

SOCIAL CAPITAL, DEVELOPMENT, AND INDIGENOUS POLITICS IN ECUADORIAN AMAZONIA*

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the formation of social capital—defined as the norms of trust and reciprocity integral to social relations—and the ways in which it may help rural people's organizations gain access to rights and resources. The formation of social capital must be viewed within the context of the symbolic systems, or cultural capital, that imbues social relations with meaning. The concept of social capital provides a valuable conceptual framework for analyzing the multiscale processes of environmental management, rural development, and resource conflicts with which many rural social movements are involved. The role played by social capital is illustrated through a detailed case study of an indigenous political and cultural organization in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The organizational history of a lowland Quichua federation and the successes and problems it has had in managing development projects and achieving political objectives provide insight into the importance of social capital in the development of the region. *Keywords:* cultural capital, development, Ecuador, indigenous organizations, social capital.

In August 1998 the recently elected leaders of the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Napo (FOIN) gathered in the center of the Amazonian town of Tena, Ecuador to take their oaths of office. They sat on a stage overlooking the town's central square, joined by representatives of the provincial and municipal governments, political parties, other indigenous federations, the Josephine mission, and the mayor of the nearby town of Archidona, himself a former FOIN president. As they do for every inauguration, federation leaders shared their stage with representatives of the institutions of local and regional power—those institutions most directly responsible for the historical marginalization of Ecuador's indigenous peoples. The square they shared is commonly used for parades, concerts, and political speeches and as a public gathering place by the town's populace. That the federation inaugurated its new leaders in this very public space, with the visible support of state authorities, illustrates the web of relations that FOIN has fostered and the degree to which, by virtue of these relations, it has become a significant actor in regional politics.

This article examines the ability of indigenous federations such as FOIN to foster interorganizational relationships and to mobilize the social capital—that is, the relations of trust and reciprocity—that inheres in them. I argue that this social capital is embedded within and given meaning through the constellation of shared understandings, or cultural capital, of which it is a part. If we are to understand how social capital is formed, we must examine the symbolic context and systems of meaning

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