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Indigenous Peoples and Globalization: From “Development Aggression” to “Self-Determined Development”

I. Introduction

In June 2009, in what had been referred to as the “Amazon’s Tiananmen”, armed police engaged in a bloody conflict with what had been a peaceful indigenous protest in Bagua, northern Peru. Several people were shot dead, and at least 200 injured. The protest was against the granting of concessions for the exploration and exploitation of gas, oil and gold to transnational companies in the Amazon region. The concerned communities protested against the adoption of national decrees allowing these concessions on indigenous territories as elements of a free trade agreement with the United States of America. These events in Bagua constitute one of the most recent and widely publicized confrontations in a series of similar and ongoing conflicts between indigenous communities and governments and/or corporations over exploitation of natural resources in their territories in countries throughout the world.

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2 Exact figures are still unclear and controversial with the government claiming that 32 people were killed in the incident while human rights lawyers and news reports put the number of confirmed deaths at closer to 60, and say hundreds are still missing, at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/06/10/peru-investigate-violence-bagua>.

3 Complaints to the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other international and regional mechanisms as well as national ombudsmen and national human rights institutions are all indicative of this trend. See for example cases currently under consideration by these bodies in relation to hydroelectric and extractive projects on indigenous peoples’ lands in Brazil, Canada, the Philippines, Peru, India, Columbia and Ecuador. See Early Warning Urgent Action procedures case of Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Brazil, Canada, the Philippines, Peru
This emerging pattern of conflicts in indigenous territories is indicative of three interrelated trends: first, indigenous peoples are increasingly the victims of systematic abuse associated with imposed forms of economic development; second, indigenous peoples are organizing at the global, regional, national and local levels to resist these externally imposed development models; third, these models of development and the process by which they are imposed on indigenous peoples are a function of the manner in which economic globalization is managed and controlled. Jerry Mander, an academic who has worked on the topic of indigenous peoples and globalization, touched on these trends when he noted: “[n]o communities of peoples on this earth have been more negatively impacted by the current global economic system than the world’s remaining 350 million indigenous peoples. And no peoples are so strenuously and, lately, successfully resisting these invasions and inroads.”

There are as many definitions of globalization as there are strongly held positions on it. Economic Nobel Prize winner, Joseph Stiglitz, observed “the differences in views are so great that one wonders, are the protestors and policy makers talking about the same phenomena?” For some it represents the solution to world poverty, facilitating flows of resources and levelling the economic playing field for all; for others it is the latest means to maintain unequal power balances that serve to ferment the growing divide between rich and poor. Indeed there is no consensus on when globalization commenced. Many argue that since the emergence of mankind some form of globalization has been taking place. Others point to its origin in the emergence of states and the establishment of the law of nations “as a framework for managing the globalization of power and trade” and associated conflicts that erupted between colonial powers. For the purposes of this article globalization, in its current manifestation, is taken to refer to the emergence of a globalized commercial market premised on the free movement of capital and increasing levels of consumerism with reductions on controls in relation to the movement of goods while simultaneously maintaining a highly