

# BETWEEN PLANETARY URBANIZATION AND THINKING FORESTS, OR, IKIAM UNIVERSITY AND ITS LIVING LABORATORY – A STUDY OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CHANGE IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON

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*NOTE: The Independent Scholar Fellowship application form has been updated since this proposal was submitted.*

## **Abstract**

This ISRF fellowship would allow an intensive fieldwork period (8 months) in the Ecuadorian Amazon, in order to begin investigating the processes of socio-ecological change surrounding the development of Ecuador's recently founded Regional Amazonian University, Ikiam (meaning 'forest' or 'nature' in the indigenous language Shuar). Ikiam plays a key role in the Ecuadorian government's strategy for 'structural change' towards a 'green and knowledge-based economy' as part of its overall 'post-neoliberal' modernization project.

The proposed project sets out to understand Ikiam's effects as well as its origins. In particular, I will investigate the socio-ecological relations that are produced or reconfigured by Ikiam, as well as the national and international discourses and policies on a transition to a 'green economy', which underpin Ikiam's development through valorisation and justification.

With a cross-cutting focus on people's lived experiences, including the heterogeneity of their interpretations and valuations of socio-ecological change, I will use ethnographic and participatory research methods to inquire into the complexities of this change 'on site', addressing (a) access to resources, (b) processes of accumulation, dispossession and marginalisation, (c) social metabolism (use of energy and materials, and disposal of waste). Critical discourse analysis will be used to approach the question of Ikiam's value in and to national and international political-economic projects and their articulation into wider global processes.

With an unusual combination of theories, and the mixed method approach which I developed in my doctoral research, the project will transcend the economic understandings of socio-ecological conflicts, as well as the understandings of global connections as uni-directional, which are predominant in 'political ecology'. The project

will also contribute to the discussions in Ecuador on how to further develop Ikiam and realise its intentions – equitably.

Securing funding for a second phase will be greatly enabled by this ISRF fellowship.

### **The Research Idea** *The innovative thesis of the project*

This project brings together strands of anthropology, political economy, and philosophy, to make sense of the socio-ecological relations brought about by the development of Ikiam, one of four new flagship universities in Ecuador, explicitly conceived to serve as foundation for the diversification of the economy and development of a knowledge-based society. In doing so, it builds upon the methodological strategy I developed in my PhD, which I aim to strengthen and refine through such renewed application.

There are as of yet no studies on Ikiam. My proposal directly responds to demands for a critical inquiry from researchers, civil society and indigenous communities in Ecuador (where I spent two years for doctoral fieldwork), and will engage intensely in their discussions.

Ikiam's ambiguous position between an ecologically-destructive neo-extractivism, and the preservation of ecologically-sound systems for study, harnessing of 'services' and 'green innovation' mirrors the dilemmas Ecuador currently finds itself in, and which are arguably inherent in the very concept of 'sustainable development'. This is why the proposed study is not only of parochial interest, despite its focus on particular dynamics in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Like other 'critical ethnographies' (Hart 2004), it insists on the relevance of 'local' particularities in understanding 'global' processes. Unlike other 'critical ethnographies', it involves philosophical analysis of fundamental concepts, such as property, knowledge and 'the social', informed by the alternative value systems and 'cosmovisions' encountered. This permits moving beyond the 'economistic' understanding of what is at stake adopted by most, even radical, 'political ecology' studies.

### **Background** *Current research reference points and their limitations*

Ikiam opened its doors in 2014, and its degrees and research areas are still being defined. At the time of writing there is no academic commentary on the development

of Ikiam, though Wilson et al. (2015) cite Ikiam in their analysis of urbanization in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

It is chiefly 'political ecology' which attends to the explosion of conflicts surrounding (neo)extractivism, concerned, as it traditionally is, with the unequal distribution of natural resources and risks influenced by multi-scalar processes (Blaikie & Brookfield 1987). Its 'economistic' conception of socio-ecological conflicts accounts for crucial, often life-or-death asymmetries in distribution of (i) access to natural resources and their benefits, (ii) exposure to ecological risk, (iii) decision-making power over these benefits and risks. Without neglecting these economic asymmetries, my project insists that struggles over the development of Ikiam are also, and crucially, struggles over meanings and values (Escobar 1996; Martinez-Alier 2002).

The perspective of 'planetary urbanization' describes (multi-scalar) processes of landscape transformation which territorialise large-scale investments in the built environment and channel flows of raw materials, energy, commodities, labour, and capital across transnational space (Brenner 2013; Harvey 2014). Ikiam is best understood as part of such processes. However, the perspective of planetary urbanization runs the risk of conceptualising capital as a totalising global force, the dynamic action of which unilaterally affects passive localities and impotent people. My research will avoid this tendency by conceptualising the relationship of global/planetary forces and their concrete manifestations in material actualities as one of co-constitution and co-production 'with cracks'.

**The Focus** *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa launched a 'Citizen Revolution' upon entering office in 2007, with the stated aim of establishing a postneoliberal order, favouring solidarity over competition, and sustainability over economic growth (SENPLADES 2007).

Despite its focus on 'greening' the economy, the Correa administration is promoting mega-development projects: constructing multi-modal bi-oceanic transport corridors, expanding oil extraction, starting large-scale open-pit mining. Resistance has been criminalised as 'sabotage and terrorism'. The revenue from continued extractive activities is meant to be re-invested in biotechnology and other biodiversity-based services, as precondition for economic transition (SENPLADES 2011). Ikiam is set to play

a key role in this transition by strengthening both traditional and 'bio'-extractivism in the Amazon region.

The university has elicited criticism from civil society. The government's proposals of a transition to a knowledge-based bio-economy are increasingly questioned with regard to what benefits will actually flow from such a transition, and for whom (e.g. Acosta 2013).

Ikiam has annexed a biological reserve of 93,000 hectares as 'living laboratory', spanning several ecosystems and indigenous territories, and serving as safeguard of biodiversity for study and development of 'bio-products'. It directly affects the lives and livelihoods of several Kichwa and smallholder communities, as well as the population of the small provincial capital of Tena, in myriad and potentially severe ways, demanding careful investigation.

Apart from its local significance, Ikiam acts as lens through which questions of global import regarding just and sustainable economies can be addressed afresh.

**Theoretical Novelty** *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

The proposed project will transcend the incumbent, economistic understanding of socio-ecological relations, amongst other things through a focus on the (often heterogeneous and conflicting, yet nonetheless collectively disregarded) views of the indigenous inhabitants whose everyday lives are affected by Ikiam. Such focus will be underpinned by an understanding of 'more-than-human sociality' (Tsing 2013) and 'thinking forests' (Kohn 2013).

For the Napo Runa, the forest and all its visible and invisible inhabitants are experiencing and contributing to the operations of Ikiam. Such perspectives are too often sidelined in social studies of environmental change. Hence, the proposed project starts, as my previous work (Moeller 2010; forthcoming), from taking indigenous perspectives seriously. This requires attempting not to explain away seemingly 'irrational' statements about, say, speaking plants – not even by generously 'translating' them so that they fit into a model of 'Western' rationality – but rather to entertain the idea of what it would mean if it were so. Eschewing the temptation to speculate about the ontological implications of speaking plants and forest spirits, the project seeks instead to tease out

the political and ethical imperatives which follow from taking indigenous – and maybe forest? – points of view as seriously as other perspectives.

Moreover, my focus on the always only partial achievements of global, totalising forces, on the messy actualities, ‘cracks’ and disjunctures of planetary urbanization, will enable the identification – and grasping! – of opportunities for emancipatory reconfiguration of socio-ecological relations, in the Amazon and beyond.

**Methodology** *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry – specific methodological examples are often helpful for non-specialist readers*

The ethnographic part of the project will focus on indigenous and smallholder communities, particularly those inside Ikiam’s living laboratory, as well as staff and students. This will require little preparation as I maintain a network of contacts in the area.

I propose to form a ‘working’ or ‘focus group’ which would use maps, photographs and excursions to the campus and/or construction sites to provide material for collective discussion about Ikiam’s transformations of space and relations. A similarly participative approach has proven very fruitful during my earlier research in the area.

In addition, reflexive participant observation (Davies 1999), unstructured and semi-structured interviews will be used to understand people’s interpretations and lived experience of the development of Ikiam, including its (landscape) transformations. Structured interviews are planned with other ‘stakeholders’ – government officials, post-holders in indigenous organisations, social and environmental activists, transport professionals (taxi and bus drivers), construction personnel, university janitors and catering staff.

The discourse analysis part of the project will examine policy documents shaping the Ecuadorian ‘Citizen Revolution’, especially those defining the role of Ikiam in the transition to a ‘post-extractive’ economy (e.g. Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior, Plan del Buen Vivir), as well as an analysis of how these are positioned vis-à-vis international discourses on the imperatives of transitioning to a ‘Green Economy’ (e.g. reports and other documents by Rio+20, the Green Economy Initiative, the Partnership for Action

on Green Economy, the World Bank, the Global Green Growth Institute). Press releases regarding Ikiam will be included.

## **Relevance**

This project contributes to ISRF's founding ambition to revive the ethical in social science through original, radical and innovative work in the following ways:

Its research focus: Ikiam and 'uneven' urban development in the Amazon, in the context of a pursuit of economic transition towards sustainability, is a new 'subject' of study responding to concrete demands from Ecuadorian civil society.

Its interdisciplinarity: the project starts from an 'event' (Ikiam), which it seeks to understand, in its effects and origins, without reducing its field of vision to that of any one particular discipline.

Its assumptions: an openness to subaltern 'cosmovisions' will allow a richer and more surprising understanding of the socio-ecological relations produced by Ikiam than a study with an exclusive focus on the more 'economic' questions of distribution of opportunities and risks could provide.

Its ultimate aim is transformative: the project seeks not only to understand, but also to seize – or help others seize – the opportunities for the emancipatory reconfiguration of socio-ecological relations (e.g. into self-determining, respectful, mutually enriching, non-market relations – but this is for the project to determine and not to assume).

This project aspires to be more than an academic research project. I envision it as the beginning of a participatory reflection about the socio-ecological relations brought about by urban, economic, educational development in one of the world's poorest, most bio-diverse regions. This will have implications beyond the Amazon, and deepen discussions of questions that have accompanied me throughout my adult life.