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The commons as organizing infrastructure: indigenous collaborations and post-neoliberal visions in Ecuador

By Tristan Partridge

Abstract

Tristan Partridge, by focusing on experiences in the indigenous community of San Isidro in Ecuador’s Cotopaxi province, shows us how different resources held in common can become the basis of both physical and social forms of infrastructure vital to the realization of a range of social and political goals. The commons in the experiences described by Partridge refer both to the natural resources at the heart of San Isidro’s pipeline project in Ecuador and the social resources that are required to maintain and sustain it – including voluntary labour schedules, cooperative decision-making processes, regular participation in assembly meetings and collective work-parties. Together, as Partridge explains, these can be understood as comprising an “organizing infrastructure” – a set of practices, skills, techniques and forms of organizing that can be (and have been) put to use in other actions and collaborations. He further argues that the timing of these developments in community praxis and collective action in San Isidro is linked to political shifts at the national-level: through their collaborative work on the pipeline project, San Isidro residents have realized a number of objectives that the 2008 Constitution aimed to achieve. Partridge invites us to see San Isidro’s community-operated irrigation system as both an expression of collaborative potential and an illustration of how a network of communities seized emergent political opportunities – where different elements of “the commons” were indeed the basis for an emergent political space that fosters collaboration. Such fraught and shifting political dynamics also reflect how post-neoliberal ideas continue to rely for their actualization on the commitment, cooperation and labour of diverse communities.

Introduction

Countless community initiatives around the world have been based on shared access to communally held land and water and the cooperative management of these productive resources. Such “commons regimes” – particular ways of managing socio-environmental relations (Kenrick, 2009) – have been embodied and developed across diverse socio-cultural contexts and historical moments. Here, I focus on experiences in the indigenous community of San Isidro in Ecuador’s Cotopaxi province. Seizing opportunities at a time of national political change, community-members in San Isidro revived forms of cooperative action to further the construction of an irrigation water pipeline, completed in 2009. This community infrastructure project had its source in collectively owned land and served to distribute water for use in agriculture among participating households. In addition to these physical resources, the project also depended on (and generated) certain social resources and collaborative relations. Elsewhere, similar social systems that support cooperation have been called “social infrastructures” (Berlant, 2016, p. 402). I use the term “organizing infrastructure” because, in San Isidro, these particular strategies and forms of organizing have been central to the successful management of the pipeline project and have been put to use in further community collaborations. In this chapter, I highlight how the community management of commons resources in San Isidro strengthened this organizing infrastructure and I relate these community-level dynamics to national political changes since 2006, an era characterized by post-neoliberal visions and rhetoric.

In highland Ecuador, collective actions led by indigenous groups have both precipitated and responded to moments of political change. This has been particularly visible when legal institutional change sought to formalize or redefine the potential for political cooperation and the governance of historically shared resources – both in terms of social organizing (for example, the 1937 Law of the Communes) and in relation to natural resources (during land reform processes in the 1960s and 1970s) (Becker, 1999; Lucero, 2003). More recently, following the presidential election of left-leaning economist Rafael Correa in late 2006, the country’s political climate shifted again – also influenced by indigenous political actions (Becker, 2011a) – with the result that visions for fashioning a post-neoliberal era became central to how social, environmental and economic policies were designed. As this chapter argues, the successful implementation of these revalorized political visions at the national level depends significantly on the labour, cooperation and social resources of indigenous and rural communities.

The commons as emergent collaborative space

Analyzing the commons and studying lived examples of how common-pool resources are governed, shared and appropriated – particularly those structured through voluntary and collaborative forms of organizing – have been vital tools for better understanding how cooperation is negotiated and how collective initiatives emerge and sustain themselves (Ostrom, 1990). The commons has also gained traction as a concept to re-orientate political action. In some analyses, the commons operates as an unspecified, utopian concept applied in relation to the institutions and infrastructures that distribute or deliver mass resources (Berlant, 2016). Other analyses have explored and critiqued the relevance of the commons concept as a domain of political thinking-

and-action that aims at radical redistribution and liberation from capital (Hardt and Negri, 2009) and/or pursues decolonization and deprivatization (Virno, 2004; Harney and Moten, 2013; Berlant, 2016). As a result, “the commons” often refer to an emergent political space or project that fosters creativity and cooperation (Alessandrini, 2012). As we shall see in the Ecuadorian case discussed below, where communities made use of political and constitutional changes at the national level, there are parallels between the idea of emergent political spaces and the systems of cooperation applied in San Isidro in order to sustain the community’s pipeline project.

However, in studying any of these broad parallels between commons regimes elsewhere in the world and the particular context of highland Ecuador in the 21st century, we must acknowledge the long regional history of indigenous struggle and community organizing that has at different times fought to defend, reinstate and sustain shared resources and particular means for their management. Such organizational and self-management work undertaken by indigenous communities has supported collaborative action despite differences within and between groups – and although such work is typically geared towards distinct objectives with unpredictable or uneven consequences for those involved, it has also frequently been central to supporting a broader political goal of collaborative self-determination (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2009, p. 213).

Collective control over shared resources has also supported communities in achieving and maintaining territorial autonomy and legal recognition – using both together as a basis for pursuing collective interests through interactions with the state and, critically, with other communities and organizations (Lyons, 2006, p. 13). As noted below, the terrain for negotiations between the state and indigenous, marginalized and environmental groups has shifted in the last decade as governmental politics began to engage with long fought-for issues and ideas, for example, through nominal support for the Kichwa indigenous concept of Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir in Spanish), which proposes relationships of respect and care among humans, communities and Nature (Zimmerer, 2012). Reflecting concerns about how the concept of “the commons” is being picked up and used, the risk of cooption is ever-present: “As with the real commons... the concept itself has been the object of many manipulations and appropriations mostly by the institutions that have made the abolition of communal property their mission” (Federici, 2011, p. 42). In this chapter, I focus not on rhetorical appropriations of the commons but specifically on praxis in a particular context, placing these practices in the broader political context of Ecuador.

The “post-neoliberal” political context and constitutional change

After periods of intense political instability, Ecuador ratified a new national constitution in 2008. Its contents were marked by the ambitions of a political movement and administration that explicitly sought to contest neoliberalism through the construction of “socialism for the twenty-first century”, an undertaking that then-president Rafael Correa not only endorsed but for which he also evangelized on the international stage and that, crucially, he declared to be necessary in order to end neoliberalism as the “perverse system that has destroyed our democracy, our economy and our society” (Burbach, 2007). Neoliberal economic policies in the

1990s, together with the move to abandon the national currency and adopt the US dollar in 2000, were among the events that led to both increased political volatility and the resurgence of social movement mobilizations – actions that removed a succession of neoliberal presidents from power, particularly from 1997 to 2007 (Becker, 2011b, p. 26).

Post-2008, the Correa administration pursued a political project – promoted under the name of the *revolucion ciudadana* or “Citizens’ Revolution” – which sought to systematize what many activists and analysts referred to as “post-neoliberalism” via increased social spending and renewed claims for national sovereignty (Clark, 2015). This marked a sea change in Ecuadorian politics. Food sovereignty was to guide national agricultural policy – rejecting large-scale intensive agribusiness in favour of small-scale production for the domestic market – and the constitutional process that incorporated such progressive ideas was itself deliberately decentralized, participatory, and responsive to the demands of social movement organizations (Peña, 2015). While still focused on growth, constitutional economics addressed issues of economic plurality and redistribution (Radcliffe, 2012). Other markers of the “post-neoliberal” era also extended beyond economic policies: there was a re-valorization of expertise and academic knowledge (Nelms, 2015), and constitutional change in 2008 provided a “critical juncture” for indigenous movements to “decolonize the country’s political structures” (Becker, 2011a, p. 48). That Buen Vivir (Sumak Kawsay) was to guide national development policy (as detailed below) also marked a “radical break” since development plans would no longer depend primarily on their “potential profitability” (Gudynas, 2013, p. 181).

Critiques abound questioning what the “post-” in “post-neoliberalism” signifies in the case of Ecuador. Analysts note, for example, that under Correa the country has seen private sector-led extractivist economic activities continue, albeit with more explicitly pro-poor policy and rhetoric (Walsh, 2010; Kennemore and Weeks, 2011; Goodale and Postero, 2013). Here, however, my focus is not on the delimiting question of whether “the post-neoliberal is, in fact, neoliberalism reinvented” (Nelms, 2015, p. 111). Instead, what is of interest is how specific communities have negotiated and responded to these shifts, and have carved out new political spaces within a changing political arena and in relation to the 2008 Constitution.

Indigenous peoples’ social movement organizations have been key civil society actors in moments of political upheaval and constitutional reform across the Andean region (Van Cott, 2003). In Ecuador, an indigenous uprising in 1990 firmly placed indigenous concerns within the national political arena and was followed by repeated calls for the country’s constitution to undo the monopolistic powers of a small governing elite, to create a more participatory and inclusionary political system and to declare Ecuador a plurinational state – a multi-cultural society that formally recognizes diverse indigenous territories, cultures, organizations and systems of justice (CONAIE, 1991; Becker, 2011a, pp. 47–53, 2011b, p. 14f.). While tensions persisted between the visions of a post-neoliberal Citizens’ Revolution and the pluri-national political priorities put forward by indigenous organizations and activists (Becker, 2011a), the influence of indigenous groups on the

2008 Constitution can be traced in further ways, particularly with reference to collective rights and ideas about development.

For example, Article #57 of the constitution (under *Heading II, Chapter 4: “Rights of Communities, Peoples and Nationalities”*) specifies 21 collective rights for indigenous communities, organizations, registered *comunas* and nationalities – including protected rights to occupy inherited lands and territories and to maintain collective control over the use, administration and conservation of land resources held in common (AC, 2008; Partridge, 2016a). The constitution also introduced a chapter on the “Rights of Nature” (*Heading II, Chapter 7: “Derechos de la naturaleza”*) with reference to the indigenous Kichwa concept of “Pacha Mama” (or Mother Nature/*Pachamama*) “of which we are a part and which is vital to our existence” (AC, 2008, p.15). Officials involved in the writing of the constitution have noted that putting forward Nature’s Rights involves not a retreat from transforming Nature in order to improve living conditions (particularly of marginalized and exploited groups) but instead

to investigate and talk with Nature, always appreciating that we are immersed in it... [consolidating] a new form of interrelation of human beings with Nature... an attitude of identification with Nature, far from ownership and dominance, and very close to curiosity and love. (Acosta, 2010, p. 2)

Although the relationship between collective control over land and the protection of Nature’s rights varies considerably across different contexts, Article #57 also contains provisions for state support of localized practices of biodiversity conservation.

Another indigenous Kichwa concept that featured heavily in the 2008 Constitution was that of *Sumak Kawsay* (or *Buen Vivir* in Spanish) – a multiple concept that translates roughly into English as *harmonious living* or *living well together* (Acosta, 2016). The country’s *Development Plan* was to be structured around guaranteeing the “realization” of *Buen Vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay* (as in Article #275 and following sections of the Constitution that outline elements of a “harmonious co-existence” with Nature). This clearly marked a radical break from prior development objectives and their political emphasis on neoliberalism, deregulation and extractivism (Aguinaga et al., 2013). Instead, *Buen Vivir* came to stand for particular values and, in translation from *Sumak Kawsay*, acquired constitutional meanings that variously brought together notions of “social justice, inclusion and equality” (Zimmerer, 2012, p. 602). Specific articles in the constitution mirrored these broad objectives, for example, to promote a politics of redistribution to provide all farmers with access to land and water (#218); to apply systems of science, technology, innovation and ancestral knowledge to improving quality of life for all beings (#385); to prioritize intergenerational responsibility (#400); and to protect fundamental rights to water (#413) and to a healthy, ecologically balanced environment (#14) (AC, 2008; Partridge, 2016a, 2017).

Such significant constitutional aspirations, however, have not only tested notions of political possibility at the national level. They have also created new political spaces and challenges for communities such as San Isidro.

In addition to protections for indigenous groups against discrimination and racism – not all of which have been consistently applied or sustained in the ensuing years – Article #57 of the 2008 Constitution included legal protection for indigenous lands used in common. It was following the introduction of these constitutional measures that the community of San Isidro opted to register legally with the state as a *comunidad* in 2009 and thus to benefit from, for example, legal support in counteracting the misappropriation of communal land or water resources (Partridge, 2016a, 2016b). Managing these “commons”, however, requires specific forms of social organizing and collaborative labour – as described in the following section.

San Isidro: action and shared infrastructures

San Isidro, at an average altitude of 2950 metres above sea level, is located in the foothills of the western range of mountains that run north–south along the length of Ecuador. The Andean climate is dry with rainfall concentrated around the months of October and March. Although the climate is usually relatively stable year-round, rainfall patterns have become more erratic and less reliable in recent years – something that many residents put down to global climate change. At the time of fieldwork (2010–11), the population of San Isidro was 492 people living in 92 registered households. On average, 85 of those households participated in a community project that brought many benefits: a collectively managed irrigation system that has transformed agricultural production in this semi-arid Andean climate. Even though maintaining this irrigation system involves more hard work for San Isidro residents than those living in six neighbouring communities who also share the water, this increased labour requirement has been key to its success – boosting community co-ownership and demanding effective, cooperative organizing.

Describing this system as commons-based infrastructure emphasizes the coincidence of social and physical relations that it both generates and requires. Here, I highlight how collective resource management of shared water and land has strengthened San Isidro’s “organizing infrastructure”. In particular, there are four factors of managing these common resources that have supported the success of the pipeline project and have strengthened a shared basis of cooperative relations and techniques: (i) *skills* and the ability to draw on and share in-house expertise; (ii) the *scale* of the project: enabled by cross-community cooperation it has accessed greater government funding; (iii) *regularity* of related work requiring greater investments of time and money both personally and communally; and (iv) *inclusivity*, which has increased community buy-in within San Isidro. The history of acquiring and controlling shared natural resources (land and water) also influences how this commons-based project has emerged and has been sustained – particularly with regard to water and the *páramo* uplands. The *páramo* in Ecuador refers to high-altitude, wetland moors that play a vital role in hydrological cycles by absorbing and releasing rainfall. San Isidro battled for many years to secure its own irrigation water supply from an area of *páramo* just over 1000 hectares in size that the community now owns collectively, known by its Kichwa name, Chaupi Urku.

There were two main efforts to launch a community irrigation project in San Isidro before the successful bid in 2009. The first came after the Ecuadorian Government had nationalized all water resources in 1972 creating

INERHI (Ecuadorian Institute of Water Resources) and had introduced subsequent measures to, at least nominally, support localized irrigation water projects. In the early 1990s, San Isidro applied to INERHI for support in locating and delivering water from the *páramo*. However, a rival bid from La Playa (a neighbouring community) was successful, at the cost of San Isidro's chances. It is important to note that almost 20 years later the La Playa project was no longer fully functioning since it highlights some of the skills that San Isidro had access to and could cultivate that supported the eventual success of their later project. The original construction in La Playa had been rushed without conducting necessary engineering surveys. A lack of technical experience among those responsible had meant professional engineers had to be hired in as consultants on any repair work, which was prohibitively expensive. By contrast, in San Isidro, a former community president (Don Jorge Llumiquinga) was a trained technician for the regional water infrastructure agency. He could be hired at a more affordable daily rate (to work on identifying and expediting any necessary repairs) and, critically, could train others in the community – input and skills that have been used increasingly throughout San Isidro's efforts to secure community access to irrigation water.

In the late 1990s, a second venture negotiated a deal whereby San Isidro would protect *páramo* sources (through grazing management and native tree-planting to maintain groundwater levels) used by a number of plantations downstream, in exchange for water concessions (OPIJJ, 2009, pp. 130–131). Unfortunately, government authorization was refused (from CNRH, the National Council of Water Resources, that replaced INERHI in 1994).

The third, and successful, venture came following the creation of INAR (National Institute for Irrigation) in 2007 by the recently elected Correa government, an institute created to focus on small-scale agricultural production. Further protections for small farmers and indigenous groups were written into the 2008 constitution, as detailed above. In January 2009, San Isidro was part of a successful joint application to INAR, different to previous bids due to its scale: rather than addressing the water needs of only one community, the application was made through the local representative political body OPIJJ (Organization of Indigenous Communities in Jatun Juigua) proposing a system that would benefit seven different communities. Consequently, it was significantly larger than most of the projects in the local area, at just over \$1.5 million (other regional projects usually amounted to c.\$200,000). The new pipeline would provide 50 litres per second (lps), and this would be split evenly between (i) Yacubamba (the largest community in the area) along with five satellite communities, and (ii) San Isidro, which would receive 25 lps (compared to 4 lps previously).

This was a good deal for San Isidro, but one that was hard won. In order for this inter-community agreement to be settled, water for the project would be sourced only from San Isidro land – higher up in the *páramo* hills and more difficult to access. This would require more maintenance work and performing that work would be more demanding and time-consuming, given the distances involved. Part of the deal was also that San Isidro would take on primary responsibility for this maintenance work. All of which placed great demands on San Isidro residents, both in terms of collective labour involved in maintaining the 20 kilometres pipeline, and the

managerial work required to coordinate those efforts.

Project participation was governed and administered by members of the San Isidro community council, in discussion with regular “assembly” meetings for all participating households. Meetings took place at least once a month, but given the overlap in community membership and pipeline membership (the vast majority of households fitted both categories), even meetings called for other purposes may find a pipeline-related item on their agenda. At least one member or representative of each of the 85 households participating in the pipeline project was expected to attend each meeting. One issue that came up repeatedly during the course of my fieldwork was whether the community should pay a full-time water-system manager. This would require more financial contributions from all members each month, but would reduce the number of weeks/days each household would have to spend in the *páramo* engaged in maintenance work. Ultimately, however, the community-assembly decision was made to save money on a manager’s salary and to maintain current levels of labour contributions from all project members.

Decisions were made by majority vote – one vote per household – and were based on extensive deliberations. Assembly meetings typically lasted for at least two or three hours, sometimes running to eight hours and into the night. Everyone who wanted to speak was invited to do so, although this relied on the facilitation skills of a community council member (often the secretary), usually seated at the head table in the community meeting house. A series of lists and accounts kept track of who had worked when, and who had paid (and how promptly) their monthly contributions to the ongoing costs of the pipeline. These costs, after any available government funding for maintenance, were divided evenly between all participating households. Carrying out such managerial tasks on a day-to-day basis fell first to the community council (whose members are elected by community vote every two years). However, ultimate responsibility for decisions and decision-making processes fell to the community as a whole – negotiated through the assembly meetings.

Labour and pipeline maintenance primarily fell into two categories: (i) as part of occasional collective work-parties (*mingas*), a form of cooperative labour that has been practiced in the region for centuries, or (ii) in smaller groups during regular, week-long shifts. *Mingas* had been crucial to the pipeline’s construction, and had since taken place in the *páramo* when large-scale maintenance work was required – a handful of times per year up to 100 people would spend a weekend there. The isolation of the huts in the *páramo* meant that all essential elements of everyday life had to be planned for and provided during these *mingas*. In such a remote spot, everyone’s most immediate needs and interests were brought together, and everyone relied on the same means for meeting them. Food – cooked and shared communally – was limited to what was made available to everyone, and to what could be carried up from the village. These became important, shared experiences. The remoteness of the *páramo* also typified the week-long shifts of work, which were taken in turn according to a rota. More regular than the *mingas*, these shifts involved three people from three different member-families living and working together from Sunday to Sunday in an isolated hut built specifically for this project. When three people were there each week, this worked out at roughly two shifts of one week per household, per year.

While these demands were significant, they had actually contributed to the success – thus far – of the project. Maintenance and project management responsibilities required member-households of the pipeline to devote more of their time, money and effort to its operation than any other collective undertaking on an ongoing basis had demanded in the past. People’s engagement with the project was thus more regular than in past scenarios. It was also the case that a greater number of households participated than in previous projects, and this *inclusivity* had combined with the abovementioned *skills* and elements of *scale* resulting in revived forms of cooperation – both within and between communities. Whether the pipeline will continue to function successfully in the longer term remains to be seen but, now eight years in, this project has already outlasted a number of other community endeavours and illustrates the potential endurance of co-ownership and commons-based initiatives.

The commons as organizing infrastructure

This chapter has highlighted how different resources held in common became the basis of both physical and social forms of infrastructure vital to the realization of a range of social and political goals. The commons in the experiences described here refer both to the natural resources at the heart of San Isidro’s pipeline project and the social resources that are required to maintain and sustain it – including voluntary labour schedules, cooperative decision-making processes, regular participation in assembly meetings and collective work-parties. Together, these contribute to the “organizing infrastructure” in San Isidro – a set of practices, skills, techniques and forms of organizing that can be (and have been) put to use in other actions and collaborations. As we have seen, this community-operated irrigation system sources water from communally held land and requires regular cooperative labour from participating households. As a result, the project has both tested and strengthened collective organizing within the indigenous community concerned. The commons is both a material basis (land and water) and a mode-of-interacting underpinning San Isidro’s organizing infrastructure.

This chapter has also outlined some of the factors that distinguish the current project from previous attempts at securing a supply of irrigation water for the community – related to skills, scale, regularity and inclusivity – and the role these factors have played in the success-so-far of this collaborative project. Evidence for how this organizing infrastructure has been put to use in further ways is found in more recent mobilizations for water justice and against land misappropriation. For example, San Isidro residents collaborated with neighbouring communities to organize protest marches and to launch a successful legal campaign that stopped an export-oriented broccoli plantation diverting local water resources away from local communities (Partridge, 2017). Within San Isidro itself, the community has repeatedly used assembly meetings and deliberations to address long-running conflict with a neighbouring landowner regarding land boundaries and ownership – also using *mingas* to construct fences, repave roads or redirect irrigation channels when required due to the nature of the dispute (Partridge, 2016a). Having social systems and forms of organizing infrastructure in place has helped make these actions and others like them successful in their aims.

The timing of these recent developments in community praxis and collective action in San Isidro is linked to political shifts at the national-level. Through their collaborative work on the pipeline project, San Isidro residents have realized a number of objectives that the 2008 Constitution aimed to achieve: applying ancestral practices, prioritizing intergenerational responsibility, protecting fundamental rights to water, sustaining an ecologically balanced environment (through grazing management in the *páramo*, and increasing family-scale agriculture at home) and, ultimately, improving quality of life not only for those participating in the project but also for those plants and animals that also benefit from more sustainable farming and irrigation practices.

This historical context highlights both the diverse forms of ongoing indigenous struggle against systematic marginalization in Ecuador as well as constitutional changes that, at least nominally, offered increased forms of legal and institutional support for indigenous communities (including increased availability of funding for irrigation projects). In this sense, San Isidro's community-operated irrigation system is both an expression of collaborative potential and an illustration of how a network of communities seized these emergent political opportunities – where different elements of “the commons” were indeed the basis for an emergent political space that fosters collaboration (Alessandrini, 2012). Such fraught and shifting political dynamics also reflect how post-neoliberal ideas – including some of the far-reaching concepts contained in the 2008 Constitution regarding “harmonious living” – continue to rely for their actualization on the commitment, cooperation and labour of diverse communities such as San Isidro.

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