



MEDIA RELEASE

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Technologists & Indigenous Activists Convene in the Peruvian Amazon

TARAPOTO, PERU: An unprecedented gathering of indigenous environmental monitors, technologists and civil society organizations just finished a five-day collaboration in the Peruvian Rainforest city of Tarapoto. [Hack The Rainforest](#), modeled after traditional “hackathons” whereby technologists gather to produce something new over the course of a set period of time, brought together 42 participants from 12 countries to collaborate on solutions to address urgent environmental problems threatening indigenous communities throughout the Amazon region.

The event convened indigenous people from across the Western Amazon whose lands and resources have been ravaged by the impacts of oil drilling, mining and deforestation. The indigenous participants shared how they have been mobilizing and organizing to form community-run monitoring programs to document environmental abuses and call governments and companies to account. The event brought together volunteer technologists from five countries to address the technical needs of the monitors by adapting open source mobile tools to help indigenous monitors gather and manage information in remote, offline environments.

The Hackathon was coordinated by [Digital Democracy](#) (Dd) in partnership with a coalition of organizations including co-hosts FEDIQUEP (Indigenous Federation of the Quechua People of the Pastaza River), [University de San Francisco de Quito](#) in Ecuador, [International Institute of Social Studies](#) of Erasmus University and [Hivos Foundation](#).

Hack the Rainforest participants included representatives from six indigenous communities and four environmental monitoring programs, as well as hackers from Lima, Chile, the United States, Canada and Israel, and academic and civil society partners from across Latin America and Europe. The event provided an opportunity for collaboration normally impossible for remote communities like FEDIQUEP, who traveled three days down river in order to attend the event.

“For FEDIQUEP, the monitoring program is indispensable,” said FEDIQUEP Vice-President, David Chino. “Monitoring helps us understand the impact of oil contamination on the health of communities. We are grateful for all the technologists and other collaborators who have come to help build our capacity to use technology to better report oil spills happening on our territory.”

“It’s exciting to bring together indigenous communities who have self-organized and mobilized to address the environmental destruction of their land,” said Gregor MacLennan, Dd Program Director. “Although they’re doing an excellent job monitoring the ongoing challenges, they have struggled with how to effectively use tech tools to tell their story to the outside world. By bringing technologists here to the jungle, we help them understand our partners’ reality. The monitors are no longer just “users” but people the technologists know and care about.”

The environmental monitoring along the Pastaza River of northern Peru began more than seven years ago, after decades of contamination resulting from oil drilling. Using basic GPS and cameras, FEDIQUEP monitors would visit existing sites of contamination and search for new spills. Two years ago their efforts paid off, when the Peruvian government declared the area a state of environmental emergency and began enforcing clean-up of affected sites. However, despite the rigorous efforts of the monitors on the ground, they frequently face challenges in managing this data and maintaining up-to-date databases and maps of the oil spills.

“The monitoring program has allowed the indigenous people to push their government and oil companies to improve operational standards, but there are plenty of technical problems the monitors face,” explained Marti Orta, a researcher with the ISS of Erasmus University, who has been collaborating with FEDIQUEP to conduct research on oil pollution for seven years.

“Computers break, hard drives get flooded, and GPS coordinates get separated from the photos the monitors take of the oil spills. We are excited to create a system that really works, to finally get it. We have been looking for this for years,” said Orta.

The five days of Hackathon included presentations from the various participants to share information on the issues present in each community, in-depth exploration of the technical problems faced by monitors, a visit to the nearby countryside, and work in breakout groups to:

- work on immediate fixes to the technical challenges
- accelerate collaboration between monitors from Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia as part of the [NEBE](#) program
- begin coding a more robust mobile data collection workflow which will eventually be released for use by community groups around the world working to document human rights and environmental challenges

Additional participants of the Hackathon included representatives from AIDSESEP (the national indigenous organization of the Peruvian Rainforest) in partnership with EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency), Frente Defensa de Amazonia from Ecuador, [Cuidadano Inteligente](#) from Chile, LIDEMA from Bolivia, Veerduria Forestal in Peru, Hacks and Hackers Lima and Open Data Peru.

“One of our goals with this event was to build bridges between unlikely allies,” said Emily Jacobi, founder and Executive Director of Digital Democracy. “It’s encouraging to see technologists from North America & Israel coding alongside hackers from Lima and Santiago de Chile, all working to directly support indigenous communities whose stories are seldom heard, but who are on the frontlines of protecting the health of the Amazon rainforest.”

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Digital Democracy is a US-based non-profit working globally to empower marginalized communities to use technology to defend their rights. Founded in 2008, Dd collaborates with local partners to build technology solutions that empower them as leaders in their communities. In 2013 Dd began working with indigenous communities in the Amazon to build a mobile toolkit for documenting, managing and sharing information from remote locations, thanks to an [award from the Knight News Challenge](#). Read more at www.digital-democracy.org