# The Impacts of Large-Scale Copper Mines on the Shuar Population in Ecuador

Alexis Stinnett

The University of Oregon

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Professor Lawrence Sugiyama

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**Abstract:** This paper will address mining in Ecuador and the impacts it has on the Shuar population. Drawing on a wide range of literature this paper will first address how mining became prevalent in Ecuador and how this is connected to neoliberal policies as well as the turn away from neoliberal policies. It will also discuss the political and social framework of economic policy in Ecuador to help explain why there is a perceived need for large-scale mining operations. This paper will address these policies and how they fit within the legal framework of the Ecuadorian constitution and laws surrounding mining. Then there will be a shift in discussion and this paper will provide some information about the Mirador and San Carlos mining projects and the implications they have had or could potentially have on the Shuar population. Lastly, this paper will analyze how different Shuar communities used different mobilization tactics to protest the opening of these mines. It is important to understand that the effects of these mines are different in different communities. I also want to discuss the responses from the Ecuadorian government and companies involved in these mining projects. The goal of this paper is to discusses these impacts and provide a comprehensive overview of how these effects can be both a shared and different experience for the Shuar people in Ecuador.

**Key Words:** The Shuar, Indigenous rights, mining, project Mirador, San Carlos Mine, neoliberalism, large-scale mining, copper mining, environmental protections, land rights, water rights.

**Maps and Figures:** Figure 1: Map of Mirador Mine Impact Area

**Table of Contents**

**Introduction**

Mining in Ecuador has a long history rooted in colonialism and neoliberal practices. In the mid-2000s when Ecuador began to move away from neoliberal practices and crackdown on illegal small scale mining operations, they opened the door for large-scale mines with foreign investors to play a role in the economy. As these large-scale mining projects began to take place many negative effects became prevalent, especially in the case of the Shuar people. These negative effects not only include environmental destruction to the land and water resources of the Shuar but also the destruction to political systems and social dynamics in many communities. Minning in Ecuador, specifically copper mining in the cases of the Mirador Mine and the San Carlos Mine, created many issues for the Shuar people and forced them to mobilize differently in their respective communities. It is important to look at these effects and the mobilization that took place as a result within the border political and economic context of Ecuador to truly understand the complexities of mining in Ecuador and its relationship with the Shuar people. This paper will aim to provide a comprehensive analysis that discusses the intersection of how large-scale mining not only impacts the environment that the Shur people call home, but also how it impacts them politically, economically and socially and how these impacts look different in certain communities. In Section I of this paper will provide a background on the Shuar people to provide a sense of who they are as a collective, how they operate and what is important to them. It will also briefly discuss some of the previous struggles they have had with obtaining land rights, gaining representation and acknowledgement from the Ecuadorian government. Section II will discuss the concept of neoliberalism and how it pertains to Ecuador. It is important to consider what economic policy looked like in Ecuador during the neoliberal era to show how policies surrounding mining changed when Ecuador turned away from neoliberalism,

and how these changes impacted the Shuar population. Section III will discuss Ecuador's turn away from neoliberalism, the constitution they instituted in in 2008 and the mining law they passed in 2009. Understanding these policy changes demonstrates how the Ecuadorian government began to allow large-scale mining operations in the country, which in turn caused the Shuar people to mobilize against a variety of these projects and brought to light many of the negative consequences that these operations would have on the indigenous population. Section VI will be a deep dive into both the Mirador Mine and the San Carlos Mine. Both large-scale copper mining operations, funded and run by international companies, caused mass protests from the Shuar population and exemplified their concerns about these operations. Section VI will discuss the impacts that both the Mirador and San Carlos mines had on the Shuar populations in their respective areas, to provide an understanding about the severity of this issue and the impact it has had and continues to have on the Shuar people. Section VI will be a discussion and comparison of the different mobilization techniques used by Shuar communities to protest the creation of both the San Carlos and Mirador mining projects. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of the various topics discussed in the previous sections and exemplify why it is important to view these issues with an intersectional approach; not only because the impacts of large-scale mining effect all areas of Shuar life, but because the impacts are different for different communities. To fully understand the impact mining has on the Shuar it is important to fully understand these differences, how and why they happen and how different populations have used their sovereignty to respond to potential threats to their livelihood.

**Section I: Who are the Shuar People?**

The Shuar people are one of the most prominent indigenous ethnic groups in South America. It is estimated that the Shuar population consists of more than 40,000 people who

primarily live in southeastern Ecuador near the upper mountains of the Andes and in the Amazon Basin (Nagan and Hammer 2013/2014). The Shuar are a semi-nomadic group that have historically relied on hunting and gathering to sustain themselves. In recent years they have shifted into a horticultural society that continues to rely on hunting and gathering but has begun to cultivate large gardens of manioc and other crops. The Shuar rely heavily on the lands they inhabit not only to maintain their way of life through cultural means, but also to stay alive. Despite the fact that in recent years, some Shuar communities have begun to form trade relations with others in their area, as well as work in mines and timber operations, they still primarily rely on their native lands of the rainforest. According to Nagan and Hammer, Shuar leadership believe that their people have been residing in the same areas of the Ecuadorian rainforest for more than four thousand years (Nagan and Hammer 2013/2014).

The Shuar community is well established throughout the provinces of Pastaza, Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe and has remained this way despite many efforts to eradicate the population. Colonization efforts began with the Shuar people in the 1500s when they first had contact with the Spaniards. Despite them first establishing peaceful trade relations with the Spaniards they resisted heavy taxation and eventually pushed Spanish colonizers out of their territory. In the 20th century missionization attempts continued which led the Shuar people to form *centros* or settlements that consisted of 30 to 50 families. According to Underrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization, "The Centros initially facilitated evangelization by Catholic missionaries but also became a means to defend Shuar land claims against those of non-indigenous settlers" (2017). The organization of these *centros* demonstrated a shift away from traditional Shuar community organization as semi-nomadic peoples but was necessary as it allowed them to protect their way of life and in time gain land rights and recognition from the

Ecuadorian government. In addition to the creation of *centros* to protect the Shuar from colonization efforts, they also formed their own form of political foundations to represent their interests to NGOs, companies and the Ecuadorian government. This political organization, the Federación Interprovincial de Centros Shuar, better known as the Federation, is charged with "overseeing Shuar political, economic, cultural, and judicial interest and hold regular assemblies where representative from all internal regions of the Shuar participate in policymaking and election officials to an elected body known as the Shuar directive (the "Directive"), which acts in executive and administrative capacities" (Nagan and Hammer 2013/1024). The Federation was officially recognized by the Ecuadorian government in 1964 only a few years after its creation.

The Federation, along with the work of individual communities of Shuar people and NGOs, has achieved many accomplishments, specifically when concerning land rights. In the case of the Tiwi Nunka forest, located in the province of Zamora Chinchipe, and the Shuar community of El Kiim, the battle for land rights and protections was long and hard fought. The community of El Kiim started their fight for land rights in the 1950s when they were forced to relocate at the hands of Christian settlers. Decades later, when those of the El Kiim community came back to their ancestral lands they found it overrun with mestizo settlers and cattle ranching operations. Even though the Shuar continued to fight for their land, it wasn't until 2008 when the NGO Nature and Culture International helped secure the Tiwi Nunka forest as a 'protective forest and vegetation area.' According to Radwin, despite this being a good first step to forest protection, this protective status only applied to the surface of the land, which still allowed for mining corporations to come in and extract resources from underground (2022). However, protections for the Tiwi Nunka forest were further secured in 2021 when the Ministry of

Environment and Water approved the communities 14,021 acre land title, finally securing them as the rightful owners of the land.

The case of the Tiwi Nunka forest and the fight of the El Kiim people is not a unique one. Many other Shuar communities have been fighting to obtain legal rights to their ancestral land. The success of the El Kiim community is an example of what is possible when it comes to protecting land rights, but it also shows how unique each Shuar community is and how their situations can vary greatly. Despite the existence of a collective governing body each *centro* and community has different experiences and different outcomes they are striving for. The uniqueness of each of these communities is why it is important to assess the consequences of large-scale mining operations through an intersectional viewpoint, and not generalize the Shuar people and their experiences as a whole.

**Section II: Neoliberalism and its impacts on Ecuador**

Neoliberalism as an economic and political strategy was extremely popular in South America in the 1980s and early 1990s. The Neoliberal wave started in Chile with the U.S. educated 'Chicago Boys' who were economic advisors to Augusto Pinochet. Neoliberalism as a term has been controversial among scholars for years as the original term has taken on a variety of different meanings. For the purposes of this paper neoliberalism will be classified as "the wave of market deregulation, privatization and welfare-state withdrawal that swept the first, second and third worlds" (Venugopal 2015). Neoliberalism in South America and Ecuador in particular, was implemented as a policy to try and increase economic output for the country and increase development. Some of the key aspects of neoliberalism in South America included opening the market to international investors, cutting social spending, increasing the military,

devaluing currency in some cases and overall privatization of the labor sector. It is important to discuss what Ecuador looked like during this era, as it sets up the political and economic background for which large-scale mining began to operate.

Since the beginning of Ecuador's history as an independent country they focused primarily on exporting certain commodities, similar to many other countries in the region. Ecuador went from extracting and exporting rubber, bananas, flowers, and most recently oil and important minerals (Fernández-Salvador 2018). Ecuador didn't begin to turn to neoliberal policies until the early 1980s when oil, their primary commodity of the time, dropped in price on the world market leaving them in massive amounts of debt. With the prices of oil dropping Ecuador turned to organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for help, who agreed on the terms that Ecuador would begin to embody neoliberal policies and open their markets to the international sector for privatization.

The first steps Ecuador took in shifting to neoliberal policies was a currency devaluation. After currency devaluation other traditional neoliberal policies from this period followed. According to Fernández-Salvador, this currency devaluation, "eventually led to the privatization of state-owned companies, budget cuts, and the creation of mechanisms to attract foreign investment to develop the oil industry in the Amazonian region" (2018). As Ecuador began to fully embrace neoliberal policies, they reduced their control over the economy as well as their role in dictating the welfare state. At the turn of the century after years of low social spending, an increase in inequality between the working class and the wealthy, and more debt accumulation – Ecuador began to turn away from neoliberal policies. They went through the process of dollarization as well as the development of a new constitution that included a variety of progressive policies. As I will discuss further in the next section, this turn away from neoliberal

policies, the new constitution, and new laws surrounding mining opened the possibility for large-scale mining operations, run by foreign companies to enter Ecuadorian markets.

**Section III: Ecuador's turn away from Neoliberal policies, a New Constitution, and a New Mining Law**

As Ecuador began to move away from neoliberal policies, they decided it was essential to write a new constitution that represented their new progressive or "leftist" values. One of the most important aspects of this new constitution was that it not only increased state control of the mining industry, but it also included regulations surrounding the environment and used language from indigenous groups of the area. The new constitution used the terms *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* which describe an indigenous view of well-being and living harmoniously with nature (Fernández-Salvador 2018). This new progressive constitution gave off the premise that Ecuador was moving towards a different type of development that prioritized the well-being of all populations. However, as time progressed it became clear that if Ecuador wanted to meet their development goal they would need to focus on extractive industries. According to Fernández-Salvador many of the policies surrounding mining and development in the new constitution included characteristics "of an increase in the state control over the economy and the extractive industry itself, which is intended to use mineral extraction as the chief pillar of a macroeconomic strategy that would allow the government to increase and maintain social expenditure (2018). This economic strategy allows for Ecuador to increase their control over the mining sector and justify large-scale mining projects as being beneficial to development, even though they pose risks to certain groups.

This macroeconomic strategy can be better recognized as the “extractive imperative.” The extractive imperative is a concept that explains “further extraction as a necessary and unavoidable step towards higher levels of development” (Arsel 2016). Through the new constitution and Ecuador's commitment to increasing development, “the government has framed the extraction of natural resources as an imperative to develop the country and satisfy the material needs of a great portion of the population” (Fernández-Salvador 2018).

In addition to the new economic principles laid out in the 2008 constitution, the Ecuadorian government also implemented a new mining law that was aimed at preventing small-scale illegal mining operations from taking place as they had for many years as well as increasing the scope that the government had in the mining sector. Law No. 45, better known as the Mining Law, was passed in 2009. The main aspect of this law asserted that “the State may grant rights in the mining sector to private and mixed companies in which it has a majority ownership” (International Energy Agency 2022). This law along with the new constitution laid out a clear framework for the state's involvement in the mining industry. It allowed them to grant mine to any organization if they believed it would benefit the country's development by increasing revenue spent on social spending programs. Despite the fact that there is a variety of language in the constitution that discusses the need to protect indigenous lands and the environment, this law essentially has been used to allow the government to grant mining rights without considering the impacts it could have on the indigenous populations of the area.

This political and economic framework is important to acknowledge as it provides a background for how involved the government is with large-scale mining operations. It also provides an understanding for why the government has chosen to allow large-scale mining in the

country and how they have been complacent in addressing the concerns of the Shuar people, even after including indigenous perspectives about the environment into its constitution.

**Section IV: The Mirador and San Carlos Copper Mines**

The Mirador mine and the San Carlos mines are two examples of large-scale mining operations in Ecuador. Both the Mirador Mine and the San Carlos Mine are in Ecuador's Copper Belt in Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021). Both areas are a part of the mountain range known as the Cordillera de Cóndor that is located in the southeastern part of Ecuador and includes territory of the Shuar people. These mines are designed to run as open-pit copper mines, producing mass amounts of copper and other minerals per day. The Mirador Mine encompasses about 10,000 hectares of land and when its production began in 2019, it was producing 10,000 tons of copper concentrate per day (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021). The mine is also likely to have a direct impact on the town of Tundaymeand. The town of Tundaymeand is home to 737 people and over one-fifth of these inhabitants identify as members of the Shuar community (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021). In the case of the San Carlos mine, it is projected that the project will be able to produce 500 million tons of copper per year and would have the greatest impact on the towns of San Miguel de Conchay, Indanza, San Antonio, San Carlos de Limón, San Jacinto de Wakambeis, San Juan Don Bosco, Santiago and Santiago de Panantza in which the Shuar consist of almost half of the population (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021).

The Mirador and the San Carlos mines are both operated by the Chinese-run mining consortium called CRCC-Tongguan. The entrance of Chinese actors into the copper mining sector of Ecuador was not a surprise as they had been expanding their operations to other countries in South America by the early to mid 2000s. According to Quiliconi and Vasco, China

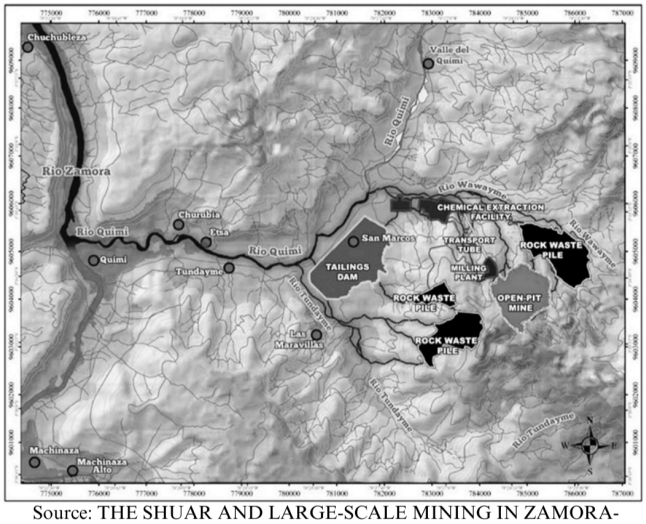
is the biggest consumer of metal in the world, demanding 12,794 metric tons of copper per year (2021). China further expanded their involvement in the copper mining sector in 2010 when it acquired Corriente Resources, a Canadian mining company, at $650 million. The acquisition of Corriente Resources came with the land on which the Mirador and San Carlos mining projects would be held (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021).

In addition to the acquisition of Corriente Resources, the 2009 mining law also allowed China to become more involved in Ecuador's mining industry. The 2009 mining law, previously discussed in Section III, was aimed at preventing illegal mining operations. However, this law allowed for Chinese investors to become more involved as, "a provision that would have required firms to acquire the prior and informed consent of affected communities was ultimately not incorporated into the law" (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021).

The Mirador and San Carlos copper mines are two examples of how large-scale copper mining in Ecuador can take place. With the power to produce millions of tons of copper, it is not surprise that the Ecuadorian government has been supportive of these projects, as the royalties will bring money and in theory help the country develop. However, as pointed out in this section, the massive scale of these projects will without a doubt impact the lives of thousands of Shuar people living in the area. Despite the countries progressive constitution and stance on environmental issues, their development model, which has allowed large mines like this to be run by foreign investors, seems to contradict what they previously prioritized in terms of sustainability and the protections of indigenous peoples.

**Section V: Impacts of the Mirador and San Carlos Mine on the Shuar population**

Figure 1: Map of Mirador Mine Impact Area




Source: THE SHUAR AND LARGE-SCALE MINING IN ZAMORA-CHINCHIPE, ECUADOR

It is not surprising that both the Mirador and San Carlos Mines would have substantial negative impacts on the Shuar population. These impacts not only include obvious environmental destruction but also the destruction of culture, the uprooting of families and the increasing of economic hardship. As previously mentioned, when analyzing these effects, it is important to note that they do not look the same for every group involved. It is also important to not only focus on environmental impacts but others as well, as these can at times create even greater consequences for the Shuar people.

One of the biggest, and most obvious impacts that these large-scale mining operations have had on the Shuar population is the depletion of resources due to mass amounts of deforestation. Even in the exploration phase of these mines, “large swaths of land are needed to create landfills or slagheaps to deposit material with no important mineral content and waste material (tailings)” (Fernández-Salvador 2018). Additionally, these projects also change the ecosystems they are near as spaces for communications systems, campgrounds, and roads are also cleared (Fernández-Salvador 2018). Water is a concern among the Shuar as open-pit copper mines not only require millions of gallons of water a day to run but they also produce toxic waste that can seep into the water tables and nearby rivers. In the case of the San Carlos mine, “6 Shuar villages in the lower Zamora River and upper Santiago River watersheds sit downstream from the site of the open pit copper mine at San Carlos, leaving them particularly vulnerable to water contamination” (Rudel 2018).

To add on to the negative environmental impacts these large-scale copper mining operations have, they also greatly decrease the ability of the Shuar to live off their ancestorial land and force them to become economically reliant on the mines. Both the San Carlos and Mirador mines have made it increasingly hard for the Shuar to maintain their agricultural and livestock activities (Latino América Sustentable 2020). This has caused economic hardship for many Shuar villages and families and threatened their ways of life. The San Carlos and Mirador mines and others like them have also forced many Shuar families to relocate, which has in some ways caused another wave a forced migration similar to what took place when missionaries came to Ecuador.

All of these impacts have made support for the mines hard to come by in the Shuar population and one can see why. These mines not only threaten the Shuar's way of life but also their livelihood and ability to provide for themselves and their kin.

**Section VI: Mobilization techniques used by the Shuar to protest the Mirador and San Carlos Mines and the government's response**

In the cases of both the Mirador and San Carlos mine, the Shuar people mobilized differently to prevent these mines from opening and attempt to force these foreign companies to listen to their concerns. In the case of the Mirador mine, many of the groups attempted to negotiate with the Chinees consortium, hoping they would listen to their concerns. However, the Chinese consortium used this hopefulness as a way to divide the Shuar population, making it easier for them to get approval for their project. According to Quiliconi and Vasco, "the story of Mirador is not one of a Chinese consortium's ignoring local leaders but one of dividing the local and poor Ecuadorian community against itself by working only with local supporters to

overcome local opponents" (2021). By using their power to only focus on the groups in the area that may accept the idea of the mine, the consortium divided the community, demonstrating an unseen effect of the copper mines. Many of the residents who continued to fight against the mine created organizations that they hoped would help better represent their concerns in negotiations. Some of these main concerns included land rights to ancestorial grounds and just compensation (Fernández-Salvador 2018). One of these organizations is called The Amazon Community of Social Action in Cordillera del Cóndor (CASCOMI) and was recognized by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021). Despite the continued formation of organizations, the consortium responded through the use of force backed by the Ecuadorian government. An example of this took place in 2014 when mining personnel along with Ecuadorian security forces destroyed a school and church in San Marcos (Quiliconi and Vasco 2021). Despite the Shuars and those in the communities continued fight against the mine through political and social organizations, the mine eventually opened in 2019. The methods that the Shuar used in the case of the Mirador mine, not only show their desire for negotiation but also for their rights to be recognized and respected. As mentioned earlier, it is important to assess these mobilization tactics and the responses of the Ecuadorian government and other actors to fully understand the turmoil people experienced while trying to express their concerns as this is another impact on its own. It is also important to note that the tactics used by the Shuar in the case of the Mirador Mine are different to those used to protest the San Carlos mine, further demonstrating how it is necessary to view impacts on a case-to-case basis and not group the effects of one mining operation onto the entire population.

When discussing the San Carlos mine there are a few distinct differences between the Shuar mobilization strategy and the response of the government. In the case of the San Carlos

mine many Shur people used physical occupation to protest the opening of the mine. This included the occupation of mining camps, barricading roads and refusing to abandon their homes after being told to leave by the consortium. The Shuar also used negotiation tactics to prevent the mine from opening but had similar results to those of the Shuar in San Marcos fighting against the Mirador mine. The fight between the consortium allied with the Ecuadorian government, and the native populations of the area, led to violence and death as three Shuar people from 2009 to 2016 died while protecting their land and/or water rights (Riofrancos 2019). The fight came to a head when on December 14, 2016, President Correa declared a state of emergency, deploying troops and the national police to the province of Morona Santiago (Riofrancos 2019). The state of emergency was declared after the death of a police officer, working to protecting the mines interests. However, there were severe levels of violence before the state of emergency was declared. According to Riofrancos, "The months leading up to the 2016 state of emergency saw military raids and the violent dispossession of Shuar villages, leaving homes, tools, and agricultural plots destroyed" (2019). Many Shuar groups became displaced, and their lives permanently altered by the violent response from the government, whose priority was to protect the interests of the Chinese mining consortium. Similar to what happened in the case of the Mirador Mine, the political and social effects that came from this battle created unseen negative impacts of large-scale copper mining. These differences in mobilization techniques show how different communities delt with similar issues in unique ways and suffered a variety of consequences.

**Conclusion**

After assessing the history of mining in Ecuador and the economic and political contexts in which large-scale copper mines were allowed to open it is clear that mining operations are rooted in colonialism and neoliberal policies. The move away from neoliberal policies in the early and mid-2000s, in addition to the 2008 constitution and the mining law of 2009, allowed for foreign investors to enter the copper mining market with the support of the government, who used development as justification while disregarding promises they made to indigenous groups. The large-scale mining operations, like the Mirador and San Carlos mine, posed many threats to the Shuar population in the area. These threats went beyond just environmental issues, even as these were a major concern, and extended to forced migration, limiting economic independence, the threat of land and water rights, creating distrust in the government, dividing communities and forever altering the lives of hundreds when the military and police were called in to stop protests.

As shown, it is important to assess the negative effects of large-scale mining on the Shuar not just at a surface level but to understand the unexpected impacts many have faced and continue to experience. Though analyzing the mobilization tactics and responses to the opening of the Mirador and San Carlos mines, it is clear that each community in the Shuar population are different and experience the negative effects of mining in different ways. To fully understand the issue, it is important to not generalize and truly work to understand the intersection between environmental, political, economic, and social consequences for all individual communities.

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