

# Understanding the Key Players in Yachay: Whose voice counts?



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## Project Overview

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**Organization:** Yachay: the new Ecuadorian City of Knowledge

**Location:** Yachay, Ecuador

**Mentor:** Sarah Moser, Geography

**Fellowship Duration:** June 6 –Aug 8, 2014



## About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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# Understanding the Key Players in Yachay: Whose voice counts for the City of Knowledge?

## Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

The goal of our fellowship was to shed light on a new issue in South America: the creation of a new and planned city in Ecuador named Yachay, and its impacts on the surrounding communities.

Building a new city is a significant undertaking. The reasons for creating a city and the impacts of its developments have to be understood and monitored carefully. In the case of Yachay, many people have been displaced from the site where the new city is now being built. However, some communities remained and were integrated into the project. The surrounding communities are affected as well by this new development.

Citizens affected by Yachay are not the ones that have the biggest impact on the development of the project because they don't necessarily have the opportunity to be heard. As a team of two students under the supervision of Dr. Sarah Moser, our presence in Ecuador helped to raise the voice of minority groups by creating links between the affected communities and those making decisions. Our goal was to create better communication between all the stakeholders in this new city through interviews, and to lay the groundwork for ongoing collaboration with local organizations.

## Background

Ecuador's economy has been characterized by exportation of natural resources, mainly bananas, seafood and flowers. Tourism also represents an important economic sector of the country, in 4th position of importance. However, the president of the nation since 2007, Rafael Correa, has set an objective for the country to change the production matrix toward an economy promoting knowledge, innovation and investigation. It is within this context that the idea of creating a new city arose. In Quechua, one of the native languages of the country, Yachay means knowledge.

In 2009, the public company of Yachay with the University of Yachay started to develop the project under the supervision of the national government. The goal is to create a new city of 4 600 hectares that aims to create innovation, technology and investigation. The site of the new city has

been chosen to be in the canton of Urququi, in the province of Imbabura. It is considered to be the best site because it is central (relatively close to Quito, the coast, the jungle and Colombia). Urququi is the poorest canton of the Imbabura province. People living there mainly work in agriculture and in construction.

There are 4 zones planned in Yachay: the zone of knowledge, which is the first one to be developed, the industrial zone, the touristic zone and the economic development zone. The city aims to promote new urbanism, openness and integration. Yachay Tec, the current core of Yachay, focuses on science and engineering, promoting at the same time theory and practice. Yachay Tec aims to be the best university in Ecuador, to be recognized on the international level and to attract the best teachers (national and international) and the best students of Ecuador.

The site where Yachay is now being developed was home to around 80 farms from small to big productions, mainly of sugar cane and dairy products. It is one of the most fertile regions of Ecuador. Some people interviewed raised issues regarding the area where Yachay is being developed. Some say that the selected area is too huge and that less could have been sufficient. Also, a lot of money is being invested in the project and some fear that it won't be managed adequately and that it won't be enough for the needs that Yachay construction requires. Almost everyone we interviewed said that the idea of a new university is a very good one, but that there are some problems that still need to be fixed. The most pressing are quality of the infrastructure, the availability of teachers, the intense schedule of the students, and the lack of food supply and recreation facilities.

## Activities

When we arrived we met with our local sponsor. He then put us in contact with some people involved in the project in order to schedule interviews. We started in Quito, where there were more people involved with the administrative side of Yachay. We talked with government agencies and Yachay developers. Then we went to Yachay to see by ourselves how the city is developing. We interviewed municipal agent of Urququi and people from the community. We also interviewed people working for the university and visited the campus. We also attended a community meeting organized by Yachay public company, which was very interesting. We were able to ask our questions to the representative of every community. All in all, we talked with people from the government, people in charge of



Yachay project, with lawyers defending people that have been evicted, with people that have been expropriated, people from Urcuqui, people from communities inside the Yachay area, teachers of Yachay, the principal of the University, and city planners.

### **Stakeholder viewpoints**

Generally, the affected communities are ambiguous about the project. They think the idea is good, but that the means are not the best, or they feel like they don't really know what is going on and that they have low impacts on what is being decided.

### **Issues for people that have been moved from their land**

- A lot of expropriated people are now in court to protest against the price that has been paid for their land. There is a feeling of injustice because they haven't been paid the correct amount of what the land worth. The lawyers we interviewed said that they were calling it a human rights violation because property rights haven't been respected. The government has the right to expropriate, but they have to pay the fair amount of what the lands and the farms are worth.
- People didn't receive help to find new jobs, they had to take care of themselves alone.
- Even if they received money from the government, some people said that money isn't compensation for a lifestyle that one is forced to quit.
- The lands that used to be owned by individuals and that are now under government property because of the Yachay project are not being used and they are almost all run down.
- A lot of people were working on these lands, and now they don't have jobs anymore since they aren't integrated into the Yachay project.

### **Issues for the communities of Urcuqui**

- Price of land around Yachay is increasing a lot, almost triple, and people fear that they will not be able to live nearby anymore.
- There is a sentiment that Yachay is trying to impose some ways of doing things on Urcuqui even if it's an independent entity.
- There is a sense of injustice because Yachay is developing fast and a lot of money is being invested while Urcuqui is still missing some basic services in some parts like drinkable water and sewage services.
- There are a lot of lands that Yachay has decided to take for its site where there used to be agriculture, but Yachay developers are not taking care of it so a lot of land is now abandoned.

- People living in Urcuqui don't feel that they have job opportunities in Yachay. The project requires diplomas that they don't have. They are also scared that many jobs will move to Yachay and that the residents of Urcuqui will be forgotten in all this development.

#### **Issues for the six communities that will remain in the area of the project**

- They are scared that one day or another they will be absorbed by Yachay city and their lifestyle will be changed, the more the city grows. They are scared to lose their culture and that the youth turn from the traditional lifestyles built around agriculture to work for Yachay.
- These people live from the land, from agriculture, and they are scared they will eventually lose their land and won't be able to work anymore.
- Even if Yachay says that the community is integrated in the workforce of the project, some people from the community say it's not true. Almost no one from the community inside the project is working for Yachay.
- Since the prices around Yachay are increasing a lot, they are scared that they won't be able to pay for land close to their community if they have to move, because they could not afford it anymore.

#### **Challenges and Successes**

I'm very happy with the work we have done. I feel like we had a good number of interviews to have a very good idea of the project, the stakeholders and the issues. We tried to have the biggest range of opinions to try to take the best position we could. It went a bit slower than what I thought, because for example here in Montreal, if you want to set up an interview, you can just send an email, you have an answer within the next few days, and the interview is set. In Ecuador, things take more time. You need to go to the office of the person you want to interview, meet them, then exchange contact information, and wait until they get back to you to fix a time. Sometimes people didn't show up to interviews or arrived late, so for these reasons, it took more time than what I expected. But we had very high quality interviews, and I think we had plenty of time to accomplish the objectives we had over there.



I'm pretty happy we've been able to build a network in a totally new country. I was happy also to be able to do all this work in Spanish and to be well received and helped by the people we met. People we were interviewing have taken us seriously. It was a bit harder to access Yachay administration because they need to have permission from the director to give interviews, so this part was a bit more inaccessible unfortunately. It seems like when it comes to government, the freedom of speech is more restricted in Ecuador.

I learned that it is interesting, challenging and a great learning opportunity to go in the field in a foreign country, and try to adapt and understand an issue in a limited amount of time. It was the first time I went to another country with this goal, and I enjoyed it. Ecuadorian people are very helpful, and I had a lot of informal conversation about Yachay, but also about Ecuador and what people think of their country, their government, their culture, etc. I felt like I interested myself deeply in the people of Ecuador thanks to that project, and it gave me a lot of opportunity to go and talk to people. I also confirmed my love for South America. I felt very good there, very comfortable.

I also learned how when you start investigating an issue, it just becomes more and more complicated, in the sense that no issue is simple and that it is hard to answer the famous question: "so what do you think of Yachay?" It is such a complex issue, and I think we approached it in a holistic way, which let us have a general idea of the pros and cons of the overall project.

One thing that I would have changed is that I would have spent more time in Urququi, maybe have stayed for a couple of weeks there instead of being based in Quito. The general approach we took also led to a more superficial relationship with people, since you don't spend a lot of time with them. I had the chance to stay a week with a family in La Esperanza, a small village in Imbabura province, and I really appreciated it because I got to know them well in a short amount of time and I got to learn about the culture from within. I would have liked to have this perspective from Urququi to better understand these people in order to help them better.

### **Community Implications and Further work**

Our contribution to social services was to listen to what communities had to say and to give a voice to those who needed to express what they had to share. They had a profound desire to be heard and this is what we offered to them.

I'm also making a short video to help expose the people that are planning Yachay to some of the issues faced by those affected by its construction. If citizens that are impacted by Yachay can have their voice raised, then heard, it can help to put some pressure on governmental agencies or Yachay administrators to reconsider some aspects of their project.

I think people of the community cared a lot about our work because nearly no article has been written about them, or no video was done about them. Any information available is promotional and the government only shows the good sides of Yachay. I think it's a huge step to show this other side. Raising awareness always makes a difference. I also think that taking time to interview and talk to people allowed those people to reflect about Yachay. Some people might feel more inspired to raise their voice and take action, some people might have found new support and new energy to continue to defend human rights, and some people might be thinking differently about this issue. I think it was good to start a conversation and raise a debate about the direction the country is taking, the reasons why it does it, and to continue questioning the Ecuadorian society. It is a society issue.



## Recommendations

I've listed a lot of recommendations. One of them that comes back a lot is communication. People need to be heard, to be taken into consideration, to feel they are treated equally and that they are truly included in the project. I think for this aspect, it would be very important to create a space of dialogue where government, people from Yachay and communities can meet. There is already one that has been created for the communities inside the project, but one for Urququi as well is needed. More research has to be done around Urququi to formulate proper policies so that Yachay isn't a nuisance for the community, but a helper, because this is a very possible option.

### National government should

- Ensure that people that have been expropriated that are in courts right now win their case and receive the money that is due to them
- Ensure that there is more redistribution of resources in the province of Imbabura so that Urququi grows as well and that not all the resources are devoted to Yachay.
- Ensure that Yachay is included in the planning of Urququi for its development.

### People that are developing Yachay should

- Open dialogue between the mayors of Urququi and Yachay
- Offer jobs to people in the communities inside the projects, and to the people of Urququi
- Ensure that the autonomy and the culture of the inner and surrounding communities is respected

- Affiliate with farmers and local people to understand the site that they are exploiting
- Reduce the area of the project to make it more realistic
- Respect Urcuqui's independence, autonomy and identity
- Employ more people from Urcuqui and the communities inside the project by offering more formation so people have the adequate training
- Ensure that more money in the project of Yachay be invested in "real things" on campus like food services, on salaries, etc.
- Re-evaluate the course planning of the students in University to be more pedagogic and realistic

#### **Local government should:**

- Ensure that services that are in Urcuqui stay in Urcuqui for the future
- Ensure that there is constant monitoring of the advancement of the project
- Work with Imbabura's cantons so a physical link can be developed to unite tourist attractions in the province, so people don't only go to Yachay but that the increased tourism benefits the entire province

#### **Communities that are affected by Yachay should:**

- Continue to fight for their right and to talk together to organize and communicate their fear and suggestions
- Put pressure on local and national government to create a formal organization for Urcuqui citizens to discuss with Yachay organizers.

### **Advice for Future Fellows**

#### **How did this fellowship further your academic or career goals?**

I think this fellowship confirmed the direction I want to take for the future. I was hesitating on doing a master or not, but this fellowship really convinced me that I wanted to do one. Field investigation is very interesting, and I really enjoyed being able to go deep into an issue to formulate my own understanding and recommendations. It is very meaningful to me to be able to use my knowledge and inform people about an issue, to contribute to academia and to propose solutions to create a more just society. Also, because we had to do a lot of interviews, it really confirmed the journalistic side of me. I really enjoyed being in Ecuador doing this project; it felt natural for me, so it was a sign that I need to continue in this direction.

#### **What did you value most about the fellowship?**

What I most valued about the fellowship is this opportunity to do something new and meaningful. It was really an unexpected experience for me, and I really value the possibility that has been offered to me to do things I love in a part of the world that I appreciate.

I also really valued the fact that it was a very serious project, that we've been trusted and that we had to produce meaningful work. I really appreciate that we needed to look for the practical side of the project, about how we could apply recommendations. It made me think outside of the papers due for a class, and made me immerse myself in the real world and try to find real solutions to problems. It opened my mind on new way to approach an issue.

### **Advice for Future Fellows**

Future fellows needs to get involved fully in the project they are doing, because once you investigate and explore a new issue, there is just so much to learn. I would also recommend talking to as many people as possible. It is by creating links with people that new opportunities arise. I had a lot of contacts for interviews that way, just by being curious and interacting with people. I would also recommend trying to have some time to live with a family, because it is a very nice experience to understand an issue in another way. Speaking Spanish is for sure a requirement because I can't even think of how I would have done all this work if I hadn't been fluent in Spanish.

I think the training we received with Denise and the other fellows was interesting, because it made us thought about the "why" of our project, and how to explain it simply. It sounds easy, but I had to think about it, so this was a good exercise before leaving. I'm very satisfied by the whole experience. It has been very meaningful for me.