Poverty measurement, social programmes and Amazonian indigenous peoples: A Peruvian case study with the Wampis people
“Classifying all indigenous peoples as extremely poor also contributes to perpetuating the stereotype that they are unproductive and that they do not know how to use the resources and the territories they have to make enough money to enable them to “stop being poor”.”
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Lima, November 2019
INTRODUCTION

“... since 2008, the people have been living in great fear that social and vaccination programmes and laws are aimed at destroying the indigenous peoples [of Peru].”

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE INDIGENOUS NAVIGATOR SURVEY, QUESTION # 56.

Since 2016, the Wampis women have been demanding that the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) make changes to its social programmes to ensure they are geographically and culturally appropriate and to enable the women themselves to conduct quality assessments of the State’s education and health services in the communities. The following text has been written thanks to their participation, on the basis of their responses to the Indigenous Navigator community survey issued in 2015 and their various complaints raised in different training and meeting spaces.

In the context of the Indigenous Navigator’s community survey, the answer given to question number 56 on whether there had been cases of deprivation of life or threats to individuals or groups since 2008 was particularly noteworthy: “No. But since 2008 the people have been living in great fear that social and vaccination programmes and [National] laws are aimed at destroying the indigenous peoples.”

This issue also falls within the scope of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as the social programmes are aimed at reducing the intergenerational transmission of poverty and improving the education, health and nutrition of vulnerable children. Since publication of the SDGs, different international organisations have clarified that they need to be interpreted in the light of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when related to indigenous peoples. The Declaration is clear that State-run development programmes must be drawn

1. Servindi: Cuestionan interculturalidad de “Juntos” en dos cuencas amazónicas: https://www.servindi.org/actualidad-noticias/03/05/2016/cuestionan-interculturalidad-de-juntos-en-dos-cuencas-amazonicas
up and decided with indigenous peoples’ involvement, a condition that is not met by the social programmes currently being implemented in Peru’s indigenous territories, and something that could have avoided many of these programmes’ negative impacts thus far. In addition, when considering indigenous peoples specifically, SDG No. 1 on poverty reduction must be understood and guaranteed through a culturally-appropriate approach, in cooperation with the indigenous peoples involved.

A FOCUS ON CASH POVERTY IS PROBLEMATIC WHEN WORKING WITH AMAZONIAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The concept of poverty has been subject to multiple approaches and definitions but, in general terms, it is commonly agreed that it relates to a human being’s well-being or, more properly speaking, their lack thereof. The concept of well-being, which basically refers to “the set of things necessary to live well”, is closely linked to perceptions of development, values and cultural contexts. To guarantee a certain quality of life, different resources and tools will be needed if we are thinking about an indigenous community in the Amazon, than those which would be needed by a neighbourhood in Lima, for example.

The view of poverty and how it is measured in Peru currently focuses on quantitative monetary methods and thus ends up exclusively identifying indicators of someone’s standard of living rather than their quality of life. This methodology is particularly inappropriate when applied to indigenous peoples, as will be addressed in the next section. This, and the government’s widespread categorisation of all indigenous peoples as living in extreme poverty, has a negative impact on their rights.

3. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Art.23: In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.

Wampis woman at the Wampis General Congress in Soledad, November 2019.
CREDIT: PABLO LASANSKY / INDIGENOUS NAVIGATOR
The poverty approach used by the State, and applied by the National Statistics Institute (INEI), is based on the Poverty Line method, which focuses on “the economic dimension of poverty and uses income or consumption as a measure of well-being” and on Unmet Basic Needs. This method uses indicators which, in many cases, largely end up assessing someone’s access to monetary resources – is their home constructed with high-quality materials (purchased on the market), are they cooking with fuel, do they have a landline, cable or Internet phone, etc. – or considering needs that would not be deemed necessary within indigenous peoples’ traditional practices (e.g. household appliances).

As already noted, considering cultural adaptation, this approach is neither appropriate nor adapted to the self-subsistence economies traditional among Amazonian indigenous peoples. This means that the method being applied is erroneous from the outset as it does not correspond to the reality of what we are trying to measure. Using the logic of “if they’ve spent no money to buy food then they haven’t eaten”, or “if you don’t have a house in which you have invested money then you don’t have a house at all”, any indigenous family that maintains a traditional way of life, however solid and comfortable their house may be and however much food they may have, is condemned to be considered extremely poor, without any further consideration of their well-being, their quality of life or their cultural practices.

From a rights-based point of view, this way of measuring poverty does not respect the right to difference, to identity, to maintain one’s own cultural practices, to define one’s own development priorities or to self-determination, to name but a few.

The communities do have economic needs in terms of being able to source the resources they are unable to obtain from their territories (school materials, clothing, tools or fuel) and they have also clearly suffered a gradual process of impoverishment, for varying reasons. However, this methodology is very far from being able to shine a light on this situation and process. Decisive factors in the lives of indigenous peoples, such as territory, a clean environment, access to and management of their own resources, the quality of education and health services and their ability to participate and manage them would be a much more appropriate way of measuring the well-being of indigenous peoples today.

Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach (identification through deprivation of capabilities and rights) or the UN’s Multidimensional Poverty Index would be far more appropriate measurement methods. In general, any systems should consider indigenous rights from the outset and be the result of a participatory consultation process in which indigenous members are able to identify the measurement variables they consider most appropriate.
2. ONE SIZE FITS ALL: EQUATING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WITH EXTREME POVERTY

In September 2014, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion issued Ministerial Resolution 227-2014-MIDIS establishing that “the indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon, as listed in the Official Database of Indigenous Peoples, and set out in M.R. No. 321-2014-MC or any subsequent resolution replacing or updating it, shall be classified socioeconomically as living in extreme poverty”.

The Peruvian State thus declared that nearly all Amazonian indigenous communities are living in extreme poverty, without further consideration other than their ethnic belonging. In this approach, the monetary criterion – the central approach to establishing the category of extreme poverty in the first place – no longer counts and ethnic origin becomes the sole criterion by which poverty is determined. Under this approach, any indigenous professional, any salaried worker or producer of goods and services or any indigenous person receiving a high monetary income – as well as anyone satisfying their needs through their territory and their own resources – thus ends up being considered extremely poor due to the sole fact that they are indigenous.

This generic classification, that links indigenous peoples with poverty without considerations, stigmatises, denigrates and creates a vicious circle of discrimination. Since being poor is commonly considered undignified, the message being sent to indigenous peoples, particularly their youth and children, through this blanket classification is a clear one: if because I am indigenous, I am automatically extremely poor, to stop being poor, I have to stop being indigenous.
In addition, such discrimination entails, to a certain extent, the logical reaction of wanting to break with the identity of the poor / indigenous and contributes to generating side effects that would seriously affect the state of the rights and well-being of these peoples, such as: i) the discriminatory effect when identifying as indigenous; ii) rejecting indigenous cultures and practices (given they’re associated with being poor) thus, a loss of traditional knowledge that results in a decline in the quality of life with profoundly negative consequences such as: significant increases in chronic child malnutrition due, between other facts, to fewer crop varieties in the fields and to a loss of fishing and hunting techniques; fewer varieties of medicinal plants being used; less knowledge of the flora and fauna and its uses, etc. and; iii) a high rate of migration among indigenous youths towards the cities, with no desire to return.

The perverse nature of this approach is exacerbated by the fact that it perpetuates a discriminatory logic that believes that the culture and knowledge of indigenous peoples are not useful in today’s world because they are extremely poor, i.e. because their culture and knowledge has resulted in their extreme poverty.

Classifying all indigenous peoples as extremely poor also contributes to perpetuating the stereotype that they are unproductive and that they do not know how to use the resources and territories they possess to make enough money to enable them to “stop being poor”. Discriminatory speeches such as the famous “Dog in a Manger” thesis by Alan García7 or proposals to break up the territories for individual ownership, are thus likely to continue to be accommodated.

Lastly, in terms of legal doctrine, this would be a regressive measure. Its approach and application can be classified as a combination of “a doctrine of guardianship dating from the 1920s when the State apparently knew what was best for indigenous peoples and thus decided for them, and the 1950s doctrine of progressive integration when the State sought indigenous peoples’ cooperation to implement policies and laws that would help them break free from their inferior position”8.

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7. “This situation is found throughout Peru, unproductive lands because the owner has no training or economic resources, so their ownership is merely perceived. This same land sold in large plots would bring technology that these community members would also benefit from but the ideological web of the 19th century remains a hindrance: The dog in a manger.”

3. WHAT DOES BEING CONSIDERED POOR MEAN? SOCIAL PROGRAMMES AS THE MAIN CONTACT WITH THE STATE

Historically, indigenous peoples have been excluded from accessing public services, opportunities and guarantees of respect and protection of their rights. The State’s presence has been minimal in the Amazon, allegedly because of difficult access. In this context of abandonment, state’s attention and consideration of indigenous peoples is only under their classification as “poor”. It is no wonder that there is an increasing perception that there are better chances for accessing resources and opportunities because of being poor rather than because of having rights.

The category of extreme poverty that the Peruvian government has established for the Amazonian Indigenous peoples was supposed to give direct access to social programmes, which, regardless of their effectiveness, lack any intercultural or rights-based approach. Conditional transfer programmes such as the Juntos programme and food supplement programmes such as Qali Warma, Vaso de leche or Cuna Más, which are operating in most of the Amazon’s native communities, have had no indigenous involvement in either their design or implementation, and nor have they been subject to consultation processes.

A targeting policy needs to be established to enable these programmes to respect cultural diversity from a rights-based approach. Many of these programmes are conditional upon use of the public education and health services, services that in themselves are of very low quality and culturally inappropriate.
Considering these flaws, the inclusion of evaluations for local school and health services and monitoring within these programmes would be more effective than focusing only on their use despite their poor quality. In any case it is important to analyse whether these programmes are, both for the indigenous peoples and for the State, an effective mechanism for guaranteeing - or ensuring greater access to - rights and opportunities. If they are, then the programmes should be thoroughly reviewed together with the indigenous peoples and reframed as a rights-based public development policy rather than a short-term poverty reduction programme.

It is therefore essential to consider the impact on the right to identity and dignity that a poverty approach, such as the one being used by the Peruvian State, may have on the lives of indigenous people in terms of valuing and proudly claiming a particular ethnic identity, and on the value the rest of society gives to it.

Unfortunately, there are high risks that the State’s interventions, such as social programmes, generally takes place without any consultation. According to the Regulations governing the Law on Prior Consultation 297815, its 15th Final Provision on Education, Health and Public Service Provision stipulates: “The production and maintenance of health and education infrastructure, as well as infrastructure necessary for the provision of public services which, in coordination with the indigenous peoples, is oriented to benefit them, shall be exempt from the consultation procedure set out in the Regulations”. This is in clear violation of indigenous peoples’ right to freely determine their own development priorities. This article was declared unconstitutional in relation to infrastructure because attempts were made to use it to avoid prior consultation in relation to an electricity transmission line that was going to cross the territories of different indigenous peoples without even offering them access electricity. This ruling was a step in the right direction but poverty reduction programmes and education/health policies still do not require prior consultation because of this legal provision.

**A Wampis tradesman frames a house in his community in the Wampis Nation. CREDIT: PABLO LASANSKY / INDIGENOUS NAVIGATOR**
4. CASE STUDY: THE JUNTOS PROGRAMME

The National Programme of Direct Support to the Poorest, “JUNTOS”, is a Conditional Cash Transfer Programme that forms part of the Peruvian government’s social and poverty reduction programme. It was first implemented in 2005 and remains current at the time of writing.

According to the programme’s website, its mission is to “Contribute to human and skills development, particularly that of future generations, with actions aimed at reducing the intergenerational transfer of poverty by means of economic incentives that promote and support access to quality services in health/nutrition and education, from an approach of restoring these basic rights with the organised participation and supervision of the community’s social actors.”

9. Conditional transfer policies are aimed at reducing poverty and investing in human capital. Using a multisectoral approach, cash transfers are offered as part of a social welfare system: “It is clear from the debate that the welfare system has evolved from a short-term poverty reduction perspective into a risk management approach, aimed at growing human capital and overcoming poverty in the long term.” (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2010).

Conditional transfer policies were designed with the following features: a) They boost demand through direct cash transfers, generally to women or mothers who meet certain poverty criteria and who have dependent children. b) They require certain obligations from the beneficiary in return, as conditions for receiving the cash.

In practice, Juntos is a programme that offers 200 soles\(^{11}\) every two months to beneficiary families who commit to participating in a range of health, nutrition, education and civic development activities, such as:\(^{12}\)

- Expectant mothers must attend their monthly ante-natal checks at the nearest health facility, undergo haemoglobin screening and, if necessary, follow treatment for anaemia.
- Boys and girls aged between 0 and 3 years must attend growth and development checks (CRED).
- Boys and girls aged between 6 and 36 months must undergo haemoglobin screening and, if necessary, follow treatment for anaemia.
- Boys and girls aged between 3 and 5 years must attend an initial-level educational institution or the Initial Level Out-of-School Programme (PRONOEI).
- Boys and girls aged between 6 and 19 years must attend an educational institution until they complete their secondary education.

As noted in the introduction, there has been no consultation, participation nor ethnic focus in the design, implementation or evaluation of the programme when applied to indigenous peoples. This has resulted in negative impacts on the lives of indigenous users and therefore, the programme needs to be changed in order to guarantee a rights-based approach and better outcomes.

**4.1. MAIN IMPACTS OF THE JUNTOS PROGRAMME IN NATIVE WAMPIS COMMUNITIES:**

In the following, we tried to classify the different problems and negative impacts as identified by Wampis users of Juntos who participated in Autonomous Territorial Government events (group work and individual interviews).

**Lack of comprehensive and/or appropriate information:** There was a widespread lack of information. People were not clear about how the programme works or what its aim is. Examples:

- People are not aware of the specific programme conditions that must be met. This creates constant uncertainty for the users and also enables the schools and health posts to put their own conditions in place that are not actually part of the programme. The most serious example of this that was raised by users of health posts who were required to give birth in the prone (lying flat) position (the only position offered in the area) if they wanted to be a programme beneficiary. This is not actually a real condition of the programme at all and is not in line with traditional practice in the region, which is to give birth squatting. This alleged condition placed Wampis women under a great deal of emotional pressure.

  o Examples of conditions that were made up from the education sector were that teachers’ demanded that the children wear a uniform, bring materials or have a back pack to be able to continue to benefit from Juntos.

- People do not understand how the programme operates, nor its aims. There is no good information. Many users say that the programme managers tell them that if they cannot collect the money every two months they will be removed from the programme or, after a certain length of time, they will lose the money they should have collected. This creates distrust as many users think they are being robbed. The conditions and the cash flows need to be clearly explained to avoid this situation.

- Household targeting system: people do not understand the criteria and who meets them. Some users have reported signing up over a year ago without having yet been added to the programme.

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11. Approx. USD 30
Cultural appropriateness:

- The local Juntos programme managers enter the communities without any authorisation or permission from the community authorities. The authorities do not know when they are on their territory, nor what they are doing. Any presence in the communities must be done under request and authorisation of the indigenous authorities, as indicated in ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- There are issues regarding the conditions themselves, which need to be reviewed: for example, the working hours of mothers are incompatible with ensuring their children get to school or to health care appointments: women go out to their chacra 13 at 5.30 in the morning and return at midday (due to very high temperatures after 11 am). If they have to make sure their children get to school then they will have to change their work dynamic and thus abandon their traditional way of working, and putting one of the basic activities needed for their family’s food security at risk.
- There is an increasing pressure over mothers to fulfil several obligations regarding children wellbeing. With the participation of indigenous peoples, changes should be made in order for both parents to share childcare obligations.
- Lack of training and cultural sensitivity are evident among the program managers with regard to inter-culturality and indigenous peoples’ rights.

Access to health and education services:

Most of the communities have no health facility or secondary school (most have a primary school). Transport in this particular area is by river and, during the rainy season, the river becomes very dangerous. Most people use canoes to get about but do not travel when the river is swollen. The programme takes no account of this situation and places sanctions on women whose children do not go to school or to the health facility because of the weather.
- Remote and inaccessible payment provision: payments are handed out in one community for a whole group of neighbouring ones, whose users therefore have to travel to get paid. The journey tends to be by river and is dependent upon how swollen the river is and whether they have the money to pay for fuel (which has to come out of the already small amount being paid to the family).

Quality of services: This is one of the biggest problems in terms of how the programme operates. Mothers are required to use services that are not capable of providing a minimum quality of provision:

- Quality and care in medical facilities: with regard to health care, various problems have been noted:
  - Equipment and supplies: the health posts lack supplies. One condition of the programme is that the beneficiaries must use a service that in the end is not capable of dealing with emergencies, complications or other situations that require equipment and drugs.
  - Care provided by health workers and doctors: some communities complained that doctors and nurses were not staffing the facilities during opening hours. Some mothers commented that they go off to drink beer and come back late and drunk.
- Many users also complained that the teachers did not arrive at school on time, that they took holidays and did not return to the communities for months on end or that they did not provide classes during school hours.

Perception of conditionality: there is a lack of information and participation in the programme by users and their representative organisations because:

- In many cases the conditions are not understood. It is assumed that the 200 soles are already owned by a mother regardless of whether she meets the conditions or not.
- There is a perception that the conditions are very complicated.
- In some cases people explained that they met the conditions just to receive the money rather than because they felt it was benefiting their children.
- People were often sanctioned regardless of programme policy without any explanation: one or two absences from school could result in the money being cut off (when children are actually allowed to be absent up to three times a month).

13. Small family plot.
4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is important to remember that the vast majority of users are not questioning the actual receipt of the money. They feel it helps them because, where they live, it is difficult to make money and they need cash to cover the costs of materials that they cannot access in the communities (transport, clothes, tools).

Their request is simply to adapt the programme to the native communities’ rights. This would involve a number of things:

- Train State officials and programme managers as to who indigenous peoples are and what rights they have.
- Train teachers and health post workers, health brigades, vaccination teams and public registration missions as to who indigenous peoples are and what rights they have.
- Ensure that the services upon which the cash transfers are conditional are able to provide good (and culturally appropriate) provision.
- Ensure that the communities’ autonomy is respected, always talking first to the community Chief (in the case of the Wampis nation, the community imaru).
- Ensure that more equal relationships are established between local programme managers and families, in which dialogue and information precedes all action. (Avoid using the programme as a tool of cultural domination).
- Incorporate a strong participatory component, in which the assembly becomes a space for interaction between the local programme manager, users, the community and those in charge of the health post and school.
- Establish a strategy that is adapted to the context and which has actions that will really make a difference to the development of the areas in which the programme is operating.

It is also important that this re-design of the programme is done with the participation of Indigenous Peoples. As a working methodology for the review and re-design of the programmes, and in order to ensure that Peru’s social programmes have an ethnic and intercultural approach, we propose:

- **Conducting** a joint assessment between the Ministry of Development and indigenous organizations to obtain an evaluation of the problems encountered with the programmes.
- **Reviewing** the targeting policy in the native communities.
- **Re-designing** the programmes on the basis of this assessment and participatory spaces with the communities and the indigenous organizations.
- **Evaluation** by indigenous organizations the need to make a free, prior and informed consultation of the new policy.
- **Implementing** the re-designed programme in a number of pilot communities with the participation of IPs.
- **Adjusting** the pilot to ensure proper operation and consult with indigenous organizations in the final design.
- **Agree** between the ministry and the organizations a participatory control system, a complaints system and a periodic evaluation and monitoring system of the program.