantling of racialized hierarchies that position indigenous peoples as passive recipients rather than autonomous political actors. Reclaiming agency, therefore, requires both equitable economic arrangements and the recognition of indigenous systems of value, labor, and governance (De la Cadena, 2015).

True transformation must go beyond technical inclusion to confront and unmake the colonial infrastructures of development (Escobar, 1995). This includes challenging extractive financing logics, redefining whose knowledge counts, and supporting indigenous autonomy over territory, economy, and future-making (Mohanty, 2003).

5.3.3. Negotiation

The final analysis is about negotiation processes and how they are deeply embedded in structural inequalities, institutionalized lobbies, different levels of trust and distrust, and asymmetrical power relations. Rather than constituting a space for equal dialogue, these negotiations reflect a discursive and material apparatus through which donors and intermediary NGOs primarily retain control over funding flows, project timelines, and definitions of "progress".

Drawing on Quijano & Ennis's (2000) concept of coloniality of power and Escobar's (1995) critique of development, this analysis contends that development is not a neutral process. It perpetuates colonial logics of intervention, where the Global North, and its technocratic agents, legitimize their authority to act upon indigenous territories by portraying local communities as passive recipients of aid and expertise. These power dynamics are not only material but are discursively produced through the construction of legitimacy, authority, and knowledge (Foucault, 1980).

Field interviews and focus groups reveal distrust among actors, donors, NGOs, regional organizations, and indigenous communities, exacerbated by high technical mechanisms of accountability and exclusion from decision-making. Although collaboration is often presented as inclusive, it occurs at unequal levels. For example, donors and NGOs frequently contract non-indigenous consultants to conduct technical assessments or social diagnostics, shaping external narratives about territories. This reinforces what Goldman (2007) terms "authoritative green knowledge", a form of expertise that marginalizes indigenous epistemologies while legitimizing technocratic discourses rooted in Western paradigms.

- Director of indigenous regional NGO 1: "An indigenous/capable NGO that demonstrates its potential is much easier to gain trust from native communities simply because of the three factors I mentioned above, than working with a Spanish-speaking NGO because of

the communication issue. I mean, they don't speak the language. They're (indigenous people) somewhat afraid. Or they don't understand."

This highlights the linguistic and cultural dissonances that support institutionalized asymmetries.

Regarding the financial structure, it reflects a system where indigenous actors remain dependent on intermediaries for accessing funds and visibility.

- Donor 1 program officer: "I also receive many projects and organizations that are not legally registered... you can also look at a project without legal registration initially, but it has to have... a fiscal agent, which is basically the organization that receives and reviews the budget for a community. So, it's basically a budget intermediary".

Even when physical proximity exists, such as the technical houses in the indigenous communities, informational asymmetries persist. In the implementation of the carbon credit project, the presence of a social specialist embedded in the indigenous communities was framed as a trust-building mechanism. However, most community members interviewed during focus groups did not mention carbon credits. Despite the specialist's success in social integration, there is apparently opaque project communication that could prevent effective participation.

This contradiction illustrates what Foucault (1980) would describe as a "microphysics of power": control operates not through overt domination, but through subtle mechanisms of knowledge management and inclusion/exclusion. The director of the national NGO 3 affirmed the communities had been informed of the carbon credits, yet field data suggest inconsistent knowledge dissemination and varying levels of understanding among community members.

Furthermore, other project's negotiations are often transactional and instrumental, with donors and NGOs investing in relationships with indigenous communities to fulfill predefined project

agendas. Indigenous needs, such as land titling or culturally grounded entrepreneurship, are often sidelined. One focus group participant shared:

- Carlos from indigenous community ACR Imiria 1: "What we would like most is for (external aid) to support us in obtaining community titles... without that, we cannot work as a community."

This reflects a disconnect between community-defined priorities and project objectives, resulting in dissatisfaction and disengagement. Another participant added as a reference to the Sacha Inchi project that was implemented in the past, and when it finished, the NGO just left.

- Ernesto from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 2: "We didn't like the project at all... even though there was funding."

These perspectives underscore that Western-trained or Spanish-speaking actors are treated as epistemic authorities, while indigenous knowledge is relegated to a secondary, symbolic role, often used to decorate projects with cultural legitimacy, but not to inform their direction or substance. As one member of an indigenous community stated:

- Camila from indigenous community ACR Imiria focus group 1: "Because I have also seen, along the Ene River, outdoor projects in the *Asháninca* communities where the ***gringos*** (a slang for "white people") came to promote the cultural rescue of seeds and make necklaces, and even we ourselves began to make their blankets with natural fabrics, with cotton... When we say that the NGO should come in, and we are already depending on something, what we are also seeking is independence."

Even when communities are represented in implementation structures, such as management committees, the contractual power lies with the NGO, as acknowledged by the director of the national NGO 3:

- Director of national NGO 3: "The communities are represented... but the contract is between us and (the investor), not with the communities."

The findings point to a need for changing the perception of negotiation in development not as a consensual or participatory process, but as a site of power contestation and epistemic control. Drawing on Escobar's (1995) post-development critique, Quijano & Ennis's (2000) coloniality of power, and Goldman's (2001) critique of environmental governance, we can conceptualize negotiation as a mechanism that naturalizes inequality while presenting a facade of inclusion.

Moreover, Foucault's theory of governmentality is useful for understanding how NGOs and donors manage not only populations but also the production of truth, who gets to speak, whose knowledge is valued, and what is considered legitimate action. Thus, development becomes a regime of truth in which indigenous actors are included mainly to the extent that they conform to institutional norms and technical logics (Foucault, 1980; Tierney, 2008).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To arrive at the conclusions, it is essential to return to the aim and central research question of this thesis. The overarching goal has been to understand and critically analyze the dynamics of power, expectations, and communication between indigenous communities, regional organizations, NGOs, and donors through various case studies in Ucayali, Peru.

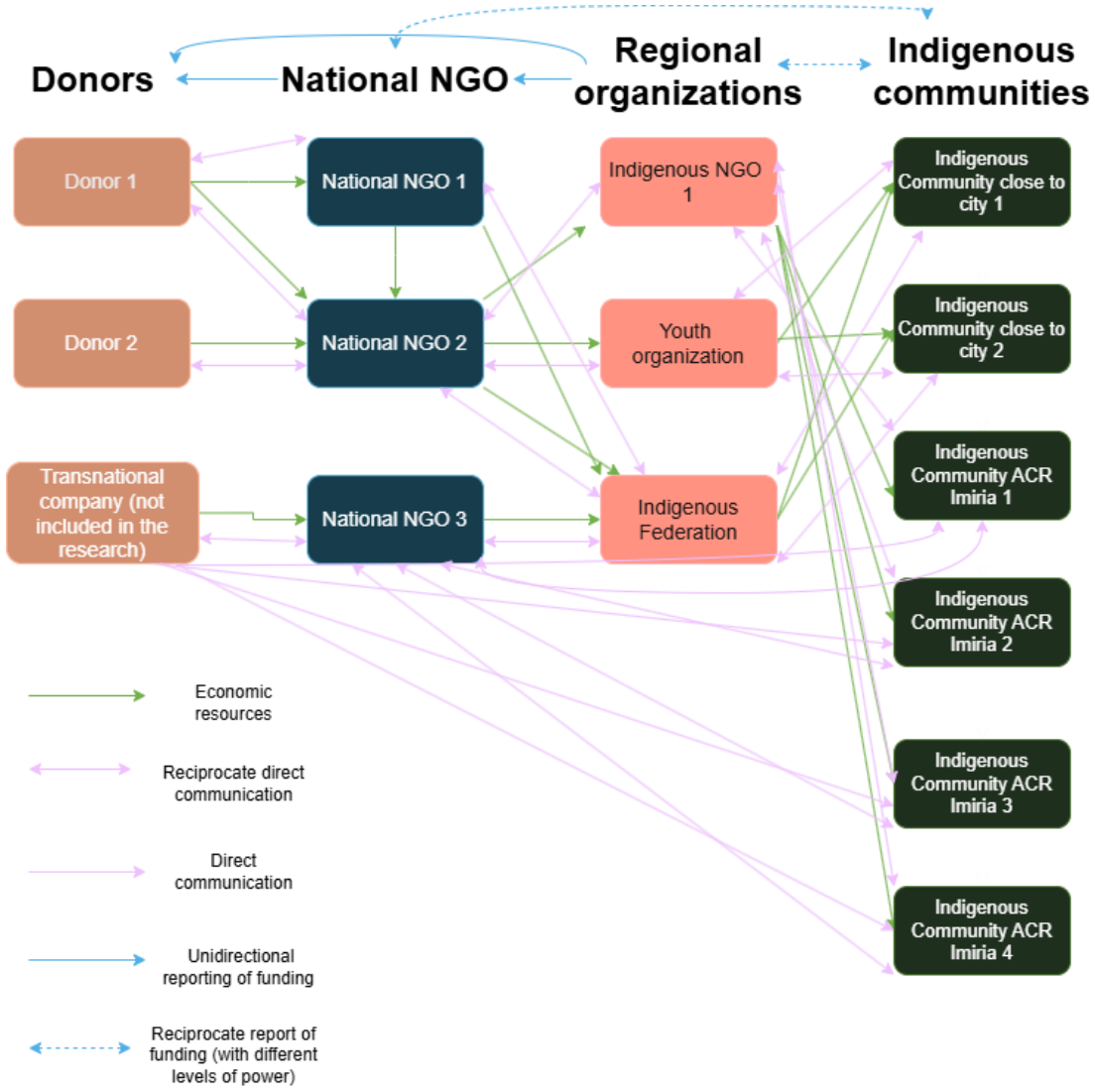
The central research question guiding this study was: "How are communication dynamics between donors, NGOs, and Indigenous communities in Ucayali managed, and what power asymmetries affect them?". The following sub-questions that supported the analysis are:

1. What elements are generating tension, conflict, or misunderstanding between the different actors?

2. How can these elements be identified and transformed to enable more horizontal and effective project implementation?

This thesis answers the main research question showing that communication and power asymmetries between actors in development projects in Ucayali are profound and multidimensional. Communication dynamics can be visualized through the analytical diagram developed during the methodology, which maps the relationships between the different actors (Figure 3: Institutional and Organizational Dynamics Map, reused from page 40):

Figure 16. *Institutional and organizational dynamic map (created by the author), reused from page 40*



Donors and national NGOs maintain a bidirectional communication flow. Donors can access and contact NGOs directly, without needing intermediaries, often relying on consultants and specialists to map suitable NGO partners. For national NGOs, access to international donors depends on their ability to navigate philanthropic networks and comply with institutional, administrative, and strategic expectations.

National NGOs and regional organizations also share bidirectional communication. National NGOs depend on regional organizations to access indigenous territories and gain local legitimacy. In turn, regional organizations often mediate between national NGOs and indigenous communities, acting as brokers of information, legitimacy, and territory.

Regional organizations and indigenous communities tend to have direct and frequent communication, as the former represent and engage with communities to shape proposals and channel agendas to national NGOs or even donors directly.

However, indigenous communities themselves have limited direct communication with most external actors. They maintain consistent contact only with regional organizations and, in one case, with national NGO 3, involved in a carbon credit project. Most other communication is unidirectional, they receive information but cannot easily initiate or shape dialogue with donors or NGOs, primarily due to disparities in economic resources, technical knowledge, and structural access. Donors and NGOs have greater ability to reach communities if they want than vice versa.

An especially illustrative case involved a large corporation oil company (excluded from the final research due to lack of access) that communicated unidirectionally with indigenous communities, while negotiating directly with National NGO 3. In theory, this NGO and the indigenous communities are co-implementers, but in practice, the NGO acts as the primary negotiator and it is the one who holds the contract with the investor, creating a power imbalance masked by discourses of partnership. This case reflects some patterns of tokenism and instrumentalization, where indigenous knowledge and territory are acknowledged but subordinated to capitalist and Eurocentric development models (Escobar, 1995; Quijano & Ennis, 2000).

Financial flows are similarly asymmetrical. Donors provide funding to national NGOs, who then pass resources to regional organizations, which in turn support indigenous communities. Occasionally, regional organizations receive funding directly from donors. However, for

communities, funding arrives fragmented and reduced, often eroded by administrative and operational costs across multiple layers. In most cases, communities receive a finalized project and a fixed budget, without the opportunity to negotiate or participate in budget design (Kang, 2011; Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

The final element in the diagram, the blue arrows, indicates power flows. Indigenous communities are accountable to regional organizations, which in turn report to national NGOs, who are ultimately accountable to donors. In rare cases, bidirectional accountability occurs between indigenous communities and other actors (national NGOs and regional organizations), often when long-standing relationships and co-created diagnoses exist. Nevertheless, the standard structure is unidirectional, reinforcing a clear hierarchy of power and limiting indigenous communities' ability to exercise agency over the decision that affect their livelihoods and their territories (Johnson et al., 2022; Rubis & Theriault, 2020).

The diagram clearly illustrates the existing power asymmetries in terms of who has the ability to initiate contact and who controls access to key resources within a capitalist system, namely, economic resources. While indigenous communities possess vital assets such as their territory, ancestral knowledge, and deep contextual and local understanding and connection, these are often devalued unless they are made legible and usable within the frameworks of Eurocentric capitalist development. If indigenous actors do not conform to externally imposed administrative and bureaucratic norms, they are effectively excluded from accessing directly to financial resources despite the fact that the projects are mainly deployed in their territories.

Regarding the first sub research question of the elements generating tension and conflict. Based on fieldwork, the key sources of tension and conflict between actors are:

- Diverging Priorities, Needs, and Resources

Each actor, donors, NGOs, regional organizations and indigenous communities, operates with distinct institutional logics, agendas, and resource capacities. While indigenous communities hold cultural, natural, and collective resources, they often have the least access to the financial, administrative, and infrastructural resources that shape project design and implementation. However, there is a clear hierarchy regarding which priorities prevail, how resources are allocated, and whose agendas exert the greatest influence. This power asymmetry becomes a key source of tension, particularly when these actors, despite being interdependent, maintain unequal relations. This imbalance generates friction when project priorities do not align or when indigenous needs are subordinated to the other actor's expectations.

- Epistemological and Linguistic Gaps

The highly technical and externally defined language of climate finance and international cooperation often fails to resonate with the lived experiences of indigenous peoples. Complex terminologies, rigid indicators, and bureaucratic procedures result in misunderstandings and alienation. These dynamics contribute to perceptions of being used or misunderstood, reinforcing distrust toward NGOs and donors.

- Structural Legacies of Colonialism

Development interventions frequently overlook the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism on indigenous communities in Peru. Without acknowledging this context, it is impossible to understand the structural barriers that limit indigenous peoples' access to education, infrastructure, economic resources, and negotiation power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000). Neocolonial practices persist when indigenous participation is reduced to checkbox exercises or when projects are implemented without genuine redistribution of decision-making authority.

Finally, the last sub research question, focuses on identifying key elements of tension and proposing strategies to transform them in order to enable more horizontal, inclusive, and effective

implementation of socioenvironmental development projects. To respond to this, it is crucial to emphasize that the recommendations presented here are **contextually grounded and practically feasible**. They consider the vast and complex landscape of international cooperation and are tailored to the capacities and constraints of each actor involved. While not idealistic in a theoretical sense, these recommendations are designed to be applicable in practice, recognizing the structural realities and power dynamics at play.

Another important consideration is the recognition that all actors that participated in this research, donors, NGOs, regional organizations, and indigenous communities, participate in development processes with intentions of contributing to social and environmental justice. The recommendations do not idealize or condemn any specific individual actor but are framed with a structural and institutional lens, aiming to generalization to support more horizontal and effective collaboration.

A) Addressing Diverging Priorities, Needs, and Agendas

To mitigate tensions arising from conflicting agendas, priorities, and access to resources, donors and national NGOs should implement clear institutional mechanisms to monitor the meaningful and effective inclusion of indigenous communities in socio environmental development projects that claims to work with them. Ideally these mechanisms should have the means to actually oversee if there is or not real participation of indigenous communities in the design, implementation, and/or evaluation of development projects. This inclusion must go beyond consultation and reflect genuine co-ownership.

Regional organizations, given their geographical and cultural proximity to indigenous communities, should adopt shared governance frameworks with indigenous actors. These frameworks must include collaborative needs assessments (diagnosis), joint decision-making on activities and budgets, and equitable distribution of authority.

B) Overcoming Language and Epistemic Barriers

Donors and national NGOs should prioritize hiring indigenous professionals for translating complex, technical language into concepts aligned with indigenous worldviews and local languages. This would bridge the gap between international environmental agendas and community understandings.

Additionally, donors and national NGOs should increase funding for indigenous-led organizations or those with substantial indigenous leadership. Supporting indigenous-led agendas enhances cultural relevance, ownership, and sustainability of project outcomes. In cases where projects are developed in partnership between regional organizations and communities, it is recommended to employ community-origin terminology rooted in indigenous cosmovision and self-determination to better reflect locally and collective defined development aspirations (De la Cadena, 2015).

C) Addressing Colonial Legacies

Tackling colonial legacies remains a major challenge, as these are deeply rooted in historical, rooted and structural practices and understandings, it is a political matter that exceed the scope of any single project or actor in the socio environmental development sector. Nevertheless, meaningful change requires structural, long-term and systemic efforts to improve indigenous access to education, infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities. These conditions are necessary for self-determined engagement in development processes in a capitalist and globalized world. This ideally would enable indigenous communities to manage and execute the full scope of project budgets, developing the technical and administrative capacities needed to lead complex initiatives that requires specialized knowledge. This would reverse the current norm where communities receive only fragmented funding through top-down channels.

It is worth noting that most indigenous participants in this study had completed only secondary education, which represents a structural barrier to their fuller participation in technical aspects of development. Addressing these structural inequalities is essential for achieving equitable outcomes.

D) Enhancing Indigenous Representation in Governance

Finally, a critical and novel recommendation, voiced during interviews, is to include indigenous leaders in decision-making bodies. This includes board positions within NGOs, regional organizations, and philanthropic donor institutions. Representation at this level would help ensure that indigenous perspectives are not only heard but hold institutional power in shaping the direction of development agendas.

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8. APPENDICES

A. CEU Ethical Procol for donors and NGO:

Central European University

Dept. of Environmental Sciences and Policy

Interview Protocol for NGOs and donors

Student researcher: Bianca Centeno Calderon

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Thesis supervisor: Professor Guntra Aistara

Contact: aistaraG@ceu.edu | +43 660 368 4072

Thesis topic:

Understanding International Cooperation: Indigenous Communities, NGOs, and Donors in Socioenvironmental Projects in Ucayali, Peru

My name is Bianca Centeno and I am a student of the Environmental Department of the Central European University. For my thesis research, I aim to better understand the dynamic of power, expectations, and communication of indigenous communities, Non-Governmental Organizations, and international donors through three case studies in Ucayali, Peru. Through three case studies in Ucayali, Peru, I hope to propose management tools for practitioners to achieve successful and ethical socioenvironmental development projects using intercultural and decolonial approaches.

This research is conducted independently and does not represent any specific organization. Your honest opinions and critiques are vital inputs to enhancing partnerships and improving the effectiveness of socioenvironmental projects.

Why is your participation important?

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international donors play a vital role in implementing socioenvironmental development projects by forging partnerships with grassroots communities. This study aims to explore the dynamics of these interactions, focusing on communication, collaboration, and the challenges faced in building equitable relationships. We are interested to hear your perspectives on the processes, priorities, and challenges in dealing with these partnerships.

If you would like to participate

- Voluntary Nature: Your participation is entirely voluntary and nonpaid, and you can choose to withdraw at any time without explanation.

- Duration: Interviews will last between 30-60 minutes or more depending on your availability.
- Recording and Consent: With your permission, the interview will be recorded for accuracy. You can skip any question or end the interview at any point. Up to one month after the interview, you may request that your data be excluded from the study and deleted.
- Confidentiality: Personal and sensible information will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used for individuals and community names where necessary to avoid the direct or indirect identification of the participants. No direct quotes or identifying details will be included without explicit permission. In the case of participating as a public authority please note that there is a risk of being traced or identified because of the institution and position. For this matter, all the necessary steps are going to be taken to avoid the identification of identities through generalizations and pseudonyms.
- Focus Groups: If you participate in a focus group, anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured for all participants.

Data Management

- Storage: Interview recordings and notes will be securely stored on a password-protected device and analyzed using secure software.
- Access: Only the student researcher and thesis supervisor will have access to the data. All data will be destroyed upon project completion of the thesis study.

Results of the study

The results will contribute to my master's thesis and a tool handbook of recommendations for practitioners working on socioenvironmental development projects to achieve horizontal and culturally pertinent partnerships which I will share with the actors involved in this study. Also at your request, I will provide you with a copy of the final draft. Findings may also be shared with my academic peers, department, and possibly in academic publications.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, the interviews, or your participation, please feel free to contact me at the details provided above. Thank you for your valuable contribution to this study.

B. CEU Ethical Procol for indigenous communities (in Spanish):

Universidad Central Europea

Departamento de Ciencias y Políticas Ambientales

Consentimiento informado para participar en investigación

Tesista: Bianca Centeno Calderon

Contacto: bianca.noemi.centeno@gmail.com | +51 977915494

Supervisora de tesis: Profesora Guntra Aistara

Contacto: AistaraG@ceu.edu | +43 660 368 4072

Tema de tesis:

"Una mirada a la cooperación internacional: comunidades indígenas, Organizaciones No Gubernamentales (ONG) y donantes en proyectos socioambientales en Ucayali, Perú"

Mi nombre es Bianca Centeno y soy estudiante del Departamento de Ciencias y Políticas Ambientales de la Universidad Central Europea en Viena, Austria. En mi tesis de investigación, busco comprender mejor la dinámica, las expectativas y la comunicación entre las comunidades indígenas, las organizaciones no gubernamentales y los donantes internacionales en la facilitación de proyectos de desarrollo socioambiental, con base en algunos estudios de caso en Ucayali, Perú. Espero proponer herramientas de gestión para que las personas involucradas en este sector logren proyectos de desarrollo socioambientales exitosos y éticos, y también mejorar la comunicación para beneficio mutuo de todas las partes involucradas.

Si bien tengo experiencia previa con el Fondo Socioambiental del Perú, esta investigación se lleva a cabo de manera independiente y no representa a ninguna organización en particular. Sus opiniones y críticas honestas son aportes vitales para mejorar las alianzas y la efectividad de los proyectos socioambientales.

¿Por qué es importante tu participación?

Las comunidades indígenas desempeñan un papel fundamental en la protección de sus territorios. Sin embargo, a menudo han sido marginadas, lo que ha dado lugar a una insuficiente participación en los procesos de toma de decisiones que afectan su desarrollo y libre autodeterminación. Este estudio busca amplificar las voces indígenas mediante la creación de una plataforma para compartir perspectivas. Nos interesa escuchar sus perspectivas y comprender qué es importante para usted y cómo ve las cosas. No necesita ninguna habilidad o experiencia especial para poder participar.

Información para participantes

- Carácter voluntario: Su participación es totalmente voluntaria y no remunerada, y usted puede optar por retirarse en cualquier momento sin necesidad de dar explicaciones.

- Duración: Las entrevistas durarán entre 30 y 60 minutos o más dependiendo de su disponibilidad.
- Grabación y consentimiento: Con su permiso, la entrevista se grabará para garantizar su precisión. Puede omitir cualquier pregunta o finalizar la entrevista en cualquier momento. Hasta un mes después de la entrevista, puede solicitar que sus datos se excluyan del estudio y se eliminen.
- Confidencialidad: No se divulgará información personal ni sensible y se utilizarán seudónimos para los nombres de las personas y de las comunidades para evitar la identificación directa o indirecta de los participantes. No se incluirán citas directas ni detalles identificativos sin permiso explícito.
- Grupos focales: Si participa en un grupo focal, se garantizará el anonimato y la confidencialidad de todos los participantes.

Gestión de datos

- Almacenamiento: Las grabaciones y notas de las entrevistas se almacenarán de forma segura en un dispositivo protegido con contraseña y se analizarán mediante un software seguro.
- Acceso: Sólo la tesista y la supervisora de tesis tendrán acceso a los datos. Todos los datos permanecerán almacenados de forma segura y sólo se utilizarán con fines de investigación.

Fotos

Durante los grupos de discusión focales se podrán tomar fotografías para fines de documentación, las cuales se incluirán como anexos en la tesis, sin información que permita la identificación de los participantes ni nombres. En caso de no querer ser fotografiado, por favor hágaselo saber a la tesista.

Resultados del estudio

Los resultados contribuirán a mi tesis de maestría y a un manual de herramientas con recomendaciones para comunidades indígenas y profesionales que trabajan en proyectos de desarrollo socioambiental para formar alianzas horizontales y culturalmente pertinentes, que compartiré con los actores involucrados en este estudio. También, si lo solicita, le proporcionaré una copia del borrador final. Los hallazgos también podrán ser compartidos con mis pares académicos, la universidad y, posiblemente, en publicaciones académicas.

Si tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud sobre esta investigación, las entrevistas o su participación, no dude en comunicarse conmigo. Gracias por su valiosa contribución a este estudio.

Atentamente,

Bianca Centeno Calderon

C. Interview questions for indigenous communities:

Questions for Indigenous communities

Research question: How can expectations between donors, NGOs, and Indigenous communities be managed to build trust and improve socio-environmental project outcomes in Ucayali, Peru?
Time:
Date and place:
Recording: yes/no
Interview sheet information:

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and what your role in the community is.
2. Please tell me more about the present or past socioenvironmental projects you have participated in.
3. What motivated you or your community to participate in these projects and since when?

Environment and Climate Change

4. What are the main environmental issues affecting your community?
5. How do these issues impact your way of life and culture?
6. What kind of external support do you receive to address these problems? And who are they?
7. Do you think the projects you've been involved in have addressed these environmental issues? How?
8. Which environmental projects have made the biggest difference for your community, and why?

Interactions with NGOs and Donors

9. Who would you identify as the key sources of external support (e.g., NGOs, government agencies, or donors)?
10. Do you consider them to be different agents or not? Why?
11. In your view, is this external support helpful to your community? Why or why not?

Before Implementation

1. Are you contacted by external supporters to fund your initiatives? If yes how?
2. Do you look for support for funding your initiatives? How?
3. Who usually presents project ideas, and how are priorities decided?
4. Does your community have opportunities to give input or revise project ideas before they are financed? Do you feel your opinion matters in this process?
5. Have there been disagreements about priorities or actions? If so, how were they resolved?
6. Are there types of projects that your community wants but have been difficult to implement or approve?
7. Is there any project that your community would like to implement but has been rejected by the donors or funding agents?

During Implementation

8. What is your community's role in implementing projects?
9. How are funds or resources distributed in your community during the project?
10. How are project activities monitored, and who is involved in this process?
11. If a misunderstanding happens during the project how it is handled?

12. How do external organizations communicate with your community during a project? Do you feel that your perspectives are heard and respected?
13. What suggestions would you make to improve the way your community and external organizations work together?

After Implementation

16. Do you think the projects that you have been part of have been successful? Why or why not?
17. How are the outcomes of the project shared with your community?
18. Does the NGO that you work with have a mechanism to receive feedback? Do you think it is effective?

Partnerships and Trust

19. Do you feel that your community's needs and priorities are respected by NGOs and donors?
20. Do you trust these organizations? Why or why not?
21. What are the most common issues or tensions between your community and NGOs or donors, and how are they resolved?

Role of donors and Power Asymmetry

23. How do you feel about the level of transparency in the way project decisions and funding are managed?
24. Have you ever had concerns about how funds or resources are allocated?
25. What values do you think NGO and donors should respect while working with your community?

Demographic Questions

30. How old are you?
31. What gender do you identify with?
32. What is your level of education?
33. What is your family status?

Focus group Questions:

1. What are the main environmental problems affecting your community?
2. What strengths does your community have to address these challenges?
3. How would you like these environmental issues to be addressed?
4. What difficulties does your community face in addressing these environmental issues?
5. How do you think external support could help overcome these challenges?
6. Who are the main external actors (NGOs, donors, government, etc.) that provide support to your community?
7. How would you like external support to work with your community?
8. What are the strengths of your community's current collaboration with external organizations?
8. What are the weaknesses or challenges in these partnerships?
9. How do external organizations communicate with your community during a project? Do you feel that your perspectives are heard and respected?
10. What improvements would you suggest to strengthen the collaboration between your community and external organizations?
11. What values do you think NGOs and donors should respect when working with your community?

D. Interview questions for NGOs and donors:

Questions for NGOs and international cooperation

Research question: How can expectations between donors, NGOs, and Indigenous communities be managed to build trust and improve socio-environmental project outcomes in Ucayali, Peru?
Time:
Date and place:
Recording: yes/no
Interview sheet information:

Introduction

1. Could you please introduce a bit about your background and share how long you have been working with your organization?
2. What led you to work on socioenvironmental development projects?
3. Can you describe the scale, resources, and types of projects you work on with (NGOs and) indigenous communities?
4. How do you allocate part of your budget to projects with indigenous communities?

Interactions between actors

5. For donors: What is your experience working with NGOs and indigenous communities?
6. For NGOs: What is your experience working with donors and indigenous communities?
7. How would you describe the interactions between grassroots communities, NGOs, and donors?
8. Please describe what would be a typical day for you while dealing with donors /NGOs/indigenous communities.
9. In your view, how do these actors interact, and are there any other key stakeholders involved?

Before implementation

10. For NGOs: Could you walk me through the typical process of initiating a socioenvironmental development project with Indigenous communities?
11. For NGOs: How do you contact donors?
12. For NGOs: How do you contact indigenous communities?
13. Where do the ideas for projects usually come from?
14. Who sets the priorities? Who initiates the conversation?
15. Is there a broader review process where all actors discuss and then revise the proposal before it is submitted?
16. Who decides the final project idea?
17. What happens if there is a disagreement between various actors about the priorities, the actions, or other project details?
18. For NGO: Have you had problems obtaining approval for certain projects that are a priority for some of the actors but not for the donors?

During implementation

19. How are funds distributed per project?
20. Who implements the projects?
21. By whom and how are you monitoring the projects?
22. How do you deal with challenges or misunderstandings when implementing the project?

After implementation

23. How is the "success" of a project defined and by whom?
24. Who monitors that a project is successful and to whom reports it?
25. How are results shared back with communities?
26. Do you evaluate the effectiveness of the community inclusion process? If so, how?

Partnerships and power asymmetry

27. Who oversees funding information in your organization, and how is accountability ensured?
28. What values are important when working with indigenous communities?
29. How would you describe the level of trust between Indigenous communities, NGOs, and donors?
30. Do you face challenges in building trust and engaging with local communities? If yes, how do you address them?
31. How do you bring transparency to your organization?
32. Have you heard criticism from communities regarding the use or allocation of project funding?
33. What are the most common tensions between your organization and local communities, and how do you resolve them?

Environment

34. How do you perceive the environment and climate change?
35. What are your organization's main problems and priorities in terms of the environment?
36. What are the main environmental issues affecting communities? What causes these environmental issues?
37. How do your projects affect the environmental aspect?
38. Which environmental projects would you consider and why have made a difference in the lives of communities regarding their territory?

Demographic questions:

39. How old are you?
40. Which gender do you identify with?
41. What is your level of education?
42. What is your family status?