

# The winding ways of development: A historical journey of a road in the Putumayo region of Colombia

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## Abstract

Roads are by nature a contested subject. Although they represent vital infrastructure to enable the flow of people, goods and ideas, their potential detrimental effects for humans and the environment have been a constant source of debate and criticism. This is particularly true for natural resource-rich regions such as the Amazon, where the development of roads has been directly associated with rampant deforestation and resource extraction, uncontrolled colonization and dispossession of indigenous lands. Yet the impact of roads goes far beyond their direct social and environmental costs and benefits. In many places of the world, roads have a strong evocative power, as they represent spaces that materially and symbolically embody ideas such as ‘modernity,’ ‘progress,’ ‘backwardness’ and ‘development.’ Combining multi-sited ethnography and historical analysis, this photo essay attempts to document the past, present, and likely future of a road in Putumayo, a region of southwest Colombia that has been traditionally considered a marginal frontier, and which has also become internationally known for the production of cocaine and the violence that has come with it. The road, as I will try to show, invites reflection about the complexities inherent to the different meanings and realities of development.

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**1. First Capuchin friars established in Putumayo, teaching the gospel to indigenous children. Santiago, 1903. Capuchin Provincial Archive of Catalonia (CPAC)**

The Capuchin missionaries arrived to Putumayo in 1899, invited by the Colombian government to ‘civilize’ the indigenous tribes scattered across the region. Since the state was practically absent and did not have the financial means nor the interest to expand its territorial control to a region of the country deemed remote and inhospitable, Capuchins were given free rein to impose ‘sovereignty’ on the land and its ‘savage’ inhabitants. Thus, along with spiritual jurisdiction over the whole territory, they were given civil, judiciary and police powers over the indigenous peoples, who at the time did not qualify as citizens since most of them, the government judged, had not yet been ‘reduced to civilized life.’



## 2. Sibundoy Valley, c.1910 (CPAC)

The missionaries embraced the assignment with religious fervor and military severity. They established the mission's headquarters in the valley of Sibundoy, a plateau located 2000 meters above the sea level in the heart of the Andes, inhabited by the Kamsá and Ingano indians. Soon, however, they found what they thought would be the major obstacle to achieve their long-term goal. Father Montclar, mission chief and a very enthusiastic friar, wrote a letter to the Ministry of Government in 1909 summarizing the problem: "Those territories," wrote the friar in reference to the Putumayo lowlands, "are destined to be one of the richest and most peopled places of Colombia, if only the government would pay some attention. These lands are completely isolated from the republic, and only some bold *caucheros* have penetrated this rich new world, a world like the one Columbus dreamed about, by breaching abysses and crossing marshes, climbing rocks and defying wild rivers."<sup>1</sup> Father Montclar thus envisioned what he would later declare as the major accomplishment of the mission in the country: the construction of a road linking the Andes mountains with the Amazon forests.



### 3. The Capuchins supervising the Indians and peasants working on the road, 1909-1930 (CPAC)

Fearing that the Peruvians, engaged in the rubber trade and excited by the friars' accounts of inconmesurable riches, would invade the territory, the central government provided the mission with the financial means required for the titanic enterprise. The mission devoted all its energy to the bridge-building project. Employing more than 1,500 Indian and peasant workers, the road advanced slowly but relentlessly through the abrupt topography of the cordillera. It took nearly three years to complete the 50 km stretch descending the eastern slopes of the Andes, which separated the Sibundoy valley from the vast lowlands of Putumayo.



**4. Inauguration of the Pasto-Mocoa road. March 10, 1912 (CPAC). Father Monctlar (on horse, second left) and members of a national government commission welcomed by the indigenous music band of San Andrés (Sibundoy Valley)**

Although it took another 20 years to cut through the damp terrain of the plains to finally reach the port city of Puerto Asis on the Putumayo river, the completion of the first section of the road in 1912 was received with numerous celebrations and adulations for the Capuchin Mission. The government published a booklet for the inauguration filled with flamboyant phrases and manifestos such as this one, written by the General Inspector of the road, which emphatically reads: “Wounded by the strokes of relentless athletes, the unsurmountable wall, which like a sentinel placed by mighty nature blocked the way to the most beautiful and rich part of our territory as if it wanted to guard a potentate anxious to give happiness to all men and generously share its infinite bounty, was finally defeated” (*Informe*, 1912, p. 6).



**5. Alluvial gold mining, n.d. (top left, GT); colono from Puerto Asis with Jaguar, 1930 (right, CPAC); Capuchin cattle farm, Sibundoy, 1912 (bottom left, CPAC)**

The Indians were to pay a big toll. As part of their compulsory duties to the Church they were frequently forced to work on the road without remuneration. The road also attracted thousands of new settlers in search of those ‘empty’ and ‘rich’ lands. Since the Capuchins thought the best way to Christianize and ‘civilize’ the Indians was to expose them to white and mestizo settlers, they encouraged the establishment of the newcomers by dispossessing the natives of their ancestral lands. The most radical experiment was carried out in Sibundoy: most of the valley was officially declared vacant in 1911, and its land assigned to the mission’s sustenance farms and the founding of mestizo towns. The drastic demographic change during the first three decades of the past century epitomizes the dramatic social and cultural conflict in the valley: from 1906 to 1933, the indigenous population of Putumayo decreased from 32,600 to 13,997, while the number of settlers grew in the same period from 2,200 to 21,587 (Bonilla, 1972, p. 186).



## 6. Embarkation of troops in Puerto Asis, 1932 (CPAC); first trucks arriving in Putumayo, c.1955 (GT)

Pressed by the growing tensions with Peru in the late 1920s and foreseeing a potential armed confrontation, the Colombian government decided to widen the Capuchin road to allow the transport of heavy artillery and military vehicles. It took almost 30 years to complete the 220 km dirt road connecting the Andean city of Pasto with Puerto Asis. The road—classified as a ‘national defense road’—not only allowed the migration of thousands of poor settlers fleeing the political violence that had taken over most of the country’s rural areas since early 1940; more importantly, it directed the way colonization and settlement unfolded across the whole region.



### 7. Town born along the road. Villa Garzón, 1952 (GT), and 2010 (author)

Rolf Wesche (1974), a German geographer who came to Putumayo in the early 1960s to research colonial development in the region, noted that at least 90 percent of the population lived at a maximum distance of one km off the road or main rivers. Those traffic arteries were not only synonymous with access to markets and mobility but were “a place of excursion, the route through which news travelled, and the primary means of social contact” (p.2). A distance of just one hundred meters off the road or river, he added, “could represent the difference between taking active part of daily life or total isolation” (p.2). Asking people what issues they considered a major obstacle for the region’s development, the great majority answered transport problems as the most important.





**8. Oil pipes and land cleared for cattle pastures and coca crops along the road. August, 2010 (author)**

The ‘development’ and ‘progress’ the road promised decades earlier, however, did not materialize. Instead, it assisted a process of chaotic colonization and deforestation, and consolidated the extractive character of the region, which traces back from the rubber boom in the early 1900s, to the discovery of oil in the 1960s, to the explosion of coca growing and cocaine production since the early 1980s.



**9. Truck accident, c.1960 (GT); crosses and commemorative plaques by the side of the road in the sector of Murallas, July 2010 (author)**

The road, moreover, had an additional issue. The engineer commissioned by the government to enhance the Capuchin road made what many deemed an irrational and catastrophic decision. On the most critical section of the road—the steep descent from the eastern slopes of the cordillera—the engineer avoided the trail that the Capuchins had forged. Instead, he designed a new road following a longer and more abrupt route. Those who travel along this hazardous unpaved road now pay the price for his decision. Eventually, this road came to be infamously known as *‘El trampolín de la muerte’*—the springboard of death—due to the dozens of people who die in car accidents each year. The most tragic event took place in July 1991, when in the sector known as ‘Murallas’ (Walls), a huge land slide buried several buses and cars, killing more than a hundred people. Only 50 bodies were recovered.



### 10. *The Springboard of death*, July, 2010 (author)

The *springboard of death* has caused countless tragedies, many of them echoing nationally, ironically reinforcing the image of Putumayo as a remote and treacherous territory. Its fame has even reached foreign tourists, who through Internet forums and blogs tout the road as a daring experience for those who like to avoid the 'beaten track' and taste something wild.<sup>2</sup> Putumayenses, however, have invested this road with a moral content in which enduring feelings and memories of isolation, marginality, and abandonment from the state converge. From public demonstrations to Facebook groups,<sup>3</sup> generations of Putumayenses have fiercely campaigned for the replacement of the road.



### **11. National Forest Reserve of the Upper Mocoa River Basin, June 2010 (author)**

Although for decades the government remained reluctant to listen to the claims of Putumayenses, the construction of an alternate road—which, ironically, will follow the same route chosen by the Capuchins one hundred years ago—seems to be a certainty. Recently, the government finally signed a loan with the International Development Bank (IDB) to finance the project, promoted as a pioneering model of sustainable development, as it promises to foster economic growth and regional integration without compromising the environment. Yet the passage of the new road through the middle of a National Forest Reservoir has been a point of contention on environmental and social grounds. NGOs such as ILSA<sup>4</sup> and Socivil Putumayo<sup>5</sup> are sceptical of the assumed benefits and have emphatically highlighted that it could expose a vast area of forest to natural resource extraction, causing more deforestation, poaching and large-scale mining.



## 12. Indigenous communities' demonstrations. June-July, 2010 (author)

Concerns regarding the environmental and social costs of the future road are only one part of the picture. Another issue, which is likely to be more complex and difficult to settle, is current indigenous claims to their ancestral territory. With the imminent construction of the road and the project's plan to enlarge the actual National Forest Reservoir as a measure of environmental compensation, the tension between the government and the indigenous communities has risen sharply. In June 2010, about 5,000 Kamsá and Ingano Indians blocked the road into the Sibundoy Valley (top left and right) to protest the measure and assert themselves as the legitimate owners of the road territory. Days later, in a more symbolic demonstration, around three hundred walked for two days across the 50 km abrupt trail Father Montclar considered his *magnum opus* (bottom left).



### 13. Peasant settlers growing coffee and staple crops in the vicinity of the future road. August, 2010 (author)

The demonstrations and protests of the indigenous communities have not been in vain. They have persuaded the government to start a negotiation process. However, the problem is not confined to the disagreements between the government and indigenous communities. Another relevant, though not as visible, party, is the dozens of mestizo peasant families living within the area that the future road will affect. Although they are aware of the indigenous claims over the territories, the mestizos also consider themselves the land's legitimate owners. Referring to indigenous rights, a peasant told me recently, "What is the meaning of ancestral anyway? We were born and grew up here. Our grandparents arrived here many decades ago; they came walking through the Capuchin road and settled here to work the land. So this land is ancestral for us, too" (peasant settler from Putumayo, personal communication, June 20th, 2010).



### 14. The road ahead

Will the future road be an opportunity to change a long history of dispossession and environmental destruction to one where development does not clash with nature and the welfare? According the government and the IDB, the road project is designed to be an exemplar of sustainable development for the country. But, and regardless of the road’s assumed benefits, it is clear that the road itself will not be a panacea for the region and its people, especially when these kinds of projects cannot be isolated from broader political and economic dynamics. The biggest challenge will then not be for the government but for the people of Putumayo: they must build a shared view of the region they want and fight for it. The recent indigenous demonstrations and the increasing participation of local NGOs and social movements represent a huge step forward. Still, as has been true literally and metaphorically for decades, the road is long and the obstacles many.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá. Fondo Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Tomo 1407, folio 194-195.  
<sup>2</sup> See: Vivalatinamerica (2010, January 28). The best (and most dangerous) way to get to Pasto [blog entry]. Retrieved from

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travelblogs/508/33196/The+Best+%28And+Most+Dangerous%29+Way+To+Get+To+Pasto?destId=363333> (2010, September 15).

Gauchito Gil (2010, March 28). San Agustín and the death road to Pasto, Colombia [blog entry]. Retrieved from

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travelblogs/967/46035/San+Agustin+and+the+Death+Road+to+Pasto,+Colombia?destId=363333> (2010, September 15).

<sup>3</sup> See: Por el cierre definitivo de la vía Pasto-Mocoa [Facebook group].

[http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=672819922&v=wall&story\\_fbid=463293399922#!/group.php?gid=24417331812&ref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=672819922&v=wall&story_fbid=463293399922#!/group.php?gid=24417331812&ref=ts)

<sup>4</sup> Latin American Institute for an Alternative Society. Non-profit organization which offers alternative legal services for social organizations and has been involved in the debate regarding the impacts of infrastructure integration megaprojects in South America. For more information visit: <http://ilsa.org.co:81/node/141>

<sup>5</sup> A regional platform of leaders and social movements committed to the promotion of participatory citizenship and the environmental conservation of the Andean and Amazon regions. Socivil has been actively involved in the consultation process for the alternate road. For more information visit: <http://socivilputumayo.org/>

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## Bibliographic note

Photographs listed under the abbreviations CPAC (Capuchin Provincial Archive of Catalonia, Putumayo mission photographic archive) and GT (Gustavo Torres, private collection) are permitted to be digitally printed in this essay.