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**Bridging the past, the present and the future**  
Ecuadorian indigenous youth defenders' role in the creation of just social  
change in Ecuador

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## **Abstract**

**Objectives:** Indigenous peoples are one of the most marginalized social groups in Ecuador. Emerging as a new actor contesting this situation, indigenous youth defenders (IYD) appear to be leading initiatives that promote indigenous rights in the country. Thus, grounded in Social Movements Theory, this thesis aims to explore the perceived role of IYD in broadening the promotion of indigenous rights and identities in Ecuador, all in all, helping create just social change.

**Methodological Approach:** This thesis has been developed using a qualitative case study research design. Data was collected through sixteen semi-structured interviews as well as through online participant observation.

**Main Findings:** The thesis's main findings showcase that IYD are assuming a leading role in the promotion of indigenous rights and identities in Ecuador. They are perceived to be expanding the indigenous claims to new territories, both physical and digital, thus increasing the scope and speed of just social change. Moreover, the findings suggest IYD have a key role in the reclamation of indigenous identities among indigenous youth. These two outcomes are being attained by information communication technologies and latency practices.

**Keywords:** *indigenous peoples, indigenous youth, social change, Ecuador, indigenous rights, indigenous identities*

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## **List of Acronyms**

CA	Collective action
CI	Collective identity
CONAIE	Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador
EISM	Ecuadorian indigenous social movement
ICTs	Information communication technologies
IG	Instagram
IPs	Indigenous peoples
IY	Indigenous youth
IYD	Indigenous youth defenders
SC	Social Change
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SM	Social Movements
SMT	Social Movements Theory

## **I. Introduction**

Societies worldwide are structured in unfair ways; they are conformed by complex power dynamics that often translate into the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and enjoyment of rights (Tverskoi et al., 2021). These complex power patterns have proven to affect some social groups more than others, many times even resulting in their systemic marginalization. Historically, this has been the case for indigenous peoples (IPs) who, because of their ethno-racial innate status, face systemic discrimination and marginalization (United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2009). Hence, IPs, for the sole reason of embodying and experiencing their ethnicity, face structural exclusion from political and economic power, an over-representation among the world's poorest, as well as forced displacement and dispossession from their ancestral lands and cultures (ibid).

However, it is necessary to conceive that societal power dynamics are not static. On the contrary, they fluctuate, they are constantly disputed and contested signalling how “we live in a world of intense social transformation” (Ballard and Barnett, 2022, p.1). For this reason, it is possible to witness how social groups often engage in collective efforts in an attempt to question and rectify the power patterns they are opposed to; thus, aiming to create deep social transformations (Ballard and Barnett, 2022). IPs have proven to be one active social group regarding these endeavours (Bello 2004). This can be said as IPs are social actors who, through their collective action actively participate in the construction of meaningful and just social change (Bello, 2004). Meaning, social change that addresses the structural injustices they routinely experience, thus leading to the development of societies that uphold indigenous rights, ethnic diversity, equitable livelihood guarantees and environmental consciousness (Rodriguez Mir, 2008; Iturralde, 2004; Roelvink, 2023).

These social transformation efforts have often been explored through Social Movements Theory (SMT). SMT is devoted to the exploration of why and how social groups purposefully mobilize and act to produce a commonly desired outcome, and new productions of social meanings (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2009; Melucci 1996). Through a profound inquiry into the collective actors’ motivations, means, and outcomes in relation to their political, cultural and identity environments, the theory provides insights into how power asymmetries are contested and how social change is achieved (Melucci, 1996). Due to SMT’s

detailed exploration of collective actors' agency and outcomes, it is used as this thesis' main theoretical lens.

IP's collective agency for the promotion of their rights and identities is a phenomenon vividly felt in Ecuador. Ecuador is an "ethnically diverse nation with sizable minorities of indigenous... peoples" (Beck et al., 2011). Recognizing this ethnical diversity, Ecuador has constitutionally pledged to protect and promote indigenous rights and cosmovision (Lalander and Ospina Peralta, 2012; Radcliffe, 2012). However, IPs' lived realities showcase an incongruency, as IPs constitute one of the most marginalized social groups in the country (Banco Central del Ecuador, 2019). Notwithstanding, Ecuadorian IPs are resilient social actors in this nation, who organized in the Ecuadorian Indigenous Social Movement (EISM), are dedicated to fostering profound just social change in the country (Galarza, 2001; Lalander and Ospina Peralta, 2012; Cueva, 1993).

Currently, a new phenomenon has appeared within the indigenous just social change venture in Ecuador. The emergence of a new actor, *indigenous youth* (IY), within the indigenous collective struggle is becoming apparent. A group of IY, recognized as indigenous youth defenders (IYD) in this thesis, are seen to be carrying out initiatives and strongly voicing the need for a social change that favours IP rights in Ecuador (Alvarado and Baquero, 2022; WWF, n.d.; Castro, 2020). For instance, IYD were at the forefront of Ecuador's 2019 and 2022<sup>1</sup> indigenous mobilizations (Andrade, 2020). Despite their growing appearance within the Ecuadorian indigenous' rights struggle, there is not much information about IYD. There is no in-depth knowledge about who they are, what motivation they follow or how they are precisely carrying out initiatives for change. Hence, there is no clear understanding of their role in the processes of social just transformations in Ecuador. Due to the rapidness of their apparent participation in the country, as well as the urgency of understanding processes of change within the current socially turmoiled Ecuador, this thesis aims to profoundly explore this research gap.

On this line, grounded on relevant SMT concepts, this **thesis aims** to explore the perceived role of indigenous youth defenders in broadening the promotion of indigenous rights and

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019 as well as in 2022 Ecuadorian indigenous peoples organized nationwide mobilizations. In 2019 the mobilizations were sparked as a way to protest the potential changes in gas prices in the country, while in 2022 the mobilizations were sparked as a way to protest against the government's unmet agreements negotiated in 2019. However, overall, it is possible to state the mobilizations were enacted to denounce IP lived realities in the country and the bettering of their livelihoods in the country (BBC News Mundo, 2022).



indigenous identities in Ecuador, all in all, helping create just social change. To do so, an exploration of potential reclamations and/or redesigns of identities, and social transformation goals that shine light on what being young and indigenous means, is made.

To achieve this objective, the following **research questions** have been designed to guide the study:

- What is the perceived role of indigenous youth defenders in the creation of social change in Ecuador?
  - How are indigenous youth defenders helping promote and broaden indigenous rights in Ecuador?
  - What tools, tactics or mechanisms are being used by IYD to produce social change?
  - How are indigenous youth defenders perceived to be causing empowerment and identity formation of young indigenous generations?

### **A. Justification and significance of the study**

It is believed that this thesis can contribute to the development field both in its academic and empirical spectrum. Firstly, the thesis aims to close the academic vacuum regarding indigenous youth agency in Ecuador. IY studies is considered an emergent academic subject (Kirshner, 2007; Perez Ruiz, 2008), and thus, research regarding their defence, agency and activism is limited. In Latin America, for instance, the majority of IY academic studies are in relation to migratory and identity and education issues (Perez Ruiz, 2008; Vásquez Arreaga, 2014). Thus, studies regarding their agency, and defence in relation to social transformations are scarce. Likewise, when looking at SMT, it is possible to find it does not closely relate to or reflect Global South perspectives (Altmann et. al., 2017). This happens as the “dominant theories of social movement studies are modelled on the experiences of the Global North and therefore tend to be Eurocentric or Americentric” (Altmann et. al., 2017, p.7). Thus, by exploring IYD’s agency within the Ecuadorian case this thesis aims to broaden SMT by approaching it through a Global South perspective.

Secondly, the thesis aims to bring forward new reality-grounded development approximation about just social change that reflect indigenous perceptions. Specifically, the thesis aims to contribute to a different understanding, of *SDG 10 - Reduce inequalities within and among countries*. Due to traditional development trends and the processes through which SDGs were drafted, all upholding “mainstream Western paradigms” (Yap and Watene, 2019, p.453), many SDGs’ “targets and indicators provide only a partial view of indigenous conceptualisations of wellbeing and sustainable development” (ibid). For instance, although, SDG10 is devoted to promoting economic, political, and social inclusion as well equal opportunities to all people irrespective of social factors such as ethnicity (United Nations, 2023), its targets run short to uphold profound understandings of issues such as social inequalities, the environment, and indigenous perspectives (Ghosh et. al, 2023). However, this thesis, by bringing forward indigenous perceptions of just social change, aims to broaden the ways SDG10 can be put forward. Thus, it contributes to the discussions on how development initiatives can ensure IPs to be the “agents of their own development” (Yap and Watene, 2019, p.453).

## **B. Outline**

Following this introduction, the thesis is structured in seven main sections. The first section corresponds to the literature review, where concepts relevant to the thesis are presented and conceptualized. The second section presents the geographical background of the thesis. There the researched phenomenon is situated in the Ecuadorian context. The third section exhibits the thesis’ conceptual theoretical framework. In this section important SMT’s concepts such as collective action, collective identity and latency are presented as well as the concept of intersectionality which is used as a supporting tenet throughout the research. The fourth section presents the methodological approaches used to produce the research. The fifth section showcases the main analytical findings, the sixth exhibits a discussion of the main findings and finally, the sixth section exhibits the thesis concluding remarks.

## **II. Literature Review**

This section presents a literature review of the main concepts relevant to this thesis. The section begins by conceptualizing social change (SC). To do so the main discussions regarding SC are brought to light and a relation between the concept and indigenous peoples is presented. The section's second part is devoted to the exploration of indigenous youth defenders. The subsection starts by framing what youth means and continues to conceptualize the *raison d'être* behind the agency and defence of indigenous youth.

### **A. Social Change**

#### **1. Conceptualizing social change**

One of the only constants societies face is change. Individuals are both involuntary and voluntary subjects of change (Garonna and Triaca, 1999), meaning they are stuck in a perennial cycle of existing in a changing world yet also actively aiding to change the world (Ballard and Barnett, 2022). Due to this historical nature, SC has been object of inquiry in the sociology, development, political and psychology fields. Due to this particularity, there is a plethora of definitions of what SC is, what it entails and how it is accomplished. Despite the various approximations of the concept, social change can be defined as “an alteration of social arrangements - a change of rather than in a system” (Zheng, 2020, p.1), where norms, relations culture etc. transform.

To conceptualize SC for this investigation it is necessary to understand how the concept has been traditionally explored. SC was first explained through unilinear theories, which believed SC happens in a straightforward process, where societies transform from a *primitive* state to an *advanced* one (Bardis, 1959; Zheng, 2020). Theories in this line of thought based their hypothesis regarding change on evolutionary assumptions and understood progress under a Westernized - modernization conception (ibid). Thus, theorists in this line of thought advocated for the dismissal of traditional, native, *backward* ways for a needed yet also unavoidable change to happen in a given society. These theories were later replaced by dialectical theories, which also perceive SC as a transformation of society to a desired *improved* state (Zheng, 2020), a state once again that exalts progress from its previous state. However, in contrast to the last,

according to dialectical theorists, SC did not necessarily happen in a unilinear way, as it could be erupted by social tensions (Zheng, 2020).

SC has also been studied through functionalist theories and conflict theories, which in contrast to the previously mentioned provide a deeper focus on profound societal happenings to understand social transformations. On this line, functionalist theories view transformative SC as a response to breaches in the equilibrium of inherently equipoise societies (Zheng, 2020). While the theorists in this branch accept progressive SC as positive and necessary, they think of the contrary when it comes to larger sudden changes (Barkan, 2011). Conflict theories, Marxism being its most renowned theoretical approach, conceptualize SC as a conflict between societal groups and classes that have opposing interests (Zheng, 2020). They imbed their arguments in deep historical analysis and view the results of social transformations as a “classless society” with reduced inequalities (Barkan, 2011; Zheng, 2020; Ballard and Barnett, 2022).

Most of the aforementioned theories understood these alterations of social arrangements as means to seek a favourable change in society. Social change meant transforming a society from “simple to... complex, from... inferior to the superior, from worse to better” (Sachs, 2010 p.6), in the end creating increased levels of well-being and progress. However, when analysing these theories’ proposed SC goals, important epistemological questions arise: a *better, superior* society according to whose views? *Well-being, progress*, for whom, and in cost of what?

Embedded in the core of SC theories the answers to these questions reflected Westernized views, and powerful elites’ comfort, all in all, repudiating and targeting indigenous “backward” ways, believes and lives (Sachs, 2019; Ballard and Barnett, 2022). For instance, Modernization theory, a unilinear theory, understood indigenous traditions, and ways as primitive and pushed for the abandonment of these old ways as they were only stagnating progress (Barkan, 2011). Furthermore, Marxism focused on class conflicts specifically on the proletariat-capitalist conflict. This meant the theory mostly based its analysis on a Western conception of class struggle and a historical system which excluded important views and groups of society, like indigenous peoples; as indigenous peoples have traditionally been perceived to exist outside history (Ballard and Barnett, 2022; Fabian 2014). Thus, it is possible to assert that IPs and communities have been left out, invisibilized, marked as irrelevant and even categorized as the issue to change in these theories.

Despite the traditional conception of indigenous peoples in SC theory, it is impossible to truly conceive it without their inclusion. They too are vital agents of social change, as IPs are actively pushing social arrangements alterations to develop societies which respect for their lives, enhance their civil and collective rights, and ensure social justice and inclusion of their ways, identities and cosmovisions. The world, through postcolonial and decolonial thought, is now experiencing the conception of SC patterns in unimaginable ways (Ballard and Barnett, 2022). Ways where change is not focused solely on changing the future but rather on changing the past to create a just present and brighter future. On this line, for this thesis work, social change is conceptualized as those social alterations enacted through collective actors which include IPs' voices, struggles and their civil and collective rights. One that views them as their own agents in defining what progress means (Bebbington, 1993).

## **B. Conceptualizing Indigenous Youth Defenders**

### **1. Defining youth**

There is no specific definition, categorization or age range that defines youth, as its understanding varies from culture to culture, and even from individual to individual. It is for this reason that it is important to conceive youth as a fluid stage (Aitken, 2005), as "it is [highly] difficult to [truly conceive] when the child ends and the adult begins" (Aitken, 2005, p.5). However, in order to study it, scholarly literature, as well as development organizations (United Nations, n.d.; World Bank, 2022; ILO n.d.), usually posit young people as those individuals between their mid-teens and mid-twenties. Likewise, it is important to note that the conceptualization of this term becomes even more nuanced when situating it in terms of indigenous youth, as perceptions of what it means, what it looks like and what the roles and responsibilities of young people are, are particular to each IPs community's cosmovision (Perez Ruiz, 2008).

Understanding the complexity of conceptualizing youth and more so indigenous youth, for this thesis an effort to do so has been made by positioning the term within the Ecuadorian context. This is because the study is carried out in this nation. On this line, the Ecuadorian pluricultural state's conception of youth, which oscillates from 18 to 30 years of age (Gobierno del Ecuador, 2022), has been utilized.

## **2. Indigenous Youth Defenders - agency, activism, and its *raison d'être***

Young people have often been categorized as second-class citizens, who because of their age are constantly trivialized and seen to lack the proper capabilities to positively contribute to the development of societies (OHCHR, n.d.). Thus, they are often denied public participatory opportunities, space, and voice in societies' political spaces (Noguera, Cammarota, and Ginwright, 2006; Ritchie 2001). However, young people are not passive individuals relevant only when thinking of the future, but rather, they are aware, conscious, and capable of contributing to the development of beneficial societal transformations and policies (ibid). On this line, it is possible to attest that young people are repeatedly enacting agency, activism, and defence. Hence, they are key participants of social change movements, that aim to promote their own rights and produce social justice changes in their communities. The youth are powerful agents of change.

Due to the general conception of youth as passive individuals in society, “research literature about youth activism is still in an emergent stage” (Kirshner, 2007, p.374), and more is so regarding literature explicitly focused on indigenous youth agency (Ritchie 2021). Despite this academic vacuum, researchers have closely linked and positioned youth agency and activism with the development of social justice and overall social change (Kirshner, 2007; Coe, 2022; Noguera, Cammarota, and Ginwright, 2006). Youth agency and activism can be defined as the “efforts to create changes in the behaviour of institutions or organisations through action strategies such as lobbying, advocacy, negotiation, protest, campaigning... raising awareness” (Koffel, 2003, p.118) and others, all which are planned and executed by young people.

Young people engage in agency and activism for a plethora of reasons, however, most of them have to do with their struggle to protect their present and future rights, express their disapproval of current social injustices and because they want to actively participate in solutions for problems lived by the youth. This is because they claim to be the “only ones who know their own experience” (Noguera, Cammarota, and Ginwright, 2006, p.26) and thus what is needed for the youth. However, it is important to take a step further and dive into a deeper analysis when inquiring about the *raison d'être* of youth agency when this intersects with ethnicity.

Due to colonization, IPs are systematically discriminated against, racialized folklorized and targeted by the effects of living in an unjust society (United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2009). Thus, from the moment they are born, indigenous peoples are thrown into a daily survival fight (Greymorning, 2018). Daily, IPs fight for the protection of their human and collective rights, the protection of their territories against extractivist and land-grabbing activities and the promotion of equal opportunities and a voice in many societal spaces (Amnistía Internacional, 2014). On this line, as indigenous scholar Neyooxet Greymorning (2018) stated, activism is one thread of “the fabric of [what being] Indigenous” (p.1) means.

However, it is also important to note that IPs' *activism* and *agency* become much more than just that; it goes beyond, becoming an inherent *defence* for their own protection and survival. Likewise, IPs agency and defence does not come without it being widely disesteemed and actively rejected. It seems to be that in modern societies, when IPs reclaim their rights and advocate for just social change they are “portrayed as radical, dissidents, [and] mad...” (Venne, 2018, p. 174)<sup>2</sup>. This causes them to receive aggressive threats and, in many cases, lose their lives, all in the name of their activism (ibid; Youngblood Henderson, 2018). For these reasons and understanding the innate connection of defence, agency, and activism with IPs *raison d’etre*, this research conceptualizes the indigenous youth studied as indigenous youth *defenders* (IYD).

### **3. IYD tactics and strategies**

In general terms, youth activism, especially in Latin America, has been enacted through student movements, participation in grassroots and revolutionary movements, such as the indigenous movement, and by the usage of peer-centred activist tactics which aim to horizontally mobilize and emancipate their peers and generation (Coe, 2022). There is limited academic research that specifically analyses IYD agency strategies, however, it is possible to state IYD carry out their defence and in several ways. IYD in this region can be linked to enact their defence through their involvement in the indigenous movement, participating as members in the youth subsections (ibid). Moreover, a novel key strategy used by IYD in their cause is the use of digital technology. IYD have appropriated technological advances and are using them as vital means to carry out their defence (García-Villalba and Gutierrez, 2021; Salazar, 2012; Duarte,

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<sup>2</sup> As further explored in Venne’s research (2018), IPs are usually reduced to become symbols of *divertissement* where they are only allowed to dance and sing for entertainment.

2017). This strategy is particularly evident in the usage of social media, as IYD are advocating for the protection of collective rights using these digital tools (García-Villalba and Gutierrez, 2021; Salazar 2012). However, it is important to note IYD aims, strategies and outcomes are particular to the context they are in. Thus, to properly frame this issue for this study the next section presents a geographical contextualization of IYD in Ecuador.



### **III. Contextualizing the problem**

In this section, the situation regarding indigenous rights and indigenous livelihoods in the country is explored, making emphasis on indigenous youth (IY) and IYD.

#### **A. Ecuador - pluricultural and multi-ethnic state: Exploring indigenous rights and livelihoods in the country**

Since its birth, Ecuador has been a country where different social groups amalgamate in various social encounters, yet where they also clash into important tensions. Ecuador is home to around one million indigenous peoples, who are part of fourteen different indigenous nationalities<sup>3</sup> that are spread across the country's coast, Andes, and Amazon regions (Ortiz, 2022). In 2008, Ecuador adopted a revolutionary constitution, which is based upon the indigenous *Sumak Kawsay*<sup>4</sup> or *Good Living* cosmovision, thus creating a “constitutional commitment to social rights, collective citizens and the rights of nature” (Radcliffe, 2012, p.240). Through this constitutional change, Ecuador not only defined itself as a plurinational intercultural nation that officially recognizes the co-existence of diverse ethnic groups within itself, but also made the formal promise to prioritize the respect and promotion of indigenous rights, territories, cultures, and livelihoods (Lalander and Ospina Peralta, 2012). A promise, at a level that had never been enacted before.

Despite this constitutional change, empirically there is still an incongruency between indigenous peoples' lived realities and the promises the constitution envisioned to protect. Currently, indigenous peoples are highly marginalized within the Ecuadorian society. For instance, by 2019, the country's poverty incidence was 51.1% for indigenous peoples, making them the most marginalized social group in Ecuador (Banco Central del Ecuador, 2019). This marginalization happens multidimensionally, as IPs experience alarming rates of vulnerability in a plethora of social affairs, such as access to education and healthcare, food security,

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<sup>3</sup> The 14 indigenous nationalities in Ecuador are the: Épera, Chachis, Awá, Tsachila, Kichwa (separated into different communities in the Andes and in the Amazon), Shuar, Cofán, Siona, Secoya, Huaoraní, Zápara, Andoa, Shiwiar, Achuar. Within the 14 nationalities, IPs are divided into 18 *pueblos indígenas - indigenous peoples communities*. (Ministerio Coordinador del Patrimonio Ecuador, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Sumak Kawsay is an indigenous concept of how one ought to live life. The concept promotes living life in harmony, with others, with nature and with one's surroundings. Specifically, the concept promotes living “life in plenitude, in harmony, in peace, not bad or worse than the other... Liv[ing] well by no profit[ing] from the other.” (Cruz, 2018, p.129). The concept is presupposing an intrinsic harmony between people and the environment.

involvement in political participation and overall access to social opportunities and space etc. (Radcliff, 2014). On this line, by 2014, 39% of the indigenous children suffered from malnutrition, the highest figure among the different Ecuadorian social groupings (UNICEF Ecuador, 2022; Ministerio de Salud Ecuador, 2014). By 2021 the average years of schooling for indigenous peoples were 7,24 years, the lowest among Ecuador's ethnicities (Machado, 2022). And overall, the vast majority of IPs recognise to face discrimination, racialisation and exclusion on a daily basis, breaching their dignity and hindering their inclusion in the Ecuadorian society (Beck et al., 2011; Torre, 1996).

In assonance with indigenous cosmologies, a contextualization of the situation about territorial and nature rights in Ecuador is needed, for it is impossible to speak about indigenous peoples' wellbeing without taking into consideration land, as it is an existential dimension of who IPs are (García Hierro, 2001). In Ecuador, IPs historically and currently face territorial injustices, as they are prone to have weak collective tenure rights and to experience health and environmental hazards due to the contamination of their territories. Ecuador's economy is heavily dependent on the extraction of natural resources, specifically, oil and metals, which in the vast majority reside within IPs' territories, especially in the Amazon region (Silveira et al., 2017). Following economic priorities and due to the weak *prior informed consent* policies in the country, IPs are commonly forced displaced for the development of extractive projects in their lands, or because the noxious effects of these projects pollute the soil and rivers they use for their daily survival (Alvarado, 2022). Consequently, IPs' livelihood is compromised, their immemorable spiritual homes are lost and vulnerabilities to marginalization, racism and poverty cycles incremented when forced to settle elsewhere.

One should recall that IPs in Ecuador are not a homogenous group. Not all experience the processes described above. Likewise, it is important to recognize that IPs are political actors, many of whom ceaselessly act against the breaches of their collective, human, and constitutional rights in the country. There is a vast number of IPs and IPs' organizations that are actively advocating for social and territorial justice in Ecuador, however, they are usually targeted, persecuted, and murdered as they are seen as an obstacle and vexation within Ecuadorian society (Alvarado, 2022). Therefore, it is vital to recognize that the marginalization and vulnerabilities of IPs in Ecuador respond to the deeply engrained colonial structures of otherness and ethno-racial exclusion that the country continuously replicates (Maldonado et

al., 2007; Martínez Novo, 2018; Veliz, 2016). Thus, it is possible to state that any solution to these issues must be made through a process of just social change.

## **B. Indigenous youth & the rise of Indigenous Youth Defenders**

When delving deeper into indigenous youth (IY) livelihoods in Ecuador, it is possible to see that they exist in a highly complex environment; one where they have to manoeuvre between contradictions of being young in a globalised world, while at the same time upholding immemorable traditions. IY in Ecuador are subjects in continuous mobility, which has caused modifications in their cultural practices and ethnic identities as well as the production of intergenerational breaches (Llanos Erazo and Sánchez, 2016). In Ecuador, there is an abrupt migratory pattern among young indigenous individuals, as many of them are moving from their rural communities to urban spaces (ibid). This spatial transitioning is performed with the aim of accessing better educational opportunities, more profitable sources of labour, and overall aspirations for a better life, free of the marginalization many experience from the moment they are born (Llanos Erazo and Sánchez, 2016; UN HABITAT, 2010). Even though some IY do achieve more opportunities in cities, usually, this migratory process is not accomplished without them facing discriminatory, and racialization challenges (UN-HABITAT, 2010). In turn, to avoid these discriminatory patterns, many times IY end up resisting, renouncing, or fearing to enhance, their ethnic identities (Maldonado et al., 2007; UN-HABITAT, 2010).

A second mobilization pattern experienced by IY is that of digital migration, as they have imbued themselves into the use of digital technologies like the internet and social media (Llanos Erazo and Sánchez, 2016). Their involvement in technology has caused IY to create digital territories where their daily life is not solely experienced within the indigenous collective community, but rather in extraterritorial digital territories where they have access to new tenets, flows of information and social exchanges (ibid).

These mobilization patterns are causing IY to experience their identities widely differently to how previous generations did before. Due to migration, digitalization, incorporation to urban and global territories, and to avoid marginalization IY are dissociating themselves from the collective sense that make up their communities through processes of decomunalization (Vásquez Arreaga, 2014) and from traditional identity aspects such as language and clothing (Paronyan and Cuenca Díaz, 2018; El Universo (2), 2013; Torres et al., 2008). It is important

to note that their new lived realities are causing a generational breach, were older generations see this social transformation many times with fear (Vásquez Arreaga, 2014; Llanos Erazo and Sánchez, 2016; Rivas, 2008).

However, it is important to mention that the newer generation's social transformations have also in a smaller sense caused patterns opposite to the aforementioned dissociative processes. Ecuador is also experiencing the emergence of young indigenous individuals who are enhancing their ethnicities and are actively promoting collective rights in the country (Rivas, 2008); these are IYD. There is not much academic research or literature about IY in Ecuador (Vásquez Arreaga, 2014), and this issue is more acute regarding IYD. However, it has been discussed that the wider escolarization and professionalization of young indigenous peoples, as well as the possibility of their involvement from a young age in the indigenous movement or indigenous organizations, has enabled the emergence of a group of young indigenous individuals as leaders (Rivas, 2008) promoting IP right initiatives in the country. In this sense, IYD in Ecuador are demonstrating to become involved in the strategies for the promotion of collective rights in the country as well as in the indigenous movement (ibid).

### **C. Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement: promoting just social change**

Ecuador's social change and development patterns have fluctuated over the decades, however, none of these have truly been socially just towards IPs in the country. From the last decades of the XX century to the first years of the XXI century, Ecuador adopted a neoliberal social change strategy, where the main objective was to incentivize Ecuador's economy through market liberalization, privatization, foreign investment and aggressive extractivist policies (Cepeda, 2021; Tomás, 2015; Hey and Klak, 1999). During this era, IPs were seen as an obstacle to Ecuador's prosperity and thus, IPs were overall invisibilized by the state, causing their collective rights and self-determination to be inherently undermined (Poirier et al., 2022; Tomás, 2015).

By 2007, Ecuador's SC and development patterns drifted to a post-neoliberal leftist model (Gardner and Richards, 2019). This model, referred to as Socialism of the XXI century, led by President Rafael Correa and his Revolución Ciudadana movement, seemed to be highly consonant with Ecuador's IPs rights and claims. In concept, this social process promoted tenets such as plurinationality, social justice, the *sumak kawsay* cosmovision, redistribution of

resources and strong social welfare policies (Vanhulst, 2015); hence, it was first seen as a beacon of hope by IPs in the country. However, as time passed, it was clear this social transformation model was mostly an illusion of the protection of IPs collective rights, as promises were left mostly as empty words. For instance, the Socialism of the XXI ignored environmental matters as well as issues of collectiveness, culture, and identity (Vanhulst, 2015). During this time, mega-mining, and mega-oil projects were enacted, and IPs territorial rights and auto-determination were undermined (Ajila, 2017; Vanhulst, 2015; Pasquel and Boelens, 2019).

Finally, from 2016 to the present day, Ecuador has returned to neoliberal SC and development patterns. Strategies such as aggressive privatization, expansive extractivism and compression of social security were enacted; all processes which affected IPs in the country by escalating their invisibilization and marginalization (Dávalos, 2022). Despite, historically, social change patterns have undermined IPs' rights in Ecuador, IPs have strongly refuted and contested these patterns. They have done this by organizing themselves as Ecuador's Indigenous Movement, an organized socio-political subject through which IPs are claiming a socially just and pluricultural aligned social change transformation in the country, one that enhances unity in diversity (Maldonado, 2004; Galarza, 2001).

The Ecuadorian Indigenous Social Movement (EISM) can be understood as the constellation of different indigenous organizations in the country and IPs from all the corners of Ecuador. The movement is led by CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador), an organization that amalgamates every indigenous nationality and community in the country and is classified as one of the strongest movements in the region (Galarza, 2001; Lalander and Ospina Peralta, 2012; Cueva, 1993). The EISM operates for the recognition and protection of indigenous land, indigenous identities, and indigenous dignity, for an intercultural and bilingual education, and overall, it operates against colonialist structures in Ecuador (CONAIE, n.d.). It is important to note that the movement has been and is an important socio-political actor in the Ecuadorian context, as it has successfully pushed for social transformation processes. For instance, it pushed for an agrarian reform where a re-indigenization of rural areas was accomplished, it led the dispersion of bilingual education across the country, and overall, it has led various accountability efforts against presidents whose work were aggressively dissonant to social justice (Galarza, 2001; Lalander and Ospina Peralta, 2012; Cueva, 1993).

Currently, the EISM is gathering and incorporating in its structure various young indigenous individuals. IY in the movement have been under-studied and thus there is not much information about their current role and impact. However, it is known some leading positions (*dirigencias*) are now occupied by them both in CONAIE and the other EISM's organizations (Rivas, 2008). Likewise, it is the youth who took the lead on the most current social protests of 2019 and 2022 (Andrade, 2020). Thus, IYD are imbued into the EISM and are closely aiding its goals.

## **IV. Conceptual Framework**

As demonstrated by the literature review and the geographical contextualization, studying the perceived role of IYD in the promotion of indigenous rights in Ecuador is no easy task as this topic is laden with complexities. To unravel and analyse the nuances within the topic, a carefully curated theoretical conceptual framework will be used. This section is devoted to presenting this framework.

The framework is formed by a compilation of relevant SMT's concepts (collective action, collective identity, and latency) and is overarchingly guided by the intersectionality concept.

### **A. Social Movements Theory**

Societies perennially experience groups of people enacting social change or resisting it. These social motions are commonly carried out by social movements (SM). Social movements can be defined as formal and informal interactions carried out by

a plurality of individuals, collectives, and organized groups that (1) share, to a greater or lesser extent, a sense of collective belonging or identity; and (2) conflict with other social or political agents for the appropriation of, participation in or transformation of power relations or social goals to be reached through the mobilization of certain sectors of society. (Tejerina, 2017, p.498).

These movements arise when individuals and social groups recognize that their current reality is unacceptable as it may be promoting discrimination, and injustices against them and thus they formally organize to publicly change it (Tejerina, 2017).

SM have long been studied, and thus there is a wide range of concepts and sub-theories intended to explain them. SMT academic work can be divided into three theoretical currents (Fry, 2020). The first current, Resource Mobilization Theory<sup>5</sup>, states that movements form due

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<sup>5</sup> The Resource Mobilization Theory has mostly been developed by scholars Olson, McCarthy and Zald (Fry, 2020). The theory puts much emphasis on resources used or desired by SM actors yet fails to include external aspects that may also be affecting the will and actions of SM (Fry, 2020; Tejerina, 2017).

to an individual's rational interest-oriented patterns and that their formation is solely possible if there the movement's members have the capacity to access human and material resources (Tejerina, 2017; Fry, 2020). The second current, called Political Opportunity Structures Theory<sup>6</sup> shifted to explain SM by studying the political processes in a given context that promote or inhibit movements to form and enact collective action (ibid). Finally, the third theory, New Social Movement Theory, developed mainly by Melucci and Touraine (Fry, 2020), posed a shift of academic focus by centering on the "explan[ation] [of] and why movements come to exist as collective actors; this mean[t] especially understanding how collective identity is constructed by movements" (Ferrari, 2022).

Notwithstanding, it is important to note that SMT does not perfectly fit Latin American realities, as its theorization has been developed mostly through Western perspectives (Fry, 2020). This has caused an academic incongruency, as the realities the developed theories allude to are very different to what is lived in the region. Understanding this problem Latin American scholars<sup>7</sup> have grounded SMT to the Latin American reality (ibid). In doing so they identified three main concepts to be present in SM in the region which are detrimental to how social change is conceived and attained. These three concepts are *territoriality*, *communality*, and *autonomy* (Fry, 2020; Modonesi and Iglesias, 2016).

These three concepts have been highlighted as, first, movements in the region are usually socio-territorial movements as territorial aspects are often an important envisioned outcome, and territory also a crucial space of defence where the movement enacts (ibid). Communality is also a base concept for movements in the region as it is a value and a tactic commonly seen in SM in the region (ibid). Finally, autonomy is conceived as a basic pillar for Latin American SM as most movements in the region are in search of the creation of their own decision-making spaces, where they can create and produce, through their own understanding, conceptions about their livelihoods and well-being (ibid).

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<sup>6</sup> Political Opportunity Structures Theory emerged as it was seen previous SM were excluding key environmental aspects which determine how and why a SM worked. Thus, the theory shifts focus to study SM through the consideration of political factors that may be inhibiting or fomenting SM actions. The main scholars responsible for the development of this theory are Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam (Fry, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Latin American scholars devoted to discussing SMT through a Latin American perspective are Modonesi and Iglesias (2020), Fry (2020), Seoane, Taddei and Algranati (2011). They have brought to light specific conceptual patterns of SMT present in the Latin American region (Fry, 2020).



It is important to note that, most of the different currents used to explain SM agree on the fact that SM are vital objects of study not only because they reflect the power dynamics in specific societies, but because “they announce what is taking shape even before its direction and content has become clear” (Melucci, 1996, p.1). Thus, SM are prophets of social change (Melucci, 1996), and a valuable tool to study it. On this line, for this thesis work, specific concepts of SMT, like collective action, collective identity and latency will be used to explain IYD in Ecuador and their role in creating social change in this nation.

## **1. Collective Action**

Collective action (CA) is the heart and essence of SM, it's both what conforms a movement and what enables it to achieve its goals. Formally collective action has been defined as

a set of social practices... involving simultaneously a number of individuals or groups... exhibiting similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space... implying a social field of relationships and... the capacity of the people involved of making sense of what they are doing (Melucci, 1996, p.20).

Moreover, it is through this system of actions in which actors and movements calculatedly respond to the societal dysfunctions they want to change.

When analysing CA, one should first distinguish if actions fall “between a reaction to a crisis [or the] expression of a conflict” (Melucci, 1996, p.22). Crises arise due to immediate discomfort of the disaggregation of a societal system, while conflict arises as the antagonism between two societal groups fighting for the same resources or power (Melucci, 1996). Conflicts unlike crises aim to dismantle and change societal structures (ibid). Following this logic, CA in SM traditionally positions itself along conflict, as the main aim is to produce disruptive social transformation. Another analytical focus that must be made is to pinpoint the orientation in which the CA is being fuelled (ibid). On this note CA can be enacted between the spectrum of deep sympathy or one-time interest aggregation, conflict or consensus, and the fracture of societal system limits or maintenance of limits (Melucci, 1996, p.26). Lastly, one should pay attention to the *ends*, *means* and the *environment* in which collective action is produced as actors “construct a ‘we’ by rendering common combining and then painstakingly adjusting [these] three different orientations” (Melucci, 1996, p.40).

For it is relevant to this thesis and to modern societies, a last element to look out for when inquiring about CA is the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) to collectively act. Recognizing the level of connectedness in which modern societies function, many scholars like Castells (2015), have identified ICTs to be key for the production and enactment of collective action (Barry, 2016). ICTs have been linked to influence CA by firstly improving information sharing, which in turn can reduce the information gap relevant to the movement's tactics and goals as well as put pressure on the government's compliance with the movement's claims (Barry, 2016). Moreover, they have reduced distances between actors which allows "easier social connection across... borders" (ibid, p.37) and the capacity for new networks of support to be formed (ibid). Likewise, they've become important collective action means as firstly they become a space where the movement can organize its members and plan mobilizations (ibid); and secondly, a place where novel digital mobilizations are being held (ibid). Finally, ICTs have supported CA as they permit actors to go "beyond limits of space and time, providing a virtual-meeting place through which people can maintain social relations, coordinate activities, and forge new networks with people that they could not have otherwise" (Barry, 2016, p.42). In today's CA analytical efforts, not looking at the usage of ICTs is to leave a wide analytical vacuum.

## **2. Collective Identity**

Besides inquiring about CA, to truly perceive processes of social change researchers must look beyond, thus an understanding of why actors act collectively needs to be done. This is achieved by inquiring into collective identity (CI). "Collective identity can be understood as the interactive and shared definition[s] produced by a number of individuals ...concerning the orientations of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place" (Melucci, 1996, p.70). Meaning it involves individual's emotional and cognitive connections to a specific cause or community (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

CI is a crucial process for SM as it delves into both rational and emotional aspects which in turn influence what objectives are pursued by movements and what means, and actions movements use to achieve these objectives (Melucci, 1996). Moreover, for researchers, collective identity has also become highly relevant, as exploring it allows an understanding of why and how movements form. Overall CI permits a broad and integral exploration of SM and

their capacity to achieve social change, going beyond the traditional focus of institutional reform to more hidden but relevant voices (Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Fominaya, 2018).

CI, which is expressed “through a common language, and enacted through a set of rituals, practices and cultural artefacts” (Fominaya, 2018, p.433) is largely responsible for “the creation of collective claims, recruitment into movements, strategic and tactical decision making, and movement outcomes” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p.285). For instance, CI allows one to distinguish the collective self-form from the ‘other’ (ibid), as well as collect common members’ dissatisfactions. This in turn permits the movement’s activists to build a case through which common claims are formed and fought for. Moreover, CI “establishes the boundaries of the actor in relation to the field: it regulates membership of individuals and defines the requisites for joining the movement” (Fominaya, 2018, p.433). Likewise, through activists' calculated strategy to foster CI a movement’s cohesion is attained and an “increase... [in] solidarity and the willingness to engage in... activism” (Fominaya, 2018, p.436) is accomplished, improving the movement’s chances to achieve social change. Finally, CI also plays a key role in a movement’s outcome by changing the identities of newly accepted members and by the spread of CI beyond the movement’s space, which creates changes in the contested political field (Fominaya, 2018; Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Melucci, 1996).

It is important to conceive that CI is a fluid process, as it can be adapted over time, adjusting to the movement's environment and to members’ new necessities, experiences, and objectives (Melucci, 1996, Polletta and Jasper, 2001). On this line, CI becomes a process where the movement’s leadership and agents of change become key figures, as they have the role of continuously strengthening the movement’s CI, assuring its proper adaptation to new realities, producing new definitions, ensuring the movement's past-present continuity (ibid). CI and its maintenance play a key role as it is largely the process through “which a collective becomes a collective” (Melucci, 1996, p.70) that can produce change.

### **3. Latency**

Traditionally, SMTs have perceived big mobilizations to be the main mean to achieve SC. However, processes of change go far beyond these intense mobilizations, as in fact, many times they take place in more subtle-everyday practices and networks (Ferrari, 2022). On this line, acknowledging the complexity of social change creation processes, it has been recognized that

activism in social movements oscillates between phases of mobilization, where there is high visibility of the movement, and more “silent” phases where agency is being performed more covertly (Ferrari, 2022; Melucci 1996). The latter has been defined by Melucci (1989; 1996) as latency phases. Phases, which are believed to be of vital importance for the creation of social change as they are “what makes mobilization possible; it is a movement’s ‘effective strength’” (Ferrari, 2022, p. 416).

Latency phases are constituted by all those activities that “keep movements going in-between... bursts of mobilizations” (Ferrari, 2022, p.416). For instance, private meetings, submerged discussions between members, strategization instances, decision-making processes, and so on, are what make up this phase (Ferrari, 2022; Gillan 2018). More importantly, however, constituting this phase is the process in which “activists try to practice lifestyles in accordance with their beliefs... [They do so] through hidden, ‘submerged’ everyday actions and relationships, developing day-to-day practices that embody their ideals ...beyond moments of [active] mobilization” (Ferrari, 2022, 416). These processes are essential for the movement as it is truly were the envisioned SC is being empirically practised: the values, justice desires and “the potential[s] for resistance or opposition [are] sewn into the very fabric of daily life” (Melucci 1989, p.71 as cited in Ferrari, 2022). On this note, latency processes are to be observed as they are creating change beyond materiality, they create changes in the production of meaning (Ferrari, 2022).

## **B. Intersectionality**

The intersectionality concept overarches this thesis analysis in order to bring forth the intricate linkages Ecuadorian IYD experience in all the subjectivities that being both young and indigenous entail. Intersectionality, first crafted by scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1980s, aims to explore “how multiple social forms of identity—such as race, class, gender, or ability—interrelate in different contexts and over time to produce inequity” (Njeze et al., 2020, p.2003). It is through this framework that an exploration of structural oppression felt by many, due to their lived social categories, is enabled, as well as the production of an approach to manage and shake down unfair power dynamics (Njeze et al., 2020).

A social situation where intersectionality is prominently helpful is when age and ethnicity converge. On the one hand, youth face challenges of exclusion due to their age (Snape and

Redman, 2006), and on the other ethnicity can create discrimination and racialization due to societal colonial structures (UN-HABITAT, 2010). Thus, when an individual experiences these two social categories simultaneously, “disproportionately burdens of adversity” (Njeze et al., 2020, p.2001) may be formed. On this line, to respond to the research questions adequately, a continuous reflective analysis of how these two social categories are simultaneously lived and faced by IYD in Ecuador is to be made.

## **V. Methodology**

This section showcases the methodological approach used for this thesis. This section specifically presents the research design, the research methods, data analysis, the limitations encountered, and the ethical considerations taken into account.

### **A. Research design**

Understanding that the present thesis focuses on the perceptions of IYD in Ecuador, a qualitative case study has been chosen as its research design. A case study, as explained by Bryman (2012), helps create an intensive analysis of the studied object and setting, hence allowing one to properly elucidate the uniqueness and complexities of the specific studied case. IYD in Ecuador have particular ways of acting and being. They enact their defence in specific ways, they face and respond to challenges particular to the Ecuadorian context and they have very specific identities. Hence, to truly interpret the nuances of IYD in this specific setting, a case study design is needed. On this line, this thesis is a case study about the perceived role IYD have in generating a just and fair society in Ecuador.

It is important to acknowledge that IYD in Ecuador come from different indigenous groups and communities that are far from being homogenous. In fact, each indigenous group has its own cosmovisions, ways, and faces different struggles (Ortiz, 2022). Despite this fact, for the development of this thesis, they are positioned as part of the same case study. This is done as a recognition that IYD and in general terms the IPs of Ecuador, in fact, work in articulation (Murray Li, 2004)<sup>8</sup>, collaborating in a “contingency of ways... at particular conjunctures” (Murray Li, 2004) for a common purpose. In the Ecuadorian case, IPs work in articulation in different spaces as part of the same movement broadly promoting indigenous rights in the country.

### **B. Research methods and data collection**

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<sup>8</sup> Articulation as explained by Tania Murray Li is “a key word of political ecology because it recognizes the structured character of distinct entities but highlights the contingency of the ways in which they are brought together—articulated—at particular conjunctures.” (2004, p.309). The term was originally drafted by Stuart Hall, yet Murray Li uses it to explain how indigenous peoples of different groups come together as a collective despite being different social groups with particular ways. She uses her analysis in Indonesia to do so.

Data was collected in a span of one and a half months using two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and online participant observation. For this study, a total of sixteen semi-structured interviews that lasted between 40 to 60 min, and which were made via Zoom and telephone were conducted. Thirteen of these interviews were made with IYD from ages 18 to 29, and the remaining three were done to thirty-plus former IYD who now work with IYD or as IYD's mentors in indigenous organizations and other spaces. A semi-structured interviewing method was chosen as it permits the interview to follow the central topic, yet at the same allowing the conversation to divert into vital detailed subjectivities, understandings, emotions, and perceptions the interviewees have about the conversed topics (Hammet, Twyman and Graham, 2014).

All the interviews were conducted in Spanish<sup>9</sup> and followed an interview guide (Annex A), composed by 10 open-ended questions, which aimed to help the interviewees provide a broad detailed response about their perceptions regarding the topics discussed (Bryman, 2012). To get as much detail and relevant information for the study, the guide was revised and improved throughout the data collection process. After a couple of interviews, some of the guide's questions were rephrased to make them clearer, a question was added to retrieve information about articulation processes between IYD, and most importantly the guide was personalized by the edition of some questions so that it was respectful and considerate to the realities (Quinn Patton, 2014; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003) and cosmovisions of the IPs interviewed. For instance, the word indigenous was changed to the word *runa* in some of the questions, as interviewees hinted, they preferred the usage of *runa* rather than the word indigenous as they see the former one as a Western word that may sometimes carry negative connotations. Overall, the data collected through these interviews was extremely valuable to produce this research.

To conduct the interviews a purposive sampling method and later a snowball sampling method were used. Due to the nature of the study, the first interviews were organized by “select[ing] individuals... [that could] purposefully inform an understanding [about]... the central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p.125); meaning renowned and highly publicly active IYD were contacted to be part of the study. These interviews were set up through the help of an indigenous gatekeeper who works closely with many IYD and by

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<sup>9</sup> Spanish is the researcher's native language; thus, a translator was not needed in this thesis. Likewise, it is important to note that the translations of interviews' direct quotes, which are posit later in the study, were done by the researcher herself.

contacting the potential interviewees through their public social media channels. Subsequently, a snowball sampling method was employed, as the researcher “relied on previously [interviewed IYD] to facilitate introductions to other [IYD] who would be willing to participate” (Hammet, Twyman and Graham, 2014, p.222) in the study and who were described to be key agents of change in the eyes of the previously interviewed IYD. Using this method not only helped the study get valuable informants but it also involved IYD in the sampling process.

Besides conducting semi-structured interviews, the method of online participant observation was also employed. Online participant observation can be described as the immersion and “linking of the researcher to the participant’s... social networks” (Hennell et al., 2020 p.479). Thus, in this case, understanding that social media is one of the key spaces where IYD perform their defence (Chiliquinga-Amaya, 2020), observations and interactions were made in this virtual space. For the study, participant observation was made to three participant-IYD’s public Instagram accounts, and to two IYD’s collectives’ public Instagram accounts, where a couple of the interviewed participants act as members. On specific terms observations about the posts and sharing of information was made but also participation in Instagram polls and in *question&answer* discussions was performed by the researcher. This method was very valuable for allowing to understand the space and ways IYD produce their defence and agency as a close immersion to their actions was obtained.

### **C. Data Analysis**

For the analysis of the collected data a thematic analysis was employed, where key themes, patterns, and trends relevant to the explanation of the research questions were identified (Hammet, Twyman and Graham, 2014). To conduct the data analysis, interviews were first transcribed and uploaded into the NVIVO data analysis programme. Subsequently, three rounds of data analysis were conducted through an iterative thematic analysis approach (ibid). In the first analytical round general themes and concepts were developed from the data. In the second analytical round, the most common themes were identified and revised. Lastly, in the final round, the coded themes were analysed through a deductive thematic analysis approach where they were linked to the thesis’ theoretical conceptual framework.



## **D. Limitations**

Even though this research has been carefully planned and executed, there are some limitations which need to be taken into consideration to properly understand its scope. The first limitation that must be highlighted is that data was collected remotely. Even though valuable data was retrieved via Zoom and telephone, and important activism interactions were observed in the digital field, conducting fieldwork in Ecuador where a direct engagement with IYD in their communities and directly witnessing their physical forms of agency would have been highly beneficial. This is because it is challenging for small details of their defence, and agency, especially in terms of their emotions and collective perceptions, to transfer into the digital world. Thus, foreshadowing a subsequent research study, travelling into the field is highly advised.

In addition, a second limitation faced was accessing highly renowned IYD who are active not only in the Ecuadorian context but in the international arena as well. At the beginning of the thesis plan, it was envisioned to count with the interviews of two of the most well-known IYP in the country. However, it was unfruitful to set an interview with them, as their schedules were full, they were constantly on the move and did not feel safe to openly talk about their perceptions at the moment. Despite this mishap, the thesis collected perceptions of other very relevant IYD, who are mostly active in a national scale. Moreover, it is important to highlight that most of interviewees are women, as it was harder to get a hold of male IYD. This might pose a limitation as a harmonious gender balance among interviewees was not attained. Despite this fact, valuable perceptions were collected that allow the study to be strong, especially regarding the intersections between youth, ethnicity, and gender. Lastly, a relevant limitation present in the thesis is related to the fact that most academic literature and theories in the scholarly world are written through a Western perspective, that excludes indigenous ways and is many times in disparity with indigenous understandings. Being aware of this limitation, an effort to reflect on potential biases was continuously made.

## **E. Ethical Considerations and Positionality**

Understanding the level of sensitivity an investigation regarding ethnicity and youth may have, thorough ethical considerations were taken into account. Firstly, it was ensured before

performing any interview that the given participant was of legal age<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, every interview was conducted by having received prior informed consent from the interviewees (Scheyvens and Storey, 2003; Bryman, 2014). Therefore, before starting the interviews the participants were asked to confirm their age, were explained they had the right to pause or leave at any moment (Scheyvens and Storey, 2003) and that all data retrieved was going to be managed with confidentiality as it was to be safely stored by the researcher (Bryman, 2014). To do so, only the researcher listened to the interviews and review the interview notes. And the interview recordings were safely stored in a private folder in the researcher's computer using a code system only known by the researcher.

Ethical considerations were also taken into account when using the online participant observation method. It is important to state that the usage of social media as a data collection method brings many ethical considerations to light (Hennell et al., 2020). Acknowledging this fact, in the study, it was ensured that observations and participation were only made to *public Instagram accounts* which had open access to the public. Moreover, any private account or private information on Instagram was avoided and all the information collected was retrieved ensuring anonymity.

Moreover, to conduct the thesis, the researcher approached the field being aware of her own positionality and thus, worked managing the hindrances and ways it could affect the research. To do so, the researcher firstly recognized she is not indigenous herself, but instead, a mestizo<sup>11</sup> woman from Quito, whose experiences in Ecuador are very different to the lived realities IYD face every day. On this note, she entered the field being wary not to fall into false preconceived assumptions but instead, she did so respectfully and open to learn about indigenous cosmologies and dismantle any biased predetermined tenets.

Furthermore, she acknowledges the fact that academic research on indigenous topics without being close to indigenous realities can become another form of cultural appropriation (Batista,

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<sup>10</sup> In Ecuador the legal age is that of 18 years old (Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia Ecuador, 2002) Thus, it was ensured all participants were 18 and above.

<sup>11</sup> Mestizo is the social categorization used in Latin American countries to denote a person who has mixed ancestry (RAE, 2023). The term came to be in post-colonial Latin American societies to denote the social mixture product of the colonial social dynamics. For many the term meant a social harmonization of societies after the colonial-cast societies, yet despite its appearance many social incongruencies are present in these societies (Wade, 2023). However, in Latin American societies other social groups not regarded as mestizo continue to face systemic discrimination (ibid). In Ecuador, most of the population (approximately 70% - as shown in the last census made in 2010) conceive themselves to fall under this socio-racial categorization (El Universo (1), 2011).

2022). Thus, the researcher ensured to collect data flexibly trying to accommodate the research to enhance indigenous lived realities. On this line, the researcher accommodated the interviews and her language to highlight key concepts indigenous self-identified with (ex: the use of the concept runa instead of indigenous and the use of the concept defender instead of activist). Additionally, the researcher has set to share the results of this thesis to all interviewees once the study is completed.

## **VI. Findings: IYD agents of social change**

In this section, the major findings of the study are presented. In doing so, an effort to respond to the thesis sub-research questions (*How are indigenous youth defenders helping promote and broaden indigenous rights in Ecuador?; How are indigenous youth defenders perceived to be causing empowerment and identity formation of young indigenous generations?; and, What tools, strategies and mechanisms are being used by IYD to produce social change?*) was made.

This process was attained by exploring IYD's agency through the exploration of IYD collective actions by focusing on their *ends, means and environment*, as suggested by Melucci (1996). On this note, the first sub-section is devoted present the findings on IYD collective agency efforts, while the next two present findings regarding the means they employ and the outcomes that they are perceived to be attaining.

### **A. IYD as collective actors - Engaging in efforts to produce change**

It is necessary to recall that collective action, the essence of movements that search social change, is when several individuals come together to produce a set of practices in pursuit of achieving change, which in turn is conceptualised by their shared interests (Tejerina, 2017; Melucci, 1996). It is also important to remember, that IPs intrinsically act communally, meaning that IPs inherently engage in collective action when producing efforts to reclaim their rights (Lauderdale, 2010). The findings, of this study suggest this to be present in IYD agency as IYD are coming together with each other to promote IP rights in the country and spark social transformations. However, the findings suggest IYD are engaging in CA in a deeper level than the one traditionally seen: Ecuadorian IYD are joining efforts not solely as indigenous individuals but mostly as *young* indigenous individuals.

On this line, IYD are collectively acting moved by the intersection of their ethnicity and age. They are enhancing as their common ground, the desire to become involved in efforts to create SC despite their age, but most importantly their aspirations to provoke SC conceived from an indigenous *youth* perspective. A perspective that assures traditional claims made by the indigenous movement such as matters regarding territoriality and autonomy but also one that provides equal importance to "newer" claims such as gender, sexuality, and indigenous

empowerment within the hyperconnected-globalized world. This can be appreciated in the following quotes:

*“Us, young people, we get together. So, it comes from this need of us wanting to know how else we can contribute, how can we contribute from our voices as young people... we want to contribute. We got together to build this project of what we wanted to do. And that’s how we formed [name of youth collective] so that indigenous youth from different parts of the Ecuadorian Amazon can come to discuss how we as youth understand the world, from our youth perspective and so we discuss topics such as cultural identity, gender, territorial governance, and other countless topics” (Interviewee 4).*

*“I created a collective, [name of collective], where we started to articulate, write, and discuss about our Andean cosmovision but also involving contemporary topics. Meaning, we discuss feminism, topics involving the LGBTQ community etc.” (Interviewee 3).*

Looking to achieve this indigenous-youth-perspective social change, the findings also suggest that IYD are shining on conflict of the marginalization of IPs and the breach of their rights on both external and internal levels. This means they are visualizing and demanding IP rights externally into the broad Ecuadorian society but also suggesting changes internally in their communities, as they feel topics important for indigenous youth are being dismissed. For instance, on the one hand it is possible to see IYD calling off and demanding reparations to state authorities and to the broad Ecuadorian society for the breach of IP rights by digitally broadcasting oil spills, territorial threats, and racialization experiences (*IG profile 1, 2, 3*). For instance, as seen in one of the observed Instagram profiles (*IG profile 2*) were public demands for the protection of the Piatua Territory in the Amazon against mining and oil concessions was made. And on the other hand, it is also possible to see IYD developing initiatives and projects on a communal level, many which are centred on discussions about gender equality, gender-based violence, the proliferation of youth empowerment initiatives, educational opportunities, and the resurgence of indigenous identity into their young peers. Such as seen in a IYD led initiative that aimed to promote IP gender equality and women leadership empowerment in the IYD’s community through workshops (*interviewee 10*). Thus, it is possible to state that IYD act in a holistic way arguing for changes in the various social levels they exist in.

To engage in collective efforts to promote distinct IPs rights, IYD are coming in support with each other in what Melucci (1996) referred to as collective action orientated by solidarity. This can be stated as IYD from different indigenous nationalities, experiencing IPs rights violations differently, and often times residing far from each other are coming together. Together they form collectives, initiatives, projects, or just unspoken networks of support to promote IPs rights in a broader more robust way. These can be acknowledged in the quotes presented below:

*“We began to thread between indigenous peoples from the Sierra [Andes], from the Amazon and the coast... We started to articulate together. We realized that there were many things in common and at the same time many things that we did not know about each other... [And now we] are generating a voice from our territories and wanting to connect with other communities to make us stronger and bigger” (Interviewee 3).*

*“What we did ... is to weave networks of solidarity, we are working with some colleagues from other regions” (Interviewee 4).*

These processes have been enabled since IYD recognize each other to belong in the same social unit. They recognize each other as individuals who aim to achieve common goals and recognize that coming together will enable them to create more pressure and bigger actions to achieve their aims more easily.

## **B. How IYD are producing change - exploring their used means**

### **1. The usage of ICTs as a tool for change - producing change from a digital territoriality**

As stated in the conceptual framework section, information communication technologies can be vital means for political participation and CA in today's digital world (Barry, 2016). The findings of this study show this to be true for Ecuadorian IYD, as ICTs play a vital role in their defence work. This can be said as most of the participants interviewed stated that social media has been a powerful tool for them to visualize breaches of their rights, demand the fulfilment of their claims, broadly educate about indigenous peoples and their inherent rights, and empower indigenous individuals about their rights and identities.

Specifically, the findings first suggest that ICTs are easing IYD's *information sharing*. This helps their claims reach important targets which in turn increases pressure for change to happen. To do so IYD are creating social media communications where they are demanding the protection of their rights by directly visualizing how these are being breached. This is reflected in the following quotes, where participants claimed to be using Instagram and Facebook to denounce oil spills in their communities:

*"[IYD in the Amazon] have taken advantage of the technological platforms to make this visible, the oil spills. Before, nobody knew about the floods that happened in the Amazon, and the children's illnesses [that were caused because they] bathed in the rivers. These were polluted waters... nobody knew about it... but now they are reporting they are denouncing. We the youth are playing a fundamental role in making this visible and denouncing" (Interviewee 1).*

*"I use it [social media] when there are terrible things happening like oil spills, [or when there] are protests. I do use social networks as a tool of struggle because it is very important for the world to know what is happening." (Interviewee 14).*

IYD's ICTs communications are perceived to be powerful means for SC as they generate large pressure for the responsible authorities to remedy the issues being reported and thus provide fulfilment to the IP rights being breached. This happens firstly because IYD can directly call-off the responsible authorities through their Instagram posts demanding solutions to be made.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, these posts are widely shared across social media networks, causing a large number of people across different localities, social groupings with distinct levels of influence to see them and demand actions from authorities as well. These two happenings in turn create a sense of urgency and shame within the linked authorities, who then are pressured to comply and assure solutions to the violations visibilized and fulfilment of IP rights.

It is important to note that the findings also suggest ICTs are facilitating information sharing along the internal level in which they are seeking change. Social media communications are being used by IYD to inform and educate their indigenous peers and communities about indigenous rights, breaches of these rights and how to recognize these violations. Additionally,

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<sup>12</sup> This is done as IYD tag or link the authorities public Instagram profiles directly to their IG posts and IG communications. Directly linking the authorities to the issues making them responsible. - As observed in the participant observation process

ICTs are used by IYD as a way to empower their indigenous peers about their indigenous identity easing a re-indigenization identity transformation to happen. These actions can be witnessed in the following quotes:

*“I share [information about racialization, racism, and discrimination] either on Facebook, Instagram or TikTok... I share that with people, many people who tell me that they learn, that they share, that they have lived the same experiences ...” (Interviewee 8).*

*“Young people are making their culture known, are making their identity known, are making their territory known... through social networks” (Interviewee 9).*

*“For us [traditional clothes] are something very political, because [they] represent you outwardly and inwardly, where you are who you are. So, for example, seeing that absence, what I do on social networks is sometimes I upload a video that also shows you are also young. I don't know dancing with your friends, or a concert... dancing whatever, but always with anaco<sup>13</sup>” (Interviewee 2).*

The facility ICTs provide in reaching large numbers of people and the direct engagement they offer is allowing more IPs to become knowledgeable about their indigenous rights in the country. This in turn allows a *wider recruitment* of indigenous voices into demanding the fulfilment of their rights. Likewise, by showcasing positive messages and images about indigenous identity symbols whilst being young, like *interviewee 2* did uploading pictures of herself in a concert wearing her anaco (a place where, as described by the participant, is not common to do so), IYD are perceived to encourage other young IPs to feel identified and comfortable with their identity, all in all generating cultural empowerment among indigenous peers.

Finally, the findings suggest ICTs to be important tools for IYD as they are helping create *new networks of support* by reducing distances and by facilitating organization and collaboration between them. ICTs have become spaces of free, direct, and easy-to-start dialogue between Ecuadorian IYD. The easiness of engaging in conversation between individuals in this digital

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<sup>13</sup> Anaco is a piece (a skirt) of the traditional clothes of many Andean indigenous nationalities (Enciclopedia del Ecuador, n.d).



territory has allowed IYD residing in different regions of the country and even abroad to form collaboration networks where they engage in discussions of how to propel more actions for IP rights defence. This has enabled IYD physically scattered to create joining collective groups of action and to plan and execute initiatives together. This happening is summed up in the following quotes:

*“We [IYDs from different communities] meet virtually and we debate sometimes until the morning... at 2:00 in the morning we are all there listening, listening to everybody's opinion deciding if that is what we should do or not.” (Interviewee 7)*

*“I think technology [ICTs] has made this network more visible, so there is even room for collaboration, one can find an IYD in the social networks, write to him or her, and collaborate with these people.” (Interviewee 7)*

In this sense, ICTs have become a vital tool for the defence and agency of Ecuadorian IYD.

## **2. Latency as a social change tactic - Generating change from silence**

The findings also suggest Ecuadorian IYD are using latency as another important tool to produce social change. First, it is important to recall that latency is conceived as the submerged networks (Ferrari, 2022; Melucci 1989, 1996), and the discreet everyday actions agents of change perform with the aim to sew the potential change they envision into their everyday lives; thus, covertly enabling change to happen (ibid). The analysis showcased that Ecuadorian IYD have created submerged networks of social change discussions as well as the imbuelement of the social transformations they envision into their everyday routines. With these latency actions it can be said that IYD expect to produce social change progressively and soundlessly, as shown in the following quote:

*“Sometimes it is understood that leadership and that leaders are those who are always there, those that everyone knows. But I also believe that forms of leadership and change can come from silence, from very small actions. And that is what I have tried to do” (Interviewee 16).*

As demonstrated by many the participants in this study, submerged networks where indigenous individuals are engaging in private discussions, internal strategizing and communal ideation of change are being enabled by IYD. These submerged networks have no intent of massively producing mobilizations or large external initiatives but rather attempt to produce conversations and new daily routines that spark change in seemingly unnoticeable ways. One example is how IYD initiated networks like a Kichwa extracurricular club at their educational institution with the aim to group together young indigenous individuals and empower them to speak their native language; as well as to create a space to discuss language revitalisation and how to create social change encapsulating identity empowerment (*Interviewee 1, 2 and 5*).

On the same line, some IYD stated to have created submerged networks of discussion in a furtive way, as a mean to educate about the protection of rights that are not commonly spoken about. This was attained for example by inserting discussions of these new topics in traditional communal activities. For instance, as shown in the following quote an IYD pushed gender equality and gender-based violence discussions in a communal sewing session:

*“We get together, for example, with the children of the community to weave and sew, but while we do that, we are talking about the ways of relating to each other. And it was so interesting because we talked so much about feminicides” (Interviewee 16).*

Thanks to these submerged networks and discussions, IYD are perceived to be slowly transforming spaces and perspectives about IPs rights. Likewise, they are perceived to be empowering their inner circles to incorporate the envisioned social transformations.

The findings also demonstrated that latency is used as a tool for change through IYD's incorporation of their desired social transformation into their everyday routines and work. Thus, IYD are setting an example of change by living on a first-hand basis how they envision society, both in the external and internal level, should look like. This can be seen by IYD's efforts of wearing indigenous identity symbols; symbols that are uncommonly worn by young indigenous peoples as stated by most participants, in their everyday routines and in spaces where it is not common to do so. This can also be seen in the incorporation of IP rights and desired social change messages into their art, everyday music, dancing, games etc. This can be appreciated in the following quotes:

*“I wear it [anaco] every day, now... I go to a disco or a bar but with anaco. And they [young indigenous individuals] ask me sometimes: ‘where are you going? do you have an important event?’<sup>14</sup> I reply: ‘No’. And they ask: ‘but why are you wearing anaco?’ I answer: ‘because that’s who I am’. So, I question their practices through this<sup>15</sup>” (Interviewee 2).*

*“I also teach dance. When I teach dance, I do it with traditional music, and this was something different, but it was a way for children to be interested in learning [about our identity]” (Interviewee 5).*

*“I do music to reflect everything, I sing in Kichwa, and I fuse contemporary and traditional instruments. Through this music, I invite them [Ecuadorian society] to tell us the real story that we have not yet been told. Because in history they practically erase us... Also, through my music I invite [IPs] to continue speaking their language, living their identity, to defend their territory as their sacred home... Music has been my platform for defence, my platform to continue demanding the rights of indigenous peoples” (Interviewee 9).*

By incorporating practices of respect towards IP rights, practices that reclaim their space in the Ecuadorian society, and practices assonant to the social change they envision into their daily life fabric, IYD are setting an example to their peers and to the overall Ecuadorian society about these issues. With these latency practices, they are influencing their close social circles to incorporate these practices into their own daily lives and hence are softly attaining change.

## **C. Analysing outcomes - the attainment of just social transformations**

### **1. Collective identity formation as IYD’s main outcome**

As shown in the interviews and the participatory observation notes, IYD are attaining a broad range of outcomes through their agency. For instance, some mobilizations and initiatives led by them have resulted in positive territorial court decisions, and some of them, as well as their initiatives, have been given visibility and space to generate impact in various renowned

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<sup>14</sup> As explained by the interviewee IY do not like to wear their anacos as before. They do so only for very specific events.

<sup>15</sup> The word *this* makes reference to her clothing choice

platforms across Ecuador and the world.<sup>16</sup> However, the analytical findings of this thesis suggest that the major collective outcome IYD are attaining in Ecuador is helping generate a progressive communal reappropriation of a collective indigenous identity that contains the different subjectivities of what being young and indigenous entails.

As previously stated, CI refers to the emotional and cognitive linkages to a specific cause or social grouping (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). It is considered a vital outcome of SM as it represents the changed identities of those influenced by the process of change into adopting the group's identity. Likewise, it represents the attainment of new spaces and territories of influence where this CI is now reproduced. Ecuadorian IYD are perceived to be accomplishing just this.

Firstly, the findings show IYD perceive to be progressively changing the identities of many of their peers. It is suggested they are empowering young indigenous individuals, into adopting their collective indigenous identity (identity that according to IYD is commonly repudiated by IY), by shifting the conception of what being indigenous in Ecuador involves. On this note, IYD, through the vivid demonstration in their initiatives and everyday practices, are “*de-romanticizing [defolklorizing] what it means to be indigenous*” (Interviewee 2). They instead are perceived to be conveying their ethnic identities to be conformed by historic memories, beauty, and capabilities to succeed in the present world. Thus, they are decolonizing the perceptions of many about indigenous identity in Ecuador, as admiration, and empowerment are being re-attributed to it. The following quotes showcase this:

*“We perform activities to promote our identity, this is very very very necessary in these spaces as many young people have no idea, and with these initiatives, we try to get them interested or knowledgeable about it. And afterwards, it grows within them to start using our clothing our things with pride”* (Interviewee 1).

*“I have realized that I have become a role model for the girls<sup>17</sup>... the girls see themselves reflected in me... And so it is a change of imaginary, they are recognizing other women, other*

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<sup>16</sup> As demonstrated in various IG posts in the observed IG profiles (*profile 1 and 5*), IYD have been very active in many UN conferences such as the latest COP, where they were able to discuss the problems, they vividly experience and demand reparations. Likewise, as shown in some observed IG profiles court cases like one were reparations against land grabbing in an IP community in the Amazon were positively attained (*profile 2*)

<sup>17</sup> *Girls* makes reference to the young indigenous girls the interviewee works with.

*type of leadership. We are trying to decolonize their admiration. That their aspirations are not to be what is reflected on TV, which is white-Eurocentric perspectives. We are [helping] them admire and recognize these [indigenous] virtues” (Interviewee 2)*

*“Seeing oneself empowered and sharing that empowerment is contagious. I believe that an empowered person can achieve many things and among them is to inspire people. A small example is how my brother told me: ‘Before I could not conceive of a world where I could dress well, being an indigenous man, until you showed me about these young indigenous people in [ICTs] who are using fashion to express their identity’” (Interviewee 10).*

Sentiments of indigenous pride and the desire for identity expression are perceived to be growing among IY, especially the younger generations. On this line, it is perceived by IYD that progressively more IY are now practising their indigenous identities loudly and proudly. This has caused a reappropriation and takeover of spaces in which native identities are not usually portrayed. This can be seen in the new growing practice of using Kichwa as a language of interaction within ICTs, as before this language was omitted as a way to mask their identities.

*“There are more young people who have taken up social networks and they no longer have that fear of using social networks and implementing Kichwa in them” (Interviewee 5).*

Moreover, the appropriation of spaces by the usage of CI has also translated into the appropriation of opportunities through the enhancement of their collective indigenous identities. IYD are perceived to be demonstrating that an indigenous identity can be conceived as a virtue rather than a detriment to access opportunities; something does not happen widely in the Ecuadorian society. This has become even more pronounced along the intersection with gender, as IYD are empowering IY women to see their gender and ethnicities as virtues and empowering to demand education, work, and livelihood opportunities, as seen in the following quotes:

*“I think it has motivated other indigenous women to continue, maybe if they were afraid at some point to start university. I am proud of these small results that have been given through the conversations that I have with other women” (Interviewee 10).*

*“I said, ‘Well I did it. I had an impact on someone, maybe it was only one person or several people’. I thought, ‘well you did it... because you are letting other people see that it is possible: That if she [the interviewee] did it now, I can also do it, or my daughters can do it or maybe someone else.’ And this is even more important as I am a woman, because there is still a very strong machismo<sup>18</sup>” (Interviewee 2).*

This new empowered conception of their ethnic selves has amplified the progressive re-appropriation of a collective indigenous identity.

Likewise, it is important to recall the CI is a fluid process, which changes overtime adapting to the new realities and sentiments from movements’ members (Melucci, 1996, Polletta and Jasper, 2001). It is possible to see how IYD are pushing for these new subjectivities within the collective IP identity. This is helping update IP identities to be now woven with what they understand being young and indigenous entail, hence helping sustain EISM in the complex contemporary world. In conclusion, IYD are progressively installing the collective re-appropriation of the indigenous collective identity among their peers and along their communities, a collective identity that is experienced not with fear of marginalisation or shame as dictated by colonial discourses but one where it is seen as pride, empowerment, and virtue.

#### **D. Summary of findings**

The findings previously exposed suggest IYD are in fact helping promote and broaden collective rights in the Ecuadorian society, while at the same time promoting other ‘newer’ topics within their communities. The promotion of these rights, in both the internal the external level, is being attained firstly by the fact that IYD are acting as a collective actor producing strong collective initiatives to visualize, educate and influence the social transformations they desire to be adopted in the environments they live in. This is being achieved through their use of specific means such as ICTs, through which they are pressuring authorities and society into acknowledging their desired social transformations and into performing them. Likewise, by using latency tactics, they are calculatedly incorporating these social transformations into their lives, setting an example of the possibility of a society where IPs rights are fulfilled and where IPs identities are seen solely as a virtue. Finally, IYD are achieving many social

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<sup>18</sup> Machismo is the term used in Spanish for sexism and social chauvinism.

transformations, yet mostly they are fomenting a re-appropriation of indigenous identities filled with positive attributes by their peers.

## **VII. Discussion**

In this section a discussion of the findings is made with the aim to draft a response for the global research question guiding this thesis: *What is the perceived role of indigenous youth defenders in the creation of social change in Ecuador?* To do so, the discussion is built upon a joint global analysis of the findings and by speaking back to theory.

### **A. The bridge between the past the present and the future - IYD's role in creating social change in Ecuador**

When analysing the findings presented in the previous section it is possible to state that IYD are perceived to have an active role in the creation of just social change in Ecuador. As seen, IYD are actively developing and engaging with initiatives that promote IPs rights, thus progressively helping create social transformations. However, when analysing the findings, it is possible to state that IYD's role is much more than just a contributing one. This can be said as IYD are accelerating and broadening the scope of the indigenous fight for IPs rights, are creating new understandings of how social change can be produced and most importantly they are generating new conceptions of what the desired social change should entail.

As demonstrated in the findings, IYD are bringing the indigenous rights fight into new *territories*, broadening the scope and field of the indigenous-sought SC. Firstly, IYD are leading the expansion of IP social change efforts by imbuing their demands into digital territories. This is proving to be vital as an acceleration of IP SC efforts are being attained. Through their engagement in this new territory, they are reaching more people, and generating stronger direct links with those individuals that can spark change, thus helping generate change more rapidly. Secondly, IYD are transferring SC efforts into an internal territory, as they are fomenting social transformations within their own communities. IYD are pushing for the incorporation and recognition of new topics and identity subjectivities within the indigenous community demonstrating and initiating reflections about how just social change is an internal process as well. IYD territorial expansion is all in all changing the understanding of how social should be produced as a dynamization of this process to different social levels is being made.

IYD are also demonstrating to have a role in the creation of meaning as they are shifting the conceptions of what the aspired social change should seek. As previously exposed, IYD are



not only enhancing the pressure, visualization and demands of the traditional claims sought by EISM but are going beyond to include or highlight topics that are important to them as young individuals experiencing life in contemporary times. On this line, IYD are sparking an ontological dynamization and re-structuring of the traditional conceptions of *autonomy* and just social change aspired by IPs in Ecuador. The envisioned just social change thus is being broadened to encapsulate other topics such as gender and sexual rights and the many intersections indigenous people may experience.

Concludingly, it is possible to state IYD are exercising the role of bridging the past, present, and future in terms of the Ecuadorian indigenous' efforts to produce just social change in the country. IYD are dynamizing the process of promotion of indigenous rights and identities in all its fronts within the country. They are thus generating spaces in Ecuador and the world both physically and digitally, externally, and internally for indigenous peoples. Spaces that are not conformed by the assimilation to “modernity” as dictated by Ecuador’s neoliberal development schemes, nor solely enhancing ethnic traditional views, but instead spaces where indigenous peoples can dictate their own rules, identities and wellbeing enhancing their many differences and intersectionalities. Thus:

*“The youth are definitely the fundamental motor in the fight for indigenous rights... We are the umbilical cord between the past and the present... we are the ones who must sustain this” (Interviewee 9).*

## **B. Talking back to theory**

Melucci (1996) called SM the “disenchanted prophets of the present” (p.1) as they “announce the commencement of change... [not] in the distant future but one that is already a presence” (p.1). This case study as demonstrated is signalling SC patterns which are taking place in Ecuador. However, the case study also provides a glimpse of change happening not only in the societal level but on a theoretical ground as well. Going back to theory, the case study makes it possible to attest how *territoriality*, *communality* and *autonomy* are indeed aspects inherently taking part in this Latin American SM. However, the case study also suggests how these aspects in contemporary societies, like the Ecuadorian, enacted by contemporary collective actors, like IYD, are being crafted in deeper complex levels, thus putting into question the existing theoretical scope to effectively understand them. As demonstrated by the

case SM are being broadened in field, scope and meaning, especially because of the new amalgamation from the different layers of social intersectionalities actors experience.

Understanding this happening the case study can firstly suggest a new concept to be incorporated in the Latin American SM discussion, this being *intersectionality*. As shown, it is impossible to properly understand the means and outcomes of the SM without analysing the potential social intersections experienced by its members. Likewise, in a broader sense, talking back to SMT a similar line of discussion can be made. In complex societies, intersectionality needs to be part of the analytical spectrum of the *ends, means and environment* of SMT. Likewise, the case also signals a new layer of complexity SMT needs to consider this being that the analyses of process of change need to be also brought to SMs internal levels, as change, happens within movements at the same time and with the same force than outside.

Finally, the case study also enables a reflection to be made about the development field in an empirical sense. Policymakers and development practitioners hoping to enhance just social change within their societies, for instance incorporating SDG10, need to be attentive of these many layers of production and enactment of change. On this note, development initiatives need to be drafted by being informed and mindful of the different intersectionalities the population at hand experiences. Just social change is complex and may mean different things for different people within a same societal group, thus development practitioners need to be mindful of this challenge and thus need to incorporate these understandings to promote true positive change in today's complex layered world.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

This thesis explored the perceived role of Ecuadorian IYD in broadening the promotion of indigenous rights and indigenous identities in Ecuador, all in all, helping create just social change. To do so data was collected via sixteen semi-structured interviews and online participant observation and later analysed through important SMT concepts. The findings generated through this process suggested that IYD indeed play an important role in this endeavour. Hence, it can be said IYD are key actors in the creation of a socially just Ecuador.

Drawing back to the three supporting research questions<sup>19</sup> IYD are promoting and broadening indigenous rights by developing initiatives, both externally for the Ecuadorian society to grasp and internally for their own communities to reflect, which visualize educate and influence individuals about adopting and respecting these rights and socially just transformations. It is important to grasp that this is being made possible due to the means and tactics IYD use. Influenced by their environment, one where they are immersed in digital spaces, IYD are using ICTs, especially social media networks, as tools to collectively act with each other, plan and execute initiatives, and widely broadcast communications about the promotion and respect of their rights. The usage of these digital spaces has eased up the connections with each other, and most importantly has created a direct line of connection with the authorities they are demanding to enact change enhancing the social change pressure. Moreover, the usage of latency, by practicing their desired social transformations in the everyday fabric of their lives, is progressively creating social transformation by setting examples and precedents of change. Likewise, IYD are helping reattributing positive characteristics to their native identities, defying traditional colonial views. On this line, they are attaining their aim by empowering their peers into the adopting this re-shaped collective indigenous identity, one that is structured with positive attributes and agency.

Going back to main research question, *what is the perceived role of IYD in the creation of social change in Ecuador?*, this thesis suggests their role is key. IYD are the responsible actors

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<sup>19</sup>As a quick reminder the three sub research questions are:

- How are indigenous youth defenders helping promote and broaden indigenous rights in Ecuador?
- What tools, tactics or mechanisms are being used by IYD to produce social change?
- How are indigenous youth defenders perceived to be causing empowerment and identity formation of young indigenous generations?

bridging the past the present and the future, helping construct meaningful change in an integral way in each of the societal levels they live in. Influenced by their ethnicities but also by their age, they are dynamizing the fight for IPs rights in Ecuador generating narratives and spaces where IPs, through their different intersectionalities, are the architects of their wellbeing and development.

As presented at the beginning of this paper, there is a wide research gap regarding IY as political actors, especially when it comes to the Global South. This thesis has contributed to the closing of this academic vacuum, however there is still much space for work to be done. For instance, further studies with narrower focuses such as, exploring IYD roles in specific Ecuadorian indigenous communities or specifically exploring the gender would be of great benefit. Thus, this thesis is just the beginning of the academic quest of understanding the importance IY have in today's complex societies.

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## **X. Appendixes**

### **A. Interview Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was originally made and used in Spanish. For the purpose of this thesis, it has been translated into English by the researcher.

<b>Introduction</b>
1. Can you introduce yourself? - Tell me anything you want me to know that describes who you are  - If the interviewee does not include the following topics ask them about it: (Age, indigenous community they belong to, where do they reside)
<b>Activism</b>
1. How are you actively supporting your indigenous community? a. What do you promote? b. How do you do it? c. Where do you do it? d. Are you using digital technologies for this purpose?
2. What is the most important objective you aim to achieve with your agency? a. What are the topics you push within your activism?
3. How do you perceive the indigenous youth activism in the country? a. Is it different to what was done before?
3. What motivated you to start?
<b>Identity</b>
1. What does being <i>runa</i> mean to you?

2. How do you live your indigenous identity?  
 - If not included in response, ask them how they practice their traditions and identity being imbued in the globalized world

3. Do you feel you live your indigenous identity differently than what your parents and grandparents did?

4. Do you reflect your indigenous identity in your agency and defence?

**Indigenous youth activism**

1. What is the outcome you feel most proud of, of your defence?

2. Do you think your actions are influencing somehow other indigenous youth?

3. What is the outcome you feel other youth indigenous defenders have accomplished?

4. Do you feel you have the sufficient space within Ecuador or your community to speak about or enact your agency and defence?

**B. Data collection details**

**1. List of interviewees**

Interviewee N.	Region	Age	Interview medium	Interview Date
1	Andes	24	Zoom	19/01/23
2	Andes	28	Telephone	20/01/23
3	Andes	25	Zoom	23/01/23
4	Amazon	28	Zoom	23/01/23
5	Andes	20	Zoom	26/01/23
6	Amazon	40	Telephone	23/01/23
7	Andes	18	Zoom	01/02/23
8	Andes	31	Zoom	01/02/23



9	Amazon	31	Zoom	02/02/23
10	Andes	23	Zoom	03/02/23
11	Andes	26	Zoom	06/02/23
12	Andes	22	Zoom	08/02/23
13	Andes	26	Zoom	07/02/23
14	Amazon	27	Telephone	07/02/23
15	Amazon	26	Google Call	07/02/23
16	Andes	28	Zoom	05/03/23

## 2. Online Participant Observation details

<b>N</b>	<b>ICT network</b>	<b>Type of account</b>	<b>Observation details</b>
1	<b>Instagram</b>	Public IYD account	Observations in posts (written description plus photos used), observation in Instagram stories (discussions made, Q&A polls)
2	<b>Instagram</b>	Public IYD account	Observations in posts (written description plus photos used), observation in Instagram stories (discussions made, Q&A polls)
3	<b>Instagram</b>	Public IYD account	Observations in posts (written description plus photos used), observation in Instagram stories (discussions made, Q&A polls)
4	<b>Instagram</b>	Public collective account	Observations in posts (written description plus photos used), observation in Instagram stories (discussions made, events broadcasted)

5	<b>Instagram</b>	Public collective account	Observations in posts (written description plus photos used), observation in Instagram stories (discussions made, events broadcasted)
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